

EXODUS: Lesson Twelve, Moses' Last Words and Death ***Deuteronomy 27 - 34***

Subject: Moses presented the blessings and curses of the covenant along with his final words to the Israelites before his death.

Main Idea: Obedience to God results in His blessing but disobedience leads to disaster.

Principles:

1. *God's discipline is intended to lead us to repentance and restoration.*

Introduction

One of our grandsons came to live with us as an infant and remained with us until he was three-and-a-half. I remember my exasperation with this very strong-willed little one as I repeatedly told him how important it was that he would learn to obey, and he would respond with a concerned expression and heartfelt, "But I don't *like* to obey!"

Older kids and adults may not be that honest but in truth, don't we feel the same way at times? I was recently awakened earlier than I like to get up in the morning and sensed the Lord calling me to get up and spend extra time alone with Him. My rebellious heart whispered back, "How about if I just lay in my bed and listen to You?" You see, my problem is the same as my grandson's. There is a part of me that wants to obey the Lord and a part that really does not.

Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, one theme takes center stage. Some call it the Deuteronomic Principle. It was the message Moses so passionately conveyed in his Deuteronomic sermons: *obedience to God results in His blessing but disobedience leads to disaster.*

We have learned that the generation of Israelites that God took out of Egypt died in the desert because they did not trust God to give them the Promised Land. Because of Moses' disobedience at Meribah (Numbers 20:2-13), God determined that he would not enter Canaan either. However, God allowed him to lead the next generation of Israelites to Canaan's border and to give them instructions for renewing the covenant that the Lord had previously made with their parents. We have also learned that Deuteronomy is predominantly comprised of three sermons that lay out the terms of this covenant. We covered the first two sermons in the last lesson. These sermons reminded the Israelites of their history and listed the covenant's terms. In this lesson, we are studying the final chapters of Deuteronomy, which contain Moses' third sermon and last instructions before his death.¹ The Deuteronomic theme completely dominates these chapters: if the Israelites chose to obey the terms of the covenant, they would enjoy God's blessing in the land, but if they disobeyed, disaster awaited them.

¹ Although there is some discussion among Bible scholars about where Moses' third sermon begins and ends, this lesson assumes that it is recorded in Deuteronomy 27-30, with chapters 27-28 capturing the blessings and curses that were typically included in treaties of the day and chapters 29-30 summarizing the entire covenant that Moses laid out in all three of his Deuteronomic sermons.

I. **Moses' Message: Blessings and Curses** – Deuteronomy 27-30

A. **Preparations for the Covenant Ceremony** – 27:1-13

- i. The Stones: Knowing that he would be dead by the time the Israelites crossed the Jordan, Moses began his address with instructions about preparing for the covenant renewal ceremony that was to take place inside Canaan in the region of Shechem, where Mounts Ebal and Gerazim stand. The Israelites were to coat two large stones with plaster and write the words of the law upon them and place them on Mount Ebal. It is probably unreasonable to assume they were to write all that is contained in the five Books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy). More likely, Moses was referring to the Deuteronomic Law contained in his three sermons. These stones would make it possible for the Israelites to consult the law at any time.
- ii. The Altar
 1. *Construction*: Next to the stones, the people were to build a simply constructed altar from fieldstones, without the use of any tools and without decoration, in accordance with God's earlier instructions for such altars (Exodus 20:25). The simplicity of the altar's construction suggested there is nothing human beings can add to God's way of salvation.
 2. *Purpose*
 - a. Since covenant ceremonies involved animal sacrifices and feasting, the altar served a practical purpose. However, the positioning of the law (on the stones) and the altar side by side, also had a rich *spiritual* meaning. God has always known that human beings cannot meet the perfect standard His Law demands. The Law is good. It teaches us to be loving and holy. It restrains evil. In fact, perfect obedience would lead to eternal life. But since none of us has ever fully obeyed, the Law also makes us aware of our sinful, rebellious nature. It is like a mirror someone holds up to us. We look into it and see how far we fall short.
 - b. Since we cannot keep the Law, we are under God's curse. The apostle Paul explained: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written [in Deuteronomy 21:23]: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree" (Galatians 3:13). We need someone who can take this curse that we might live, and Christ, who lived a perfect life, took our curse upon Himself at the Cross (Romans 3:19-20, 5:20-21, Galatians 3:10 – 4:7; 1 Timothy 1:8-11). Not surprisingly, the stones (representing the Law) and the altar were both placed on Mount Ebal, the place, we later learn

(verse 13), where the Israelites would affirm the covenant's curses.

- c. While the stones were an ever-present reminder of the Law, the nearby altar pointed to God's provision for those who broke it. Until Christ came, that provision was through the animal sacrifices that foreshadowed His atoning, perfect, and final sacrifice.

B. Pronouncing the Blessings and Curses – 27:14-26

- i. The Setting: Shechem was a significant location for the ceremony. It was the site of Abraham's first altar upon his arrival in the land (Genesis 12:6-7). It was there that the Lord first promised to give Canaan to his descendants. It was also the site of Jacob's well (Genesis 33:19 with John 4:5) and the place at which the Israelites would bury Joseph's bones (Joshua 24:32). Mounts Ebal and Gerizim stand side by side. At their bases, they are shaped in such a way that the two mounts form a natural amphitheater. A person talking on one mountain can be heard clearly by someone on the other.
- ii. The Ceremony: The Joshua 8 account of the actual covenant renewal ceremony tells us that the Ark of the Covenant, representing God's own presence, was positioned in the valley between the Lord's people on both mountains (Joshua 8:33). Six tribes were to stand on Mount Gerizim to pronounce the blessings of the covenant and six on Mount Ebal to pronounce the curses. Sanctions that spelled out the results of obedience and disobedience were an indispensable part of ancient Near Eastern treaties. When the parties involved were a sovereign and his vassals, the penalties fell only on the subordinates, unless the king pledged himself to some degree of accountability.ⁱ The blessings and curses were actually read by the Levites, and the people pronounced their agreement by answering, "Amen."
- iii. Blessings Enumerated – 28:1-14: Included in the blessings is a poem summarizing God's commitment (verses 4-6). If the Israelites fully obeyed His commands, He promised to bless every part of their lives, prospering and giving them success in their work, their homes, their relationships with other nations, and their relationship with Him (28:1, 14). The poem is short enough to have been memorized.
- iv. Curses Enumerated – 28:15-68
 1. The curses are emphasized far more than the blessings and reasonably so, because of the stubbornness of the Israelites' hearts. A good parent details the outcomes of negative behavior for their children, often at length, to warn them, out of loving concern. Our

loving, Heavenly Father desires that we experience the life He offers. He takes no pleasure in our suffering.

2. In Leviticus 26 we find the record of the covenant's blessings and curses as the Lord first gave them at Sinai, forty years earlier. In that chapter, we find that the curses were progressive and increasingly intense. If the Israelites failed to obey the Lord, they would first be punished with strength-sapping disease and military defeat. If, after that, they did not repent, they would endure drought. If, after that, they still did not repent, the Lord would allow their enemies to completely overrun them, with famine and plague resulting. In spite of all that, if they *still* did not repent, the Lord would ruin the land so thoroughly that even their enemies would be appalled. Some would resort to cannibalism in order to survive. Those who lived would be scattered among the nations where they would perish. The few who remained in the land would be so traumatized that they would live their lives in sheer terror. Each step only occurred if the people did not respond to the Lord's discipline. The Leviticus passage clearly shows that each punishment was for the purpose of driving the Israelites to repent. They were the Lord's hand of discipline. The Lord disciplines those He loves (Proverbs 3:11-12). Sadly, after many years of the Lord's patience with their ongoing disobedience, the Israelites eventually fell under the full weight of the curses.
3. Leviticus 26 ends with God's assurance of mercy and restoration if His people would only repent (Leviticus 26:40-42). This promise is also recorded in Moses' summary of his sermons (30:1-10). When we pull away from God and His laws, we distance ourselves from the Source of Life. The further we move away from Him, the further we are from all that is good and alive! The more we disregard our consciences and disobey Him, the more we hurt ourselves. Eventually, left unchecked, our sin nature will lead us into terrible depravity.

C. Summary of Sermons – 29:1 – 30:20: Verse one of chapter 29 concludes the message contained in chapters 27-28. In chapters 29-30, Moses gave a summary of his three sermons: The Israelites' ever-faithful God was making a covenant with all of them, one that would benefit even their yet unborn children (29:2-15). There would be consequences for not keeping the covenant (29:16-29). The Lord would restore them if they turned back to Him following His discipline (30:1-10). The covenant left the Israelites with a choice to make between a way that led to life and a way that led to destruction and death (30:11-20). Several particular verses in these two chapters are worthy of special attention.

- i. They “Saw” Without “Seeing” – 29:4: on Deuteronomy 29:4 says, “The Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.” The Israelites had physical vision but they lacked spiritual vision. The Lord’s intervention was needed to transform the Israelites’ hearts, that they might see the error of their ways. Both Isaiah and Paul commented on this verse (Isaiah 6:9,10; Romans 11:8).
- ii. An Oath to be Taken – 29:16-21
 1. The Israelites had had over four hundred years of exposure to idolatry in Egypt, which had then continued during their forty years in the wilderness through contact with other nearby nations (Numbers 25:1-3). In 29:16-18, Moses warned that interest in idolatry was a deadly root they were carrying with them, one that would produce poison. They were responsible for what they did with the root; it needed to be pulled out.
 2. To enter the Covenant was to commit oneself to allegiance to God the King and to reject other gods. Verses 19-21 warn those who believed they could somehow gain the covenant’s blessings without giving up idolatry. Taking the “oath” of the covenant, without sincerely intending to be loyal to God, would be foolish. Verbal assent alone was not enough to invoke God’s blessing. They could not worship the Lord and other gods at the same time and expect to be blessed. The warning also applied to anyone who, upon hearing the words of the covenant, immediately rejected it as unnecessary, believing he or she could continue living as they pleased and bring happiness into their own lives apart from God’s blessing. Such people would find themselves experiencing the curses of the law.
 3. Verse 20 speaks of a person losing any opportunity for forgiveness. It is not a warning that applied to the disobedience of the truly repentant. For those, the altar made provision. It was a warning to the apostate who knew God’s Law but never really intended to embrace it. This is the apostasy spoken of in the New Testament in Hebrews 6:4-8 and 2 Peter 2, 3:16-17. To be fully conscious of what God requires of us and to fail to respond is a very serious matter indeed. Only the Lord knows when a person has crossed the line from rebellion into spiritual apostasy and lost any opportunity for forgiveness. This is the reason why Paul urges, “Indeed, the ‘right time’ is now. Today is the day of salvation!” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

iii. The Secret Things Belong to the Lord – 29:29: 29:22-28 speaks prophetically of the devastation that would come on Israel as a result of disobedience, resulting in their exile from the land. The nations would ask why this had happened to them (verse 24), but the Israelites knew it was because they had abandoned the covenant with the Lord (v 25). It is perhaps in this context that we should attempt to understand the puzzling verse 29, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” Considering the serious outcome of not keeping the Lord’s covenant and Moses’ prophecy that the Israelites would not keep it, what were they to do? Were they meant to understand that they were already destined to disobedience and cursing? Was there genuine opportunity for them to obey and be blessed? If they disobeyed and were so completely destroyed, how was it really possible that God restore them in the land (as chapter 30 foretold)? How much of their future did they determine and how much did God determine?

1. Many things are revealed in the Scriptures but others remain mysteries. Many things about the future are unknown. God’s sovereign will and our freedom to choose right and wrong are mysteries we cannot completely understand. These are what verse 29 calls the “secret things” that only He knows.
2. However, the verse tells us that what is certain is what God has revealed in His written word. The Bible’s clear teachings, and learning to live according to them, should be our focus. It is not wrong to ponder and discuss great mysteries, but if we allow them to absorb us, we will lose sight of the task before us, which is to simply act upon what we do understand.

iv. Israel’s Future Prosperity – 30:1-10

1. Deuteronomy 30:1-10 foretells a time when, after Israel would be dispersed among the nations, they would turn to the Lord and obey Him with all their hearts. At such a time, the Lord promised to restore their fortunes and gather them back from all the nations where they had been scattered. It speaks of great spiritual awakening and blessing upon Israel, a time in which the Lord would “circumcise their hearts” so that they would “love Him with all their heart and soul.”
2. There is no question that this was fulfilled, at least in part, when the remnant of Jews returned to Jerusalem from exile in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. However, many scholars believe that this late sixth century B.C. restoration of a few Jews to the land was only a down payment on a greater future fulfillment of the prophecy. There are two primary viewpoints among those who do not think

that this and other Old Testament promises to the Jews were all fulfilled in Old Testament times.

- a. One viewpoint holds a strong opinion that all Biblical prophecies should be taken as literally as possible. According to this view, the Old Testament foretells a mass turning of ethnic Jews, who will experience a great spiritual awakening, repent of their sin in crucifying Jesus, and return to God through Him. They understand the Scriptures to teach that this spiritual awakening of ethnic Jews will not take place until just before Christ's second return to earth, at which time He will set up His earthly "millennial" kingdom.
 - b. There are many others, however, who interpret these Old Testament prophecies less literally, believing they are being fulfilled *in a spiritual sense* through Christ and His work. Based on passages such as Galatians 3:28-29 which says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise," they believe that the New Testament Church is the "new Israel" and the promise of prosperity refers to the spiritual wealth that is ours in Christ.
 - c. Let us remember the warning given in Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God." While the study of "eschatology" (the theology and events of the future) is of great importance and is addressed more fully in later *GOD of the WORD* studies, our primary focus should always remain on conforming our lives to what God's word clearly tells us to do! As important and interesting as these prophecies are, *daily obedience to the Lord* is far more important.
- v. The Commands are Not Too Difficult – 30:11-14: In Deuteronomy 30:11-14, Moses says that the commands of the covenant are not so unclear that the Israelites would need to ascend to heaven to discover their meaning. Nor would they need to cross an ocean in search of someone wise enough to understand them. The Law was completely understandable to them and accessible to them; it was in their mouths and in their hearts (30:14, Romans 2:15).

- vi. Two Paths are Available – 30:15-20: Moses concluded his summary by stating that the covenant comes down to a very straightforward decision: to obey or not to obey. Obedience would lead to abundant life. Disobedience would cut them off from the Source of Life and thus result in destruction and death. Moses said, “Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him. For the Lord is your life, and He will give you many years in the land...” (30:19-20).

Summary Statement: Moses’ third sermon lays out the blessings and curses of the Covenant and foretold the fulfillment of the curses as God’s discipline to lead the Israelites to repentance and restoration.

Principle: *God’s discipline is intended to lead us to repentance and restoration.*

God’s judgment on Israel through these curses was necessary to drive idolatry out of them and it was effective! History indicates that by the time the Israelites returned from captivity, the sin of idolatry no longer had a hold on them.

In speaking of the curses, Ray Stedman said,

...there is no greater persuasion than heartbreak and despair. Have you found that out? Sometimes God must almost break our hearts, sometimes He must actually break them, before we will take seriously what He has said to us and observe the provision He has made for us in Jesus Christ.ⁱⁱ

Application: Is God breaking your heart in order to get your attention? Not all trials result from our disobedience, but certainly some do! His discipline is intended to lead us to repentance and restoration.

Transition: With his third sermon completed, Moses had finished giving the Israelites God’s instructions for the covenant renewal. The Israelites were fully prepared to enter Canaan, an indication that the time for Moses’ death was drawing near. Deuteronomy 31-34 records his final words to Israel and his death.

II. Moses' Final Words and Death – Deuteronomy 31-34

A. Encouragement to Be Strong – 31:1-8: Israel faced war ahead in Canaan.

They and their new leader, Joshua, needed to be strong and courageous. Moses reminded Joshua that he had been commissioned to lead the people into the land, destroy the Lord's enemies, and divide the land among the Israelites. It was a big task, but the Lord would never leave or forsake him. Therefore, he need not have been afraid. The attitude of a leader greatly influences those he or she leads. It was important that Joshua showed the Israelites that he had full confidence in the Lord. All of us experience fear. Even the apostle Paul asked for prayer that he might be fearless (Ephesians 6:19-20). Courage is acting in faith, even if we tremble within.

B. The Witnesses to the Covenant – 31:9 – 32:43

i. The Witness of the Law

1. *Moses' Writings and the Reading of the Law*: 31:9 and 24 say that Moses wrote down the Law from beginning to end. When the term "law" ("torah") is used in a general way, it refers to all five books of Moses. Here, however, it seems more likely that Moses was referring specifically to writing down the Deuteronomic law code recorded in Deuteronomy 5-28. This scroll was given to the Levitical priests, who were responsible for teaching it to the people. Moses commanded that the scroll be read in the presence of all the people every seven years during the Festival of Tabernacles. This gave the children an opportunity to hear the Law two or three times in their growing years and learn to fear the Lord.
2. *The Canon of the Scriptures*: According to the first chapter of Joshua, Joshua and the Israelites immediately recognized "the Book of the Law" (Moses' writings) as God's authoritative word (Joshua 1:8). This helps us to understand how the canon of the Scriptures came to be. The late scholar Francis Schaeffer explains it this way:

Joshua knew Moses, the writer of the Pentateuch, personally. Joshua knew his strengths and weaknesses as a man; he knew that Moses was a sinner, that Moses made mistakes, that Moses was just a man. Nonetheless, immediately after Moses' death Joshua accepted the Pentateuch as more than the writing of Moses. He accepted it as the writing of God. Two or three hundred years were not required for the book to become sacred. As far as Joshua was concerned, the Pentateuch was the canon, and the canon was the Word of God. The biblical view of the growth and acceptance of the canon is as simple as this: When it was given, God's people understood what it was. Right away it had authority.ⁱⁱⁱ

- ii. Depositing the Scroll as a Witness: Ancient covenants were to be agreed upon in the presence of witnesses. Usually, the witnesses called upon were the gods of the parties entering the covenant. Since this covenant was between the only true God and His people, creation (the heavens and earth) was called upon to bear witness to the parties' agreement (30:19 and 31:28). Moses instructed the Levites to place the scroll within the Ark of the Covenant (31:9, 24-26). In addition to creation, the Law within the Ark would bear witness to the covenant agreement.
- iii. The Song of Moses
 - 1. *Purpose*: The Lord told Moses that soon after he died, the people would begin prostituting themselves to the foreign gods of Canaan. They would forsake the Lord and break the covenant (31:16). Therefore, before Moses' death, the Lord gave Moses a song to write down and teach to the Israelites (31:19). The Lord said the song would serve as a third witness to the Covenant. The Israelites could never say they had not been forewarned of the dangers of idolatry. "And when many disasters and calamities come on them, this song will testify against them, because it will not be forgotten by their descendants... So Moses wrote down the song that day and taught it to the Israelites" (31:21-22).
 - 2. *Songs in the Bible*: Exodus 15 records the first song of Moses, which celebrated the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The song in Deuteronomy 32 is a second song of Moses. Songs have an important place in the Bible. The book of Psalms, many of which are attributed to King David, later became the hymnbook of Israel. Psalm 90 has been attributed to Moses. Ephesians 5:19 tells believers to sing. Revelation 15:3 speaks of the first song of Moses being sung in heaven. Revelation 5:9 and 14:3, 4 also speak of a new song being sung in heaven. Singing hymns and songs has always been and will continue to be an important part of the life of God's people.
 - 3. *Content of the Song*
 - a. *Call to worship* – 32:1-2: The song begins with a call to worship (32:1-2) that speaks of the word of God (Moses' teaching) as rain and dew on new grass, coming from heaven to grow and enrich us. Time spent hearing and reading God's word is never wasted but accomplishes its purpose, whether we see it or not (Isaiah 55:10-11).

- b. *Praise for God* – 32:3-14: The call to worship in Moses’ song leads directly into praising God (32:3-14). God is called Father, Creator, and Most High, but most frequently is exalted as the Rock who saves and offers refuge. The imagery of God as a Rock points to His stability, dependability, and permanence. Out of all the nations of the earth, the Creator chose the Israelites when they were as vulnerable and weak as an infant, cared for them, and guarded them as the apple of His eye, and training them as an eagle does with its young. He brought them into a land where they were fed with rich food and enjoyed His blessing.
- c. *Israel’s apostasy* – 32:15-18: Rather than being grateful for what God had done for them, the Israelites’ prosperity would cause them to turn from Him. Prosperity is often more dangerous to our spiritual lives than tribulation. The Israelites worshipped false gods, which are not gods at all. Psalm 106:37 and 1 Corinthians 10:20 explain that worship of idols is actually worship of demons. “Jeshurun” is a poetic name for Israel. Jeshurun’s idolatry made the Lord jealous. This part of the song foretells Israel’s wealth in the Promised Land (under Solomon) and also her ongoing unfaithfulness to the Lord and flirtation with idolatry.
- d. *Judgment* – 32:19-33: As a result of their idolatry, the fire of the Lord’s wrath would be kindled. The Lord would bring judgment on them through a foreign nation, a nation that had none of the spiritual privilege Israel had, a people who were as wicked as Sodom and Gomorrah (verse 32). Perhaps worst of all, God would hide His face from them (verse 20). This part of the song foretells Israel’s defeat and captivity by the Assyrians and Babylonians. In verse 27, the Lord speaks of His repugnance in using a godless nation as His instrument of justice against Israel. Habakkuk asked the Lord how He could possibly use a people even more wicked than Israel as His instrument of judgment against them. God’s answer to Habakkuk was simply that justice belongs to Him. He is a righteous Judge. “He is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him” (Habakkuk 2:20). In the end, His judgments ensure perfect justice.

- e. *God's Vengeance on Israel's Enemies* – 32:34-43: The song states that eventually God would turn His wrath on the wicked people He used to discipline the Israelites. This part of the song also foretells God's future judgment against all who reject Him.
4. *Moses' Encouragement and Warning*: Moses' song was a warning to Israel. After he recited it, he encouraged them by saying, "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you today... They are not just idle words for you – they are your life" (32:46-47). Is that how you see God's word? Is it your lifeline?

C. Moses' Blessing of the Tribes and Death – 33:1 – 34:12

i. Moses' Blessing

1. *Nature of the Blessing*: The Lord told Moses the time had come for him to climb Mount Nebo and view Canaan. There, on the mountain, he would die (32:48-50). Fathers customarily gave their children blessings before their death. Thus, Moses pronounced a final blessing on the Israelites. His blessing is reminiscent of Jacob's prophetic, deathbed blessing on his twelve sons (the progenitors of Israel's twelve tribes). Moses' speech focuses less on future events and more strictly on issuing blessing. In these, Moses' last words, he foresaw the Israelites receiving God's blessing in the Promised Land.
2. *Omission of Simeon from Blessing*
 - a. Neither Simeon nor Levi had received blessings from their father Jacob on his deathbed. Their wicked deed at Shechem (Genesis 34) had only earned their father's curse (Genesis 49:5-7). The Levites overturned this curse by zealously defending the Lord in the judgment that followed Israel's worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32). There is no such record of the Simeonite curse being overturned. That tribe received no blessing from Moses. Perhaps another factor in being excluded was their role in the idolatry at Baal Peor, when the Midianite women seduced them (Numbers 25:6-15). Later in their history, the tribe of Simeon became absorbed within Judah.

- b. Gordon Wenham has pointed out that while Jacob’s blessing emphasized Judah and Joseph, the important political tribes, Moses’ blessing gives most attention to Levi. The Levites received their blessed position because of their (difficult) obedience to the Lord following the Israelites’ idolatry at Sinai (Exodus 32). Because they observed God’s word and kept His covenant, they had received the blessed position of teaching God’s laws to the Israelites (33:9–10). “Thus,” Wenham writes, “even in his final blessing Moses keeps the key theme of Deuteronomy to the fore: enjoyment of the land and observance of the law go hand in hand.”^{iv}
3. *Final Benediction*: Moses’ benediction closes with beautiful words of praise for God, reminding the Israelites that there is no one like Him. He “rides across the heavens to help you and on the clouds in His majesty. The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms... Blessed are you, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord? He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword” (33:26-29).

ii. Moses’ Death

1. After issuing his blessing, Moses climbed Mount Nebo where the Lord showed him the Promised Land spread out before him. Moses was alone with God when he died and the Lord buried him (34:6). No one else knew where he was buried. Jude 9 makes an obscure reference to the fact that the archangel Michael and Satan argued over Moses’ body. Apparently, this was related to God’s purpose in burying Moses secretly. It may be that the Lord wanted to prevent the Israelites from bringing Moses’ bones with them into Canaan since Moses had lost that privilege.^v Another possibility, given the Israelites’ weakness for idolatry, is that the Lord kept Moses’ gravesite from becoming found so that they would not be tempted to turn it into a shrine. Although Moses was 120 years old when he died, Deuteronomy 34:7 indicates that his death was premature, physically speaking, since he was still strong and healthy.
2. Verse 12 says that no one has ever performed the awesome deeds Moses did. Moses himself obviously did not write this divinely inspired obituary in verses 10-12. Most likely, Joshua added it as a postscript.
3. The Lord’s judgment against Moses in forbidding him to enter Canaan must have ended at his death, for the Gospels tell of Moses’ presence inside Canaan on the Mount of Transfiguration during Jesus’ earthly ministry (Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36).

Summary Statement: Moses' last words to the Israelites included the song that foretold the disastrous consequences of disobedience and his blessing that pictured Israel prospering in the land. The Deuteronomic theme of obedience leading to blessing and disobedience resulting in disaster thus continues to the end of the book.

Perhaps you consider this principle and groan within. You realize you cannot earn your salvation by your obedience. You know you are saved by faith alone. As a New Testament believer, you realize you live under the New Covenant of grace and that God has given you a new heart so that you now desire to please Him. Yet you groan because doing so continues to be a battle. Why is it that we struggle so much with obedience?

- To answer that we must first understand that we are born with what the Bible calls a sin nature that has been handed down to us from Adam (Romans 5:12). Because of this, rebellion against authority is the natural inclination of the human heart. We see proof of this all around us: children have to be disciplined, teens struggle with rebelliousness, some adults never can keep a job for very long, and even within the church, some members are always resisting the authority of the church leaders. It is most profoundly seen, however, in the secret desire in every human heart to have their own way. Since we prefer to rule our own lives, God's very existence represents a threat to us!
- When we receive Christ, we are born again (John 3:3, 7)! A new nature is birthed within us and, in keeping with the promise of the New Covenant, it is a nature that loves God and desires to please Him (Jeremiah 31:33, 2 Corinthians 3:6, 18; 1 Thessalonians 4:1). The Holy Spirit also comes to live within us and helps us be obedient (John 14:15-17). Some new believers are immediately aware of these radical changes within them and others become more gradually aware over time. In either case, awareness of this new nature, this new life, this *new power* at work within us, almost always results in great enthusiasm among new believers.
- However, over time, we become aware that, although the new nature is within us, the old sin nature is *also* still there. Previously, we only had our old nature, but now we have two natures that war against one another. Paul writes of this inner struggle, saying, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out... I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin" (Romans 7:15, 18, 25).
- We will not be rid of our old nature until we die. Death, for the believer, is swallowed up in victory (1 Corinthians 15:54), since we will then be clothed with new imperishable bodies and never again struggle with sin!

- In the meantime, we live with two natures. Sometimes a young believer who has been overjoyed by their new nature becomes quite discouraged that the old nature still has a pull on them. As we mature, we can rediscover the joy of our new birth by daily practicing disciplines that cause our old nature to diminish and our new nature to blossom. First, it is important that we acknowledge our every sin as rebellion against God rather than trying to pretend it is anything less. We must confess it to God and ask for His forgiveness. Then we must ask God for victory over sin, since apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). Alongside these steps, we must recognize that *the nature we feed is the one that grows*.

Principle: *Believers have two warring natures within us, and the one that is fed dominates.*

Illustration: We might picture this by thinking of both natures as balloons: Two balloons within one room, the “room” of our body, both with the capacity to be inflated and deflated. We would like to “pop” the balloon of our sin nature and be done with it, here and now, but we cannot. As long as we remain in the “room” of our bodies, both “balloons” will be there. There are things we can do, however, to *deflate* the balloon of our sin nature and *inflate* the balloon of our new nature. In fact, it is our goal to grow our new nature to the degree that there is virtually no space left within us for our sin nature.

Application: When we feed ourselves a diet of crass, seductive, and violent entertainment, when we secretly entertain temptation in our thought life and surround ourselves largely with people who live the same way, our sin nature will dominate. The less opportunity we give those things to influence us, the more our sin nature diminishes.

When we feed ourselves with a steady diet of God’s word, converse with Him throughout the day, make time for healthy conversations and fellowship with growing believers, expose ourselves and meditate on things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8), we are feeding our new nature and it will grow!

We deceive ourselves if we think we can indulge our old nature and grow the new at the same time. When we indulge the old nature, the new nature always suffers, even if we do not see the evidence immediately, and if we continue to do so, then God will discipline us.

What kind of a diet are you taking in? Which nature are you feeding? If you’re not sure, consider what you prefer to do when you have spare time or what you think on when you’re free from tasks that demand your attention.

Conclusion

The nature we feed is the one that will dominate. The old nature will lead us to disobey God, while the new gives us the desire to obey. Obedience leads to blessing but disobedience will lead to disaster. That is the lesson of Deuteronomy simply put.

Two paths are set before us. Which path are you choosing? Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

ⁱ G. E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955), 30, 34, as referred to in Merrill, E. H. (1994). *Deuteronomy* (Vol. 4, p. 339). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/leviticus/either--or>

ⁱⁱⁱ Schaeffer, Francis A. (1975). *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History* (p. 34). Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

^{iv} Wenham, G. J. (2003). *Exploring the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (Vol. 1, p. 142). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

^v Merrill, E. H. (1994). *Deuteronomy* (Vol. 4, p. 453). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.