

Moses Blesses the Tribes of Israel

Deuteronomy 33:1-12

Deuteronomy 33:1-5 – *“Now this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the children of Israel before his death. ² And he said: “The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, and He came with ten thousands of saints. From His right hand came a fiery law for them. ³ Yes, He loves the people. All His saints are in Your hand; they sit down at Your feet. Everyone receives Your words.”*

⁴ Moses commanded a law for us, a heritage of the congregation of Jacob. ⁵ And He was King in Jeshurun, when the leaders of the people were gathered, all the tribes of Israel together.”

Background Notes

Deuteronomy 32 recorded the Song of Moses, and chapter 33 contains the Blessing of Moses. After Moses wrote the Song, the Lord told Moses to ascend Mount Nebo and view the Promised Land. There Moses would “be gathered to his people,” an expression for a peaceful death.

In the culture of that day, a father would give a blessing to his children before he died. Thus Moses, who was like a father to the children of Israel, gave his blessing to the tribes of Israel before he died. In that day a father’s final blessings were as binding as a legal will.

In Moses’ inspired blessing on the tribes of Israel there was both blessing and prophecy. In fact, some of the prophetic blessings he pronounced have not yet been completely fulfilled – but they will be fulfilled! When the Lord returns, the nation of Israel will be restored - not only to the Land, but also to the Lord. In that day, the various tribes of Israel will again live in the territory of the land of Israel, and the Lord will bless them. (Read Ezekiel 48 in this connection.)

Genesis 49 is the record of the blessing of Jacob on his sons, who would become the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Genesis 49:1 - *“And Jacob called his sons and said, ‘Gather together that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days.’”* So Jacob’s blessing in Genesis 49 and Moses’ blessing of Israel in Deuteronomy 33 contain some predictions that carry on right through the end of the time.

There are several interpretations of Deuteronomy 33:2: *“The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned on them from Seir. He shone forth from Mount Paran, and He came with ten thousands of saints; from His right hand came a fiery law for them.”*

- One interpretation is that the Lord was guiding His people from Mount Sinai where the Law was given (in association with lightning and angels), and then moving on with His people past Seir (Edom) and Mount Paran, and then on to the Promised Land.
- Another interpretation is that this is figurative language that pictures the Lord shining on Israel, as the morning sun would dawn on Mount Sinai, rising up over the mountains of Seir and Mount Paran to the east.
- Another interpretation (that I tend to favor) is that this is a vision. Moses saw the Lord's care and concern for Israel from Mount Sinai and on all the way until the future return of the Lord, assuring Moses that all the prophetic aspects of his blessing on the tribes of Israel would be fulfilled. That same thought of the return of the Lord is found in Habakkuk 3:3-4: *"God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah. His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of His praise. ⁴ His brightness was like the light; He had rays flashing from His hand, and there His power was hidden."* In addition, in the prophetic passages of Isaiah 63 and Ezekiel 43, the Lord was seen as returning from the east.

In this view then, the "holy ones" that the Lord loves in Deuteronomy 33:3 are not just the Jewish people of Moses' day, but all believers when the Lord returns. They have followed in His steps and received His Word.

Moses was the man God used to communicate the Law to the children of Israel, and lead them as a king in Jeshurun, speaking of the upright children of Israel in the early days (v4-5).

Doctrinal Point

The blessings of Moses on the tribes of Israel are both past and future.

a. The blessing on Reuben.

"Let Reuben live, and not die, nor let his men be few" (v6).

The tribe of Reuben was located on the east side of the Jordan River. Thus it was more exposed and vulnerable to enemy attacks than the tribes on the west side of the Jordan River. Therefore Moses prayed that the tribe of Reuben would not be wiped out and not become extinct, because of the greater danger of living on the east side of the Jordan River.

b. The blessing on Judah.

"And this he said of Judah: "Hear, Lord, the voice of Judah, and bring him to his people. Let his hands be sufficient for him, and may You be a help against his enemies" (v7).

Moses' prayed that the people of Judah would be militarily strong, and be successful in their leadership role. Think of Caleb's military success in conquering the mountain that was in enemy hands in the tribal area of Judah (Joshua 14). The Messiah, of course, would come from the tribe of Judah, and He would lead and restore God's people and defeat all their enemies.

Joshua 19 recorded that the tribe of Simeon was included in the territory of Judah. There was no special blessing pronounced on the tribe of Simeon in this chapter.

c. The blessing on Levi.

“And of Levi he said: “Let Your Thummim and Your Urim be with Your holy one, whom You tested at Massah, and with whom You contended at the waters of Meribah, ⁹ who says of his father and mother, ‘I have not seen them’; nor did he acknowledge his brothers, or know his own children. For they have observed Your word and kept Your covenant. ¹⁰ They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your law. They shall put incense before You, and a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar. ¹¹ Bless his substance, Lord, and accept the work of his hands. Strike the loins of those who rise against him, and of those who hate him, that they rise not again.”

The Urim and Thummim (v8) were used by the priests of the tribe of Levi to determine God’s will. Moses and Aaron were Levites, and they represented the tribe of Levi when it was tested at the waters of Massah and Meribah in the wilderness. The tribe of Levi proved faithful to the Lord during the incident of the golden calf idol. In verse 9 they were commended for putting the Lord and His Word first, even before family members who were involved in idolatry: *“Who says of his father and mother, ‘I have not seen them,’ nor did he acknowledge his brothers, or know his own children. For they have observed Your word and kept Your covenant.”*

Verse 10 gave the special privileges and responsibilities of the tribe of Levi in their service to the Lord – to teach God’s Word, and to lead God’s people in worship. What a great privilege that is for God’s servants today! *“They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your law. They shall put incense before You, and a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar.”*

Servants of the Lord are special targets of those who hate to submit to the spiritual and moral values and standards of Scripture (v11). This is certainly true today as well. *“Bless his substance, Lord, and accept the work of his hands. Strike the loins of those who rise against him, and of those who hate him, that they rise not again.”*

The Levites were targeted by the evil one because they were God’s special servants, who were involved in teaching the Law. Thus, in verse 11, part of the blessing on Levi was that those who hate the servants of the Lord would be prevented from hindering and holding back the work of the Lord.

This still holds true today. Servants of the Lord, especially those who are teaching and preaching God’s Word, are special targets of the enemy.

d. The blessing on Benjamin.

“Of Benjamin he said: “The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him, who shelters him all the day long; and he shall dwell between His shoulders.”

The blessing of Benjamin was to be loved by the Lord and in close fellowship with the Lord. Dwelling between the shoulders of God meant resting in that special place of strength and protection. It reflected the fact that the Lord chose Jerusalem in the territory of Benjamin as His special city, and there He would place His temple. Earthly Jerusalem is God's special city forever.

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Practical Application

Make your last days count for the Lord!

In Deuteronomy 31:14, the Lord said to Moses: *“Behold, the days approach when you must die. Call Joshua, and present yourselves in the tabernacle of meeting, that I may inaugurate him. So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the Tabernacle of Meeting.”*

For our practical application, the important part of this verse is the first part: *“Behold, the days approach when you must die.”* If the Lord said that to you, what would you do? Would you be afraid? Would you be bitter? Would you beg for more time on earth? Would you just sit around and wait to die? Or would you be like Moses, and make your last days count for the Lord?

In the final days of Moses' life on earth, he transferred the leadership of Israel to Joshua. He wrote a great song filled with theological content for Israel to memorize and sing. And Moses gave a special blessing to each of the tribes of Israel. Wow! Moses stayed busy for the Lord right up to the day of his death.

What a lesson for us! As we near death, we may become physically limited in a number of ways, but we can always do something for the Lord. For example, older believers make great prayer warriors.

Make your last days count for the Lord!