

Deut 31:1–29 Moses' Final Remarks

We are finally approaching the end of the book of Deuteronomy and the end of Moses' career and life. His remaining days are few. He's about to utter his last words, his final remarks to the nation and then turn over the leadership to Joshua.

Last words are often very important. They often say something about the one who utters them.

Here are the last words of several famous people:

All my possessions for a moment of time. ~~ Elizabeth I, Queen of England, d. 1603

It is very beautiful over there. ~~ Thomas Alva Edison, inventor, d. October 18, 1931

I must go in, the fog is rising. ~~ Emily Dickinson, poet, d. 1886

That was the best ice-cream soda I ever tasted. ~~ Lou Costello, comedian, d. March 3, 1959

Friends applaud, the comedy is finished. ~~ Ludwig van Beethoven, composer, d. March 26, 1827

Lord help my poor soul. ~~ Edgar Allan Poe, writer, d. October 7, 1849

One of the main ideas in Deut 31 is that Moses is going to die and Joshua will be taking over. This chapter records some of Moses' last words. Moses has a few further things to say after this, but this passage contains his final exhortations to Israel. These statements are quite profound; he says some important things about leadership and the courage leaders need.

Let's see how this passage records some of Moses' final remarks to Israel.

- I. Moses explains why Joshua will be the next leader of Israel. .1–8
 - A. .2 Moses is 120 years old. We can divide up his life into three parts:
 1. Moses spent his first 40 years in Egypt in the court of pharaoh.
 2. He spent the next 40 years in the desert as a shepherd.
 3. He spent the next 40 years leading the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness.

.2b He can no longer “go out and come in.” I.e., he can no longer carry on the daily responsibilities of leadership.

In other words, Moses is at the end of his life, and he’s preparing the people for his imminent death.

- B. .2c The Lord had told him that he could not cross the Jordan and enter the PL (Num 20:12; 27:12-14). Remember that he had struck the rock instead of speaking to it. That act of disobedience cost him dearly.

App: Significant disobedience can disqualify us for further service.

- C. .3a Moses assures the people that God will be with them as they cross the Jordan and begin the conquest of the PL.

1. Moses will not be their leader, but God will still be with them. God is still their ultimate leader and king.
2. He will destroy the Canaanite nations and dispossess them. They don’t need to worry about their immediate future.

- D. .3end God usually works through human leadership, so Joshua will be the leader after Moses. God selected Joshua personally (Deut 1:38, 3:23-29), so no one should doubt Joshua’s authority.

Joshua had been Moses’ assistant for a long time. He was right there when God gave the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. He was one of the men who wanted to begin the conquest of the PL when God told them to originally. He was at Moses’ side during the entire 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. So he was well-qualified to take over the reins of leadership from Moses.

The Bible refers to Joshua as Moses’ servant several times. Joshua proved to be faithful as a servant, and now God is moving him up to leadership of the entire nation.

App: Those who aspire to leadership must prove themselves to be faithful servants. Good leaders usually begin as servants. Leaders usually prove themselves first before moving into leadership. If you want to lead, you have to learn to serve. Cf. Mt 20:28

- E. .5 They should do to the Canaanites whatever God commanded them to do—it to annihilate them.
- F. .6-7 Repeated admonitions to be strong and courageous. They need not fear because God will be with them; he will not forsake them.

Why does Moses exhort Joshua to be strong and courageous? Because leadership is difficult; it often requires strength and courage.

App: Serving God, especially in leadership, is often difficult; that's what we should expect. Moses had all kinds of opposition and rebellion to deal with, even from his own family. Leaders need to be courageous and strong.

- G. .8 He repeats that God will go before them, will be with them, and would not forsake them. Therefore, they need not fear or be dismayed.

App: Strength and courage comes from knowing that God is with you. If God is with us, there is no need to be fearful or dismayed. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

God had been preparing Joshua for leadership, and he was ready to take over for Moses.

Like Israel, we need people from the next generation to step up and take responsibility. E.g., deacon, treasurer, SS teachers. Seek to be qualified for those responsibilities.

- II. Moses declares that the law should be read to Israel every seven years. .9-13

Leadership for Israel would be changing, but one thing that would *not* change is God's word. God is with them, and God's word remains in authority over them.

- A. .9 Moses gave a copy of the law – probably the book of Deuteronomy – to the Levitical priests who were in charge of the ark.

App: It's amazing to think that we have a copy of this very same document sitting before us today. The Jews were very careful to preserve the Scriptures that God gave to them. And we have accurate copies and translations of those ancient documents still today. And these documents are still inspired and authoritative.

- B. .10-13 He commanded them to read the law at the Feast of Tabernacles every seven years. All of Israel should gather together to hear the law and learn to fear God and observe his commandments.

The generations would come and go, so it was important for the nation as a whole to recommit themselves to covenant loyalty.

.12 And notice that everyone in Israel should hear the reading of the law and learn to obey it. Normally, only the men were required to attend the yearly feasts (Deut 16:16). But in this case, everyone is supposed to attend this ceremony. Everyone should “hear and learn to fear the Lord” (.13).

This was obviously not the only time that Israel heard the law. Levites were teachers of the law, and they would be spread out throughout the whole land. So the people would hear the law regularly. Moses seems to be speaking of a special occasion where the Levites would read through the entire book of Deuteronomy.

App: Regular exposure to the word of God is very important. We should be diligent to read the word in our homes so as to teach our children to know God’s word and to fear the Lord.

And obviously it’s important that the church teaches the word of God to every generation. The word of God gives us stability as people come and go over the years.

And it’s good to dedicate special occasions for more intense exposure to God’s word—e.g., Bible conference, camp.

III. Moses transfers leadership to Joshua .14–15

- A. .14 The Lord affirmed that Moses would die soon, and so he must officially transfer the leadership role to Joshua.
- B. .15 The two of the went to the “tabernacle of meeting,” and the Lord appeared to them in a pillar of cloud standing at the door.

[You may recall that this “tabernacle/tent of meeting” (vs. 14) was not the same as the tabernacle where the ark of the covenant was. The tabernacle was for public worship, but this “tent of meeting” was placed outside the camp and it was where the Lord often met with Moses (Ex 33:7f; Num 11:16). It was not a public place of worship but a place where God met privately with Moses and the other leaders of Israel.]

IV. .16-18 Moses receives a warning about Israel’s future disobedience.

- A. .16 Moses would soon be resting with his fathers. His life is about to end.
- B. .16b The people would become idolatrous and forsake God. God tells Moses three times here (vss. 16, 18, 20) that Israel will become idolatrous.

Moses had warned about that previously, and now God affirms that Israel would fall into idolatry, forsake God, and break the covenant. The result would be severe judgment.

Imagine how disappointing this would be for Moses to hear. After everything that God had done for Israel, and after all the hardships Moses had endured, and after all this teaching on the law, and after all Moses' exhortations to obey the law and remain faithful to God, after all the warning and the threats, still, Israel would be unfaithful and disobedient.

App: In some cases, there is virtually nothing anyone can do to prevent someone from falling into sin and rebellion against God. We can teach people the Word of God, encourage them to obey, and warn them about the consequences of disobedience, but they might still rebel against God and become unfaithful. Sadly, that outcome is fairly common.

When it happens, it is exceedingly discouraging. Moses could not prevent Israel's rebellion and apostasy. It's unlikely anyone could prevent it. That shows us the sinful, rebellious human nature.

C. .17 God in response would forsake Israel and refuse to hear their prayers. The result would be Israel's destruction.

1. .17b God declares that he will forsake them and hide his face from them (vs. 18) because of their idolatry. The covenant curses would fall upon them as a result.
2. And God would no longer be "among" them. Evils and troubles come upon people because God is not with them.
3. Why does God threaten to forsake his people (.17) when earlier (.6) Moses said that God would not forsake them? Of course, he's talking about two different time periods.
 - a) God will be with them as they enter the PL and conquer it (vs. 6). They'll continue to follow the Lord obediently while Joshua and the elders are the leaders.
 - b) Once they get established in the PL, and they forsake the Lord by falling into idolatry (vs. 16), then the Lord will forsake them (vs. 17).

That's exactly what happened. Cf. the book of Judges.

- D. .19 God instructs Moses to compose a song and teach it to Israel as a testimony against them. The song itself is found in chapter 32. We'll look at the song next week, DV.
- E. .20 The people will enter the PL, conquer it, and become prosperous. But they will quickly turn away from God and become idolatrous. They will break the covenant, and that will result in many evils coming upon them. This song will be a witness against them.

App: Prosperity often leads to apathy and neglect of spiritual priorities. People turn to God in times of adversity and forget God in times of plenty. Jesus affirmed that it is very hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of God. Prosperity often leads to corruption and neglect of spiritual responsibilities. The Bible warns us repeatedly not to let prosperity lead to neglect and spiritual drift.

- F. .21end Note the word “inclination” (יָצָר) – it means manner, tendency, disposition, impulse.
 - 1. Israel is a stubborn and rebellious people, and God knows it very well. He wants the best for them, but he knows what's going to happen—idolatry and disaster is in their future.
 - 2. God has foretold their unfaithfulness and disloyalty even before they enter the PL.
- G. .22 Moses wrote the song and taught it to the people. We'll look at that next time.
- H. .23 He inaugurated Joshua as the new leader and encouraged him to be strong and of good courage. He would bring Israel into the PL, just as God had promised. God would be with Joshua just like he was with Moses.

App: Success depends on God's presence with us. We want to enjoy God's blessing on our lives, not his discipline. God's presence with us largely depends on our faithfulness to him.

V. Moses deposits the book of the law with the Levites. .24-29

- A. .24 Moses wrote these things in a book/scroll. Remember that Deut is a series of sermons on the law. Moses probably originally spoke these things to Israel and later compiled all of this into a single scroll.

Obviously, the book of Deut continues after vs. 24, so what Moses wrote down was probably his messages, basically chapters 4-30, and then that material was compiled and edited later.

- B. .25-26 He gave the documents to the Levites who put it beside the ark of the covenant as a witness against the people.

These documents are a witness—i.e., they retain their authority over Israel even after Moses is long gone. The law of Moses is the permanent law for Israel. This is their constitution for the nation.

Illus.: Constitutions are important. Somewhere in Washington DC (I assume), some library preserves the original Constitution and Dec. of Independence. Why do we keep those old documents? Because they continue to be relevant and binding on us as a nation. They act as a witness against us, especially when we ignore them. People appeal to the constitution still today, centuries after it was written.

The law of Moses was the constitution for Israel; it retained its authority over them.

The presence of a witness implies that God will judge the people for their failure to follow their constitution. When they turn away from the Lord and suffer for it, this book of the law will testify that they deserve to be judged.

So there were actually *two* witnesses against Israel if they became disloyal and disobedient—the scroll of the law and the song of Moses.

- C. .27f Israel was a rebellious and stiff-necked people. Moses expects the people to rebel further after his death.

1. .29 they would become utterly corrupt and turn aside from God's commands. Moses saw that apostasy was inevitable.
2. .29end "through the work of your hands" – i.e., making idols, cf. the golden calf incident.

Their disobedience would provoke the Lord to anger.

- D. .28 Moses demanded that the elders of Israel gather to hear these words and call creation as another witness against them.

[It's unclear if Moses read all of this again to the elders and officers or if he read portions of it or just summarized it. Perhaps he reviewed the blessings and cursings of the law. Or maybe he just demanded that the elders and officers legally accepted the terms of the covenant.]

We now have *three* witnesses against Israel – the book of the law that God gave Moses, Moses' song, and creation itself—"heaven and earth" (.28end) would testify against Israel if they become unfaithful.

Try to imagine what Moses must have been thinking as the Lord tells him that shortly after Israel conquers the PL they will fall into idolatry, suffer destruction, and be evicted from the land. After 40 years of struggle—leading Israel out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the verge of the PL—after all of Moses’ exhortations and warnings, Israel was destined to turn from the Lord, suffer under the curses of God, and be evicted from the land. It must have been terribly disappointing for Moses to know that his people would turn away from the Lord so quickly. I imagine that he was severely disheartened by this revelation.

Serving or leading people can be very discouraging. You pour your time and effort into people, only to see them turn away from everything they were taught and pursue the opposite. We must remember that our service is ultimately to God. We serve God by serving people. We cannot control how people respond. All we can do is be faithful. Moses and Joshua were both faithful. Even the greatest leaders have mixed results when it comes to how people respond to their exhortations and teachings.

Was Moses a failure? He certainly made one particularly large mistake. But aside from his rare failures, and even in spite of them, Moses was faithful. He did what God called him to do. And even though the Israelites were hard hearted and rebellious, Moses kept trying to work with them and to teach them. He did what he could do; he was faithful to his commission, even though he knew that the people would rebel. And that’s all we can do as well. We can be faithful no matter how people respond.

Further, we must keep in mind that human failure and sin cannot hinder God’s plan. Even Israel’s apostasy was all part of God’s plan to bring the Messiah into the world. God knew of Israel’s future rebellion and idolatry; he would use it for his own purposes.

Let’s try to serve God’s people faithfully and with courage and strength. We keep on serving until we cannot serve anymore. We can trust that God is with us when we are faithful to him.