

Not just idle words – they are your LIFE!

Deut. 31:9-13, 31:30-32:4, 44-47

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Introduction: How do you cultivate an authentic, enduring faith that will carry you through the chaos of transitions? They're some of the most unsettling, perplexing, and **painful times** of our lives – when the “old order” is giving way, but the new is not yet clearly defined, much less established. This can be the result of a lot of different circumstances: e.g., moving to a new country, starting a new job, retiring from your old one, dealing with health challenges, growing your family, starting a new school year, or just changing out the old pastor for a new one! This was even truer for Israel in their big transition: as they were uprooted from Egypt, from slave mentality, into the “freedom” of the wilderness, following Yahweh to a destination that only He knew. But that 11-day journey turned into 40 years of wilderness camping and high death tolls (average of 90 per day!) – the time extension, due to their unbelief.

So in today's Scripture passage, the leader who led the liberation movement, gave them the law and brought them through all those early trials is about to be taken away. So their **nerves** are on edge, their **anxiety level** is saturated with too much adrenalin; they're excited because the Promised Land is finally on the horizon, but they're frightened because there are BIG enemies to face. And Moses begins to give his *final witness*, inviting them to a **renewal of the covenant**, made some 40 years earlier: before all the rebellion, the disappointments and the endless wandering through the desert, back when this relationship with Yahweh was still so fresh (their “first love”), when their God was so powerful and matchless, and every day felt like a victory! (Can you remember a time like that in your spiritual life?) But now they have a **little more realistic view of themselves**, of life and their earthly journey; after so many mistakes, detours and disillusionments, now they know better what to expect!

1) The Bible does NOT set forth a **simplistic, two-dimensional view** of this life; it's frightfully realistic, making clear that God is our only hope! So Moses wants to help the Israelites thru this difficult transition: change of leadership, change of territory, change of strategy (on the offensive!), military operations to conquer the Promised Land, a whole new mindset! **A)** Moses has written down multiple instructions – the law and the covenant from these past 40 years, and **B)** he tells the priests that every 7 years they need to read from this law for all the people (vv. 10-13). **C)** Then Moses composes a song in which he **extols the perfect justice** of God. He's bearing a final witness before the Israelites of God's faithfulness, His kindness, and he bemoans the faithlessness of Israel, how often they turned away from their Rock, provoked Him to anger with idols, spurning His love again and again, until He let them have their own way and suffer the consequences of their foolishness, although in the end God's truth would always prevail over His enemies. The song is

long and fierce (you can read it on your own time and wonder over it – we would never sing it in church!). But after rehearsing that song in the people’s hearing, **D)** Moses gives them a final warning about how they should view these instructions, trying to put them on their guard about all the pitfalls ahead, and even verbalizing his expectation of their falling short after his departure.

From what Moses says to them, you could think he was just a bitter old man; his view is *that* negative, because he fully expects them to go off in every wrong direction after his departure (v. 29: **“I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you”**). Is this just resentment over all the times they let him down? Isn’t this bad psychology? Like setting them up for a self-fulfilling prophecy! Or is this just a realistic picture of what’s in the human heart? (It didn’t take long for his prophetic word to come true.) Not IDLE words, says Moses, but a verdict revealed by God Himself! Here’s the take-away for us: the human race is infected with a **deadly virus** that will NOT go away with placebos or self-help measures or lukewarm, hand-me-down faith. According to Moses’ witness to God’s people, **your inclination** to sin and idolatry is so **much stronger** than what you ever imagined! It’s **so much stronger** than what you can handle, so strong that you **need to be rescued from yourself!** (If not, you have yet to capture the essence of the Gospel!) This is basically what Moses was saying just before leaving them. Translating his words to our times: **half-hearted Christianity will not make a difference in your life!** Half-hearted faith in God will not help you survive transitions or any other challenge! In fact, a “lite” version of the Christian faith will only inoculate you against the real thing!

2) So how do we face our transitions and challenges without being overwhelmed by them? We definitely need to take advantage of **the pain** they involve! **“Don’t waste your pain,”** as Rick Warren put it! C.S. Lewis (in *The Problem of Pain*) reminds us: **“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”** Pain insists on being tended to; you can’t ignore it. And painful things in this world are not going away any time soon. So **develop a healthy biblical theology of suffering!** Scripture has one – Jesus had one, the disciples developed one, the apostle Paul taught it! You don’t have to stop and question God or doubt your faith every time something upsets the apple cart of life, every time something tragic happens in our world! Moses had a healthy doctrine of suffering! He learned it suffering with those Israelites in the desert! When they rebelled again and again over their discomfort or discontentment, Moses didn’t start questioning God or threaten to quit this job; he just fell on his face before God! (Rebellion of Israel against the Promised Land, Num. 14:5; rebellion of Korah, Num. 16:4; when the Lord was ready to destroy Israel, v. 22; rebellion over the lack of water, Num. 20:6.)

I assume you saw the news about the recent Georgia school shooting (Sept. 4); to use Brian Berry’s question from last week, “how did that make you feel?!” How traumatic was that? “Only 4 died” (so it can’t compare with Sandy Hook in 2012, with 26 deaths, or Uvalde in 2022, with 21?). But it’s no less tragic and heart-rending! To start the new school term with a shootout at your child’s school ... we shudder with outrage; we can’t stop shaking over the senselessness! For good reason Diane Langberg says, **“Trauma will be the mission field of the 21st century.”** When I think of my grandchildren, I can almost lose it, because things are not going to be easier for them, but only harder – the questions, the tragedies, the wars, the lies. They will need to understand how broken humanity is – or else they’ll just fall in with the wrong-headed attempt to try to fix things without listening to the Lord. How I long for them to anchor their hearts to God’s Word – their **LIFE!** It’s so **urgent** that we teach our children (at church and at home!) according to the **truth of Scripture**, in the power of **the Holy Spirit**, effectively and consistently, **in word and deed!** It’s the only way they’re going to have resources to resist the bombardment of lies and deception from the media, from Internet, from the educational system, from the government, from peers! Am I just an

old man who doesn't know how to adapt to the times? An old man like Moses with a doomsday message, venting frustrations? The challenge of keeping our feet on the ground, when our heads are in the cloud so much of the time, is how to distinguish the real from the false, how to stay true to the only Good News that delivers LIFE ... when the opposition is coming at you like a tsunami! The challenge today is beyond everything we can imagine! Our whole belief system as Christians is anathema to the ideology that's dominating our world – from the highest levels of society the die has been cast in favor of restricting freedoms, repression, and legalese that sounds democratic on the surface but underneath it's all about stamping out God's truth! We need wisdom from on high, God's love overflowing our cup, the power of God's Spirit enabling us. We will survive only by focusing and concentrating on this testimony: *this* is our Life!

3) This mentality is well illustrated by **the life of Corrie Ten Boom**: she and her family were Christians in their home town of Haarlem, the Netherlands (their story is told in *The Hiding Place*). During the Nazi occupation, they chose to act out their faith through peaceful resistance to the Nazis and active participation in the Dutch underground. So they hid, fed and transported Jews out of the country, as well as underground members hunted by the Gestapo. It's estimated they were able to save the lives of 800 Jews, in addition to protecting underground workers. But on Feb. 28, 1944, they were betrayed, and Corrie and several relatives were arrested. (The 4 Jews and 2 underground workers in their house at the time of their arrest were never located by the Nazis; they were later extricated by the underground 47 hours after they came to the tiny hiding place located in Corrie's room). The Ten Boom's father died 10 days after his arrest, but Corrie and sister Betsie were transferred to a brutal concentration camp. They were a great witness to many suffering inmates, holding Bible studies in the most unlikely places! Her sister Betsie eventually perished in the camps. But thanks to a clerical error, in Dec. 1944, Corrie was released. It was an act of Providence to preserve the testimony of this amazing woman and the power of trusting in the Lord no matter how great the sacrifice. After the war, Corrie Ten Boom became a public witness to all that she had seen and experienced of God's power and presence in the worst of times, traveling the world over to share her story and her faith in God, witnessing to the power of forgiveness even for her persecutors. Besides becoming an international speaker and writer, she was one of the most remarkable ministers of hope in the 20th century. She summed up her "philosophy" in these phrases: *"If you look at the world, you'll be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed. If you look at God, you'll be at rest."*

Conclusion: No matter how rough the trial or the storm of transition, as long as we keep our eyes on Jesus and hold on to His Words in our heart, that will sustain us – it's our LIFE. So we need to hear this challenge and ask how well we are practicing this lesson. Are we making God's words and this vision the dominant criteria in our everyday decisions and relationships? Haven't we witnessed His faithfulness? Are we convinced of the deceitfulness of our own heart? Haven't we witnessed that?! What do our priorities and agendas actually reveal concerning the place of God's truth in our lives? What would you do differently and how would it affect the chaos of your transitions if you really *knew* that God's instructions weren't just idle words, but your very life? Have you witnessed that?