

Deuteronomy 31:1-6

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Moses addressed all Israel to tell them that his time leading them was coming to an end and that Joshua would succeed him and lead them into the Promised Land. He encouraged them to be strong and courageous because the Suzerain God (the LORD) will accompany them and will not fail them.

In order to prepare the Israelites for the future, Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel (v. 1). These words Moses spoke here refer to what follows (vv. 2–6), rather than what he previously spoke to the people. This meeting was not limited to the leaders—all the people of Israel needed to hear what Moses said.

The first topic Moses addressed concerned his own future. He told Israel that he was a hundred and twenty years old today (v. 2). He was old and was becoming physically weak to the point where he was no longer able to come and go, an idiom meaning the ability to do one's daily work. In Moses' case, his old age was beginning to hinder his ability to lead.

Moses' life can nicely be divided into three forty-year cycles. He spent forty years of his life in Egypt as an Egyptian noble (Acts 7:23), forty years in Midian as a sheep herder (Exodus 7:7), and forty years leading God's people through the wilderness, where he fully employed the capacities he learned in his prior eighty years. For example, Moses is credited with writing the first five books of the Bible, likely applying the literary skill he learned as an Egyptian noble. It is also likely he learned diplomacy and the art of war, both of which would have come into play while engaging with hostile nations. And of course his skill living as a wilderness shepherd would have served Israel well while living in the wilderness.

Another thing that Moses told the people was that *the Lord has said to me, 'You shall not cross this Jordan.'* Israel's leader told them that he would no longer be able to lead an active life because he was old. Plus, he had received words from the LORD that he would not cross the Jordan River and lead the Israelites when entering the Promised Land.

The reason for this is found in the book of Numbers. We learn about the incident that prevented Moses from entering the Promised Land (Numbers 20:1–13). The text tells us that the Israelites were grumbling because they were thirsty, and God commanded Moses to speak to the rock to bring water for the people. However, instead of speaking to the rock, Moses struck it twice out of anger. Moses displayed a lack of faith (Numbers 20:12) which manifested in a lack of obedience to God, resulting in Moses not treating God as “holy in the sight of the sons of Israel” (Numbers 20:12). The penalty the LORD applied to Moses was that He would not use Moses to lead the people into the land of Canaan.

But Moses’ inability to lead Israel to Canaan would not handicap the conquest because the Suzerain God, ruler of Israel, had already made provisions for successor leadership. The first provision was that it would be *the Lord your God who will cross ahead of you* (v. 3). He would *destroy these nations before them*, ensuring that the Israelites would *dispossess them*. The conquest was thus assured, because the Suzerain (Ruler) God would lead the Israelite army to give them victory over the enemy.

The LORD’s second provision for leadership succession was that *Joshua is the one who will cross ahead of you*. This informed Israel that Moses would not lead them anymore and that Joshua was Moses’ successor. This was both because Moses was past the age to lead Israel, as well as because he was banned from entering into the Promised Land, *just as the Lord has spoken* (Deuteronomy 3:23–27). Simply put, the Suzerain God would be the divine leader and Joshua would be the human leader of Israel’s army.

So, as Israel’s army approached Canaan in battle, *the LORD would do to the Canaanite nations just as He did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land, when He destroyed them* (v. 4). This is a reference to the LORD’s deliverance of Sihon into the hand of the Israelites, who in turn annihilated them (Deuteronomy 2:32–37). Likewise, God delivered Og, the king of Bashan, with all his people into the hands of Israel and the Israelites smote them until no survivor was left (Deuteronomy 3:1–7). God reminded Israel of His past faithfulness and used it as an illustration of what He would do for Israel if they followed His leadership.

Then Moses reminded Israel that *the LORD would also deliver the Canaanite nations before them* (v. 5). The Israelites were then to *do to them according to all the commandments* which Moses had commanded them. Just as the LORD

delivered *Sihon* and *Og* to Israel, He promised to deliver the Canaanites to them. The Israelites were then to completely destroy them as they had done to *Sihon* and *Og*.

With such a promise of guaranteed victory if Israel would follow the leadership of God and Moses, Moses told them to *be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them* (v. 6). There would be times when the Canaanites would appear invincible. In spite of this, the people of God needed to march toward their enemies with great confidence because *the Lord your God is the one who goes with you and would not fail you or forsake you*. Israel's God remains faithful to His words.

He chose Israel to be His covenant people and promised to protect them and make them victorious if they kept their word to abide by the commands of the covenant, as they had promised to do (Exodus 19:8). Therefore, Moses encouraged Israel to remain strong and bold as long as they listened to God's voice, because He would not fail them or forsake them. Israel's victory would not depend upon its army. Their victory would ultimately come from God, the great Warrior fighting for His covenant people. However, Israel would have to be willing to fight, and follow God in order to see the works of His hand. God intended to work through the people, so it would require that they follow God's leadership.

It is worth noting that this section is an excellent example of Moses' humility. As Numbers states, Moses was more humble than any man on the earth (Numbers 12:3). Humility is the ability to see things as they are. Moses does not hide the fact that God had banned him from entering the Promised Land. He does not shrink back from recognizing his old age. He does not avoid giving up his position as leader, or cling to his current authority. He states simply and clearly the reality of the situation and plays his part willingly.

Biblical Text:

¹So Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. ²And he said to them, “I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I am no longer able to come and go, and the Lord has said to me, ‘You shall not cross this Jordan.’ ³It is the Lord your God who will cross ahead of you; He will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua is the one who will cross ahead of you, just as the Lord has spoken. ⁴The Lord will do to them just as He did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land, when He

destroyed them. ⁵The Lord will deliver them up before you, and you shall do to them according to all the commandments which I have commanded you. ⁶Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.