

Old Law, New Leader

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] We may like to open the Bibles back to the first reading to page 163 and we're continuing our sermon series on the book of Deuteronomy.

And let's pray. God our Heavenly Father, you've revealed yourself and your purposes to us in the words of the scriptures. We pray that we may meditate on them and not depart from them so that we may fear you and obey your word and bring glory to the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen. I am now 68 years old. I'm no longer able to win votes. The cabinet has told me you shall not stand at this election.

I'm now 39 years old. I'm no longer able to score centuries. The Australian Cricket Board has told me you shall not continue after this test series. I'm now 59 years old.

I'm no longer able to win premierships. The club board has told me you shall not continue to coach after this season. I'm now 120 years old.

[1 : 17] I'm no longer able to get about. The Lord has told me you shall not cross over this Jordan. Leadership is such a big theme in our society.

Not least this year, it has dominated our political landscape. Day after day after day, the speculation has been about leadership on both sides of politics for the future and beyond.

Who will win the next election? Who will lead each party? Who will lead each party after the next election? And so on. It also receives high attention in sport.

The debate some years ago over the captaincy and leadership of Steve Wall. Would he continue? Should he continue? Kevin Sheedy coaching Essendon this year. The St Kilda Board and the leadership that it is or is not giving, for example.

In the corporate world, it's the same. So there's frequently articles in the media about leadership in the corporate world. The leadership of the Qantas Board in recent months. ANZ in the paper yesterday.

[2 : 24] PBL and other main companies. And of course, it's not limited to Australia. Leadership is a big issue around the world. And we've seen that in the UK this year with the transition of one prime minister to another and the constant speculation there about an election.

Leadership in the United States seems to be always a matter of debate whether there's an election coming or not. And in recent months this year in Japan, in Russia, in France and in many other countries the same.

If you're going to a bookshop, there are books and books and books. It's about leadership. All sorts of leadership gurus and non-gurus writing about leadership from all different sorts of perspectives.

A component within the debate about leadership is the context of leadership transition from one leader to another. When will Howard retire? If he does indeed retire.

Who will succeed George Bush? The transition from one coach to another, a captain to another, etc. Well, leadership is also a major biblical thing. And sometimes we might forget that.

[3 : 29] But actually a good deal of attention in the scriptures is given to the issue of leadership. So there are big profiles and commentary about leaders. Moses, for example, in the Old Testament gets many, many chapters in several books.

The leadership of Samuel, of David, of Solomon, of other kings. The leadership of the prophets.

The leadership of Jesus, of Paul and other apostles.

There's not only the commentary or narrative about those leaders and what they did and didn't do.

But there are also books that have sections or large parts of those books that are actually about the issue of leadership.

You see it, I think, in the book of Judges. You see it in the books of Kings. We see it in 2 Timothy and Titus. We also see laws about leadership. So in the Old Testament, if you remember back to

May, I preached on Deuteronomy 16 to 18.

So there's laws there about the leadership of the judges, the kings, the priests and the prophets in those chapters. As well as that, quite a deal of attention is given to transitions of leadership.

[4 : 36] So there's a significant section all the way through the books of Samuel into 1 Kings of the transition from Samuel to Saul. So from a judge and prophet to a king.

From Saul to David, many chapters devoted to that. From David to Solomon, again, many chapters at the end of 2 Samuel into 1 Kings. We see the transition from Elijah to Elisha at the beginning of 2 Kings.

We see the transition from Paul to Timothy in some senses, in 2 Timothy. And today, it's the transition from Moses to Joshua. The context of this leadership transition is highly significant and important.

And some of that we've seen in the sermons on Deuteronomy scattered through this year. Firstly, Moses, the leader who's on the way out, is indeed a great figure.

Without any dispute, he is probably the person, humanly speaking, of the Old Testament. He's 120 years old at this time. He's led Israel for at least the past 40 years.

[5 : 47] So very few in Israel would have memory of leadership other than the leadership of Moses. As well as that, his leadership has encompassed the most important events of the Old Testament.

So it's encompassed the time of slavery and oppression under the Egyptian Pharaoh. But through the plagues, the Passover event, the passing through the Red Sea, the voice of God speaking and giving the laws at Mount Sinai, and then through 40 years of the wilderness to the verge of the Promised Land.

They are indeed the key events of the Old Testament. And Moses has led the people of Israel through all of that time. Indeed, he is great. But the context of this leadership transition also is about Israel, the people whom Moses has led and whom Joshua will lead.

Israel's not an easy people to lead. And we've seen that in Deuteronomy. And you see it in the earlier books of the Old Testament as well. So that through Israel's history, there has been persistent sin and failure.

Notably, the time when they got to the border 40 years before, but failed to enter and were therefore condemned to 40 years in the wilderness. The time when at Mount Sinai, at the beginning of that 40-year period, they worshipped a golden calf instead of trusting and waiting for God's word through Moses to them.

[7 : 13] They are significant sins. And we've seen in the last couple of weeks, and we'll see again next week, the full expectation in Deuteronomy that Israel will not be any different under a new leader or in a new land.

So we're dealing with a very critical point in Israel's history, in the history of God dealing with this world. The passing of a great and significant leader to another, Joshua, but the leadership of a people who are persistently rebellious.

And the third part about the context is that they're on the verge of the promised land. So Moses, who's led them for so long, will not lead them into the promised land.

And the very first task that confronts Joshua when he will become the leader, and we see it in the book of Joshua that follows Deuteronomy, is not a small matter. It's the matter about a conquest of a land and the settlement of God's people in that land.

So this is a very critical time in Old Testament history, and the transition of leadership is part of that. We should probably explain that Moses is not allowed by God to enter into the promised land.

[8 : 25] Admittedly, he's 120, so he's getting a little bit long in the tooth, and maybe John Howard might draw some comfort from the fact that Moses actually led for many more years than Robert Menzies even did.

Moses is excluded from the land because of his own sin. Recounted in Numbers, the previous book, chapter 20, Moses, under provocation from Israel's rebelliousness, doesn't in effect give glory to God when God had said he would provide water from a rock.

And Moses in anger strikes that rock. And because of the way he did that and the lack of trusting God and giving glory to God for the water, God says you will not enter the land.

It's a theme that is expressed a couple of times in the beginning chapters of this book, in chapters 1, 3, and 4. In particular, in chapter 3, just to get a feel for it in this book, Moses reminds the people of what Moses had said to God earlier on.

He'd said, Moses' own sins have precluded his entry into the Promised Land.

[10:02] And we'll reflect more on that in two weeks' time when we look at the last chapter of this book and the death of Moses. But for now, what does Moses say to Israel and to Joshua in the matter of the transfer or transition of leadership from himself to Joshua?

Notice the focus of his first words in verses 3 to 5. His focus is not, here's Joshua, he's a great guy, he's going to do it, he's managed the economy for 10 years pretty well, he's my chosen anointed leader to succeed me.

There's not that sort of political statement going on here. Far, far from it. Rather, the focus is very clearly on God. Moses says in verse 3, That is, the real leader is actually God.

Verse 3 goes on to say, He will destroy these nations before you. That is, it is God who will bring you victory. Israel may be anxious because their great leader is about to die and there's a new untried leader.

But Moses is saying, actually, God is the leader. He goes before you. He will bring the victory. Indeed, then he goes on in verse 4 to say, The Lord will do to those nations the enemies as he did to Sion and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land when he destroyed them.

[11:28] God is the one who's in focus here. Same in verse 5. The Lord will give them over to you. So God, God, God is the focus of what Moses is exhorting Israel at this point.

Now, that doesn't absolve Israel from any action or responsibility. Not at all. So, for example, at the end of verse 3, having said, The Lord your God himself will cross over before you.

He will destroy these nations before you. Then Moses says, And you shall dispossess them. So there is some responsibility. For Israel. The same at the end of verse 5.

The Lord will give them over to you. You shall deal with them in full accord with the command that I've given you. So Israel is not to sort of sit back in its armchairs in the great southern stand and look across the Jordan and see God just winning a battle.

No, they've got to go over. But actually, God is the leader and God will bring the victory. And that's the encouragement of this exhortation to Israel and to Joshua that Moses is making.

[12:32] But notice that Israel's action is, in a sense, secondary to or responsive to God's action. God will go before you. God will destroy the nations. You shall dispossess them.

God is the one who will defeat the enemies like he's done before. You, verse 5 says, shall deal with them in full accord to the command that I've commanded you.

So Israel's action is in response to God's victory and God's leadership. Now, there's just one mention in those verses.

At the end of verse 3, Joshua also will cross over before you, as the Lord promised. The Lord will go before you. Joshua will cross over before you.

That is, God is actually the main leader. That's where the focus is. But humanly speaking, Joshua will be the leader under the leadership of God. Well, that's always true in the Bible, that the leaders of God's people, in both Old Testament and New Testament, are meant to be leaders under God's leadership.

[13:38] We saw that back in chapters 16 to 18. The judges are to judge Israel under the fact that God is actually the supreme judge. The kings are to rule over Israel, but under God, because they're under God's word in the law.

The priests are to perform leadership of ancient Israel, but they are restrained by acting under God's word. The same for the prophets. They exercise significant leadership in the Old Testament. They're addressed in Deuteronomy 18, and their leadership is restrained by the fact that what they say must be only what God tells them to say. They are under God's word. And so it is in the New Testament as well.

The leaders of God's people, the leaders of churches, are to lead under God's word, and therefore under God. The supreme authority for Christians, for churches, for Christian leaders, is the word of God.

And what matters most in any Christian leadership is submission under the word of God. And so too here with the military side of leadership, God is actually the one who will bring the victory.

[14:50] In some senses, the conquest of the land, the promised land, the land of Canaan by Israel, is rather different from the grand final. People have speculated about which player is the most important on the team, but recognizing it's a team game, apparently.

Well, not so really here. If God fights, there's victory. If he doesn't fight, there's defeat. Deuteronomy 1 made that very clear. Israel refused at first to go into the promised land.

So God said, okay, 40 years in the wilderness. I'm not playing. Israel said, oh, we've made a mistake. We'll go and fight. God said, I'm not going. They went. They lost. Actually, it's a one-man team in effect.

We see that time and again in the Old Testament. The story of Gideon when he gets his army to bring a victory. The army goes from 32,000 to 300 or so. It's unimportant.

Israel has some role, but it's a very secondary role. The decisive player is God. It is God's leadership who will bring victory. That's all that is needed is God.

[15:55] At one level, it makes God's people almost redundant, but at another level, it gives us comfort that victory is assured because God is fighting. It doesn't depend on us.

But actually, our activity is not totally redundant. We're still called to trust and obey, and Israel is still called here to cross over, to fight, to dispossess. Well, Moses therefore exhorts Israel, be strong in verse 6 and bold.

Have no fear or dread of them. And then in the next paragraph, he says the same thing in effect to Joshua. In verse 7, be strong and bold. Those two things repeated from the previous verse to Israel.

And at the end of verse 8, at the end of that paragraph, do not fear or be dismayed. Three things, strong, bold, not fearing. Both for Israel as a whole, and for Joshua in particular, as the leader of God's people.

What are the grounds for saying you should be strong, bold, and fearless? Well, those grounds come in those verses, and they all go back to God. And so, for example, we read in verse 6, Be strong and bold, have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you.

[17:18] He will not fail you or forsake you. That is, the grounds of it are God's presence. He goes with you. And God's faithfulness. He will not fail you or forsake you.

When we get to the instruction for Joshua, the reason why Joshua is to be strong and bold in verse 7 comes in verse 8. It is the Lord who goes before you. So it's the leadership of God.

He will be with you. Again, the presence of God. And he will not fail you or forsake you. The faithfulness of God. Do not fear or be dismayed. So three things are the grounds for boldness, strength, and fearlessness.

That is, three outcomes from three grounds. The grounds are God's leadership, presence, and faithfulness. And they give rise to boldness, strength, and fearlessness.

How does that happen? Well, we need to be careful in thinking about this. Israel and Joshua are not commanded to summon up internal reserves of strength.

[18:23] They're not to sort of psych themselves into a sort of grand final state to go out onto the ground and defeat the people of Jericho and Canaan. Rather, the strength and boldness and fearlessness that they are to exhibit comes from God via God's word.

How do we see that? In Joshua 1, when this commission is repeated in a sense or reiterated at the beginning of the book of Joshua, having twice said, be strong and courageous, the words of that children's song we picked up this morning, then the commission from God is meditate on God's word.

Don't deviate to the left or the right. Make sure that it's part of you, part of your thinking. That is, God's word is actually what gives rise to the boldness, strength, and courage.

Now, the same idea we find here, though not quite in the same way. The very next paragraph goes on to focus on God's word. That's how God leads his people.

By giving them his word to guide them and direct them. So let's see how it unfolds in verses 9 to 13. And then we'll come back to the strength and boldness and fearlessness.

[19:43] In verse 9, Moses wrote down this law. By that he means Deuteronomy 1 to 30, the speech of Moses. And though parts of it are narrative and exhortation and preaching, it's regarded overall as law or Torah.

In Jewish terms, the word law has got more the sense not just of a legal do this, don't do that, but rather the sense of direction for life, way of life. Moses wrote it down.

That's because Moses' speech in Deuteronomy is not a one-off occasion. It's not to be preached and then forgotten, but it actually becomes an abiding word from God generation for generation.

Remember that what Moses has said in his speech chapters 1 to 30 is in a sense not new. It all comes from what was given 40 years before at Mount Sinai. And in effect, Deuteronomy is for the next generation what had happened 40 years before.

And by writing it down now before his death, the idea is that generation by generation, God's word still abides with authority over God's people. Writing it down, he gives it to the priests, the sons of Levi, the tribe of Levi was the priestly tribe, and they carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord.

[21 : 01] And later on, we discover that this written law, Deuteronomy 1 to 30 at least, is to be placed alongside the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle. The Ark of the Covenant, the box, had the Ten Commandments in it, the rest of the law next to it.

And the Ark of the Covenant is like the throne of God, or maybe better, the footstool of God's throne. And so in the representation in the tabernacle, God's throne was above the Ark between the cherubim.

So what it shows us is that God rules over his people, and he rules over them through his word in the scriptures. And the priests and the Levites have the job of guarding God's word, preserving it. But it's not there to be on a shelf gathering dust either. Every seventh year, verse 10 says, in the scheduled year of remission, during the festival of booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that he'll choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing.

that is the idea of God's word is for it to be heard. And in the days, ancient days, when people didn't have books because there was no printing, there would just be a handful of copies and the main way of communication was reading out loud to a congregation of gathered people the word of God.

[22 : 22] Here it's to be read to all of Israel, verse 11 says at the end. And notice that verse 12 says, assemble the people and that includes the men, the women, the children and the aliens, that is foreigners from other nations who've taken up residence and in effect want to be Israelites.

That is, it's all inclusive for the adults and the children and the foreigners. It's not limited to just the leaders or to a select group of educated people, not at all.

God's word is for all people, a very important principle, one that drove the Reformation in the 16th century in Europe as people tried to get the word of God translated into their own languages, rightly so, sadly, often at the expense of their lives.

Not only that, this is to be read every seven years, not sure why it's not more frequent, but nonetheless, it's every seven years, and the context of its reading is important.

It's to be the year of remission. Back in Deuteronomy 15, when I preached on that passage, some of you will remember that every seventh year, slaves have been set free and debts to be written off.

[23 : 30] So the year, the seventh year in which the law is to be read has therefore got an added note of joy and liberation about it, of debts being put to one side, slaves being set free, celebrating, in effect, the ultimate liberation that God gives us through the sacrifice, ultimately, of his son.

Not only that, it's at the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, which is on virtually now, I think, in the Jewish calendar this year. The Feast of Booths commemorated the liberation from Egypt and it commemorated the provisions of God in the wilderness.

It was a joyful time. It was the end of the summer harvest as well. So there was an added celebration of the bounty of the land. So the law was read in the context of, in effect, what we might call the gospel.

That is, the liberation, redemption that God brings and the celebration of all of God's people together at that festival in that year. Now, the reading of God's word is a reminder that God is actually the one leading God's people.

But the reading of God's word is there so that the people of God and Joshua the leader and subsequent leaders will not deviate from God's word.

[24 : 45] They're reminded of it, they think about it, they reflect on it. It reminds us that God's people are, in a sense, to be theocratic. That is, God is to rule God's people.

And ultimately, the God himself through the scriptures is our primary authority. Now, the purpose of this is to read it not for head knowledge, but as verse 12 says, so that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law and for future generations. Verse 12, or 13 rather, goes on to say, they're to hear it, learn to fear and observe. To fear doesn't mean to stand in terror of God.

It's not to be scared and running away from God. It's actually a positive term. Frequently in Deuteronomy, fearing God is more or less like what we might call faith. It's an acknowledgement that God is God and God alone is God.

And therefore, to be revered and feared as God, but trusted. It's a relational term in the Old Testament. And so in a sense, what the purpose of God's word is for the nation and the leader is to teach trust and obedience, fearing and observing the commandments, faith and obedience, or as Jesus' opening words in Mark's gospel were, repentance repentance and belief or faith.

[26 : 20] See, all through the scriptures, the whole purpose of God dealing with people and the whole purpose of giving us the scriptures is that from them we don't gain head knowledge, but that we learn to trust and obey.

The basic two things. In fact, they're one thing for faithful obedience together is what God wants from us. The purpose of the gospel as Paul states it at the beginning of Romans is the obedience of faith.

That's what God is on about. Now that's why the commissioning of Israel and Joshua to be bold and strong and fearless is tied to this giving and reading and heeding God's word.

What would it mean for Joshua and Israel in practice? Well, if they knew their Bibles and for them, of course, it's Genesis to Deuteronomy only, if they knew their Bibles as they ought and they read them as they ought and they meditated on them as they ought, then out from that will come boldness, strength and fearlessness.

For example, the three things, the three grounds in verses 6 to 8 that give rise to this right response of boldness, strength and fearlessness were the leadership of God going before you, the presence of God and the faithfulness of God.

[27 : 45] Now, if Joshua and Israel read their Bibles through and knew them well, they would know that indeed God had already gone before Israel. He'd gone before Israel through the wilderness, symbolized by cloud and fire.

He had led them through the Red Sea earlier on, 40 years before. In some senses, he's gone before Joseph into Egypt. So, God, when he says, I will go before you, is not making some empty claim.

He's actually making a claim from which their Bible would have evidence to trust the word of God. When God says, I will be with you in verses 6 and 8 to Israel and to Joshua, that's something that's already been proved true in the first five books of our Bible, Joshua's Bible in effect.

so that as Joshua and Israel read their Bible, they would know that when God says, I'll be with you, he was. When Jacob left the land and got his family and came back, God was with him as he promised to be.

He was with Joseph in Egypt in the early days and as he rose to be prime minister and so on. He was with Moses. He was with Israel in the Exodus.

[28 : 59] He was with them in the wilderness, symbolized again by the cloud, the fire, and the tabernacle. So when God says, I will be with you, promising them his presence, they could say, we trust that promise.

We know that God has already been with us all the way through the story of our Bible so far. And when God says, I will not fail you or forsake you, another grounds for being bold, strong, and fearless.

Again, he's not making a new or empty claim. Read the first five books, read Joshua's Bible in effect, and God has said on a number of occasions, I will not fail you or forsake you, in effect.

I will not abandon you. And when he made those promises in effect to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, not explicitly, but in effect, to Joseph, and certainly did to Moses in Exodus 3, God kept that promise all the time.

And you see, the Bible is to function like that for us, that we see in it substantial evidence for fearing and for observing God's word, for trusting and obeying.

[30 : 06] That is, we're not doing that in a vacuum, but we're doing it on the grounds of the evidence of God's word. And of course, we have 66 books in a Bible, not just three. We've got far more evidence that Joshua and Israel had, primarily, of course, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

We have all the evidence, the grounds, the substance that we need to trust and obey God, to be bold, to be strong and to be fearless in our own lives.

Not that we're facing the conquest of a land, but in all the challenges of living as Christians on this world. That's how the Bible is to function and that's what is going to give strong leadership and faithful people of God.

That's what it's all about. And that's why this claim to be bold, to be strong, to be fearless, even though it's made to a people whose track record is poor, actually has got some substance about it. It's urging them to know, meditate on and heed the word of God. For God actually is the leader and he leads by his word.

[31 : 14] In the fellowship of God's people, we're not a nation like Israel was, but in church life, the leadership of the people of God is first and last and always to be leader leadership under the word of God.

Where it's not, it needs to be rejected. But then we come to the issue of transition. And that's where the transition from Moses to Joshua, even at this climactic time of their history, in the turmoil of facing the conquest of the land, there is real comfort.

It's a new leader, maybe in some ways people might say an untried person, though Joshua's track record is pretty good. He was a faithful spy, one of the or two of the 12 spies who'd gone into the land, who'd given a minority report that was positive.

Ten of them had said, oh, we're afraid of the enemy. Joshua, Caleb said, no, no, no, we should go in, we should trust God. Joshua has now been made the successor, so he's got a good track record.

But actually the real comfort for Israel, as Moses is about to die, is the continuity of the leadership of God by his word.

[32 : 28] It's the same word, the same law that Moses is writing down. And Joshua is to be under that word, like Moses was under that word. And so even though it's a new person, the leadership of God's people, the leadership of God's church, does not actually, in a sense, ultimately depend on the person.

It's not about the person or the personality or the style. It is first and last leadership under the leadership of God, under the authority of God's word.

Yes, it's a new leader that Israel is now facing, but it's the same word of God, the same God, the same law of God. The continuity of God's leadership is what matters the most.

Let's pray. God, our Father, we pray.