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Sunday Evening Service
Series: Deuteronomy
Community Baptist Church
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PASSING THE BATON Deuteronomy 31

I cannot say that this chapter in Deuteronomy took me off guard. Having read through the chapter many times in my life, I knew the content. But, it kind of strikes me as an “Oh no” kind of thing. Deuteronomy and the life of Moses are so intricately entwined that the book almost feels like the story of Moses as he dealt with God’s people.

In this story, we had to know that the day would come when Moses would get too old to continue to lead God’s people. Or he would just up and die. Granted, it was not likely that he would retire. But in some way, a change was going to have to take place. And suddenly, almost without warning the change is upon us. Again, we knew it was inevitable. But here it is.

I find quite interesting the fact that, in the context of turning leadership of God’s people from Moses to Joshua, we read the challenge “be strong and courageous” three times in this chapter (vv.6,7,23), and then four more times in the first chapter of Joshua (vv.6,7,9,18). Obviously, passing on the baton of leadership takes a lot of strength and a lot of courage. To some extent, that is a reality in many endeavors or organizations. In fact, the larger and more important the organization, the more strength and courage will be needed to make the necessary change.

But, when it comes to making the change in leadership over God’s people, strength and courage are critical. It certainly was for the people of Israel. At stake was the certainty that God had drawn this group of people out of Abraham and founded His seed as the nation of His choice. God delivered the people from Egypt and established them as the apple of His eye rooted in His covenant. The

problem was that, in character, those people were more accurately a thorn in God’s side rather than the apple of His eye. They were fickle at best and downright stubbornly rebellious at worst. Moses could judge, based on 40 years of experience with these people and their parents, that they and their posterity were not going to hold to God’s covenant. Moses knew that Joshua and the future leaders were going to have their hands full. That is why strength and courage would be necessary to complete the transition.

These truths apply very plainly to the Lord’s work still. Making transitions in the Lord’s work is not like electing a new president, hiring a new C.E.O., or selling the company to the highest bidder. The Lord’s work is about the Lord’s people. Their reflection on His character will state plainly that our God is pure, and right, and holy, and just. Or, by their lives they will tell the world that God is not necessary, He is optional, or doesn’t really mean what He says. That attitude will bring God’s judgment, which is often demonstrated in the dissolving of the Lord’s work. Strength and courage are always necessary when God’s people pass the baton in God’s work.

The LORD’s Plan for the Future (vv.1-8).

In the LORD’s plan, His part is to do what He promised (vv.1-5). And within the scope of that plan, God determined that it was time for a change. The change was necessary in part because Moses was succumbing to the curse of sin and becoming decrepit. *So Moses continued to speak these words to all Israel. And he said to them, “I am 120 years old today. I am no longer able to go out and come in” (vv.1-2a).*

Moses realized that he was getting too old to keep the pace of leading God’s nation. But more than that, God had revealed His own plans to Moses. *The LORD has said to me, “You shall not go over this Jordan” (v.2b).* We were already aware that God planned not to allow Moses to enter the Promised Land because of his act of stealing the LORD’s glory at the waters of Meriba when he struck the rock. *And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have*

given them” (Numbers 20:12). Moses referred to this sad sentence from God three times in Deuteronomy (1:37; 3:26; 31:2).

While it was true that Moses, the first and original human leader of Israel, was destined to pass off the scene, it was also true that there would be no change in ultimate leadership. God promised to go before the people and would dispossess the citizens who were so deeply entrenched. *The LORD your God himself will go over before you. He will destroy these nations before you, so that you shall dispossess them, and Joshua will go over at your head, as the LORD has spoken (v.3). And the LORD will give them over to you, and you shall do to them according to the whole commandment that I have commanded you (v.5).*

How did Moses know this? How could he confidently tell the people that God would run off the inhabitants of the land? Moses had confidence because God had promised as much and Moses believed God. But added to God’s promise was precedence. Moses assured the people, *And the LORD will do to them as he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land, when he destroyed them (v.4).* Based on what God had done over and over, Moses was sure God would continue to act according to precedence.

In the same way, Moses ends, not only this speech, but His ministry with the Israelites by predicting the future based on precedence. He knew that the people would rebel against God even from the outset of going into the land (i.e. Achan). Moses could be pretty confident of that based on forty years of experience with their parents first, and now this generation.

God said that on His part, He would be sure to carry out His plan, even if it meant change in leadership. There was also the people’s part in carrying out the future plan. Their part was to be strong in the LORD (vv.6-8). Joshua (the new leader) and the people would need courage and strength. So Moses said, *“Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.”*

We read again in the first part of verse seven, *Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong and courageous” (vv.6-7a).* That sounds like a logical challenge for people and leaders getting ready to go to war. But unlike your typical highschool pep rally, the need was for the people

to find strength and courage in the Lord. *“Be courageous,”* Moses told Joshua, *“for you shall go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall put them in possession of it. It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed” (vv.7b-8).*

What did God promise? He will go with them and dispossess the enemy just like He already had destroyed Og and Sihon. That is one of those “Easy to say – hard to do” kind of things. The oft repeated New Testament principle, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” requires incredible faith. Incredible faith must be reminded many times a day that I depend on Christ not me; that Christ supplies my strength, it is not from myself or in me.

The Foundation for the Future Plan (vv.9-13).

A foundational principle looking toward the future was to protect God’s Law (v.9). *Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi (v.9a).* God gave the Law inscribed on stone tablets at Mt. Sinai. The Ten Commands were the condensed principles of the full law. Those stone tablets and at least the oral version of the full law were given to the first generation Israelites. Now Moses wrote down the full Law, most of which would be what we have studied in Deuteronomy 5-28.

Moses delegated the responsibility for care of the Law to the priests and Levites. He identified them as *the ones who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD (v.9b).* Also, responsibility was given to *all the elders of Israel (v.9c).* The leaders of the people protected the Law, guarded the Law from corruption, taught the Law, and were responsible to review God’s Law (vv.10-13). Moses instructed the leaders to read God’s Law every seven years. *And Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns (vv.10-12a).*

This is not a rule for the modern Christian's use of their Bibles. Though in reality one reading of God's Word every seven years might be more than most Christians get. But why bother? Why was it good for God's people to be reminded of God's law (or plan or promises)? They needed to hear it in order to learn to fear. The rule was so that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess (vv.12b-13).

Fear (at least the fear of the Lord) is a right and awesome respect for God. If we don't respect God, we really don't care what He thinks or says or desires. If we respect God's person, character, and position, we realize that we must be submissive to Him. This is not difficult to figure out. But it is very difficult to carry out when my flesh is so strong.

The Human Leader of the Plan (vv.14-21).

According to God's plan for His people, He had already determined that Joshua would be commissioned. It would be necessary to commission a new leader because of an awful reality. *And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, the days approach when you must die" (v.14a).* Obviously, Moses knew that he had to die some day. We all know that about ourselves because death is appointed because of Adam's sin. But to hear, "The days approach" is like getting a terminal diagnosis from the doctor. And yet the fact remains that the day approaches for all of us. The truth is enough to drive a man to write something like "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). Psalm 90 happens to be composed by Moses.

The LORD gave clear instruction about commissioning the new leader. The LORD appeared in majesty and power at the place where such a leadership change should take place—the tent of meeting. There God told Moses, "Call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, that I may commission him." *And Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting. And the LORD*

appeared in the tent in a pillar of cloud. And the pillar of cloud stood over the entrance of the tent (vv.14b-15).

Notice according to the text that the LORD commissioned Moses's successor. *And the LORD commissioned Joshua the son of Nun and said, "Be strong and courageous, for you shall bring the people of Israel into the land that I swore to give them. I will be with you" (v.23).* To commission is to command. The command as Joshua took charge was again, *Be strong and courageous.* But God also attached the promise of His presence to encourage the new leader. Also, God promised to bring about handing over the land to which He swore.

There was very good reason for Joshua to obey the command to be courageous and strong. Moses also promised that rebellion was in the future of God's people (vv.16-18). He predicted that the people would commit infidelity with lesser gods. *And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them" (v.16).*

And when God's people chose to rebel against Him, the LORD promised to keep His warning to judge their rebellion. Moses warned that God had already promised to judge in anger. *"Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them" (v.17a).*

The good news is that when the judgment came, the people would be able to make the connection. The response: *"So that they will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?'" (v.17b).*

But whether they understand or not often makes little difference. When God hides His face, we are in trouble. *"And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods" (v.18).*

Verses nineteen through twenty-two deal with introductory words to Moses's song which is the content of the next chapter. So I will consider these four verses to be parenthetical. *"Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of*

Israel. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to give to their fathers, and they have eaten and are full and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, and despise me and break my covenant. And when many evils and troubles have come upon them, this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring). For I know what they are inclined to do even today, before I have brought them into the land that I swore to give.” So Moses wrote this song the same day and taught it to the people of Israel (vv.19-22).

A Sad Conclusion of the Plan (vv.24-29).

The Book of the Law would serve as a witness (vv.24-26). We read that Moses finished the book. *When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end . . . (v.24).* Again the references to “these words” refers to the words from Deuteronomy 5-28. The book was a copy of the law. It was something like what the future king would write. Moses also promised that coming event. *And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. (Deuteronomy 17:18).* It appears that the stone tablets were in the ark and the copy, the book from which the priests read, was beside the ark.

Moses gave instructions about the book. *Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, “Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God” (vv.25-26a).* According to God’s plan, God’s chosen servants were responsible to protect the Book. They were to put the Book beside the ark that represented the presence of God (where He met with His people at the mercy seat on the top of the ark).

The ark represented the covenant Yahweh made with His people. The basic principles that define God’s character (10 Commands) were in the Ark that represented God’s covenant. The details of why God chose those people and what He had the right to expect were written in the Book that was beside the ark that represented God. That is why it would be a witness against the people

as is the meaning of the words, *that it may be there for a witness against you (v.26b).*

The book Moses wrote served the same principle as the Bible does for us. The Bible is a wonderful book full of God’s detailed description of His character. The Bible unpacks God’s manifold promises. The Bible provides the most precious, valuable comfort and encouragement to us as we walk in fellowship with God. But the Bible also contains warnings from God. The Bible should scare the living daylights out of us if we, being God’s people, choose to live in rebellion against Him.

Moses knew (vv.27-29). This is knowledge assumed based on precedence. This is a bit like the way parents assess their teens because they were once teens. This is how Israeli defense forces protect their airliners and people from terrorists. Liberals call it profiling and don’t like it.

Moses knew the people’s character. *“For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold, even today while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD. How much more after my death!” (v.27).* He knew the people would act according to their character. He called God to witness against them. *“Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears and call heaven and earth to witness against them” (v.28).*

In the same way, Moses warned the people about their future rebellion. *“For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you” (v.29a).* And he warned the people about future judgment. *“And in the days to come evil will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands” (v.29b).*

And the people did exactly what Moses warned about, and God judged them. And when God sent the prophets to the people in Israel and the people in Judah, they ignored them, did exactly what God said they would do, and God judged them. And we read good descriptions of sin in the New Testament. God warns that if we are not walking in fellowship with Him, we will do them. We do them. God judges us. As we look to the future, let’s determine that we will fear God and keep His commands because that is our duty.