

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker
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Deuteronomy 1:6-8, 19-46; 2:1-3, 13-14 (read 1:6-8, 19-26) “It Time to Move On!”

Intro. This morning I begin a series of messages from key sections of the book of Deuteronomy. The name Deuteronomy means the second giving of the law. It contains three major messages by Moses in the plains of Moab to the people of Israel to prepare them to take possession of the land God was giving them and to govern themselves well. Faith and obedience to God would result in God’s blessing, both for the nation and for the individual. My challenge is going to be to explain the meaning of each text, and to make proper application for believers today.

What we have before us is two different times that God told the Israelites that it was time to move on to take possession of the land He had promised them. It was a good land. It was a large allotment of land, according to v.7.¹ Reminding them of what happened 38 years previously, He said beginning in v.6, “You have dwelt long enough in this mountain. Turn and take your journey, and go to the mountains of the Amorites, to all the neighboring places in the plain....” They had spent about a year at Mt. Horeb (v.2). They had received the Law and accomplished God’s other purposes for them there. It was time to move on. Then He said in v.8, “see, I have set the land before you; go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to your fathers....” When they arrived at last near the Promised Land to the oasis of Kadesh Barnea, once again Moses said in v.21, “Look, the Lord your God has set the land before you; go up and possess it, as the Lord God of your fathers has spoken to you; do not fear or be discouraged.” The Hebrew word translated “set” also means “to give, bestow,” and the perfect tense refers to completed action. Theologically and by divine grant from ancient times (cf. Gen 13:14-17) the occupation of the land was an accomplished fact. It was just a matter of time. So the nation had finally arrived on the bank of destiny, with the Promised Land lying before them. How would the people respond? Would they rely on God to help them complete His mission for them?

Well beginning in v.22 Moses reminded them of their nation’s failure to claim His promise by faith and take the land. He said in v.26, “Nevertheless you would not go up....” As a result, the nation wandered in the wilderness for the next 38 years until that generation of adults died off. Then, beginning in chapter 2, v.3, God said, “You have skirted this mountain long enough; turn northward.” He then gave instructions regarding their movements as they passed through surrounding nations on their way to the Promised Land. This time they would obey God as He led them and put their trust in Him to take possession of the land He had promised them.

Too often we are like the Israelites. We are stuck in the wilderness of unbelief and disobedience. We are going in circles, not making progress and claiming the wonderful promises of God by faith. That can happen to us as individuals, and that can happen to a church. Are you making steady progress in your spiritual growth? Are you claiming the promises of God? He has promised forgiveness and eternal life to all who believe in his son Jesus. Have you claimed that promise? He is promise that we can be filled with his Holy Spirit, to be led by him, and to be empowered by him. Have you claimed that promise? He has promised to be with us as we go forth to make disciples, even of all nations. Are you as an individual, and are we as a church

¹ See also Gen 15:18-21; 26:3; Exod. 23:31. The land was at the crossroads to many nations. From there they could be a blessing to the nations.

making progress toward the fulfillment of that mission? Too often Christians remain as babes in Christ instead of becoming mature disciples of Jesus. Too often we are making little progress in rescuing souls from the kingdom of darkness and advancing the kingdom of God. Too often we are stuck in the wilderness of unbelief and disobedience when we should be making progress both individually and as a church.

This morning I want to share with you how we can move on as Christian individuals and as a church. So how do we avoid getting stuck in a spiritual wilderness of failure to claim God's promises?

I. LEARN FROM PAST MISTAKES

Basically, the approach of Moses is to rehearse the experiences of their fathers and call upon his people to learn from the mistakes of the past rather than repeat the failures. That is one of the advantages of age and experience; hopefully we learn from our mistakes, or from observing the mistakes of others. Israel ought to have learned something from their history. The mistakes and sins and shortcomings of the past ought to be avoided at all cost.

So what can we learn from their nation's mistakes?

A. To Live by Sight, Not by Faith, Is to Suffer Defeat - After Moses agreed to their suggestion that they send spies into the land, they reported that the land was indeed a good land. However, they reported something else. We read in v.28, "Where can we go up? Our brethren have discouraged our hearts, saying, 'the people are greater and taller than we; the cities are great and fortified up to heaven; moreover we have seen the sons of Anakim there.'" What they literally said was their hearts melted. They were fearful of the size of the enemy, the heights of their walled cities, and lacked any courage whatsoever. Their use of hyperbole in reference to the height of their walls shows how their focus on the problem only made the problem worse. They were clearly fixated on the enemy rather than on God. Indeed, faithless "eyes" are selective in what they allow to register in the heart. These people were blind to God's gracious providences, and they saw only the obstacles in their road.

It reminds me of the time Peter asked permission to walk out on the water to Jesus during the storm. He did fine as long as his eyes were on Jesus, but when he focused instead of the waves, he began to sink!

The basic problem was not the size of their enemy but their own unbelief. Now notice what Moses said in v.32, "yet, for all that, you did not believe the Lord your God." That was their major sin. Likewise, Heb. 3:19 says, "We see that they could not enter in because of unbelief." Granted, Israel lacked experience in warfare and the enemy was powerful and well-fortified. But God had said that He would take care of the giants because He would enable Israel. Moses said of God in v.30, "He will fight for you..." (cf. 3:22; 20:4; Exod. 14:13-14). In spite of that they did not believe God. Unbelief repudiates the very character of God. It implies that His promises are not to be trusted.

By the way, another evidence of their lack of faith was a desire to send men in to spy out the land, as stated in v.22. Under normal circumstances such a reconnaissance mission might have made good sense (Josh. 2:1; 7:2; Judg. 18:2), but coming immediately after God's command, the proposal itself seemed to betray a lack of faith (cf. 9:23) and indicates that they were not wholly persuaded of the presence and power of God. So the real challenge was neither physical nor military, but spiritual. Would they trust God?

Christians in every age have encountered representatives of the kingdom of darkness who stand in the way, obstacles to the fulfillment of the mission to which God has called us. Many times the Christian today finds himself confronted by giants in this life. Believe me, it is difficult to know how to handle a giant. But God has given us the same promise that He is able to handle the giants for us. It is not our circumstances on the outside which are our real problem. It is the unbelief in our hearts, which is the cause of our problems. That is why the writer of Hebrews issues this warning in 3:12, "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God."

B. To Live by Sight Leads to Wrong Conclusions about God - Notice in v.27 what they complained about upon hearing the report, "Because the LORD hates us, He has brought us out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us." God had declared His love for them, but the negative report of the enemy caused them to conclude otherwise. Then in v.39 Moses refers to their "little ones and your children, who you say will be victims...." They were insulting God; they were really saying that God didn't care for their children.

Even so, bad circumstances cause many to doubt the fact of God's love. They only see the bad circumstances and ignore the many evidences of God's love, both in Scripture and in their past experiences.

C. Unbelief and Disobedience Brings God's Judgment - We read in v.34, "in the Lord heard the sound of your words, and was angry...." Note with me all the ways the people suffered because of their unbelief and disobedience:

1. God Voided Their Inheritance - We read in v.35, "Surely not one of these men of this evil generation shall see that good land of which I swore to give to your fathers." Those adults whom the Lord had brought out of Egypt were rejected as heirs of the promise to the fathers. They were told in 2:1 to go back and journey near the Red Sea for a while in a stunning reversal.

2. They Were Defeated by Their Enemies - After hearing what God had said, and considering the wilderness alternative stated in v.40, look at what we read in vv.43-44, "So I spoke to you; yet you would not listen, but rebelled against the command of the LORD, and presumptuously went up into the mountain. And the Amorites who dwelt in that mountain came out against you and chased you as bees do, and drove you back from Seir to Hormah." They decided to step out on their own to try to take the land. Yet for Israel to attempt war in Yahweh's name without His sanction and presence was to court inevitable disaster. The Amorites of the hill country responded like wild bees in a disturbed hive. The Israelites discovered that the land "flowing with milk and honey" also produced stinging bees, which swarmed around them, chased them off (Block, p.74). Israel's decisive defeat in this initial attempt at conquest was so devastating and demoralizing that the people could only weep in their frustration before the Lord. But the weeping was too late and too lacking in genuine repentance.

It is so foolish to try to live apart from God's enabling power. If you get ahead of God and do something without His direction or blessing, you are courting disaster. Also, this is an example of the fact that so often people do not listen to good advice because they are so bent on doing their own will.

3. God Refused to Hear Their Prayers - Moses said in v.45, "Then you returned and wept before the LORD, but the LORD would not listen to your voice nor give ear to you." Faithlessness yields alienation so acute that God refuses to respond to the prayers of faithless

supplicants, regardless of the passion with which they plead with Him. Psa. 66:18 says, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.”

4. They Wandered and Died in the Wilderness - Then we read beginning in v.46, “So you remained in Kadesh many days, according to the days that you spent there.” Apparently, they stayed a good while there.² Then v.1 says, “Then we turned and journeyed into the wilderness of the Way of the Red Sea, as the LORD spoke to me, and we skirted Mount Seir for many days.” Those *two* verses summarized 38 years!³ In fact, look with me at chapter 2, vv. 14-15, “And the time we took to come from Kadesh Barnea until we crossed over the Valley of the Zered was thirty-eight years, until all the generation of the men of war was consumed from the midst of the camp, just as the LORD had sworn to them. For indeed the hand of the LORD was against them, to destroy them from the midst of the camp until they were consumed.” What we read is designed to show the wearisome monotony of that lost era of Israel’s history. During that time the Israelites made no progress whatsoever toward the fulfillment of the mission on which they had embarked when they came out of Egypt. Added to that was the condition of the wilderness. What a place to spend much of the 38 years! In fact, in v.19 Moses called it “that great and terrible wilderness” (see also Num. 11:1-12:16). In 8:15 also says it was a “great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water....” Furthermore, for almost four decades Israel was a death camp in which the dominant sound was the death wail. It took 38 years for that entire generation to die. Even if that number was just one million, that meant that 72 died on average every day! Oh, the consequences of sin and unbelief!

Yes, Romans 6:23 says, “The wages of sin is death,” and unbelief is one of the greatest of sins.

D. Unbelief and Disobedience Adversely Affects Others - Moses said in v.37, “The LORD was also angry with me for your sakes,⁴ saying, ‘Even you shall not go in there.’” That was a prophecy rather than a judgment caused by something Moses had done. If the Israelites had trusted the Lord at Kadesh Barnea and entered the land at his command, the event recorded in Numbers 20 of him striking the rock twice would never have occurred. He would have entered with them at that first opportunity!

II. LIVE BY FAITH IN GOD

How can we strengthen our faith? Trying to correct the people’s flawed perspective, Moses’ response was to focus entirely on the Lord.

A. Remember What God Has Done in the Past – In v.10 Moses reminded them of our God had fulfilled one of His promises. He said, “The LORD your God has multiplied you, and here you are today, as the stars of heaven in multitude.” That was a direct fulfillment of Gen. 15:5. Then Moses said beginning in v.29, “Do not be terrified, or afraid of them. The Lord your

² Given the enormous population, the nomadic or seminomadic lifestyle of the people, and the vicissitudes of climate and pasturage, there can be no doubt that the tribes of Israel ranged widely throughout the Sinai and Negev regions (cf. Num 14:25).

³ Not a word is forthcoming in Deuteronomy about those silent years, and all Numbers records by way of narrative is negative: the rebellion of Korah (Num 16:1-40), the complaint of the people (16:41-17:13), the death of Miriam (20:1), and the rebellion at Meribah (20:2-13).

⁴ The Hebrew could mean, “on occasion of you” as in Gen. 30:27, 30.

God, who goes before you, He will fight for you, according to all He did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, and all the way that you went until you came to this place.” How could they be afraid of the inhabitants of the land when they consider what God did to the Egyptians, a nation that was superior militarily and in other ways. How can they be concerned about their well-being when God had demonstrated many times in the wilderness his loving care for them, like that of a father for his son. In fact, the picture is that of a father who carries his son through danger to safety. How can they be concerned about which way to go on their way to possess the land (v.28a), when God had led them through the wilderness by means of a cloud by day and fire by night (v.33b).

So they could trust God as their Divine Warrior leading in battle, their Loving Father who will carry them safely through, and their Guide.

B. Step Out in Obedient Faith - We see the next generation of Israelites doing this in chapter 2, v.13. Moses said, “‘Now rise and cross over the Valley of the Zered.’ So we crossed over the Valley of the Zered.” It did not matter that giants were in the land. It did not matter that they had strong and high walled cities (Num 13:27-29). All that mattered was that God was with them, and He had promised them the land! Faith was the essential thing. They believed God and they were willing to step out in faith.

Caleb provides an illustration of such obedient faith back when they were first told to possess the land. He was one of only two of his generation that would possess the promised land. In v.36 God warned that the entire generation of adults would die in the wilderness “except Caleb the son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him and his children I am giving the land on which he walked, because he wholly followed the Lord.” Despite the pervasive unbelief of Israel, every age knows a faithful remnant.

Friend, you don't truly believe God unless you step out in faith for Him. Yet sadly, like Israel, the church and Christians as individuals have often proved faithless, being more impressed by the power of the enemy than the power of God and the resources he makes available to his people. But the example of Caleb inspires us in our pursuit of God and provides the key to passing the tests we face: possession of a different Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit of God, and unqualified commitment to God and his mission. To those who persevere the Lord promises not a plot of land but the eternal reward of an inheritance with him (Eph. 1:3-14).

Sources: Donard F. Ackland, *Studies in Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1964); Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2019; J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Eugene H. Merrill, *New American Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Nothing available from Maclaren.

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