

The Death of Moses – Lesson 20  
Deuteronomy 28:49-34:12  
By Dellen Ludwig

The first week of February, my middle grandson, Ezekiel, left home for boot camp. He has joined the Army reserves, and is the first of their family to join the armed services. No matter how many of your children step into adulthood by leaving for service, education, or a job that is out of state the question enters your mind, have I taught them everything they need to know? Are they really ready to enter life without me? Without my help or advice?

This lesson we have studied this week is Moses' answer to that question, because he was the one who would be leaving, in death. Were the children of Israel really ready to enter life in the Promised Land, without Moses? Had he taught them everything they needed to know? Would this new generation follow the Law without his constant reminders or seek the Lord for themselves, without his advice?

We will see how Moses used his last days as the leader of the nation of Israel to satisfy his concerns about their preparation by reviewing: Consequences for disobedience; Commitment to God's covenant; Confirmation of Joshua as their new leader; Compassion God had shown; Contention over Moses' body.

In last week's lesson, Moses had reviewed the Law with this new generation. He didn't take for granted that they had learned God's commandments from their parents during the last 40 years of their wanderings in the wilderness. In Deuteronomy 26:16 Moses reminded them, "The Lord your God commands you this day to follow these decrees and laws; carefully observe them with all your heart and with all your soul." But as Moses rehearsed the Law, he reminded them of the consequences for breaking the law. Although God would bless them

with harvests, growing children and protection from their enemies as long as they obeyed God's commands, He would turn the land against them if they disobeyed his commands. He warned them that He would not block the evil their enemies would bring upon them if they turned away from the Lord their God. And as today's lesson began, Moses saw far into Israel's future.

Moses warned them that ultimately, viciously powerful nations would swoop down upon them, like an eagle dives upon its prey. This would be, "a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old, or pity for the young." [Deuteronomy 28:50] Their siege would be so severe and prolonged, that the people who fled into fortified cities would run out of food while the enemy feasted on Israel's flocks, herds and crops. People would turn to cannibalism to try to survive. Terrible plagues would be unleashed on them as well as natural disasters on their land.

Now as the people listened to these dire warnings, they may have felt they were horror stories, meant to frighten them into obedience. But Moses was actually seeing into their future. Once the people occupied the land of Canaan, they would get busy setting up their homes, and farms and cities. They would begin to drift from their worship of the One True God, and worship idols. But God would not forget their promises to worship Him and obey all He commanded.

When they fell away from Him, He would withdraw His hand of protection and allow countries that weren't even established yet, to invade with devastating destruction and complete occupation. First Assyria would sweep down and conquer the northern part of Israel. Then Babylon would come and carry away the rest of Israel into exile. Moses prophesied, "Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods – gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known." [Deuteronomy 28:64]

As Moses announced all of these terrible consequences, the people could scarcely bear it. They had been looking forward to this adventure, to chase out the evil nations and take possession of this land; to live in it as their own homeland. Yet their beloved leader was warning that they would one day be forced to leave the Promised Land by these powerful enemies! Please, may it never be!

This dower flash of a terrible future accomplished its purpose. In chapter 29, Moses again summoned all the Israelites there in the valley of Moab to renew their Covenant with the Lord. He reminded them of all God had done for them since Egypt. He challenged that they themselves were witnesses of this: “Your eyes have seen all that the Lord did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials and to all his land. With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those signs and great wonders.” [Deuteronomy 29:2,3]

Some of Israel's people were children when they fled Egypt; old enough to remember walking through the Red Sea. They recalled how the Lord provided food and water and clothes that lasted 40 years, without wearing out. They witnessed how He enabled them to win their battles with Sihon and Og the giant. So, now Moses challenged them to renew their Covenant with the Lord.

“You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God, a covenant the Lord is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God but also with those who are not here today.”  
[Deuteronomy 29:12-15]

Moses knew that there were people standing before him and in the future, who would not take this covenant oath seriously. He confronted their doubt. In verse 19 he challenged them: “When such a person hears the words of this oath,

they invoke a blessing on themselves, thinking, 'I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way,' they will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry." Moses warned that God could isolate even those who inwardly were rolling their eyes at these warnings.

As parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents, we might also wonder about our children whom we know are "rolling their eyes" as we share our advice about their future. We may even share our own experiences. If only they could learn about trusting the Lord from our own bad consequences, learned the hard way. But often loved ones will only learn from the experiences in the UHK; the "university of hard knocks."

In verse 21 Moses reminded them, "The Lord will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for disaster, according to all the curses of the covenant written in this Book of the Law." [Deuteronomy 29:21] This apostasy would be the downfall of the nation of Israel. Moses could see it in their future. In fact, other nations would come and see their desolate land, shaking their heads asking "Why has the Lord done this to this land? Why this fierce, burning anger?" [verse 24]

"And the answer would be: 'It is because this people abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the covenant he made with them when he brought them out of Egypt. They went off and worshiped other gods and bowed down to them, gods they did not know, gods he had not given them. Therefore, the Lord's anger burned against this land, so that he brought on it all the curses written in this book. In furious anger and in great wrath the Lord uprooted them from their land and thrust them into another land, as it is now.'" [Deuteronomy 29:25-28]

The calamities described in Deuteronomy 28 and 29 were even worse than those recorded later concerning the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. Moses envisioned that the entire nation would be scattered among all the nations of the earth. The first exile transplanted the tribes north into parts of present-day Iran and

Iraq, and allowed any who desired to return to the land afterward to do so. The Jews from the tribes of Judah and Levi were those who returned, to rebuild Jerusalem during the time of Nehemiah and Ezra.

But in 70 AD, a Roman General named Titus destroyed Jerusalem capturing over 90,000 people, after killing more than a million Jews during his campaign. Then, Emperor Adrian forbid any Jews from setting foot back in Israel, on pain of death. This was the law until Rome fell. But in Deuteronomy 30 verses 4 & 5 the Lord promised, “Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.”

Our greatest fear may be that our children will fail. Our visions of the prodigal son, wasting away in a pig pen can be so depressing. Moses' visions brought him to the brink of despair, but God offered him a final glimpse of the prosperous, dedicated nation of Israel that we know today, with one possible exception. “The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul and live.” [Deuteronomy 30:6] As yet, Israel may not have fully returned in our time, with their hearts circumcised to love the Lord; however, God is not through with Israel.

Like our adult children, Israel must learn to love God as their own possession. Moses wanted them to choose this state of living in God's pleasure for themselves. But this vision revealed that they might choose to learn the importance of a personal relation to the Lord the hard way. It would take a heart change to bring Israel to truly love God for themselves. That heart change was not totally beyond them, it was just a matter of choice, as our memory verse said.

“Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.” [Deuteronomy 30:11] So Moses placed that choice before them.

“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.”

[Deuteronomy 30:15,16] With these words Moses presented Israel with the choice of their future: between “life and prosperity, death and destruction.” [verse 15] The choice was in the hands of the people.

It was now time to place Joshua firmly before them as their new leader. In Deuteronomy 31:7 and 8, Moses called Joshua to stand before him in the presence of all of the people. His final official words to him were, “Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

This admonition to “Be strong and courageous,” was exactly what Joshua and the people needed to hear. God told Moses to tell the people not to fear because He would go before them and with them into the land. “he will never leave you nor forsake you.” [verse 6] Although Moses could not go with them, the Lord would. Joshua needed to know this because stepping into Moses' shoes was a big responsibility. But “The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you;” [verse 8] was God's promise to Joshua as the leader and commander of this nation.

Moses then completed a copy of the Law and presented it to the Levitical priests, to keep next to the Ark of the Covenant. He commanded them to read it before all of the people every seven years, during the Sabbath Year at the Festival of Tabernacles, so that the people would never forget God's Law. In this way, the

people would hear God's decrees in their homes, synagogues, at the congregational meetings at festivals and particularly at the Festival of Tabernacles. It would become a constant reminder in their lives to love and obey the Lord their God.

The day came for Moses to officially step down as the leader of Israel. The Lord appeared to Moses and Joshua in a pillar of cloud at the entrance of the tabernacle. With a final warning that Israel would be prone to wander away from God, Moses was given a song to teach to all the people, that would remind them of their history. This song was to be taught to everyone. The text of the song is found in chapter 32, and must have been set to a catchy tune so that soon, everyone was singing it, and remembering all that God had done for them

A recurring theme of this song was that God is their Rock: "He is the Rock, his works are perfect and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he." [Deuteronomy 32:4] It is repeated in verse 15, saying the people would reject Him; in verse 18 where they "deserted the Rock, who fathered you"; in verse 30 to remind them only God could enable one man to chase a thousand enemies; in verse 31 so even their enemies would admit "their rock is not like our Rock"; because in verse 37 they had to admit that the stone idols the enemy worshiped, their rocks, would abandon them before the One True God.

So, by repeatedly singing this special Song of Moses the people of Israel would remind each other, as said in the stanza of verse 39 "See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me." In contrast to Moses' vision of Israel's apostasy, God presented Himself as superior; One who would avenge the nations who punished Israel for their lack of faith, and would establish them again in the Land. As he stated in the last refrain, "Rejoice, you nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people." [Deuteronomy 32:43]

Moses knew that God would continue to guide His people into the land He had sworn to give them. He would help them follow Joshua to victory. They only needed to obey God's commands and teach their children to follow them, and all of God's blessings would be upon them as they took possession.

Moses had one more task on his bucket list. He desired to bless the twelve tribes before he left them. His blessings are found in Deuteronomy 33. Moses seemed to envision the land that he had seen from Pisgah as we read in chapter 3 of Deuteronomy. But in his blessing for each tribe, he saw them placed in the portion they would inherit after they had conquered the battles with the seven nations. He blessed them to grow large in number, and to cultivate their territory. He blessed them as faithful servants and blessed the skilled work of their hands.

Moses seemed to see what each tribe would become as their faith remained in the Lord God as their refuge. So, he ended his blessings, exclaiming, “Blessed are you, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord? He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword. Your enemies will cower before you, and you will tread on their heights.” [Deuteronomy 33:29] With these blessings, the Lord called Moses home.

Deuteronomy 32:48-50 stated, “On that same day the Lord told Moses, 'Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people.’”

“That same day,” was the day he had sung his song to the people. So, perhaps he blessed the tribes as he walked through their camps on the way up the mountain. Or perhaps he had already recorded his blessings in the copy of the book of the law he had given to the Levites. But Moses, now one-hundred and twenty years old, climbed up one of the tallest mountains in that range, and gave

up his life to the Lord. From the record in this last chapter of Deuteronomy, it appears he may have gone there alone. It is not recorded that anyone accompanied him, although Joshua perhaps had done so.

Despite his advanced age, it was said about his health, “yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone.” God simply “buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is.”

Jude, the half-brother of Jesus, commented on a contention over Moses' body. He stated, in verse 9 of his book, “But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!' [Jude 1:9]

Most commentators stated that God, knowing His people's disposition toward false worship, would surely desire to return often to worship at Moses' grave, if they knew where it was. Satan tried to claim his body, so he could set it before the people to lure them into forming a worship of this man in place of God. So the Lord God set his archangel to guard the place and keep it a secret.

“Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face,” [Deuteronomy 34:10] was, I believe, the Lord's epitaph for Moses. He was the man who reluctantly became the doer of miracles, the speaker of the Law, the one who interceded with God for Israel sake, face to face.

Perhaps, then, this is what we need to remember when we are concerned about our children and grandchildren as they go off into a land where we cannot follow. The best advice we can ever give, was that which Moses gave to his people: “the Lord your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands...if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees ... and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

[Deuteronomy 30:9,10]

Then, let us be that one who loves them enough to always pray for them. We may not be able to walk beside them daily, but we know that God will never leave them or forsake them. Let's leave them with that promise of prayer, and like Moses, leave them in the Lord's strong and faithful arms. That should be our legacy.