

Looking to the Future: 1. Keeping our Gospel Moorings

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[0 : 00] Turn now to our Bible reading this morning. We are in Deuteronomy chapter 31, and that is page 172, I think, in the Church Bibles.

And just as you're turning that up, let me just say to you, this is a chapter which is arranged symmetrically. We often find that, don't we? And we've seen it quite often in this book of Deuteronomy already.

So I want you to just pay attention to that as we go through it. You'll see, if you look carefully, it begins in the first verse and ends in the last verse with Moses speaking to all Israel.

Then we have the next sort of layer of the sandwich at verse 9 to 13, and then again in verses 24 to 29, where Moses writes.

He writes the law and gives it to the Levites for it to be preserved and proclaimed. And right in the center of the passage, from verse 14 down to verse 23, we have the Lord speaking.

[1 : 07] And even there, it's a bit of a sandwich because that section begins and ends with the Lord commissioning Joshua. And then right in the middle, having spoken about that succession, he's speaking about this song that he wants Moses to write down.

So a bit of a sandwich in this chapter, but it's arranged very carefully for good reason to draw our attention to what it's all about. Moses speaking, Moses writing, and the Lord speaking.

So let's see what it says. Deuteronomy 31 at verse 1. So Moses continued to speak these words to all Israel. And he said to them, I am 120 years old today.

I am no longer able to go out and come in. The Lord has said to me, you shall not go over this Jordan. The Lord your God himself will go over at your head, literally.

He will destroy these nations before you so that you shall dispossess them. And Joshua will go over at your head as the Lord has spoken.

[2 : 13] And the Lord will do to them as he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land when he destroyed them. And the Lord will give them over to you and you shall do to them according to the whole commandment that I have commanded you.

Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them. For it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, be strong and courageous. For 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. It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you. He will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.

Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them at the end of every seven years at the set time in the year of release at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose.

[3 : 20] You shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God.

And be careful to do all the words of this law. And that their children who have not known it may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going to possess over the Jordan.

And the Lord said to Moses, Behold, the day's approach when you must die. Call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting that I may commission him.

Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting. And the Lord appeared in the tent in a pillar of cloud. And the pillar of cloud stood over the entrance of the tent. And the Lord said to Moses, Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers.

Then this people will rise and whore after 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.

[4 : 30] 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. And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done. Because they have turned to other gods.

Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths. That this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, Which I swore to give to their fathers.

And they have eaten and are full and grown fat. Then they will turn to other gods and serve them and despise me and break my covenant. And when many evils and troubles have come upon them, This song shall confront them as a witness.

For it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring. For I know what they are inclined to do. Even today, before I have brought them into the land that I swore to give.

[5 : 40] So Moses wrote this song the same day and taught it to the people of Israel. And the Lord commissioned Joshua, the son of Nun, And said, Be strong and courageous, For you shall bring the people of Israel into the land that I swore to give them.

I will be with you. When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, Take this book of the law and put it by the side of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God, That it may be there always for a witness against you.

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.

Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, That I may speak these words in their ears, And call heaven and earth to witness against them. 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 works of your hands.

[7 : 03] Then Moses spoke the words of this song until they were finished, In the ears of all the assembly of Israel. Amen.

May God bless to us. His word. Well, do turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter 31.

A chapter all about keeping our gospel moorings. Now, transition in leadership is often an anxious time, Especially when there has been long and tiring and fruitful leadership.

And it's passing to others who are as yet unknown and untested. You see that in the business world, in companies, You see it in national leadership. And succession planning is hugely important, isn't it, In industry, so that investors don't lose confidence.

But it's also true in church life. And leadership change in the church of Christ can often lead to great anxiety and the anticipation of it.

[8 : 06] And alas, such changes often do end up with real problems and even disaster because, well, perhaps it's been poorly handled. Or as is often the case, because actually, God's people don't really want real leadership.

They resent it. They murmur against it. And often want to undermine it. God's people need leadership. But very often they don't like it. You see that, don't you, all the way through this book with the people's murmurings against Moses.

Israel was constantly complaining about his leadership. But that is one reason why the Bible actually focuses greatly on leadership transitions. Just think of all the times in the scriptures we see it.

Elijah giving over to Elisha. David over to Solomon. Or Jesus to his apostles. Think of all his preparation for them. Think of all those discussions in the upper room. Or Paul speaking to the leaders of the church in Acts chapter 20.

Or his letters to Timothy and Titus and so on. Clearly, it's a vital thing. And it's certainly a vital thing here at this time of leadership handover from Moses to Joshua.

[9 : 17] At a crucial moment in Israel's history as a nation. These last chapters of the book are all focused on the future. Both the immediate future.

The transition to Joshua's leadership and the conquest of the land. But also the whole unfolding future of God's dealings with his people right until the latter days.

We've seen that phrase, haven't we, several times. Those far off days of ultimate fulfillment of the covenant. The things God promised way, way back in the book of Genesis to Abraham.

And so as God's people look to the future then, at a time of transition, God focuses their minds. And the minds of Moses and Joshua.

As they step forward. And he wants them to be clear about what they need to know if they are not to lose their moorings in God's covenant gospel purposes of saving grace.

[10 : 16] And what they needed to have their minds and hearts fixed on is just what God's people today need to have our minds and hearts fixed on. If we're to think about our future as the church of Jesus Christ.

Just like them, we need both great realism and great hope. Realism about the sinful propensity of God's people.

And that that will continue into the future, just as it is in the present. To plague his church, to hanker his church. But also hope because the gracious purpose of God will also continue.

And despite all sin and rebellion among his people, will bless all nations through the seed of Abraham. As God has promised, as he has covenanted to do.

And friends, if we don't hold ourselves both a powerful realism about sin. Especially sin within God's professing people, within the church. And also a profound hope in God's purposes of grace.

[11 : 24] And we also, as we look to the future of the church. Especially in this western world. We are very likely to lose our gospel moorings. We're very likely to give up in despair.

Or to just capitulate in disbelief. Isn't that true? I mean, when we look around at the world today. Especially this western world. There's so much, isn't there? To discourage, to despair.

Just as it was for the apostle Paul, remember. In the first century. When his great desire for his mission to his own people. To Israel. To the Jewish nation. Seemed to be disastrous.

Because in the main, they were rejecting their own Messiah. But Paul did not lose his moorings, did he? Why? Well, because he had understood, among other things, these very chapters.

Very especially the Song of Moses in chapter 32. And he was full of utter realism. Both about the sin of Israel. But also about the hope of the ultimate future God had promised for his true Israel of God.

[12 : 27] If you doubt that, read Romans 9 to 11. And you'll see just how vital Moses' theme in these very chapters was. For his understanding of the extraordinary outworking of the purposes of God.

And so these chapters are vital. They're vital for us as Christian people today. As we look to the future of the Church of Jesus Christ. And chapter 31, right in front of us today, has so much to teach us about keeping our gospel moorings.

As we do that. As we look to the future. And it might be especially pertinent, perhaps as well, for some of us here today. For whom change and transition is something that's looming in our own personal life.

In the days and months to come. As I mentioned at the reading, this chapter is somewhat symmetrical. Like a sandwich. It begins and ends with Moses speaking to all Israel about the succession to Joshua.

And about the song he's going to teach. And then that next layer, as I said, where Moses is writing. Writing the words of the law and commanding the Levites. Both that that word should be proclaimed at the heart of Israel's covenant life.

[13 : 37] And also preserved right at the heart of their religious life. Right beside the Ark of the Covenant. And then at the very heart of the passage, God himself speaking to Joshua and to Moses.

About the succession, announcing it and accomplishing it. But right at the heart about this song that was to be taught the people. A sung version of the covenant. That's what he's speaking about in verses 16 to 22.

So right at the center of this passage is God himself telling his leaders and telling his people. Of the need for that constant witness of gospel covenant grace.

Because of the people's propensity to sin. So people need to hear the gospel story over and over and over. As a gracious warning from God.

To keep them from turning away from such a great salvation. And you see that structure I think helps us to see the emphasis of the message that's there for us.

[14:37] All this is God's story. It's unstoppable. And no mere human leader is ever the true savior of his people.

Only he is. And despite all human sin therefore. God has given his people all that they need for life and godliness.

In his great and precious covenant promises. And he's preserved them in the scriptures. So that his word will go on being spoken. And being heard.

And indeed being sung. So that his abiding presence will remain in the midst of his people. With power to save. And to safeguard his people's future.

Whatever they may face. Well friends that's vital isn't it? For any Christian worker. Any Christian leader. To learn today.

[15:31] Whatever your responsibilities might be within the church. It's vital for everybody in the whole church. In every place. In every age. So that we'll be people who are full of realism about sin.

And yet filled with the hope of God's grace. As we face the future. So we don't lose our covenant moorings. So I want to summarize the message here in four parts.

First. God is telling his people that there is a new leader. But it is the same land. That is the story is still progressing.

And these verses give clarity. Don't they? About the unstoppable purposes of God. As I've said. Verses 14 and 15.

And verse 23. There focus on God's commissioning of a new leader. Of Joshua. But it's right up there in the start as well. In verses 1 to 3. There must be a new leader for this next phase.

[16:29] Now it's not. Because. Because Moses was too old and frail. Now chapter 34 verse 7 tells us. Later on. That he was full of vigor. His vigor was unabated.

No. It was. As we're told here. Because God had said to him. You shall not cross the Jordan. It's going to be Joshua now. Not you. Who goes out. And comes in from the presence of the Lord.

And leads the people. It's going to be Joshua verse 7. Who goes with this people. And what's he going to do? Look for a new vision.

Make his own mark on Israel's future. Have new goals. Stand up and say. Well folks. It's time for change. As every politician seeking election seems to do these days.

That's what churches can think. Isn't it? So often. When they wanted to make fresh impact. A new leader. A new vision. Time for change. No. No.

[17:25] No. God's goal. Says these verses. And God's vision. Is unchanged. It's very simple. It's for his kingdom.

To advance in the earth. As he has decreed it. And it's for his people. To march along with his vision. And know his blessing. Not. To obstruct it.

And then fall under his curse. And that's so clear here. Look at all the references. In this chapter. To the land. Joshua verse 3. Will go over.

At your head. Where is he going over to? Well verse 7. Is explicit. Into the land. Of promise. Verse 13. To possess the land.

Across the Jordan. Verse 16. It's about entering the land. Verse 20. It's into the land. Verse 21. It's into the land. And on and on it goes. New leader.

[18:19] Yes. A change at the top. But it's the same land. There is no change. In the goal. To see God's heavenly kingdom advance.

To the outermost boundaries. That God has set for it. And then in that day. It was. The outermost boundaries. Of greater Israel. But of course.

Now. The Lord Jesus has told us. It's to the uttermost parts. Of this whole earth. Go into all the world. And proclaim the gospel. To all nations. Teaching them to obey.

All that I've commanded you. And you see. Whatever changes. In leadership. There might be. In the church. From generation. To generation. The same story. Is still progressing.

And these verses. Give utter clarity. About that. About the unchanging. And indeed. The unstoppable. Purpose of God. For his people. In this world. The Lord buries.

[19 : 15] One generation. Of his workmen. But the Lord's. Work. Goes on. There is no change. In vision. There's no change. In the goal. The same great commission.

To take the word. Of the gospel. To all nations. That is. The church's. Unchanging mission. Now. That might seem. So obvious to you. You say. Well of course. We take that.

For granted. But friends. It can't be taken. For granted. Within a few. Short generations. Of Israel. They totally lost sight. Of that vision. They settled. For far. Far less.

And so often. Has that not been. The truth about the church. Of Jesus Christ. That it settles down. With a far lesser vision.

Or indeed. With a different vision. Altogether. And the gospel imperative. So quickly. Can become lost. We know that. We've seen that. And no church is immune.

[20 : 07] Let me make clear. Not long ago. I was speaking to an elder. In a. An evangelical church. Facing a vacancy. And he was talking about. About looking for somebody.

With a fresh vision. A different vision. And he actually said to me. Oh well. Our last minister. But one. His real vision. Was proclaiming the gospel. And teaching the bible. But then the one who came after him.

Had a bit of a different vision. We went in a different direction. And perhaps the next one. We're different still. And actually. That was true. And the tragedy is. It remains to be seen.

Whether that church. Will. Actually recover. The true gospel vision. Of God. But God says to Joshua here. Can you see. No new vision is allowed.

In a new leader. It's you. But it's the same land. You are leading this people to. It's the same kingdom goal. It's exactly what Paul says to Timothy.

[21 : 03] Isn't it? In 2nd Timothy chapter 2. What you got from me. That's what you're teach. To teach to others. And that's what they're to teach to others. And that's what they're to teach to others.

No new vision. There'll be new tactics of course. For new situations. And new places.

And new people. Of course there will. We don't need to speak in. In Elizabethan English today. For example. Any more than we need to speak in 1st century Greek. We don't need to wear 17th century clothes.

We don't have to have 17th century church structures. Of course not. But we do need. To cherish the same. Unchanging eternal gospel. We do need to be serving.

The same everlasting kingdom. And taking that gospel. To the very ends of the earth. Because the same story. Is still progressing today. And we're part of it.

[22 : 01] And God's purposes are unchanged. And they're unstoppable. And so we better not be perverting it. Better not be standing against it. That's such an important word.

Isn't it? For every Christian leader. Or prospective Christian leader. And for every Christian church. That wants to remain. A true Christian church. New leader. Same land.

But the second thing this chapter makes. Again. So very clear. Is that there is a new leader. But it is the same Lord. That is. Their Savior. Will still be present with them.

These verses give us great assurance. Of the abiding presence of God. Still in Joshua's day. Just as in Moses day. Look at verse 3. I don't know why our ESV obscures it.

The NIV in this case has it better. But look at the second half of verse 3. Literally Joshua will go over ahead of you. The first half of the verse. God will go over ahead of you.

[23 : 05] Same words. You see a new human leader. But exactly the same. Divine leader. The Lord. The true Savior. Will still be present with them.

And that is what really matters. Look at verse 3. He goes before them. He goes ahead of them. To prepare the way. And verse 6.

He goes with them. He is an ever present help. Again verse 8. He goes before you. He will be with you. He will never leave you or forsake you.

So do not fear or be dismayed. That's why you can be strong and courageous. There's no other reason. It's the same Lord with you. See he doesn't say.

Oh Joshua is a man of action. A man of charisma. He's a young man. He's in touch. He's got great gifts. He's going to make all the difference. He'll get your church really moving and going.

[24 : 03] He's got a young family. He'll bring in the youth. He's got all sorts of gifts. That will bring people in. All the sorts of things. That church vacancy committees think about. And talk about.

When they're looking for a new leader. Well all those things are good.

And Joshua did have very many gifts. And of course. Leaders need to be gifted. But the future did not depend. On Joshua's gifts. But upon Joshua's God.

Do you see that? And it's awareness of his abiding presence alone. That can give this people the strength and the courage to go on. And friends that is exactly the same for us today.

It's so important isn't it? Especially at times of transition. To look beyond God's under shepherds. His earthly leaders. And to look to the great shepherd.

To the chief shepherd. Because earthly leaders will change. They'll die. But God never changes.

[25 : 04] The Lord never dies. He's from everlasting to everlasting. He's ever the same. And of course. Earthly leaders in our lives. Are evidence of God's faithfulness to us.

We need leadership. He gives us leaders. He invests in leaders. Indeed. The scriptures would command us. As the church. To invest in leaders. And in leaders development. Much, much more than the church often has done.

Because they're important. And of course. It's natural isn't it? That we feel that. And we feel very keenly. The end of an era. Of significant leadership.

Whether it's in a local church. Whether it's in the wider Christian scene. Or in fact. Whether it's in your own life. Those who have led you to the Lord Jesus. Who have led you on in the faith.

And they get old. And they go to be with the Lord. And you think. Well how can I go on without so and so? And we feel feeble. Well we are feeble. And we can feel afraid.

[26 : 02] Can't we? I confess to feeling that often. I'm at the stage in life. When most. If not all of those. Significant leaders. In my Christian life and development. Are very very old. Or have gone to glory.

And I think. Well how am I going to manage? I found myself the other day. I was at a funeral. That just reminded me. Of that passing of an era. I find myself saying. It's the end of an era. It's the end of an era.

And we can feel that. Can't we? And it was certainly. The end of an era. For Israel here. They would no longer have. That colossus of Moses. As their rock. A rock like presence.

Leading them. In the way of the Lord. But you see. Again and again. What this passage tells us. Is that you will have.

The rock. You will have Moses. God. He remains with you. You'll never leave you. Or forsake you. And we'll have our leaders.

[27 : 02] God. With us. All the days of our lives. That's what. The apostle says. In Hebrews chapter 13. Remember the leaders. Who spoke the word of God to you. And follow their faith.

He says. Not trusting in them. But trusting in their God. Trusting in the one who gave them. Their courage. Their leadership. Their faithfulness.

Their God. Is your God. That's our only true solid rock. Isn't it? That's what we sang about. I rest on his unchanging grace. In every high and stormy gale.

My anchor holds. Within the veil. His oath. His covenant. His blood. Support me. In the whelming flood. When all around. My soul gives way. He then.

Is all my hope. And say. On Christ. The solid rock. I stand. All other ground. Is sinking sand. Even. The ground. Of trusting in those.

[27 : 58] Who are our leaders. In an earthly sense. And that's so important. To remember. Isn't it? Maybe you'll have to move. From. A fellowship. Where you've had great support.

Where there have been those around you. To love. And to help you. And you'll wonder. You'll fear. How am I going to cope? Rested away from that. Well you may not have them. But you will have their God.

Isn't that a lot better? Certainly than the other way around. Or if leadership changes in the church. Or just as time moves on.

As eras move on. Look at verse 6. Look at verse 8. These things are written for us. I've actually heard some preachers say silly things.

That these verses for example. Can't be claimed by believers today. Because God's not speaking to us. He's speaking to Joshua. He's speaking only to his anointed leader of his people. So these things only apply to Joshua.

[28 : 57] And they only really truly apply to the Lord Jesus. The great anointed leader of his people. It's rather a fashion today to say similar things like that. For example about the Psalms.

Perhaps you've heard it.

Some of you who are training in Bible teaching. The words of the Psalms. Are only the words of the Psalmist. Only the words of the anointed king of Israel. And so they can't be truly said by believers. Only by the Lord's true king Jesus. That sort of talk is very, very confused. First of all, look.

It's plain here. Verse 7. Yes. Speaking directly to Joshua. But verse 6 says exactly the same words. Doesn't it? To all Israel. That's who Moses is speaking to in verses 1 to 6.

So God's presence is promised to all his people then. As well as it was promised to Joshua. And secondly, the whole message of the New Testament gospel is not.

[29 : 54] Oh, it's different for you. It's not as good for you. But rather, how much more are these promises true for us in the great fulfillment in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Because in him, the Lord who has promised to be with his people has become Emmanuel. God with us forever. And he's given us better promises even than these.

Never to leave us. Never to forsake us. Not ever. Think of the great commission. Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. And behold, I am with you always.

Even to the very end of the age. Forever. What does Jesus say in the upper room repeatedly to his disciples? I will not go away and leave you orphans. When he ascends to the Father.

I will come to you. I will give you another comforter. I will be with you forever. The Holy Spirit will be with you. He'll be in you forever. Forever. Not just for the next generation.

[30 : 57] And so, when we fear the future. When we need courage for the race before us. We look back not just at Moses and Israel's history. As we do to all the great cloud of witnesses.

As the apostle says in Hebrews 12. We also look to Jesus, the author and the completer of our salvation. Who has gone before us to prepare the way.

And who will ever be with us. We have an even greater assurance to courage and strength. And it's no accident.

That it's right there in the very next chapter. In Hebrews chapter 13. That the apostle urges Christians, doesn't he? To be generous. To be hospitable. To be open handed. Not full of the love of money. Not holding things back.

Why, he says? Bailey quotes this verse. Because he has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you. And by the way, for good measure. He immediately goes on to quote a psalm.

[31 : 53] And apply it to God's people. And says, The Lord is my helper. I will not fear. What can man do to me? Not just something that the psalmist can say.

But every single believer in Jesus too. Because he is with us forever. So we have new leaders. And we'll have new leaders.

Yes. But the same Lord. Our Savior is still present with us. And so we can be strong and courageous. But we must also be realistic.

Because thirdly, we're told very plainly here. That with new leaders come the same limitations. The Savior will be present. Yes. But so will the people's sin.

And sin will still be a great problem. So in the middle of the chapter, verses 16 to 22, speak about realism. Which is necessary for any effective work for God.

[32 : 52] Look at these verses. They're extraordinarily candid and real, aren't they? Just as the Apostle Paul is very real to the Ephesian leaders and to Timothy. See, terrible times are coming.

That's what he's saying here. This isn't a job offer, is it? That paints the company in all wonderful glory. But hides away down in the small print somewhere at the back. The fact that the company is nearly bust.

The whole thing is about to fold. No. God never hides the truth like that. He is absolutely honest and real. Joshua, you are taking on a people with a huge problem.

Their recalcitrant sinful hearts. Verse 16, this people will rise. They will whore after foreign gods.

They will forsake me. They will break my covenant.

And invoke God's anger. What a terrible prediction. But look at verse 21, you see. What God says, it's because this is hardwired into human nature.

[33 : 51] I know what they're inclined to do. It's exactly the phrase that's used back in Genesis 6 before the flood. When God says that, I saw that every inclination of man's heart is only evil all the time.

And even after the flood, they haven't changed because it's not something we can unlearn. He says it again in Genesis 8. Human beings can't change their hearts. And it's still the same.

So the Lord Jesus says in Mark chapter 7, it's out of the heart of man that comes all manner of evil. Our sin is still the problem.

It's the problem for all life and leadership in God's church. It's you he's talking about there. And it's me he's talking about. And friends, to be an effective worker for God, a servant of the Lord in any age, and especially an effective leader, you better get very, very clear about that.

So often we don't, you see. Somebody goes to a new post, maybe as a missionary or as a Christian worker or as a pastor. And they think, it'll be different for me.

[35 : 06] Because I've learned so much at college. Well, that's highly unlikely. Or I'm so gifted. Or I know what to do. I know how to handle people. So it'll be different for me.

I remember when I started out in Christian ministry, that older, wiser heads told me all the sorts of things that would happen to me that I would face. And you know what I thought? I thought, I'm smarter than that. I thought, I know how to handle that.

It'll be different for me. And you know what? It wasn't different for me. I faced every single thing that I was warned about. And so will every Christian worker and every Christian leader.

And so will every Christian church. And so will every Christian believer. Because, verse 21 here, is true. Our hearts are naturally inclined towards sin and evil.

And God knows that. And every Christian worker better listen to God and realize it. There are only two real problems in Christian leadership, let me tell you.

[36 : 13] It's the sinful hearts of those people you lead and shepherd. And it's the sinful heart inside of you. And so here, and all through the Bible, God warns us.

New leaders, great. But the same limitations. Sin is the great limiting factor. Always. Period. Period. And notice the warnings here in verse 17 and in verse 20.

You see, our sin is so perverse that it will take every opportunity in both the good times and the bad times to floor us. So verse 17, you see, God says people will blame him when things are bad.

It's God's fault. He's deserted us. He's not among us. When it's entirely their fault for ignoring him and rejecting him and driving him away. But then in verse 20, look, when God is blessing us undeservedly, when we grow fat with his blessings.

Well, even then we're not safe from our sinful hearts. Because even then, he says, we'll turn away and worship other gods and break his covenant. It's such a dangerous thing to be blessed materially by God.

[37 : 23] The Bible tells us that repeatedly. Because we get comfortable. We lose our gospel edge. We settle down into comfortable mediocrity. And let me say, by the way, that is the besetting sin of middle-aged men.

I know. I am one. Are you listening, men? I'm serious. That's why Jesus tells in that parable of the sower about the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, rising up and choking the word.

And men who were once keen for the gospel of Christ, keen for the kingdom, shrivel into that comfortable mediocrity. More interested in their golf or their sailing or their football or their curries with their mates or their gardening or their share portfolios or whatever it is.

There's a hundred other things. Other than the advance of Christ and his gospel in his church and in their own families and even in their own marriage. And let me tell you, your wives know it if you don't.

Am I wrong? We can't pretend to God. You see, he knows, verse 21, he knows the inclination of our hearts.

[38 : 45] And if we're honest, we know it too. That's why we need those around us who will call us to account, who will call us back from that mediocrity, call us back onto track with God. That's what real Christian fellowship is.

And we need fellow Christians who will do that for us in the small group that we share in, in the prayer trip that we're in, in the friendships we have. If you don't have that kind of real Christian fellowship, let me tell you, especially you men, and it's more for men than women.

We're worse at this. Then let me warn you, verse 20 is likely to be describing your future. But it's not inevitable.

Realism is not the same as fatalism. And that's the whole reason for this song that God tells Moses to write in verse 19. It's to be a powerful witness, a warning to God's people not to stray.

Verse 21, to confront them as a witness, to live, do you see, unforgotten in their mouths, indeed in the mouths of their offspring, as gospel truth. Just as the Levites, likewise, were to ensure both the

preservation and the proclamation of all God's words for his people.

[40 : 02] And you see, that's the final great emphasis right at the heart of this chapter. They will have a new leader, yes, but the same law. The people will still be sinful, but the scriptures will still be powerful.

As Paul says, to make even those of us with perverse hearts, which is all of us, wise for salvation and equipped for every good work.

And that's why this rather grim central section is hedged in by the provision of God's ongoing leadership and by the permanence of God's powerful word of witness.

All this about the message of the song and what's there in verses 9 to 13 and verses 24 to 29, about the law being preserved and being proclaimed.

See, it speaks of the vital necessity of a permanent, powerful witness of God in the scriptures to be written so that they might be heard, indeed, son.

[41 : 04] Because that alone is what will keep God's people from disaster in the future. You see, it's hearing and it's heeding and singing the gospel word all through life that will realize the saving purposes of God in the lives of his true people in every generation.

Hence, the command in verses 9 to 13, you see, for God's word to be at the very heart of the great celebrations of Israel, of all this sabbatical year and the Feast of Tabernacles.

So all their greatest conventions and celebrations are to have God's word right at the center. And in verse 24 and following, his word is to be at the very heart of their regular, ongoing, day-in, day-out religious life.

The word is to be right by the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle. So their routine worship is never, ever to be just a matter of symbols, of rituals, of signs.

It's to be about hearing the word of God and responding to the word of God together in their lives.

And verse 28, since leaders' principal job is to teach and to proclaim the word of God, they've got to have their own special teaching in their ears, with all the weight of the judgment of heaven and earth upon their shoulders to make sure they are doing what God wants them to do.

[42 : 30] Leaders have got to be listeners and learners of the word. Do you get that? You want to be a leader in Christ's church? Better start listening and learning his word for yourself first.

Why? Because look at verse 12. It's by hearing God's word that you learn to fear God, to revere the Lord your God.

And it's by hearing God's word, as verses 26 and 27 make clear, that you learn about your own sin and about restraining that sin. It's the living word of God. It's the serious ministry of the scriptures that God has given.

And that alone, which is powerful in the hands of God's Spirit, as Thomas Cranmer put it famously, to tell the world, to turn the sinner and to tether the saint.

To keep us in his life all the days of our lives. You see, that's what it's all about in this chapter. The whole thing. That's why God's law is written.

[43 : 32] To preserve the accuracy of his binding, powerful covenant word. So that being preserved, it can be proclaimed and sung by everybody. Because, well, song can have such a grip on the memory, can't it?

It's an evocative phrase. To live unforgotten in the mouths of your offspring. As a deep personal expression of faith and obedience in response to God.

That's why, of course, what we sing mustn't be drivel. Well, it's got to be strong, substantial gospel truth. That's certainly what Moses' song is in the next chapter. That's so important.

Great theologian P.T. Forsyth once said that the Christian church will stand or fall on the quality of its preaching. And that's true. But Moses knew that its song is also preaching.

It's the preaching of all God's people, isn't it? To ourselves and to one another. That's why John Newton wrote so many hymns. That's why Charles Wesley wrote so many hymns.

[44 : 33] They both preached to far, far more people in their song than they ever did in their sermons. And the church today is hugely influenced by what it sings.

And all too often, friends, what it sings is terrible. And the influence is terrible because of that. And it's not good enough in our songs not just to teach error. Plenty of evangelical songs today do teach error, plain and simple.

But it's got to be real and worthy of remembering, living on, unforgotten in our mouths and in the mouths of our children. Not just lightweight things, not just drivel. So that when we are, perhaps, in

the days to come, isolated, may we find ourselves imprisoned for our faith with nothing, no Bible, no nothing.

We'll be able to sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for us. We'll be able to keep ourselves in the truth of the gospel, living unforgotten in our mouths and in our hearts. Or even as we age and we start to lose our minds, these truths will be embedded so deep in our minds to live unforgotten in our mouths.

Even when everything else that comes out of our mouths must be confusion and foolishness. It's a wonderful thing, isn't it? Those of us who have seen it and heard it. When aged Christians who are losing their minds and maybe can't even dress themselves, can't speak, can't speak any sense, but you start playing something on the piano and they can sing the words of wonderful gospel truth that have been deep in their hearts from the very earliest days of their lives, living unforgotten in their mouths.

[46 : 16] What are you going to be singing in your 80s and in your 90s when Alzheimer's is taking over your brain, if you live that long? This is what we need to guard us and keep us.

You see, this chapter tells us that it's the word of God preserved for us in the scriptures to be spoken, to be sung continually in our midst. It's that that will guard us and keep us.

Keep us from straying and collapsing in faith and instead keep us strong and courageous in faith.

The scriptures are still powerful. Peter the apostle tells us as he prepares for his own handing over to the next generation.

God, he says, has given you everything you need for life and godliness in the great and precious promises you have in the scriptures. The words of the apostles and all the words of the prophet, the whole Old Testament.

A lamp, he says, shining in a dark place to lead you until the dawning of the day of Christ himself.

We have God's word written, preserved.

[47 : 23] So remember it, says Peter. Remember it. Proclaim it. Sing it to one another. Paul says the same. Preach the word. In season and out of season. Sing to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs so that the word of Christ may dwell in you richly.

That's how you'll keep your gospel moorings. When the world and the flesh and the devil all seek to sink you, to seduce you, to carry away in your natural sinfulness.

Friends, we must be realistic about the future. It can't be naive. Moses is very plain. Jesus is just as plain. Great struggles lie ahead for the people of God in every age, certainly in our age.

But realism is not fatalism. We can embrace the way of faithfulness and the lives of fruitfulness.

We can have strength and courage, not straying and collapsing faith. Joshua did all the days of his life.

[48 : 33] He kept that people tethered to the Lord because he knew, yes, his was a new leadership, a new era. But he was part of the same story. He served the same Savior.

And despite the people's sinfulness being just the same, they had the same scriptures, the means of great power to guard and keep them.

Joshua was a man of great gospel realism concerning God's people's sin. But he was a man of great gospel hope concerning God's saving power.

And if we can learn what Joshua learned in this chapter here, then you and I also, we can be strong and courageous. Whatever the future may hold, we can keep our gospel moorings and those of our offspring and those of our church so that the story still goes on with us in our lives as God has so wonderfully called us to be part of.

Well, may God help us. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we are so conscious of the inclinations of our hearts.

[49 : 49] We're so thankful for the great provision of your presence and your power. Guard us, keep us, we pray, tethered by your grace.

And keep us, all the days of our lives, strong and courageous in you. For Jesus' sake, amen.