

INTRODUCTION TO DEUT. CHAPTER 31

In this chapter Moses, having finished his sermon,

I. Encourages both the people who were now to enter Canaan (#De 31:1-6), and Joshua who was to lead them, #De 31:7,8,23. And,

II. He takes care for the keeping of these things always in their remembrance after his decease,

1. By the book of the law which was,

(1.) Written.

(2.) Delivered into the custody of the priests, #De 31:9,24-27.

(3.) Ordered to be publicly read every seventh year, #De 31:10-13.

2. By a song which God orders Moses to prepare for their instruction and admonition.

(1.) He calls Moses and Joshua to the door of the tabernacle, #De 31:14,15.

(2.) He foretells the apostasy of Israel in process of time, and the judgments they would thereby bring upon themselves, #De 31:16-18.

(3.) He prescribes the following song to be a witness against them, #De 31:19-21.

(4.) Moses wrote it, #De 31:22. And delivered it to Israel, with an intimation of the design of it, as he had received it from the Lord, #De 31:28-30.

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 8.

Loth to part (we say) bids oft farewell. Moses does so to the children of Israel: not because he was loth to go to God, but because he was loth to leave them, fearing that when he had left them they would leave God. He had finished what he had to say to them by way of counsel and exhortation: here he calls them together to give them a word of encouragement, especially with reference to the wars of Canaan, in which they were now to engage. It was a discouragement to them that Moses was to be removed at a time when he could so ill be spared: though Joshua was continued to fight for them in the valley, they would want Moses to intercede for them on the hill, as he did, #Ex 17:10. But there is no remedy: *Moses can no more go out and come in, #De 31:2.* Not that he was disabled by any decay either of body or mind; for his *natural force was not abated, #De 24:7.* But he cannot any longer discharge his office; for,

1. He is 120 years old, and it is time for him to think of resigning his honour and returning to his rest. He that had arrived at so great an age then, when seventy or eighty was the ordinary stint, as appears by the prayer of Moses (#Ps 90:10), might well think that he had accomplished as a hireling his day.

2. He is under a divine sentence: *Thou shalt not go over Jordan.* Thus a full stop was put to his usefulness; hitherto he must go, hitherto he must serve, but no further. So God had appointed it and Moses acquiesces: for I know not why we should any of us desire to live a day longer than while God has work for us to do; nor shall we be accountable for more time than is allotted us. But, though Moses must not go over

himself, he is anxious to encourage those that must.

I. He encourages the people; and never could any general animate his soldiers upon such good grounds as those on which Moses here encourages Israel.

1. He assures them of the constant presence of God with them (**#De 31:3**): *The Lord thy God that has led thee and kept thee hitherto will go over before thee;* and those might follow boldly who were sure that they had God for their leader. He repeats it again (**#De 31:6**) with an emphasis:

"The Lord thy God, the great Jehovah, who is thine in covenant, he it is, he and no less, he and no other, that goes before thee; not only who by his promise has assured thee that he will go before thee; but by his ark, the visible token of his presence, shows thee that he does actually go before thee."

And he repeats it with enlargement:

"Not only he goes over before thee at first, to bring thee in, but he will continue with thee all along, with thee and thine; he will not fail thee nor forsake thee; he will not disappoint thy expectations in any strait, nor will he ever desert thy interest; be constant to him, and he will be so to thee."

This is applied by the apostle to all God's spiritual Israel, for the encouragement of their faith and hope; unto us is this gospel preached, as well as unto them. *He will never fail thee, nor forsake thee, #Heb 13:5.*

2. He commends Joshua to them for a leader: *Joshua, he shall go over before thee, #De 31:3.* One whose conduct, and courage, and sincere affection to their interest, they had had long experience of; and one whom God had ordained and appointed to be their leader, and therefore, no doubt, would own and bless, and make a blessing to them. See **#Nu 27:18**. Note, It is a great encouragement to a people when, instead of some useful instruments that are removed, God raises up others to carry on his work.

3. He ensures their success. The greatest generals, supported with the greatest advantages, must yet own the issues of war to be doubtful and uncertain; the battle is not always to the strong nor to the bold; an ill accident unthought of may turn the scale against the highest hopes. But Moses had warrant from God to assure Israel that, notwithstanding the disadvantages they laboured under, they should certainly be victorious. A coward will fight when he is sure to be a conqueror. God undertakes to do the work--*he will destroy these nations;* and Israel shall do little else than divide the spoil--*thou shalt possess them, #De 31:3.* Two things might encourage their hopes of this:--

(1.) The victories they had already obtained over Sihon and Og (**#De 31:4**), from which they might infer both the power of God, that he could do what he had done, and the purpose of God, that he would finish what he had begun to do. Thus must we improve our experience.

(2.) The command God had given them to destroy the Canaanites (**#De 7:2; 12:2**), to which he refers here (**#De 31:5**, that you may do unto them according to all which I have commanded you), and from which they might infer that, if God had commanded them to destroy the Canaanites, no doubt he would put it into the power of their hands to do it. Note, What God has made our duty we have reason to expect opportunity and assistance

from him for the doing of. So that from all this he had reason enough to bid them *be strong and of a good courage*, #De 31:6. While they had the power of God engaged for them they had no reason to fear all the powers of Canaan engaged against them.

II. He encourages Joshua, #De 31:7,8. Observe,

1. Though Joshua was an experienced general, and a man of approved gallantry and resolution, who had already signalized himself in many brave actions, yet Moses saw cause to bid him *be of good courage*, now that he was entering upon a new scene of action; and Joshua was far from taking it as an affront, or as a tacit questioning of his courage, to be thus charged, as sometimes we find proud and peevish spirits invidiously taking exhortations and admonitions for reproaches and reflections. Joshua himself is very well pleased to be admonished by Moses to be strong and of good courage.
2. He gives him this charge *in the sight of all Israel*, that they might be the more observant of him whom they saw thus solemnly inaugurated, and that he might set himself the more to be an example of courage to the people who were witnesses to this charge here given to him as well as to themselves.
3. He gives him the same assurances of the divine presence, and consequently of a glorious success, that he had given the people. God would be with him, would not forsake him, and therefore he should certainly accomplish the glorious enterprise to which he was called and commissioned: *Thou shalt cause them to inherit the land of promise*. Note, Those shall speed well that have God with them; and therefore they ought to *be of good courage*. Through God let us do valiantly, for through him we shall do victoriously; if we resist the devil, he shall flee, and God shall *shortly tread him under our feet*.

Ver. 9. thru Ver. 13.

The law was given by Moses; so it is said, #Joh 1:17. He was not only entrusted to deliver it to that generation, but to transmit it to the generations to come; and here it appears that he was faithful to that trust.

I. *Moses wrote this law*, #De 31:9. The learned bishop Patrick understands this of all the five books of Moses, which are often called the *law*; he supposes that though Moses had written most of the Pentateuch before, yet he did not finish it till now; now he put his last hand to that sacred volume. Many think that the law here (especially since it is called *this law*, this grand abridgment of the law) is to be understood of this book of Deuteronomy; all those discourses to the people which have taken up this whole book, he, being in them divinely inspired, wrote them as the word of God. He wrote this law,

1. That those who had heard it might often review it themselves, and call it to mind.
2. That it might be the more safely handed down to posterity. Note, The church has received abundance of advantage from the writing, as well as from the preaching, of divine things; faith comes not only by hearing, but by reading. The same care that was taken of the law, thanks be to God, is taken of the gospel too; soon after it was preached it was written, that it might reach to those on whom the ends of the world shall come.

II. Having written it, he committed it to the care and custody of the priests and elders. He delivered one authentic copy to the priests, to be laid up by the ark #De 31:26, there to

remain as a standard by which all other copies must be tried. And it is supposed that he gave another copy to the elders of each tribe, to be transcribed by all of that tribe that were so disposed. Some observe that the elders, as well as the priests, were entrusted with the law, to intimate that magistrates by the power, as well as ministers by their doctrine, are to maintain religion, and to take care that the law be not broken nor lost.

III. He appointed the public reading of this law in a general assembly of all Israel every seventh year. The pious Jews (it is very probable) read the laws daily in their families, and *Moses of old time was read in the synagogue every sabbath day*, #Ac 15:21. But once in seven years, that the law might be the more magnified and made honourable, it must be read in a general assembly. Though we read the word in private, we must not think it needless to hear it read in public. Now here he give direction,

1. When this solemn reading of the law must be, that the time might add to the solemnity; it must be done,

(1.) In the year of release. In that year the land rested, so that they could the better spare time to attend this service. Servants who were then discharged, and poor debtors who were then acquitted from their debts, must know that, having the benefit of the law, it was justly expected they should yield obedience to it, and therefore give up themselves to be God's servants, because he had loosed their bonds. The year of release was typical of gospel grace, which therefore is called the *acceptable year of the Lord*; for our remission and liberty by Christ engage us to keep his commandments, #Lu 1:74,75.

(2.) At the feast of tabernacles in that year. In that feast they were particularly required to *rejoice before God*, #Le 23:40. Therefore then they must read the law, both to qualify their mirth and keep it in due bounds, and to sanctify their mirth, that they might make the law of God the matter of their rejoicing, and might read it with pleasure and not as a task.

2. To whom it must be read: *To all Israel* (#De 31:11), *men, women, and children, and the strangers*, #De 31:12. The women and children were not obliged to go up to the other feasts, but to this only in which the law was read. Note, It is the will of God that all people should acquaint themselves with his word. It is a rule to all, and therefore should be read to all. It is supposed that, since all Israel could not possibly meet in one place, nor could one man's voice reach them all, as many as the courts of the Lord's house would hold met there, and the rest at the same time in their synagogues. The Jewish doctors say that the hearers were bound to *prepare their hearts*, and to hear *with fear and reverence, and with joy and trembling*, as in the day *when the law was given on Mount Sinai*; and, though there were *great and wise men who knew the whole law very well*, yet they were bound to *hear with great attention*; for he that reads is the messenger of the congregation to cause the words of God to be heard. I wish those that hear the gospel read and preached would consider this.

3. By whom it must be read: *Thou shalt read it* (#De 31:11), "Thou, O Israel," by a proper person appointed for that purpose; or, "Thou, O Joshua," their chief ruler; accordingly we find that he did read the law himself, #Jos 8:34,35. So did Josiah, #2Ch 34:30, and Ezra, #Ne 8:3. And the Jews say that the king himself (when they had one) was the person that read in the courts of the temple, that a pulpit was set up for that purpose in the midst of the court, in which the king stood, that the book of the law was delivered to him by the high priest, that he stood up to receive it, uttered a prayer (as every one did that was to read the law in public) before he read; and then, if he pleased, he might sit down and read. But if he read standing it was thought the more commendable, as (they say) king Agrippa did. Here let me offer it as a conjecture that Solomon is called the *preacher*, in his Ecclesiastes, because he

delivered the substance of that book in a discourse to the people, after his public reading of the law in the feast of tabernacles, according to this appointment here.

4. For what end it must be thus solemnly read.

(1.) That the present generation might hereby keep up their acquaintance with the law of God, **#De 31:12**. They must hear, that they may learn, and *fear God, and observe to do their duty*. See here what we are to aim at in hearing the word; we must hear, that we may learn and grow in knowledge; and every time we read the scriptures we shall find that there is still more and more to be learned out of them. We must learn, that we may fear God, that is, that we may be duly affected with divine things; and must fear God, that we may *observe and do the words of his law*; for in vain do we pretend to fear him if we do not obey him.

(2.) That the rising generation might betimes be leavened with religion (**#De 31:13**); not only that those who know something may thus know more, but that *the children who have not known any thing* may betimes know this, how much it is their interest as well as duty to fear God.

Ver. 14. thru Ver. 21.

Here,

I. Moses and Joshua are summoned to attend the divine majesty at the door of the tabernacle, **#De 31:14**. Moses is told again that he must shortly die; even those that are most ready and willing to die have need to be often reminded of the approach of death. In consideration of this, he must come himself to meet God; for whatever improves our communion with God furthers our preparation for death. He must also bring Joshua with him to be presented to God for a successor, and to receive his commission and charge. Moses readily obeys the summons, for he was not one of those that look with an evil eye upon their successors, but, on the contrary, rejoiced in him.

II. God graciously gives them the meeting: *He appeared in the tabernacle* (as the shechinah used to appear) *in a pillar of a cloud*, **#De 31:15**. This is the only time in all this book that we read of the glory of God appearing, whereas we often read of it in the three foregoing books, which perhaps signifies that in the latter days, under the evangelical law, such visible appearances as these of the divine glory are not to be expected, but we must take heed to the more sure word of prophecy.

III. He tells Moses that, after his death, the covenant which he had taken so much pains to make between Israel and their God would certainly be broken.

1. That Israel would *forsake God*, **#De 31:16**. And we may be sure that if the covenant between God and man be broken the blame must lie on man, it is he that breaks it; we have often observed it, That God never leaves any till they first leave him. Worshipping the gods of the Canaanites (who had been the natives, but henceforward were to be looked upon as the strangers of that land) would undoubtedly be counted a deserting of God, and, like adultery, a violation of the covenant. Thus still those are revolters from Christ, and will be so adjudged, who either make a god of their money by reigning covetousness or a god of their belly by reigning sensuality. Those that *turn to other gods* (**#De 31:18**) forsake their own mercies. This apostasy of theirs is foretold to be the effect of their prosperity (**#De 31:20**): *They shall have eaten and filled themselves*; this is all they will aim at in eating, to gratify their own appetites, and then they will wax fat, grow secure and sensual; their security will take off their dread of God and his judgments; and their

sensuality will incline them to the idolatries of the heathen, which *made provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts of it*. Note, God has a clear and infallible foresight of all the wickedness of the wicked, and has often covenanted with those who *he knew would deal very treacherously (#Isa 48:8)*, and conferred many favours on those who he knew would deal very ungratefully.

2. That then God would forsake Israel; and justly does he cast those off who had so unjustly cast him off (**#De 31:17**): *My anger shall be kindled against them, and I will forsake them*. His providence would forsake them, no longer to protect and prosper them, and then they would become a prey to all their neighbours. His spirit and grace would forsake them, no longer to teach and guide them, and then they would be more and more bigoted, besotted, and hardened in their idolatries. Thus *many evils and troubles would befall them. (#De 31:17,21)*, which would be such manifest indications of God's displeasure against them that they themselves would be constrained to own it: *Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?* Those that have sinned away their God will find that thereby they pull all mischiefs upon their own heads. But that which completed their misery was that God would *hide his face from them in that day*, that day of their trouble and distress, **#De 31:18**. Whatever outward troubles we are in, if we have but the light of God's countenance, we may be easy. But, if God hide his face from us and our prayers, we are undone.

IV. He directs Moses to deliver them a song, in the composing of which he should be divinely inspired, and which should remain a standing testimony for God as faithful to them in giving them warning, and against them as persons false to themselves in not taking the warning, **#De 31:19**. The written word in general, as well as this song in particular, is a witness for God against all those that break covenant with him. It shall be for a testimony, **#Mt 24:14**. The wisdom of man has devised many ways of conveying the knowledge of good and evil, by laws, histories, prophecies, proverbs, and, among the rest, by songs; each has its advantages. And the wisdom of God has in the scripture made use of them all, that ignorant and careless men might be left inexcusable.

1. This song, if rightly improved, might be a means to prevent their apostasy; for in the inditing of it God had an eye to their present imagination, now, *before they were brought into the land of promise, #De 31:21*. God knew very well that there were in their hearts such gross conceits of the deity, and such inclinations of idolatry, that they would be tinder to the sparks of that temptation; and therefore in this song he gives them warning of their danger that way. Note, The word of God is a *discerner of the thoughts and intents of men's hearts*, and meets with them strangely by its reproofs and corrections, **#Heb 4:12**. Compare **#1Co 14:25**. Ministers who preach the word know not the imaginations men go about, but God, whose word it is, knows perfectly.
2. If this song did not prevent their apostasy, yet it might help to bring them to repentance, and to recover them from their apostasy. When their troubles come upon them, *this song shall not be forgotten*, but may serve as a glass to show them their own faces, that they may humble themselves, and return to him from whom they have revolted. Note, Those for whom God has mercy in store he may leave to fall, yet he will provide means for their recovery. Medicines are prepared before-hand for their cure.

Ver. 22. thru Ver. 30.

Here,

I. The charge is given to Joshua, which God has said (#De 31:14) he would give him. The same in effect that Moses had given him. The same in effect that Moses had given him (#De 31:7): *Be strong and of a good courage, #De 31:23.* Joshua had now heard from God so much of the wickedness of the people whom he was to have the conduct of as could not but be a discouragement to him:

"Nay," says God, "how bad soever they are, thou shalt go through thy understanding, for *I will be with thee.* Thou shalt put them into possession of Canaan. If they afterwards by their sin throw themselves out of it again, that will be no fault of thine, nor any dishonour to thee, therefore *be of good courage.*"

II. The solemn delivery of the book of the law to the Levites, to be deposited in the side of the ark, is here again related (#De 31:24-26), of which before, #De 31:9. Only they are here directed where to treasure up this precious original, not in the ark (there only the two tables were preserved), but in another box *by the side of the ark.* It is probable that this was the very book that was found in the house of the Lord (having been somehow or other misplaced) in the days of Josiah (#2Ch 34:14), and so perhaps the following words here, *that it may be a witness against thee,* may particularly point at that event, which happened so long after; for the finding of this very book occasioned the public reading of it by Josiah himself, for a witness against a people who were then almost ripe for their ruin by the Babylonians.

III. The song which follows in the next chapter is here delivered to Moses, and by him to the people. He wrote it first (#De 31:22), as the Spirit of God indited it, and then *spoke it in the ears of all the congregation (#De 31:30),* and taught it to them (#De 31:22), that is, gave out copies of it, and ordered the people to learn it by heart. It was delivered by word of mouth first, and afterwards in writing, to the elders and officers, as the representatives of their respective tribes (#De 31:28), by them to be transmitted to their several families and households. It was delivered to them with a solemn appeal to heaven and earth concerning the fair warning which was given them by it of the fatal consequences of their apostasy from God, and with a declaration of the little joy and little hope Moses had in and concerning them.

1. He declares what little joy he had had of them while he was with them, #De 31:27. It is not in a passion that he says, *I know thy rebellion* (as once he said unadvisedly, *Hear now, you rebels*), but it is the result of a long acquaintance with them: *you have been rebellious against the Lord.* Their rebellions against himself he makes no mention of: these he had long since forgiven and forgotten; but they must be made to hear of their rebellions against God, that they may be ever repented of and never repeated.
2. What little hopes he had of them now that he was leaving them. From what God had now said to him (#De 31:16) more than from his own experience of them, though that was discouraging enough, he tells them (#De 31:29), *I know that after my death you will utterly corrupt yourselves.* Many a sad thought, no doubt, it occasioned to this good man, to foresee the apostasy and ruin of a people he had taken so much pains with, in order to them good and make them happy; but this was his comfort, that he had done his duty, and that God would be glorified, if not in their settlement, yet in their dispersion. Thus our Lord Jesus, a little before his death, foretold the rise of false Christs and false prophets (#Mt 24:24), notwithstanding which, and all the apostasies of the latter times, we may be confident that *the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church, for the foundation of God stands sure.*