The Promise of God’s Presence

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God remains with His people and provides words of life even when we abandon Him.

MAIN PASSAGES: Deuteronomy 31:14-23; 32:44-47

Transitioning into a new leadership position can be quite difficult. Whether replacing a company’s outgoing CEO, taking over as a new teacher midway through the year, or stepping in as a new coach for a successful team, the challenges can be numerous. Those who have experienced transitions like these—either as the transitioning leader or as a member of the team—can testify that new leadership can often be disruptive. It can shake the status quo and culture of an organization, for better or worse.

? What are some challenges you have faced when stepping into a new position of leadership or when following a new leader? How did you respond to these difficulties? What helped you navigate the transition?
Point 1: Sinful rebellion remains despite faithful leadership (Deut. 31:14-18).

14 The LORD said to Moses, “The time of your death is now approaching. Call Joshua and present yourselves at the tent of meeting so that I may commission him.” When Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves at the tent of meeting, 15 the LORD appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud, and the cloud stood at the entrance to the tent.

16 The LORD said to Moses, “You are about to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves with the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will abandon me and break the covenant I have made with them. 17 My anger will burn against them on that day; I will abandon them and hide my face from them so that they will become easy prey. Many troubles and afflictions will come to them. On that day they will say, ‘Haven’t these troubles come to us because our God is no longer with us?’ 18 I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all the evil they have done by turning to other gods.

Rather than a power struggle, we see here a clean transition of leadership. Moses was instructed not only to hand over the title and role of “leader” but also to be part of commissioning his successor. God called Moses and Joshua to the tent of meeting, where God’s presence was manifested in the pillar of cloud. God’s leader was changing, but as the pillar of cloud shows, God’s presence with His people remained unchanged.

What are some transitions in life that Christians can weather well believing that God dwells with His people?

God’s desire to dwell with His people makes His prophetic warning about their prostitution in the promised land even more striking. He told Moses that the Israelites would eventually abandon Him for the false gods of the surrounding nations and break the covenant He had made with them. In response to their unfaithfulness, God would remain faithful to His word—He would hide His face from them, but only for a time and for the purpose of restoration (Deut. 28–30).

How should we respond to God’s warnings about the consequences for sin and idolatry?
Point 2: Sinful rebellion remains despite warnings and reminders (Deut. 31:19-22).

19 Therefore write down this song for yourselves and teach it to the Israelites; have them sing it, so that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. 20 When I bring them into the land I swore to give their fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey, they will eat their fill and prosper. They will turn to other gods and worship them, despising me and breaking my covenant. 21 And when many troubles and afflictions come to them, this song will testify against them, because their descendants will not have forgotten it. For I know what they are prone to do, even before I bring them into the land I swore to give them.” 22 So Moses wrote down this song on that day and taught it to the Israelites.

The lyrics of Moses’ song are laid out in Deuteronomy 32. It details the death and destruction of the Israelites as a result of their sin and unfaithfulness. With this song, God wanted the people to grasp how their sin would eventually lead to this outcome. God had rescued them from their slavery in Egypt, but they were still enslaved to their sin. Singing this song would remind the Israelites that God is holy, and a holy God cannot overlook sin and injustice, otherwise God would fail to be God.

Enslaved to Sin: Human beings are enslaved to sin, continually living with the propensity to ________________ God’s commandments whenever possible. It isn’t until one experiences ________________ through the work of Christ that he or she is able to overcome sin’s enslavement through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Even though God’s people would abandon Him, He would not abandon them forever. God would not give up on His promise to bless the nations through Israel. According to Moses’ song, when the people finally found themselves in a position of judgment and unable to find deliverance through their powerless pagan gods (vv. 15-38), God would be there, holy and faithful, to purify His people and His land (vv. 39-43). No one will ever be able to claim that God abandoned His promises.

What does God’s faithfulness to the Israelites in their sinful rebellion say about His love for the nations today?
Point 3: God’s presence remains with His people and He gives them words of life (Deut. 31:23; 32:44-47).

23 The LORD commissioned Joshua son of Nun, “Be strong and courageous, for you will bring the Israelites into the land I swore to them, and I will be with you.” ..................................................

32:44 Moses came with Joshua son of Nun and recited all the words of this song in the presence of the people. 45 After Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, 46 he said to them, “Take to heart all these words I am giving as a warning to you today, so that you may command your children to follow all the words of this law carefully. 47 For they are not meaningless words to you but they are your life, and by them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.”

God used Joshua to lead the people into their inheritance, and the people were blessed. But each generation had to renew its own commitment to the covenant and pass God’s commands on to the next generation, and most failed to.

How would you describe your faith in Jesus on this scale?

No Faith Borrowed Owned

Moses implored the people to “take to heart” his words from God because they are “your life.” If the people or their children ignored them, death would come, but long life to those who honored them. Similarly, how we respond to Jesus has life and death implications for eternity.

God Is Merciful: Mercy refers to God’s ________________ and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as ________________ for sin.

Voices from Church History

“The amazing thing is that everyone who reads the Bible has the same joyful thing to say about it. In every land, in every language, it is the same tale: Where that Book is read, not with the eyes only, but with the mind and heart, the life is changed.”

—Amy Carmichael (1867-1951)

What are some ways we can take God’s Word to heart in order to own our faith in Jesus and live by it?
My Mission

Because we are a forgiven people in whom God’s presence dwells, we proclaim the Word of God to others so that they too might have eternal life in Him.

- How will you show love and adoration for the Word of God, Jesus Christ?
- What are some ways your group can encourage one another in the spiritual discipline of spending quality time in God’s Word?
- How has God’s faithful warnings and reminders in Scripture benefited you personally? How can you use those past moments of growth when sharing the gospel with an unbeliever?

Notes
Daily Study

Day 1: Read Deuteronomy 31:1-18

When was the last time you struggled with fear? Maybe it was when you were younger and you saw a movie that frightened you, leaving you awake at night with an overactive imagination. Maybe it was just recently when you or someone you love received an unsettling health diagnosis. No matter our age, we still can be frightened.

What’s interesting about fear is that it forms an inverse function with knowledge. The less we know, the more we are prone to fear. In other words, we often are afraid because we lack certainty or knowledge in a particular situation. You were fearful as a child because you weren’t certain that the noise you heard from your closet wasn’t from the monster you saw on TV. And you may be fearful today because you are uncertain about the outcome of that health diagnosis. In both cases, and in many others, the root cause of our fear is a lack of knowledge.

Perhaps it was a lack of knowledge that also tempted the Israelites to fear as they stood on the edge of the promised land. They knew this was coming after their forty years of wilderness wandering, but they didn’t know the end result. Maybe this is why Moses countered their fears with knowledge by saying that God would be the One going with them; in fact, He would go before them. Moses implored them to be strong and courageous because God was with them, fighting on their behalf.

The courage and fearlessness the Israelites were called to display is the same we as Christians are called to live out today. Sure, we live in uncertain times and we don’t know what the future holds. However, we do know the One who does know and who works all things together for our good, and because of that, we can stand strong and courageous.

What situation are you facing in which you need God to help you cast aside your fear?

Voices from Church History

“He will keep His word—the gracious One, full of grace and truth—no doubt of it. He said, ‘Him that cometh unto me, I will in nowise cast out,’ and ‘Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name I will give it.’ He will keep His word: then I can come and humbly present my petition, and it will be all right. Doubt is here inadmissible, surely.”  

–David Livingstone (1813-1873)
Day 2: Read Deuteronomy 31:19-22

There is a sad reality within Christian culture of what some have called “easy-believism.” This mind-set thinks all is well if one simply believes some of Christianity’s basic truths. No change of heart or transformation of character is needed, just mental affirmation that this set of beliefs is true and others are false.

One of the problems with this mind-set—other than the fact that it is unbiblical—is the fact that “easy-believism” tends to come crashing in on itself when things aren’t going so well in life. In these verses, God told of a similar situation that would occur with His people. Notice the connection between God giving them this land filled with abundance and them eventually forsaking God and turning toward idols. They needed God and God helped them by giving them the land He promised. Then, instead of living in constant thankfulness and dependence upon God, they satisfied themselves with the gifts of God instead, eventually giving way to idolatry and “easy-believism.”

Like the Israelites, the reminder for us is never to become so satisfied with God’s provisions that we lose our way and forget our greatest need: Him. Because if and when we do, the next step we take will be toward a lifestyle of “easy-believism.”

In what ways have you fallen into “easy-believism,” focusing more on what you believe than on who you have been made in Christ?

Day 3: Read Deuteronomy 31:23–32:52

It is difficult, if not impossible, to lead people where you have never been yourself. It’s hard to do that from a leadership capacity in the world of business, and it’s even harder to do that in a spiritual capacity as we seek to disciple others in the faith.

Maybe this was Moses’ emphasis in Deuteronomy 32:46 when he said, “Take to heart all these words I am giving as a warning to you today, so that you may command your children to follow all the words of this law carefully.” Here Moses emphasized that they should first take God’s word to heart, internalize it, let it change them, and then command the next generation to do the same. Why? Because the parents could never take the next generation of disciples where they needed to go until the parents had gone there themselves. A good reminder for us all.

How can you use your experiences—both your successes and your failures—to disciple someone else?
Day 4: Read Deuteronomy 33:1-29

As with all character development in the Bible, we know that the Bible isn’t trying to portray Moses as blameless or perfect by any means, much like it didn’t try to mask the mistakes and failures of Abraham. Yet despite his shortcomings, Moses certainly had both character and leadership qualities worth emulating, such as his shepherd’s heart in wanting to bless his people one last time as he uttered the words in this chapter.

Of course, while wanting to be a blessing to people is good and noble, what you believe will bless them the most is even more important. Here Moses gave us an example of blessing others by wanting them to be happy in God, and the way he went about that was by reminding them of God initiating a relationship with them. He said, “How happy you are, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord? He is the shield that protects you, the sword you boast in. Your enemies will cringe before you, and you will tread on their backs” (v. 29). Moses decided to exit this life by reminding his fellow Israelites that God is good and that it was in Him, not their own strength or cleverness, that they were protected from their enemies. May we likewise serve those around us.

In what ways are you seeking to be a blessing to others around you? How are you striving to do this?

Day 5: Read Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Even though it’s not difficult for us to imagine a bitter and angry Moses being denied access to the promised land because of his disobedience, there was also so much grace and mercy in his just being allowed to catch a glimpse of the promise come to fruition. This brief glance confirmed God’s faithfulness and gave credence to all Moses had done leading God’s people.

Why does God allow some of His people only a glimpse of future blessing and not the full experience? One answer is the glimpses allow us to carry a spiritual legacy forward that is intended to outlast ourselves. As Christians, we get to play a part in God’s story of redemption, something far beyond ourselves. We can find more than enough joy in the glimpses God gives us of His plans because they point us to the very face and heart of God. But these glimpses also allow us to stand in a historical line of faith with those before us and those who will come after—all waiting for His promises that are to come.

In what ways do you anticipate God allowing you to play a role in His plans without seeing the final outcome?
Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- Sinful rebellion remains despite faithful leadership (Deut. 31:14-18).
- Sinful rebellion remains despite warnings and reminders (Deut. 31:19-22).
- God’s presence remains with His people and He gives them words of life (Deut. 31:23; 32:44-47).

How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?

What are some ways you should respond to faithful leadership? How can you help to lead one another in faithful living?

How are you growing in your understanding and appreciation of God’s Word? What have you learned that you can share to encourage others?

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UNIT 7

SESSION 1
1. Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2009) [eBook].

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

SESSION 4

UNIT 8

SESSION 1
1. Noël Piper, *Treasuring God in our Traditions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 64.

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

EASTER SESSION

UNIT 9

SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

SESSION 4

SESSION 5
In these sessions of The Gospel Project, we experience some of the most exciting narratives in Scripture. There are accounts here of sin and judgment, of moral decline and merciful intervention, and of rescuers who need rescue. Through it all, one thing is clear: God is with His people and He is faithful to His promise.

It’s important to keep that central theme in mind because many people read these stories about the conquest of the land and try to find examples for emulation. To be clear, we can learn a lot from these Old Testament heroes (see 1 Cor. 10), but we cannot implement their virtues apart from our connection to the Vine—Jesus Christ Himself, the One who bears fruit in us and through us.

As we walk through our present wilderness, struggling against sin and encountering sorrow, we know that the God who has gone before us is faithful. He is the One who prepares the way for us to be His ambassadors. He is the One who breaks the chains of our idolatry and lifts our gaze to His unchanging glory.