

“A Farewell Address for the Ages”

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

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I have begun reading Three Days in January: Dwight Eisenhower’s Final Mission by Bret Baier and Catherine Whitney. This book focuses upon President Eisenhower’s last three days in office as he was preparing to turn the reins of government over to a man twenty-seven years younger than he was. Of particular importance to these authors was Eisenhower’s farewell address that was delivered to the nation from the Oval Office.

Eisenhower wrote this speech himself. Every word was well thought out and carefully crafted. After twenty-one drafts, President Eisenhower delivered the speech on January 17, 1961.

This morning, our attention turns to another farewell address. This one was voiced by Moses days before he died.

Moses was responsible for securing the release of the Hebrew children from bondage in Egypt. Life for the Israelites became unbearable under Pharaoh’s harsh leadership, and they cried out to God for help.

The Lord heard their prayers and led Moses to confront Pharaoh with a demand that he set the Hebrews free. After a time of bitter resistance, Pharaoh finally succumbed to Moses’ demand, and the Israelites set out on a journey toward hope and a homeland.

After living in the desert for forty years, the Israelites made their way to the edge of the land God had promised to their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, Moses would

not accompany them on this portion of their pilgrimage from Egypt. His final journey would be to heaven, not the land flowing with milk and honey on the other side of the Jordan River. Joshua, his successor, would be the one to lead them in to the land of their dreams.

Before Moses died, though, he left these parting words. Actually, Deuteronomy contains three farewell discourses, and this is the last one. Many consider these carefully chosen words to be one of the most moving and inspiring speeches in the Old Testament.

“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. **Now choose life**, so that you and your children may live, and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

You know what impresses me the most about this passage? It is the mature and responsible way Moses dealt with the Israelites in his farewell address.

He did not threaten them or try to manipulate them with guilt. Neither did he make this decision for them by telling them what they were going to do.

After describing their options and the consequences accompanying them, he respected their right to make this decision on their own. He was candid, clear, concise and caring. He had done all he could do and said all he needed to say. The rest was up to them.

There was no question about what Moses wanted them to do, that's for sure. He strongly encouraged them to trust God with all their hearts and to be faithful to God all their days.

Why? Moses believed staying close to God would lead to life over death and blessing over curse.

In his book Care of the Soul, the former monk turned psychotherapist, Thomas More writes,

The great malady of [our time], implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is 'loss of soul.' When soul is neglected, it doesn't just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning...

The emotional complaints of our time, complaints we therapists hear every day in our practice include emptiness, meaninglessness, vague depression, disillusionment about marriage and family relationships, a loss of values, yearning for personal fulfillment...All of these symptoms reflect a loss of soul and let us know what the soul craves...

...We yearn excessively for entertainment, power, intimacy, sexual fulfillment, and material things, and we think we can find these things if we discover the right relationship or job, the right church or therapy. But without soul, whatever we find will be unsatisfying, for what we truly long for is the soul in each of these areas. Lacking that soulfulness, we attempt to gather these alluring satisfactions to us in great masses, thinking apparently that quantity will make up for a lack of quality....

Moses did not want his people to lose their soul and their way. He was certain this would not happen if they remained faithful to God. He believed with all his heart that God's way of living would lead to life and untold blessings.

This was why Moses boldly challenged the people he loved so dearly to seek God's will when arranging their values and priorities, relating to family members and neighbors, handling

problems and difficulties, settling disputes, struggling with temptations and making decisions about which invitations to accept and which paths to follow. For Moses, trusting God would lead to life over death and blessing over curse.

On the other hand, Moses was equally confident that abandoning God's way would lead to death and destruction. If they did not value and pursue love over hate, serving over being served, sacrifice over self-indulgence, truth over deception, justice over injustice, inclusion over exclusion, generosity over greed, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting and peace over violence, they would suffer individually and as a nation.

The choice was theirs, though, and Moses knew it. He outlined the options and no doubt prayed they would make the right decision.

Who needs you to be Moses at this time in their life? Whose future depends upon you having a candid conversation with them about their plans? What's going on in their life? What can you do to help them make wise decisions?

How many nights have you laid awake wrestling with these questions? I suppose as long as we have children, and they have children, or we have friends whose welfare is important to us, we'll always struggle with what to say or do to help them make good choices.

We also know our best efforts don't always lead to good results. In spite of our attempts to help those we love make wise decisions, they don't always do it.

Everyone who heard Moses' final address did not remain faithful to God, and certainly those who followed them did not. Reading the words and warnings of the prophets who harkened back to Moses' advice makes you wonder if any of them did.

This did not keep Moses from trying to persuade the Israelites to make good choices, though, and it should not discourage us. Love is willing to do the difficult. It is patient, tenacious, resilient and determined. Love doesn't give up. Instead it gets up and tries another approach. This is what Moses did for the Israelites until his dying day!

Having said this, I believe this text suggests things we can do to help those we love to make wise decisions. Let me share them with you.

Teach those under your care what God expects of them. Good choices begin with character development. Help them to understand God's way of living is best for them and everyone around them, as Moses did one final time before he died.

Be specific. Take advantage of every opportunity to teach them to be honest, trustworthy, responsible, reliable, dependable, loyal and faithful. Impress upon them the value of being kind, fair, respectful, compassionate, humble, generous and forgiving.

Encourage them to resist the temptation to be selfish, greedy, mean, ugly, self-centered, petty, dishonest, unfaithful, insensitive, uncaring, vindictive or violent. Challenge them to be good friends and neighbors by building bridges of goodwill and understanding to everyone instead of walls of suspicion and hate.

Yes, good decisions begin with character development. Moses knew this. This is why he told them twice in this passage to love God, seek his will for their lives and walk in his ways. Doing so would bring the best out in them and build healthy communities around them as they crossed over the Jordan and settled in a new homeland.

Tell them how hard it will be to trust and follow God at all times. Remind them the temptation to adopt the culture's values will be strong and will come often. The resistance to justice and peace is always accompanied by gale force winds. Caution them against taking the path of least resistance.

When our children were growing up there were times they wanted to respond to someone who hurt them in unhealthy ways. Jackie and I advised against it. "Why?" they would ask. "Because you need to respond based upon who you are, not who they are," we replied. "Evidently, their character will allow them to hurt other people, but yours should not," we told them.

Be a good role model, as Moses tried to be. If you don't want your children to do something, don't do it. If you want them to do something, show them what it is. By all means, don't send confusing signals by saying one thing and doing another.

Be transparent. Tell them about the times you did not make wise decisions and what the consequences were. Talk to them about how you felt and share with them what you learned. Describe the changes you have made because of those experiences.

Don't rescue family members and friends when they make bad decisions. When you take away the consequences, you reward bad behavior. Nothing in their lives will change as long as you absorb their pain. It may not change anyway, but the potential for change drops dramatically when people don't have to suffer the consequences of their bad choices.

At the same time, forgive others when they make mistakes and help them recover. Don't abandon them when they need you the most. Walk alongside them as they deal with the consequences, offering encouragement and hope.

It is ok to be a part of the solution. Everyone needs help charting a new way forward out of a mess. It is not ok, however, to take away their opportunity to grow from this experience.

Bring people into their lives that will have a positive impact upon them. There is an old adage that states, "Show me your friends and I will show you your future." There is a lot of truth in these words.

You cannot pick another person's friends, but you can surround them with good teachers, mentors and role models. Do it every chance you get.

This is especially true for your children. Make sure they are involved in our church's children and youth ministries where they will interact with peers and leaders who will call forth the best from them.

Encourage family members and friends often. Tell them you know it is not always easy to make wise decisions, and at times there is a price to pay for doing what is right. Let them know you admire their good judgment and courage, and they inspire you and many others.

Pray for them without ceasing. Ask God to speak to them clearly about his dreams for them and to grant them wisdom, strength, courage, hope and faith. Pray that God will open doors of opportunities for them and help them take those first steps.

Looking back upon your life, who did these things for you? Who was as candid, clear and concise with you as Moses was with the Israelites? Who brought the best out in you or helped you overcome the consequences of bad decisions?

Where would you be now had they not loved you this much? Is it your turn to pass it forward?

Who is trying to help you make wise decisions now? Who is talking to you about your decisions and where you are heading?

Who is losing sleep over the choices you are making? Do you need to put your defenses down and your selfishness aside? Do you need to be a better listener and give those who love you another chance to help you see what you are overlooking?

“Choose life so you and your descendants may live,” Moses told the Israelites.

What does “choose life so you and your descendants may live” mean to you today? I have a friend who says it means “staring death and darkness in the face and saying, ‘NO!’”

What do you need to say no to this morning? What do you need to say yes to this week?

Will you ask God to help you take those first steps now?