

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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PASS THE BATON

Deuteronomy 31:1-8

In honor of Mother's Day, here is a list of some of the worst Mother's Day gifts ever, according to mothers who actually received these gifts:

- Cleaning supplies
- Hair dye
- Deodorant
- Fire extinguisher
- Car parts
- Screwdriver
- Calculator
- Toilet paper
- Salad dressing

If you're in need of a last-minute gift for your mom or wife, you can do better than these. A lot better.

And then, here are a few of the worst Mother's Day cards ever. One card says:

“Well, I guess this Mother's Day card is late.
Looks like someone wasn't raised properly.”

Another says:

“I'm awesome. You're welcome.
To the luckiest Mom ever.”

Another says:

“Mom, thanks for always checking up on me.”
(Showing a picture of a cell phone
with 24 unanswered calls from “Mom.”)

Still another says:

“Mom, I love you loads.”
(Showing a picture of a laundry basket
overflowing with clothes.)
“Speaking of loads ...
Can you do my laundry?”

Not the kinds of cards your mom desires or deserves on Mother's Day.

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We have now come to the final chapter in the long and storied life of Moses, one of the true giants in the history of God's chosen people. The death of Moses is recorded in Deuteronomy 34, which tells of Moses climbing Mount Nebo to the top of Pisgah, from which the Lord gives him a panoramic view of the whole land of Canaan, which God had promised to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses is permitted to see the Promised Land, but, because of his failure to follow God's instructions and to honor God as holy in the sight of the Israelite people in Numbers 20, he, like his brother Aaron, is prohibited from entering the Promised Land.

Earlier, in Deuteronomy 3, Moses recalls how he had pleaded with the Lord to let him cross the Jordan River and go into the Promised Land before he died. But the Lord refused, saying to Moses: "That is enough. I don't want to hear another word about it. Joshua will lead the people into the land. Not you" (3:23-28).

Before that, in Numbers 27, when the Lord tells Moses it is about time for him to be "gathered to (his) people" (27:13) – in other words, to die – Moses asks the Lord to appoint his successor as the leader of Israel, the man of God's choice to "lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (27:16-17). With the clock winding down on his life, Moses is concerned about the well-being of the people of Israel after he is gone. Rather than presuming to appoint his own successor, Moses asks God to make clear His choice.

The Lord's choice, as we know, is Moses' longtime assistant Joshua, one of the two faithful spies (along with Caleb) who had explored the land of Canaan nearly 40 years earlier (Numbers 13-14). The Lord instructs Moses to take Joshua – "the Spirit is in him!" (MSG), to lay his hand on him as a sign of the transfer of leadership authority to Joshua, and to commission Joshua as the one chosen by God to succeed Moses and lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land (Numbers 27:18-23).

When we get to Deuteronomy 31, Moses knows his remaining time is short. He makes no bones about the fact that he is an old man. In verse 2 he says to the people: "I am now 120 years old and no longer able to lead you."

Can you imagine living to be 120? Who wants to live that long in these aching, creaking jars of clay? In the case of Moses, though, even at the age of 120, the Scripture says, "his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone" (Deut. 34:7). Even so, Moses knew it was time for him to go, because he knew it was time for the people of Israel to cross over into Canaan and take possession of the Promised Land.

Before he goes, though, Moses gives this charge in Deuteronomy 31 to all the people, reminding them of what God has promised to do for them, and urging them to "be strong and courageous," not to be frightened or intimidated by the people who live in the land, because, he says, "the LORD your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you" (31:3-6).

Moses then gives almost the identical charge to Joshua in the presence of the people. As the leader of the people, Joshua, too, is to “be strong and courageous.” He, too, is not to be frightened or intimidated or discouraged, because “the LORD Himself goes before you and will be with you.” As he has said to the people, Moses now says to Joshua: “He” – the Lord – “will never leave you nor forsake you” (31:7-8).

After the death of Moses, the Lord repeats this promise to Joshua. In Joshua 1:5, the Lord says to him: “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

That is a pretty amazing promise, don’t you think? God promises to both Joshua and all the people of Israel the grace of His unfailing presence. He promises He will never abandon them or leave them. He will always be with them, always be there for them. Can you imagine what that must have meant to Joshua as he prepared to step into Moses’ shoes?

Wouldn’t you love to go through life with a promise like that? The Israelites, unfortunately, misunderstood God’s promises to them. They seemed to think it didn’t matter what they did or how they lived. They seemed to think they could get away with murder or the worship of other gods or whatever the sin du jour happened to be, and God would always come to their aid, rescue them from the consequences of their sinful folly, and give them some candy or ice cream as a treat. God was – is – always gracious, but it is a grave mistake to think that God owes you – or anyone – His grace. God was faithful to His promise never to abandon or forsake His covenant people. He always preserved a remnant of His people. But when His covenant people rejected Him, or reject Him today, as the Bible says, you reap what you sow (Galatians 6:7). Sin has consequences. It is a basic principle of life.

Joshua and the people of Israel were given the promise of God’s unfailing presence, the iron-clad assurance that God would never leave them nor forsake them. Here is some really good news: God has given the same promise to you and me, to all of us who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. We have the promise of Jesus in Matthew 28, when He gave His followers and us the Great Commission to go and make disciples. The same Lord Jesus who was given the name Emmanuel, which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23), would assure His disciples: “I am with you always, even to the end of the world” (28:20).

I. Am. With. You. Always. That is a promise you can count on.

The promise of God’s unfailing presence and love is reaffirmed by Paul in Romans 8, where the apostle asserts that literally nothing – neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither anything in the present or in the future, nor any powers, neither anything up or anything down, nor anything else anywhere in all creation – can separate us from the love of God for us in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

These are probably familiar words to most of you. Maybe to all of you. I hope they are. They are among the most uplifting words in the whole Bible. But maybe you need to be reminded of them today. Maybe you need to be reminded that the promise of God’s unfailing presence and love is for *you*. Maybe you’re shouldering a huge responsibility that is keeping

you up at night. Maybe you're a parent who is concerned about the future of your children. Maybe you're a son or daughter who is concerned about your parents' well-being. Maybe life is just hard.

The promise of God to Israel and to Joshua to be with them, like the promise of Jesus to His followers and the promise of Romans 8:38-39, is meant for you. Personally, it is meant for us. It is repeated in Hebrews 13 where, among his final exhortations, the writer of Hebrews urges his readers to "keep your lives free from the love of money" (obviously, a very common and dangerous infatuation) "and be content with what you have, because God has said" (now quoting Deuteronomy 31:6):

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

"So," the writer of Hebrews continues (now quoting Psalm 118:6-7), "we say with confidence:

'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"

Exactly. *If* we know the Lord is our helper; *if* we know He will never leave us or forsake us; *if* we know that He is with us always; *if* we know that *nothing* can ever separate us from His presence and His love; why in the world should we ever be afraid? Why should we ever give in to fear?

When you are fearful, when you are tempted to give in to fear, remember God's promise to you. Preach God's promise to yourself and to one another. Remind yourself and each other that Jesus is with you always, that God will never leave you nor forsake you, and that nothing can ever get between you and God's love for you. *Nothing*.

That is what Moses most wanted the people of Israel to know as the time approached for them to cross the Jordan River and – at last – begin to take possession of the Promised Land. It is what Moses most wanted Joshua to know as he, the founding father of the nation of Israel, passed the baton to his successor as the leader of this fledgling nation. As he passed the baton of leadership. The baton of God-ordained authority.

In a relay race, you know, it is not just speed that counts. It is not just how fast each member of the team can run. Speed does count of course. But you can have the fastest runners and still lose the race if you fail to pass the baton cleanly from one runner to the next. Some of our U. S. Olympic relay teams have had problems with this in the past. At the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, for example, both the U. S. men's and women's 4X100-meter relay teams dropped batons and lost as a result. Four years earlier, at the 2004 Athens Olympics, shoddy baton-passing by the American men cost them a gold medal, while the U. S. Women were disqualified after a botched exchange.

Though he was disqualified himself from leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land personally, Moses wanted to make sure he didn't botch the hand-off to Joshua, whom God

had chosen and prepared during his years of faithful service as Moses' deputy, so that Joshua could effectively lead the people in the conquest of the land.

In virtually every area of life, there are always new leaders to be trained and equipped to take the reins of leadership. In business. In government. In the military. In sports. In education. In the church. In the family. In parenting. Until Jesus returns, the time will always come for one generation to pass on the baton to the next, because unlike Moses, none of us is likely to live to 120. Even if we do, we're still not going to live forever in these mortal bodies. We are all going to return to dust.

Each generation must always be preparing the next generation to assume leadership in life. If we drop the baton, or fail to hand it off, we increase the challenges the next generation will face. God knows that. Moses knew it. Wise leaders in church and society know it. Which is one reason why our commitment to and personal involvement in the Great Commission to make disciples in *our* generation of *every* generation matters so much. It is not just a nice spiritual idea. It is the core of our mission as a church. It is one reason why a vigorous, grace-filled, gospel-centered, Bible-saturated ministry to children, youth, and their families is essential. And why developing and empowering a new generation of leaders in the church – in our church – is so critical.

Wise and godly parents know it, too. You know you have a sacred calling from God to raise your children to know and trust and love and serve and follow Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to think and act Christianly throughout their lives.

You can't protect your kids from every possible hurt or disappointment in life. You can't shield them from the possibility of pain or suffering or sorrow. In this life they (our kids) and we (all of us) will have troubles. Jesus said so in John 16:33. But He also said we shouldn't lose heart. We shouldn't be discouraged when troubles intrude. Why? Because He has overcome the world (16:33b). Because His love and power cannot be overcome by the troubles and trials of this world.

Passing the baton to our children involves arming them with the truths and resources of God's Word as the solid rock foundation on which they can build the "house" of their lives (Matthew 7:24-27), so they can deal with the troubles that come without losing heart or faith or hope in God.

In his book *Just Courage*, Gary Haugen, head of the International Justice Mission, a Christian organization dedicated to fighting sex trafficking and other forms of slavery in the world today, writes this about parenting:

"After we have poured into our children all the good food and shelter and clothing, after we have provided them with great education, discipline, structure, and love, after we have worked so hard to provide every good thing, they turn to us and ask: 'Why have you given all of this to me?'"

"And the honest answer from me is; 'So you'll be safe.'"

“And my kid looks up at me and says: ‘Really? That’s it? You want me to be safe? Your grand ambition for my life is that nothing bad happens?’” (124-125)

Parents, is that really your grand ambition for the lives of your children? Or your grandchildren? Or the children of our church? Of course, you want them to be safe. But there is more to life with God than just being safe. And, of course, you want your children and grandchildren to be happy. We all want that. But even the feeling of happiness is not the *summum bonum*, the highest good there is in life.

Don’t you have a higher aspiration for your children? For your grandchildren? For the children God has entrusted to us in our church family? Isn’t it your aspiration to pass on to your children and grandchildren the baton of faith, a true, living, personal faith in Jesus? Isn’t it your ambition for them to truly know God and to love Him, to know and love His Word, and to integrate their faith into every area of their lives?

These are things – I hope none of you will take offense at my saying this – these are things that matter way more than what sports teams your kids play on or what neighborhood you live in.

What I’m saying is: As intense as the cultural pressure may feel at times, don’t sacrifice the spiritual training, nurture, and development of your children by allowing anything, however good it may be in itself, to become more important than your child’s heart relationships with God.

One size does not fit all when it comes to raising children and passing on the baton of faith. Nor does the most godly parenting guarantee that a child will never wander away from the faith. Our children are ultimately responsible before God for the choices they make in life. If you’re the parent of an adult child, and you’re grieved by your son or daughter’s choices in life and distance from God, remember that the last chapter in your son or daughter’s life has not yet been written. The story isn’t over yet. Remember the persistence of the father’s love for the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Don’t stop loving your son or daughter. Don’t stop praying for him or her to come home to the Heavenly Father. It’s not too late. Remember that God is able to do more than you could ever ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

Wherever we may find ourselves in the generational scheme of things, may we rely always on God’s grace and wisdom, and make it our aim to do all we can, in our families and in the church, to pass on the baton to the next generation. As we do, may we never forget the promise of God’s unfailing presence and love. We’re not alone. He is with us always. And He will never, ever leave us or forsake us.

Lord, let it be so. Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. Amen.