

## Deuteronomy 32:48-52, 33:26-34:12 Moses' Last Words and Death

We've finally arrived at the very end of Deuteronomy. We began this series on Sept 1, 2024. We've taken breaks during the summers and during the holidays, but otherwise we've looked at most of the book verse by verse over the last year-and-a-half. Considering that Deut has 34 lengthy chapters, that's not too bad.

We now come to the very end of Moses' life. He's 120 years old and would not be crossing the Jordan to enter the PL.

Deuteronomy ends with God preparing Moses for death, his last words, his death on Mt. Nebo, the transition to Joshua's leadership, and then a final statement about the importance of Moses.

We learn here that the consequences of sin persist, but also that God is merciful and blesses his people when they remain faithful to him.

Let's consider Moses' last words and death.

### I. Directives for Moses' Death (32:48–52)

- A. .49 God directed Moses to climb Mt. Nebo and view the land of Canaan.

Mount Nebo is in the Abarim Mountains, a range running in a general north and south direction about ten miles east of the most northern part of the Dead Sea, rising to about 4,000 feet above the Dead Sea.<sup>1</sup>

This area is east of Jericho, just at the north-eastern end of the Dead Sea.

- B. .50 He will then die there on the mountain.

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<sup>1</sup> Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 217.

C. .51 The reason he will not enter the PL: he trespassed against God when he hit the rock instead of speaking to it (Num 20:11-13).

.51b Notice how God describes Moses' sin: "you did not hallow me..." I.e., you did not treat me as holy; you did not uphold my holiness. What Moses did was simple disobedience, and God saw that as a violation of his holiness.

**App:** That's what sin is—a violation of God's holy character and commands. A failure to uphold God's holiness is sin. Sin is the failure to be holy.

Moses had appealed to the Lord to change his mind about letting him enter the PL (3:23-25), but God refused. God held him accountable for this sin.

If you read the story of the occasion where Moses hit the rock, it is obvious that Moses was acting on emotion; he was lashing out because of frustration and stress. Under that pressure, he indulged his anger and made a sinful decision.

**App:** That can easily happen to any of us as well. Our sinful, disordered emotions are often the cause of our sinful choices. When we follow our emotions—when we indulge our sinful desires—the outcome is usually regrettable.

Sin may have long-term consequences. Moses was "the servant of the Lord," but still, his sin had long-term effects. We live with the results of our choices, and some of those effects may persist for the rest of our lives.

I'm sure Moses reflected long and hard about how his sin prevented him from entering and enjoying the PL.

So the best thing to do is control ourselves and not indulge our sinful feelings. We must not allow our disordered emotions to ruin our prospects for the future.

- D. .52 God will not allow Moses to enter the PL, but he will allow Moses to see the land that he is giving to the children of Israel. This viewing of the land was a final blessing that God gave to Moses; it was an expression of God's grace and mercy.

Moses could imagine what life would be like in the PL, but he was not allowed to experience it for himself.

**App:** We don't often get a glimpse into what could have been, what we might have enjoyed had we made better decisions. Some of us can imagine how life could have been if we had not made wrong decisions in our lives.

We must avoid making the kinds of decisions that we will regret later. We have to be able to see that bad decisions will have a long-term negative impact on us—and avoid making those bad decisions.

If we uphold God's holiness—if we faithfully obey God's commands—we won't make the kind of decisions that will cause us regret later in life.

## II. The Blessing of Moses on the Tribes (33:1–29)

Moses speaks of each of the 12 tribes in poetic and prophetic language. This material is specific to the 12 tribes and does not have much application to us.

Skip most of this; pick up the last part of this section.

## III. A final tribute to God and Israel (33:26–29)

Moses uses some picturesque, poetic, and figurative language here to confer a final blessing/congratulation upon Israel.

- A. .26 God is unique.

1. “Jeshurun” – another name for Israel (third time in Deut); it's a term of endearment.

The word seems to pertain to righteousness; it was an honorable name that described Israel as a nation of just/righteous men.

The point is that no other nation has a god like the God of Israel. God is utterly unique; no other so-called god is like him. And that means that Israel, as God's own people, should not be like the other nations; they should be set apart and distinct.

Numbers 23:9 ... [Israel is] *A people dwelling alone, Not reckoning itself among the nations.*

**App:** That principle of separation is thoroughly biblical—both OT and NT. God's people ought to be distinct.

2. .26 God pictured as riding upon the heaven and the clouds is a figure used to denote the unlimited omnipotence with which God rules the world.<sup>2</sup>
3. God uses his omnipotent power to help his people. Israel is utterly dependent on God as they enter the PL. The only way they can conquer the PL is that God will help them.
4. .27 God is your refuge. He upholds and supports Israel while expelling and destroying their enemies.
5. .27 God is transcendent above all things—he's in the heavens and the clouds—yet he is with his people, supporting them and holding on to them.

**Quote:** Everlasting arms are arms whose strength is never exhausted.<sup>3</sup>

- B. .28 Israel will dwell in safety and will enjoy prosperity in the PL.  
Grain, wine, and dew are signs of God's blessings in the land of milk and honey.
- C. .29 "Happy are you," or "Hail to thee" (K&D)  
These are the very last words of Moses recorded in the book. He finishes his life with a final blessing for Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> Keil and Delitzsch *OT Commentary*

<sup>3</sup> Keil and Delitzsch *OT Commentary*

Israel should be happy. The Lord saved them and helps them. Israel's enemies will submit to them, and Israel will tread down their high places, i.e., they'll triumph over the Canaanites.

God was Israel's shield and sword—these are military pictures that implied Israel's victory over their enemies.

**Quote:** Moses pictures God as warrior king who rides on the clouds of heaven and drives out the enemy from the land, so that Israel might possess it in fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise (33:26–29).<sup>4</sup>

This is rather optimistic language, especially after the revelations of failure and idolatry Moses had predicted and warned about earlier (chapter 32). But I suppose Moses wants his final words to be encouraging and uplifting, in spite of his previous dire and discouraging predictions.

This last section is an expression of what Israel could potentially experience. If they would keep God's covenant, God would help them, provide refuge for them, uphold them, defeat the enemy, provide safety, provide food, make them happy and save them, protect them, and give them military victory. That's the life they could have if they remained faithful to God and obeyed his commands.

One of the key, repeated themes of Deut is that God blesses his obedient people. God threatens severe discipline if Israel rebels and becomes idolatrous, but he also promises immense blessings if they would be faithful and obedient. They could enjoy an abundant life—if they simply obeyed the Lord.

**App:** The NT repeats that same theme—Jesus promises an abundant life for those who follow him. If we want to enjoy God's blessings on our lives, then we must be faithful and obedient.

Following the Lord faithfully is the key to a happy, productive, and long life. Human flourishing comes through faithful obedience to God.

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<sup>4</sup> Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 5, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 329.

What would your life be like if you kept God's commandments faithfully?

#### IV. The Death of Moses and the Succession of Joshua (34:1–12)

One major question about this final part of the text is, Who wrote it? If Moses is alone on the mountain with God, and if he dies, he obviously did not write this part of the text. Maybe Joshua wrote it. The text does not say that he was there, but he might have been.

This seems to be a first-person report from someone who was there and who observed all of these details. Probably the only one who could have been there was Joshua. Or maybe God revealed this directly to Joshua.

A. .1 Moses climbed Mt. Nebo (Pisgah) and the Lord showed him all the PL—from north to south.

Note: the name "Pisgah" means "cleft, ridge, range." It might not actually be a place name but more a description of the highest point in the range of mountains north east of the Dead Sea.

Moses began his ministry when the Lord appeared to him at the burning bush, and now he ends his ministry in God's presence as God shows him the land that he had promised to give to Israel.

1. .1b Gilead and Dan are in the north.

There are two places called Dan, both in the north—one to the west (Laish) and one in the east (probably in Gilead).

2. Naphtali, Ephraim, and Manasseh are around the Sea of Galilee.

3. Judah is in the center of the PL.

4. The Western Sea is the Mediterranean.

5. The south (Negev) and Zoar (south of the Dead Sea) is the extreme south of the land.

The view extends from north to northwest, then west, then southwest, then south—a counter-clockwise sweep of the land.

On a clear day, you can apparently see most of this land. I'm told you cannot see the Med from this spot because of a range of mountains that are in the way. So some suggest that God perhaps improved Moses' vision or granted him the ability to see all of this land. God somehow caused Moses to see all of this land, either physically or in a vision.

- B. .4 The Lord verified that this was the land that he had promised to Israel.

These are the last words from God to Moses as recorded in Deut.

God began the book with a promise to give the PL to Israel and he finishes it by restating the same promise.

Deuteronomy 1:8 *See, I have set the land before you; go in and possess the land which the LORD swore to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—to give to them and their descendants after them.*

And we should note that the very last words from God to Moses during his earthly life recorded here were “you shall not cross over there.”

Deuteronomy 1:37 *The LORD was also angry with me for your sakes, saying, ‘Even you shall not go in there.’*

So Deut begins and ends with the same statements—Israel will inherit this land, but Moses will not have the privilege of entering the PL.

**Quote:** What drama! What pathos! What inward pain! What sense of accomplishment mixed with disappointment must have been in Moses' mind as he looked over the land the Lord had promised to Israel! ... The Promised Land lay before him—but his mission was over.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 234.

C. .5-6 Moses died and God buried him in a valley in Moab.

1. Notice the description here: “Moses the servant of the Lord.” That’s a fitting description for the man who led his people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the edge of the PL.

**App:** That would be a great description for any Christian—a servant of the Lord. Put that on your tombstone (epitaph).

I trust that you are a servant of the Lord. Would anyone say that about you? Would those words be used at your funeral? Would they be appropriate on your tombstone?

2. God apparently caused Moses’ death. He did not die of disease or old age (cf. vs. 7).
3. .5 “according to the word of the Lord” – “word” is literally “mouth.” I.e., “at God’s mouth.” God commanded it; he spoke it, and it happened—Moses died because God took his life.

God was with Moses when he died. Moses was present in the body and present with the Lord at his death. God who called him to be a prophet was there with him when he died.

**App:** That’s true for all Christians—God is present with you throughout your life and when you die. Upon death, you are immediately present with the Lord.

4. .6 God apparently buried Moses somewhere near the top of Mt. Nebo/Pisgah; Num 21:20 mentions a valley on the top of Mt. Pisgah. So somewhere in a valley not far from the top of this mountain range is where God buried Moses.
5. .6a “He buried him” – quite an amazing statement—God buried Moses’ body. God did this only for Moses.

God did not allow Moses into the PL, but as a final privilege or blessing, God himself buried Moses’ body. This was a final statement of approval for Moses’ ministry.

**App:** The fact that God buried Moses tells us something about the proper method for dealing with a dead body. God could have done anything with Moses' body, but what did he do? He buried it. God himself shows us what to do with a dead human body.

- D. .7 Moses was 120 years old and still in good health. God preserved Moses in good health until his purposes were fulfilled.

**App:** We live as long as God has a purpose for us. We should plan to keep serving God as long as we are physically able. Moses served right up until the day of his death.

Likewise, we should keep on serving God as long as we can.

God gave Moses a long life—120 years. We find some promises in the Bible that pertain to long life. We can extend our lives by following these principles:

Exodus 20:12 *“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you. (cf. Ephesians 6:2–3)*

Deuteronomy 5:33 *You shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess.*

Proverbs 3:1–2 *My son, do not forget my law, But let your heart keep my commands; 2 For length of days and long life And peace they will add to you.*

Proverbs 10:27 *The fear of the LORD prolongs days, But the years of the wicked will be shortened.*

The biblical prescription for long life and peace is to fear the Lord, keep his commandments, and walk in his ways.

- E. .8 Israel mourned Moses' death for 30 days.

**App:** We see here that mourning over someone's death is appropriate and fitting. We do not mourn as others who have no hope, but we still mourn the death of loved ones.

F. .9 Joshua asserts his leadership over Israel.

1. Moses had previously conferred the position of leadership on him. So there was no dispute or conflict over who would take over after Moses. There was a smooth transition of authority.
2. .9 Joshua had the qualifications for leadership—he was full of the spirit of wisdom.

**App:** Wisdom is probably the most important quality for a leader to have. We ought to pray that God would give wisdom to our leaders. All of us ought to be asking God for wisdom.

G. .10-12 A final tribute to Moses

Deuteronomy finishes with a eulogy for Moses.

This final eulogy describes Moses as the greatest of all prophets, one who knew God intimately, one who worked great miracles. These signs, wonders, mighty powers and terrors that Moses did confirmed him as a great prophet, unlike any others.

Remember that Moses is the author of all five books of the Pentateuch. We have all of that because of Moses. He was a great man.

Exodus 33:11 *So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. ...*

Numbers 12:6–8 *... If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. 7 Not so with My servant Moses; He is faithful in all My house. 8 I speak with him face to face, Even plainly, and not in dark sayings; And he sees the form of the LORD. ...*

No one else, other than Jesus himself, has had the privileges that Moses had, to see the glory of God and speak to him face to face.

1. .10 No prophet like him has arisen within Israel since that time. Joshua was also a great leader, but he was not quite up to the level of Moses.

2. Another prophet like Moses will arise (Dt 18:15)—the Messiah. Jesus is a prophet worthy of greater honor than Moses. Moses was the founder of the old covenant, and Jesus is the founder of the new covenant.

John 5:46 *For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me.*

3. .10end Moses knew God face to face. Lit., “mouth to mouth.” Moses’ relationship to God was unlike that of anyone else.
4. .11-12 God used him to perform signs, wonders, mighty powers, and great terrors.

**App:** This eulogy for Moses reminds us that someone is probably going to say something about us when we die. What will people say about us at that point? We ought to live in such a way that people have some nice things to say about us at our funerals.

And that finishes the book of Deuteronomy. It took us 40 messages and 422 pages of notes to get through almost the whole book.

Did Moses set foot in the PL? Yes, he did. Moses shows up on the Mt. of Transfiguration with Elijah.

Theme: summarized in Deuteronomy 10:12–13 *And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?*

Deuteronomy should challenge us to love, fear, serve, and obey God. God will bless us if we hear His word, obey it, and love God from the heart.