

Deuteronomy 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Deuteronomy chapter 9 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, whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you.

Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you, and that you 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. Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord 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. Even at Horeb you provoked the Lord to wrath, and the Lord was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you.

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.

[1 : 52] And at the end of forty days and forty nights the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant. Then the Lord said to me, Arise, go down quickly from here, for your people whom you have brought out 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. Furthermore the Lord said to me, I have seen this people, and behold it is a stubborn people.

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. So I turned and came down from the mountain, and the mountain was burning with fire, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands.

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. So I took hold of the two tablets, and threw them out of my two hands, and broke them before your eyes.

Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before, forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread, nor drank water, because of all the sin that you had committed, in doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger.

[3 : 04] For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the Lord bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you. But the Lord listened to me that time also, and the Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him, and I prayed for Aaron also at the same time.

Then I took the sinful thing, the calf that you had made, and burned it with fire, and crushed it, grinding it very small, until it was as fine as dust, and I threw the dust of it into the brook that ran down from the mountain.

At Taborah also, and at Massah, and at Kibroth Hata'ava, you provoked the Lord to wrath. And when the Lord sent you from Kadesh Barnea, saying, Go up and take possession of the land that I have given you, then you rebelled against the commandment of the Lord your God, and did not believe him, or obey his voice.

You have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you. So I lay prostrate before the Lord for these forty days and forty nights, because the Lord had said he would destroy you. And I prayed to the Lord, O Lord God, do not destroy your people and your heritage, whom you have redeemed through your greatness, whom you have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not regard the stubbornness of this people, or their wickedness, or their sin, lest the land from which you brought us say, Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them, and because he hated them, he has brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness.

[4 : 31] For they are your people and your heritage, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm. Deuteronomy chapter 9 begins with a statement that Israel is about to go into the land, displacing powerful peoples, because the Lord will go over before them as a consuming fire.

The Lord has previously been described as a devouring fire in chapter 4 verses 23 to 24. Take care lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you.

For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. While on this occasion it relates to God's judgment upon the people in the land, on the earlier occasion it relates to God's judgment upon Israel, if they are unfaithful.

Israel then cannot presume upon God's judgment, as if it were only directed against their enemies. When the nations of the land were driven out before them, the natural temptation for Israel would be to speculate that this happened because of their own righteousness.

The Lord is clearly rewarding them for being an upright people. And the point of this chapter more than anything else is to leave Israel under no illusion that this is the case. The majority of this chapter is devoted to cataloging the various forms of rebellion that Israel committed in the wilderness, while also making entirely plain that it was only on account of the intercession of Moses and his appeal to the grace of God that they survived as a people.

[6 : 01] When were there beneficiaries of great fortune or favour that sets us apart from others? The natural underlying question that we and others are asking is, why us? And in such situations we're generally inclined to give reasons.

We worked particularly hard. We used our smarts. We were the most talented of the people in the situation. We liked to believe that our good outcomes set us apart from others.

Not just in the outcomes themselves, but in some deeper way. Those outcomes reveal something about us that makes us special, that sets us apart, that demonstrates in some way or other that we are special, that we are above others.

And we should not only enjoy our good fortune, but we should feel entitled to it. We merit this. We're the type of people to whom this sort of fortune belongs. While we might attribute negative results to our bad luck, whenever we have positive outcomes, we want to draw a line that connects it to our greater virtue, our greater capacity, our shrewdness, or some title that we have to it.

And in a society that appeals to meritocracy as much as ours does, this is a particular problem. We often labour under the illusion that those who enjoy the best results in our society, who have the most wealth, the people who have the greatest power, the greatest positions of authority, the greatest status, whatever it is, we like to believe that that all comes down to some special characteristic in them.

[7 : 27] Save, of course, for the occasions when this would cast an unflattering light upon us. We have already seen that Israel would face the temptation when they enter the land to forget the Lord in their prosperity.

This is another temptation that Israel would face, the temptation of attributing their blessings to their own righteousness. Moses has already taught concerning this to some extent in Deuteronomy 7, verses 7-8.

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the house of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

Israel is not being given the land on account of its righteousness. Indeed, the bringing of Israel into the land seems almost incidental here. The real point is driving out the wicked people before them and they're driven out not because of Israel but because of their own wickedness.

At this point, Israel might still want to pat itself on the back for its supposed righteousness. Perhaps they weren't given the land for this reason but clearly they aren't that bad and they can congratulate themselves to some extent.

[8 : 42] And the rest of this chapter is designed to puncture that illusion. Israel is a stiff-necked people. It escaped destruction by the Lord in the wilderness only by the intercessions of Moses and by the skin of their teeth.

Even at Horeb, you provoke the Lord to wrath. Even at Horeb, the place where the covenant was established, where the law was given, where they saw the theophanic cloud and the fire and when they heard the voice of God coming from the cloud.

Even at Horeb, they rebelled against the Lord. And Moses discusses the golden calf for the first time in the book, recounting the events of Exodus chapter 32 to 34, Israel's sin and his intercession for them.

In that passage, it was only because Moses stood in the gap between the Lord and his people and prevented the Lord from destroying them that Israel was saved. The Lord was about to blot them out and start anew with Moses and Aaron also was about to be destroyed.

Moses had to intercede for both of them. And then he goes on to list sites of Israel's rebellion. Tabera, Numbers chapter 11 verses 1 to 3, the place where they complained.

[9 : 50] Massa, Exodus chapter 17 verses 1 to 7, they tested the Lord there and he gave them water from the rock. Is the Lord truly among us? Kibroth, Hata'ava, Numbers chapter 11 verses 31 to 35, the events with the quail.

And then finally, of course, Kadesh Barnea, Israel's failure to enter into the land. Israel must not forget these events. If at any point Israel forgets these events, they may fall into the trap of thinking that they entered the land because of their righteousness, because they were better than all the other peoples, that they enjoy these blessings on account of some virtue in themselves.

Once again, the task of memory is important here. It will be as they remember their sin in the past and the way that God showed grace and forgiveness to them. It's only in their remembrance of that that they will be saved from deep error in the future and all the dangers that that would open them up to.

Moses saves his most powerful argument till the end. He mentioned his intercession earlier in the chapter, but he did not outline its contents. It is when we see the contents of Moses' intercession that it becomes plain.

Israel has no claim by virtue of its own righteousness. Indeed, if God were to judge Israel according to its own behaviour, there would be nothing but destruction awaiting them. What was Moses' argument?

[11 : 12] First, he spoke of the way that Israel is the Lord's heritage and that he has delivered them from Egypt. He then recalls the patriarchs and the covenant and the promises that God had made to his people.

Third, he speaks of the way that the Lord should do this for the sake of his own name among the nations. And then at the end he returns back to the claim with which he began. Israel is the Lord's inheritance and he has delivered them from Egypt.

He has set his name upon them and he has his own people. What should Israel notice? That there is no reference to their own behaviour here. That indeed, the whole purpose of Moses' intercession is to draw attention to something that stands firm over against the fickleness of their behaviour, a generous grace that persistently resists their stubbornness.

This, of course, has much to teach us too. We, like the Israelites, are tempted to attribute our favoured status, the blessings that we enjoy, the privileges that we have, and to attribute all of those to our own virtues, to some characteristic that we have, to some special entitlement that we possess, whatever it is.

And, like the Israelites, we need to learn that we have been the recipients of completely undeserved divine favour. We are the recipients of grace and of mercy.

[12 : 31] God has not given us what is due to us. If he had, we would be destroyed. And God has given us boundfully from his storehouses of favour things that we had no title to.

God has blessed us richly with things that can only be attributed to his own kindness and goodness. Like the Israelites, we should never forget our own sinfulness, lest we fall into the dark ingratitude of thinking that the grace and the goodness of our God has been received on account of something in us.

One of the central themes of Moses' sermon is that there is nothing in the people themselves that merits God's goodness. To give them that vertiginous awareness that what holds them aloft in this position of incredible blessing is nothing but the undeserved favour of God.

And this is no less true for us. A question to consider, how can we learn from Moses' example in our own prayers for the Lord's forgiveness and favour?

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