

Blessings Before Death
Deuteronomy 32:48-33:29
Series: Loving God in Every Way

Introduction: Take your Bible and turn with me to Deuteronomy 32. Maybe you have heard of the name of William Carey. He has been considered by many to be the father of modern missions because of his pioneering work in India. He labored under intense conditions and in the face of great sorrow. He was an expert linguist and his methods have become the paradigm for many missionaries since. You will certainly recognize his most famous motto – “Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.” And this motto became the theme of his life, and the guiding principle of his ministry endeavors. In his will he directed that these words be put in his tombstone – “A wretched, poor, and helpless worm, On thy kind arms I fall.”

He died in 1834 and as he was about to die, he said to one of his friends – “When I am gone, say nothing about Dr. Carey; speak about Dr. Carey’s Saviour.” He desired his reputation after death to be a carry-over from his life. He didn’t live his life for himself, and he didn’t want those remembering after his death to be concerned with him, but rather with His Savior.

This is similar to what we find in Deuteronomy 32 and 33. We come this morning to Moses’ final words. Moses stands like a giant of the faith on the pages of Scripture. We will see the description of the Lord over Moses’ life next week when we cover chapter 34, and we will see that he was a unique servant of the Lord. But in the face of his own death, Moses was not concerned with Moses. As he thought about his final hours, he was consumed with his great Savior God. And so, like William Carey, his final words were about God, not about himself. But they were also words which were deeply encouraging and helpful and instructive to those he would be leaving behind. So, the takeaway from the text this morning for us is a lesson in how to die well, but also in how to learn from those who die well in the Lord.

Before we read the text this morning, I want to briefly point out how the text is organized. Chapter 33 is Moses pronouncing a blessing upon the individual tribes of Israel. Within that chapter there is a sandwich pattern. The chapter starts with a general, overarching statement about the greatness and powerful working of God. The chapter ends with a statement about the uniqueness of God and the resulting joy of God’s people. In the middle is the blessing upon the individual tribes. But if you zoom out a bit further you realize that the whole chapter is also sandwiched by similar texts. The death of Moses is the topic of the end of chapter 32, and then it is the topic again in chapter 34. So, this blessing is sandwiched between the text commanding Moses to ascend Mount Pisgah to die and be gathered to his people. You know that Scripture is not flippant in how it is put together or in what it includes. God uses an economy of words and he orders it perfectly to communicate truth – not just in what he says, but also in the order in which he says it. So, why is this chapter of blessing sandwiched between two texts which tell us about Moses’ death?

Well, certainly the final words of Moses are important, so we need to know that he is about to die to know that these are his final words to the people. But there's more here, I think. I think God is communicating that the blessing and the success on the people in the Promised Land is not dependent upon Moses. The faithfulness and the provision of God will not die with the death of their famed leader. God outlives the greatest of his saints, and his blessings are not captive to their demise. But I think the Lord is also teaching us that He is really serious about the curse of the Law. This book has been a series of sermons by Moses in which he has recounted the good law of God. And this has been replete with warnings about the seriousness of going against God's law and forsaking God's character and his good promises. And that is what Moses had done when he struck the rock rather than trusting the word of the true Rock. He is now about to die and miss out on the Promised Land because of his sin. In other words, he is exhibit Z – the final real-life picture of the seriousness of God's law before they enter the land. God's holiness will not be muted even for the greatest of his servants! With those things in mind, let's read Deuteronomy 32:48 through the end of chapter 33.

Last week we studied the very encouraging song that Moses taught to the people as their national anthem. It was a song of exaltation and exhortation and expectation. And now, on the same day as he taught them that song, the Lord spoke to Moses and told him it was time. It was time to go up the mountain and be gathered to his people. But before he leaves, he will speak one last time to his beloved people. Consider the emotions of this moment for Moses and the people. He has been their leader for their whole lives. He had faithfully followed the Word of the Lord and led them through the wilderness. And he had seen all of them grow up into the mighty people they were today. He had buried their parents and grandparents in the wilderness, and he had instructed them on how to love the Lord in every way. He had given his life and his soul to them out of obedience to the Lord. And now it was his time to go. I want to show you three evidences of God's gracious work in these final hours of Moses' life. He is reminded of God's holiness and reassured of God's promises and reliant on God's trustworthiness.

In the face of death Moses is:

- I. **Reminded of God's Holiness – 32:50-52**
 - a. That first evidence is seen in verses 50-52 where we learn the details of why Moses will not be entering the Promised Land. Before Moses will go to die, he is reminded of why he will die before entering the Promised Land. And that is because not even the best of God's servants can mute the holiness of God. There are two descriptions of Moses' sin given in verse 51. This is describing the incident of Numbers 20 where the people are out of water and they come complaining to Moses and Aaron about it. In their complaints they say things like, we should have just died with our brothers when they died. And, why did you make us leave Egypt and come into this forsaken wilderness where there is no water.
 - b. So, Moses and Aaron went to the Lord and asked him what to do with this faithless and complaining people. And the Lord told Moses to take the staff – the one by which he directed so many of the miracles in Egypt – and he was to go to the rock and speak to the rock and tell it to give its water to the people. But

Moses went and instead of speaking to the rock, he took the staff and struck the rock twice, and a great amount of water came out.

- c. And the Lord told them both right away that their sin in that moment would keep them from entering the Promised Land with the people. But why? The people were far from perfect, why do they get to enter, and Moses doesn't? Because Moses was to lead the people in faith filled obedience. And in this incident, he broke faith with the Lord and did not regard God as holy in the midst of the people. In other words, Moses broke the core command of this very book – to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. In that moment Moses did not love the Lord and he did not obey the Lord.
- d. The description of his sin is that he broke faith and that he did not treat the Lord as holy. To break faith means that he forsook the covenant he had entered into with the Lord. It is a word for sin that is used in the Old Testament exclusively for God's people – not for unbelievers. So, this is the sin of treachery and unfaithfulness to one's relationship with the Lord. It is used of Achan's sin in the book of Joshua to describe how he broke faith and didn't believe and obey the clear command of the Lord to not take any of the spoil from Jericho. The word is used in Numbers 5 to describe an adulterous wife – by her actions she betrays the relationship and breaks the good faith covenant of marriage she has entered into. That is what Moses did before the Lord at Meribah-kadesh. He didn't believe and follow the word of the Lord. He publicly betrayed the Lord.
- e. This is also described as not treating the Lord as holy before the people. This simply means that by Moses' sin he minimized God and maximized himself. His power and authority in the moment became too much for him and he operated in accordance with his own frustration and anger with the people rather than in humble submission to the Lord. Therefore, God's word was cast aside, and Moses' actions took center stage. And he thought that by his anger he could work the righteousness of God. But James is very clear about that isn't he? The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:20). The anger of man only produces the exaltation of self, the degradation of others, and the forsaking of a holy God. Moses' unbelief in that moment was not going to go unpunished by our holy Lord.
- f. And so, for the fourth time in the book of Deuteronomy we are told about the fact that Moses is under the same penalty as the rest of his generation who died in the wilderness. They all died because they refused to believe God's word and enter into the Promised Land when he told them to. Moses will die in the wilderness because he refused to believe God's word when he struck the rock. If the judgment is right and fitting for the common folk, then certainly it is fitting for, and even more appropriate for the leader. And remember who is writing these words about this punishment for Moses' sin – it is Moses himself. And this is one of the keys to understanding the greatness of Moses' usefulness to the Lord. He owned his sin before the Lord, and he spoke of it to God's people for the purpose of their own growth in faith. He desired for them to learn from his trespasses against the Law. He desired to be chief warning sign of what a faithless moment

can do in the life of the believer. He wants them to know how serious God is about his own holiness, more than he wants to save face and cover over his sin. And so, as God reminds him of his sin, he willingly and humbly puts it on paper for all of God's people in every generation to read – so that we will all know – no servant of God is above the serious judgment of sin against the holiness of God.

II. Reassured of God's Promises – 32:49, 52

- a. But even in God's statement to Moses about this judgment upon him, he also showers Moses with grace and mercy. We see that in verses 49 and 52 where he tells Moses that he is to go the mountain and view the land of Canaan. This is a merciful moment of reassurance for Moses. God is here reassuring Moses of his promises to his people. He takes Moses to see the land because he will keep his promise to give that land to His people. The view he gives Moses from the mountaintop is a view of merciful grace. God doesn't have to do this. He can just have Moses die in the camp. But he lets Moses see the land which he is giving to the people of Israel for an inheritance.
- b. This is the Lord keeping His promises to His people, and he is reassuring the people's leader that all of his life efforts have not been in vain. But more than that the Lord also reassures Moses of what will happen to him at the point of his death. He will die and be gathered to his people. In other words, he will go the way of the saints who have gone before him. The way of Jacob, and Isaac, and Abraham. He could face death confidently because it was not the failure of God to keep his promises, but the fulfillment of God's ultimate promise, that of eternal life. And what we see in chapter 33 flows out of this heart of assurance in the promises of God. Moses has never been more certain that God will do what God has said he will do – therefore he can bless the people like he does.
- c. What we see in Moses here is that he dies like he lived. He lived as one who was confident in and trusting of the promises of his God. He knew that the Lord would keep his word and so his life reflected a humble trust and an obedient faith. Your faith muscle doesn't usually become miraculously stronger at the end of life if you have not been exercising it your whole life. But if you have walked in humble trust in all of God's Word then when you come to that point of death you will be able to peacefully walk through the River of death into the waiting arms of your Savior.
- d. John Bunyan certainly modeled that for us. He had lived a life of humble trust after his conversion. He suffered much as he refused to conform to the rules of the State Church in England. And from his jail cell he wrote the greatest book of all time, behind the Bible – The Pilgrim's Progress. In 1628 he traveled to London to seek to reconcile a father and son who had become alienated from one another. And on his way back home he was caught in a bad storm and succumbed to some mysterious disease. As he lay on his death bed, about to die, he spoke words of humble trust which reflected his life of faith. He said, "Weep not for me, but for yourselves. I go to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; Who will, no doubt, through the mediation of His Blessed Son, receive me, though a sinner: when I

hope we shall ere long meet to sing the new song, and remain everlastingly happy, world without end, Amen!”¹ Bunyan died as he lived.

- e. The same can be said, on the negative side, of Stephen Gardiner. He was the Bishop of Winchester and he became a wicked tool in the hands of Bloody Mary, Queen of England during the 1550’s. He was part of the condemnation and execution of Ridley and Latimer, two of the most famous martyrs of that day. And on the day, they were burned at the stake he was smitten with some fearful disease and was soon on his deathbed. Among the curses and torments that came out of his mouth as he lay dying, were these final words, “I have sinned like Peter, but have not wept like him.” His faithless and sinful life was on display at his death.² But Moses, in the face of his death, was reassured of the promises of God, and died in faith, just as he lived.

III. Reliant on God’s Trustworthiness – 33:1-29

- a. And this shapes then his final words in chapter 33. As he speaks these words of blessing upon the tribes of Israel, he does so with a reliance upon God’s trustworthiness. He is confident in the Lord’s ability and intention of keeping all of his good promises, and so he can speak this blessing over the people in his final hours. If you know anything about your Old Testament, you know that this is remarkably similar to what Jacob did in Genesis 49 as he was about to die. He called his 12 sons together and he spoke a blessing over each one. And that was at the beginning of their exile in Egypt. But here we are now in Deuteronomy 33 at the end of their exile. They are about to reenter the land of Promise, the land that Jacob used to live in with his 12 sons. Now they are going to go in and take possession of it as their inheritance. And what Moses does here is a mirror of what Jacob did in Genesis 49. And this forms and inclusion, or a parenthesis, around the whole period of their captivity in Egypt. The God who was faithful to carry them through the years of uncertainty in captivity is the God who will now be faithful to take them into the land He has promised to them. So, there is similarity with Jacob’s blessing. But there is also a significant difference – and that is that this blessing by Moses is more of a prayer asking for God’s blessing, whereas Jacob’s blessing is more of a prophecy predicting how things would go with each tribe.
- b. Rather than go through each request that Moses makes for each tribe, I want to point you to the character of God that rings throughout this prayer of blessing. Every request Moses makes for the specific tribes is a request built upon his confidence in the proven character of God. The blessing begins and ends with a section extolling the greatness of God. And everything in between is an example of God’s trustworthiness. So, let me point you to four aspects of God’s character and work which shape how Moses prays in his final moments.
- c. *Mighty Warrior King – 1-5*

¹ Herbert Lockyer, *Last Words of Saints and Sinners*, pg. 63.

² Herbert Lockyer, *Last Words of Saints and Sinners*, pg. 89.

- i. In verses 1-5, God is presented as the Mighty Warrior King. Moses speaks of the Lord as the one who came from Sinai and dawned upon his people with ten thousand holy ones and with flaming fire in his right hand. This is how God showed his power and holiness and glory to the people when he came to give them his law and to call them into covenant with him. And this might and power and glory they saw at Sinai was seen again and again throughout the wilderness as he provided for them and fought for them.
- ii. Notice the three main verbs in this first section. Moses says that the Lord came, and the Lord loved, and through Moses the Lord commanded. This shows us once again the divine initiative in this relationship which has been one of the themes of Deuteronomy. That God chose this people to be his people out of the loving goodness of his own nature. And having set his love on them he came to them and revealed himself to them. And having revealed himself to them he established with them a relationship of love in which he loved them first and then called them to love him in return. And this call to love him in return looked like him commanding them through Moses to keep the covenant agreement. In this way then, he was their King and they were his loyal servants. And the whole relationship was built upon the Lord's initiative and the Lord's love and the Lord's authority. In other words, they were to love him in every way because he had first loved them.
- iii. This idea of God as the Mighty Warrior King who will fight their battles is obviously important to them as they prepare themselves to enter into the Promised Land and fight against the 7 nations who refuse to leave. And as Moses prays for the specific tribes, you would expect then that this theme of God helping them defeat their enemies would be prevalent, and it definitely is. You see it in his prayer for Judah, Benjamin, Gad, and Dan. He prays for God to contend for these tribes and to help them against their adversaries. He prays for Benjamin that the tribe would dwell in safety as the beloved of the Lord, and that the high God would surround him like a strong city wall. Gad and Dan are described as a lion and a lion's cub – ready to pounce and conquer by the Lord's strength. These are all prayers which rest upon the character and nature of God. He will overpower and defeat their enemies in keeping with his promises. He is their Mighty Warrior King.

d. *Strong Defender – 8-11*

- i. Then in verses 8-11, Moses prays a blessing over Levi in which he is reliant upon God as the Strong Defender. Levi and Joseph are the two tribes which receive the most amount of attention in Moses' prayer. Levi because they were the tribe tasked with carrying out the proper worship of the Lord and teaching the people the Word of God. So, Moses prays that Levi will be given the Urim and the Thummim – or the tools of direction for God's people. And he rehearses how the Levites stood with

God at the Golden Calf incident of Exodus 32. Moses asked, “Who is on the Lord’s side? And all the sons of Levi gathered around. They strapped on the sword and they took the sword of justice into the camp and had no regard for family relationships in the carrying out of justice. They stood with the Lord instead of with family because their loyalty was with Him first. And so, Moses rehearses this as a prayer that this may always be the case. In essence, Moses is asking the Lord to always use Levi as the means of his strong defense of the truth in the nation of Israel. May they teach the people well, may they bring the sword of justice of the Law where needed, and may they lead the people in true worship all their days. Bless Levi as the Strong Defender of your own truth and your own proper worship, so that the nation is blessed by them.

e. *Great Provider – 13-17*

- i. Then in verses 13-17 we see the concept of God as the Great Provider underneath the prayer for Joseph. This is the other major section of Moses’ blessing, and it emphasizes his confidence for all of the tribes. He longs for the Lord to bless Joseph’s land with an abundance of yield and with the finest produce and with the abundance of the everlasting hills. He prays for God to overflow the best gifts the earth can produce and to raise him up as prominent among the tribes.
- ii. This same theme is seen in his prayer for Zebulun & Issachar, Naphtali, and Asher. Zebulun and Issachar are to rejoice in their tents and in their going out of their tents because of the abundant provision of the Lord. They are to call people to worship the Lord with them because of his great bountiful blessing. Naphtali is to be satisfied with the favor of the Lord and to be full of God’s blessing. And Asher is to be the most blessed of all with such abundance of wealth that he washes his feet in olive oil and his cities are secured with iron and bronze. All of these are prayers for them which are reliant upon God as the Great Provider. Their entrance into the Land and their sustenance in the land is not about them, nor is it about Moses or Joshua. It isn’t about the tribes even. It is about the Lord their God. He must provide because He is the Great Provider.

f. *Holy LORD – 26-29*

- i. And then, Moses ends the prayer for blessing by pointing once again to the exclusively great character of God in verses 26-29. He tells them again – there is none like God. At the beginning of the song he pictured God as coming to them as a Mighty Warrior King. But here he presents God as riding through the heavens to be their majestic help. And then in verse 27 the Lord is their dwelling place where they will rest secure for all eternity. And His everlasting arms are always underneath them – holding them and carrying them through to His intended purpose. In other words, God is above them and with them and around them and underneath them. Wherever they look, God is there. Whatever their need, God is there.

However big their enemy or their problem, God is there. However severe their weakness, God is there. However strong the opposition, God is there.

- ii. So, he can say in verse 28, in a tone of prophecy, that Israel lived in safety, and Jacob's sons lived in a land of grain and wine that was well supplied by the dew of heaven. Therefore, they are the happy people of the Lord. Since they have this uniquely Holy LORD, they are a uniquely holy people. He is their help and the shield, their great warrior king, and their strong defender. The enemies that lay before them in the Promised Land will be no match for the Lord their God.

Conclusion: Moses' final words to God's people were words of encouragement and hope. They pointed the people to the trustworthiness of God and to the blessing and satisfaction that is found in God alone. But, did this blessedness in the Promised Land last for the people of God? They certainly enjoyed it for a time, but as you know, they eventually fell into the hands of nations greater and mightier than they. What was the problem? Did God cease to be their mighty warrior king and their strong defender? No, they went the way of human sinfulness and they stopped walking by faith in loving obedience. They worshipped other gods and they forsook the Lord their God. The defeat of their physical enemies was not the greatest enemy needing to be defeated. Their greatest enemy was internal, not external. And so, the Lord sent forth His Son to win this most important battle with sin. Unlike Moses, Jesus never forsook the covenant relationship he had with His Father, and he never deserved or earned the righteous wrath of God upon him because he never sinned. And so, as the eternally blessed one who also earned the full blessing God through His obedience, he took upon himself the curse of the Law and suffered and died on Mount Calvary. Moses died on Mount Pisgah under the weight of the Law he delivered, looking for another to save him. Jesus died on Mount Calvary under the full weight of the Law for those given to Him by the Father, so that they could be freed from their sin and eternally blessed in Him. Moses pronounced blessings which had temporary fulfillment, but Jesus pronounced blessings which have eternal fulfillment. Moses' blessings were dependent upon tribal association and human birth. Jesus' blessings were dependent upon the grace of God and being born again from above. Do you know this blessing today, found only in Christ? Are you secured in Christ's blessing? Did he bear your curse so that you can rejoice in His blessing?