



## Salvation through Judgement (Deuteronomy 31:30-32:47)

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Stories are powerful things. They are the foundation of the best works of fiction. They are one of the most effective ways of teaching history. When used to communicate truth, they have a remarkable ability to instruct, warn, and comfort. When the prophet Nathan needed to correct King David, he told a story. When Jesus explained the realities of the kingdom of God, he spoke in parables, or stories.

The Bible itself doesn't just contain stories. It tells one big story – a story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. A story that explains our experience in this world better than any other. A story that gives life precisely because it's not centered on you or me. It's all about Jesus, the Eternal Son of God.

God created us with an awareness that we are part of his story. But that doesn't stop us from suppressing the truth and retelling the story of our lives in such a way that God is conspicuously absent. We're just like the people of Israel in Deuteronomy. We forget God is the center of our story. Something or someone else looms larger. It's the root of all sin.

In Deut 32, right before he dies, Moses gives Israel the gift of a story. It's a story about the past and the future, a true story that urges them (and us) to order our lives according to God's big story. Moses tips his cards in v. 3. "For I will proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God!"

"Ascribe" is not a description of what Moses is about to do. It's a command. Israel, I'm going to proclaim the radically God-centered story of your life through the words of a song you cannot forget. Why? So that when every chapter of the story comes to pass exactly God has said, you will respond by ascribing greatness to our God. So that when you are suffering under the weight of sin, you will turn back to the Lord, trust him, and order your life according to his ways.

Here's the main point of the story. It's the single most important reality Israel needed to remember as she stood poised on the banks of the Jordan, eager to enjoy life in the land God promised. We need it just as much! **God is faithful in salvation through judgment that we might know there is no Rock besides him.**

Do you believe that, my friend? That's God's story. And Moses tells it as a story of four "rocks" which are ultimately One Rock. The Rock who gives life, the Rock we reject, a Rock of judgment, and a Rock of salvation.

## **CHAPTER 1: THE LORD IS THE ROCK WHO GIVES LIFE (vv. 4-14)**

The song begins where all true stories begin, with the God who created us, in whom we live, move, and have our being. V. 4 tells us what he's like. "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice." Why does Moses compare God to a rock? Because rocks are enduring, immovable, reliable, and sure – everything we are not. Think El Capitan in Yosemite National Park.

There's a constancy, a consistency, an absolute faithfulness, at the core of who God is. Not with respect to wickedness, like a gangster who predictably does what is wrong. With respect to justice and righteousness. All his works – past, present, and future – are "perfect." He always does what is just, good, and right. Why? Because his divine nature is "without iniquity" and his actions conform in every respect to the perfection of nature. His ways "are justice" because he is completely "just and upright."

His integrity? Unassailable. His deeds? Matchless. No one in the universe is more wonderfully dependable than our God. He is a Rock like no other. From the dawn of creation, v. 8, he reigns over every nation in the world. And yet in his overflowing goodness, he chose a particular people for himself. V. 9, "But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage."

Of all the nations on earth, God gave Israel the incredible privilege of being his treasured possession, the unmerited object of his affection. V. 10 tells the story. "He found him in a desert land," enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, "and in the howling waste of the wilderness," where Israel had wandered for the last 40 years. It's a gripping picture of what life apart from God is like. Helpless. Hopeless. Condemned to death.

So what did the Lord do? "He encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye." No one compelled God to do it. He's not like a kid who has to be told by his parents to go hug grandma after opening her Christmas present. He gave his chosen the gift of life, the gift of relationship with himself, because he wanted to do so. He loved her because he is lovely and delighted in the freedom of his will to make her lovely.

The Israelites were exceedingly precious in God's sight - the "apple of his eye." So he fed them, millions of them, every day, for forty years. He gave them water. He kept

their clothing from wearing out. He protected them. He sustained them. He was unimaginably patient with them. V. 11, “Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the LORD alone guided him.” It’s a picture of strong and tender care! No one else did for Israel what Yahweh did.

Eventually, he brought her to Canaan, the land he promised to give her forefathers. In Deuteronomy, Israel had yet to receive it in full, but she was already beginning to enjoy its abundance in the plains of the Transjordan. V. 14, “Curds from the herd...milk from the flock...the very finest of the wheat...foaming wine.”

We’re not talking about basic necessities or all she needed. We’re talking about all she could ever want or imagine! The Lord lavished unmerited blessing on Israel in abundance. He was rich toward her in every way. One miracle of divine generosity after another. V. 13, “Honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock.” 1 Cor 10:4, “For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.”

Friend, you too owe your very life to God! He created you. He knit you together in your mother’s womb. There’s nothing you have – no ability, no skill, no resource, no provision or power – that you have not received. Apart from him you can do nothing. Apart from him you would have nothing. You couldn’t even breath the air you just inhaled unless you he gave it to you. Jas 1:17, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...”

As creatures we could not be more indebted to our Creator. Both the glory of who God is and what he’s done demand our devotion. And that’s where the song begins, with the Rock whose work is perfect. A God of faithfulness. Supremely worthy of praise. Supremely worthy of allegiance. What’s the right response? Gratitude. Trust. Obedience. It didn’t happen, at least not for long.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE LORD IS THE ROCK WE REJECT (vv. 15-18)**

Look at v. 15. “But Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked; you grew fat, stout, and sleek; then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.” If life in the wilderness is the test of adversity. Life in Canaan is the test of prosperity. No troubles. No problems. No suffering to keep her mindful of her absolute dependence on the Lord of Life. Only abundance and blessing.

How did Israel respond to that test? She rejected the Lord. She exchanged loving and serving the Rock who created her and gave her life for pagan idols. It’s the same thing



Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. The same thing we all naturally do today. We exchange worshiping the One True God for “strange gods” (v. 16) that are “no gods” at all (v. 17), “new gods” that promise pleasure without requiring all that bothersome obedience stuff.

Entertainment. Ease. Wealth. Our reputation in the eyes of men. We are endlessly creative in selecting alternatives to the Everlasting Rock. He has been nothing but faithful. Yet we turn our backs on him and embrace lovers we think we can control. In a word, we sin.

We take classes on mindfulness, hoping to find peace by getting more in touch with what we’re thinking and feeling. V. 18 captures the real problem. “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.” Israel never flat out denied God’s existence. She simply stopped paying attention. The Lord gradually faded from view.

Friend, that danger is just as great today. Our tendency to become “unmindful” of the Lord, remains. It’s one of the reasons we need the community of the church. I need you to stir me up to remember God is sovereign, loving, and wise. The preaching of God’s Word, sharing in the sacraments, the gift of conversation with fellow believers, those are supernatural means of grace God has ordained to keep you from forgetting “the Rock that bore you,” friend.

Whenever we sin, we relate to God in the opposite way of how he relates to us. He is faithful and just. We are faithless and unjust. I’m not just talking about what bad guys on the news have done. I’m talking about every one of us has done! We’ve all gone astray. V. 5, “They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation.

The LORD is the Rock who gives us life, and yet he is the Rock we reject. The question in v. 6 indicts us no less than Israel. “Do you thus repay the LORD, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?”

### **CHAPTER 3: THE LORD IS A ROCK OF JUDGMENT (vv. 19-33)**

Look at v. 21. “They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are no people. I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.” God isn’t retaliating. He’s saying, “Israel, because you have turned away from me to false gods, I will turn away from

you. I will not participate in your spiritual adultery by continuing to bless you. I will give my help and favor to another nation that is not my people, a nation I will use to punish you for your unfaithfulness.

It's the judgment of exile, when the Lord allows the Assyrians and Babylonians to destroy his people. In Deuteronomy, it all has yet to happen. But the Lord foresees their rebellion and points to his certain response. The surrounding nations will triumph over you to the point where you become jealous of their success and finally ask, "Why is Yahweh prospering them instead of us? I thought we were God's chosen people? Why are we suffering?" V. 22 provides the answer. "For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burn to the depths of Sheol, devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains."

The judgment of God in response to sin is not a religious scare tactic. It's the moral foundation of the universe and an awesome expression of his justice. Evil will be punished. Righteousness will be rewarded. The Lord alone will be exalted. He will hold you accountable, my friend, for what you have done with the life he gave you.

There is no escape. Even in the grave, "the depths of Sheol," God will find you. The "increase" or riches of this earth may distract you for the next 40 years, but it cannot hide you from your Maker. When Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, all the stuff in which you trusted will be devoured. There will be no hiding place. Even the most seemingly immovable rocks in the world, "the mountains," will be consumed by the wrath of God. As Rom 3:19 says, "the whole world" will be "held accountable to God."

His judgment is personal, comprehensive, and inescapable. So why isn't Israel completely wiped out? It has nothing to do with something good in her. It has everything to do with God's concern for his holy name. V. 26, "I would have said, 'I will cut them to pieces; I will wipe them from human memory,' had I not feared provocation by the enemy, lest their adversaries should misunderstand, lest they should say, 'Our hand is triumphant, it was not the LORD who did all this.'"

God is jealous for his glory. He doesn't want Israel's enemies to conclude, "Man, look at us! We overcame them because we're stronger. Our gods are better. Look at what our hands have done!" No. Israel's judgment is my doing, says the Lord. And lest you conclude your will is supreme and rob me of glory, I will not allow you to wipe them out. Friends, the fear of the Lord begins with recognizing the utter God-centeredness of God. All he does is driven by a supreme concern for the honor of his name.

In vv. 30-31, Israel begins to recognize she's ordered her life according to the wrong story. She comes to her spiritual senses and exchange a man-centered fiction for a God-centered reality. She realizes God will not allow us to domesticate him, to rack him up next to all our idols and continue to enjoy his blessings. Either we submit to his righteous rule and center our lives on him, or we will be judged, just like Israel.

It's where all true repentance begins, with recognizing our suffering apart from God isn't pointless. It's his way of opening our eyes to see just how much we need him! "How could one have chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight, unless their Rock had sold them, and the LORD had given them up? For their rock is not as our Rock; our enemies are by themselves." Israel realizes the Assyrians and Babylonians didn't overcome her because their gods were superior. It was the Lord's doing. The problem is her relationship with him.

He's been "our Rock" all along. We experienced his covenant faithfulness in the past as a Rock who gives life. Now we're experiencing his covenant-faithfulness as a Rock of judgment. But he's still "our Rock." He's still our Lord. And in that single word "our" a ray of hope shines. Could he become a Rock of life again?

The answer is, "Yes." Wayward Israel exchanged gods, but God has not exchange peoples. Yet salvation for Israel, no less than salvation for us today, doesn't come from something she does for herself. It comes from what the Lord does for her.

#### **CHAPTER 4: THE LORD IS A ROCK OF SALVATION (vv. 34-42)**

"There's something I have purposed," the Lord declares in v. 34. A sovereign plan I have stored up and carefully guarded. It's not a back-up strategy. It's a treasure, a resolve from eternity past in which I delight! What is it? V. 35, "Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly.' For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants..."

God's promising a coming day when he will save Israel by judging the surrounding nations who had taken her captive. Their day of reckoning is coming, and when it does, I will rescue you and vindicate you. Fueled by compassion, I will act for the honor of my name. As I saved you from Egypt through great acts of judgment, so I will save you again.

But what's the promise of salvation through judgment ultimately about? It points forward to the gospel, to the day when Jesus, the Rock of our Salvation, crushed the



Serpent's head at the cross, taking vengeance on all the powers of sin and death. Then he rose from the grave, proving his death was more than sufficient to atone for the guilt of your sin, destroy the power of your sin, and replace the death you deserve with an assurance of eternal life for all who trust in him.

When does God promise he will bring his salvation to pass? V. 36, "...when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free." He doesn't break in when Israel's power is small. He breaks in when her power to save herself is "gone"! Why wait until she's helpless? So it might be abundantly clear to all, Israel included, that salvation belongs to the Lord!

It's the same reason God brings us to an end of ourselves today. He wants us to recognize just how much we need him – not because he's toying with us, but because he loves us. Because until we see and know the depth of our need, we will never run to him for salvation. Friend, take heart if you consider your life and feel like you're at the end of your rope. That's precisely when the Lord delights to redeem and restore. Don't despair. You're not there by accident. Look to the Lord!

What compels him to bring physically exiled Israel home? The same thing that compels him to bring spiritually exiled people home today. Look at v. 37. "Then he will say, 'Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge, who at the fat of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their drink offering? Let them rise up and help you; let them be your protection!'"

He's reminding us that all the false gods we cling to instead of him never deliver as promised! Salvation belongs to God and God alone. He's the only Rock. There is no other! Look at v. 39. This is the ultimate reason God works salvation through judgment for his people. "See now that I, even I am he, and there is no god besides me; I kill and make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand."

It's the main point of the entire song. Arguably, it's the main point of the entire book of Deuteronomy. Israel, KingsWay, the LORD alone is God! There is no other! The power of judgment and salvation alike are exclusively and eternally his. His will is supreme. His purposes are irrevocable.

You are not God. Your boss is not God. Your broken body is not God. Nor are the friends who betray you, the spouse who hurts you, or the pastor or politician who disappoints you. Your life does not come from them and is not controlled by them. Your life comes from the Lord. Will you not trust him? Will you not hope in him? He's the Rock of your salvation!

Is that not what you need to remember every morning you arise, Christian? There are some who say, "I'm not really into all that doctrine stuff. I'm more of a practical Christianity kind of guy." Friend, the monotheism at the heart of our faith, the utter uniqueness and supremacy of God as he has revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ could not be more practical!

When one kid is screaming and the other is throwing up, what do you need to remember? The Lord alone is God. When your teenager says, "I'm done," and slams the door in your face, what do you need to remember? The Lord alone is God. When the lug nut won't come off the wheel stud, what do you need to remember? The Lord is God. When you stumble and fall into the same sin again, Christian, what do you need to remember? The Lord is still God.

The spiritual and physical enemies arrayed against you in this life are more than your enemies. They are Jesus' enemies. The battle is the Lord's And he swears by his own life in v. 40 that his work of saving you by judging them will surely succeed.

## **CONCLUSION**

The song of Deut 32 is the story of the gospel – the Lord is the Rock who gives life, the Rock we reject, a Rock of judgment, and a Rock of salvation. And like the gospel, it demands a two-fold response. V. 43, "Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people's land."

**The first response is to rejoice with the Lord!** As the Father, Son, and Spirit delight in the wonder and power of gospel, so too we are commanded to follow their example! Here's what that means. Trusting Jesus to save you requires more than mental assent, more than knowing what he did for you on the cross. It requires wholehearted affection – savoring the good news of the gospel – treasuring Jesus for who he is and what he's done for you!

It sounds like Ps 118:21–24. "I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

**The second response is the overflow of the first. We gladly submit to his rule or as Moses says, we "bow down" to him!** As 1 Jn 5:3 declares, "For this is the love of





God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” Why not? Because they mark out the path of joy and life. When Jesus is your treasure, no act of sacrificial obedience is too great in order to have him.

The Apostle Paul recognizes in Rom 15:10 that when Moses summons the universe to rejoice in the Lord and bow down to him, he’s pointing forward to the universal invitation of the gospel. Rom 15:10, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” In response to all God has done, he commands the whole world to joyfully trust and obey the Lord. We need to remember and respond to the story of the gospel no less than Israel, KingsWay. We need to sing songs that cause the Word of Christ to dwell in us richly (Col 3:16)!

And whenever you read God’s big story or sing of God’s big story, you have a choice to make. Will you take it to heart or not? V. 46, “Take heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law.”

How can we know whether we have taken the gospel to heart? When the truth about Jesus comes out in the words we speak. When those for whom God has given us spiritual responsibility – starting with your children and extending to the fellow members of the church in which God has placed you – are the beneficiary of encouragement, instruction, and correction that directs their gaze to Jesus and equips them to follow Jesus.

Those who take the gospel to heart demonstrate as much by practicing gospel-centered discipleship. We remind one another to hold fast to the Rock of our Salvation! If words that give spiritual life are not coming out of you, it may very well mean there is little to no spiritual life within you.

Why is a lifestyle of gospel-centered discipleship so important? Because the Word of Christ is no “empty word” for us, KingsWay. It is, v. 47, our “very life,” because it is through the good news of the Word Made Flesh that we come to enjoy relationship with the Lord of Life. He gives us spiritual life through his Word. And he sustains our life through his Word.

May we rejoice and submit to Jesus as the center of our stories this year, brothers and sisters. For He is the center of God’s story. He is faithful in judgment and salvation that we might know there is no Rock besides him.