

## Sermon – 27/08/2006 am

### A New Leader

Study Text: Deuteronomy 31:1-8

If a sports team loses a few games we hear calls for the captain to be replaced. If a business is not growing we hear calls for the CEO to be replaced. If a political party loses an election there are calls for a new leader. If a church is not growing some start to call for a new leader. But is this the way it should be in the church of God. Is there not something different about the church?

When a church gets a new pastor we may see some small changes but can there be a whole change of direction. Yet some choose to leave a church when a new pastor comes – ‘we do not like his style’, or ‘we do not like his family’ they may say. On the other hand there are those who will only come when their pastor is preaching. If there is a visiting man they will stay at home.

Is this how it was in Israel? As Moses handed over to Joshua, would dots of people leave the assembly of God’s people? Is this how it was in the New Testament church? Actually a party spirit did arise in that worldly church at Corinth, and Paul had to correct them. What would Paul say to our churches today?

### Old Leader

Moses was coming to the end of his term as leader of the people of God. Moreover he was coming to the end of his life in this world. As the people gathered before him on the plains of Moab he told them he was 120 years old. He could *no longer go out and come in* (31:2) – although in the last chapter (34:7) we read that *his eyes were not dim nor his natural vigour diminished*.

Moses was the only leader these people had known, and what a great leader he was. They did not choose him – he was sent by the Lord to rescue them. The Lord had his hand upon Moses from the very beginning. He saved him from drowning in the Nile. In the providence of God Moses was raised as a prince in the Pharaoh’s palace. His first forty years were spent receiving the best education in the land. *Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds* (Acts 7:22).

But he never forgot his Hebrew roots. One day Moses killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. When this became known he fled to Midian where he spent the next forty years of his life. He married and worked as a shepherd in this wilderness. All this time the Lord was preparing him for a great work.

When Moses was eighty years old the Lord spoke to him at the burning bush, calling him to go and bring the people of God out of Egypt. The next forty years of his life he spent leading these people to Mt Sinai and through the wilderness towards the land of Canaan. These chosen people turned out to be a grumbling, rebellious lot. In the strength of the Lord, and with help from his assistant Joshua, Moses pressed on. He pressed on in faith, looking to his reward.

It was during the last of those wilderness years that he sinned against the Lord by striking the rock with his rod in anger. It is not only the young who are tempted and sin. *Because you did not believe me to hallow me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them* (Numbers 20:12). Moses pleaded with the Lord for he dearly wanted to bring the people into the good land. But the Lord told him to *speak no more to me of this matter* (3:26).

The great leader Moses was not perfect – and no human leader ever is or will be. Whenever Christians begin to think that their leader is perfect they are in danger of idolatry. In fact whenever Christians like the preaching of their pastor warning bells should flash. As a friend said the other day ‘I feel I have preached well when people go away angry’. We have been calling Moses a great leader not a popular leader!

It is disturbing to see Christians who revere preachers of old while discounting the preaching of today. For them nothing about today’s preaching is ever as good as it was in the old days. We might wonder what these preachers of old would say to such an attitude. Well, we do have the words of Moses. He called Joshua and set him before the people as their new leader. And we have the words of the apostle Paul who rebuked the church at Corinth for this sin of sectarianism. Some were saying ‘I am of Paul’, others ‘I am of Apollos’ and ‘I am of Cephas’.

Here by the Jordan at 120 years of age Moses accepted the will of God, indeed the judgment of God, and called upon the people to respect and follow Joshua as their new leader. Many church leaders are not so ready to hand over to a younger leader. They start to think they are indispensable. They think that the congregation will fall apart without them. Moreover, the congregation may think like this also.

Moses did not teach the people to depend on him but on the Lord. This is the sign of a great leader in the church – not a man who exalts himself but one who exalts the Lord. Not a man who acts like a father, but one who points people to their heavenly Father, and to the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus alone is able will keep the people of God in every place, and for all time.

## **New Leader**

Joshua son of Nun was from the tribe of Ephraim. Moses was from the tribe of Levi. There was no nepotism here. ‘Joshua’ means salvation – equivalent to ‘Jesus’ in Greek. At the time to the exodus he was a young man. Moses gave him the responsibility of leading these ex-slaves in battle against the Amalekites (Exodus 17). Even at this time it seems Moses knew Joshua would be his successor. Joshua proved himself faithful, along with Caleb, when he was sent to spy out Canaan. Caleb was his senior but was not considered as a potential leader.

As he began his last address to the people, Moses told them the facts – he would not be crossing the Jordan with them. He did not start to reminisce, or doubt that they would be able to go on without him. Rather he encouraged them. *Be strong and of good courage* he told the people, for the Lord your God is with you (31:6).

He summoned Joshua to stand in front of the assembly and exhorted him with the same words. *Be strong and of good courage for you must go with this people to the land... and you shall cause them to inherit it* (31:7). Not only will Joshua lead the people into the land, but the

allocation of territory as the inheritance of each tribe was also his responsibility. Joshua was to do this in fulfilment of the Lord's promise given to his forefathers.

Moses reminded Joshua he would not be doing this in his own strength, but in the strength of the Lord. *The Lord, he is the one who goes before you, he will be with you, he will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed* (31:8). It is hard to imagine more strengthening words! Is this what young men are told today as they enter in the Lord's service?

It is not the words of course that bring comfort – it is the God who stands behind them. Moses was not saying 'do not worry – everything will turn out all right'. That is the limit of human counsel and comfort. But Moses was saying, and Paul also says, 'do not worry for God will work things out for good' (Romans 8:28). Do you see the fundamental difference? Which counsel would you prefer?

A new Christian came to us in distress because her neighbours were abusing her and throwing rocks on her roof. We were able to comfort and encourage her with these words. We find them quoted in the New Testament in the book of Hebrews – *I will never leave you or forsake you*. The writer there goes on to include words from the Psalmist also. He wrote *the Lord is my helper I will not fear, what can man do to me?* (Hebrews 13:6). Just as Moses encouraged Joshua with these words so the Lord also spoke directly to him after Moses died. *I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you* (Joshua 1:5).

Do we encourage young leaders in the same way today or do we put burdens on them that they are not able to bear? Why is it that so few young people remain in our church?

## **True Leader**

Great leader that he was, Moses was still a humble man. Power that so often corrupts had not corrupted Moses. He knew that the Lord God was the true leader of his people. He knew that it was the Lord who delivered them out of Egypt, not Moses. He knew that it was the Lord who gave them victory over the two Amorite kings, not Moses or Joshua. And so Moses could say with confidence that the Lord would give them victory over the Canaanites.

*The Lord your God himself crosses over before you; he will destroy these nations from before you* (31:4). Moses had given them instructions as to what they were to do. This was holy war, and the wicked Canaanites were to be destroyed. The leadership was about to change, but commands of the Lord remained the same. It was simply a 'changing of the guard' as it were. The eternal God, their true leader, is unchanging and his words do not change. What he has spoken, even unto Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, will be fulfilled.

Are you facing some struggle at present? Do you doubt that the Lord will help you through? Satan will continue to attack you as long as you live in this world but in Jesus Christ you have the victory. Remember the Lord your God. He is the one who goes before you every day of your life. He will not leave you or forsake you.

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