

Deuteronomy 31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 31. 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. The Lord has said to me, You shall not go over this Jordan. 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. 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. 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.

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. Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, Be strong and courageous, 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.

Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. 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, 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. And the Lord said to Moses, Behold the days approach when you must die. 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. 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. 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, so that they will say in that day, Have not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us? 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. 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. 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. When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, 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, that it may be there for a witness against you. For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are.

[4 : 04] Behold, even today, while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the Lord. How much more after my death! 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.

For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you. 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.

Then Moses spoke the words of this song until they were finished, in the ears of all the assembly of Israel. Deuteronomy chapter 31 is a chapter of transition. It moves us from Moses to Joshua.

In verses 1 to 8, we are told that Moses is going to die. He is not going to be the one that leads them into the promised land. Rather, the Lord and Joshua are the ones that are going to go ahead of Israel into the land. Moses is 120 years old. This is 10 times 12, representing the whole of Israel, perhaps. It's also 3 times 40. His life can be divided into three periods of 40 years. In Acts chapter 7 verse 23, we're told that he went out to see his brethren at the age of 40. So that's the time that he would have gone into Midian, and then spent 40 years in Midian, followed by 40 years in the wilderness. He's no longer able to go out and come in. This is the language of leadership. It's something that we see in Joshua chapter 14 verse 11. Also in Numbers chapter 27 verses 15 to 21, which is a passage that corresponds to this as Joshua is set up as the new leader of the people. Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them, and come in before them, who shall lead them out, and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be a sheep that have no shepherd. So the Lord said to Moses, Take

Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him. Make him stand before Eliezer the priest, and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey, and he shall stand before Eliezer the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation. Moses cannot go over the Jordan before the people, but God and Joshua will. During his life, the people of Israel have been tempted to treat Moses as if he were some sort of God, dealing with Moses rather than God more directly.

[6 : 46] The golden calf incident is a good example of this. When Moses was away from them for a period of time and they thought he might have died, they wanted to construct a God to go in his place. They weren't replacing the Lord so much as Moses. Moses was the one that was the God before Yahweh, the supposed lesser God that they had alongside the greater God of the Lord.

Now as Moses dies, there is the possibility of a movement beyond this way of thinking. Joshua is a great leader, but he's not of the same stature or kind as Moses. The Lord assures Israel that the Lord will do to the Canaanites as he did to the kings of the Amorites, Sihon and Og. They shall be strong and courageous, knowing that the Lord himself goes before them. Moses commissions Joshua as his successor before all of the people, and removing Moses allows for Israel to grow into a new level of maturity. Leaders can run out of the capacity to change things, and sometimes there needs to be a new leader for significant change to be made possible. When long-term leaders are removed from a community, especially leaders of a stature as great as that of Moses, the community will have to reorient itself to find a new footing. After the removal of Moses, they will no longer have the same fixation on the leader. Israel is also like a child growing up. They're leaving the direct oversight of a parental figure. Moses has acted like a parent figure to them in a period of childhood, and now he's gone, they're going to have to come of age. They're going to have to enter the land and act in a new way. This will involve discovering new strength and resolve as they look to the Lord for themselves, and not just depending upon Moses to do these things for them. When leaders are removed, we can discover how much we rested upon them, and we must find alternative sources of strength, and this is going to be the case for

Israel. Joshua is not of the same stature as Moses, but yet the removal of Moses is good for the people. It gives them the opportunity to grow into something greater. In verses 9 to 13, the priests are instructed to read the book of the law on key occasions. Moses writes the law and commits it to the charge of the priests and the elders of Israel. The former represent the Lord, and the latter represent Israel.

The book of the law that Moses writes is the covenant that's formed on the plains of Moab. This is in addition to, and in association with, the covenant that was formed at Sinai. It might also be seen as a sort of last will and testament of Moses himself. The death of Moses will be connected with the closing of this book. The priests are instructed to read the book of the law on the Feast of Tabernacles in the sabbatical year. It's a sort of covenant renewal. On that year, the entire population of Israel seems to be required to participate in an assembly, not just the males.

This is going to be for everyone, for the sojourner, for the women, for the children. It's important also that the children who weren't present at the first giving of the book of the law, or of the covenant at Horeb, might be acquainted with it. And this ceremony seems to have been done at key moments in Israel's history, as a sort of national rededication. We see this in 2 Kings 23, verses 1 to 3.

[10:21] There's a description of such a ceremony in Nehemiah chapter 8, verses 1 to 8, and it gives us a better sense of what would have been involved.

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate, and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the water gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.

And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maasaiah on his right hand, with Pediah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashem, Hashpadana, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left hand.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it, all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Aqab, Shabbathai, Hodia, Maasaiah, Kalita, Azariah, Jehozabad, Hanan, Peliah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book from the law of God clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading.

This ceremony then seems to involve a public reading followed by some sort of exposition, where the people have the law explained to them in ways that they can understand. In such ceremonies, Israel returned to its first receiving of the law, and it was also a return to first principles, to the foundations, so that the national life could be well founded.

[12 : 33] In verses 14 to 23, the Lord gives instruction to Moses and Joshua concerning Joshua's succession and the teaching of the song. Once again, themes of succession are prominent here, as they are throughout the rest of the chapter. This section is the centre of the chapter in many ways. God appears at the tent of meeting, for the first time in the book of Deuteronomy, and the Lord foretells the fact that Israel will soon rebel against him and reject the covenant.

They will prove adulterous and idolatrous, whoring after other gods. And what God does is give Moses a song that will serve as an extra witness to and against Israel. This is something that will stick in their memories and not easily be forgotten. The testimony of the book of the law, the testimony of heaven and earth, and now the testimony of the song come together as witnesses to Israel.

The song will stick in the mind, and unlike the book of the law, which would only be read through once every seven years, the song could be performed far more easily and often. And song is a way in which words can become part of us. In this way, the testimony of the book of the law could be internalised in a particular condensed form of it. Moses writes down the song that very day, and then he also commissions Joshua once more. In verses 24 to 29, Moses writes the words of the song and the entire words of the law. The important words of the covenant are immediately committed to writing. The purpose of writing is partly to preserve a memory, but also to create a physical object that will serve as a symbolic witness. On the one hand, the law is to be read out every several years. On the other, it is deposited next to the Ark of the Covenant as a symbolic witness, that book representing Israel's covenant with the Lord. Moses assembles all of Israel to hear the song, which will serve as a testimony to and against them. By converting the book of the law into a particular volume and expressing it in a condensed form in song, we see the word on the one hand embedded in a material thing, and then on the other hand, the word internalised in a memorised song.

Both express something about the intended character of the law. The word is to be fleshed out in the world, in concrete structures and physical objects, and also internalised. It's supposed to be on their mouths and in their hearts. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we might renew covenant with the Lord, as individuals and as churches?