

## A People Saved by the Lord

### Deuteronomy 33:26-29

David Wollen    November 29, 2020



Good morning. Today we are finishing our series in Deuteronomy. I have to confess, this is bitter sweet. Deuteronomy has been preaching the gospel to us in a surprisingly powerful way. It's a book that looks forward and it takes us into Advent in a wonderful way.

When I was growing up, my father had a saying I heard many times: “The right thing at the wrong time is the wrong thing.” That was drummed into my head as a teenager and it was a good thing. When I left home and went out on my own, I needed wisdom like that. Fatherly wisdom is a gift.

In a sense, the book of Deuteronomy is full of fatherly wisdom. Over the past few weeks, we've been hearing the parting words of the father figure of the children of Israel. Taking possession of the land of Canaan was always the right thing. But for 40 long years, it had been the wrong time. It was the wrong time because of what the first generation of the Israel had failed to do 40 years prior. In the first chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses recounted that part of their history, saying, *“The Lord grew angry and swore an oath, ‘None of these men in this evil generation will see the good land I swore to give your fathers, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh...and Joshua, the son of Nun’* (Deuteronomy 1:34-35, 38).

Now these two men, Caleb and Joshua, are the only surviving members of that generation. One by one their peers had fallen and died in the desert. That was God's judgment on them for their faithlessness and unbelief, when they too had stood east of Jordan, on the threshold of Canaan, looking in right where their children now stood.

These children had grown up in the desert, hearing story after story around the campfires about all God had done. They heard about how God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt through miracles like the world had never seen. Next God led them through the parted waters of the Red Sea on dry ground and then took them to Mt. Sinai, where with clouds and thunder God gave the Law to Moses. They were then led to the edge of the Promised Land. How could they have been so faithless and so full of unbelief? Their children must have wondered these things and felt shame. How could their parents have failed to believe that God could do these great things when the good things He had promised were so close? Sometimes

the painful legacy of a parent can hang over their children like a dark cloud. Are they doomed to repeat those failures?

This land before them is still flowing with milk and honey. The people are still larger and taller. Their cities are still “*fortified to the heavens*” (Deuteronomy 1:28), very well protected. The descendants of the Anakim are still thriving there. Nothing has gotten easier with the passage of time. On top of that, this time—unlike it would have been for their parents—Moses is not going with them. He can’t go with them. Moses, the man of God, their father figure, their faithful prophet, is speaking to them as a father with the kind of faith and godliness their fathers had lacked. This is like the “coming of age” for a nation.

Throughout Deuteronomy, we’ve heard Moses urging them, pleading with them, “Listen and respond with faith and obedience. The goodness of God is not in question. The power and faithfulness of God are not in question.” What is in question is the people themselves and their fickle, wayward, sinful hearts. Would they succeed where their parents had failed? That’s where Deuteronomy gets a little complicated. At times, the answer seems to be yes, they will certainly succeed. But at other times it’s more like no, not only will they fail, but catastrophically so.

On the one hand, Moses says in Deuteronomy 9:3, “*Understand that today the Lord your God will cross over ahead of you as a consuming fire; he will devastate and subdue them before you. You will drive them out and destroy them swiftly, as the Lord has told you.*” Then on the other hand, Moses says in Deuteronomy 31:26-27:

*Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God so that it may remain there as a witness against you. For I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are. If you are rebelling against the Lord now, while I am still alive, how much more will you rebel after I am dead!*

This is one of the keys to understanding the book of Deuteronomy. Moses is preaching to more than one audience. He is speaking to the attentive ears and the beating hearts of this generation standing before him. They are hanging on every word of this beloved leader who’s about to die. But Moses is also preaching to future generations, to all future Israel yet to come. Even today, on this side of the cross, Moses is preaching to spiritual Israel—to us—even today.

It’s like the difference between what you can see on the horizon when you stand at ground level versus what you can see at 30,000 feet. From ground level, you can only see about three miles, but if you go up to 30,000 feet, you can see over 200 miles. In this way, throughout the book of Deuteronomy, Moses has been preaching at both altitudes. He’s speaking to the present and future generations interchangeably; sometimes he’s even speaking to both. In every

case, whether present or future, the only One Who is faithful is God Himself. He's the only One Who is faithful to the covenant in the end. Perhaps that's why, by God's design, Deuteronomy ends the way it does—with a blessing, a father's blessing. With these last words of Moses, we will finish our series and receive this blessing as well.

Turn with me now to Deuteronomy 33. This entire chapter is the blessing and there's only one other blessing like it in the whole Bible—back in Genesis 49 when Jacob was lying on his death bed and gave a similar blessing to each of his sons, the act of a father and a great patriarch. Now, Moses—who has become like a father to Israel—gives a similar blessing, tribe by tribe. You can scan through it and see that these are affectionate but prophetic words, first for the tribe of Reuben, then Judah, then Levi and so on.

Then we get to verse 26, when Moses takes a step back and does something Jacob did not do in his blessing. Moses gives a blessing for the entire family of God, as a whole family unit; a blessing for God's people for all time. Let's read this together, starting in verse 26:

- <sup>26</sup> There is none like the God of Jeshurun,  
who rides the heavens to your aid,  
the clouds in his majesty.*
- <sup>27</sup> The God of old is your dwelling place,  
and underneath are the everlasting arms.  
He drives out the enemy before you  
and commands, "Destroy!"*
- <sup>28</sup> So Israel dwells securely;  
Jacob lives untroubled  
in a land of grain and new wine;  
even his skies drip with dew.*
- <sup>29</sup> How happy you are, Israel!  
Who is like you,  
a people saved by the LORD?  
He is the shield that protects you,  
the sword you boast in.  
Your enemies will cringe before you,  
and you will tread on their backs.*

This is the Word of the Lord and we are so thankful for it.

There's a gravity that comes with a person's last words; even more so, the last words of a father to a child. With his last words, Moses is reminding the people of Israel who they are, but he doesn't do that by affirming their virtues and strengths. He does it by directing their gaze toward God. "*There is none like the God of Jeshurun.*" Jeshurun is God's affectionate, poetic

name for Israel. It doesn't show up very often in Scripture. The literal meaning is "straight one" or "holy one," which of course Israel on her own is not. But God can and will make her holy.

This is the final word for this new generation about to step forward in faith and go to war against Canaan, as they watch God fulfill His promises to them. "Israel," Moses is saying, "you're going into battle now, but do not fear. The God of heaven is rushing to your aid with all His majesty and power." The warriors of Israel may hold swords in their hands, but it is God Who is going into battle on their behalf.

In Deuteronomy 9:4 Moses says, "*The Lord will drive out these nations before you...*" Then he adds, "*...because of their wickedness.*" The purpose of this military conquest was not only to give them the land, but also to cleanse the land of its horrific evil. Back in Genesis 15, hundreds of years before when Abraham was in Canaan, God had made a promise and told him what would come to pass after his death. God told him that his descendants would go down to Egypt and live there in slavery for generation after generation. One of the reasons for that waiting, God said, was because "*...the iniquity of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure*" (Genesis 15:16).

You see, in history—both then and now—God works all things together for good and for His purposes (Romans 8:28). God's timing is never capricious. It wasn't like, "Sorry, Canaanites, but this land is reserved for someone else more important than you, so you're going to have to get up and go now." No, God is proactively and righteously issuing a judgment on their idolatry and evil. So yes, the coming war will have a physical dimension but first and foremost, it's going to be a spiritual battle.

Canaan was a land in the seductive, demonic grip of polytheism—they worshiped many gods. For the Canaanites, chief among those gods was Baal, whom they associated with the power of the clouds and the sky. In ancient Canaanite literature, Baal is described as "the rider of the clouds." That's how they saw him.

How fitting that God, sending His people to drive out the servants of Baal and to cast down those idols would reassure Israel, "It's not Baal riding the clouds to save them. It's the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—the great I AM—Who's going to be riding the clouds He created, coming to their aid." Moses is saying, "Don't be afraid. He Who fights for you is greater than all who oppose Him."

This spiritual battle continued throughout history and continues to this day. It's still being waged all around us. But on the cross, Christ won that war against sin and the devil. His victory was decisive. But the fighting is not over yet. Today, we're still living in spiritual wartime. There's still a battle being waged around us which begs the question: what do we need

to know today? What does this generation need to know about how to fight the good fight in 2020 and beyond? Well, we need the same thing.

### **In the heat of the battle, it is God Who fights for His people.**

Moses is preaching to us too, which is our first point. In the heat of the battle, it is God Who fights for His people. The New Testament is full of reminders of the reality of this battle. God's Word is clear that the enemy exists and Satan is taking the fight to us, the church. The Apostle Paul writes, "*We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*" (Ephesians 6:12 ESV). More likely than not—especially in our context—we need to pay closer attention to these things which are invisible to us.

Recently the Preachers' Cohort read through a book titled The Care of Souls, written by Harold Senkbeil. He's a wise retired pastor who's writing to a new generation of pastors. There's a powerful section where he gives sound advice for how to deal with spiritual warfare. I'm going to read a longer quote from his book. Listen to what Harold Senkbeil writes:

You've got to pay closer attention to invisible things. Behind every complication and difficulty encountered by pastors and churches, yes, by every Christian, lurk the machinations and intentions of the evil one. The devil is the sworn enemy of Christ and His church, yet too often we remain oblivious to the whole dimension of spiritual warfare. Thus by default we relegate that field to those who see this conflict with Satan in terms of demonology.

In that type of thinking, Christians need to take the fight to the devil out of the world to prevent him from taking over. But Scripture teaches that Satan is the prince of this world. The ungodly world is already in his corner. So he focuses his attacks and assaults on the church instead. This means our spiritual battle is a defensive one.

Yet there is good news too. We are not alone in this battle. We have a Hero Who fights for us. Like a medieval champion that took on challengers on behalf of his liege lord, Christ Jesus has fought against Satan in our place and won the victory. In His death and resurrection He routed all the forces of death and hell. And He still fights on our behalf, interceding for us before the throne of His Father on the basis of the atoning sacrifice and His blood. Keep that in mind next time you come under spiritual attack. Never attempt to go it alone and fight these battles by yourself.

Church, in the heat of the battle, it is the Lord Jesus Christ Who is fighting for us—for you. Our role is less like a warrior and more like a sentinel on the defensive wall of a fortress. When you see the enemy attack coming, your job is to sound the alarm, to call for God’s help through prayer, to reach out to brothers and sisters who will pray on your behalf.

Do you know, there is only one offensive weapon listed in the spiritual armor described in Ephesians 6? Paul says to take up “...*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication*” (Ephesians 6:17-18 ESV). The offense of the Christian is the Spirit of God. He’s the divine Warrior “*who rides the heavens to your aid, the clouds in his majesty*” (Deuteronomy 33:26). So take heart. The enemy can and will be defeated. So cry out to Jesus. Pray God’s Word, then wait for His deliverance. He is the One Who rescues us time and time again.

But that’s not all Moses has to say about the battle. Look at the last half of verse 27: “*He drives out the enemy before you and commands, ‘Destroy!’*” God could not have been more emphatic and repetitive on this point for Israel. They were commanded to utterly annihilate the enemy, to devote every idol and place of pagan worship to complete destruction, giving no mercy and no quarter. He forbade them to even tolerate the presence of evil among them.

Now, if we were to continue our series chronologically and go into the conquest of Canaan in the book of Joshua, we would see Israel falling short of this almost immediately. They did show up to fight at Jericho; that wasn’t their problem. The problem was that there were some of them who, instead of devoting everything to destruction as God had commanded, secretly held back some of the spoil for themselves. Because of this, in the next battle, Israel was routed completely, so they had to repent before God and root out the evil from their midst before they could take another step.

Preaching on this same verse in Deuteronomy, Charles Spurgeon makes this direct application: “If you would triumph over darkness, set yourself in the presence of the Son of Righteousness. There is no place so well adapted for the discovery of sin and recovery from its power and guilt as the immediate presence of God.”

**In the heat of the battle, do not become complacent about sin in the pursuit of holiness.**

Before God, there is no such thing as secret sin. What is done in darkness is seen as clearly by God as that which is done in the light of day. All is laid bare before Him at all times and God will not allow us to be complacent about this. When we make a place for sin in our

lives—whether we’re ignoring it or we’re actively hiding it—of one thing we can be sure: that sin will have a corrosive effect on our hearts and our walk with God. It will leach out into every other part of our lives. So it’s vital that we eagerly seek the destruction of every besetting sin that still lingers within us. How is this done?

John Piper writes about a trick question he once heard. I think this illustrates this idea well. “If you had access to all the latest machinery in a sophisticated science lab, what would be the most effective way to get all the air out of a glass beaker? If you’re like me, your mind immediately jumps to all the various ways you might be able to suck the air out of the glass beaker that would create a vacuum. It would be empty space. After all, that was the objective of the question—no air left in the beaker. But the best answer is far simpler and more effective than any more complicated method. The best way to get the air out of the glass beaker is simply to fill it with water. The air is expelled by displacing it with something else.”

Likewise, sin is driven out of our hearts when we set our hearts on the beauty and excellency of Christ, when we inhale and exhale the gospel daily, when we meditate on His Word, when we fix our minds on Christ, when we feed on Him, our true bread and our true drink. In this way, the Spirit of God transforms our hearts and resets our affections. Sanctification isn’t merely self-discipline or learning to control your behavior or thoughts. Sanctification is heart transformation, being conformed into the image of Christ.

The Puritan preacher Thomas Chalmers described this process as “the expulsive power of a new affection.” Isn’t that good? The heart will never be a vacuum. It will always be filled with something. The roots of sin are only eradicated by abiding in Christ, as the affections of our hearts are increasingly transformed, not only to love what He loves, but to love Him above all else. The amazing thing is that this is something God does in us Himself.

So in your defense against the enemy that attacks from the outside, as well as the offense against the sin that still lingers on the inside, the question and the solution in essence is the same: recognize that the battle belongs to the Lord. *“It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”* (Philippians 2:13 ESV). Your victory is assured!

### **In the heat of the battle, God gives His people contentment and peace.**

There’s more. There’s another promise woven into this text and it is our third point today. In the heat of the battle, God gives His people contentment and peace. If you put yourselves in the place of Israel, that’s quite a statement. Their future homeland was the crossroads of the ancient world and much coveted by other nations. In their history, there would always be the presence of war or the immediate threat of it. Yet God is telling them not to

live in fear, never getting a moment's peace, always wondering when the enemy will attack again.

Look at verse 28: *“So Israel dwells securely. Jacob lives untroubled in a land of grain and new wine; even his skies drip with dew.”* How can a people always under threat dwell securely and live untroubled? The former President Teddy Roosevelt once described his foreign policy as “speak softly and carry a big stick.” It was called “big stick diplomacy.” Well, for the nations of the world, they find their security in a strong military and a robust economy. But God's people find their security in Almighty God.

Look at the first half of verse 27: *“The God of old is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”* That is the key to the whole thing. God is telling Israel, “Abide in Me. Dwell in Me.” The imagery of fatherhood enters here. These metaphors are both intimate and fatherly. Moses doesn't want them to look to him anymore. He wants them to look to God as Father.

There's a familiar cliché that I'm sure you know well: “Home is where the heart is.” Well, Jesus says, *“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”* (Matthew 6:21 ESV). This is why for Jeshurun—for God's holy ones—home is where God is. He is their dwelling place as long as He remains the treasure of their hearts. Not only will God give them their homes, God will be their home. Moses is saying, “Be thankful for the land, but don't deify it. Don't make the land an end unto itself. Don't let this land become like an idol hiding in plain sight,” which is sometimes what we let God's blessings become. *“The God of old is your dwelling place...”* The text goes on to say, *“...underneath are the everlasting arms.”* What an intimate picture of a father with a child.

Here's the visual for this. My children love road trips. One of the chief reasons for that is that hotels have swimming pools. Even as small toddlers, they couldn't wait to visit the pool. But there was one problem: they couldn't swim. So for them, swimming meant jumping into the pool with Dad. They could kick their legs and laugh and splash and call over to the hot tub, “Mom, look! I'm swimming!” And they were—but not on their own. Underneath were the arms of a father. If their father were to let go, they would drop straight to the bottom, totally powerless to save themselves. But that was the furthest thing from their minds. They were totally secure and untroubled because they knew and loved and trusted their father. They didn't question his love for them or his trustworthiness.

Do you know that that's the kind of relationship God wants to have with you? The arms of earthly fathers are not everlasting. Soon my oldest will be too big for me to pick up; if I were to do so, I would tire out quickly. But we never grow too big or too old for the everlasting arms

of God. In every age and stage of life, God wants you to know Him as Father. You never outgrow this. You never stop being a child of God.

This is true because of the cross. When Mary first found the resurrected Jesus in the garden, He said to her, *“Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’”* (John 20:17 ESV). In Galatians 4:6, Paul says, *“God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”*

This is a truth that holds, even when it feels like the bottom has fallen out—which, if we’re honest, much of 2020 has felt a lot like. There are some in our congregation who have lost loved ones this year. Others have lost work. Some marriages are struggling. Some people are very isolated. Maybe you’re in a crisis of some sort right now. For all of us, there is a great heaviness that has surrounded our world this past year with much division, strife, suffering, fear and anxiety. I don’t think any of us are impervious to this.

But do you realize that the everlasting arms which never tire are holding you up right now? Even if the bottom does fall out, the everlasting arms will not give out. Those arms were stretched wide on the cross. The everlasting One atones for our sins with those arms and now draws us near with them. The price was so great that only the everlasting One could have paid it and it’s only because of this that now we can call God “Father.” For this reason, no matter the circumstance, we have joy.

What a fellowship, what a joy divine  
Leaning on the Everlasting Arms!  
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine  
Leaning on the Everlasting Arms!

What have I to dread?  
What have I to fear?  
Leaning on the Everlasting Arms  
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near...

Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms

[From “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” by Elisha Hoffman]

This is why Moses can gaze across God’s gathered people—both in the present and in the future—and then say these words in verse 29: *“How happy you are, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord?”* And how happy are you, brothers and sisters at New Covenant Bible

Church, together with God's family all around the world. Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord?

But for you, still an outsider looking in, perhaps today you're aware that you're not trusting in Christ alone. Or maybe you're someone who comes to church often; you know when to stand up and sit down and the right words to say when, but you know that this profession of faith isn't true for you. Are you becoming aware of the great and awesome burden of the sin you're carrying? Jesus died to take that from you. Don't you long to know the Father like this?

Let this be the day you bend your knee to Him and invite Jesus to be the Lord of your life as you trust in Him alone for salvation. That's who God's happy people are—those who have trusted in Christ and who are saved by Him and for Him.

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