

## Moses Sings the Blues

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SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

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We're nearing the end of our series of studies in the book of Deuteronomy. The Israelites are on the bank of the Jordan River. Moses has been preaching to them about how God has rescued and cared for them and the importance of loving him exclusively as they begin their new life in the Promised Land. He's reviewed God's law and over and over again challenges them to keep it and it would seem they're now ready to go. But before they go a few things have to happen. One of the things is that Moses has to pass the mantle of leadership on to Joshua. Moses is on the verge of death and there's a need for a new leader. Makes sense. But the other thing that has to happen may surprise you—Moses wants to teach Israel a song. They have the law, but that's not enough. They won't be ready unless they have this song under their belt. So in ch.32 Moses records a song.

Have you noticed that music and singing are irrepressible expressions of our being? Think about it: we've all been created by God with a built in musical instrument, the voice. Small children sing to themselves while they play outside. At the other end of life, an old woman hums a song while she knits. We seem to enter the world wired for music and song and we leave it the same way, perhaps even knowing that singing will be an ongoing activity in heaven. In between, singing allows us to express our joy, our sorrow, our confusion and our convictions. Singing can also be intensely practical. Songs are used to start revolutions. Research shows music plays a role in mental therapy. There are even claims that students do better on exams after studying against a background of classical music. William Congreve said, "Music has charms to soothe the savage beast, to soften rocks, to bend the knotted oak."

Singing is also an irrepressible aspect of our faith. I remember as a high school student hearing about fellow students going to Young Life meetings. Someone invited me and I asked what they do there. She said that one of the things they do is sing. Nothing could have sounded more bizarre to me. Music was something I listened to in my car or bedroom on my 8 track. I just couldn't fathom sitting around someone's living room and singing. What for? But a few months later I became a Christian and singing with those people became as natural to me as breathing. I haven't been gifted with a very good voice. Those of you who stand near me in worship know this. That's why a lot of you sit over there. But I don't buy into the idea that "singing in church is for singers." The truth is "singing is for believers." The most important question isn't "Do you have a voice?" but "Do you have a song?"

### I. Why sing?

Moses had a song. And before the people of Israel

entered the land they had to learn this song of Moses. Why is that? They had the law on two stone tablets tucked away in the ark of the covenant. Moses had taught it and explained it. Why do they need a song? God answers this question in chapter 31. He comes to Moses and speaks to him. He says in v.16, "**They made Him jealous with strange gods; with abominations they provoked Him to anger.**" The Lord expounds a bit on that in vv.17-18 and then in v.19 he says, "**The LORD saw this, and spurned them because of the provocation of His sons and daughters.**" A little bit later down in vv.21-22, "**They have made Me jealous with what is not God; they have provoked Me to anger with their idols so I will make them jealous with those who are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation, for a fire is kindled in My anger, and burns to the lowest part of Sheol, and consumes the earth with its yield, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.**"

It's clear that somehow this song would function as a witness; somehow this song would testify against them when they fell into sin. It's not a real happy song, but as we'll see it's a hopeful song. It will serve as a warning to future generations of what will happen if they turn away from God. It will also remind them that even in the darkest days of judgment, God would not abandon them. There is still hope.

We say, "But why a song? Why not just spell it out in plain language?" Well, Moses says it's because "**it shall not be forgotten from the lips of their descendants.**" Songs have a way of getting embedded in our heads. Try to get your child to memorize something and they'll learn it faster and store it longer in their heads if it's in a song (sing "A, B, C, D..."). That's why it's good for you parents of young children to teach your children to sing songs about Jesus. "Jesus loves me this I know..." Those songs get embedded in their heads and like little time bombs they go off later in life when they need it the most. II. What should we sing?

That's one really good reason we pay careful attention to WHAT we sing. That's why in the New Testament Paul says to "**speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs...**" (Eph. 5:19). What we sing is important because it expresses and reinforces what we really believe about life. So we need to look at what this song of Moses is all about. It's got some dark notes to it so it's kind of a blues song. It also has some dissonance in there and that would make it part jazz. There's even a little bit of anger which would put it in the rock category. And it has a story to it which means best of all it's country!

**A. Sing about God's care for his people:** The song teaches us to sing about three things. First, we should sing about who God is and especially his care for us. This is

really what dominates the first part of the song. In v.3 he says **"I proclaim the name of the Lord; Ascribe greatness to our God!"** And then he goes on and uses three powerful images to speak specifically about his goodness and care.

**1. He is like a reliable rock:** He says God is like a Rock. Look at v.4. **"The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He."** This image of God as a rock is the dominant image in the whole song. In v.15 he sings Israel **"scorned the Rock of his salvation."** In v.18 he says they **"neglected the Rock."** What do we mean when we say God is a Rock? These people had lived in the wilderness for years. Rocks in the wilderness provided shelter in a desert storm and even a shadow to protect from the blazing sun. They knew the sharp contrast between a firm and secure rock and the shifting sand of the desert. The picture is of God as one who is totally reliable, unchanging and stable. He's one we can totally rely on in every circumstance. He's unlike his own people who love him one day and turn away the next. They're unreliable, sand-like. In v.31 he even says of those who worship other gods **"their rock is not like our Rock."** Their rock is flimsy and crumbles in your hand; our Rock is perfect, faithful in all his ways.

When I was a kid we would spend a couple of weeks each summer in a cabin on the north fork of the Yuba River. In front of the cabin was a huge rock in the middle of the river, big enough for ten kids to climb on. We called it Elephant Rock. We would fish off that rock, dive off that rock, hold onto that rock to keep from floating down the rushing river, and throw things off that rock like small rocks. It was a great rock. I've been back to see that rock and it hasn't changed a bit. God is like that; you can put all your weight on him; he never changes, and that's worth singing about.

**2. He is like a caring Father:** Look at vv.6-10. **"Do you thus repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is not He your Father who has bought you? He has made you and established you. Remember the days of old, consider the years of all generations. Ask your father, and he will inform you, your elders, and they will tell you. When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel. For the LORD'S portion is His people; Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of a wilderness; He encircled him, He cared for him, He guarded him as the pupil of His eye."** As a Father, God creates his family. The Lord bought them and made them and established them. This was true of Israel but how much more true of us who have been bought by God at the steep price of his Son. He says, **"If you doubt that, ask your father."** In other words, **"If you doubt your heavenly Father's care, ask your earthly father to tell you about it. If you can't remember, he will."** If you're an earthly father don't hesitate to tell your children about all your heavenly Father has done for you.

As a father, God also supports and protects his family. While God gives other nations an inheritance of land, he does so **"according to the number of the tribes of Israel."** That means he does so with his people in mind.

He's constantly thinking of our welfare because we're his portion and his inheritance. Imagine being God's inheritance! That's how much he values you. That's emphasized even more in v.10 where he says he guards us **"as the pupil of his eye."** That's where we get our term **"the apple of my eye."** The pupil of the eye is the most sensitive part of our body; that's why God made it with an eyelid; an automatic defense mechanism to protect it when in danger. God guards us like the pupil of his eye.

My son drives to school in the morning which requires him to merge onto 101 at rush hour. Recently he had a rather close call when someone cut him off and he spun across three lanes and ended up sideways in the fast lane. Lynn and I were on a plane to North Carolina when it happened and all we could think of when we heard was **"what if...?"** We felt it was a miracle he didn't hit anybody. How grateful we were that at that very moment when his earthly father and mother were on the other side of the country, his heavenly father was guarding him like the apple of his eye! He's important to us, but he's even more important to God.

**3. He is like a protective eagle:** But that's not all. He's also like a protective eagle. Look at vv.11-12. **"Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that hovers over its young, He spread His wings and caught them, He carried them on His pinions. The LORD alone guided him, and there was no foreign god with him."** In their wilderness the people would have seen eagles circling their camps. Perhaps they spied a mother eagle stirring up her nest and encouraging her little birds to fly. She would hover over the nest and grab a little eagle out and fly up as high as she could go. Then she would drop the little guy and he would fall fast. He's never flown in his life. The ground is getting closer, his heart is ready to burst, and he knows there is no way he's going to survive. But the mamma eagle is watching, and at the last moment she swoops down and catches him. The baby eagle thinks, **"I'm saved, I'm fine, I'm gonna survive."** The mamma then flies up as high as she can go and again drops him. She continues to do this until he learns to fly.

What a picture of how God stirs up our lives and takes us out of our safe little nests to grow us and train us. He's persistent in this, isn't he? I think of many who are struggling right now in this economy; some of you have lost jobs and you're right in that place where it feels like you're falling. During those times we often feel so alone and so threatened but God is there ready to catch us and teach us again. He wants us to fly!

A story is told of a town where all the residents are ducks. Every Sunday the ducks waddle out of their houses and waddle down Main Street to their church. They waddle in and squat in their pews. The duck choir waddles in and takes its place, and then the duck pastor comes forward and opens the duck Bible. He reads to them: **"Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings you can fly! With wings you can mount up and soar like eagles. No walls can confine you! No fences can hold you! God has given you wings, now go out and fly!"** All the ducks shout, **"Amen!"** And then they all waddle home.

But God's not like that. He will force us to fly. He'll

put us through times of uncertainty where we feel like we're falling. He's teaching us to trust him. He's like a mamma eagle forcing us to use our wings of faith. That's why the Bible says to rejoice in our trials. Without these trials we'd never learn and grow.

**B. Sing about sin and judgment:** So when you sing, sing about God's care. He's a reliable rock, a caring Father and a protective eagle. But the second part of the song is different. It's darker. Look at vv.15-18. **"But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked--you are grown fat, thick, and sleek--then he forsook God who made him, and scorned the Rock of his salvation. They made Him jealous with strange gods; with abominations they provoked Him to anger. They sacrificed to demons who were not God, to gods whom they have not known, new gods who came lately, whom your fathers did not dread. You neglected the Rock who begot you, and forgot the God who gave you birth."** Jeshurun is another name for Israel. It means "upright one." It was like God's pet name for them. It shows he was proud of them. But then he says his upright one got fat and kicked like a cow. It's like God had fed them and cared for them but they misused that care and in their strength rebelled against him. They scorned the Rock and turned to other gods, provoking him to jealousy and anger.

He says some interesting things about idolatry. We've defined idolatry as anything we give ultimate value to. For Israel it was the gods of false religion but for us it's more often things like money, security, pleasure, power, love and family. Whatever our gods are notice he says we're sacrificing to demons. We don't think of it that way because these are good things. But when we make good things into gods we come under the influence of the enemy. There is a malicious power that takes hold of us and pretty soon we're in way over our heads. Notice also he calls them "new gods who came lately." It's like "Who are these Johnny-come-lately gods? They're not the God of your fathers. They're not the God who gave you birth."

Then he goes on and sings about God's judgment. Look at vv.19-20. **"The LORD saw this, and spurned them because of the provocation of His sons and daughters. Then He said, 'I will hide My face from them, I will see what their end shall be; for they are a perverse generation, sons in whom is no faithfulness.'" Skip down to vv.23-25. "I will heap misfortunes on them; I will use My arrows on them. They will be wasted by famine, and consumed by plague and bitter destruction; and the teeth of beasts I will send upon them, with the venom of crawling things of the dust. Outside the sword will bereave, and inside terror--both young man and virgin, the nursling with the man of gray hair."** It's kind of weird to put this in a song, isn't it? "Gee, let's sing a song about our sin and about how angry God is and about how he's going to heap misfortunes on us. Let's sing a song where we call ourselves a bunch of fat cows!" Do you know any songs like that? There are few songs like this. One old hymn says, "The wicked you will surely slay; from me let sinners turn away." But I like Bob Dylan's *Slow Train Comin'* better:

*Sometimes I feel so low-down and disgusted  
Can't help but wonder what's happenin' to my  
companions,*

*Are they lost or are they found, have they counted  
the cost it'll take to bring down all their earthly  
principles they're gonna have to abandon?  
There's a slow, slow train comin' up around the bend.*

*Man's ego is inflated, his laws are outdated, they  
don't apply no more,  
You can't rely no more to be standin' around waitin'  
In the home of the brave, Jefferson turnin' over in his  
grave,  
Fools glorifying themselves, trying to manipulate  
Satan  
And there's a slow, slow train comin' up around the  
bend.*

I wonder why we don't sing more about God's judgment? That's exactly what Mary sings when she realizes she is going to give birth to the Messiah. She sings, **"He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things; And sent away the rich empty-handed."** That sounds kind of harsh to me. But this is part of what we're supposed to sing because this is part of our story and it's part of God's story. Do we want our songs to be biblical? Do we want to become like Israel, a bunch of fat cows who kick against God? We sing because it helps us to remember who God is and what he's done and part of what he does is judge. Sing about the story of salvation, but be sure to sing about the WHOLE story: not just the happy parts!

The truth is that for believers, even God's judgments are for our ultimate good. C.H. Spurgeon wrote, "There is a subject for song even in the judgments of God towards us... Faith discerns love gleaming like a jewel on the breast of an angry God. Faith says of her grief, 'This is a badge of honor, for the child must feel the rod'; and then she sings of the sweet result of her sorrows, because they work her spiritual good."

**C. Sing about God's grace:** That was true in Israel and it's true for us. Even in his judgment God can't forsake us. God's judgments are really his way of bringing us back. Starting in v.34 there is a third thing we're called to sing about and that is God's grace. We never can sing about God's grace unless we've first sung about his judgments. If there was no judgment there could be no grace because grace is God favoring us precisely when we deserve judgment.

Moses sings about God's grace in vv.36-37. **"For the LORD will vindicate His people, and will have compassion on His servants, when He sees that their strength is gone, and there is none remaining, bond or free. And He will say, 'Where are their gods, the rock in which they sought refuge?'"** He says God is so gracious that he will allow all your gods to fail you. Right when you get to that point where your strength is gone; where it becomes clear that the things you once depended on and turned to for help are impotent; then God will rescue you. He's not the kind of God to say, "You made your bed; now sleep in it." But rather he'll have compassion on you.

And he's not like a kind but powerless grandpa who

may feel compassion but has no power to do anything about it. Look what he says in v.39. **"See now that I, I am He, and there is no god besides Me; it is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal, and there is no one who can deliver from My hand."** When he says, **"I am He"** he uses the name he gave to Moses at the burning bush, **"I AM."** That would remind Israel that this is the same God who sent the plagues on Egypt and opened a path through the Red Sea. He's not only compassionate but he's powerful. He says **"there is no one who can deliver from my hand."**

And that's reason to rejoice. Look at the last verse of the song in v.43. **"Rejoice, O nations, with His people; for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and will render vengeance on His adversaries, and will atone for His land and His people."** Not only will he judge our enemies but he'll atone for our sins. That word "atonement" points to sacrifice. When a sacrifice was made, sins would be atoned for and covered up. This is really talking about the forgiveness of our sins. But in order for sin to be atoned for it has to be exposed. You can't try to disguise or conceal your sin. You have to bring it out in the open. There is no forgiveness without confession, but neither is there confession without forgiveness.

You know, when it comes right down to it, this is really a Christmas song. It's a song that looks forward to the whole reason God sent his Son to earth. That's what Zacharias was singing about when he said, **"He has visited us and accomplished redemption for his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us"** (Luke 1:68-69). Later he sings that Jesus will **"give to his people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins"** (v.77).

## CONCLUSION

That's why singing is such a big part of Christmas. Mary sang a song of trust. Zacharias sang a song of salvation. The angels sang a song of peace. Elizabeth sang a song of blessing. Simeon sang a song of hope. But each of their songs really focuses on how God is rescuing us from our sins through his Son Jesus. The greatest thing about Christmas is not just that God became a man, even a tiny baby. That's wonderful, for sure. But the most wonderful thing is WHY he came. He came to accomplish redemption for us. He came to be a horn of salvation. He came to make forgiveness possible through his own sacrifice. He came so that you have a song to sing; a song like Moses' song; a song about God's care; a song about sin and judgment; a song about how instead of judging us he sent his own Son to save us.

You know, the people of God have not always sung together. A long time ago all the singing in church was done by chanting priests and choirs. Congregational singing really didn't get started until the Reformation in Germany. Martin Luther loved singing. He wrote hymns about sin and redemption and he put the words in little tracts and sent them out so they could be sung in schools and homes and fields. He wanted everybody singing, not just in church but everywhere. Someone said that these songs became so popular that "One could not go into the fields without finding the plow at his hallelujahs and the mower at his hymns." Isn't that great? Do you sing this song of salvation as you drive along, or as you walk, or as you work?

Perhaps I should ask you, do you know this song? Can you sing this song of salvation? Is it your song? Can you sing about this in the first person? If not, put your trust in Jesus Christ, ask him to enter your life and make you new, and you will have a song. Second, if you do have this song to sing, are you singing it? Or are you moping around like someone without a song? If you know Christ the Savior, you every reason to sing!