

I want you to picture Moses standing up on top of a hill, speaking with a loud voice. All of Israel is standing below him, listening to everything that he has to say. And all of this is happening on the border of the Promised Land, where they are getting ready to go in and take it for themselves. Most of the book of Deuteronomy is a copy of the speech that he gave on that day, when he gave his last instructions to Israel. In it, Moses prepared them for what was to come. He reminded them of all that God had done for them. He showed them the way that they should go and taught them what it means to live as God's people. That is the book of Deuteronomy in a nutshell.

But Deuteronomy is also Moses' farewell speech. He would not be with them for much longer. God had told Moses clearly that he would not enter the Promised Land. He had sinned at the waters of Meribah, when he did not listen to God as he should have done and did not uphold God as holy in the eyes of the people. Because of that sin, Moses would be able to see the Promised Land, but he could not enter into it. God was about to bring his life to an end.

But that presented a problem. Who would lead them in the future? Sure, Joshua would lead them in battle. They needed somebody to command the armies, especially since they would have to fight to take the Promised Land. That was important. But who would lead them when it came to the things of the Lord? Who would speak for God so that they would know His will? Up to this point, Moses had been the one to do all of that. If they had a question, all they had to do was go to Moses. What does God say about this or that? Ask Moses. What does God want us to do? Ask Moses. What is God's command? Ask Moses. Moses spoke for God in a way that no one before him had done. As we hear the Lord talking about Moses in the book of Numbers: "With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" Moses was clearly the voice of the living God. But all of that was about to end. Moses would soon be dead, and then what would they do?

Moses shows them what would happen in our reading for today. He made it clear that God would not leave them helpless and leaderless, like sheep without a shepherd. God would raise up another prophet, one who would be like him in everything. This prophet would lead and speak for God just as he had done. As we hear in the reading, starting at verse 18: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him." This prophet would be like Moses in every way. Refusing to listen to him would mean not listening to God. He would be the true leader, the true successor of Moses in the things of the Lord. So there was no need to worry, fretting about what might happen in days to come. God would raise up this prophet to speak for Him and to lead them in His ways.

But how would they know when this prophet had come? How would they be able to tell him apart from others who might claim to be the promised one? It was really quite easy. All they had to do was apply some simple tests. First of all, is he speaking the truth? A true prophet would only say what God wanted him to say. A true prophet would not lead God's people into idolatry. He would not teach people to go after other gods or say something that God clearly had not said. A true prophet only teaches the way of truth and life. Anything less than that is a false prophet, no matter how good he sounds. So the prophet like Moses would also teach the truth and lead God's people in the way of righteousness.

That was an important test, but there had to be another one. It was possible that someone could still only claim to speak for God when God had not sent them. They could say something which sounded right, even sounded good, and yet still be a liar and a false prophet. One good example are those who say that everything is fine when in reality God's people need to repent and turn away from some great sin. It sounds good to hear that nothing needs to change, but it leads people into death. So they needed to apply a second test: did everything that he said would happen actually happen? As our reading says: "And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'— when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him." The test was really quite simple. If he said that God would give them victory over their enemies, did they win? If he said that it would rain, did it rain? If these things did not happen, then he is not from God. It didn't matter if he got some things right or even most. If it did not happen, he is a false prophet. They did not need to listen to him or be afraid of him. They simply needed to turn away and follow after God.

All of this seemed straightforward and clear. God would raise up a prophet to lead them in the days to come. He would speak for God and show them the way of truth. They also knew what to look for and know when the prophet had come. But there was still one more problem. Moses had clearly said that this prophet would be "like him." That meant that this coming prophet would not be an ordinary one. After all, there were many who spoke for God. It was important to listen to them too, of course. God would hold people responsible for everything he said through them too. But it was clear that they were not on the same level as Moses. Moses had known God face to face, speaking to the Lord like a man speaks to his friend. Moses had given Israel the Law and laid the foundations of their covenant with God. That was very different from the prophets who came after Moses. They often pointed back to that covenant and showed how Israel had failed to keep it. They called for people to return to the promises made at Sinai and to walk in the ways of God that Moses had shown them. But they were simply trying to clean up the house. Moses, on the other hand, had built it.

Even the great men who followed Moses were not really "like him." Elijah spoke God's Word in his generation. The Spirit passed from him to Elisha, who carried on his work. Isaiah called for people to return to God. Jeremiah spoke a word of judgment to the people of his time. Ezekiel saw visions of what was to come. And that's not even counting the many prophets throughout the Old Testament, both those whom we know by name and those whom we don't, who also spoke for God. They were all important, but none were truly like Moses. They were always following behind him, always walking in his steps. The book of Deuteronomy even says at the end, in chapter 34: "There has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face."

So it became clearer over time that Moses was pointing toward something still in the future. This passage was a prophecy of a prophet yet to come, one who would truly be like him in every way. People began to look for this coming prophet. They were eagerly watching for him. We see an example of this in the days of John the Baptist, when the Jews sent messengers to him to ask who he was and what he was doing. In John chapter 1, it says: "And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' And he answered, 'No.'" John made it clear that he was not the promised prophet like Moses. But people still want the prophet to come.

They wanted to hear the Word of God from his mouth. They wanted to know what God says. They wanted to hear God speak like He had done in the days of old.

But Christians, the prophet like Moses has already come. He truly fulfilled the prophecy of Moses. He knew God face to face as Moses had, because He is, in fact, God. The prophet like Moses is Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, our Savior. Peter makes this perfectly clear in the book of Acts. God had just worked a miracle through him, and people were amazed at what had happened. As Peter spoke to them, he says this in Acts, chapter 3: “Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus.” And right after he said that, he directly quotes the words of Moses from our reading. Peter makes it perfectly clear that Jesus is the long-promised prophet, who has come to speak the Words of the living God. Jesus shows us the way to the Father. He shows us the way of righteousness. As He says in John, chapter 8: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

And Jesus certainly passes the tests given in Deuteronomy 18. He tells us the truth. All that the Father sent Him to tell us is what He says to us. His words are the very words of life. And if there was any doubt, we can look at the things that He did. He healed the sick. He multiplied the loaves and fed the crowds. He walked on the sea. He raised the dead. Who other than the one sent from God could do such great things?

And He also passes the other test too. Everything that He said would happen actually happened. Jesus said that the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed because of its sins. And it actually happened about forty years later at the hands of the Romans. Jesus said that He would suffer and die at the hands of His own people, and it too actually happened. But above all, Jesus said that He would rise from the dead on the third day, and it happened. The risen Jesus proves beyond all doubt that He is the long-promised prophet like Moses, and He now comes to lead us into the greater Promised Land.

Therefore, Christians, if you want to know God’s will, listen to Jesus. If you want to know the way that God wants you to go, listen to Jesus. If you want to know what God wants you to do, listen to Jesus. And above all, if you want to know the way which leads to everlasting life, listen to Jesus. He tells us the way of grace and truth, and all who turn to Him in faith, confessing their sins, will find eternal life in His name.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, who has the words of eternal life, open our ears and our hearts to listen to Your voice, so that we may find the way to life in You; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.