

June 10, 2018

Sunday Evening Service

Series: Deuteronomy

Community Baptist Church

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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Deuteronomy 9:1-12.

1. There was no difference between God's command to the first generation Israelites or the command to the second generation. Nor had circumstances about the strong enemies changed. Why did the second generation people obey?
2. What does obedient faith look like in your life?
3. What are some promises on which you depend in your quest for spiritual success?
4. In what ways do you fall into the error of thinking that God blesses you because you are more righteous than others? (cf. Deut. 7:12-16).
5. How should we respond when our flesh brings up past failures?

NOT BY WORKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS Deuteronomy 9:1-12

In many ways, God's promise to Israel of the possession of the Promised Land is a picture of our promised and possessed salvation. For example, God delivered the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt like He delivered us from our slavery in sin. Though God had already promised the possession, there was a journey to the Promised Land. In a similar way, our salvation is a journey, even though we are

assured that at the end of the journey we will enter the perfection of eternity – the Celestial City as Bunyan called it.

While God freely granted the Promised Land to His people, He also required them to fight and battle in order to secure His blessing. Likewise, God has already given us salvation from sin, but we live in this flesh that often is not much different from the wicked Canaanites, Hittites, Amonites and other "ites" who previously possessed the Promised Land. And according to our text, when God sent His people into the land to possess it, He promised that their success in possessing it was a sure thing because He would fight for them. In the same way, God reminds us that because we already have salvation we can overcome the world through the Holy Spirit who lives within us. He who has already overcome the world gives us victory.

Therefore, we should be greatly encouraged by this section of Moses's speech. You will remember that the larger context of our text is Moses's second speech to the people, which began in 4:44 and runs through 26:19. In this subsection Moses reminded the people that they were going to march into the Promised Land and run off the inhabitants with smashing success. They would be successful, not because they were strong and skillful, but because God promised to go before them and fight in their behalf.

In the second part of our text, Moses reminded the people to remember their parents' failure. They had been rebellious from the get-go until they finally pushed God's patience to the limit. When they rebelled with the golden calf at Mt. Sinai, God threatened to disown them. When they refused to obey God and take the Promised Land, God threw down the gauntlet and promised to let them all die in the wilderness.

God had kept His promise. The warning is valid still. Do not make God angry with your rebellion. But, with the warning was the obvious evidence of God's mercy and blessing. Moses was giving this speech to the second generation of Israelites. The children of the rebellious parents were on the verge of possessing God's promise because God is merciful. These are good lessons for us to learn from this text.

Know That You Will Succeed (vv.1-6).

God promised that the people would succeed in possessing His promise. This would mean that they would overcome the unconquerable. It was not a recommendation or even a conclusion about what might happen. This was a command. Moses said, *Hear, O Israel: you are to cross over the Jordan today* (v.1a). Notice that he did not say, “You can cross over if you want to.” Rather, as is the case so often in Scripture, the clearly expressed will of God is not optional.

In fact, this was the same command God had given the forefathers of these people 40 years earlier. After God had led His people to the brink of the Promised Land in Kadesh Barnea, He commanded, *Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them* (Numbers 13:2). The people began to obey God’s command, but then they did not carry out their obedience. Now the second time the command is clear: *you are to cross over the Jordan today*.

The command was clear enough, but the reality was a bit hard to deal with. After commanding the people to go into the land, Moses admitted that they would need *to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourselves, cities great and fortified up to heaven, a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know, and of whom you have heard it said, “Who can stand before the sons of Anak?”* (vv.1b-2). The nations firmly situated in the land were greater and mightier than Israel. It was still as it had been reported 40 years earlier, that their cities were *great and fortified up to heaven*. The spies sent into the Promised Land during the time of these peoples’ parents had come back and said that it was a wonderful land, *However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there* (Numbers 13:28).

Yep, the sons of Anakim were still there. This was a unique race of people who were probably like giants. They had been around for centuries. A proverb had developed to express the impossibility or danger of trying to do something unwise. Like, “You don’t tug on Superman’s cape and you don’t pull the mask off the Lone Ranger.”

So what has changed? What is different now from when their fathers concluded, *We are not able to go up against the people, for*

they are stronger than we are (Numbers 13:31)? This time God expected the people to have confidence in His promised care. *Know therefore today that he who goes over before you as a consuming fire is the LORD your God. He will destroy them and subdue them before you. So you shall drive them out and make them perish quickly, as the LORD has promised you* (v.3).

They needed to believe that the LORD their God would go before them like a consuming fire. They needed to be sure that He would destroy whom He would destroy and subdue whom He would subdue. God promised that He would work through His people so that His people will succeed in driving out the people who are stronger and whose cities are fortified up to the sky. It was the LORD’S promise. Wasn’t that God’s promise previously? *“I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites”* (Exodus 33:2). So again we ask, “What changed?”

This tension between God’s promise and our faith to obey is at work every day for us. God promises Christians success in spiritual battle. Consider God’s promise through John: *Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world* (1 John 4:4). Also, *For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith* (1 John 5:4). Through Paul, God gave a similar reason to be confident. *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us* (Romans 8:35-37).

Is God serious about these truths? Are we really more than conquerors? Does our faith really overcome the world? Are we of God and, therefore, able to overcome the world through the ministry of the Holy Spirit? Because these things are true, it seems like God’s people ought to be experiencing victory over sin. Truly born again people do experience progressively more victory over sin. We rejoice when we are able to look back at success over pesky failures and sins.

But while we are enjoying spiritual victory, we need to remember that God’s people did not succeed because of their own

righteousness. Moses reminded the people that any success they experienced was because of God's plan. He warned them not to assume that they deserved success because of their righteousness. *Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, "It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land" (v.4a). Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land (v.5a).*

There was danger in the victors wrongly concluding that they were victorious because they were better than the wicked people who lived in the land (v.4a). But, why wouldn't God reward righteousness over evil? God had already given laws to His people that stated His standard of righteousness. If the people obeyed God's laws, would they not be righteous? Yes, they might indeed live "somewhat" righteously, but that was not the reason why they would experience victory. Rather, victory over sinners would be because God judged the sinners' sins. God didn't give victory because His people were comparatively more righteous, but *it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you (v.4b)*. It was *because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you (v.5b)*.

God was driving the inhabitants out of the land because He had promised it to Abraham. Part of the reason God promised this land to Abraham was because the wicked inhabitants were enjoying God's blessing while ignoring Him, rejecting Him, worshiping non-gods, and living like Satan. God had already promised to judge the peoples' sins. Therefore, victory would come because God keeps His word. It was so that *He may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. "Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people" (v.5c, 6)*. Success in possessing the gift God already determined to give was dependent upon God keeping His promise. The people would not succeed because they were more righteous than the God-rejecting pagans (though they probably were, or at least should have been). Rather God guaranteed possession of the land in order to confirm the word He had already sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God does

not take His promises lightly. And what might be most amazing is that He keeps His promise even for *stubborn people*.

This principle still applies in our age as we Christians do not live like Christ through our own strength. We, too, are in constant danger of wrongly concluding that we enjoy victory over sin because we are more righteous than others. Are we living more like Christ because through our own efforts we are more righteous than the thief, the drug addict, the alcoholic, the prostitute, or even the unfaithful co-worker? Do we despise the increasing sinfulness of our local culture? I do. I truly am disturbed to see an endless establishing of new craft beer businesses. I don't like the fleshiness that is thoroughly demonstrated at the various so-called family events held downtown throughout the year. I do not like the fact that Greenville citizens have no problem with *Jesus Christ Superstar* playing at the Peace Center. I truly am happy when the local authorities shut down places like the Platinum Club.

Frankly, I have a certain satisfaction that I don't care to frequent worldly venues. Is it because I am more righteous than they are? Yes, I am and I should be if I am following Christ. But I don't follow Christ and become more like Christ because of my intrinsic righteousness. Any spiritual victory I enjoy is wholly because God is kind and merciful to draw me along by His grace. I, who am stubborn by nature, follow God's bidding only because He is working in me to do His good pleasure.

Remember or Forget (vv.7-12)?

The call from Moses in this speech was for the people to remember past failure. Calling to our remembrance the failure of the first generation Israelites, Paul warned us: *Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Corinthians 10:12)*. That was a reminder that the parents of these people had failed miserably. They rebelled almost without ceasing. That is why Moses said according to verse seven, *Remember and do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD (v.7)*.

Reading the history of the first generation Israelites, we learn that right away the people began to complain about not having food, or the preferred kind of food, not having water, or being sitting ducks for Pharaoh's army. Okay, those are legitimate problems. But the real problem was failure to trust God. God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt through incredible displays of His power. Why or how did they forget? Did they really believe that God brought them into the wilderness to let them die? By accusing Moses of doing that, they were actually accusing God. What sinful lifestyles would make them think that the righteous and holy God would kill them. The irony is that what they accused Moses and God of planning, actually happened because of their sinful stubbornness.

Those people even rebelled against God at the very moment He was giving His law to Moses. Moses recalled, *When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water. And the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words that the LORD had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly. And at the end of forty days and forty nights the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant* (vv.9-11).

While Moses was wholly dedicated to knowing God's will, the people were wholly given over to the desires of their flesh. A short time later in this speech, Moses recalled, *"And I looked, and behold, you had sinned against the LORD your God. You had made yourselves a golden calf. You had turned aside quickly from the way that the LORD had commanded you"* (Deuteronomy 9:16). What a story! While Moses was receiving God's standard of righteousness, God's rules for right living, the people were breaking all the rules.

We are not surprised to discovery that those people stirred the LORD's anger. *Even at Horeb you provoked the LORD to wrath, and the LORD was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you* (v.8). The words, *You provoked the LORD to wrath* should be scary words to us. If we believe that God is who He says He is and able to do what He has already done and what He promises to do, we should avoid at all costs stirring His wrath. Moses feared the wrath and anger that the people stirred up in the LORD. The Hebrew word translated

wrath actually is used twice in the verse. *Provoke* and *wrath* are the same Hebrew word. The same word is found 33 times in the Old Testament to speak of relationships that break down because of anger.

Were the people unaware that God desired to have a relationship with them? This is a good picture of the husband and wife relationship by which God pictures our relationship with him. What kind of wife would be so obtuse toward her husband that she would have a relationship with someone who was not her husband? That is precisely the picture God gave through the prophet Hosea. No wonder God was angry.

The sin was so grievous that the LORD was ready to disown His people. Moses reminded the people, *Then the LORD said to me, "Arise, go down quickly from here, for your people whom you have brought from Egypt have acted corruptly. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them; they have made themselves a metal image"* (v.12). A couple of verses later Moses reminded the people that God had said to him: *"Let me alone, that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven. And I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they"* (Deuteronomy 9:14).

We, too, are reminded not to be like those stubborn, unfaithful people. *Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did* (1 Corinthians 10:6). Sometimes it is even good for us to remember our past failure to help us appreciate that danger of rebellion against God.

But even better is for us to remember God's mercy in past failure. Even after all the rebellion, God continued to work with Israel. It is true that He judged the first generation for their ongoing rebellion. In Israel's history we read, *These were those listed by Moses and Eleazar the priest, who listed the people of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho. But among these there was not one of those listed by Moses and Aaron the priest, who had listed the people of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. For the LORD had said of them, "They shall die in the wilderness." Not one of them was left, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun* (Numbers 26:63-65). Refusal to trust God and enter the Promised Land to possess it was the last straw. God had endured so much rebellion from these stubborn people. Finally, His patience ran out

just like it would centuries later when God raised up Assyria and Babylon to judge His peoples' sins. That, too, was a matter of God keeping His promises. The LORD said "They shall die in the wilderness," and die they did.

But here stood their children ready to inherit the promise. God did not destroy the entire nation because He is merciful. God would keep His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because He is merciful. God still has a plan for Abraham's seed because He is merciful.

It is a joy for us to apply that same principle of God's mercy in response to our rebellion. We do well to remember the mercy God grants in forgiveness for sin. On one hand, when we remember our past failures, we are driven to be so thankful for God's mercy to forgive and restore. If we got what we deserved for being born with a sin nature, we would have no option but to feel the sting of God's wrath. If God gave us what we deserve for our rebellion even after being born again, we would experience the expressions of His anger.

Too many times we even deserve God's discipline for becoming proud of our righteousness. We easily assume that we deserve God's blessing and mercy—especially more than those sinful worldlings who live all around us. We wrongly interpret God's mercy, forgetting that He gives it only to us who are so rebellious and stubborn that we really deserve His wrath.

On the other hand, it is also good for us to forget some things from the past. Paul left us with this principle practiced in his own life. He confessed to the Christians in the church in Philippi, *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-14).*

There is little doubt that Paul remembered many examples of his own stubborn rebellion against God. For example, sometimes in his own letters or when he gave his testimony to kings, Paul brought up his persecution of Christians. Could he ever forget the scene of Stephen being stoned to death in his presence? Paul even confessed that his achievements of the flesh (which is the context of this statement) were carried out in rebellion against God. He chose to forget these things.

By God's grace we can choose not to bring up our foolish displays of rebellion. It is important for us to remember that any spiritual victory we enjoy is wholly because God goes before us and defeats the enemy. It is good for us to remember regularly that God the Spirit who lives within us is the overcomer who gives us victory over sin, the world, and the devil. When our memory digs up junk from the past, it is good for us to remember that God's mercy has buried it in the depths of the sea. It is good for us to look at the promise of victory over sin and press forward in full dependance on Him who loves us and gave His life for us.