

Deut 31:30–32:47 The Song of Moses—a Warning Against Ingratitude

Music has an amazing ability to remain within our minds. E.g., a song gets “stuck” in your head.

Teachers often use songs to help students learn and remember.

But imagine singing a song that is highly critical of your family or your nation. Imagine singing a song that describes your failures and that predicts a dreadful future for your people. Some songs are like that; they include all kinds of terrible things that have happened. That’s the kind of song recorded for us in Deut 32.

Moses composed a song (cf. 31:19), wrote it down and taught it to the people (31:22). This song serves to exhort the people toward faithfulness and it will serve as a testimony against them if they disobey God’s commandments.

Quote: [Moses’] song is fundamentally about God’s faithfulness and the people’s faithlessness. Most of the song condemns the incomprehensible stupidity and ingratitude of Israel in turning from the LORD to other gods.¹

This song is ancient. It’s not much like songs we sing today. The song uses Hebrew poetry, symbolism, and figurative language that may be unfamiliar to us. Much of this uses past-tense language, but it’s actually referring to the future. This is a prophecy of what will happen to Israel after they settle in the PL.

Let’s consider the song of Moses and think about what we can learn from it. We must avoid Israel’s sin – unfaithfulness and ingratitude. If we want to avoid God’s severe discipline, we must be faithful and grateful.

This is a rather long passage, and I’ll try to move through it quickly.

I. Prelude/introduction: an exhortation to listen (31:30-32:2)

A. .1 Moses appeals to heaven and earth to hear his words.

Appealing to creation as a witness suggests that the song has universal importance. The Jews needed to hear this, but so does everyone else.

¹ Matt Fuller, *Teaching Deuteronomy: From Text to Message*, Teach the Bible (Ross-shire, Scotland; London: Christian Focus; PT Resources, 2022), 325–326.

B. .2 Comparing his teaching in the song to rain and dew shows how this material is beneficial. I.e., it's in the best interests of Israel to listen to this.

C. The point of vss. 1-2 is that the people better listen to this teaching.

II. The theme: the proclamation of the Lord (32:3–4)

A. .3 The general purpose of the song is to proclaim the name of the Lord. This poem is a reflection of God's character and work. It's an appeal to Israel to trust in God because of his greatness.

1. .3 God's name is "LORD" – Yahweh. This is the personal, covenant name of God.

2. To "ascribe greatness" to God is to worship him.

a) The word is parallel to "proclaim." It's basic meaning is "give."

b) Worship is proclaiming the great character and nature of God; it's giving to God the glory that he deserves.

c) Moses is reminding the people that God is greater than any of the Canaanite gods, and that idolatry would be stupid and disastrous.

App: In our context, the purpose of Christian music is to aid in worship. The music we use at church should "ascribe greatness" to God. It should be God-centered, focused on the majesty and glory of God. That's what hymns are supposed to do.

B. .4 Describing God as a "rock" (4x) implies that God is steadfast and stable; he is firm and unchanging. Everything else in in flux and changing in our world, but God is permanent. We find stability when we cling to this rock. We can rely upon God.

C. God's work is perfect, and his character is just, true, righteous, and upright. God is absolutely without sin or error. God always does what he promises he will do. That's why we can rely on him. He is stable and unchanging.

So proclaiming all of this about God is worship; we worship God by ascribing these great character qualities to him.

III. The indictment of Israel (32:5–6)

After proclaiming the righteous character of God, the Song now turns to the sinful, unfaithful character of the nation of Israel.

- A. .5 Israel, by way of stark contrast, is the opposite of God. They do not share his holy character. They are corrupt, not his children, blemished, perverse and crooked. God is right; Israel is wrong.

The words “not his children” are a severe condemnation of Israel. The Jews are God’s chosen people, his children. Yet here, he disowns them because of their sin.

The word “blemish” (מִלּוּם) means “stain, spot, defect.” i.e., the sense is that Israel is morally stained, morally defective, morally unclean.

Moses describes his people as “perverse” and “crooked.” They twist and turn away from the right path.

- B. .6 They are foolish and unwise.
1. They seem to have forgotten that God is their father and creator. God brought them out of Egypt and established them as a nation. He made a covenant with them and gave them the law. He created them and sustained them.
 2. But after all that God had done for them, how do they respond to the Lord? They lacked gratitude. They dealt with the Lord corruptly and foolishly. After all that God had done for them, they responded to God’s benefits by unfaithfulness, disloyalty, and moral corruption.

So God is righteous and upright, while Israel is corrupt and perverse. They deserve the judgment that’s coming to them.

IV. God is a Rock of faithfulness (32:7–14)

Here is a long list of benefits from God that Israel enjoyed. If Israel would remember its history, it would remain faithful to God.

- A. Israel is God’s inheritance (32:7–9)
1. .7 “days of old” – previous generations long ago
 2. .8 refers to the early chapters of Genesis when nations were developing and various people groups were gathering together.
 3. .9 God chose Israel out of all the nations as his people; Jacob is his inheritance.

“portion” refers to a piece/share of land measured out. Israel is ready to inherit the land that God has designated for them.
- B. The Lord cared of Israel (32:10–12)

.10a Israel was helpless and miserable (i.e., life in Egypt or in the Sinai Desert). But the Lord took Israel, loved her, and cared for her like an eagle does with its chicks.

.10end To keep Israel as “the apple of one’s eye” is to show the most tender care to something. The Hebrew literally means “little man of the eye,” i.e., the pupil. Anything very dear or cherished is protected like the apple of the eye.

.11 presents another comparison—that of an eagle caring for its chicks. God is like an eagle watching over and supporting his people.

The comparison pertains to care, protection, and guidance.

.12 God takes credit for this alone; no foreign god helped Israel; God alone protected them.

C. The Lord will prosper Israel in Canaan (32:13–14)

1. The language here seems to be prophetic, describing what Israel will experience once they settle in the PL. The verbs are in the past tense, but they describe the future.

2. .13a To “ride on the heights of the earth” is an expression that refers to the conquest of the land. Canaan was a mountainous land. Those who control the high places in the land possess the land.

3. .13-14 Moses mentions various products of the field—honey, olive oil, cheese curds or butter, milk, lambs/rams/goats, wheat, and wine. Honey and oil coming out of rock implies that God will make even the least productive places produce food for Israel.

The picture here is that of prosperity and fruitfulness. This is looking forward to how it will be for Israel once it conquers the PL.

When they conquer the PL, they’ll enjoy these choice, rich, fine foods in abundance. That will be one of God’s blessings.

App: We should recognize that abundant, rich, fine food is an aspect of God’s blessing. Most of us are very blessed to enjoy abundant, good food. We should recognize that as a blessing from God.

But, in spite of God’s blessings ...

V. Israel are children with no faithfulness (32:15–18)

Israel repaid God's benefits with unfaithfulness and neglect.

- A. .15 "Jeshurun" is another name for Israel (3x in Deut); it's a term of endearment.
1. The word seems to pertain to righteousness; it was an honorable name that described Israel as a nation of just/righteous men.
 2. The point here is that Israel is anything but that; they are exceedingly unrighteous because of their ungratefulness toward God. They had become the opposite of a righteous nation.

- B. .15b Israel "grew fat, thick, obese." These words describe prosperity, plenty, and wealth. God gave them plenty to eat, and in return, rather than remaining faithful and thankful, Israel forsook God and became idolatrous.

To "kick" (.15a) at something is to rebel against it. Think of a goat or cow that kicks when the owner tries to milk it. The farmer takes care of the cow/goat, but the animal still kicks. Israel was kicking at God's commands and God's authority over them.

App: We need to be very careful that we don't "kick" at God's commands. We must submit to God willingly and thankfully, not rebel against him.

- C. .16 "provoked Him to jealousy" – Israel is in covenant with God, and their idolatry provokes God's jealousy.
- D. .18 Israel is "unmindful" of God; they forgot God; they are not thankful for all God has done for them. Their mind is not focused on God.

App: One of the worst sins is lack of gratitude. We should be very careful to express our thanks to God for all of his blessings.

So while God had created Israel and been a loving, caring father to the nation, Israel acted faithlessly and corruptly, deserting God, abandoning him, and forgetting him. They turned from their father to false gods.

And so, in response ...

VI. God will reject and punish his rebellious people. (32:19–25)

Because of this idolatry, Israel is in for some severe judgment from God.

- A. .19 In response to Israel’s unfaithfulness, God will spurn Israel—he will reject, despise, abhor them.
- B. .20 God will hide his face and let them go on by themselves.
 - 1. Hide his face – to withdraw his favor
 - 2. What will their end be? What would happen to Israel if God withdraws his special care from them? They would almost instantly be destroyed.
 - 3. .20b God describes Israel as perverse and lacking faith.
- C. .21 They provoked God to jealousy through their idolatry; God is angry with them. Israel had provoked God, and now God intends to provoke them.
- D. .22 God’s anger is like a fire that will burn everything down to the ground.

This is figurative language, but note the extent of this judgment—“burn to the lowest hell,” “consume the earth,” “set on fire the foundations of the mountains.” So this is very serious and severe. The point is that when the judgment from God falls on Israel, it will be exceedingly harsh and thorough. Their unfaithfulness and corruption will lead to a profound catastrophe.

Deuteronomy 4:24 *For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.*

- E. .23 God will send disaster upon the nation; he’ll shoot his arrows at them.
 - 1. Disasters will be a “heap”—speaks of great abundance.
 - 2. Disaster will be like “arrows”—speaks of sharpness and pain, like a warrior shooting an enemy.
- F. .24 lists some examples of the calamities Israel can expect. The result of God’s severe judgment will be famine, pestilence, and destruction. Beasts and poisonous serpents will attack them. Again, we have figurative language pertaining to all kinds of disasters and catastrophes.

- G. .25 “The sword” implies warfare. Israel will be swept up in war. Other nations will destroy them. People of all ages will be terrified. This will affect everyone from youth to old age and both men and women.

The judgment that God has in store for Israel if it turns to idolatry will be very severe. The nation should expect destruction if it violates the terms of the covenant.

App: Likewise, we can expect severe discipline/chastisement if we are stubbornly, unrepentantly disobedient.

VII. God is ready to utterly destroy the nation. (32:26–30)

- A. .26b The destruction would be so severe that the surrounding nations would forget Israel ever existed.
- B. .27 The only reason God does not utterly destroy Israel is that the nations would boast that they had done it. The conquering nations might think that their own power has conquered Israel. Only for God’s own name does he abstain from utter destruction for Israel.

The Jews have endured enormous suffering over the centuries, but they were not utterly wiped out. Their memory has not ceased. There are still about 16M ethnic Jews living today. Many other ethnic groups have ceased from among men, but not the Jews. It’s only because God still has a plan for them that they still exist as a distinct group.

- C. .28 Here we have the reasons for these calamities that have struck Israel. The nation lacks counsel and understanding. Israel is stupid, wicked, and without sense.
- D. .29 God wishes that they could understand all of this. If they considered what God would do for them if they obeyed, and what will happen to them because of their rebellion, they would not make such a bad choice.
- E. .30 God could make one Israelite soldier chase a thousand enemies. I.e., Israel could enjoy military victories; they could conquer all their foes easily. But as it stands, God had sold and surrendered them to defeat.

App: Only God knows the blessings that we might have experienced had we remained loyal to him. When we stand before the JSOX, most of us will regret that we failed to serve God as well as we might have.

VIII. God will punish Israel’s enemies (32:31–38)

A. .31 The gods of the Canaanites (“their rock”) are not like the God of Israel (“our Rock”). Even the pagan Canaanites would have to admit that the God of Israel was much more powerful than the Canaanite gods.

B. .32 “their vine” again refers to the Canaanites and their false gods. The heathen religions are like Sodom and Gomorrah, full of gall and bitterness.

Everyone knows what happened to S & G—severe judgment fell.

C. .33 their “wine” is poisonous and venomous.

D. .34 The sense is that everything coming to Israel because of its sin has been within the plan of God. Nothing can stop God’s decrees against Israel.

E. .35 God will have vengeance and recompense against Israel for their idolatry; their foot will slip.

1. A slipping foot marks the beginning of a fall.

Jonathan Edwards preached a famous sermon in 1741 from this passage—“Their foot shall slip in due time” – the title of the sermon was *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.

2. .35b Their calamity is at hand. Judgment will fall quickly.

App: We can apply these principles to both apostate Israel and to the unrepentant wicked people of our generation. Their foot will slip; the day of judgment, vengeance, and calamity will come upon them. Their only hope is repentance and faith in Christ.

F. .36-38 God will judge but also show compassion.

1. In spite of Israel’s corruption and idolatry, God will still show compassion to his “servants.” There was always a small remnant in Israel who had not bowed the knee to idols.

So God will not utterly destroy and disown Israel. God still has a plan for them in spite of their rebellion and corruption.

2. .36b Israel will eventually get to the place where it has no power. Their idols will not help them. They will seek after these false gods but they cannot save them.

3. .38end These idols can do nothing to help them. Israel cannot take refuge in such false gods.

App: This reminds me of how so many people in our culture have abandoned God and pursued their own lusts. The result of that has been chaos and destruction. Some people are finally realizing that abandoning God was not a good idea. Life works better when we fear God and keep his commandments.

IX. The Lord has compassion toward Israel and vengeance on the enemies (32:39–43)

Vs. 39 is the climax or high point of the song. God controls all of life, history, and nations. Because Yahweh is the one and only true and living God, Israel must worship him alone and reject their false gods.

- A. .39 God has the power of life and death. The destiny of Israel is in God's hands; he can grant them life or he can destroy them. No one can deliver one to be judged from God's hand.
- B. .40 "raise my hand to heaven" – as in taking an oath or invoking the name of God. God swears by himself that he will do all of this. This judgment is guaranteed by God's oath.
- C. .41 God portrays himself here as a strong warrior who is about to destroy his enemies. He will take vengeance with his "glittering sword." He will repay those who hate him.
- D. .42 Judgment will be severe for his enemies. This is the language of complete military victory. How sad that this language applies to Israel, as if they were God's enemies and not his own people!
- E. .43 The song ends with an invitation to the nations to rejoice that God will punish his enemies and atone for the land and his people.

At the very end of the song, there is still hope that God would have mercy on Israel. In spite of all that Israel had done, God will still provide atonement for the land and for his people.

App: I believe that God still has a plan for national Israel.

We also see that the only hope for rebellious sinners is atonement—a price must be paid to satisfy God's wrath. That's what Jesus did when he died on the cross.

X. Moses presents the song and exhorts Israel to obey the law. (32:44–47)

- A. .44 Moses spoke all the words of this song to the people. Did he sing this or speak it like a poem? It says that he "spoke" this song, so it was most likely more of a poetry reading than singing a song.

- B. .46 Moses exhorted the people to listen to the words of this song. He again tells them to “command your children to be careful to observe all the words of this law.”
- C. .47 Life and success for Israel depends on them keeping God’s law. If they want to remain in the PL and enjoy all the blessings that God had promised, they’d better obey God’s commands and reject idolatry.

The intent of the song was to provoke Israel to obedience by proclaiming God’s greatness. This prophecy of their apostasy is an attempt to prevent it from happening. They should be loyal to God and not fall into idolatry.

Israel learned this song and it helped them live in obedience and faithfulness for many generations, right?

Sadly, it did not work out that way. It seems unlikely that Israel kept Moses’ song in mind for more than a single generation. We find in the book of Judges that Israel went astray as soon as Joshua and his generation passed off the scene. Israel had a remarkable ability to ignore the warnings and exhortations God gave them. They apparently forgot this song.

We should not be so stupid and foolish as Israel was. We must remember that God is a “consuming fire.” The language of this poem/song reveals that God wants to bless his people, but he will chastise them severely if they rebel against him. The Bible reveals that God is both good and severe. If we want to enjoy God’s blessings, we must remain faithful and obedient to his commands. If we flagrantly disobey God’s commands, we will experience God’s severe, stern discipline.

Moses wanted Israel to think about this song, to keep it in mind, so as to remain faithful to God. The song should remind us about the benefits of faithfulness and gratitude for what God has done, as well as remind us about the judgment that God promises when we are unfaithful and ungrateful.

The song includes many dreadful threats, but it ends on a positive note: *He will provide atonement for His land and His people.*