

Passing the Baton Deuteronomy 6

I. Let me start this morning by asking the question, has anyone here run in a relay before? Now, my guess is most of us are going to say, "You've got to be kidding!" But think back to Field Day in elementary school. Even if you never ran track and field in middle or high school you probably at some point in your life ran around some traffic cones with 30 marshmallows stuffed in your mouth, or wearing a bucket full of water on your head, or wearing a blindfold and hopping on one leg. Maybe these were not particularly physically challenging but rather made you feel like a big fool. But if you even ran a legit relay in school, college, or in the Olympics you know that one of the aspects of the race is not the running but in handing off the baton. Let's watch the following

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0Klly3vml8>) You might think, "Okay, this is amateur hour. Really how hard can it be! Just passing a little stick from one person to the next?" Let's watch this from last summer's Olympics in Rio. These women we are about to watch are among the top runners in the world and several of them ended up winning golds in their respective events.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3tUwiqxjzo>) So surprisingly enough passing the baton, getting the timing just right, getting in sync with the other runner and getting your hand out in the right place is equally important as training to run like Usain Bolt. In fact, your team can be the fastest in the world but I (and a team of equally out of shape middle aged guys) can beat you if you flop on the handoff. So learning how to pass the baton is of essence if we ever want to compete in a relay. But I imagine most of us are saying, "Ron, you must have eaten too many doughnut holes this morning if you think I ever want to do anything like that. So what gives, talking about all this?" Here is the reason. Most of us never will be in a relay again (if you are lucky!) But if you are a Christ follower, my hope is that you will want to pass along the baton of faith. Maybe to your children, your grandchildren, maybe your nephew or niece, or maybe simply to those close to you such as friends and neighbors. And as we finish up today our series on Moses, we are going to look at how Moses passes on the baton of faith to God's people before he walks off into the sunset.

II. Before we say more about that, let's remember where we are in the Moses story. Pastor Bob did a wonderful job last week exploring the lessons Moses and the Israelites learned while wandering around the desert, aka the wilderness. Among dealing with more complaints than you get from the security line at the airport, Moses had to deal with thousands of legal decisions between his fellow Jews. Sounds like they were almost as litigious as we are today. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law who unfortunately had the same name as a lead character of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, a 1960's sitcom, came up with the perfect solution. Empower the laity, the people, to do ministry. A radical idea he had. That everyone is called to serve in some capacity. This enabled Moses to focus on the big picture while other trusted Israelites did the day to day work. The church still employs this method. This is why I insist on folks here at G3 not calling myself or any of the pastors "the ministers." We are not the ministers, but some of the ministers since all Christ followers are called to ministry, or God's service, of some kind or the other. Later in the wilderness Moses' own faith wavered, so like many of his fellow Jews, he would never see the Promised Land to which they were headed. And that gets us back to our topic today.

III. It wasn't too many years ago that my grandfather discovered he had terminal cancer. My grandmother had passed several years before and his health was failing on many fronts. There was some talk of treatment but in the end, that would have been a delaying action as there was no real hope for a cure. He decided to let the disease take its course. I remember my last visit with him a few weeks before he died. We sat in the family room of his small Tennessee house in the mountains in front of an

expansive window that looked upon acres and acres of open land. We watched a family of deer make their way up from the bluff to feed on some acorns in the waning winter sun. We both knew this was the last time we would see each other this side of eternity. I know there was so much that he wanted to say but something held him back. I finally asked him about his faith. He replied by showing me an ancient bible. As he opened it you could hear the leather cracking. He pointed me to the very page where it read "Carl Moore accepted Jesus on July 3rd, 1927". I wanted to hear more. I wanted to hear how accepting Jesus might have changed his life. I wanted to hear if this decision impacted all his other decisions. I wanted to hear if being a Jesus follower gave shape and meaning during his service in WWII. I wanted to hear if being a Christian made a difference in the Jim Crow South. I wanted to hear so much more but that is all I would get from a man I loved and respected my whole life. A man who told me story after story of his adventures as a boy growing up in North Georgia but could barely utter a word about what supposedly was foundational to who he was. I decided then and there that if nothing else my children and, Lord willing, my grandchildren and friends would know about my faith. If they knew nothing else, that is one baton I wanted to make sure I didn't drop.

IV. Moses evidently felt the same way. God let him on to the fact that his days were coming to an end. I mean, 120 years old wasn't bad in the days before antibiotics and Poligrip. He had spent the last 40 years leading his people (who at times acted like a gaggle of grouchy preschoolers who needed a nap) through some of the most treacherous and hostile environments on the earth. And before that, Moses confronted the most powerful leader in the ancient world. And spent the years before that caring for ornery sheep in the middle of nowhere. Moses had to be tired after leading such a life and was ready to go home, to his eternal home, to the God he had served and loved. But before he climbed his last mountain, Mount Nebo, where he would die, he gave a long series of sermons that retold the Exodus story as well as served as Moses' last word and testament on keeping the faith. We find in this book Moses passing the spiritual baton to the next generation. This is why Deuteronomy is considered one of the most important books of the entire Hebrew bible. Not only is it like the Cliff or Spark Notes version of the book of Exodus, but it summarizes the most core teachings of God spoken through Moses, which Jesus will later build upon at the Sermon on the Mount. Let's look at just one of Moses' farewell speeches as he is passing the baton. **Deuteronomy 6: 1-12 and 20-25 MSG**

V. As Hamilton points out, you can sense the urgency of Moses' words as he understands that the Jewish faith was only one generation away from extinction. They were about to go into a land that worshipped other gods and had religious practices that included "sacred" prostitution. As I shared before, consider how tempting this would be: "Hey, Eliab, sure you can go ahead to the Tent of Meeting and sacrifice Billy the goat for your sins, OR you can come with me to the temple of Baal and "worship" with Padriya in her private chambers." But not only would they be tempted by foreign gods, as Moses points out, they would also be tempted by the easy life. We see this in verses **6:10-12 MSG**. When the good life comes don't forget how you got there, Moses is saying. I don't know about you, but I find that I am most likely to wander off from God not when things in my life are going bad but when things are going really well. When Meg and I have experienced our most hardship, when we didn't know how we were going to pay the bills, when we didn't know if G3 was going to be able to go forward, or when we faced a health crisis of one thing or another, we clung to God like a tick on a dog. But those times when we actually have a little extra in the bank, when the church is rolling along, and there are no dark clouds to be seen (metaphorically speaking) I tend, to borrow Moses' words, to "forget the Lord" ...how I got to the place I am. And this isn't just my story, it was the Jews' (God's people) story and the story of many

of us here as well. Some of us might remember that immediately after 9/11 there was a surge of church attendance. But that only lasted a few weeks and then we began to forget. Not about the attacks but about our need for God.

VI. One Old Testament Scholar, Walter Brueggeman, discerned a pattern with the ancient Israelites. He described it as “orientation, disorientation, and reorientation” ...things are going well so they forget God, life begins to unravel and then they turned back to God, life became good again and the pattern repeated. And it is the same with us. Writer Brennan Manning described it something like this: “We get up, we fall down and we get up again.” But this returns us to the question, how do we pass on the baton of faith even when we are so fickle? And we should know that the church is always one generation away from extinction too.

VII. Let’s look again at Moses’ words. **DT 6:6-9 MSG** For we parents and grandparents who follow Christ, when is the last time we brought up Jesus in our day-to-day conversation with our kids? That is what Moses is getting at here. If we are Jesus followers, it seems kind of strange if we don’t. It’s not like He is a secret we are trying to keep from them except on Sundays. It would be like if you were on a bowling team, but the only time you ever even mentioned bowling was on game day. Let’s say your child mentions the fact they tripped on your bowling ball in the hall way and you respond, “Jimmy, I don’t know what you are talking about. I don’t bowl. That is my own personal wrecking ball.” Kind of strange, right? Jesus shouldn’t be like Lord Voldemort from Harry Potter...“He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” I understand that we don’t want it to be forced or creepy, like “Suzy, look at my egg salad sandwich...you can see Jesus smiling!” But we should talk about Jesus when it fits. You don’t have to be a bible scholar. Ultimately the Christian life is about transformation not information. Yes, reading the bible is vital to help us get to know Jesus. But the living out what we learn is even more important. The point? Bring Jesus into everyday conversations. If your son comes home complaining about how he found out that his best friend was talking about him behind his back, ask something like “How do you think Jesus would want you to handle this?” Or when you do something wrong you say, “I messed up. I need to ask forgiveness from God and the person I wronged.” Or if they have a kid at school that is a real bonehead, ask them “Why do you think Larry is so mean? Let’s pray Jesus will strike him dead” Kidding. Or if we are in that disorientation season where we are feeling far from God, we can let our children know, if they are teenagers. “You can pray for me. I know God is present but I am just not sensing Him right now. I am in a dry spot spiritually.”

VIII. What does this do? It introduces them to a personal God. He is not something out there completely unknowing but someone we can have a relationship with. It also brings God into our day-to-day life. He is not just a Sunday God, He is an everyday God that is with us every moment of every day...and He cares about every aspect of our life. But Moses’ commands here also means we need to walk it not just talk it. Our children should see us feeding the hungry, caring for the hurting, visiting the prisons, or whatever we as ministers may be called to. Otherwise we end up being like Coach Gibson, my cross-country coach, who had us run while following close behind in a golf cart watching TV and eating French fries...yelling between scarfing down Burger King, “Run, run, run!” Not very inspirational. And neither is saying that our faith is important, as parents or grandparents, yet keeping it hidden. Instead, bring God into everyday discussions...whether we are sitting at the dinner table or on the way back from soccer practice. We can of course do the same kind of things for our friends and those who are closest for us. This is what passing the baton of faith looks like and will help keep it from being extinguished. **Brian**

IX. Well my youngest daughter is starting high school next week. When she comes downstairs in the morning she no longer looks like the little girl I remember. She, like her older sister, has become a young woman in what seems like overnight. But I can still see her as five years old with big brown pigtails. It seems just like yesterday I was chasing her down the hall at Mt. Tabor preschool pretending to be "Franklenstein." Yes Franklenstein. That is how she said it. It was one of my favorite parts of my day. And she couldn't wait for when I or her mom would pick her back up to take her home. But no longer. Now she is more than happy to leave home to hang with friends. We still have a little parenting left but we are over the hump. And my hope and prayer is that despite my mistakes and missteps as a father, that despite the fact I haven't always run the race of faith well and even came close to giving it up a few times, that on the day we drop her off to college she will know Jesus intimately and follow Him as her Lord. And that when the day comes to take my last breath as it came for Moses on Mount Nebo, I will have passed the one baton that counts. My hope and prayer is you do the same as well.