

“At the End of the Forgotten Road”

- Deuteronomy 8 -

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Deuteronomy 8 - *"Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers. 2 "And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. 3 "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD. 4 "Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. 5 "You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the LORD your God chastens you. 6 "Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. 7 "For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; 8 "a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; 9 "a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper. 10 "When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. 11 "Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, 12 "lest— when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; 13 "and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; 14 "when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; 15 "who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; 16 "who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end— 17 "then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.' 18 "And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. 19 "Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the LORD your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish. 20 "As the nations which the LORD destroys before you, so you shall perish, because you would not be obedient to the voice of the LORD your God.*

The great New England minister, educator & writer Cotton Mather once penned the words, *“Religion begat prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother.”* Here in Deuteronomy 8, after Moses gives the commandments, God tells the people that the land in which they will ultimately settle is a fantastic place where they will live ‘the good life.’ But then comes the crucial P.S....a warning not to forget... who gave it to them, and His truths, commands, and promises. To not forget where they came from. It is clear that this warning is as relevant today as it ever was. If you forget where you came from and the journey from there to here...this chapter warns Israel and by way us also, that you will “perish.”

This week we find ourselves once again in another Thanksgiving season. Yet I wonder how many of us will embrace the holiday with honest thanks?

We have generally kept a little book around the church here by Jerry Benjamin that is called “What Is the First Indication of Turning Away from God?” Its subtitle is “Murmuring: Its Consequences, Causes, and Cure.” In that small booklet we quickly come to see that one of the greatest causes to this sin of murmuring is an unthankful spirit. While that certainly can happen because we have a chip on our shoulders...a “beef” with God because our life journey is not going the way we had it planned, the truth is that such a state occurs more often than not because we simply don’t think about the journey at all anymore. We don’t clearly remember where we came from nor the road that brought us here.

Chapter 8 of Deuteronomy picks up the story of Israel at the end of forty years wandering in the desert regions of the wilderness. That first generation - that is, the generation of the exodus - had failed to enter the rich and prosperous "promised land" that God had promised them. They failed because they had refused to believe God, were afraid of the people that were living there and because they rejected his implicit directions. (Numbers 14:26-35). And now that the first generation had died in the wilderness, the second generation was about to enter in and take possession of the land. The book of Deuteronomy contains God's final words of exhortation to that generation before it entered into the riches and blessings that God was about to give to them.

God was about to give them a land to possess that was remarkable for its prosperity and goodness. He was about to give them many great reasons to be very thankful to Him. And it was at this time that God speaks to His people through Moses and gave them these final words of exhortation. And both God and Moses wanted the people to stop and remember. Furthermore, they were warned to never forget...

Consider the recipients of Moses words herein. They had just come to the end of forty years of wandering in the wilderness. They had been former slaves who had suffered horribly under hard bondage in the land of Egypt and therefore already had so much to thank God for. And now hearing of the prosperity that we know did indeed eventually come to this people, they had even more reason to thank God.

Now think of us! As a fellowship...a church...a people today who have been dramatically rescued from our lost condition in sin, and welcomed into the full covenant blessings of the God of Israel, how we also have much to thank God and praise Him for. Of course that doesn't even include eternal life in God's presence where the streets are gold and there is "no tears and no crying." And what about all the material prosperity we enjoy today, as well as all the things that money cannot buy - friends, family, and wonderful memories and awesome experiences? Who would argue that as Christians...as a church body, we are today very rich and prosperous indeed!!

But in light of these things and in light of God's warning we too need to heed this passage - just as much as did the people of Israel. We need to beware; because in all the prosperity we so freely enjoy, there is a danger that we may "sit back to eat and drink, marry and give in marriage" as is warned for the last days. It is a remarkable truth in that it is rarely if ever hardship and austerity that causes us to drift away from God and church. It is in fact prosperity. It seems the "good times" can kill us, and for many, it already has.

I'd like for us to pull out some of these principles from this passage this morning. You can sum them all up in four words. And the first of these four words is . . . "Remember."

Where the righteous attitude must begin is by looking back over our shoulders. Remembering where we came from both individually as well as corporately as a church. That little book I spoke of warns us about forgetting and then grumbling and failing to walk in humble acknowledgement of the road that God has brought us down.

Having been in this pulpit as long as I have has provided some unique perspectives of time and people's stories. I have watched countless times how people came into this fellowship and into the family of God and experienced forgiveness and acceptance from both. All their dirty laundry was buried and they were loved and allowed participation in the ministry. But I also watched how they began to forget. They forgot who they were when they came to us, and the condition they were in. They forgot how messed up they were and had really nothing to offer anyone and yet God took them into the major leagues. They forgot how good these friends are...the brothers and sisters that have put up with all their socially unacceptable behaviors.

There have been those who came in here with marriages in crisis, in bondage habits, in criminal backgrounds, and sometimes in severe illness. There was an outpouring of love and concern on their behalf. We went through it all with them...praying for them, helping them in their family affairs, took them meals, helped with their financial affairs. We helped with their children when things were tough, and taught those same children the ways of Christ. But after all of that, they inexplicably forgot all those blessings and when the crisis of their lives

were believed to be over, they dumped this fellowship and everyone who had blessed them, often with cries that not enough was done for them!

If we're going to cultivate an attitude of thanksgiving to God, then one of the most important things we can cultivate is a good memory! Look at how Moses points them back to the things that God had done for them during that forty-year period that was now coming to an end. Look at how he calls them to "remember" the things that happened.

It may seem surprising; but the first thing that Moses calls them to remember is how God "humbled" them. *"And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not."* (v. 2). Moses starts off by urging them to keep God's commandments in verse 1; and then, He lets them know that the forty year period in the desert was, among other things, a "test" - intended by God to humble them and reveal what was truly in their hearts. God wanted it to be revealed through the hard experience of testing and trials: Would they follow Him and obey Him, or not?

Throughout that 40 year journey, throughout all that time of testing and in all those hard experiences, God had proven to them...*as well as us on our journey*, that He really was worthy of their trust all along. He showed Himself that He could be trusted and that He had their backs. Moses goes on to say; *"So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD"* (v. 3).

Those same words were spoken by Jesus when he had His own wilderness experience, when He was tempted by the devil for forty days (Matthew 4:4). Jesus Himself - as God in human flesh - demonstrated trust in His heavenly Father as the divine Provider of all He needed; and He demonstrated that trust through faithful obedience to His Father's commands.

But it wasn't very long after the people of Israel left Egypt before they started complaining. They had already forgotten. They even said to Moses - in a very faithless way - that they wished they'd stayed in Egypt; and they said that Moses had brought them out into the wilderness to kill them with hunger. Instead of punishment, God stepped up to care for them. He told Moses, *"Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not. And it shall be on the sixth day that they shall prepare what they bring in, and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily"* (Ex. 16:4-5).

God literally caused food to fall down to the people from heaven. That blessing came with only one caveat...on the sixth day, they were to gather twice as much - enough for two days, because the seventh day was the sabbath; and they were not to gather on that day. For forty years - every day - they had a vivid reminder of God's faithfulness and they had a clear call to obey His command. Yet even this small and simple request for some could not be followed and they gathered more, tried to save it overnight, and it spoiled and was full of worms. God wanted them to trust Him daily...not depend upon their own abilities and resources.

Moses also called them to remember other ways God provided for them. He reminds them, *"For all these forty years your clothes didn't wear out, and your feet didn't blister or swell."* (v. 4). Think of that! God provided wonderfully for them, didn't He? They could even look at the clothes on their back and the shoes on their feet, and see for themselves the testimony of God's provision!

As we read on in this passage, we see lots of additional ways that God provided for them during their forty year journey. Moses reminds them that it was God who brought them out of Egypt, "from the house of bondage" (v. 14). He led them, "through that great and terrible wilderness" (v. 15) - keeping them in His care, and protecting

them from all the dangers of heat, and wild animals, and robbers, and hostile nations. When they were thirsty, God even provided water for them from out of a rock (Ex. 17:7; Num. 20:2-13).

And why did He do all of this? Why did he do all this for us? It was to test them; to show whether or not they would trust Him and do what He said. It was forty years of intense training in trust of the God who proved - by actual experience - that He never, ever fails. As we approach this Thanksgiving season, have you taken the time to "remember"?

The second word we need to note is the word "obey." That's how this chapter starts out: "*Be careful to obey all the commands I am giving you today. Then you will live and multiply, and you will enter and occupy the land the LORD swore to give your ancestors.*" (v. 1). He picks up that same theme in verse six: "*So obey the commands of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and fearing him.*"

Look at the description of the land that He is about to give them. It sounds like a paradise! "*For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land of flowing streams and pools of water, with fountains and springs that gush out in the valleys and hills. It is a land of wheat and barley; of grapevines, fig trees, and pomegranates; of olive oil and honey. It is a land where food is plentiful and nothing is lacking. It is a land where iron is as common as stone, and copper is abundant in the hills.*" (vv. 7-9). What a blessing that must have been to a people who had been in slavery for so many years! Plenty of water! Plenty of produce! Plenty of natural resources! What a wonderful gift God was giving them! What a rich blessing He was pouring out on them!

And all that rich blessing was being presented to them as one reason why they were to obey Him. They weren't called to obey Him in order to receive all this - as if they were earning it. They were called to obey Him because He was *already* freely giving it to them. They were to obey Him as a response to His grace toward them. John tells us, "*We love Him because He first loved us*" (1 John 4:19). We never earn His love for us by our love toward Him. Our love toward Him is always a response to the fact that He first loved us.

Third, we find the word "thank." "*When you have eaten your fill, be sure to praise (or 'bless') the LORD your God for the good land he has given you...*"

The word that Moses uses, here translated "praise or bless" (bārak), is related to the Hebrew word for "knee" (berek). To "bless" in this sense means to "adore with bended knees". This isn't talking about some ordinary "table grace" kind of thing. It speaks rather of an expression of worship! It's acknowledging that God truly is our good Provider, who not only meets our daily needs but has poured out on us blessings that are above and beyond our needs...blessings to just bring us great joy.

Clearly God takes pleasure in our enjoying the good things He gives us. The people of Israel are allowed to 'eat and be full' (v. 12); to build 'beautiful houses' and 'dwell in them' (v. 12); to multiply 'herds' and 'flocks' (v. 13); to multiply 'silver' and 'gold' (v. 13); and even to see all that they have 'multiply' (v. 13). An abundance of food, houses, money, and things! Can we deny that we have been so blessed? I wish you could have known this church in its early days. Our humble storefront space with its white plastic chairs. Donuts and percolated coffee for fellowship. In its birth we had a hotel conference room and a boombox for worship! We have come a long way.

What about you? How has your journey been here? What a field of blessing I see before me today...marriages, children, vocations, finances, cars, and houses. And yet some still cannot find hearts of thankfulness. They still cannot respond to such in simple obedience that He asks of us. They cannot love as they are loved. Because it is never enough. "More" is their constant battle cry. One that eventually leads them out of the promised land and back into Egypt. Do you ever notice how such folks inevitably return to their old stomping grounds and to their old ways? They dig up old friends they used to hang with, start in again with the same sins they had been forgiven of and given power over. They forgot. They remembered only the "leeks and onions" they enjoyed in their bondage and have forgotten that that life held no joy and purpose.

Lastly, we are warned with the word “beware.” You see; there's a danger in the land of plenty. The danger is that, in the midst of the plenty, we will forget the God who so richly blesses us and think that we can do better on our own. We don't need so much God and we certainly don't need these people around us.

In verse 11, for example, Moses says, “Beware”... “(For this) *is the time to be careful! Beware that in your plenty you do not forget the LORD your God and disobey his commands, regulations, and decrees that I am giving you today.* . . . In verse 17, he says that we're to beware, lest we forget, and begin to think, “I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy.” In verses 19-20, he says, “*...I assure you of this: If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods, worshiping and bowing down to them, you will certainly be destroyed. Just as the LORD has destroyed other nations in your path, you also will be destroyed if you refuse to obey the LORD your God.*”

First, let's keep in mind what our wilderness journey was for. It was intended to humble us and train us to trust Him so we can truly enjoy His rich blessings. If we forget that road behind us then it was for nothing, and we are in grave danger of having to go through it all again...and life is too short to make *that* mistake.

A second important thing to keep in mind is from whom the rich blessings of life really come from. They do not come from ourselves or our own efforts, but only from God. Verse 18 says, “. . . *Remember the LORD your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful.* . . .” We are always ultimately dependent upon Him. And if we fail in that, we can just as quickly lose it all. Paul wrote to the Corinthians and said, “. . . *what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*” (1 Cor. 4:7). Just as He is able to give us the rich blessings of life when we trust Him - He is also able to take the rich blessings of life away if we ignore Him. We find this in verses 19-20; where Moses warns that if the people forget God and turn away from Him to other gods, “. . .*I assure you of this: If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods, worshiping and bowing down to them, you will certainly be destroyed. Just as the LORD has destroyed other nations in your path, you also will be destroyed if you refuse to obey the LORD your God.*” God was not being harsh and mechanical in saying this. Rather, He was being very 'fatherly': “*You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the LORD your God chastens you*” (v. 5).

Thomas Carlyle once said “For every one hundred men who can stand adversity there is only one who can withstand prosperity.” If we forget the path behind and what we were before...if we forget that God has so blessed us to bring us to this day...if we forget the rare blessing of these people around us today and the love they bring into our lives...if we forget what a rare church fellowship this is that we have today...we stand in danger of losing it all. We have seen several over the past few years that have fallen in just such a manner. It is not longer “well with their soul.” This is God's ground and God's show. Don't forget it. The price is steep.