

Comforting And Conquering

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 July 2024

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Well, for a wee while together I'd like us to turn back to the passage that Ken read from us from Deuteronomy chapter 33 and I want us focused especially on verse 27 where it says, The eternal God is your dwelling place and underneath are the everlasting arms and he thrust the enemy before you and said destroy.

I'm sure if you're like me, lots of you will be watching the European Championships just now. It's so good to have football on every day, although it's not so good now because it's not quite every day as it was a couple of weeks ago, but European Championships World Cup always a treat when you've got football on day in, day out.

And often those of you who like football will know that people will talk about football as often as a game of two halves and what they mean by that is the fact that sometimes you can watch a football match and the first half and the second half can be very, very different.

So you can watch a team and in the first half they might play really badly and in the second half it might be completely different and they play really, really well and people will say, oh well that was a game of two halves and often you'll have teams where they'll have maybe one bad half, one good half.

Of course, Scotland that never happens for us both halves are always bad, but often football is a game of two halves.

[1 : 28] This verse is a verse of two halves and that's what I want us to look at today. The first half of this verse is one of the most beautiful statements that you'll ever read.

It's the kind of statement that we want to memorize. It's one of these sections of the Bible that you just always want to take with you and I'm sure that many of you will have seen the first half of verse 27 on a plaque or on a calendar, a card or a key ring or something like that.

The eternal God is your dwelling place and underneath are the everlasting arms. That's so beautiful. Second half of the verse is not so like that. It's not really like that at all and I've never seen a fridge magnet in a shop that says and he thrust out the enemy before you and said destroy.

So we come to the second half of the verse and we think this is very different and it's not got the same beauty as the first part.

Now, that's an interesting thing for us to think about because one of the core beliefs that we have as a church is that we believe that the whole Bible is the inspired, inerrant word of God that applies to every part of every verse in the whole of the Bible.

[2 : 48] We absolutely never go through the Bible and pick out parts where we think, yes, that's the word of God and then look at other parts and think, oh no, I don't think that bit's meant to be there.

We never, ever think like that and that's a core belief of our church. So the whole Bible is the inspired, inerrant word of God, but that means we come to a verse like this and we read the first part and we think, oh, that's so beautiful.

Then we read the second part and we think, why does it have to say that? Why is that kind of language there? And I have to acknowledge that even for myself, I think of the first part of this verse and I think, I want to preach that and then you read into the second part of the verse and you're like, oh, I'm not so sure or I'm not so sure what I would say or I don't even quite know why it speaks in those terms.

That was my instinctive reaction when I turned to Deuteronomy 33 when I was preparing for today. But rather than go somewhere else, I thought, well, I can't think I'm not going to preach that verse. I thought, I have to think about this. And what happened was the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the whole of this verse is saying something amazing.

[4 : 14] And the truth is, and what I hope we're going to discover is the fact that the second half of this verse actually makes the first half of this verse even better.

And I hope we're going to see that together today. And as we do that, our title is going to be comforting and conquering. And we're going to use these two headings to go through the two parts of the verse.

So as I said, the first part of this verse is one of the most beautiful statements you'll read. It's one of my favorite quotes from the Old Testament. And it's important for us to remember when these words were spoken.

They were spoken by Moses just before he died. We saw that in verse one, this chapter forms part of the blessing that Moses gives to the people before his death.

In fact, pretty much the whole of Judaism is Moses' final word to the Israelites as they stood on the brink of entering the Promised Land and as he stood on the brink of death.

[5 : 11] That means that at this moment for the Israelites, two massive changes lie ahead. They're about to enter the Promised Land. So 40 years earlier, they had escaped from Egypt for four decades.

They'd been wandering around in the wilderness. Now at last they're about to enter the land that was promised to Abraham, their ancestors. The second massive change is that they're about to lose Moses.

That's the man that God raised up to confront Pharaoh, the one who led them out of Egypt, the one who had guided them, prayed for them, loved them, taught them for the last 40 years.

He was their figurehead, their leader. And now he's about to die and the Israelites are going to have to go into the Promised Land without him.

And so they're about to face massive changes and it's the reality of these changes that help us to see why the words at the start of verse 31 are so needed and so precious.

[6 : 12] And I want us just to unpack them a wee bit more. We'll just go through it little by little. It speaks of the eternal God. And that word eternal is a very interesting word.

It can also mean ancient and you see that in verse 15. The same word appears there, talking about the ancient mountains early in the chapter.

It's the word that can also mean east and when you go back to Genesis chapter 2, it talks about Eden being planted in the east.

It's all the same word. And so what does the word mean? It's a word that speaks about looking back and it's getting us to think about the stuff that's ancient, longstanding.

And as it does that, it's evoking the idea of an idyllic state. So it's making us to think of the past, of that ancient, of that beautiful.

[7 : 13] So maybe there's a link between the idea of a beautiful sunrise in the east. Maybe there's even a connection to the beauty of Eden, the garden that God planted in the east.

Sometimes the word is translated days of old as you have there. We would maybe use good old days in that language. Again, it's looking back at something, long lasting, something positive, something idyllic.

It's all evoking these kind of things. And here the word is applied to God, the eternal God. And it's pointing us to the fact that he is the ultimate one from days of old.

He is the ancient of days as Daniel goes on to describe in the Old Testament. He's the eternal one. So that means that for the Israelites, everything's about to change, except God.

He's the eternal, unchanging one. He never decays, never deteriorates, his ancient perfections are new every morning.

[8 : 21] And he is their dwelling place. And that's a really interesting concept to think about. And first and foremost, because for the Israelites who've been wandering through the desert, that's what they desperately need, a place to dwell.

They've been homeless for so long. And now that they're entering into the promised land, it's going to be their home, it's going to be their place of safety. But the interesting thing here is that it doesn't actually say the land is your dwelling place, it actually points to a bigger truth.

God is their dwelling place. First and foremost, he is their place of security. Interestingly the word can also refer to an animal's den, which I think is a really, really interesting and helpful image to have.

Because if you just think about an animal's den, you're thinking of a place of security, of nurturing, of belonging, a place where the vulnerable are safe, the hungry are fed, the next generation is raised.

And so in all the changes that Israel is about to face, the eternal God is their dwelling place. And that image of safety is reinforced by the word underneath.

[9 : 35] I love the imagery that's been given before us here. If you think about the Israelites, they have so much that's behind them. They've been slaves for 400 years in Egypt. They've been wandering in the desert for four decades.

They've suffered, they've struggled, they've stumbled, they've come through so much. They've got so much ahead of them. They're about to lose Moses. They're about to enter the promised land. They're going to have to defeat the enemies who are currently occupying and they need to try and build a nation of their own. There's so much behind them. There's so much ahead of them. What matters most though is what's underneath them. And underneath them are God's everlasting arms. Underneath are the everlasting arms.

Arm there is what we call an anthropomorphism. We mentioned that a couple of weeks ago. There's something you very, very often see in the Bible, anthropomorphism.

[10 : 34] It's where the Bible will use human language to describe something about God. So it's using our human language of arms. You see it with the same heart and feet and hands.

God's arms is a picture of strength and power. We sang about that in Psalm 89. There has to be an arm that's full of power. It's all speaking about God's strength and might and power.

And all of this is being described at the highest level. These are everlasting arms. So you've got the kind of parallel language, the eternal God there, the everlasting arms there.

And so you have these two things, bracketing, eternal, everlasting. In many ways, eternal is making us think about the perfection of God. Everlasting is making us think about the never-endingness of God.

You've got the kind of vertical, horizontal balance where you think about God's perfection. It's stretching as high as you can when you think about God's presence. It's lasting as long as you can go.

[11 : 39] And it's all reminding us, all teaching the Israelites that they have a God who is eternal. And that limitless, vertical perfection of God, that unending, horizontal, unchangeableness of God is pointed to the fact that God is so good, so strong, so powerful, so stable, so ultimate, and all the time he's holding you.

For the Israelites then, for everyone who is a Christian or who becomes a Christian now, God has placed his everlasting arms underneath you and he's holding you forever.

And for the Israelites and for us, these words are so comforting. Because how often do we feel lost? How often do we feel unstable?

How often do we feel shaken so often? Life is full of uncertainty. So often things happen that we didn't expect. How often do we find we've got plans and they're ruined?

Hopes, our shattered dreams are lost. How often do we find that as we go through life, the hopes we had for our future get replaced without yearning for the past?

[12 : 54] How often do we find that life knocks us and hurts us and does stuff to us that we never expected to happen? How often we feel exposed and vulnerable and weak?

How often on a Sunday we're dreading Monday? How often we feel like everything is slipping through our hands and all the time God is saying, I've got you.

I am your dwelling place. My arms are everlasting. They're underneath you. I'm holding you.

So often in our lives we are plagued by what lies behind us and we're crippled by what lies before us. Our past is full of mistakes, full of things that we regret, full of things that we wish we'd never done, full of choices that we wish we hadn't made, full of failed plans, broken promises, unfulfilled dreams, full of things that did not turn out the way that we wanted them to or the way that we thought they would, our past is full of all of that kind of stuff.

And our future is scary. We don't know what lies ahead, but yet we know that things will change. It will always change lying ahead, whether that's going in from primary school to high school, whether it's leaving school, whether it's going into a new job, whether it's thinking of it where you're going to live, whether it's facing a diagnosis, retirement, old age, whatever.

[14 : 29] What lies behind us casts a long shadow. What lies ahead looms large. What really matters is what's underneath you.

And in the Gospel, God is giving us the promise that for everyone who trusts in Jesus, the moment you do so, God's arms come underneath you. He becomes your dwelling place and his everlasting arms will never let you go.

Everybody who lives here knows that the weather is not normally like this in Lewis. And most of the time it's windy and I was going to say the winter is full of storms, really autumn, winter, spring and half a summer is full of storms on the island.

And we get battered by the wind relentlessly. And even those who visit in the summer, I'm sure, have experienced that many times. When you think about Agale and Lewis, I want you to think about everything that gets battered.

Trees are bending, slates and tiles on the roof are rattling, power lines are whistling. Everything is getting shaken by the wind.

[15 : 45] There's one thing that the wind never moves. No matter how strong it blows, there's one thing that the wind in Lewis never, ever moves.

It never moves the ground underneath you. And that's exactly what this verse is telling us. In God we have an immovable foundation. And that foundation is His loving arms that are holding you.

And life may batter you, it'll never move those arms. He's holding you so safe and so secure. And that's such a comfort. It is such a comfort.

And I've got to ask you, do you have that comfort? Is that where you go for your comfort and for your security? Because that's what the Gospel is offering us.

[16 : 42] That sentence is one of the most beautiful promises that we can ever hear. It's one of the things that we most desperately need.

It's one of the most comforting statements we'll ever read. But it's not all that the verse says. It goes on to say, He thrust the enemy before you and said, destroy.

Now that's very different language. All of a sudden it becomes very confrontational. It doesn't really have any of the kind of poetic, peaceful imagery of the first part of the version.

You're thinking, Moses, why did you have to say that? What's going on here? Well, in the context of Deuteronomy, it actually makes perfect sense.

Because Israel has been wandering through the wilderness. They're now approaching the Promised Land. That land is not empty. It's actually full of people who occupy that land, various groups, and they have no intention of handing that land over to Israel.

[17 : 41] So that means that when we talk about Israel entering into the Promised Land, what we really mean is that Israel is going to enter into a war. And that's what you read about in Joshua as you go on past Deuteronomy.

And by the time that Moses speaks here at the end of his life in Deuteronomy, the fighting's actually already begun. So if you go to Numbers 21, you can read about Israel defeating two kings, one called Zion, one called Og.

And Deuteronomy chapter one refers to this. So at the very start of this book, Moses speaks to Israel after he defeated Zion, king of the Amorites, and Og, the king of Bation.

The confrontation, the fighting has already begun. And so here, Moses is reassuring the people that, look, if you're going to enter into battle, there's going to be confrontation.

You're going to meet enemies. But as you do so, you can be confident because God has promised victory to you. And that's what the last part of the verse speaks about.

[18 : 49] It goes on in verse 28, 29 to speak about God, bringing them victory, their shield, their triumph, and the enemies will be overcome.

So in the context of Deuteronomy, this statement, why see why Moses would say that? But there is a much bigger why question. Why is this kind of language there?

Why are passages like this? And if you read through Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, you will read a lot of language that speaks very positively about destroying enemies.

And you think, why is that? Why is it that going into the Promised Land meant attacking and killing so many people? Why is this part of Old Testament history so violent?

Because it is violent. And why does one of the most beautiful promises in the Bible here have to share a verse with the kind of language that we have here in the second part of the verse?

[19 : 55] Well, there's lots that we could say about that. I want to just highlight two key reasons why this language is here. The first relates to the specific context of Israel entering the Promised Land, which we need to think about a little bit more.

And the second relates to the bigger story of the Bible. So there's like a narrow reason focused on Deuteronomy in the circumstances and there's a bigger reason connected to the story of the whole Bible. In terms of that narrow reason, the specific context of the Bible, the specific context of Deuteronomy, in order to understand these commands to go and fight and destroy, we need to make sure that we understand this word here.

We need to understand the word enemy, because we can easily misunderstand it. When we talk about enemies, we often will talk about people that we dislike.

So most of us in this room had 11 enemies playing against Switzerland last night. So we often think of people we dislike.

I should not have said that, but anyway, never mind. I thought it, so why not? It can be sports, it can be school, it can be business, competitors, whatever it may be.

[21 : 23] And sometimes these people might stay enemies, sometimes they might become friends. We come across that in life all the time. People we disagree with, people who we feel are against us.

That's not what the Bible means by the term enemies. And that's not what we should think of when we see that word in verse 21, in verse 27. In the Bible, an enemy is someone who is determined to kill you.

An enemy is somebody who is determined to kill you. So when you have the situation of two individuals or two groups who are enemies in the Bible, someone's going to die.

One or the other. And if that threat to kill subsides, then they are no longer enemies. They're only enemies when it is at that level.

We often apply the word enemies to rivalries. Football is just a rivalry. Trump and Biden are not enemies. They're not trying to kill each other. They are rivals. Same with our political leaders.

[22 : 26] They're not enemies. They're not trying to destroy each other. They're just rivals against one another, seeking the same position. None of that is what this is talking about.

The level of confrontation facing Israel is at a different level. They faced enemies who had one objective, destruction. And you see a really clear example of that when you talk about Zion, that king of the Amorites.

In Numbers 21, Israel wanted to pass through his territory. They said, look, please let us just travel through here. We're not wanting a fight. We just want to pass through your land. We are not going to do anything.

And we will go the other side. Zion said, no, you can't do that. And at that moment, Zion the foreigner became Zion the enemy and battle commenced.

And one is going to win. One is going to lose. One is going to survive. One is going to die. And in that situation, God gave Israel victory and Zion was defeated.

[23 : 27] So we need to understand that word enemy. That's the reality of the situation that Israel faced. But the more important reason, the more important lesson, is in relation to the bigger story of the Bible.

And that's something that we have to recognize that's so, so crucial. One of the things that all of this is teaching us, when you go to the when you go to Deuteronomy, Joshua, into judges, when you when you see all the language of war and violence and confrontation, there's one crucial lesson that you've been taught.

You've been taught that war and violence and military victory doesn't actually work. And you will only see that when you think of the whole message of the Bible.

Because in the moment, it looks like it works. Because they defeated Zion. They defeated Og. They go into the Promised Land and they destroy Jericho. And they do win. It looks like it works.

It doesn't actually work. Because the whole storyline of the Bible tells us that it doesn't work.

Because everything in the Old Testament doesn't actually work.

[24 : 46] And it's not meant to work. Because everything in the Old Testament is a shadow. And that's its purpose.

So the violent conquest of the Promised Land doesn't ultimately work. The sacrificial system of the Tabernacle in the Temple doesn't actually work. The royal line established through David doesn't

actually work.

Because it's not meant to work. Because it's all a shadow. And the shadow is pointing us to the ultimate reality of God's purposes.

And this is where you have to understand the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The relationship in the Old Testament and the New Testament is like using a torch to find a light switch. You go into a room that's dark and you've got a torch.

And you try to find a light switch. And you're looking around. And then you find it. And that's very helpful. So the torch has been helpful. It's guided you to the light switch. You turn the light switch on. You don't need the torch.

[25 : 47] It pointed you in the right direction. It showed you something crucial. But actually, the light coming on shows you that the torch is inadequate.

And it's that same relationship. Shadow to reality that you have between the Old and New Testament. Israel here in the Old Testament are standing before an enemy that wants to destroy them.

God's telling him, that enemy will rise up against you. I will say to you, destroy. It's happened in the past. It'll happen again in the future. That's a shadow. It's a shadow of the full reality.

The enemy nations that Israel faced are a shadow of the real enemy. The enemy of sin and death. But from the very beginning of the Bible, right through human history, is trying to destroy us.

And the Israelite army is a shadow of the real warrior, the real conqueror, the real hero, Jesus Christ. And all of its pointing to the ultimate confrontation, the real battle, the ultimate victory.

[26 : 50] It's all pointing us to Jesus' mission to come and defeat sin and death. Death is the enemy that wants to destroy every Israelite, every Amorite, and every other human that exists.

And Jesus has come to confront that enemy. And God is saying to Jesus, I am thrusting that enemy before you on the cross.

Go and destroy it. And that's exactly what Jesus did. And all of this is the language of conquering. Israel would go on to conquer the land. But it didn't last. It's all a shadow of the fact that Jesus has come to conquer. He's come to destroy death.

He's come to win a victory that lasts forever. And he did it by dying on the cross. And in doing that, he allowed sin to empty all of its ammunition onto him. In doing so, he fell under the curse that our sin deserves.

[27 : 52] But in doing so, he destroyed the power of death. He rose again. He won the victory. As Hebrews 2.14 speaks so beautifully, he came to do that through his death.

He might destroy the one who has the power of death. That is the devil. And deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. All of this means time has disappeared.

It's so frustrating. But we're almost there. All of this means that this language, this verse, is full of the language of comfort.

And it's full of the language of conquering. And what I want you to see is that the amazing thing about the gospel is that through Jesus, these two things go hand in hand. And so in the gospel, we have amazing promises that give us the comfort that we desperately need.

But in the gospel, we also have the conqueror without whom we are lost. And Jesus comes to give us both, to give us the comfort that we need in a life that's so broken and unstable and hurts us so much.

[29 : 03] And he has come to conquer death. Death that has every one of us under its grip and death that's caused so much damage and sorrow and pain in life.

Jesus has come to conquer it. And that's what makes the first promise so amazing. The first part of the verse is wonderful. It's beautiful.

But the second part of the verse is what makes it utterly amazing. God's everlasting arms are underneath you because death has been conquered.

He's your dwelling place forever if you're trusting in Jesus because death has been conquered. And you're safe with him forever because death has been conquered.

On its own, the first half of the verse is beautiful. All together, the whole verse is absolutely amazing. And that's what I want you to see.

[30 : 05] And that's what I want you to think about. Do you need comfort? All of us do. And I'm sure you know that.

Do you need a conqueror to save you from death? Oh, man, we need that more than anything. And that's exactly what Jesus has come to do.

And in him, we find all the comfort and all the conquering that we will ever need. And he's calling all of us to respond to him today, those of us who follow him, to keep looking to him, to keep following him.

For those of you who are not sure where you stand with the Lord, where you're just not sure, Jesus, he has got his sat nav turned right up.

And he's saying, just turn around. Follow me. Come with me. And I'll hold you. My everlasting arms will be underneath you forever.

[31 : 12] Amen.