

Sometimes You Never Get It

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a four-week series

Sep 6, 2020

©2020 Scott L. Engle

Deuteronomy 34 (NRSV)

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, ²all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. ⁴The LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” ⁵Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. ⁶He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. ⁸The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

⁹Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

¹⁰Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹²and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Matthew 7:7–11 (NRSV)

⁷“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Romans 8:26 (NRSV)

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

It is time for some hard truth.

Hard truths. Life is filled with them. We either face them or lie to ourselves. Yes, sometimes we don’t get what we want . . . period. Even if it seems like a good want, or a biblical want, or a just want. Life is as hard as often as it is easy; it has always been this way and will be until Jesus returns.

Take Moses for example. Called by God to lead his people from slavery to freedom. The Law-bringer. But even Moses was denied entrance into the Promised Land. He didn’t trust God when the Israelites needed water and disobeyed God’s direct command; so he would only see the Land from afar. (The story can be found in Numbers 20:1–13). It seems harsh, but Thomas Dozeman notes that none of Moses’s actions were made in isolation. The same can be said for us all.

The power of leadership is dangerous. It can breed arrogance, making people intolerant of conflict and blind to due process. The fall of Moses is a paradigm of such abuse. He is impatient. Moses first demonstrated impatience when he killed the Egyptian taskmaster (Exod 2:11–15), forcing him to flee for his life. In Num 20:2–13, Moses’ impatience cost him entry into the promised land. Anger forces

him to exploit his power by not following the legal channels of accountability between God and Israel. In the process, he places himself above the law and plays God. The tragedy of the story resides in his blindness and confused motivation. He accuses the Israelites of being rebels in their legal complaint against God, when all the time he is the rebel himself. The continuing message of this tragedy is clear: No one is above the law, not even Moses the law-giver.¹

When it comes to my own relationship with God, the wants most often left unsatisfied are my unanswered prayers. Yes, I know that perhaps the silence is God's answer, but honestly, it doesn't always feel like that. Sometimes, it just feels like prayers go unanswered for year after year. And I'm pretty sure I'm not the only Christian who feels that way. What do we do with the times when it seems like God is silent, when it feels like our prayers go unheeded? Since we are focusing on Moses today, let's reflect on prayer in the Old Testament.

Prayer among the Hebrews

Terence Fretheim is one of my favorite OT scholars. By his count, there are 97 Old Testament prayers outside of the book of Psalms and 38 of them are spoken by lay people, not prophets, priests, or kings. These prayers, often seeming more like

Making Sense of Deuteronomy

It surprises people to learn that Deuteronomy is the most quoted OT book by the NT writers. The book can seem so foreign to us. Yet, its message is deep and everlasting, helping us to see what it means to live in covenant with God. The phrase, "the structures of covenant life" summarizes very well the focus of the last half of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. God had chosen a people and promised them a land. In these books, God tells his people how they are to live in covenant with him. He tells them how they are to worship him, how they are to organize and administer their society, and how they are to build relationships among themselves. Thus, nearly all aspects of the community's life are touched by God's word: the foods they are to eat, the ways they are to dress, the sacrifices they are to make (and not make!). Though we usually translate the Hebrew word, *Torah*, as "Law," our word "instruction" would be closer to what they meant. The Law was not simply a list of rules for managing an orderly society; rather, the Law showed the Israelites, the chosen people of God, how they were to live in relationship with the Lord, the one true God. The Law also marked the Israelites as God's people, different from all others. The odd dietary laws, keeping the Sabbath, the practice of circumcision, and so on were all membership badges worn by God's people, setting them apart from all the cultures around them. In an important sense, they were the badges of the covenant.

Here are a few things to keep in mind as you read Deuteronomy.

- Though the book contains many laws, it is much more a book of the heart. Look for the spirit of the law, the instruction given by God to Israel. Notice that the book reads much more like a sermon than some sort of legal code.
- In its structure and much of its language, Deuteronomy is a treaty/covenant between a king and his people, in important ways a standard ancient near-eastern treaty. They both have preambles, a reminder of all the things the king has done for his people, laws/regulations, blessings that come from keeping the law, and curses that will flow from breaking the laws. But, of course, Israel's covenant was not with some earthly king, but with God himself, the one true god.
- The Law given by Moses was seen as a delight by the Israelites, not a burden. The Law is God's instruction to Israel on how they are to live in relationship with him. There is one God, one people, one land, one place to worship, and one law.

¹ Thomas B. Dozeman, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 2, 167.

conversation, are integral to the story of God and his people; they express the nature of their relationship. And prayer is just that . . . a relationship. Prayer isn't simply language; for Paul writes that the Spirit lifts up to God the prayers that we can't articulate. He urges believers to "pray without ceasing" (1 Th. 5:17). And any sampling of Old Testament prayers helps us to grasp the true depth and wonder of the relationship that God desires to have with us and for which we were made.

In these prayers, we find Moses interceding with God for the rebellious people and changing God's mind. You'll find many who will argue that it can't really be that God changes his mind, at least not in anything like the sense that you and I mean. But is it really so crazy to suggest that God changes his plans and actions in response to those whom God loves? What is love if it isn't a relationship characterized by genuine mutuality?

We find in the prayers a God who is present and close and who is delighted when his people pray. To no surprise, we find that our sins damage our relationship with God. We learn nonetheless that God is always there, ready to listen and to respond. And as you'd expect in a genuine relationship, God is deeply affected when we hurt and is ready to listen, even crying out "Here I am" in the face of our silence.

One of my favorite stories of prayer in the OT is that of King Hezekiah, told in 2 Kings 20:1-11. Hezekiah, king of Judah, was one of the few good kings of either Israel or Judah. Hezekiah fell ill and was near death when Isaiah, God's prophet, told him that the Lord had said Hezekiah would not recover. It was time for the king to get his house in order. In his sorrow, the king wept bitterly and prayed to the Lord, reminding God that he had always been faithful to God and done what is good in God's sight. Before Isaiah had even gotten out of the building, the Lord told him to go back to the king and tell him that he would be healed and would live another fifteen years. . . . This is the God whom we worship and with whom we pray; a far cry from the "divine mind" of Plato and Aristotle.

Can prayer really change what happens?

I considered for a while the title for this section of the study. I wanted something clear and penetrating. Too often when we talk about prayer we limit ourselves to the change prayer makes in ourselves and in our relationship with God. But there is this ever-present question as to whether prayer can actually change the course of events. We pray for a friend's recovery from illness. We pray that we and our home would be spared from a devastating storm. Then, our home is destroyed and a loved one lost. Not surprisingly, we wonder whether our prayers have any real effect at all. Or we begin to think that we prayed poorly, or lacked faith, or, worse, that perhaps there is simply no one on the other end of the line.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes:

God's response to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does and does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course God doesn't respond to this. You wouldn't either.

Part of the problem is that we fail to comprehend how God has freely chosen to work in this world. God works through us. Going back to the creation story, we were the ones tasked with filling the world and subduing it. It is a mistake to think that when it comes to life, we do part A and God does part B. Or that we "let go and let God" waiting for God to do it all. Or that we try to do it all. Rather, we do it all *and* God does it all.

If a young woman goes back to school so she can get a better job, it will change the course of her future. Not even the most rigid determinist doubts that. But when it

comes to God, all of a sudden, I'm supposed to believe that what I do (as in pray) is pointless and has no effect – on God or on the future.

The truth is that our prayers not only do us good, they do God good, and they can affect the course of events. God works with my hands, my intellect, *and* my prayers. Indeed, the more fully I embrace a genuine trusting and faithful relationship with God the better instrument I become for God's purposes and my own. Yes, the truth is that our friends die prematurely and pandemics strike. Creation remains wild, untamed, and even hostile. However, Fretheim writes:

We confess that in response to prayer (and in other ways) God is at work in these devastating effects to bring about positive results in and through human (and other) agents. But one must also speak a "Who knows?" (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14) or a "Perhaps" (Jonah 3:9 GNT) with regard to the effect of the divine work upon specific persons and particular generations. It is not a question as to whether God wills good in the situation, but whether, given God's own self-limited ways of responding to evil and its effects in the world, what can actually be done and how and when.²

So, with all this, we pray and we pray some more. In all things, for all things, as we seek an ever-deeper, more honest, and more loving relationship with the One who made us.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of Matthew's Gospel

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Genesis

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Current series: *Living Hope*. We'll be talking about the nature of the Christian hope and how we can live that hope every day, how such hope can change how we see ourselves and how we understand the world around us.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.

² from Fretheim's book, *Creation Untamed*.