

LIFE VERSES
Deuteronomy 5:6-8, 11-12, 16-21; 6:4-9; 31:6

Baccalaureate Address
Mount Vernon Nazarene College
May 1996
Dr. E. LeBron Fairbanks, president

Introduction

In a recent retreat for the College's Board of Trustees, a consultant made a comment which, I believe, relates to each of you. He said, "The great task of leadership today is not managing change but managing transitions. Change is inevitable. It will happen. Problems arise in the transitions."

Generally, the two most difficult semesters for college students are 1) the first semester of their first year, and the second semester of their last year. In both semesters, transitions are anticipated, experienced, and perhaps, endured.

In the first semester of their first year, freshmen transition from high school to college, from living at home to living away from home. In the second semester of their last year, seniors prepare to transition from college to the work place (or graduate school), from living in a rather safe and secure environment of the MVNC community, to working in an environment probably very different.

EXCELL students face a different kind of transition as they prepare to take on new and more challenging leadership assignments in their companies and communities.

So I have asked myself during the past several months: "What wisdom does scripture offer for seniors in transition?"

I have been driven back to the book of Deuteronomy. This Old Testament book is a good place to look for guidance, particularly when the future appears so uncertain. This "fifth book of Moses" is a book about people in transition.

It was written as a guide to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised

Land. It tells how Moses stood between the Lord and the Israelites to receive what we know as the Ten Commandments. Later, the Great Commandment is recorded, known as the SHEMA. Jews, to this day, understand this as one of the greatest passages in all of the Old Testament. At the conclusion of the book of Deuteronomy is the record of the death of Moses, the appointment of Joshua as leader, and the crossing of the Jordan river. At this transition time, God's people are given a great and deeply personal promise.

These words became life verses on which the Israelites pinned their faith during the transition from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Students, as you face the movement from one important phase of your life to another, I challenge you this evening to make these passages your life verses. Let's look more closely at the guidance provided in this profound Old Testament book.

I. In the first place, these life verses IDENTIFY us.

We are identified as God's very own possession and recipients of His special provisions. Throughout chapters 5 and 6, we read these words,

"The Lord our God made a covenant with us..."

"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

"Now...this is the commandment...which the Lord your God has commanded to teach you..."

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord in one."

"You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you..." (5:33)

And from chapter 31:6, we read these familiar words: *"Be strong and of good courage, fear not, nor be afraid, for the Lord your God, He it is that does go with you, He will not fail thee or forsake thee."*

Unequivocally, the Creator God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, identifies Himself with us as our God, our Provider, our Strength, our Comfort. And with our response of faith and obedience, we are proclaimed His people, His children, His very own possession.

This God who made a covenant with His people -- this God who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, and out of the house of bondage -- this God who has led seniors and their parents through trials, temptations, discouragements, setbacks, and questions.

This God now empowers us,
leads us,
provides for us,
comforts us,
cleanses us, and
gives us our very own relationship with Himself.

What an identity we have in Him and with Him! What a relationship we have with the all-knowing God, as we walk through transition periods in our lives! We do not have to walk alone. We can have a childlike relationship to the One who was faithful to Israel.

These life verses in Deuteronomy IDENTIFY us as God's very own possession, and recipients of His special provisions. *Great is Thy faithfulness, Great is Thy faithfulness, Morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed Thy hand has provided, Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.*

II. Not only do these verses identify us, secondly, they INSTRUCT us.

These verses instruct us in how to live as God's chosen people. The God of Scripture is faithful...to those who obey and respond to His commands.

I read recently of a survey which revealed that only one out of three Christians believes that one's faith should shape one's lifestyle. Not so with Moses as he spoke to the Israelites. In chapter 5:1, we read: "And Moses called all Israel, and said to them,

‘Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your hearing today, that you may learn them and be careful to observe them.’”

Moses proceeded to give to the Israelites the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are a summary of all the laws in the Old Testament. They provide a big picture of the instructions God has for His people.

God forbids the worship of other Gods.

God’s people are to keep themselves from idol worship.

Swearing in God’s name will not be tolerated.

The Sabbath Day should be kept as a day for
worshipping God.

God commands us to honor our parents.

God’s people value human life. Murder is prohibited.

Marital fidelity is of paramount importance to God;
therefore, we must not commit adultery.

God’s people respect personal property; therefore, we
shall not steal.

God’s people should have the right to enjoy a good
reputation. Therefore, we do not tell lies on others.

God leads us to surrender our lust to Him; therefore, we
must not covet that which belongs to others.

If MVNC graduates are to be people of integrity, you must reclaim and proclaim these timeless truths and moral imperatives. Amen!

These summary commandments are further reduced by Moses in the next chapter in what the Jews throughout history have called the SHEMA. Listen to this command (6:4-5) "Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."

Doesn't this command sound familiar to the response of Jesus when asked by the scribes, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus replied, "*The first of all the commandments is: Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*"

This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is not other commandment greater than these.*" (Mark 12:29-31) We must be faithful to the eternal God, who identifies us as his very own, and instructs us to walk in obedience to Him, especially in the transition times.

I challenge you to consistently live out the traditional Judeo-Christian moral standards in the work force or graduate schools where you will find yourself following graduation. Set the standard high for those around you!

There is one more set of God's instructions to His people in chapter 6, verses 4-9: "*These words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes, You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*"

Whatever else these verses mean, they include:

Internalizing the instructions until they are convictional to us.

They also compel us to pass on to others, particularly our family, the faith we have in the one God, and to demonstrate our loving

obedience to Him.

These instructions are similar to the instruction of Paul to young Timothy in

II Timothy 2:2: "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

These life verses in Deuteronomy not only **identify** us, but they **instruct** us.

III. Thirdly, these life verses INSPIRE us.

These verses inspire as we mature in Christian faith and grow in Christlikeness. In general, life verses inspire us because they SHAPE us on our spiritual journey. They shape us in our growing devotion to God, and in our relationship to others, in the workplace and in the family. They shape us in our cultivation of personal values, and in our walk with fellow believers.

Life Verses CHARACTERIZE US at our best

At our best, we are increasingly becoming more like Christ.

At our best, our lives are increasingly identified with Christ's mission.

At our best, our motives increasingly focus on encouraging and strengthening others.

At our best, our faith is increasingly maturing and being transformed in Christlikeness.

Life Verses CONVICT US at our worst

They convict us...and we must forgive...and seek forgiveness.

They convict us...and we must pray...for others as well as for ourselves.

They convict us...and we must go...across the street or around the world.

They convict us...and we must listen...and listen...and listen.

More specifically, these verses in Deuteronomy inspire us to bold responses. Regarding the seemingly impossible situations facing the Israelites, Moses said, *Be strong, Be courageous, Fear not, Neither be dismayed.* (31:6)

And the Lord of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob expects the same bold response from us today as we face transitions to unknown tomorrows. These verses inspire us to radical faith in God.

Moses reminded the Israelites, Deut. 31:6, *“For the Lord THY God...*

Each of us has a history/journey of faith wherein God has proven Himself faithful to us in the past. The hymn affirms, *“He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater...”*

Our God, the giver of great grace in the past (through prevenient grace, sanctifying and sustaining grace). *“He ... will go with you”* (as we face the seemingly “unknowns” of tomorrow). *“He will not leave you (me...us) or forsake you.”*

We can choose to believe...He will be present to provide what is needed in that moment of uncertainty or period of transition.

We stake our lives on this radical assumption...that God really does lead us throughout our lives.

We draw a line in the sand and say, *“I will believe He is present. I can do no other.”*

In radically believing in the abiding presence of God, we risk with some people, reputation, friendships, position, and influence. So be it!

We base this faith not on emotions, feelings, or even evidence around us, but on the promises of God in scripture which affirm, God will not leave us or forsake us.

Conclusion

What are your life verses from the Scriptures? Can you quote them? Can you locate them in the Bible?

These verses from Deuteronomy identify us as God's possession, instruct us regarding God's commands, and inspire us on our spiritual journey. They are like the necessary food needed to sustain our body.

Several years ago, a reader of the *British Weekly* wrote this provocative letter to the editor.

Dear Sir,

It seems ministers feel their sermons are very important and spend a great deal of time preparing them. I have been attending a church quite regularly for the past thirty years, and I have probably heard 3,000 of them. To my consternation, I discovered that I cannot remember a single sermon. I wonder if a minister's time might be profitably spent on something else?

For weeks, a real storm of editorial responses ensued. The uproar was finally ended by this letter:

Dear Sir,

I have been married for thirty years. During that time I have eaten 32,852 meals -- mostly of my wife's cooking. Suddenly, I have discovered that I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet, I received nourishment from every one of them. I have the distinct impression that without them I would have starved to

death long ago.

These life verses from Deuteronomy, and from other passages from the Bible, become nourishment for the soul, especially in times of transition. And without them identifying, instructing, and inspiring us, we become spiritually starved.

Think on these life verses from Deuteronomy as the choir sings a song from the musical, *God With Us*. The words of the song are taken from Deuteronomy 31:6.

Be strong and take courage; Do not fear or be dismayed.

For the Lord will go before you, and His light will show the way."

... especially in transition times! Amen!