COVENANT IN SONG

When one thinks of covenants, solemn and somber agreements with lists of requirements come to mind, along with promises and pledges. Although these are part of the picture, the book of Deuteronomy ends differently, with a song and a poem of blessing. The importance of music cannot be overstated. Often even those who cannot talk because of dementia are still able to sing. A song can take us back to a particular time and place that was decades ago. Thus, God called Moses to write a song that encapsulated the covenant. The people were to learn it and sing it and pass it on to their children. This would help them remember all that God had done for them, to pass on the stories of how God had blessed them.

The content of the rest of this song with many stanzas is to review and recall God’s blessings to Israel, along with their rebellion and disobedience. God is gracious, but sin has consequences, and singing about Israel’s past history would help it to remain more vividly in the memory. This is the reason that the psalms are also powerful to many people even today. Poetic writing itself has a musical quality to it, and it invites the readers to sing along and remember. Music can also lead to prayer, and is a form of prayer, so that the singer is drawn to worship God and communicate with Him in new ways. The covenant in musical form makes a fitting end to this book that is really all about the heart and love and life.
Write out Deuteronomy 32:35–47 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Deuteronomy 32:35–39. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
SET YOUR HEART

Songs help us to remember and reflect on God’s word. Songs also help to change our hearts. When Moses finished speaking the words of the song to the people, he made the statement, “Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe” (Deut. 32:46). Of course, he is referring to the entire Torah as well, but it is significant that this immediately follows the song. Setting one’s heart on something implies reflection, intentionality, and repetition. The people are not just to hear and forget, but to examine and analyze and reflect on how the words of the Torah, and especially the song, impact them personally. They are also to be intentional about speaking and singing the words of the Torah and the song. They are to pass it along to their children, and to think about how and with whom they can share it. The English Standard Version translates this phrase as, “Take to heart,” which indicates the repetition that is also involved in the process. This is not something that they do once, but something that becomes a very part of them, and that they do often and with joy.

The song is also a warning to the people of what will happen if they do not remain faithful to God and continue in their rebellious ways. As they set their hearts on the song, it will serve to protect them from falling further away from God. Moses concludes this admonition to keep the Torah and the song in their hearts, by noting why this is so crucial: “For it is no empty word for you, but your very life” (v. 47, ESV). The temptation would be to think that these are just words, empty and useless. But in reality, the words bring life, they are not futile! In fact, especially in light of Deuteronomy 30, the Torah points to God, who is their life (30:19). And the word needs to be passed on to the next generation, to continue this life-giving power that a relationship with God brings.

And ultimately, this song brings hope! Although there will be consequences for their sins, God will forgive, bring atonement, and destroy their enemies. As they set their hearts on God’s word, God’s song, He is enabled to work through it to reach and change their hearts, as He promised to do in Deuteronomy 30:6.
“VENGEANCE IS MINE”

The very first verse in this section of the song begins with a concept that can be challenging to understand about God. How can God take vengeance? How can God kill and wound (v. 39)? And how can God bring retributive justice against His enemies, in sharpening His sword, repaying those who hate Him, devouring flesh, and avenging His people (vv. 41–43)? It is crucial to understand these verses in light of the overall plan of the great controversy. God wants to save everyone, and the Bible is full of examples where God shows much more mercy than people do! But at some point, people reach a point of no return, where they have completely shut themselves off to the Holy Spirit. It is not that God is not trying to reach them, but they have made it impossible. For instance, before the flood, “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and . . . every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually,” leaving God with no options with which to reach them (Gen. 6:5). Yet God takes responsibility for the ultimate punishment of sin. He does not want anyone to die, and He does everything He can to bring them back to Him. But many choose the way of death instead.

In addition, true love cares about justice done when loved ones are wronged. God is a God of justice. God makes things right when people have hurt the vulnerable and innocent. If a friend is raped and brutally murdered, you might forgive the rapist/murderer, but true love would not smooth things over and pretend nothing happened. True love demands justice. For those who accept His forgiveness, God took the penalty on Himself and died so that they do not have to experience the second death, but there are still consequences on this earth for heinous crimes done against innocent people. When you have experienced a situation like this, knowing that God will take vengeance as one who knows hearts and minds and will make things right, brings much comfort and peace.

Verse 43 is very different in the ESV and the NKJV, because certain manuscripts have a couple extra lines, which are included in the ESV. However, the basic concept is still the same: other nations and/or nature itself will rejoice as God restores the land and His people and avenges the wrongs done to them. Once again, anyone can be a part of God’s people, and will then experience His plan to right the wrongs and take vengeance against sin and suffering. The cursing psalms express similar sentiments, calling on God to bring justice and to finally win against evil. God wins, Satan loses; amen and amen!
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Romans 12:17–21
Nahum 1:1–8
Deuteronomy 24:17–22
Luke 18:1–14
Deuteronomy 31:19–30
Psalm 96:7–13
Revelation 18:1–8, 20–24, 19:1–3

What other narratives come to mind in connection with Deuteronomy 32?

Review your memorized verse from Deuteronomy 32:35–47.
VINDICATION BY GOD

While Deuteronomy 32 may seem antithetical to the picture of Jesus that most people have, it is actually consistent with Jesus in much of the New Testament, especially Revelation. God is love, but true love includes justice against wrongdoing and eventual total eradication of sin from the universe. God is the defender of the vulnerable all through Scripture, especially those who have been exploited and oppressed. Jesus makes similar statements, even in the gospels, about those who hurt children (Matt. 18:5–6). And yet, Jesus paid the penalty for even the worst sins ever committed, so that anyone who accepts His grace will be in heaven. This is the mind-boggling nature of the cross. The vengeance here shown against God's enemies was ultimately poured out on Jesus, as He took it for us, so that we could be made righteous if we choose Him.

In verse 36, the NKJV reads, “For the Lord will judge His people and have compassion on His servants, when He sees that their power is gone,” but the ESV captures the meaning of the first verb more accurately for the context: “For the Lord will vindicate his people.” God is full of compassion, despite the litany of sins that the many previous verses document. And God will judge His people, but judgment in the Old Testament is almost always positive when it is for God's people! It is a vindication of them, because they have accepted His grace and given Him their hearts. Judgment is good news, and the psalmists can't stop talking about it. They look forward to the judgment, because they know that they have no hope on their own, but that they are judged by their walk with God, not by their righteous deeds, of which they have none (Psalm 51). God speaks life through His word, to change hearts and bring hope.

This passage also hearkens back to Deuteronomy 31, where Moses once again predicts the rebellion and debauchery of the people, but also plans that the song will be a witness and testimony to bring them back (vv. 19–21). And even in the midst of this, God gives Joshua hope and encouragement, saying multiple times to him: “Be strong and of good courage . . . the Lord, He is the One who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed” (31:7, 8). This is the same message that God leaves with each one of us. God will vindicate His people, and while we are waiting for that wonderful final day of judgment on our behalf, He is walking with us, and will not leave us or forsake us. We can be strong and of good courage in our vindicating God.
THE LAW REPEATED

“The more deeply to impress these truths upon all minds, the great leader embodied them in sacred verse. This song was not only historical, but prophetic. While it recounted the wonderful dealings of God with His people in the past, it also foreshadowed the great events of the future, the final victory of the faithful when Christ shall come the second time in power and glory. The people were directed to commit to memory this poetic history, and to teach it to their children and children’s children. It was to be chanted by the congregation when they assembled for worship, and to be repeated by the people as they went about their daily labors. It was the duty of parents to so impress these words upon the susceptible minds of their children that they might never be forgotten.

“Since the Israelites were to be, in a special sense, the guardians and keepers of God’s law, the significance of its precepts and the importance of obedience were especially to be impressed upon them, and through them, upon their children and children’s children. The Lord commanded concerning His statutes: ‘Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up... And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.’ ” (White, Patriarchs and Prophets, 467, 468.)

The Blessings and the Curses

“Satan is ever at work endeavoring to pervert what God has spoken, to blind the mind and darken the understanding, and thus lead men into sin. This is why the Lord is so explicit, making His requirements so very plain that none need err. God is constantly seeking to draw men close under His protection, that Satan may not practice his cruel, deceptive power upon them. He has condescended to speak to them with His own voice, to write with His own hand the living oracles. And these blessed words, all instinct with life and luminous with truth, are committed to men as a perfect guide. Because Satan is so ready to catch away the mind and divert the affections from the Lord’s promises and requirements, the greater diligence is needed to fix them in the mind and impress them upon the heart.

“Greater attention should be given by religious teachers to instructing the people in the facts and lessons of Bible history and the warnings and requirements of the Lord. These should be presented in simple language, adapted to the comprehension of children. It should be a part of the work both of ministers and parents to see that the young are instructed in the Scriptures.” (White, 503, 504.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What examples of injustice have you seen or experienced in your life?

How does it make you feel when you see the wicked go unpunished and the vulnerable/innocent suffer?

In what ways can you act and speak differently in your own life to stand up for the vulnerable and oppressed?

What songs have been meaningful to you, either as a remembrance of what God has done for you or as a warning of the importance of following God with your whole heart?

How can we live to exhibit that God’s Word is our very life? What is a real result of that truth?

What is the significance of these being the last words of Moses?