

Part 16: Singing for Your Life

Tyler Velin | Deuteronomy 31:24-32:47

February 23, 2020

We are in the last two weeks of our series through the book of Deuteronomy, and today we are in a wonderfully unique passage.

Today's passage is primarily a song. In one sense this isn't super unique because God's people have long been a people of song. We've already done it this morning, it's happened just about every Lord's day since Jesus ascended into heaven, Christians sing praises to God.

But whether you are a believer or not, the art of praising is not far from either of us. When C.S. Lewis reflected back on his coming to Christ he realized how the whole world, even the secular world, is set to praise something out loud: **The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game – praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars...Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible...I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: "Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?**

Where our world is always inviting us to praise the flavor of the day, here God's word is calling on God's people to praise God in song. In other words there are thousands of things in this world which demand a song from you, but here in this text is not only the object of greatest praise, but also the substance of transformative praise, that's praise that changes us.

However there are a couple features unique about this song. The first is that this song isn't all roses. This song includes harsh words of judgment towards both God's people and the enemies of God's people. This song is one part National Anthem (singing the identity of Israel), one part African American Spiritual (singing songs of lament) and one part victory ballad (singing the confidence of salvation).

And yet, the second unique feature of this song is that it is written by God himself. Now all the songs in scripture are written by God in that they are written by men inspired by the Holy Spirit, but this song is dictated to Moses by God himself, God alone is the songwriter of this song.

Look at what we saw last week: **Deuteronomy 31:19, 22, 30.**

While the translators of our Bible give this passage the heading of "The Song of Moses" this is very much "The Song of God." And what we are going to do this morning is look at two primary questions in this song which shape not only the circumstances Israel was in during this time, but also shape part much of our own response in our own church today.

The two questions we are going to answer are: **Why do Christians sing?** And **What do Christians sing?**

The first reason Christians sing is that ***God wants and is worthy of our singing***. God wanted the people of Israel to sing to him, and God is worthy to be sung of.

Look at how this Psalm puts it: **Psalm 92:1-4**. We sing to God because God wants to be praised, and God is worthy of our praise. The primary audience for all of our songs in the worship service is God himself. We do sing for our own sake (we will talk more of that in a moment) but primarily we sing, as Lewis noted, because God is worthy of our song.

This is why we sing even in the church today. When Paul writes to both the Ephesian church and the Colossian church he encourages them to sing to one another psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. To be a Christian and to attend church only to not sing is to have your wife leave you a wonderful list of things you can do for her on Valentine's Day, only to ignore all of them.

I'm speaking specifically to men here, but there is sometimes this disposition of stoicism towards singing. But God has told us to do it. Which means if you are a Christian, to not sing is not aesthetic stoicism, it's a form of spiritual arrogance. Praise flows naturally and freely from those who know God.

This leads us into the second reason why Christians sing. If you consider the context of Deuteronomy, it is incredibly interesting that this is what God has for them at this time.

They have been redeemed out of slavery. They were too fearful to approach God at Horeb. They were too scared to enter into the Promised Land at Kadesh Barnea. They were punished in the desert for 40 years. They are now marching back to door #2 to the Promised Land, door #2 to what in the past has only been failure. And they stand at the foot of the Jordan River knowing that on the other side of that river are seven angry, hostile and heavily armed nations waiting for them. And on their own side of the river their long time national hero and leader Moses is about to die.

And in the face of all of this, God gives them a song. Not a military guide book. Not a revelation for modern civilization. But a song.

This seems almost silly to consider but we know how powerful songs are when it comes to our memory. Science has dedicated countless studies to the way in which song helps us commit things to memory. A 2008 study sought to examine how those songs you hear on the radio from your youth, and the feelings of nostalgia they give you, are actually an important part of your brain's autobiographical understanding of itself.

Songs do something to us. And God knows this because God designed us this way. Look at the ways God wants this song to shape his people: **Deuteronomy 31:19-22, 32:44-47**.

This song is unique because God wrote it, but God wrote it because (and here's the second reason why Christians sing) ***songs remind us and bear witness to us about the gospel***. This song was meant to bear witness to Israel and to remind Israel so that they might choose life.

We know how songs bear witness against us don't we? How many of you know the little jingle: "I before E except after C or when sounding like A as in neighbor and weigh"? Yet how many of us still mess up our I's and E's? That song bears witness in that we knew it, we know it, we just don't take time to heed it.

Part of this song outlines the way in which Israel will be punished as they reject God, and look at what it says: **Deuteronomy 32:28-29**. In other words God is saying, you will often forget the dangers of sin, you will forget what it will do, but this song as song which speaks of God's justice and wrath against sin will remind you and bear witness against you so that you might choose to live differently.

This can be both a weighty thing and a wonderful thing. Part of Sarah's story of salvation is that a song bore witness to her the reality of the gospel which she hadn't considered. My wife was invited to a Bible camp in high school by her friend and she sang the song, "In Christ Alone." And two particular lines stood out to her.

The first one was "What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are still when strivings cease." The second one clarified the peace when it said, "Till on the cross as Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied."

In that moment the song bore witness to my wife that her life needed peace and that peace only comes through Jesus taking her punishment on the cross. It bore witness to her sins, and called her to respond.

Songs get stuck in our head and remind us of the hope we have in Jesus. There are so many times in my life when wrestling with sin what pops into my mind first isn't a verse but the line, "Prone to wander Lord I feel it prone to leave the God I love."

God is prescribing a song for his people not only because he is worthy of it, but because he loves us and wants us to be changed by the gospel revealing work of songs. Songs which display truths about God can bear witness against our sin, or they can call us back to repentance. The point of this is that you should be careful what you sing, because you might just mean it.

God wrote this song so that it would be a practical help for his people. He wants it to be their life, what drives them to obedience and joy. But I find it wonderfully interesting as to how God himself desires to produce that result in song.

This leads us into our second point today: **What do Christians sing?** Christians sing because God wants and is worthy of our songs, and because songs remind us and bear witness to us about the gospel. But what do Christians sing? What pleases God and changes us?

Look at the pre-chorus to this song: **Deuteronomy 31:30-32:3**.

How are the people going to be changed? By the proclamation of God's greatness. God's people sing of God's greatness.

Don't skip over what God himself is teaching to us as rain from heaven. One of the most practical and life shaping truths in your life is your view of God's greatness.

Let me give you two examples. In the movie Aladdin, Abu the monkey is in the Cave of Wonders and he's told to not touch anything. However he sees this massive red ruby and it compels his heart so much so that he can't help but grab it even though his friend tries to keep him from it. But after he picks up the ruby the Cave itself starts to shake and melt away. So what does Abu do? He tries to put the ruby back.

Why? The ruby didn't change. But instead Abu saw the great power of the Cave and it compelled him to in a way repent. An encounter with greatness changed him, it stood as a witness against his wrongs.

But consider a positive example. In "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" when it seems the armies of Narnia had been defeated by the White Witch, everyone was retreating. That was until Aslan, resurrected from the dead, appeared. And in that moment, when the once defeated armies saw the greatness of the lion, they changed directions and turned back to the battle field. Their enemy didn't change, but an experience with greatness changed them.

It's true isn't it, that experiencing the greatness of someone else changes us because in seeing who they are, we learn a little bit about ourselves and we respond to that.

God's goal is that his people would be changed by this song, and his means for that change is to express upon them his greatness. Learning to sing God's greatness reminds us of the most practical news we need to endure in our own lives.

This song that Moses is teaching his people is a song which produces change by stressing the greatness of God. And he does this for Israel in a very specific way.

This song is really a theological summary of everything which took place in the previous 31 chapters. It spans God's calling of Abraham, their desert wanderings, their prophesied exile among the nations, and one day their redemption. It is dense and it is long, and you could preach a hundred sermons on it.

But what we are going to do with the bit of time we have remaining is we are going to look at three primary themes of God's greatness that are expressed in this song and we are going to let those shape us.

And the first place ***we see God's greatness in his nature.***

Read with me **Deuteronomy 32:1-4.**

So many of our songs as Christians begin with the wonderful concession that God is not like us. In fact he's unlike anything else. When we sing to God it is not just another love song. God is not your girlfriend, and our worship should reflect that difference. He is, as Moses puts it, "The Rock."

I visited New York City once when I was younger and I had spent most of my life growing up here in Missoula. I remember being there and being overwhelmed with the endless span of buildings and concrete. I couldn't quite put my finger on what was causing the anxiety until we took a tour and the tour guide told us that in all Manhattan there were two houses with grass out front.

And I realized in that moment, that's all I wanted. I wanted a break from the chaos, I just wanted some grass to stand on.

That's the kind of imagery Moses is using when he speaks of God as "The Rock." These people have spent the last 40 years wandering on the changing sands of the desert and you can imagine that these people are aching for ground which doesn't slide away under your feet, sand that doesn't sting the eye, a foundation for your home which doesn't erode with the wind or the rain.

That Rock, that solid foundation is this God who created everything and who has drawn near to his people through his covenant. In this world we don't have a category for God besides the way God is described in scripture. We use words like "perfect," "just" and "faithful" in speaking of admirable humans, but no one is wholly perfect. But God's work is always perfect, it has no fault, no error, no weakness. His way is only justice, he cannot rob or deceive, he is faithful to his word, without sin or shortcoming, just and upright.

There is no one like this God. We need to be reminded of this. In Montana we know what it's like to climb a mountain peak and stand in awe at something vast. This is what happens when we remind ourselves of God's nature.

If God is like us, it may work out well when things are good. But if we think that God is just like us, then he's not what we will turn to when things get difficult because we won't expect him to be able to handle it.

But look at how Moses speaks of this God, **Deuteronomy 32:31**. Their rock is not as our Rock. When the other nations begin to attack Israel due to their sin, God reminds them that these nations, mighty as they are, are still not as powerful as our God.

Look at **Psalm 113:4-9**. We want to constantly remind ourselves of God's greatness because something incredible happens when we learn to sing and savor the bigness of God: we become encouraged when other things seem bigger.

God's nature is to be rejoiced in. But this is where God's song introduces a less than great character: us. Read with me **Deuteronomy 32:4-9**.

God is great in his nature, and yet, God has chosen a people for his own possession. If you are a husband, you most certainly have had times in your life where you say to yourself, "How did I get a wife? What could possibly cause a woman like that to love me?" This is only a small picture of the astounding nature of God's love for us. This is the second theme where we learn to see God's greatness: ***We see God's greatness in his love towards his people.***

If we don't see God as independently beautiful, then we will never fully understand the wonder of God's love for us.

I love how David puts this here: **Psalm 8:1-4**.

Do you hear what David is really saying here? If you look at the whole of our world, don't you see the wonder of the God who created it? In this world we have places like Glacier National Park, we have wonders like Victoria Falls, and Mount Everest. We have amazingly powerful beasts like the Elephant, noble creatures like the blue whale, beasts of mass and strength like the Rhinoceros, and incredibly intelligent creatures like Dolphins.

All I'm saying is that if I were God and I had to choose for my possession someone, or something, I wouldn't choose the ones who eat their own laundry detergent.

God created the cosmos and yet he chose people who can't even map the depth of them.

But God, in his free and wonderful will, chose to create Adam and Eve in his image, because he wanted to be their God and he wanted them to be his people. Why would we deserve such a grace? We don't, but God loved to do it.

Look at the way in which this song reminds God's people of how free and wonderful his love was: **Deuteronomy 32:10-14.**

Here Israel is personified as a singular person, a person whom God found, a person whom God blessed, and grew and kept, a person who made it through the hardest times of life without the help of any foreign god because the God, the Rock, was with him.

You see we live in a culture which demands loveliness in order to love. Make this much money, the world says, and we will love you. Look this way, and we will love you. Do this thing and we will love you. But God started out by loving people because he wanted to love people.

We want to sing songs which remind us of God's immense love for us. But we want to make sure that our songs and our reminders don't end up ultimately being ballads of our own loveliness. The wonder of love which believers sing about isn't in our innate loveliness, but in the wonderful grace of our lover. This is shown all the more to Israel in **Deuteronomy 32:15-18.**

The story of Adam and Eve was the story of Israel, and Paul in Romans 1 says it's the story of us. Despite seeing how wonderful and great this God is, we choose to reject him and pursue other gods. What is translated here as "no gods" is literally in Hebrew "non-gods."

Israel scoffed at God the Rock. It grew fat on calories of grace and used it to run a marathon of disobedience. And at the end of all things they were unmindful of the Rock which bore them.

For all of Israel singing this song, this response is not a good look on them. But that's the point. It's not supposed to be a good look. When we sing of our sin, what we are actually singing of is the amazing love of God who saved a wretch like me. Our sins they are many, his mercy is more. To really understand God's love we must understand our unloveliness.

Because the astounding part of God's love is not just that he loved us, but that after our hearts rebelled against him, he willingly chose to go to great lengths to bring his people back to himself.

And God wants them to see that the way in which he bring his people back is actually through discipline. Discipline is how God is going to fight for his people. Look at **Deuteronomy 32:21-22.**

But look at how God's discipline plays out: **Deuteronomy 32:34-39.**

It's actually in this discipline that we see the last theme of God's greatness: ***We see God's greatness in his exclusive ability to save.***

God is going to discipline his people so that one day all of those "non-gods" that the people followed will be shown as just that: nothing. Where are the gods of your comfort in these moments of sorrow? Where are your gods of sex? There are nowhere because they are no God.

Don't you think that we have amassed enough years of human history that if someone were to find salvation from the pains of this world through physical things, we'd have heard about it? And yet most often the stories of sex symbols, business moguls and billionaires show a continued display of emptiness not satisfaction.

But by God's grace, the gospel speaks to what experience might not prove. God who says, "See now that I, even I am he, there is no god beside me."

Salvation, compassion, vindication comes when God in his mercy painfully removes our false gods to show us that he is the God who can save and save to the uttermost.

If you are a not a Christian in here, I pray that you come to see that. The gospel is the good news that Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God. And it's actually in this restoration which this song ends. **Deuteronomy 32:43.**

Now this text is a really difficult Hebrew text to translate. And depending upon your translation verse 43 probably reads differently. The ESV has a footnote on it, which is the way most translators render verse 43 and this is how it reads: "He repays those who hate him and atones for his land and his people."

At the end of this song, God wants his people to have burned into their lyric bank two things: that God will one day vindicate them by destroying their enemies, and that one day God will atone for them and cleanse their land. In other words this story song shows that despite their faithlessness, God will one day take care of their external and internal enemies.

Brothers and sisters this song so wonderfully points Gods' people then, and us today to the work of Jesus Christ.

We are those who lack discernment and who at times cling to non-gods when God himself has made himself known. We deserve punishment for rejecting a God as beautiful and lovely as this God.

And the discipline which brings us back is Jesus who makes atonement for us and cleanses us finally and fully. Jesus was disciplined on the ultimate level for us. Jesus took the arrows of God's wrath for us. And in so doing he cleanses our hearts and wins us back to God.

Look at how Paul writes of this: **Ephesians 5:25-27.** Jesus took the fat and rebellious people of God and he washed them pure and presented them back to himself as the portion he desired.

And all of this wonderful salvation is ours through faith.

You see the truth is Christians will always be a singing people because we have the most to sing about. But if we don't see the exclusivity of God to save then his nature will never be wonderful to us.

If we don't see Jesus as the way in which God loved us, then his love will always be distant to us.

If we don't see that on the cross of Jesus, when it seemed everything failed, that God was drawing closest to his people, then we will never be able to worship when times are tough.

But the gospel reminds us of all of these things. So we ought to sing about it, talk about it, and remind each other of it because this song, the song of salvation in Jesus, is no empty word, it is your life.

God's greatness and the most practical truth in your life is in the gospel which saves you. This is something to sing about. This is something which changes us.