**Change, difficulty, strength, and courage for the way ahead**

Text: Deuteronomy 31

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 31; Hebrews 3:1-6

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 163, 119:33-40, 184, 366, 513

**Series:** Deuteronomy (#17)

**Theme:** The Lord calls all Israel, and especially Joshua (who will lead the people into the Promised Land in the place of Moses), to be strong and courageous because He will go before them, He will be with them, and He will not leave or abandon them unless they forsake Him – which He reveals to Moses they will do in the future by breaking the covenant that He had make with them.

**Proposition:** Brothers and sisters, be strong and courageous in the Lord because Jesus has conquered sin and death and He is with you, and He will not abandon those who trust in Him.

**Introduction**

What is the most dangerous job? Commercial fishing? Logging? Being an aircraft pilot, a roofer? Author and speaker Paul David Tripp has written a book entitled ‘Dangerous Calling’ in which he identifies that the church culture surrounding pastors is often spiritually unhealthy. Having spoken in thousands of churches globally, Tripp has discovered a serious problem. He writes about church cultures that actively undermine the well-being and effectiveness of church leaders and thus of the entire church body.

As we’ll see in this sermon, speaking up and faithfully leading with integrity and commitment was a ‘dangerous calling’ for both Moses and for his successor Joshua. It was a dangerous calling for the prophets of old (Matt 23:31). It was a dangerous calling for Jesus, which He willingly followed so that in Him we could have strength and courage for the way ahead. Today we’re going to focus on our text from Deuteronomy 31 under three headings:

1. A change of leadership
2. A revelation of the future
3. A call to strength and courage
4. **A change in leadership**

We all know that inevitably all of our roles on this earth will come to an end one day. This is true of mothers, fathers, business owners, employees, elders, deacons and pastors. At some stage we all ‘retire’ from all the roles and positions we have held on this earth.

Our text today from Deuteronomy 31 reveals the ‘retirement’ of Moses from service. As we’ve seen over the past few months, the book of Deuteronomy is the last sermon, or series of messages, delivered by Moses to the people of Israel. Through His servant Moses, the Lord renews His covenant with His chosen people. The book of Deuteronomy also reveals a change of leadership from Moses to his successor, Joshua.

Even though Moses was 120 years old (31:2), ‘*no longer able to go out and come in*’ (v2), yet his ‘*eye was undimmed, and his vigour unabated*’ (34:7). Whilst he experienced the effects of physical aging, this was not the reason why he was never to enter the Promised Land. The Lord had said to Moses ‘*you shall not go over this Jordan*’ (v2). As we saw back at the end of chapter 3 a few months ago, the Lord was angry with Moses. Even though Moses was a very humble, gentle, long-suffering and peaceful man (Num 12:3), yet in an outburst of frustration, anger, violence and pride, he disobeyed the Lord’s clear command. Instead of speaking to the rock, he struck it twice and said to the people: "*Hear now, you rebels: shall* ***we*** *bring water for you out of this rock?"* (Num 20:10b).

Now, as the people were poised to enter the Promised Land after 40 years in the wilderness, Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: “*You shall go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall put them in possession of it*” (Deut 31:7). This was not just a selection of a new leader by Moses the man, it was the appointment of his successor by the Lord Himself. We can see this clearly in verses 14-16: ‘*Call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, that* ***I*** *may commission him." And Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting*’.

Some events in the Olympic Games are relay races where one person ‘passes the baton’ to the next, who then continues and moves the team forward. In the presence of God, there in the Tent of Meeting, the Lord Himself ‘passed the baton’ from Moses to Joshua. The Lord laid the charge, that is commissioned, the younger man with leading His people forward into the Promised Land.

Why select Joshua for this key leadership role? He was one of the 12 spies (one from each tribe – Num 13:4-16) who had been sent to scout out the land of Canaan 40 years previously. His name had been Hoshea, which means ‘salvation’, but Moses called him Joshua (Num 13:16), which means ‘the Lord saves’. 40 years in the past, only Joshua and one other spy, Caleb, sought to exhort the people to immediately go and possess the land the Lord was giving them (Num 13:30-33). Yet the people rebelled. They did not trust the Lord’s Word and they grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying: ‘*Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt."*’ (Num 14:3-4).

Then Joshua and Caleb said: “*If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them*" (Num 14:8-9). After Joshua and Caleb exhorted the people to trust the Lord we read in the book of Numbers (14:10) that “*All the congregation said to stone them with stones*”.

The dangerous calling of Joshua points forward to the perilous, and ultimately fatal calling of Christ. His name ‘Jesus’ is a translation of the Hebrew word ‘Joshua’ meaning ‘the Lord saves’, or as the angel explained it to Mary ‘*he will save his people from their sins*’ (Matt 1:21). As we heard from the writer to the Hebrews earlier (3:1-6), Jesus is greater than Moses and also greater than His namesake Joshua. He has saved His people from their sins by being faithful to His dangerous calling – being obedient all the way to the cross (Heb 12:2). He has conquered sin, Satan and death. In his humanity, on this earth, Jesus knew ahead of time what He was called to endure, which brings us to our second point:

1. **A revelation of the future**

What are your hopes for the future beyond your own death? I think for most of us, perhaps all, we desire first and foremost that life would go well for the people we love and care about. We want the best for our offspring, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren – if we have been so blessed. We also want the best for the church of which we have been a part, for our brothers and sisters in Christ here. We desire that they would flourish, growing both in faith, knowledge and in number.

However, you and I do not get a detailed glimpse of what will take place after we have left this earth – but Moses did! We can read this in verses 16-18: "*Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them*”.

Scripture doesn’t record how Moses felt when He heard these words. I can’t imagine that he was glad. Think of all the effort which he had expended leading the people over a period of 40 years and yet now he knew for certain that they were going to be unfaithful **again** in the future. What would happen after that? It would be the **same pattern** as before; covenant disobedience would lead to covenant curses.

This is exactly what the Lord reveals: “*Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?'*” (v17). The Lord would act so that the people might come to see that it was their sin which had resulted in the loss of God’s presence from amongst them. He would forsake them and not be with them. This is a warning to all who will listen. The Lord does not forsake those who do not forsake Him.

Imagine a person is being charged with an offence, but they don’t want to admit any liability, they might make a defence by saying: “I forgot that I wasn’t supposed to act that way” or “I didn’t know that there was a law against doing that!” The Lord ensures that Israel can’t (legitimately) try either of defences by setting up two different witnesses (or testimonies) against them: a song (v19) and a book (v26).

Do you ever find yourself humming or singing a familiar tune? There are many different aspects to music and the lyrics which make up songs, one of which is that they are often easy to remember. ‘The Song of Moses’ as recorded in Deuteronomy 32 is a memorable account of the faithfulness of God and the disobedience of Israel. We’ll look at this song in some detail next Lord’s Day, including phrases that are well known (and memorable!) for many of us:

* ‘*Ascribe greatness to our God!, The Rock’ (v3)*
* *‘He kept him as the apple of his eye’ (v10)*
* *‘vengeance is mine’ (v35)*
* *“The Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants*’ (v35)

Moses taught this song to the people of Israel (31:22).

The second witness against a future wayward Israel was the law which has comprised much of this book of Deuteronomy. Moses wrote this law down in a book which was put by the side of the ark of the covenant (31:26). Moses also prophesied to the people saying: “*For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold, even today while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD. How much more after my death!*” (v27).

He then spoke to the assembled elders and officers, saying: “*For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you. And in the days to come evil 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*" (v29).

These are sobering words, which we know from the Bible came to pass in the unfolding history of Israel. They are like the sombre words of Scripture in the New Testament about what will happen in this world and in the church. For example:

* “*But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty*” (2 Tim 3:1).
* “*I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock*” (Acts 20:29).
* “*There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction*” (2 Pet 2:1).

We do not know the details of our own future, as individuals, as families as a church, but we do know that our lives will not always be peaceful, tranquil and pain-free. Jesus said, ‘*In the world you will have tribulation*.’ (John 16:33). The prospect of the future can be very frightening, a cause of great anxiety and fear, perhaps even a reason to doubt the Lord’s love, care and protection in time to come. Most of us experience this turmoil at some time or times in our lives. This is why the Lord reveals His call to have strength and courage…which brings us to our third point:

1. **A call to strength and courage**

We know that the Promised Land of Canaan was not empty when the Israelites crossed the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua. There were many people groups living there – the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites (Deut 7:1). These seven nations were more numerous and mightier than the invading Israelites. The spies had reported to the previous generation that the people who lived in the land were strong, that their cities were large, and fortified and that the mighty Nephilim made them feel like grasshoppers (Num 13:25-33). Humanly speaking, God’s people were hopelessly weak and outnumbered.

They didn’t have any superior technology, nor were they physically stronger than those who lived in Canaan. What Israel did have was far more important than who they were or what they possessed materially. They had the Lord! - who would himself go over before them. He would destroy the nations before them so that they would dispossess them (Deut 31:3).

So why, you might ask, did the Lord call His people through Moses to ‘*be strong and courageous*’ (v6)? Why did the Moses call Joshua to ‘*be strong and courageous*’ (v7)? Why did the Lord commission Joshua with the words ‘*be strong and courageous*’ (v23)? Why was any human strength and bravery necessary if the Lord Himself was going to win the battles for them?

Strength is the ability to withstand great force or pressure. Strength is not just a physical characteristic; it is also mental and spiritual. The strength which the Lord calls for is an attitude. An attitude of strong trust in the Lord. This is a call to bold and resilient faith. Courage is the ability to do something that frightens you. To be courageous is to be brave, to be willing to make the choice to face agony, pain, danger, uncertainty and intimidation.

The Lord had promised to win all the battles for His people when the trusted in Him, but they still had to do the fighting! Their strength and courage were not a mental exercise in fooling themselves that they were better than they really were, it was to be grounded on the solid reality of the Lord their God who: would go before them (v8), would go with them (v6), and would not leave or forsake them (v8).

Take a step back and ask yourself ‘why has the Lord set down so much detail in the Bible about His deliverance of Israel from captivity, His testing of them and His faithfulness over 40 years in the wilderness and His work in bringing them into the promised land?’ As history it is quite interesting, but much more importantly, ‘*these things have been written down for our instruction*’ (1 Cor 10:11).

Today and always in this life, we face an uncertain immediate future. Spiritually our ‘three sworn enemies’, the devil,the world,and our own flesh never stop attacking us (to use the words of the Heidelberg Catechism LD52) as we move forward in faith. There are the obstacles which we face internally as we struggle with persistent sin within – with all the doubt, shame, guilt and despair that facing up to our sinful nature can bring. Then there is sickness, strained or broken relationships, and the constant pressure of living in a broken world where the daily news is full of the pandemic, fires, floods, famines, wars, abuse and violence. Behind all of this is Satan, our adversary, who ‘*prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*’ (1 Pet 5:8).

It can all seem overwhelming. Too much to bear, too hard, too difficult. Mental health issues, despair and depression abound. We can experience great weakness, frailty, disability, and helplessness. We can feel very much like a small grasshopper confronted with an army of giants. We can feel fear, faint-heartedness, timidity and impotence. This is understandable because by ourselves we are weak and unable to face up to our enemies. But, brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not alone! We are not by ourselves!

In the upper room before His crucifixion, having learned that one of them would betray Jesus, having heard Christ speak of the world’s hatred for Him and His own, they were likely confused and troubled. Jesus said “*In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33). What are our grounds for strength and courage? In Christ, they are the same as those for Old Testament Israel: If your faith and trust is in Jesus today, God is with you. Jesus has gone before you. He will not leave or forsake you. He is your strength and your courage. Our Lord and Saviour is with us always, to the end of this age (Matt 28:20).

If you have not committed yourself to Jesus, then you have every reason to experience weakness and fear in the face of all that you are confronted with. So come to Christ today! In Him we can face change, difficulty and uncertainty with strength and courage.

Ours is a dangerous calling brothers and sisters, fellow disciples, but in Christ alone we are safe. We can go forward, because Jesus our leader, our Saviour, our Lord, has gone before us (John 14:1-2).

AMEN.