

Succession Planning

Deuteronomy 31:1-8 (April 19, 2020)

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When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, ²he said to them: "I am now one hundred twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about, and the Lord has told me, 'You shall not cross over this Jordan.' ³The Lord your God himself will cross over before you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua also will cross over before you, as the Lord promised. ⁴The Lord will do to them as he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land, when he destroyed them. ⁵The Lord will give them over to you and you shall deal with them in full accord with the command that I have given to you. ⁶Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you." ⁷Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: "Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the Lord has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. ⁸It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

Historical Context

Deuteronomy is organized as a series of three discourses by Moses (1:6-4:40, chs. 5-28, chs. 29-30), with a concluding addendum (chs. 31-34), his final "words" given to the Hebrews as they prepare to enter the land of Canaan. These "words" recall the past activities of God in order to build identity for the present community. The people are then called to continued faithfulness in the future based on that communal identity. The conclusion (31-34) includes instructions concerning Moses' successor, final liturgies, the Song and Blessing of Moses, and his death.

Theme: Succession Planning

After the speeches, Joshua succeeds Moses as leader of Israel. Moses conducts the transition publicly for two reasons. First, Joshua has to acknowledge before the whole nation that he has accepted the duties laid upon him. Second, the whole nation has to acknowledge that Joshua is Moses' sole, legitimate successor. After this, Moses steps aside in the most complete possible way—he dies. Any organization, be it a nation, a school, a church, or a business, will be in confusion if the matter of legitimate succession is unclear or unresolved.

Notice that Joshua is not a capricious, last-minute choice. Leaders have a duty to prepare the people in their organizations to assume leadership in due time. This doesn't mean that leaders have the right to designate their own successors. That power often belongs to others, whether by appointment, election, commission or other means. It is the Lord who designates Moses' successor. Under the Lord's direction, Moses has long been preparing Joshua to succeed him. As early as [Deuteronomy 1:38](#), the Lord refers to Joshua as Moses' "assistant." Moses had noticed Joshua's military capability not long after the departure from Egypt, and over time delegated leadership of the army to him ([Deut. 31:3](#)). Moses observed that Joshua was able to see things from God's perspective and was willing to risk his own safety to stand up for what was right ([Num. 14:5-10](#)). Moses had trained Joshua in statecraft in the incident with the kings of the Amorites ([Deut. 3:21](#)). Praying to God on Joshua's behalf was an important element of Moses' training regimen ([Deut. 3:28](#)). By the time Joshua takes over from Moses, he is fully prepared for leadership, and the people are fully prepared to follow him.