



Deuteronomy - Chapter Thirty One

Summary of Chapter Thirty One

Moses already knew that he would not be the one to lead the people into the Promised Land but he still wanted to encourage them so he reiterated that it would be the Lord who would go before them and who would ensure they would be victorious in battle, just as he had been in the lands they had already conquered. He also informed them that it would be Joshua who would lead them and he commissioned Joshua in the sight of all the people.

Moses then wrote down the entire law and gave it to the priests to be kept beside the Ark of the Covenant. He also gave instruction that it was to be read every seventh year to the whole gathered nation during the Festival of Booths.

God summoned Moses and Joshua to the tent of meeting to commission Joshua as leader. However, before doing so, God stated that he knew that the people would soon forsake him and turn to other gods, bringing disaster upon themselves by doing so. Therefore, God instructed Moses to write a song that, along with the book of the law, would be learned by the people and that would act as a witness against them because they would forsake God rather than God forsaking them.

VI Deuteronomy 31:1-34:12 Succession of Leadership

The final chapters of Deuteronomy concern the succession of leadership from Moses to Joshua and the writing down of the covenant for its perpetuity and ongoing authority in Israel's life.

VI.a Deuteronomy 31:1-29 - The commissioning of Joshua and the writing of the law

It has been clear throughout Deuteronomy that Moses will die before entry into the land. Now his successor, Joshua, is commissioned. Refer also to the summary.

VI.a.i Deuteronomy 31:1-8 - Joshua Becomes Moses' Successor

Moses announces that he is old and about to die. However, the people need not fear as God would go before them into the land and Joshua would lead them.

¹ When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, ² he said to them: 'I am now a hundred and twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about, and the Lord has told me, "You shall not cross over this Jordan."

Deuteronomy 31:1-2

I am no longer able to get about seems to refer to Moses' old age. However, it is also written: <<*Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated*>> (Deuteronomy 34:7), indicating that it was not age that prevented Moses from continuing in leadership. At a hundred and twenty years old he was not as old as the likes of Abraham (175), Isaac (180), and Jacob (130), but it was still a good age. It should also be noted that the reason why Moses would not lead the people into the Promised Land was not to do with age but with his failure to obey God fully at Meribah; refer to Numbers 20:2-13.

Moses age of one hundred and twenty years allows his life to be equally divided into three forty-year segments: aged 1-40 Moses lived in the palaces of Pharaoh and had a privileged life; aged 41-80 he lived and worked as a shepherd in Midian; aged 81-120 he was the leader of his people, confronting Pharaoh, bringing the people out of Egypt, receiving the law and leading them throughout the wilderness years.

You shall not cross over this Jordan. Moses' exclusion from the Promised Land was due to his sin. God's correction of Moses was hard; not only will he not lead Israel into the Promised Land; he will not even go there. That which he had dreamed of and felt called to as a child in the palaces of Egypt, to deliver God's people, will not be completed.

Essentially, at Meribah, when Israel complained and cried out for water, Moses misrepresented God. He misrepresented God by lecturing the nation harshly and unnecessarily. Moses misrepresented God by acting as if God needed him to provide water for the people. And Moses both misrepresented and disobeyed God by angrily striking the rock twice, instead of just speaking to the rock as God had instructed him to. This may seem an excessively harsh punishment for Moses; after all, with only one slip-up, he now must die outside the Promised Land? However, Moses was being judged by a stricter standard because of his leadership position within the nation, and because he had a uniquely close relationship with God. It is right for teachers and leaders to be judged by a

stricter standard (James 3:1); although it is unrighteous to hold teachers and leaders to a perfect standard. It is true the people's conduct was worse than Moses' but that is irrelevant. Worst of all, Moses defaced a beautiful picture of Jesus' redemptive work through the rock which provided water in the wilderness. The NT makes it clear this water-providing, life-giving rock was a picture of Jesus (1 Corinthians 10:4). Jesus, being struck once, provided life for all who would drink of him (John 7:37). It was and is unnecessary, and unrighteous, that Jesus would be struck again, much less again twice, because the Son of God needed only to suffer once (Hebrews 10:10-12). Jesus can now be found with words of faith (Romans 10:8-10), as Moses should have only used words of faith to bring life-giving water to the nation of Israel. Moses 'ruined' this picture of the work of Jesus that God intended. So now, Moses must face his destiny. What should also be remembered is that the death of one of God's children is not a tragedy for they go to be with him forever!

³ The Lord your God himself will cross over before you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua also will cross over before you, as the Lord promised. ⁴ The Lord will do to them as he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land, when he destroyed them. ⁵ The Lord will give them over to you and you shall deal with them in full accord with the command that I have given to you. ⁶ Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.'

Deuteronomy 31:3-6

The Lord your God himself will cross over before you. Moses had led Israel for forty years; he was the only leader most of these people had ever known. Yet the nation could be confident and Moses could go his way in peace because he knew God was with Israel. Israel, Moses, or Joshua did not have to be afraid. Instead, they could be strong and of good courage, because the Lord God would always go before them. Moses was a great man; one of the greatest to ever walk this earth. But Moses was not irreplaceable. God being with them, Israel was in good hands, with or without Moses.

For the battles east of Jordan against Sihon and Og and the outcomes for the nation, refer to Deuteronomy 2:24-3:11 and the associated comments.

Be strong and bold. It was now time for the nation to take courage in the Lord and not fear nor be dismayed. Moses passes from the scene, but God has not abandoned Israel. This command to all Israel is also made directly to Joshua.

Do not fear. In Deuteronomy 1:28 Moses recounts that the returning spies feared going into the land thirty-nine years earlier because they found the people to be taller and stronger than they were. This would still be the case but, if they trust in God, the size and strength of the opposition does not matter at all.

He will not fail you or forsake you. In 1 Chronicles 28:20, David applies this to Solomon; and the Christian community are reminded that this still applies to those who are faithful to God: <<*Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you'*>> (Hebrews 13:5).

⁷ Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: 'Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the Lord has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. ⁸ It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.'

Deuteronomy 31:7-8

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel. Here Moses commissions Joshua, which God himself then does in v.23. Bringing the people into the Promised Land was God's work. He was going to do it. However, God almost always does his work through men and women who make themselves available to him.

Since God was going to use Joshua, he must **be strong and bold**. Moses knew Joshua, and was confident that he would be. So he confidently said: **you will put them in possession of it.**

Men of encouragement like Moses are a blessing. Moses knew that Joshua might be wavering or at least daunted by the challenges that lay ahead, so Moses encouraged Joshua, and pushed him forward to be more than he perhaps thought he could be. God uses encouraging people to help others fulfil the destiny he has for them. Joshua was the man; but the work was the Lord's: he is the one **who goes before you**: <<*The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night*>> (Exodus 13:21).

VI.a.ii Deuteronomy 31:9-13 - The Law to Be Read Every Seventh Year

Moses gave a written copy of the law to the priests who were to keep it by the Ark of the Covenant and were to ensure that it was read to the entire nation every seventh year during the Festival of Booths.

⁹ Then Moses wrote down this law, and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel.

Deuteronomy 31:9

Moses wrote this law. The writing of Deuteronomy Chapters 1-30 by Moses indicates that God's Law had ongoing validity for future generations. From now on, the mediation of God's Word to Israel, given orally through Moses, will be through the written text. Just as the kings of Israel were to write their own copy of God's law (Deuteronomy 17:18), so Moses wrote this law. He, as an uncrowned king over Israel, loved God's Word and wanted to pass it on to the generation behind him.

Although oral traditions served ancient people well and much of what was passed on was faithfully reproduced from generation to generation, God's Word is of far greater importance and therefore needed to be written down to ensure it was never misinterpreted either accidentally or intentionally. Today, many have tried to translate the original language copies into other languages and this has led to various versions with, in most cases, slight differences in wording and emphasis. Therefore, all who read Scripture today, especially those called to preach and teach, should seek the Holy Spirit's guidance.

¹⁰ Moses commanded them: 'Every seventh year, in the scheduled year of remission, during the festival of booths, ¹¹ when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing.

Deuteronomy 31:10-11

Every seventh year, in the scheduled year of remission. The year of remission or the Sabbatical year was a time when all debts were cancelled. Refer to Deuteronomy 15:1 and the associated comments.

The festival of booths is also known as the Festival of Tabernacles; refer also to Deuteronomy 16:13-15 and the associated comments. This passage gives one of the clearest pictures of how people were taught the law. The priests had the responsibility to read this law aloud to the people at the great autumn festival.

At the place that he will choose. This place is unnamed, although centuries later it was clearly identified with Jerusalem. Until then, the place was where the tabernacle resided, which for much of that time was Shiloh; refer to Deuteronomy 12:5 and the associated comments.

You shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Part of the job of the Levites was to minister the Word of God to the nation, as they were scattered

throughout the nation. Every seven years they were to have a public reading and explanation of the law of God, as was modelled in Nehemiah 8:1-8.

The first known public reading of the law is in Joshua 8:30. The next recorded reading is during the reign of Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 17:7, more than 500 years later. Then, in the reign of Josiah there was another public reading of the law in 2 Chronicles 34:30, more than 250 years after Jehoshaphat. Of course, there might have been public readings of the law as commanded here which are not recorded; but the fact that some are recorded probably means they were unusual, not typical. With this kind of neglect of God's Word, no wonder Israel was so often in trouble! There were many prophetic warnings about the absence of God's Word among his people, especially: <<*The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord*>> (Amos 8:11).

¹² Assemble the people – men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns – so that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law,
¹³ and so that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess.'

Deuteronomy 31:12-13

Men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns. According to Deuteronomy 16:16, only the men were required to make the pilgrimage to attend the festival each year. Here, that obligation is extended to everyone in the seventh year, when the law is to be read.

So that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God. This seven-year national focus on God's Word was especially important for the children among the people of Israel. However, this was not the only time they should hear the statutes of God for the people had already been commanded: <<*You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise*>> (Deuteronomy 11:18-19). Through his Word, they could come to a personal relationship with the Lord.

VI.a.iii Deuteronomy 31:14-29 - Moses and Joshua Receive God's Charge

God summons Moses and Joshua into the tent of meeting to commission Joshua as the successor to Moses. However, God also informs Moses that the people will soon

forsake God and will go after other gods, thus bringing disaster upon themselves. Therefore, God will give Moses a song to teach the people which, along with the written law, will bear witness against them when they recall it in the times of woe and disaster that they will bring upon themselves.

¹⁴ The Lord said to Moses, 'Your time to die is near; call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, so that I may commission him.' So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting, ¹⁵ and the Lord appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud; the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the tent.

Deuteronomy 31:14-15

Present yourselves in the tent of meeting. Throughout the wilderness journey, Moses and Joshua are found together before the Lord. Exodus 33:11b states: <<*his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent*>>. Joshua was qualified to serve because he was at home in the presence of the Lord. For more information on the tent of meeting refer to Exodus 33:7-11 and Numbers 1:1.

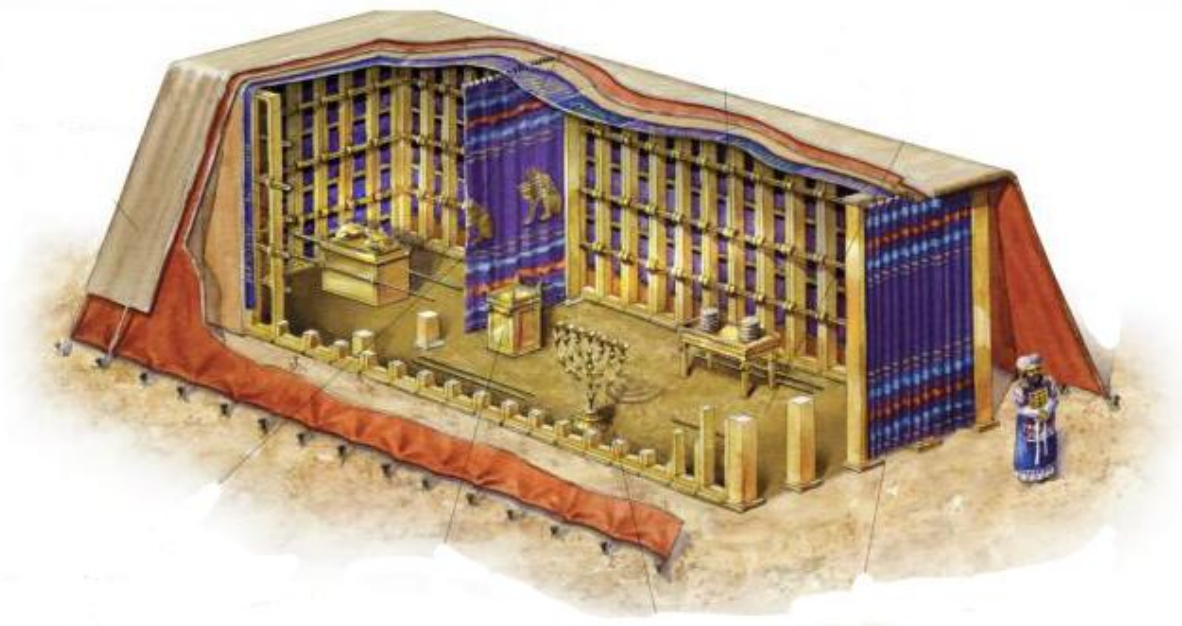


Illustration of the Tent of Meeting

I may commission him. God personally commissions Joshua in v.23.

The Lord appeared. This begins a solemn and important chapter in the history of God's people. Moses passes on the responsibility of leadership, which is finalised at Joshua's inauguration ceremony.

A pillar of cloud indicated the presence of God in all his glory or *Shekinah*. Refer to Exodus 33:9 for God's initial appearance in the tent of meeting.

¹⁶ The Lord said to Moses, ‘Soon you will lie down with your ancestors. Then this people will begin to prostitute themselves to the foreign gods in their midst, the gods of the land into which they are going; they will forsake me, breaking my covenant that I have made with them. ¹⁷ My anger will be kindled against them on that day. I will forsake them and hide my face from them; they will become easy prey, and many terrible troubles will come upon them. On that day they will say, “Have not these troubles come upon us because our God is not in our midst?” ¹⁸ On that day I will surely hide my face on account of all the evil they have done by turning to other gods.

Deuteronomy 31:16-18

Then this people will begin to prostitute themselves to the foreign gods in their midst. The clear expectation is that Israel will disobey, end up in idolatry, and become the object of God’s wrath. Idolatry is often described in the OT in language of whoredom and adultery; refer, for example, to Ezekiel Chapter 16.

¹⁹ Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites.

Deuteronomy 31:19

Write this song. The anticipation is that Israel will disobey and that the song will therefore be a witness to Israel’s disobedience (v.21). The song is written in full in Deuteronomy 31:30-32:44.

²⁰ For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I promised on oath to their ancestors, and they have eaten their fill and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, despising me and breaking my covenant. ²¹ And when many terrible troubles come upon them, this song will confront them as a witness, because it will not be lost from the mouths of their descendants. For I know what they are inclined to do even now, before I have brought them into the land that I promised them on oath.’

²² That very day Moses wrote this song and taught it to the Israelites.

Deuteronomy 31:20-22

As Deuteronomy often suggests, Israel’s heart was inclined to faithless disobedience, not faithful obedience, which is why they will turn to other gods and serve them: <<How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How

long will you love delusions and seek false gods?>> (Psalm 4:2 NIV), and: *<<This is your lot, the portion I have decreed for you,>>* declares the Lord, *“because you have forgotten me and trusted in false gods>>* (Jeremiah 13:25 NIV).

For I know what they are inclined to do even now. God always knows the hearts of people: *<<And you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve him with single mind and willing heart; for the Lord searches every mind, and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will abandon you for ever>>* (1 Chronicles 28:9), *<<But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone>>* (John 2:24-25).

That very day Moses wrote this song and taught it to the Israelites. This was a strange national anthem because the purpose of this anthem was to confront them as a witness. God knew that words are more memorable when set to music, so he told Moses to compose the sermon in a song found in the following chapter.

²³ Then the Lord commissioned Joshua son of Nun and said, ‘Be strong and bold, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them; I will be with you.’

Deuteronomy 31:23

Be strong and bold. It is remarkable how often this exhortation is directed towards Joshua. He hears it seven different times, here in v.6, v.7, and v.23; and later after Moses’ death in Joshua 1:6, 1:7, 1:9, and 1:18. This exposes Joshua’s potential weakness; there was a need for such a command, because even a great leader like Joshua needed such encouragement. Many people are too big for God to use; they are too full of their own schemes and their own ways of doing things, as seen in: *<<In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes>>* (Judges 17:6). Joshua needed to take strength and courage in the Lord, and was small enough to be big in God. Wonderfully, the last time this phrase is used in connection with Joshua, he is encouraging others to be strong and of good courage: *<<And Joshua said to them, ‘Do not be afraid or dismayed; be strong and courageous; for thus the Lord will do to all the enemies against whom you fight’>>* (Joshua 10:25). He could encourage others with the encouragement the Lord, through others, had given him.

For you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them. Joshua, although proven in battle, needed to hear this from Moses because the role he was about to undertake would require even more courage. He needed to hear, “You are going to do it. It is going to happen.”

I will be with you. The same promise was made by God to Moses in Exodus 3:12.

²⁴ When Moses had finished writing down in a book the words of this law to the very end, ²⁵ Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying, ²⁶ ‘Take this book of the law and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God; let it remain there as a witness against you. ²⁷ For I know well how rebellious and stubborn you are. If you already have been so rebellious towards the Lord while I am still alive among you, how much more after my death!

Deuteronomy 31:24-27

When Moses had finished writing down in a book the words of this law. Moses finished not only Deuteronomy but probably the complete works attributed to him, the Pentateuch, and gave this to Israel, and to all creation, as the inspired words of God. Some raise objections at this point, wondering who wrote the last three chapters of Deuteronomy, because the text says that Moses finished here. No doubt, Joshua had the remainder of Moses’ words and deeds recorded and added to the end of his magnificent work, either personally or through a Levitical scribe.

Put it beside the side of the ark of the covenant. The tablets of the Ten Commandments were placed inside the ark: <<*In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant*>> (Hebrews 9:4); the Book of the Law was to be alongside the ark in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle.

One function of the law was to witness against Israel, exposing its sinfulness. Moses knew Israel would rebel. He knew this both from the promise of God (vv.16-17), and from common sense: If you already have been so rebellious towards the Lord while I am still alive among you, how much more after my death. Therefore the law would stand as a witness against a rebellious Israel.

I know well how rebellious and stubborn you are. Israel is often referred to as a stiff-necked and hard-hearted people in Scripture, for example: <<*Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people*>> (Exodus 33:3), <<*Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had made fools of them, did they not let the people go, and they departed?*>> (1 Samuel 6:6), <<*But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you*>> (Mark 10:5), and: <<*You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do*>> (Acts 7:51).

Many people love to find refuge in God's Word in their times of stress and trouble, but they do not often consider that God's Word, if they reject Jesus and rebel against God, is no friend to them. It is a witness against them, a witness that rises up to testify against them.

²⁸ Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officials, so that I may recite these words in their hearing and call heaven and earth to witness against them.

Deuteronomy 31:28

Heaven and earth are called to witness against Israel, refer also to the comments made on Deuteronomy 30:19-20, anticipating their future faithlessness. So the three witnesses are the song (v.19), the Book of the Law (v.26), and heaven and earth.

²⁹ For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, turning aside from the way that I have commanded you. In time to come trouble will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands.'

Deuteronomy 31:29

The work of your hands refers to the making of idols: <<*You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods*>> (Acts 19:26).

Verse 30 will be commented on in the next chapter as it introduces the Song of Moses and thus forms the start of a new section.