

Everlasting arms

Chapel message on Deut. 33:26-27

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It's the end of the semester. It's the end of an academic year. We bid farewell to our graduating students, and a temporary farewell to students who are doing internships during the summer. It reminds me of the farewell speech of Moses to the people of Israel.

The people of Israel were standing at the threshold of the promised land. They have come to the end of their forty years journey through the desert. Perhaps we have a similar feeling today. This past year, especially the past semester, has been a "desert" experience for us. We had to live through Covid-19 restrictions, working from home, not being able to meet as we would have wished. There was the accident of Dr. VanRaalte. More could be mentioned.

The people of Israel were standing on the threshold of the promised land. They were going to cross the Jordan soon. What is awaiting them on the other side? Warfare! We wouldn't blame them if they were anxious, especially knowing that Moses would not be there to lead them anymore. Likewise, we can be anxious about the near future. What will it be like, going to classis, doing an internship, working in the churches, being involved in mission work?

Moses encourages God's people with a promise of God's help. He does not say "may it go well with you" or "just be positive" or something like that. Instead, he says: You are blessed because God is with you. Moses is not stingy. He preaches a gospel of grace.

It's a message for us as well. There are three aspects in this text passage that I would like to highlight: (1) the recipients of God's help, (2) the dimensions of God's help, (3) the fulfillment of God's help.

The recipients of God's help

In verse 26 Moses calls Israel "Jeshurun." It is a nickname, perhaps even a term of endearment. It means something like "upright one." And he congratulates Jeshurun for having the kind of God that they have. "Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD" (v. 29).

These words are surprising because earlier Moses had mentioned that Israel had not been upright at all. Just look at the previous chapter, the Song of Moses: "But Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked, then he forsook the God who made him... You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth" (Deut. 32:15-18).

The use of the name Jeshurun is even more surprising if we consider that Moses knew that the people of Israel would be unfaithful again and again in the future. Listen to these

words: “I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold even today while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD. How much more after my death” (31:27)!

So how could Moses give the people of Israel such a positive name and such a wonderful blessing if he knew that the people were unfaithful and rebellious by nature? The answer is found in the Song of Moses: “For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free” (32:36). We are reminded of God’s gracious and forgiving character, as Psalm 30:5 sings about it: “For his anger is but for a moment and his favor is for a lifetime.”

From a New Testament perspective we understand this, and we acknowledge that God has shown his mercy and grace to us in Jesus Christ his Son. “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

If we examine ourselves honestly, if we evaluate what we have said and done in the recent past (both as faculty and students), we realize that we too have fallen short in many ways and that we do not deserve God’s favour. And yet, we too may think of ourselves as “Jeshurun.” Despite our many sins and shortcomings, we are addressed as “beloved saints of the Lord.” With that in mind, we can go forward and move on to the next assignment that the Lord will give us in coming months, trusting that we will receive his blessing.

The dimensions of God’s help

Focusing on what follows in verses 26-27, we see that Moses describes God’s help in a beautiful way, by pointing to three dimensions of God’s help. The first dimension: God is above them: “He who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty.” God is supreme. He is above everything. And He has divine power to help his people on earth.

You get a sense of this when you sit in a plane, looking down on the little earth. Large towns become small specks; people are so small you cannot even see them. And yet, you realize that God knows each one of his creatures by name—not a sparrow falls to the ground without the will of our Father in heaven.

There is more to be said. Why is God riding through the heavens? Why is He riding through the skies in his majesty? Moses says: He rides through the heavens *to your help!* He comes to the rescue of his people, and He uses his divine power to protect them and to set them free. This is something we also confess as Christian believers. In Lord’s Day 1 we affirm that Jesus Christ preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head. This is the first dimension, and it is awe-inspiring. We see a majestic God riding through the skies, hurrying to help his people.

The second dimension is more intimate. God carries his people and holds them up: “The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” There are two

metaphors here that should be taken together. First, God is the dwelling place of his people. He provides safety and security. Second, Moses uses this beautiful metaphor of God's everlasting arms. Moses had often reminded the people of Israel that God had delivered them from bondage "with an outstretched arm" (same word in Hebrew). Now he says: those same powerful arms that delivered you from bondage are there to hold you up, to prevent you from falling.

By way of illustration, think of a child that gets tired and the father says, "Come here, let me pick you up and carry you." Or think of a child who has climbed into a tree and suddenly becomes afraid, starts crying, and the father says, "Don't worry, I will come over and get you out of there." Likewise, God's people may have this trust and comfort that our heavenly Father will always be there to sustain and support them.

This promise is reinforced with the words "eternal" and "everlasting." "The *eternal* God is your dwelling place and underneath are the *everlasting* arms." What a comfort that is. We have an eternal God. He does not have a beginning and He does not have an ending. And his arms are everlasting—they will never get tired and they will always be underneath!

It reminds me of a situation that I encounter, now that I am a grandfather. I love carrying my grandchildren around our home, but as those "little ones" grow up and become heavier, my arms get tired after a while. But the LORD's arms, Moses tells us, do not get tired. *His* arms are everlasting.

What does this mean? It means that God's people will never hit rock bottom. Life can be hard, and we sometimes have to go through very difficult times in our life, and yet there is no moment when we are not carried and sustained by God's everlasting arms. Back in February, when Dr. Van Raalte hit some object with his snowmobile and went flying, there was not a moment that he had escaped the everlasting arms of God.

This also applies when we fall into sin. Remember the example of Jonah. He walked away from the assignment the Lord had given him, and he ended up in the depths of the sea. But even there the Lord's arms reached him. "The waters closed in over me to take my life....," Jonah said, "yet you brought up my life from the pit" (Jonah 2:5,6).

I urge each one of you to remember this, wherever you may go in the coming months and in whatever situation you may find yourself. When you have that sinking feeling, remember the promise about God's everlasting arms and ask Him to pick you up.

Moses highlights yet another dimension of God's help. The LORD will go ahead, before his people: "And he thrust out the enemy before you and said 'Destroy'" (v. 27). These words can also be translated in future tense, as a promise. The people of Israel had some sense of what was waiting for them. After crossing the Jordan, they would have to drive out the nations that lived in Canaan. A scary prospect! But they can be assured that the LORD will go into battle for them, ahead of them, if only they put their trust in Him.

If we reflect on these three dimensions of God's help, we have a picture of total security. As one commentator, Daniel Block, says: "Yahweh rides *above* Israel, he upholds his people from *below*, and he marches on *ahead* of them."¹

These promises are important for us to keep in mind as we look forward to the activities of this summer and beyond. Some of you are going to classis. Many of you will be spending time in ministry situations. Some of you might feel like the people of Israel, wondering what will happen on the other side of the Jordan River....

The ministry can be difficult. It can be stressful. You have heard stories about this, and you will probably hear more stories about it as you get involved in internships and ministry situations this summer. But keep in mind that the ministry is the work of the Lord, and that He promises to be there, to uphold his servants, and to sustain them with his everlasting arms.

Remember the LORD's promise to Joshua, the one who was commissioned to lead God's people into the promised land: "Be strong and courageous, for you shall bring the people of Israel into the land I swore to give them. I will be with you!" (31:23)

I will be with you! Does that ring a bell? The Son of God told his apostles the same thing, just before He ascended into heaven: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Mat. 28:20). This brings us to the final aspect.

The fulfillment of God's help

We need to talk about the Lord Jesus, but I want to go back to Moses one more time. Moses was the founding leader of Israel, but in his farewell speech he does not draw attention to himself at all. He is not talking about his achievements. He is not trying to secure his personal legacy by erecting memorials to himself. He wants the people of Israel to focus on their God.

If we now compare Moses and the Lord Jesus, we see an important difference. Moses *did not* talk about himself in his farewell speech, but the Lord Jesus *did*. Moses was just a prophet. Jesus is the Son of God. Immediately prior to his death, after Judas had left, the Lord Jesus called his disciples around him for final conversations and to bless them.

When you read his speech to his disciples in John 13-16, you will see that he repeatedly draws attention to his Father in heaven, but He also presents *himself* as the focus of the disciples' trust and security: "Believe in God, believe also in me" (14:1). Moses would have never said this, but Jesus did: "Believe in God, believe also in me." He presents himself as "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6).

The Lord Jesus promised his disciples that in Him they would find all the resources needed to cope with a hostile world and with difficult situations in the churches. He offered them hope of a future with him (14:3, "I will come again and take you to myself"). He promised

¹ Insights borrowed from Daniel I. Block, NIV Application Commentary on Deuteronomy.

to give them the resources needed for any circumstance (14:13, “whatever you ask in my name...”). He promised divine presence and aid in the person of the Holy Spirit (14:26, “He will teach you all things”). He assured them of his and the Father’s love (15:9, “as the Father has loved me, so have I have loved you”). Even though He would be in heaven and they on earth, He told them to abide in Him and expect abundant fruitfulness (15:1-8, “abide in me and I in you... whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit”). He promised to give them the ultimate triumph (16:33, “in the world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world”).

If we then look at how this all played out in the lives of the apostles, we see that the Lord’s promises were trustworthy and true. The apostle Paul, for example, certainly had his share of struggles and strife. But if you read his letters, he often talks about the joy that is experienced in the ministry. And in almost every letter he refers to his thanksgiving for the work of the Lord in the churches.

We need to apply this. Dear students, as you go out into ministry situations, no doubt, you will experience that the work of the Lord is hard and demanding, but you will also see the Lord at work in the churches, and I can assure you that this will be a joy and encouragement to you. Yes, the ministry is demanding, and it can be stressful at times, but it is not a place of gloom and doom. It is a place where you get to see the Holy Spirit at work, renewing and enriching the lives of God’s people. It is my prayer that in the coming months all of you will be able to experience the reality of how the gospel changes people and how the Lord turns people’s mourning into dancing (Ps. 30:11).

Whatever your assignment is for the next little while, go forth without fear, knowing that you have a strong Helper and Defender at your side. You have the promise of the Father’s everlasting arms to hold you up. You have the promise of the Spirit’s presence to teach you and to guide you in all wisdom. You have all this because of the commitment of the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. Look up to Him for everything you need, and it will be well.