

WANDERING TOWARD A LINEAGE

A Devotional Meditation on Ki Tavo (When You Enter In)

Deuteronomy 26:1-29:9; Isaiah 60:1-22; Galatians 3:6-14; James 1:1, 2:5-26

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My grandfather, Charles Howard Wood, wandered from his home in Rome, Georgia, looking for work in Alabama. He found it in a steel mill. He also found a wife: my grandmother, Mildred Lochridge. They married in 1923, when she was 16, and before long they had a family of seven children. My sister was the first of their grandchildren. From the time of her birth until the day of his death, Howard never lacked a small child to cradle in his arms and dandle on his knee.

My grandparents were godly people. I credit my grandmother for moving the Lord through her prayers to set boundaries around me so I would not stray too far from Him. My grandfather taught me by his firm, but gentle hand how a man of God pursues righteousness. It was many years after he died that I learned something amazing about him: my grandfather was the one man whom both the black and white steelworkers trusted to keep their union dues. I would like to have talked with him about his tenure as treasurer of the steelworkers' union – about the racial tensions of the laborers, and about the tensions between labor and management in an era of both communist and Fascist agitation. He must have been a man of tremendous courage and character to navigate such a perilous landscape.



Top Row: My grandparents Howard & Mildred Wood at their wedding in 1923 (L), with their seven children in 1940 (C), and at their 50th anniversary in 1973. Bottom row: Mildred with my brother and me, 1963 (L), Mildred with my daughters and my brother's sons, 1999 (R).

Those tensions, and the realities of the Great Depression and World War II, contributed to Howard's continued wanderings. He led his family from Anniston to Holt, Alabama, then Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Haines City, Florida, before returning to Alabama to retire in Irondale, a suburb of Birmingham. That's where I got to know my grandparents, where my identity became intertwined with theirs, and where their godly legacy set me on a path of pursuing righteousness as defined by our righteous God.

I am glad to know my lineage. There are still many gaps in what I know of both my parents' families, but I know enough to be secure in who I am. Once I was at a gathering with close friends where we shared our stories. Several of us explained our lineages going back many generations, but there were some who could not do so. They may have known one parent, but the circumstances of their lives were such that they never had opportunity to learn their family background. One of my friends had been adopted, so the only family stories she knew were those of the people who had taken her into their home and hearts.

That family gave her an identity she sorely needed. The alternative would have been rootlessness and continuous wandering in the sea of humanity – perhaps not literally, but certainly in a spiritual and emotional sense.

It seems to me that's the point behind God's command to the Hebrews about a ceremony they were to perform when they had settled the Promised Land of Israel:

Now when you enter the land that *ADONAI* your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you possess it and dwell in it, you are to take some of the first of all the produce of the soil . . . put it in a basket and go to the place *ADONAI* your God chooses to make His Name dwell. You are to go to the *kohen* [priest] in charge in those days and say to him, "I declare today to *ADONAI* your God, that I have entered into the land *ADONAI* swore to our fathers to give us. . . . My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and lived there as an outsider, few in number. But there he became a great nation—mighty and numerous. The Egyptians treated us badly, afflicted us, and imposed hard labor on us. Then we cried out to *ADONAI*, God of our fathers, and *ADONAI* listened to our voice and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression. Then *ADONAI* brought us out from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land—a land flowing with milk and honey. So now, look! I have brought the first of the fruits of the soil that You have given me, *ADONAI*." Then you are to set it down before *ADONAI* your God and worship before *ADONAI* your God. You will rejoice in all the good that *ADONAI* your God has given to you and to your house—you, the Levite, and the outsider in your midst.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 TLV

This is a worshipful declaration of an identity imparted by the Redeeming God Who created a people for Himself and invited the whole world to join the celebration of that reality. That's why He mentions the "outsider in your midst" – the strangers or foreigners who would be drawn to the redemptive phenomenon of Israel to see what it was, and perhaps find out how they might become part of it.

Those inquiring strangers would learn that the Creator had done mighty things to redeem Israel to Himself, and that He had taught them how to live in ways that would be honoring to themselves and glorious to His Name and reputation. That's the purpose of the Torah: to show humanity how to live in a way that brings life and peace rather than conflict and death. That's how we might explain what Moses meant when he taught Israel about the blessings they would receive by obeying God's commandments, and the curses that would come upon them if they disobeyed.

We see how that worked out in biblical history, but we don't often make the connection of that history with our own time. What we miss is that the Torah's blessings and curses are expressions of universal principles God built into the fabric of creation. He wants us to be nice to one another, which is why He commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. James the apostle calls that commandment the *royal law*. Our King and Creator made that law, and expects everyone in His Kingdom to obey it.

James makes the point that we should take our King seriously and do what He says. In other words, obedience to His laws is proof that we believe in Him, and have accepted

not only the promises of His blessings, but the responsibilities He places on us. As James says, that's what Abraham did:

You see that faith worked together with his works, and by the works his faith was made complete. The Scripture was fulfilled that says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness"—and he was called God's friend. You see that a man is proved righteous by works and not by faith alone.

James 2:22-24 TLV

This is why James and Paul refer to Abraham as our spiritual father. He's not only the father of the Jewish people; he is the father of all who follow his example by believing God, coming into His family, and obeying His commands.

Even those who have no lineage can come in. The beautiful thing is that, once they are adopted into Abraham's Hebrew family, they have a lineage and an identity. One day, when this life of exile is over and our King reigns from His Holy City of Jerusalem, all who share that lineage and identity can go up to worship Him with their joyful gifts of praise. Since this identity is all about bringing life from the dead, it's quite possible that we could nod to our grandfather Abraham when we declare –

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and lived there as an outsider, few in number. But there he became a great nation—mighty and numerous.