

Deuteronomy 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Deuteronomy chapter 9 Deuteronomy chapter 9 Deuteronomy chapter 8 continues Moses' teaching on the first commandment, the fact that Israel should have no other gods besides the Lord.

The testing was to discern what was in their hearts.

The gift of the land was for the sake of Israel's calling, but if they weren't careful, it would become a snare to them. Consequently, before they could enter into the land, they had to be prepared for it. In the wilderness, they lacked provisions, they lacked power, and they lacked direction.

And they had to depend upon the Lord for each of these things. The Lord would guide them through. The Lord would give them the food that they needed. The Lord would protect them from their enemies and from the wild creatures of the wilderness.

[3 : 5 4] And during that time, they would hopefully learn the lesson of what it meant to relate to the Lord their God properly. The wilderness was also a time of testing and judgment, where the heart of Israel was exposed through sin and rebellion, and when God judged them so that they would learn the lesson and be faithful.

If they had entered into the land as a haughty and disobedient people, the land would not bring blessing to them. It would not be a context of enjoying fellowship with God. It would actually be a snare to them.

It would be a means of their own destruction. The land wasn't a reward for Israel's righteousness. Rather, it was something that they were supposed to mature into. It was a realm of increased responsibility and blessing.

However, before they could enter into the land, they had to learn the lessons of the wilderness and graduate from that class. And when they failed to do so, when they failed to heed the word of God, to obey his voice, they had to take this remedial period of 40 years of testing and humbling, and they were judged for that period of time, because they were not prepared for that new level of responsibility.

The manner in particular is singled out as something that was designed to teach them that man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God. In times of plenty, we might be tempted to think that we live primarily by material resources.

[5 : 1 2] We live by our crops, by our wealth, by the strength of our hand and our military, and we live by the way in which we can foresee the future and plan for it. However, the wilderness was designed to teach Israel that societies ultimately live by the word of God.

And the manner was a way in which God taught this. It taught dependence. You couldn't accumulate the manner. You couldn't build it up and become wealthy through manner.

You couldn't preserve it. Each day, you had to depend upon God for your daily bread. You couldn't cultivate it. Ultimately, it came from God. It was not something that you could produce by your own might and ability and skill.

It taught obedience. You had to work according to God's schedule. You had to survive on his provisions. And it was absolutely imperative that this lesson wasn't forgotten when they entered into the land.

One aspect of the Feast of Firstfruits was to recall this fact when they offered an omer of the barley grain of the land. This omer corresponded with the omer that they would gather each day of the manna.

[6 : 16] It expressed the fact that the reality of God's provision in the manna continued in the grain. That the principle of the wilderness, while not so obvious, continued in the land.

Israel is on the brink of its greatest test. They have the choice between enjoying the good gifts of the land and forgetting the Lord, or enjoying the good gifts of the land and remembering the Lord.

This is the real challenge. It's one thing to remember the Lord in the tough times, quite another to do so in times of prosperity. Decadence easily develops when we lack any crisis, and life is easy when everything is handed to us on a plate, and Israel was about to enter into a situation of plenty and prosperity.

And Moses wants to be absolutely certain that they're ready for this. How do you prepare yourself for the difficult days when decadence crouches at the door of your prosperous society?

This is what Israel is being prepared for in this chapter. When we look through the Pentateuch, it is startling how much of it is devoted to memory. Israel is constantly having its mind directed back to the events of its history.

[7 : 25] It's recalling these in retelling the story, but also in the repeating of the rituals over time. The second half of Exodus, the book of Leviticus, much of the book of Numbers, and the book of Deuteronomy all have the establishment of memory and continued practice and memorialisation at their very heart.

The tabernacle and its sacrifices is an institutional continuation of the meaning of Sinai and that event of meeting with God there. The Sabbath and all the feasts of Israel's calendar are a continuation of the meaning of the Exodus event.

In the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, they are entering once again into the experience of Israel leaving the land of Egypt. And then again at the end of the festal year, when they celebrate the Feast of Booths, they are once again entering into that experience of leaving Egypt for the first time.

These events are not to be forgotten. These events are written into the calendar. They're written into the book that Israel is supposed to take into itself. They are supposed to meditate upon these events.

And that will preserve their society from decadence and the destruction that comes to decadent societies. God never wanted Israel to remain all of its life in dependence in the wilderness.

[8 : 41] He wanted them to grow in strength, to act in strength. And so he strengthened them to act, and he gave them resources to cultivate and employ for their strength. However, when you have such strength, it's very easy to forget where that strength has come from.

Unless Israel constantly returns to the events of its history, it will forget. And in forgetting, they will forget not just their history, but forget the Lord who has equipped them with this strength.

I have argued that this section belongs to an extended sermon concerning the first commandment. And here we see part of the purpose of that. We must have no other God beside the Lord.

The point of this is not merely that we shouldn't replace God with idols and false gods, but also that we must not forget him. The uniqueness of God is seen in his provision for all of our needs, our dependence upon him in every area of life, the fact that whatever we do, our strength, our resources, our provision, our protection, all of these things ultimately come from the Lord.

And perhaps the greatest and most dangerous idolatry of all is assuming that we are God, that we are the ones whose providence rules the affairs of history, that we are the ones who provide for all of our needs, that we are the ones who have the autonomous strength to serve all of our purposes.

[10:03] And this temptation to forsake and forget the Lord our God is felt most keenly in times of prosperity and growth. This, of course, is perhaps the greatest temptation that we face in the modern world.

And the consequence of such forsaking and forgetting is destruction. Such societies will decay and collapse. The discipline of constant memory is the way in which we will be preserved from this.

Remember our history. Remember the Lord our God, what he has done for us. Remember the lessons that we learnt in times of humbling and testing. Constantly return to these.

Learn the lessons that God has taught us at those times. And then move forward in the light of those things. A question to consider.

What are some of our practices of memory and memorialisation that ensure that we do not forget the lessons of the past?