

What's the Connection?

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Westmont College Baccalaureate Address

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Deut. 31:24-29, 32:45-47.

What an honor, you guys. Thank you for this invitation.

You know, your time here at Westmont bears an eerie resemblance to mine. Your arrival coincided with my time as “unchaplain” while we waited for Ben Patterson to come. We were *all* getting oriented that semester. As other faculty were teaching you how to learn, they were teaching me how to teach. As you were looking for majors, I was looking for full-time positions. When you were off campus, I was off campus!

That era together makes us *fellow* students, as well as fellow instructors. I hope our time together has been as formative for you as it has for me.

And look at you now! Y'all clean up pretty good! Another class of caterpillars has transformed into butterflies. Amazing. And so encouraging.

Finger your tassels for a second. Tonight they are on the right. Tomorrow they – and you – cross over to the other side. That is a big deal, and it calls for more than congratulations and sentimentality. So I am going to interrupt this little love-fest and get serious.

What do you guys think it will be like *over there*? What's going on in those agile graduating heads of yours?

As I have tried to guess – and remember – I have thought of the Israelites as they made their final preparations to enter the land of Canaan. What a range of feelings there must be in this room tonight:

- Some of you are raring to go into that land of milk and honey, and take what is now yours. Bring it on!

- Some of you just want to kiss this place goodbye. No more manna from the DC! No more papers! No more professors! No more chapel! No more community life standards! No more public displays of spirituality. I may not know what comes next, but I know that I'm outta *here!*
- Some of you are shocked at how attached you became to the quirky life here in the wilderness of Montecito. You got better and better at gathering manna, packing and unpacking, marching wherever you were told, obeying the rules – and bending, circumventing, and breaking the m too. You endured and adapted. Now you are surprised at how much you already miss it, and tempted to wander a little while longer in graduate school. (I have news for you: grad school is a lot less like college than you think. A *lot* less.)
- Some of you are intimidated by the giants in the so-called “real world” you will be entering. For you Westmont has felt more like a bubble than a wilderness. You worry that despite all we've said, what you have been learning here will prove irrelevant to life on the other side. What does hiking have to do with conquering? What does camping have to do with farming? What do GE courses have to do with a career? All that liberal arts talk seemed so promising back in Egypt, but what if it turns out not to work? Can I go back home and be a kid again? (Uh, no.) Is it too late to transfer to a research university? (Uh, yes.)
- I imagine many of you are worried – and some of you are relieved – about what your lives will look like once the pillar of fire and smoke disappears and you are on your own. Your hands have been held spiritually for years on-campus, and perhaps for decades off-

campus. Now we are letting go. Whether the sensation of free hands is delightful or terrifying, it is unnerving, and you wonder how everything will turn out.

- Above all, I sense some of you are finding yourselves struggling to put it all together at this turning point in your lives. You are thinking back to your parents' stories of Egypt, reminiscing over your own wilderness experiences, and speculating about what life in the new land could possibly be like. How can such different things possibly tie together? What is the connection?

Well, that depends.

Whichever group you fall into, you still have a possible future in which there is *no* meaningful connection. You could enter the Promised Land with any attitude you like and still forget about everything that brought you into it – all the promise, the sacrifices, and the investments. You could ignore the Torah you have received and learned in the wilderness. You could exchange your distinctiveness (another word for that is holiness) for conformity. You could go from *fitting* to merely *fitting in*. You could do it so slowly and subtly that the change would be imperceptible. And if you did, your past would drift away from your future.

American culture rewards that kind of behavior just as ancient Near Eastern culture and ancient Roman culture did, and a lot of today's graduates of Christian educations respond accordingly. They let go of their old stories and adopt new, more comfortable ones. Whether suddenly or gradually, they surrender themselves – to employers, peers, families, mates, the market, the state, and especially to their own fleeting desires. They gain the world – and they lose their souls.

There is another possible future that doesn't involve fragmentation, confusion, adversity, and loss of identity. In many ways, it looks a lot like the other one: similar careers, similar neighborhoods, and similar families. After all, Jesus is lord of all. Yet in this future, your stories up to now have *everything* to do with your stories from here on. What is the connection between the lives your parents and your school have taught you and the lives you will be living in dramatically different contexts? The faithfulness of *God* is the connection. Only the God of Israel – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – will turn these different seasons of your life, with all their triumphs and devastations, into one whole happy story.

That sounds trite, doesn't it? I mean, *doesn't* it? Well, hear me out.

Deuteronomy is set on the eve of Israel's entry into the Promised Land, at Israel's baccalaureate service as it were. Among its closing remarks are these:

When Moses had finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them: "Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today; give them as a command to your children, so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law. This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life; through it you may live long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess" (Deut. 32:45-47).

See, all these years in the wilderness, God has been training all of you for life on the other side. You all have been learning skills of learning, thinking, and communicating that will help you prosper. You all have been learning how to negotiate a life that is no longer childlike, even if it is not yet quite independent. You all have been learning how to get along with each other, how to move beyond high-school society and youth-group Christianity, how to handle growing responsibility and take on tasks of leadership. You all have been learning how to be the people you are meant to be. If you keep with it – *if you keep with it* – then these years are chapters in the testament of a whole life, laps in a whole race.

Moreover, in the new covenant you have a *new* Torah: the law of the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2). The Torah was just a tutor, but the Holy Spirit is your inheritance. The Spirit is the seal of your identity on both sides of the divide you will cross tomorrow.

No matter what your location, line of work, calling, social status, or family status, the Holy Spirit you share with all the other heirs of God will keep you connected with them and with yourself.

Still a little trite, isn't it? Hear me out.

At the cost of dampening the mood tonight, you need to know that many of you *won't* stick with it. Observance drops off among graduates of Christian institutions. I'm not sure why. Maybe it is because people who know only the youth-version of Christian faith suppose they are graduating from Christianity, not just school. Anyway, for whatever reason, a lot of you *are* going to trade all this in for a future that makes your life incoherent. In fact, some of you, like the Israelites, have already started (31:21).

The sketchy history of both Israel and the Church show that more rules won't prevent this. Promises of blessings won't hold you close. Even threats won't scare you away. So Deuteronomy interrupts its graduation ceremonies with a heartbreaking passage:

The Lord said to Moses, "Soon you will lie down with your ancestors. Then this people will begin to prostitute themselves to the foreign gods in their midst, the gods of the land into which they are going; they will forsake me, breaking my covenant that I have made with them. My anger will be kindled against them in that day. I will forsake them and hide my face from them; they will become easy prey, and many terrible troubles will come upon them. In that day they will say, 'Have not these troubles come upon us because our gods are not in our midst?' On that day I will surely hide my face on account of all the evil they have done by turning to other gods" (Deut. 31:16-18).

Can you imagine! For more than forty years Moses has poured himself out for this people, and now God has told him not only that he won't be graduating with them, but that

without him they will apostasy, inherit the awful curses he has just delivered, and not even understand why.

Do you ever wonder whether God just has a cruel streak? I mean, why *tell the guy*? He is 120 years old and about to die. Why not let him rest in peace? And why ruin Israel's graduation with the bad news? What kind of timing is that?

And why am I telling *you guys* all this? Just to be shocking?

The answers come as we read on in Deuteronomy:

“Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I promised on oath to their ancestors, and they have eaten their fill and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, despising me and breaking my covenant. And when many terrible troubles come upon them, this song will confront them as a witness, because it will not be lost from the mouths of their descendants. For I know what they are inclined to do even now, before I have brought them into the land that I promised them on oath.” *That very day Moses wrote this song and taught it to the Israelites* (Deut. 31:19-22).

That very day!

This revelation isn't out of cruelty. God is baiting Moses because God loves Israel *something fierce*, and Moses does too. These two have an understanding. God knows that the freedom, the land, the commandments, and even the blessings and curses won't be enough. So God prods Moses out of retirement and into yet another effort to save Israel.

The result is the Song of Moses of Deuteronomy 32. It is a *remarkable* text. It might even be a seed of later biblical prophecy. It is a combination of rap, parental rant, and legal brief, as if your own folks had beat out N-Step in the Westmont debate tournament. I won't try to sing it, and I certainly won't try to rap it. I will just sum it up – and as I do, ask yourself whether it is true of you:

<<From his world of nations, God took Israel and made it his very own. God doted on his children from the wilderness all the way to the promised land. But God's gifts only sedated and spoiled Israel. Once in the land, the chosen people forgot God and idolized the world instead. So, tit-for-tat, God will send disasters through the very nations Israel has decided to imitate (Deut. 32:1-25).>>

Want some flavor? "The teeth of beasts I will send against them, with venom of things crawling in the dust. In the street the sword shall bereave, and in the chambers terror, for young man and woman alike, nursing child and old gray head" (Deut. 32:24-25).

This is uncomfortable stuff. We won't be singing this one in chapel any time soon. But not every worship song can be "I Could Sing of Your Love Forever."

The news is bad. Yet the song is only half over – because Moses, like all proper saviors, always knows *when not to stop*. Moses is not just going to win God's argument; he's going to *win back* the ones God is arguing against. God commissioned a song, and God gets one – with a happy ending he hasn't asked for! Listen:

<<After all the carnage, the pagans will naturally think they were responsible for the victory. That is the very interpretation God is punishing Israel for, and fears from Israel's enemies! [Did he say *fears*?! Gutsy move, Moses! Way to tweak the Almighty!] Retribution is not for pagans to give, the song says. It belongs only to God.

And how will God punish the idolaters? By vindicating and redeeming Israel!

When the idols prove themselves worthless, then Israel – and the other nations too! – will finally see that God is their only hope. This song of failure is the key ingredient for saving Israel from its own success. As Israel remembers, God humiliates the idols and wins back his child by

confuting the enemies, saving even the pagans, *and* cleansing the promised land (Deut. 32:26-43).

This is *brilliant*, you guys. Moses turns a sure disaster into a sure reprieve. Abject failure morphs into final success.

Yet this song is not really an act of brilliance. Like all prophecy, it is an act of all-conquering love. *Love* put those words in Moses' mouth and Israel's ears: love for backsliders, for enemies, for cynics, for spoiled brats, for hypocrites, for weaklings, for the innocent, for the intimidated, for the arrogant, for the foolish, for the nostalgic, for the forgetful and fragmented – *for the lost*. Love for you and for me.

(We need to love each other that way if we want to know the Father.)

Israel did memorize that song. Hosea drew on it. Isaiah drew on it. Jeremiah and several psalms seem to echo it. According to Josephus, a copy was kept in the Temple. Jesus addressed it to his skeptic s. There was a scroll of the Song of Moses at Qumran. Israel remembered, and so Israel survived.

Will you?

Now it might seem theologically correct, or even spiritual, to suggest that Israel only needed the Song of Moses because it was stuck with the old covenant. Surely things are different with Jesus, right? “Who will separate us from the love of Christ,” right?

Well, what happened the night Jesus left his flock behind? They discovered that years of signs and wonders and wisdom weren't enough. “The rest of them might leave you,” Peter told Jesus, “but I won't!” Wrong answer, Peter! You may have a diploma, but you are still as weak as the rest. Cock-a-doodle do!

So the Church makes itself remember too. Paul relies on the Song of Moses to explain what it means that Israel rejected Jesus. Hebrews dusts off the Song of Moses to worry about Christians who backslide. Apparently not even having the Spirit guarantees one's future (Heb. 6:4)!

How can that be?

Look, transitions are *huge*. You went through a big one when you left your childhood to come to college. Most of you have now spent a fifth of your lives here, in the very awkward space between a past that has ended and a future that has not yet begun. Now it's time for another wrenching dislocation. Don't misunderstand me: I loved my first years after college, and I think yours will be marvelous. *Enjoy them!* Be thankful for them! Don't be intimidated! God is with you to go in and settle! But be prepared for how different these years will be. Be aware of how seductive these new worlds will be. Be alert to how easy it will be to reinvent yourself in ways that someday leave you restless, empty, and uncomprehending.

And don't think of us faculty as the songwriters. Moses never graduated, remember? *We did!* We have been settled in the land for a long time now. You guys were in preschool when I crossed over. And the years since have shown me that I am just as frail as Israel. I need more than rules, resolve, and daily devotions. I need more than friends and family. I need more than signs and wonders. I need more than a degrees – even a degree in theology.

Jesus knew people like us couldn't make the connection on our own. So, on the very night that love was betrayed, love put words to bread and wine and taught the disciples a story: "This is my body, which is given for you. *Do this in remembrance of me.*" "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." "I confer on you ... a kingdom, so that you

may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom.” “Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:14-34).

The cross is our ultimate abject failure, turned by incomprehensible grace into God’s ultimate deliverance.

When all else fails, retelling that little story keeps the connection alive. Remember how God told Moses he would hide his face to prove the futility of Israel’s idolatry? On the day of his resurrection, Jesus appeared to two of his slow, foolish disciples walking along the road to Emmaus, “but their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:16). And do you remember what opened their eyes? They stayed with him until dinnertime, and “when he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (24:30-31).

Even after he appeared to them, even after he personally explained the scriptures for hours, what finally brought it all together for his followers was sharing at his table of all-conquering, never-failing love. They finally understood because they remembered. This is why I am so adamant about you remaining a part of a local church in and after college. Communion is your means of remembrance. It is your link to everything that holds the cosmos together, including yourself. It interprets every triumph and every defeat that lies ahead of you. Jesus is the guardian of your identity, and the Church is your safe-house.

Congratulations, you guys! Way to go! The time is now over for syllabi, GE and major requirements, residential policies, flies in classrooms, and chapel cards. All these things are staying at Westmont, but you are moving on.

Seeing you go is bittersweet, but we are *brimming* with pride over you. We are excited for you, and hopeful. And we pray you will take all you have learned along with you, like the commandments in the Ark of the Covenant, so that as you cross over you gain a *past* that grounds a firm and fruitful future.

But what matters even more than all that is that you remember the song. Will you?

What's the connection? Christ's faithfulness over our unfaithfulness. *That's* the connection. Live in remembrance of that, and everything will work together for good, even if to the outside world your life looks like a disaster. Live in forgetfulness, and even if your life looks glorious you will forget everything, even yourself.

It comes down to that.