

# Deuteronomy 31.7-8

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*Ready... but for what?*

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 8 August 2021

## Intro

If you have a Bible with you, please open it to Deuteronomy 31. Today we are looking at Moses' last words to the Israelites as they were about to enter Canaan, and his handover to Joshua.

There's an interesting fact about Joshua: along with Adam and Eve he's the only person in the Bible without any parents. Exodus 33 introduces Moses' young aide as **Joshua, son of Nun...**

*Pause for raucous laughter (!).*

You will discover about me that I like niche Bible puns. My favourites are probably the shortest man in the Bible (Bildad the Shuhite), and only Irishman in the Bible (Nicodemus).

Some of my jokes are better than those – but in general, they aren't, so please lower your expectations...

## Context

Here in Deuteronomy 31 we are at the end of Moses' life. 40 years earlier he had led the people of Israel out of Egypt, and they had been wandering in the wilderness ever since. Here they are by the river Jordan, about to enter the Promised Land.

I chose this passage today – but I did *not* choose it because I think you've been wandering in the wilderness for the past 40 years, and now I've arrived you're about to enter the Promised Land!

**Not at all** – there has been much good and faithful ministry here over many years. And that includes during the vacancy and the pandemic. It's important to acknowledge and give thanks for all the good that has gone before.

I repeat: I did *not* choose this passage because I think I'm about to lead you out of the wilderness into the Promised Land (!).

I *did* choose it because like us now God's people then were on the cusp of a new thing, so what Moses said to them then is relevant for us now.

I imagine some of them were excited about what was coming next. Others would have been nervous, apprehensive about the changes ahead. Still others would have been downright terrified – they were about to go to war after all. Many of them would have been weary and exhausted after years wandering in the wilderness without a proper home.

Excited... nervous... terrified... weary... I think they adequately describe the main emotions swirling around in my heart at the moment! I'm excited about starting here and following Jesus with all of you – but there are a lot of nerves too, I'm pretty terrified of learning / forgetting your names, and I'm exhausted from the past 18 months of pandemic.

But let's see what Moses said to Joshua and the people as they stood by the river Jordan: ready... but for what?

# 1. ‘You must go with these people into the land’ (7)

We’re going to pick out three key phrases that Moses used. First (7): Moses said, **‘you must go with this people into the land’**.

If you know the story of the Exodus and the wandering, you’ll know that Moses was a firm, directive leader: he told the Israelites what to do, where to go, and sometimes it feels like he was dragging them along by sheer force of will.

In most ways his leadership had been a huge success – and yet if you know the story of the struggles and the grumblings in the wilderness, you’ll know that although he had taken the people out of Egypt, he hadn’t managed to take Egypt out of the people. They were constantly looking back, even saying several times it would be better to *go* back, even as slaves!

Here, perhaps, Moses was reflecting on that one failure, desperate for his protégé to learn from his mistake. Lead the people by consultation and consensus, he said: **go with** the people

A few years ago I read a biography of Steve Jobs. He was of course one of the founders of Apple Computer, today the largest company in the world, worth over \$2.4tn.

By all accounts, working for Steve Jobs was not pleasant. He would scream and shout and humiliate employees publicly. Failure was simply not an option for his staff, he would insist on things that seemed impossible – and often by his force of will they would achieve it.

But that is not the leadership style Moses commended to Joshua, it is not the leadership style Bishop David commended to us at my licensing on Tuesday, and you'll be glad to know it is not the leadership style I intend to employ!

**In the presence of all Israel**, Moses told Joshua (7), **'go with this people.'** And so, by implication he also told *the people* to go with Joshua. My main prayer for *us* is that we will go with each other wherever God is leading us.

## 2. 'The Lord himself goes before you' (8)

For, look in verse 8 with me at the second phrase we're picking out this morning: **'the Lord himself goes before you.'**

The people weren't to follow Joshua, but God; Joshua was to lead the people in following God into the land – to *lead by following with*. That's my motto: *lead by following with*.

This is so important – because only God knows where we are going! Really? Surely the people knew *exactly* where they were going. **‘You must go into the land,’** Moses said.

Except, **‘the land’** wasn’t really a place – yet. Canaan was a ragtag collection of minor ‘kings’ and warlords. The people had no idea where they were heading.

Brothers and sisters, I don’t know where God is going to lead us together. I haven’t arrived with a five-year plan or a specific vision of what I want Christ Church to do. I hope that’s reassuring!

On Tuesday evening some of our guests were late for the licensing service, because they had entered the wrong postcode into their satnav. Instead of B29 7PS, they entered B27 7PS – which happens to be in Acocks Green. They were merrily driving along, with no clue they were heading in completely the wrong direction.

It is so easy for churches to do that. There are so many good things that can be done – but that doesn’t mean they *should* be done. The key thing is not to hit the ground running, but to hit the ground *kneeling*, in prayer, in *listening* – so we don’t end up running in the wrong direction.

As we emerge from the pandemic, I don't know what will be right for us to do, to start doing again, to stop doing. So I will spend the next few months praying and listening – and I invite you to do the same.

That is my commitment to you, today. I will not go charging off into the distance, yelling for you all to follow me. Instead I will spend the next few months observing, chatting, sharing, praying, listening. As Moses told Joshua, I want us to go, I want us to follow where God is going **before** us.

### **3. ‘Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged’ (8)**

A little boy was afraid of the dark. One night his mother asked him to go out to the garden and bring her the broom. The little boy turned to his mother and said, ‘Mummy, I don't want to go out there. It's dark.’

His mother smiled reassuringly. ‘You don't have to be afraid of the dark. Jesus will look after you and protect you.’

The little boy looked at his mother really hard and asked, ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I'm sure. He is everywhere, and he is always ready to help you when you need him.’

The little boy thought about that for a minute and then went to the back door and opened it a little. Peering out into the darkness he called, 'Jesus? If you're out there, would you please pass me the broom?'

Our third and final phrase comes at the end of verse 8: **'Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.'** Wisely did Moses speak those words. Fear and discouragement are powerful enemies when it comes to following God, especially into the unknown.

First, fear. Fear paralyses us, it's like a barrier, a wall that stops us in our tracks.

Jess and I have been watching the Olympics over the past few days. It's fair to say I can't even imagine being able to do the things the competitors are able to do. Last night we watched the artistic synchronised swimming. It is simply incredible what they are able to do in the water, in time, together.

But if I were asked to do the 10m dive, or the skateboarding – those I *really* couldn't do, because I would simply be too terrified even to start.



I wonder what you are afraid of? Change? Covid? Something else? The truth is that the opposite of faith isn't doubt, it's *fear*. Being afraid is normal, but when we let those fears take over, we are demonstrating a lack of trust in God.

And then there's discouragement. This is the one I struggle with, if I'm honest. I used to think it was depression, but actually I get discouraged, disheartened. Normally this happens when I try to do things in my own strength, and stop relying on God.

Moses told Joshua and the people, '**Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.**' If only it were that easy! But did you spot what he said just before that? Did you spot *why* we don't need to be afraid, *why* we shouldn't allow discouragement to take away our hearts?

'The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.'

*Deuteronomy 31.8 (NIV)*

When we are afraid we need to hear this: **the Lord himself will be with you; he will never leave you.** The antidote to fear is knowing and trusting that God is with us and will *never* leave us, *ever* – even to the end of the age.

When we are discouraged we need to hear this: **the Lord himself goes before you; he will never forsake you.** The antidote to discouragement is knowing and trusting that God has gone before us and will never make us fight in our own strength.

‘The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.’

*Deuteronomy 31.8 (NIV)*

*Pause*

## Rest

This morning we’ve picked out three phrases from Moses’ words to Joshua and the people:

1. ‘You must go *with* these people into the land’
2. ‘The Lord himself goes *before* you’
3. ‘Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged’

After this the people set out from Shittim where they were camped, to the edge of the Jordan and... waited. In Joshua 3.1-2 we read that for three days they camped by the river, waiting.

They were ready, but first they stopped, waited, and *rested*.

As Chris said in his talk a couple of weeks ago, many of us feel weary. Weary of the pandemic. Weary of the long vacancy. I am weary too. We are excited to be here at last – eight months to the day after my interview! – but still weary from the challenges of the last weeks and months.

Therefore I agree wholeheartedly with the wisdom in Chris's talk: that we all take time in August to *rest*.

Jesus said in Mark 6.31, **'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'** He is not a demanding boss, he is not a hard taskmaster. **'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,'** Jesus said, **'And I will** tell you to stop moaning, pull your socks up, and get on with it.' Yes? No!

**'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will**  
*give you rest.'*

*Matthew 11.28 (NIV)*

Brothers and sisters, as we stand ready for something new, let us start by *resting*. And as we rest I'd like us to pray in three simple ways. You can forget everything else I've said this morning.

First, let us **give thanks to the Father**. Paul said: **always give thanks to God the Father in everything** (Ephesians 5.20).

Second, let us **listen for Jesus' voice** so we can follow *him* as sheep follow their shepherd. That means we need to make time to stop and be still, for words and activity risk drowning him out.

Third, let us **pray 'Come, Holy Spirit'**. We need his help, his power, his inspiration. **'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty** (Zechariah 4.6).

(1) Give thanks to the Father, (2) listen for Jesus' voice, (3) pray 'Come, Holy Spirit'.

*Pause*

As we stand ready, on the cusp of something new, let us first *rest*:

1. giving thanks to the Father
2. listening for Jesus' voice
3. praying 'Come, Holy Spirit'

Amen.