

Deuteronomy 31:14-23

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The LORD summoned Moses and Joshua to the tent of meeting in order to commission Joshua as Israel's new leader. He also asked them to write a song that will serve as a witness against Israel when they turn from the LORD to other gods and break God's covenant.

This section switches to the LORD's speech. In this narrative, God reminded Moses that he was *about to lie down with his fathers*, meaning that *the time for him to die was near* (v. 14). For this reason, God told Moses to *call Joshua* in order to *present themselves at the tent of meeting so that He might commission Joshua*. The *tent of meeting* did not always refer to the Tabernacle. It also referred to a tent Moses placed outside the Israelite camp where he met with the Suzerain (Ruler) God (Exodus 33:7–11). In any case, the LORD was about to express His presence as He did over the tabernacle while Israel wandered in the wilderness.

Once Moses and Joshua were at *the tent of meeting*, *the Lord appeared in the tent in a pillar of cloud, and the pillar of cloud stood at the doorway of the tent* (v. 15). The *pillar of cloud* was one of the ways the Suzerain God manifested Himself to His covenant people, especially during their wilderness wandering (Exodus 13:21–22; Numbers 11:25). The appearance of the LORD emphasized how solemn and important this moment was. He was going to reveal an important prophetic word to Moses and Joshua.

The LORD then reminded Moses that he was *about to lie down with his fathers* (v. 16), and afterwards the *people of Israel would arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of the land, into the midst of which they were going*. For the people to follow the pagan gods around them meant that they would deliberately *forsake* their Suzerain (Ruler) God and *break His covenant which He had made with them*. Israel would fall into idolatry by worshiping the pagan gods of the Canaanite nations. What would follow such idolatry would be the practices that attended it, which were exploitative, where the strong took advantage of the weak (Leviticus 18). This would be in complete contrast to God's command for the Israelites to serve Him by loving their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18).

Because of this future disobedience, God's *anger would be kindled against them in that day* (v. 17). The result was that He would *forsake them and hide His face from them*. The word *forsake* (Heb. "āzab") means "to leave," "to abandon," or "to stand at a distance." The LORD would disassociate Himself from His people because they had forsaken (or abandoned) Him (Deuteronomy 28:20; 29:25). God had assigned to His people the "job" of being a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). Their "deal" with God was that He would bless them if they would serve one another and show the world a better way to live. If they didn't, then God would need to disassociate from them, lest the world misunderstand His ways.

For the LORD to *hide His face* means that He would withdraw His presence from the Israelites. Also, hiding His face would be the opposite of letting His face "shine" on them (Numbers 6:25 – 26), resulting in the loss of His blessing. Israel needed to perform its proper function in order to obtain God's blessing.

Because the LORD would withdraw His protective presence when His people became idolatrous, *they will be consumed, and many evils and troubles would come upon them*. Stated differently, the Suzerain God would perform the provision of His covenant/treaty with Israel, and severely punish His people by allowing them to suffer because of the *many evils and troubles* that would come upon them. Had they been faithful to Him, He would have been faithful to them and protected them from such suffering. The Israelites would suffer the curses described in Deuteronomy 28:15–68. These curses would come upon them for the sole reason that Israel chose them.

Israel's suffering would prompt them to inquire about God's presence among them, saying, *Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have come upon us?* God's people would come to the realization that all of this suffering occurred because the LORD withdrew His protection from them. His treaty with them as their sovereign ruler required that they submit to Him. In the ancient world, the typical treaty would require inferior rulers to pay tribute to the superior/Suzerain ruler. In God's case, His "tribute" was that Israel walk in His ways, and love their neighbors, which was for their own good. In the future, God says they will fail to obey the voice of their Suzerain (Ruler) LORD. They will not pay any attention to His warnings.

God said He would *surely hide His face in that day* (v. 18). The Hebrew for *surely hide* is emphatic, saying that it would be a guarantee that He would

pay no attention to Israel's afflictions *because of all the evil which they would do, for they would turn to other gods*. It is interesting that the *evil* mentioned here would be the result of their idolatry. Israel would need protective help, and God would look away.

In light of the apostasy to come after Moses' death, God commanded Moses and Joshua to *write this song for yourselves* (v. 19). They were then to *teach it to the sons of Israel*. God further asked Moses and Joshua to put the *song* on Israel's *lips*. Using a *song* made it easier to memorize this message and pass it on to others than merely repeating a series of statutes. The song was to be on Israel's *lips* so they would know that they were being judged and that they would know how to regain God's blessing and protection. It was to be taught to all generations so *that this song might be a witness for Him against the sons of Israel*.

The reason God wanted Moses and Joshua to teach the song to the Israelites was because He knew what they will do *when He brings them into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers* (v. 20). The LORD promised to give them victory over the Canaanites, give them the Promised Land, and to bless them. And the LORD would fulfill His side of the covenant. But God knew that a new generation would arise that would become entitled, and begin to seek their own way.

The LORD knew that His people Israel, once they occupied the Promised Land *and they have eaten and are satisfied and become prosperous, then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and spurn Me and break My covenant*. To spurn (Heb. "na'as") means to "despise," "treat with disrespect," or "have contempt for." The people would willingly reject their Deliverer/Provider and also fail to live up to their agreement to abide by the covenant they made with their LORD (Exodus 19:7-8).

Material possessions and physical comfort would lead Israel to indulgence and entitlement, which in turn would cause them to abandon the Suzerain God and seek the pagan ways of self-indulgence and exploitation (see Leviticus 18 for a list of common pagan practices). This warning was clearly spelled out in Deuteronomy 8:11–16. The Suzerain (Ruler) God would bring His vassals (Israel) to the Promised Land, a *land flowing with milk and honey*, that is, an abundant and prosperous land. God would bless Israel to the point of excess and His blessings would cause Israel to take their prosperity for granted. This would in turn cause the people to lose their need for the LORD and forsake

Him and to *turn to other gods*. In general, pagan *gods* were means to justify fleshly behaviors, particularly sexual immorality.

However, Israel's idolatry would not go without negative consequences. As the Suzerain God said earlier (v. 17), *many evils and troubles would come upon Israel* (v. 21) and when that happened, *this song would testify before them as a witness (for it shall not be forgotten from the lips of their descendants)*. In particular, when Israel sunk to becoming exploitative, God would give them over to be exploited by conquering nations (Deuteronomy 28:25-35).

God provided Moses and Joshua with this *song* because He knew the people's *intent which they are developing today before He had brought them into the land which He swore*. God knows every thought of humans (Hebrews 4:12). Nothing can be hidden from Him because He is all-knowing (omniscient). As God said in Jeremiah 17: "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds."

Thus the *song* (Deuteronomy 32:1–43) would ultimately function as teaching material to motivate Israel to remain faithful to the LORD, and to witness for God against his faithless people when they failed to follow Him. It also taught them about the sovereignty of God over all creation and His just punishment of sins. In this song is a reminder that Israel had agreed to obey the provisions of God's covenant law, and to abide by the adverse consequences of disobedience.

So, *Moses* obeyed the LORD and *wrote this song the same day, and taught it to the sons of Israel* (v. 22).

Having commanded Moses and Joshua to write the song and teach it to the Israelites (vv. 14–22), the Suzerain God now turned His attention to Joshua. He *commissioned Joshua the son of Nun, and said, Be strong and courageous* (v. 23). As the new leader of Israel, Joshua needed to be bold and firm because he would *bring the sons of Israel into the land which the LORD swore to them*. God had promised to protect Israel, and assure them victory. But He expected the people to have the courage to fight. His blessing would come through their obedience. The people needed a courageous leader.

God concluded His speech to *Joshua* by reassuring him of His presence, saying, *I will be with you*. Throughout the Old Testament, the Suzerain God promised His abiding presence with many of His chosen leaders. He promised to be with Isaac (Genesis 26:1–3, 24), Jacob (Genesis 28:10, 15; 31:3), and Moses (Exodus 3:12).

God's presence with His people guaranteed success, protection, and victory. That means, for an Israelite leader to be successful, he must first and foremost obey the LORD.

It is important to note that although there were substantial adverse consequences for Israel if they choose to disobey their covenant agreement, God would never forsake them as His people. God chose Israel to be His people not because of their performance, but because He loved them (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). In the Song of Moses in Chapter 32, God will make clear that out of His judgment when they disobey Him will come their deliverance by God's hand:

“For the LORD will vindicate His people,
And will have compassion on His servants,
When He sees that their strength is gone,
And there is none remaining, bond or free.”
(Deuteronomy 32:36)

Biblical Text:

¹⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Behold, the time for you to die is near; call Joshua, and present yourselves at the tent of meeting, that I may commission him.” So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves at the tent of meeting. ¹⁵ The Lord appeared in the tent in a pillar of cloud, and the pillar of cloud stood at the doorway of the tent. ¹⁶ The Lord said to Moses, “Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers; and this people will arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of the land, into the midst of which they are going, and will forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them. ¹⁷ 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 consumed, and many evils and troubles will come upon them; so that they will say in that day, ‘Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have come upon us?’ ¹⁸ But I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil which they will do, for they will turn to other gods. ¹⁹ “Now

therefore, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the sons of Israel; put it on their lips, so that this song may be a witness for Me against the sons of Israel. ²⁰For when I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and are satisfied and become prosperous, then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and spurn Me and break My covenant. ²¹Then it shall come about, when many evils and troubles have come upon them, that this song will testify before them as a witness (for it shall not be forgotten from the lips of their descendants); for I know their intent which they are developing today, before I have brought them into the land which I swore.” ²²So Moses wrote this song the same day, and taught it to the sons of Israel. ²³Then He commissioned Joshua the son of Nun, and said, “Be strong and courageous, for you shall bring the sons of Israel into the land which I swore to them, and I will be with you.