

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Be Blessed**

Deuteronomy 33:22-29

During the coronavirus pandemic, we've had to rethink lots of things, including parting words. Whether you're communicating with someone on the phone, face to face, by text, via Zoom, or by other means, there comes a point when you have to conclude your interaction. Normally, you could use one of the customary expressions, like "Goodbye," "Farewell," "Stay in touch," or "Talk to you later." But under present circumstances, you may be tailoring your words to suit the uncertainties and dangers of the moment. Maybe you wrap things up by saying, "Stay safe," "Be well," or "Take care."

One journalist noted how COVID-19 has caused people to reassess their email sign-offs. She said, "It was clear that some would have to be benched. 'Cheers' might be obnoxiously jaunty in the best of times. It certainly is during a pandemic. Do 'Warmest regards' fail to sizzle? During a pandemic they do." She went on to point out that some people have come up with sign-offs that "combine well-wishing with reminders about what everyone is supposed to do: 'Stay safe and stay home!' or 'Stay safe and wash those hands!'"<sup>1</sup>

How we say goodbye makes a difference. This is true not only for an email but for even greater and grander occasions. Think for instance of Abraham Lincoln's farewell address to the people of Springfield, Illinois on February 11, 1861. Lincoln said:

I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

Saying farewell requires the right words for the right occasion. That's what Moses is doing in today's text from Deuteronomy. Before his death, he gives words of blessing to the people of Israel. He bids farewell to the nation that he has led and nurtured for a full generation. Remember that Moses has experienced the full range of Israel's response in its relationship with God. The obedience and the rebellion. The faithfulness and the disloyalty. The attentiveness and the hardheartedness. When it comes to the people's covenant life, Moses has seen it all. And now, it's time for him to yield to his own mortality, and prepare to hand over leadership to Joshua.

Before he does, Moses releases Israel to its future, and offers his blessing. The blessing itself is framed by a song of praise. Deuteronomy 33 begins with a vision of God coming in triumph to Israel from Mt. Sinai and the southern hill country. "Surely it is you who love the people; all the holy ones are in your hand. At your feet they all bow down, and from you receive instruction, the law that Moses gave us, the possession of the assembly of Jacob" (vv. 3-4).

Then, after remembering how God disclosed himself by giving the law on Mt. Sinai, and offering praise, Moses begins a series of blessing formulas. To each of the twelve tribes of Israel, he gives a divine message about its individual destiny. Moses speaks about the unique gifts and characteristics of each tribe. He reminds them that these are not their own achievements, but gifts of God that will enable them to live securely and fruitfully in the promised land they're about to enter. So for the Israelites, being blessed by their leader is less about where they've been and more about where they're headed. Moses' blessing pulls them forward into the future that God has promised.

That's what the act of blessing should do. It should point us forward, commit us to God, and reassure us that we go into the future with the promise of his presence and his power. This is one of the reasons we conclude each Sunday's worship service with a benediction, or closing blessing. Sometimes it takes the form of a prayer, and other times it involves my more directly blessing you as you get ready to leave our gathering and journey into the week ahead.

In our case, you're already standing by the time we reach the benediction. But in other congregations, folks may still be seated at the time the service nears its conclusion. So the minister may say, "Let us stand for the benediction." This is an even sharper transition indicating that you're now on your feet and ready to take your first few steps out of the Lord's house and into the territory where you live your daily life. Your first stop may be the church parking lot. In fact, for many of you, the benediction brings a sense of relief that you can go back outside, and soon be able to remove your mask. Those words, "Let us stand for the benediction," are a sign that fresh air and deeper breaths are on the way.

During the benediction, sometimes from behind my mask, come words of blessing to send you on your way. One of the things we miss during this low touch worship environment is having access to our hymnals. In addition to all the songs of faith within its pages, our hymnal also contains a section dedicated to spoken benedictions. You may recognize some of them: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:24-26). "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21). "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

All of you. Not just some of you. Not just those sitting in the sanctuary. Not just those seated in the fellowship hall. Not just those listening online at home. All of you. In addition to being a blessing upon each individual worshiper, the benediction is a blessing upon God's people as a whole. That's one of the important things about Moses' blessing. It takes into account and pronounces God promises upon all the tribes of Israel. What matters is not only the future of each Israelite, and the future of each tribe, but the future of the entire covenant community as it enters and settles into the land of promise.

One of the things we've been navigating during the coronavirus pandemic is the challenge of being a unified congregation while also being a more scattered congregation. Even after reopening about a month ago, and being reunited with one another through in-person worship, we still miss those who aren't able to join us here at our facility on Sunday mornings. For various legitimate and important reasons, they aren't yet able to be here with us in this space on the Lord's Day. But that doesn't mean they're beyond the reach of God's blessing. Through recordings of each week's sermon, through prayer, and through your own ways of staying in steady contact with those who can't attend, the assurance that

comes through God's promises gets extended beyond the walls of our sanctuary and into the lives of fellow believers. In other words, God's benediction is still for all the people called Grace Baptist Church, no matter where they may be.

The act of blessing should both gather and scatter. Before we leave God's house, the benediction should bring us together one last time and remind us that we're God's people, living further into God's will and purpose for us. And it should scatter us, send us, into the world where we participate in God's mission of reconciliation and restoration in the name of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As you do that, you need strength. And strength is part of what's promised in today's text. During his last blessing, the blessing upon the tribe of Asher, Moses concludes by saying "your strength will equal your days" (v. 25). Or as another version renders it, "and as your days, so shall your strength be" (ESV). God's promise here is that we'll be given strength to face and overcome the challenges and troubles of each day. As another Bible teacher has pointed out, "Notice that the verse doesn't say 'As thy weeks, so shall thy strength be,' it doesn't say 'As thy years, so shall thy strength be,' 'As thy days.'"<sup>2</sup> Day by day by day, one at a time, God provides the strength needed for then and there.

You may be familiar with the expression that only two things are certain, death and taxes. And this year, the disruption created by the coronavirus even made taxes at least a tad uncertain. After the filing deadline was extended from April 15 to July 15, there was even some talk that it might be delayed again. But that didn't happen, and as we learned this past Wednesday, taxes are still as certain as ever. At the same time, the pandemic has increased our uncertainty in many other areas of daily life, such as health, jobs, finances, schools, and even church. Day by day, we're learning more and more about how to live with the unknown, the uncontrollable, the unpredictable.

And yet, as we come into the presence of God today, whether you're here with me face to face, or at some point listening online, we assemble to receive again God's word of blessing, reassuring us that our ultimate destiny in Christ, in the reign of God, remains certain. His kingdom will come, and his will will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. The journey of faith from here to there confronts us with many uncertainties and unknowns. It passes through many trials, struggles, and sufferings. But the benediction still holds: "As your days, so shall your strength be."

Now take that strength, given moment by moment, day by day, and use it to serve the Lord wherever you are. Richard Halverson, the former chaplain of the United States Senate, used the following benediction during many messages and services. And I pronounce it upon you today:

Wherever you go, God is sending you.  
Wherever you are, God has put you there.  
God has a purpose in your being right where you are.  
Christ, who indwells you by the power of his Spirit,  
wants to do something in and through you.  
Believe this and go in his grace, his love, his power.  
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Katy Steinmetz, "'Stay Safe!' The Art of Emailing During the Coronavirus Pandemic." TIME website. April 24, 2020. Accessed July 15, 2020 <<https://time.com/5827280/stay-safe-emailing-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>>.

<sup>2</sup> David Legge, "Strength for the Days." Accessed July 16, 2020 <<https://www.preachtheword.com/sermon/Misc0066-strengthforthedays.shtml>>.