

Final Blessing of the Tribes

Deuteronomy 32:44-33:11

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

I. Introduction and Background

- a. The **Book of Deuteronomy** consists of three speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness. We are now into Moses' final speech in Deuteronomy.
 - i. **Speech No. 3: Deuteronomy 27-34** (the last eight chapters of the book) includes:
 1. Final instructions pertaining to the Law, including blessings and curses that would come, depending on whether the people obeyed or disobeyed what Moses had delivered to them.
 2. A final charge to Joshua, to be "valiant and strong" in the battles ahead.
 3. The "Song of Moses," which would be passed down to future generations to sing, to convict them when they abandoned the Lord (the immediate prior message).
 4. Final blessings that Moses gives to the tribes of Israel before He dies (the focus of the current lesson).
 5. The death of Moses and handoff of leadership to Joshua (the next and final message).
 - b. As we prepare to tackle what some might consider an obscure part of the Old Testament, let us keep in mind something that Paul said in **Romans 15**, after he had just quoted a passage from the Old Testament.
 - i. "For whatever things were written before *were written for our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." (**Romans 15:4**, NKJV)
 - ii. Paul here was writing to Christians. He was explaining that everything in the Old Testament was written for our learning. The Old Testament is "our book." It is filled with valuable lessons intended to benefit Christians.
 - iii. With that in mind, we should always be looking for things in the Old Testament text that will offer practical benefit for us. For some passages (like the ones we will encounter today), it may take greater

effort to unlock what is in the text. However, that knowledge should motivate us to work even harder to find the spiritual gold nuggets that may be hidden from immediate view.

II. Concluding Instructions, After the Song is Given to the Israelites

a. Read **Deuteronomy 31:44-47**.

- i. These instructions are given right after Moses gives “the song” to all the people. They were to sing it and pass it down to future generations.
- ii. The song spoke of how the people would abandon the Lord, and as a result, the Lord would exact vengeance on them.
- iii. This was intended to reinforce to all the people that everything hung on whether or not they would follow the Law that Moses had delivered to them. Moses explained, “This is not an empty word...this is your life!” Everything would hang on whether they followed or abandoned the laws Moses had given them.

b. Read **Deuteronomy 31:48-52**.

- i. The Lord tells Moses that the time has now come when he will go up Mount Nebo and die there. Moses will see the Promised Land from a distance, but will not be allowed to cross over with the rest of the Israelites.
- ii. The reason Moses is not allowed to enter Canaan is because he disobeyed the word of the Lord during the episode with “the Water of Contention at Kadesh,” where He did not “sanctify the Lord in the midst of the children of Israel.”

1. **Question:** What is the episode that caused Moses to be rejected from entering the Promised Land?

2. Read **Numbers 20:1-13**.

- a. The first time Moses was to bring water from the rock, in **Exodus 17:1-7**, the Lord told him to strike the rock at Horeb with the same rod he had previously struck the river.
- b. However, this second time, in the Desert of Sin in **Numbers 20**, the Lord told him to take the rod with him, but to “*speak to the rock*” before all the people.
- c. However, instead of speaking to the rock, Moses struck the rock (twice) with his rod. While the rock produced

water, Moses' disobedience of not following the Lord's instruction made the Lord very angry.

- i. As a result, both Moses and his brother Aaron are prohibited from entering Canaan. Aaron dies on Mount Hor, and Moses will die on Mount Nebo.
- d. **Question:** Why was it such a great offense that Moses struck the rock this second time? After all, God had no problem with that the first time. What was so special about that rock?

i. **Possible Clues:**

1. **On the Rock.** Paul said in **1 Corinthians 10:4** that "that rock" in the Wilderness, from which the water came, "*was Christ*". If this is to be understood figuratively, that would mean it *represented Christ*.
2. **On the Rod.** The famous rod of Moses was the one that turned water into blood, and could be transformed into a serpent. In **Exodus 17:1-7**, Moses had to hold up this same rod all day long, between two men. He was thereby making the form of the cross (foreshadowing the crucifixion of Jesus) to win the battle against the Amalekites.
 - a. For more on how early Christians understood the importance of this event from **Exodus 17**, see lesson from the Exodus expository teaching series: '*Exodus 17: Water from a Rock and Victory Over the Amalekites*' (5/3/2020)

ii. **My Own Opinion Regarding the Answer:**

1. If this rod of Moses foreshadowed the cross of Christ, and the rock represented Jesus, then perhaps striking the rock with the rod (the first time) represented Christ being crucified. Striking it the second time

would be the equivalent of crucifying Christ a second time.

2. In **Hebrews 6**, it says that if we “fall away” after we have been enlightened, have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, etc., we can reach a point where we are beyond the ability to repent. In doing so, a Christian can “fall away” in the sense that they cannot repent, since they would “crucify again the Son of God” and “put Him to an open shame.”
3. “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.” **(Hebrews 6:4–6, NKJV)**
4. Perhaps that is the reason Moses' striking the rock a second time was such a serious offense. It reminds us who have “tasted the good word of God” that we must not fall away, thereby effectively *crucifying Christ a second time!*

iii. **Practical Implications for Us:**

1. Learn from the lesson of the mistake made by Moses. After we have been saved through Christ's sacrifice, we must not turn back to a life of sin and thereby crucify Christ (represented by striking the rock a second time with the wood) a second time. Christ was to be crucified only once.

III. Blessings Given to the Tribes

- a. This starts and ends with general blessings to the Israelites and acknowledgments of the Lord. Between those are several blessings directed to specific tribes.

- b. The blessings to the tribes are similar in format (but not in content) with the blessings Jacob gave to his twelve sons in **Genesis 49**, right before he died. There is some benefit to comparing and contrasting the two sets of final blessings to the tribes.
 - i. The first one was given shortly after they entered Egypt, while the patriarchs were still living.
 - 1. A blessing was given to each of Jacob's twelve sons (and to the tribes that would come from them).
 - 2. The most detailed blessing is given to Judah. This is an especially important one, a famous prophecy fulfilled by Jesus.
 - ii. The second set of blessings was given hundreds of years later to the twelve tribes' descendants, right before they entered Canaan.
 - 1. A blessing is given to the descendants of 10 of the 12 sons of Jacob (Simeon and Issachar and not mentioned).
 - 2. The most detailed blessings are directed to the tribes of Levi and Joseph.
 - 3. While we might look to find some clues about the Messiah in the blessing given to Judah here, nothing is immediately apparent in the blessing given by Moses to that tribe.
- c. While this chapter initially struck me as having very little that would be of interest to us, after looking at some insights from early Christian writers on this, I had to reconsider.
 - i. There were a few of these tribal blessings in which some early Christian writers found things pertinent for us. In this lesson, we will focus on those things.
 - ii. These blessings are worded a bit cryptically in some cases. Having a good knowledge of all Five Books of Moses will be extremely helpful in the effort to grasp what Moses was referring to in some of the comments he makes in these verses.
- d. Read **Deuteronomy 33:1-5**. (General blessing to the entire nation of Israel.)
 - i. It recounts significant encounters they had with the Lord, such as at Mount Sinai and in Kadesh. (from **Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy**)
 - ii. It says He had angels involved with Him in these encounters.
 - iii. It recounts how they had received the Law from His words, through Moses.

- iv. In **Deuteronomy 33:5**, there is a reference in the LXX to “a ruler” who will be “among the beloved people.” That might possibly be referring to Christ, the ruler Jacob spoke of in his blessing in **Genesis 49:8-12**, in the famous prophecy about the ruler who would come from the line of Judah. (Perhaps it does refer to that, but the potential connection seems unclear to me.)
- e. Read **Deuteronomy 33:7-11**. (First three tribes mentioned: Reuben, Judah and Levi)
 - i. Reuben, who was the oldest son of Jacob, was mentioned first (as he was in Jacob’s blessing in **Genesis 49**).
 - ii. The second blessing mentioned here is for the tribe of Judah. However, while the blessing for Judah given in **Genesis 49:8-12** provided a detailed prophecy of Christ, there does not seem to be anything here in **Deuteronomy 33** that clearly points to the Christ.
 - iii. Levi is mentioned third. There are a few things worth noting here.
 1. Both Moses and Aaron were from the tribe of Levi.
 2. The priesthood was reserved for the descendants of Aaron, and the ministry of the tabernacle was set aside for the Levites (who would not inherit any tribal land for themselves).
 3. The reference to “the holy man, his Urim and Thummim” were references to the office of the High Priest, who had to be from Levi. References to the altar and incense, as well as to guarding the oracles of God, also allude to the special role reserved for the Levites.
 4. Here, it refers to Aaron being tested by the Israelites repeatedly, including at the Water of Contention incident, where the people complained to Moses and Aaron about there being no water to drink.
 5. Reread **Deuteronomy 33:9**.
 - a. **Question:** It seems Levi is held up here for disregarding members of his own family. Is that considered a *positive* thing here?
 - b. **Question:** What are some examples Moses might be referring to, where Aaron and the Levites disregarded their relatives (to honor the Lord instead, where there was a conflict between pleasing the two)?

- c. I can think of a few examples:
- i. In the aftermath of the Golden Calf incident, in **Exodus 32:23-29**. Moses asked who stood with the Lord, and only the Levites volunteered. They were called to go through the nation and execute with the sword anyone they encountered (even including relatives).
 - ii. Upon the death of Nadab and Abihu, priests who were sons of Aaron, in **Leviticus 10:1-7**, Aaron and his remaining sons had to remain at their post while others dragged out the dead bodies.
 - iii. When Korah and fellow Levites rebel against the Lord and against Moses and Aaron. They and their families are swallowed up by the earth, and their bronze censers are beaten into a covering for the altar, in **Numbers 16-17**.
 - iv. Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, skewered the two caught involved in fornication, the Israelite man and a Moabite woman, in **Numbers 25:1-15**. For that act, the plague stopped (after 24,000 had died), and Phinehas and his descendants were given God's "covenant of peace" and the eternal priesthood.
 1. Phinehas, like the other Levites in the examples above, was more concerned about honoring God than being sentimental and pleasing his fellow Israelite brothers and sisters!
- d. **Questions:** Is there anything for us to learn from this? Did Jesus and the apostles teach anything like that, encouraging us to please Him at the cost of alienating our families?
- i. Cyprian, an early Christian writer, pointed out the connection between this statement about Levi disregarding his relatives and statements later made by Jesus.
 1. "He Himself instructs and warns us, saying, 'He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and he

that loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.’ (**Matthew 10:37**)

2. “Also in **Deuteronomy**, for the strengthening of faith and the love of God, similar things are written: ‘Who say,’ he says, ‘to their father or mother, I have not known you; neither did they acknowledge their children, these have observed Your words, and kept Your covenant.’ (**Deuteronomy 33:9**) For if we love God with our whole heart, we ought not to prefer either our parents or children to God.”
 - a. Source: Cyprian, *Treatises, Treatise No. 8: On Works and Alms*, chapter 16; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 480.
 - b. See also a similar point made by Cyprian in *Treatise 11: Exhortation to Martyrdom*, chapter 6; in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 500.
- ii. In the Old Testament, the prophet Micah also addresses rejecting one’s own relatives. Read **Micah 6:16, 7:2** and **7:5-6**.
 1. Micah was a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah. He was writing during a time of spiritual decline, observing that “the God-fearing man has perished....”
 2. Is this just an Old Testament principle, or does it remind us of something Jesus said in the gospels as well?
- iii. Read **Matthew 10:34-39** (where Jesus quotes from Micah and applies that passage to His followers).
 1. “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her

mother-in-law;’ and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’ [*quoting from Micah 7:6*] He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.” (**Matthew 10:34–39**, NKJV)

- iv. **Questions:** Did this only apply to Jews in the first century, or did Jesus indicate this would always be the case?
1. Did this statement, that following Him will lead to making enemies in our own households, still apply today?
 2. Or was that only applicable to the first generation of His followers, who would be persecuted by their Jewish families?
 3. Won’t following Jesus lead to having perfectly harmonious families if we do everything right? What do you think?
- v. **Answer:** Let us consider what Jesus said in **Luke 12**.
1. “Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. For *from now on* five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” (**Luke 12:51–53**, NKJV)
 - a. According to Jesus, following Him is no guarantee that you will have a harmonious, unified family. In fact, you can expect the opposite.

- b. We should not be surprised when following Jesus brings great conflict and division into our own families.
- c. Everyone has free choice regarding whether to follow Jesus, and whether to ignore specific commands he or the apostles gave us. *IF* each member of the family ultimately decides to follow Jesus and all of His commands, it will lead to an extraordinary degree of unity.
 - i. HOWEVER, that is a big “IF”!
- d. We are all given free choice, and some members of the family may choose to do otherwise. That will cause division. It did in the beginning, and Jesus said, “from now on...,” indicating that this pattern of causing division in families would continue to the very end.
- e. Taking a clear stand for God will *still split up families!*
- vi. Jesus taught the same thing in **Luke 14**.
 - 1. “Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, ‘If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, “This man began to build and

was not able to finish.” Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.” (**Luke 14:25-33**, NKJV)

vii. Consider also what Jesus said in **Luke 9**, regarding how we should view allegiance to our family members in comparison to following the Lord.

1. “Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, ‘Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’
2. “Then He said to another, ‘Follow Me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.’ And another also said, ‘Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.’” (**Luke 9:57-62**, NKJV)

e. I have seen some Christians use Scriptures like the ones cited above as an excuse to neglect their parents or children, in favor of pursuing various church-driven activities. Please do not make that mistake!

i. Jesus said that we need to honor our fathers and mothers. (**Matthew 15:1-6** and **19:16-19**)

1. This includes showing respect and making personal sacrifices to meet their needs.

- ii. Also, let us never forget what may be one of the most severe warnings in all of the New Testament, directed to Christians. Paul admonishes us to take care of our relatives in need, and in particular, our mothers who are widows.
 - 1. “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has *denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*” (**1 Timothy 5:8**, NKJV)

IV. Conclusions and Takeaways

- a. Let us learn from the example of Moses’ sin. Follow the commands of the Lord, neither adding nor subtracting from what He says.
 - i. After being saved through the sacrifice of Christ, the Rock, let us not turn back to a life of sin and thereby effectively “crucify again” the Son of God. He suffered and died *once* for us.
- b. Let us follow the positive example of the Levites that Moses refers to in the blessing he gave to that tribe. They did not show undue regard for their relatives, and honored God above honoring their families.
 - i. Jesus taught the same principle very directly in the gospels. We must never allow love for our parents, children, spouses or other relatives to draw us away from loving and obeying Jesus.
 - ii. We should not be surprised when following Christ leads to division in our families. Jesus spoke about that and warned us that it would be the case. While we always want to strive for unity, realize that everyone has free will, and each person must choose whether or not to put the Lord first in all things.
 - iii. This principle of putting the Lord first, above members of our family, can never be used as a justification for being unrighteous with others. In particular, it cannot be used as an excuse for failing to honor our parents, including not providing for them materially.