

Deuteronomy 33-34 • Blessing the Tribes/ The Death of Moses

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Deuteronomy chapter 33. The first 5 verses of chapter 33 appear very much in the form of a poem. And I have to tell you here, before we get into these verses, before we read them, that they convey to us some very difficult Hebrew translation. So we're going to do our best here to work through this, but I'm aware that in some cases, if you have a different translation than the one I'm reading, you may have a meaning here that is quite different than the one the ESV conveys, and we're going to look at that and see why, hopefully.

Anyway, so this poem begins in verse 1 by saying, *“This is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the people of Israel before his death.”* (ESV)

And by the way, this tells us right here that the last part of Deuteronomy was obviously not written by Moses. It goes on to talk about the things he did prior to his death, and then it will actually cover his death, and his burial, and things like that. And so whether this was written by Joshua or whether this was written by someone else, we don't know for certain. But it goes on to tell us about this final blessing.

Verse 2 says, *“He said, “The LORD came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us;”* And by the way, Seir, as you probably know, Mount Seir, is another name for the region of Edom, where Sinai was located.

He goes on to say, *“he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, ...”* By the way, the inclusion of the word, the, seems unnecessarily cumbersome here. Let me show you how the New American Standard Bible (NASB) puts this.

Deuteronomy 33:2 (NASB)

And He came from the mist of ten thousand holy ones...

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Frankly a little bit, I think, easier to understand.

“...with flaming fire at (or in) his right hand.”

Now, verses 3, 4, and 5, these are particularly challenging. It says,

*“³ Yes, he loved his people,
all his holy ones were in his hand;
so they followed in your steps,
receiving direction from you,”* Notice the, it changes from he to you.

And then in verse 4,

*“when Moses commanded us a law,
as a possession for the assembly of Jacob.
⁵ Thus the LORD became king in Jeshurun,
when the heads of the people were gathered,
all the tribes of Israel together.”*

And of course that talks about the ratifying of the law which we read about here in one of our recent studies.

Anyway, you can tell, again, these verses are in a little bit of a poem, kind of a form. But it's interesting that things change as far as the target, whether we're talking about somebody who says, he, referring to Moses. And then thus changing as we go through to your, and you, in the very same verse so kind of challenging to read.

But as we begin verse 6, we're going to see how Moses speaks a word of blessing over the tribes of Israel. And I'm going to tell you ahead of time, there's a strange omission. There's nothing said of the tribe of Simeon. It's just not included in there.

One of the reasons for this could be because Simeon existed within the confines of Judah, and it's very possible that over time, and see I, that's the confusing part about this, they hadn't really received their allotments yet, and so it's hard to think of it, it's a little anachronistic to think of it that way.

Simeon existed within the confines of Judah, they essentially became very much the same tribe over time. But at this time, they were still very distinct, and so why Moses left out Simeon, we don't know. We don't know. We'll just have to ask him when we see him.

It begins with Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob. It says, “*Let Reuben live, and not die, but let his men be few.*”

Now, right away, we come to an issue with this verse, but let me start off by saying, Reuben, as you probably know, was the firstborn son, and he never escaped the dishonor of going into his father's bedroom and lying with his father's concubine. And the dishonor that came from that seemed to follow him.

And even though that sin always seemed to resurface, however, the message here is that the descendants of Reuben might be allowed to live and not to die.

Now, it's the final wording of this verse that is in dispute. You'll notice the ESV renders it as “*but let his men be few.*” Which expresses a heavy kind of wish for limitation on the population of this tribe.

But the NASB, again, let me put this on the screen for you, refers to it this way, or renders it this way.

Deuteronomy 33:6 (NASB)

“May Reuben live and not die, Nor his men be few.”

“May Reuben live and not die, Nor his men be few.”

Which, as you can see, it's the opposite sentiment. I'm not a Hebrew scholar, but I did look into this and I found out that the negative particle here is not in the Hebrew which is what the NASB translated as, or inserted as, nor. But let me show you here the two different ways that this could be seen.

Deuteronomy 33:6

“Let Reuben live, and not die, but let his men be few.”

“Let Reuben live, and not die, but let his men be few.” Which is a limitation.

Or,

Deuteronomy 33:6

“Let Reuben live, and not die, but let NOT his men be few.”

“Let Reuben live, and not die, but let NOT his men be few.” Is what many translations actually insert, or something similar.

And the reason they do is because this is a blessing. And so it is assumed that the negative should be put in there. *“Let not his numbers be few...”* But the actual Hebrew does not contain that word so we're left wondering a little bit here whether Moses is saying, let him live, but he will be restrained in his population because of his sin. Or, whether he's just extending grace and saying, and let him also be many.

Moving on. This is where the tribe of Simeon would be mentioned, but he is not. And it goes on to say in this, *“⁷ And this he said of Judah:*

*“Hear, O LORD, the voice of Judah,
and bring him in to his people.
With your hands contend for him,
and be a help against his adversaries.”*

Moves on to Levi. Remember Moses was of the tribe of Levi. *“⁸ And of Levi he said,*

*“Give to Levi your Thummim,
and your Urim (which were the means by which the priest would determine the will of God) to your godly one,
whom you tested at Massah,
with whom you quarreled at the waters of Meribah;
⁹ who said of his father and mother,
‘I regard them not’;
he disowned his brothers
and ignored his children.
For they observed your word
and kept your covenant.
¹⁰ They shall teach Jacob your rules
and Israel your law;
they shall put incense before you
and whole burnt offerings on your altar.
¹¹ Bless, O LORD, his substance,
and accept the work of his hands;
crush the loins of his adversaries,
of those who hate him, that they rise not again.”*

And then moving on. *“¹² Of Benjamin he said,*

*“The beloved of the LORD dwells in safety.
The High God surrounds him all day long,
and dwells between his shoulders.”*

¹³ *And of Joseph he said, ... ”*

Now let me stop right there and remind you that there are technically is not a tribe of Joseph. There is a son named Joseph, but there's not technically a tribe. The tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim took over where Joseph would have been because they were the sons of Joseph.

Remember, Joseph got a double portion. And so instead of the tribe of Joseph, you have the tribe of Manasseh and Ephraim, who will be mentioned at the end of this blessing.

But it says regarding Joseph and his descendants,

*“Blessed by the LORD be his land,
with the choicest gifts of heaven above,
and of the deep that crouches beneath,
¹⁴ with the choicest fruits of the sun
and the rich yield of the months,
¹⁵ with the finest produce of the ancient mountains
and the abundance of the everlasting hills,
¹⁶ with the best gifts of the earth and its fullness
and the favor of him who dwells in the bush.*

*May these rest on the head of Joseph,
on the pate (that's not a word you and I say, most translations either say
crown or brow) of him who is prince among his brothers.*

*¹⁷ A firstborn bull—he has majesty,
and his horns are the horns of a wild ox; (speaks of strength)
with them he shall gore the peoples,
all of them, to the ends of the earth;
they are the ten thousands of Ephraim,
and they are the thousands of Manasseh.”*

So the great blessing that came upon Joseph.

“¹⁸ And of Zebulun he said,

*“Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out,
and Issachar, in your tents.*

¹⁹ They shall call peoples to their mountain;

*there they offer right sacrifices;
for they draw from the abundance of the seas
and the hidden treasures of the sand.”*

²⁰ *And of Gad he said,*

*“Blessed be he who enlarges Gad!
Gad crouches like a lion;
he tears off arm and scalp.*

²¹ *He chose the best of the land for himself,
for there a commander's portion was reserved; (you can see that in Gad
there's a kind of the idea of the warrior)
and he came with the heads of the people,
with Israel he executed the justice of the LORD,
and his judgments for Israel.”*

²² *And of Dan he said,*

*“Dan is a lion's cub
that leaps from Bashan.”*

²³ *And of Naphtali he said,*

*“O Naphtali, sated with favor,
and full of the blessing of the LORD,
possess the lake and the south.”*

²⁴ *And of Asher he said,*

*“Most blessed of sons be Asher;
let him be the favorite of his brothers,
and let him dip his foot in oil.*

²⁵ *Your bars shall be iron and bronze,
and as your days, so shall your strength be.”*

All right, so the blessings to the sons of Israel.

Verse 26, “*There is none like God, O Jeshurun*, (you remember we defined the name Jeshurun in one of our last studies. It means, the upright which God sometimes uses in a sarcastic manner)

*who rides through the heavens to your help,
through the skies in his majesty.*

²⁷ *The eternal God is your dwelling place,
and underneath are the everlasting arms.*

*And he thrust out the enemy before you
and said, 'Destroy.'*
²⁸ *So Israel lived in safety,
Jacob lived alone,
in a land of grain and wine,
whose heavens drop down dew.*
²⁹ *Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you,
a people saved by the LORD,
the shield of your help,
and the sword of your triumph!
Your enemies shall come fawning to you,
and you shall tread upon their backs."*

Interesting chapter, is it not? Almost again poetic in form challenging to understand because we don't know a lot of the history of what would take place in these tribes. And we know some, but not all. We usually know what we know based on the characters who came out and who played a prominent role. But in some cases they didn't, and so we just take at face value some of the things that are said here.

But this chapter ends with the statement, "*Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like... a people saved by the LORD,*" Who is like Israel? And that is a fascinating statement in and of itself because it conjures to mind just so much. Who's like Israel? Who's like the people of Israel?

Well, in one sense, we all are because Israel was no different from us from the standpoint of being human beings. Sinful, rebellious, hard hearted, stubborn, Can you relate? So in that sense, there's really very little difference. I see a lot of myself there.

But on the other hand, there is a position that Israel has among the nations of the world that no other nation shares, and that is receiving the Law. Being God's chosen people, being that chosen nation on the face of the earth.

It's amazing and God's not through with Israel as we've said many times. It's funny too, I get a lot of interesting comments over the internet, particularly from our Old Testament studies. And you know what, people either love Israel or they hate them. And I do get comments from time to time that are very, very negative about the nation of Israel. And there's a hatred.

And there's a generally not, I'll have to say this, not among born again believers. I think that there's a natural tendency that we have, once we understand the crux of God's Word and God's heart toward Israel, it's very difficult, I mean,

practically impossible for us to take any other view than to see them as God sees them.

But there are many people who don't see them that way and actually see them in a very, very negative light. And I do get very mean spirited comments about Israel from time to time, and they remain to this day a very controversial nation.

Isn't it interesting? Isn't it interesting you guys? It's this little sliver of land. I mean you look at it in the scope of the world and it's this little nothing. It's this little sliver that's like insignificant, and yet how much attention and political pressure is placed upon the people who live in this small little sliver of land.

And you're like, what's the big deal? If I were not a believer, I would say, whenever something came up on the news regarding Israel, I would say, stop wasting my time. If I was an unbeliever. And I would want to question news people and say, why are you talking about this little sliver of land in the Middle East? Who cares? I mean, who cares? Right?

Now, as a believer, I understand. This is the focal point of the purpose, plan, and will of God. Because not only did God have this special relationship with Israel, out of this favored nation came the Messiah who was prophesied even during the time of Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him.

I get it. As a believer, I get it. And I could stand to probably ignore the rest of news and just talk about Israel as a believer. I'm fascinated by Israel. I'm fascinated by it because of the prominent place it holds in the Word of God. And as a student of the Word of God, I can't help but be enamored by Israel because so much of God's prophetic timetable centers on the nation of Israel. And so much prophecy is yet to be fulfilled related the nation of Israel. That is just fascinating.

But like I said, if I were an unbeliever, I would say, hey, stop wasting my time. This is ridiculous. Who cares? I mean, who cares? I would probably say, just let these guys fight it out and kill each other. That's probably what I would say as an unbeliever. I would say, let's just get on with the important news about the economy and the desire and effort to be happy, because it seems like Israel has nothing to do with my effort and desire to be happy. But as a believer, I understand that it has everything to do with God's redemptive program. And His prophetic timetable. Fascinating.

Deuteronomy 34, short chapter. *“Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, ...”* Now, Pisgah is usually not a proper name. It's, it can be, but it's usually not. It usually just means like a bluff, or a high area. But it tells us here it *“is opposite Jericho.”* So we have a good idea where all this is. I mean, we know where Mount Nebo is, and we know opposite ancient Jericho.

“And the LORD showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, ² all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, ³ the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. ⁴ And the LORD said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, ‘I will give it to your offspring.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.’”

Let me show you a picture of what it would look like if you went to Mount Nebo today.



There is actually a monument there and there's a slate, that kind of a carved slate as you, what you're not seeing is, there's a railing there. But you can look out and this is essentially, where Moses roughly stood and looked out from Mount

Nebo toward ancient Jericho and to the land. And what, you probably can't see that very well on that slate, but it gives the distance to the various places and how far they are from this area, and how Moses would have looked from here and seen the land. So pretty amazing, isn't it?

Oh, and this is more specifically without the slate. If you go to the next picture, this is specifically toward the view of ancient Jericho.



So that would have been, and I dare say, he would have been able to clearly see the city walls from where he was standing there, and not just the area. So it's pretty amazing to see those pictures.

Isn't it wonderful that we have a Bible that we can say, we read about it and then we can look at the pictures? I always liked pictures when I was a kid. You read the book and it's like—your kids ever say that to you when you're reading them a book, show me the picture.

And it's so cool that you and I have a Bible that has a history, a geographic history that goes along with it. And we can stand at roughly the same place Moses stood, on Mount Nebo and look out toward ancient Jericho and say,

wow, that's the vista that he saw, it's there. It's still there, these places. You and I aren't hearing stories that made up from someone's fiction.

It says in verse 5, *“So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD,⁶ and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day.”*

And by the way, that phrase, *“...he buried him...”* is taken to mean that God Himself did the burial of Moses. But notice where it says He buried him. It's in the valley of Moab, opposite Beth-Peor. Notice that He didn't bury him on the Mount where he went to go look on Mount Nebo. It doesn't say He buried him on Mount Nebo.

So Moses went up there alone, he breathed his last, and the Lord carried him to the Valley of Moab where he buried him with no one watching. And so he was buried, it says, in a valley. A mount and a valley are not the same thing. So no one knows the exact spot of his burial.

Now you go to Mount Nebo today and you'll see a large erected stone that, that speaks of the memorial. In fact, it even says like, the memorial of Moses or in memorial. And it speaks of, this is where he died, but it's not where he was buried. Okay. Because as we've said, no one knows the burial spot.

And it's very possible that the reason that Moses was buried privately had to do with Israel's incredible propensity for idolatry. And I have no doubt in my mind that they would have made that burial plot a shrine. I mean, this is Moses. This is where Moses was buried, and so the Lord obviously didn't want that to happen. And so He himself buried Moses. That's crazy, isn't it? It's an amazing.

“⁷ Moses was 120 years old when he died.” Just a youngster. By the way, you can take Moses life and you can divide it into three 40 year groupings. Right? You've got 40 years in Egypt. You've got 40 years in Midian, basically herding sheep and goats and stuff like that. And then you have 40 years with Israel in the wilderness and you come to his 120 years. How amazing though to have your life divided so evenly into three particular groupings.

It says here that *“His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated.”* Which is to say to you and I the Moses didn't die because he got sick or he didn't even technically die because his body gave out. It says his strength was unabated. He died because his task was done. His task was completed. That's why.

“⁸ And (we're told that) the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days. (so they observed an entire month of mourning for Moses, a and) Then (then we're told that) the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended.

⁹ And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses. ¹⁰ And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, ¹¹ none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, ¹² and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.”

The life of Moses, as we complete this study of Deuteronomy, the life of Moses is a truly amazing life. A truly amazing man. A man who the Bible says here knew God face to face.

Now, again, we know that doesn't mean he saw the unbridled glory of God. We know that because we know that Moses asked to see God in His unbridled glory, and he was declined. He was turned down. And the reason is because these bodies of ours are not created to see God in His glory. You and I can't do that. People will say sometimes, I wish God would just appear to me. No, you don't. Because you wouldn't be around to talk about it afterward.

Moses sought that kind of vision, that kind of understanding of God. Let me see Your glory, he said. Let me see Your face. And God said, no. No man may see my face and live. (Exodus 33:20)

And yet it speaks here in this passage of no man like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. That is a statement that refers to intimacy. It means that there was nothing between them.

Typically, when God speaks to people, it's through dreams and a dream is a medium or a vision. A vision even is a medium. Or through prophets. Through, God speaks through this other individual. Or in the cases of the priests, we know that the Urim and the Thummim were used to determine the will of God.

But it says of Moses, he knew God face to face. And so there was an intimacy and a closeness that Moses had with the Lord, that no other individual had to that degree. Even someone like David. Moses had a unique sort of a relationship with God.

Can I suggest something to you though this evening? May I suggest to you that what you have with God is greater still. Is greater than what Moses had because as much as Moses loved to commune with the Spirit of the living God, that very spirit dwells inside of you and me.

Speaking of John the Baptist, Jesus said a fascinating thing in the Gospel according to Luke. He said this, he said, among those who've been raised up among the sons of men, no one is greater than John. And yet, He said, the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. (Matthew 11:11) So there's a unique, even a greater and more unique relationship that you and I have.

And Christians, let's never take that for granted. Let's never look upon that. We look at people like Moses, we're like, wow! Moses would look upon you and say, wow!

The very Spirit of the living God indwells you. He has placed his name in you. His power at your disposal. And as, as much as Moses struggled to get the nation of Israel to understand their birthright as a special nation, what the New Testament says of you and I is that we, the body of Christ are a holy people. A holy people unto God.

And that's what Moses longed for and never really ever saw. Never ever saw that in his lifetime in the nation of Israel. He never saw the reality of a people that were truly set apart unto God.

Even before his death, he said to them, you're a stiff necked people and you're always going astray. You've gone astray all during my lifetime. I can't even imagine what you guys are going to do when I leave. That's the kind of thing he left with. That was the kind of understanding that he had and how disappointing, that could very well be.

And yet you and I, the holiness, the righteousness that God has bestowed, imputed into our lives, Moses would look back, Moses would look, or for him, it'd have to look ahead, but he would look upon your life and say, wow, what a blessing, what a privilege, what a privilege you have.

No one has to teach you saying no, the Lord, for you all know Him. You have that intimacy with God because He lives inside of you. So pretty amazing stuff.