

How To Face Our Past

Deuteronomy 1-3

David Sunday September 13, 2020



David Wollen

Good morning. A few weeks ago, our Preacher's Cohort had the joy of immersing ourselves in the book of Deuteronomy during a 24-hour retreat. Now we're excited about preaching through this book over the next 12 weeks. While we're not going to be expounding every single verse from the book, we want to cover enough to give you a flavor for the richness of Deuteronomy and to whet your appetite to read and study this book on your own.

Did you know that Jesus quoted from the book of Deuteronomy, along with Isaiah and the Psalms, more than any other books in the Old Testament? This is the book that gave Jesus the strength to resist Satan's temptation in the wilderness; He was quoting Deuteronomy. Since Jesus is the heart of the gospel and since this book figured so prominently in his life, it should not be difficult for us to find the gospel message throughout this book.

We're going to be focusing today on chapters one through three. You'll want to have your Bibles open for this. We'll be reading portions from these three chapters to help us get the lay of the land and we'll be reading from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

Now, let's set the context. Moses is now an old man, at the end of his life. A whole generation of Israelites has died in the wilderness because of their rebellion and a new generation is poised at the edge of the Promised Land. They're about to go in and take possession of it at last. But Moses is not going with them. He's now going to preach to them, reminding them of what they need to remember in order to live in the full enjoyment of God's blessing in a life of covenant faithfulness.

In order to move forward in the life of faith, we have to learn how to face our past. We cannot ignore or deny our failures. That's the journey all of us are on. It's punctuated along the way with our failures, but it's also permeated all the way by God's grace at every step. Our failures have to be brought into the light, where God's grace and mercy are always ready to forgive, cleanse and empower us to reach forward for what is ahead and to pursue as our goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

So I invite you to listen as Moses reminds the Israelites of the many dangers, toils and snares they'd fallen into during the past forty years, rejoicing with them about God's amazing grace which has not given up on them—or on us.

Joe Jones

I'm going to read Deuteronomy 1:1-8:

¹ These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel across the Jordan in the wilderness, in the Arabah opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Di-zahab. ² It is an eleven-day journey from Horeb to Kadesh-barnea by way of Mount Seir. ³ In the fortieth year, in the eleventh month, on the first of the month, Moses told the Israelites everything the Lord had commanded him to say to them. ⁴ This was after he had defeated King Sihon of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon, and King Og of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth, at Edrei. ⁵ Across the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses began to explain this law, saying:

⁶ "The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb: 'You have stayed at this mountain long enough. ⁷ Resume your journey and go to the hill country of the Amorites and their neighbors in the Arabah, the hill country, the Judean foothills, the Negev and the sea coast—to the land of the Canaanites and to Lebanon as far as the great river, the Euphrates River. ⁸ See, I have set the land before you. Enter and take possession of the land the Lord swore to give to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their future descendants.'"

Moses then reminds them how they appointed leaders from among men to guide them and to judge their disputes in verses 9-18. Let's pick up on their journey in verse 19. God's Word says:

¹⁹ "We then set out from Horeb and went across all the great and terrible wilderness you saw on the way to the hill country of the Amorites, just as the Lord our God had commanded us. When we reached Kadesh-barnea, ²⁰ I said to you: You have reached the hill country of the Amorites, which the Lord our God is giving us.

²¹ See, the Lord your God has set the land before you. Go up and take possession of it as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has told you. Do not be afraid or discouraged.

²² "Then all of you approached me and said, 'Let's send men ahead of us, so that they may explore the land for us and bring us back a report about the route we should go up and the cities we will

come to.’²³ *The plan seemed good to me, so I selected twelve men from among you, one man for each tribe.* ²⁴ *They left and went up into the hill country and came to Eshcol Valley, scouting the land.* ²⁵ *They took some of the fruit from the land in their hands, carried it down to us, and brought us back a report: ‘The land the Lord our God is giving us is good.’”*

Blake Glosson

In spite of this overwhelmingly positive report of how faithful God was being to them in fulfilling His promise to give them a land filled with His goodness, the people’s hearts were hardened in unbelief. Listen to the sad story of their failure in verses 26-40. God’s Word says:

²⁶ *“But you were not willing to go up. You rebelled against the command of the Lord your God.* ²⁷ *You grumbled in your tents and said, ‘The Lord brought us out of the land of Egypt to hand us over to the Amorites in order to destroy us, because he hates us.* ²⁸ *Where can we go? Our brothers have made us lose heart; saying: The people are larger and taller than we are; the cities are large, fortified to the heavens. We also saw the descendants of the Anakim there.’*

²⁹ *“So I said to you: Don’t be terrified or afraid of them! ³⁰ The Lord your God who goes before you will fight for you, just as you saw him do for you in Egypt. ³¹ And you saw in the wilderness how the Lord your God carried you as a man carries his son all along the way you traveled until you reached this place. ³² But in spite of this you did not trust the Lord your God, ³³ who went before you on the journey to seek out a place for you to camp. He went in the fire by night and in the cloud by day to guide you on the road you were to travel.*

³⁴ *“When the Lord heard your words, he grew angry and swore an oath: ³⁵ ‘None of these men in this evil generation will see the good land I swore to give your ancestors, ³⁶ except Caleb the son of Jephunneh. He will see it, and I will give him and his descendants the land on which he has set foot, because he remained loyal to the Lord.’*

³⁷ *“The Lord was angry with me also because of you and said, ‘You will not enter there either. ³⁸ Joshua son of Nun, who attends you, will enter it. Encourage him, for he will enable Israel to inherit it. ³⁹ Your children, who you said would be plunder, your sons who don’t yet know good from evil, will enter there. I will give them the land, and they will take possession of it. ⁴⁰ But you are to turn back and head for the wilderness by way of the Red Sea.’*

The people realized their sin and thought they could avoid the consequences of their sin by turning around and doing the right thing, but it was too late. They wanted the blessings of God, but their hearts had not been changed. They still were not obedient to the voice of God. They rebelled against the Lord's commands and defiantly went into battle in the hill country—and they were defeated miserably. Their progress toward God's promise was stalled for 40 years. Everything is going into reverse.

Brandon Stern

But God. But God is not finished with His people. Chapters two and three describe how God is acting in His grace to bring a new generation to the place where they will face a new decision. Israel must come again to the place where it all went wrong, so that after many years of languishing in the desert, the Lord can open up a new pathway for success and blessing. Listen to Deuteronomy 2:1-3:

¹ Then we turned back and headed for the wilderness by way of the Red Sea, as the LORD had told me, and we traveled around the hill country of Seir for many days. ² The LORD then said to me, ³“You've been traveling around this hill country long enough; turn north.”

Israel is finally “on the move” again! And there are lessons to be learned along the way about God. One of those lessons is that the Lord is not only the God of Israel—He is Lord of the nations. An emphasis is placed on how the Lord gave land to the Edomites, the Moabites and the Ammonites. These neighbor nations took possession of the lands the Lord gave them in spite of the giants who were in those lands.

Further, when other nations—led by kings like Heshbon and Bashan, Sihon and Og—stood against Israel on their journey toward the Promised Land, Moses reminds them how the Lord was more than able to deliver His people from these enemies and lead them on their journey. They can certainly trust Him!

Another lesson we learn from chapters two and three is how faithful the Lord was to provide for His people. This is stated beautifully in chapter two, verse seven:

⁷ For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this immense wilderness. The Lord your God has been with you these past forty years, and you have lacked nothing.

All of this should encourage God's people to cast themselves on God's grace and trust Him to fulfill His promises to them as they obey His command. This is the rallying cry of Moses as we approach the end of chapter three, in verses 18 through 22:

¹⁸ I commanded you at that time: The Lord your God has given you this land to possess. All your valiant men will cross over in battle formation ahead of your brothers the Israelites. ¹⁹ But your wives, dependents, and livestock—I know that you have a lot of livestock—will remain in the cities I have given you ²⁰ until the Lord gives rest to your brothers as he has to you, and they also take possession of the land the Lord your God is giving them across the Jordan. Then each of you may return to his possession that I have given you.

²¹ I commanded Joshua at that time: Your own eyes have seen everything the Lord your God has done to these two kings. The Lord will do the same to all the kingdoms you are about to enter.

²² Don't be afraid of them, for the Lord your God fights for you.

David Sunday

Paul told Timothy to give himself to the public reading of Scripture and it's good for us to do this together. One of the most motivating reasons to read the Old Testament is stated by the Apostle Paul in Romans 15:4 where he says, *“Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that we may have hope through endurance and through the encouragement from the Scriptures.”*

That means the Holy Spirit breathed out the words of Deuteronomy in order to breathe in the gift of hope into your hearts and into mine. The particular word of hope I pray today's message will breathe into your heart is that it is possible for you to advance in the Christian life. You don't have to stay stuck in a spin cycle of sin and despair. You don't have to stay stuck in a cycle of smug self-satisfaction. You can move forward. You can advance. You can grow in the Christian life.

Moses is preaching here to the younger generation of Israelites whose parents have died in the wilderness. He's calling them to decision. It's time to move forward, he's telling them. You see this in chapter one. Look back at verses six and seven: *“The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb: ‘You have stayed at this mountain long enough.’* Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai. He says, *“Resume your journey and go to the hill country of the Amorites.”* Then look at verse eight. *“See, I have set the land before you.”* It's a gift. *“Enter and take possession of the*

land the Lord swore to give to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their future descendants.”

This same command to advance, to go forward, is repeated again in Deuteronomy 1:21, 2:2-3 and 2:31. There comes a point in the life of a believer when God says, “All right. You’ve been here long enough. It’s time to move forward. You’ve grown as much as you can grow in this place. Now it’s time to stretch, so that you *‘become mature, attaining to the full measure of the fullness of Christ’* (Ephesians 4:13 NIV).”

Charles Spurgeon described this like a tree that needs transplanting:

See, there is a tree, which has grown in the place it now occupies as much as it can grow there, because there is not much earth there, and there is, besides, a pan of rock just underneath it from which it cannot derive any nutriment. Now, if with care the husbandman lifts the tree and shifts it to another position where the soil is deeper and richer, the tree will develop wondrously; and, sometimes, it is so with us. We have grown as big in Christ as we ever shall grow in that particular position, so now we must be shifted into a new one.

Moses is looking out at this generation of Israelites standing on the boundary of the Promised Land and he’s saying to them, “It’s time for you to be transplanted. It’s time for you to go in now.” Here’s the problem. These Israelites should have entered into that land a long time ago. Did you notice an unusual detail in verses two and three of chapter one? We need to pay attention to the contextual details, lest we miss something important.

Children, you have a question on your children’s ministry worksheet: how long should it have taken the children of Israel to get from Horeb (Mount Sinai) to the edge of the Promised Land, which is a place called Kadesh-barnea? I want you to nudge your mom or dad or grandparent to see if they’re still paying attention, then ask them—based on Deuteronomy 1:2—how long should it have taken? The answer is that it was an 11-day journey.

Now, how long did it actually take them to get to this place where Moses is now speaking these words to them? Look at verse three. It’s now 40 years and 11 months later. If I’m calculating correctly, they’re 14,919 days late! It took them 1,356 times longer than it should have taken them to enter the Promised Land. This would be like getting on the train in Geneva and thinking you’ll be in downtown Chicago in about 70 minutes, but not actually arriving until December 15th. And to make matters worse, everyone who was 20 years old or older when they got on that train dies on the journey, except for two people. Not fun.

Moses is now preaching to the survivors. They're going to be able to advance where their parents had failed. They're going to be able to experience the blessing their ancestors had forfeited. But in order to do this, they have to face some painful lessons from their past. They need to learn from their failures in order to advance into the future God has for them.

We really need to grasp the fact that Moses is speaking to this new generation in the second person, as if that history of their parents and grandparents is their history, as if they had taken part in all of it. He's including them in this recital of failure, because if their hearts remain untouched and unchanged by God, they're just going to repeat the same mistakes their parents made. Moses is insisting they needed to learn from the failures of their parents and their history, so they would choose a different path—a path of trust and obedience to the Lord.

It's not God's fault that you find yourself where you are.

So if you want to get unstuck, you have to know why you got stuck in the first place. If you want to advance into the future God has for you, you have to face your past. The first lesson you have to master is that it's not God's fault when you find yourself where you're at right now. Moses takes great pains to stress how faithful God has been to His people.

In Deuteronomy 1:4, he reminds them that God gave them victory over King Sihon of the Amorites and King Og of Bashan. In 1:8, he reminds them that God made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What was in those covenant promises? Three things:

- First, God says, "I'm going to bless you."
- Second, He says, "I'm going to multiply you and make you into a great multitude that no man can number."
- Third, He says, "I'm going to settle you in a land that is good, a land flowing with milk and honey."

By the time we get to verse ten, we can see God's blessing on these people is being fulfilled. They have multiplied so greatly that Moses cannot bear the responsibility for them any longer. They are "*as numerous as the stars of heaven,*" it says. The point is that God has been very faithful, from Egypt all the way through the wilderness. We read in 1:30-31, "*The Lord your God who goes before you will fight for you, just as you saw him do for you in Egypt. And you saw in the wilderness how the Lord your God carried you as a man carries his son all along the way you traveled until you reached this place.*"

Finally, in Deuteronomy 2:7 we read, "*For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this immense wilderness. The*

Lord your God has been with you this past forty years, and you have lacked nothing.” God has been faithful. “You’re stuck here in this wilderness, wandering around on a zig-zag path through this desert. You haven’t yet entered into the fullness of the blessing God has for you. But it’s not because God has failed you here. He hasn’t let you down. He hasn’t forgotten you. You’re not in this place because of some fault on God’s part.”

That’s the first lesson these people—and we—need to learn whenever we find ourselves stuck in the Christian life. So what is it then? What is the problem?

I want to be ever so careful here pastorally that I don’t give the impression that there’s a “one size fits all” answer. We can get stuck in grief, for instance, during the time of loss or a time of bereavement. Or we can get stuck in some kind of physical illness that practically saps all the life out of us and leaves us feeling very depressed. Or we can get stuck under the abusive treatment of someone else who is oppressing us. These are just some of the reasons we can get stuck. If we’re in Christ, all of us are simultaneously saints, sinners and sufferers.

Sometimes we are way too glib in assigning sinfulness as the reason for someone’s suffering, when we haven’t listened to the heart of that person or understood what they’re really going through. That was certainly the problem with Job and his friends. So please don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying everyone who is struggling with grief or anxiety or depression is in need of finding the reason as being some sin in your life. I’m not saying you need to recognize your sin and confess it, then everything is going to be okay. I am saying there are times in the Christian life when we get stuck, when we’re not growing, when we’re not advancing, yet the Lord is calling us forward. The way He calls us forward is to make us face our past, to acknowledge where we got stuck in the first place, to confess it and to repent.

Our complaints reveal what we think about God’s heart.

So I’m going to ask you a diagnostic question that might help you pinpoint where you got stuck and how you can move forward. Here it is. What are you grumbling about and what do your complaints reveal about what you think God’s heart is like? That’s our second lesson this morning. Our complaints reveal what we think about God’s heart. Our grumbling hearts reveal what we believe about God’s heart toward us.

Now, a grateful heart is like Shell’s nitrogen enriched gasoline in your tank. It cleans the engine and sends you on your journey with power. You can only advance in the Christian life with a heart that’s filled with gratefulness. A grumbling heart is going to grind you down to a

standstill. The Israelites grumbled so much that even a great and humble leader like Moses became exasperated with them.

This reminds me of a story of a monk who was entering the monastery for the first time. His abbot told him, “You may only speak two words per year, so choose them carefully.” The time came for his first annual review and the abbot asked the monk, “Do you have any comments?” The monk said, “More food.” Year two rolled around. They did the review. The abbot asked, “Is there anything you’d like to say?” The monk said, “More blankets.” Year three rolled around and by this time the monk had had enough. He came into that meeting, slammed his fist on the table and said, “I quit.” The abbot replied, “Well, fine. You’ve been with me three years and you’ve done nothing but complain.”

That’s how Moses felt with these Israelites—complain, complain, complain. But to God, it was much more serious. It was nothing less than rebellion because their grumbling revealed what they really believed about God. Think about it. They should have trusted in the goodness of God’s promise and God’s provision, without needing to send spies into the land to check it out. But they were fearful and suspicious, so they sent the spies. And what did the spies say when they came back? *“It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us”* (Deuteronomy 1:25). They carried grapes in clusters that were so heavy it took two men to carry that pole full of grapes. But instead of rejoicing in the goodness of God’s provision and trusting in His promise, look again at Deuteronomy 1:26-27. What does it say there?

But you were not willing to go up. You rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, ‘The LORD brought us out of the land of Egypt to hand us over to the Amorites in order to destroy us, because he hates us.’

Here’s the key phrase: *“because he hates us.”* That’s what they believed was in the heart of God toward them. The very events that should have been proof for them that God loved them they turned into evidence that God was out to get them.

I’m asking you today, friends, what does your grumbling and complaining reveal about what you believe is in God’s heart toward you? You might not say it out loud, but do you believe God has malice in His heart toward you?

Kate and I never liked having our children leave the house without them hearing us say to them, “We love you.” We hated it if we were in the middle of a fight or an argument—which did happen in our home—and they walked out without hearing, “I love you.” More than anything, we wanted our kids to know they’re loved.

That's what God wants for you more than anything. He wants you to know, as His child, that He loves you, that His heart is bursting with delight in doing you good. With all His heart and soul, He wants you to trust Him that His heart toward you is good and filled with love. God does not want law keepers who are not lovers. He wants you to know His love for you and He wants you to love Him. Then when you love Him, you will obey His commands. He doesn't want you slaving away for Him while your heart is grumbling about how miserably He treats you. In fact, God has orchestrated the Christian life in such a way that we really can't move forward one step without hearing, knowing and believing that we are loved by Him.

We see this illustrated at the end of chapter one. That first generation of Israelites realizes, "We've blown it. We've sinned miserably. We failed to obey God's command to take possession of the land." Look at verse 41. They decided, "Now that we've failed, we're going to turn it around. We're going to go up and fight, just as the Lord God commanded us." They thought it would be easy to go up into the hill country.

Had they obeyed when the Lord first commanded them, it would have been easy, because God would have been with them. But now look at what God says to them in verse 42. *"Tell them: Don't go up and fight, for I am not with you to keep you from being defeated by your enemies."* Those five words should have stopped them dead in their tracks: "I am not with you." They should have stopped right there and said, "O God, more than anything, we desire that You be with us. We will not go any further without knowing that You're with us." But they didn't listen. When God first commanded them to go, their hearts said, "He hates us. We can't trust Him." So they wouldn't obey.

Now, when God commands them to stay, they say, "We'll go ahead anyway—with or without God." It was presumption. In verse 43 Moses says, *"So I spoke to you, but you didn't listen. You rebelled against the Lord's command and defiantly went up into the hill country."* Chapter one concludes with a litany of disaster, with weeping and tears, all because they failed to believe that God loved them. They failed to trust in the goodness of His promise and rebelled against His word.

If you're stuck in the Christian life—whether it's through smug self-satisfaction or you're spinning in a cycle of sin and despair—I'm asking you today to be ruthlessly honest with yourself and with God. What is in your heart when you think about God's heart toward you? What do you think His heart toward you is really like? What do you functionally believe is in God's heart toward you?

Listen to how Dane Ortlund describes how gentle and lowly God's heart in Christ is toward us:

We tend to think divine anger is pent up, spring-loaded; divine mercy is slow to build. It's just the opposite. Divine mercy is ready to burst forth at the slightest prick.

For fallen humans...this is reversed. We [must] provoke one another to love.... [The LORD] needs no provoking to love, only to anger. We need no provoking to anger, only to love... The Bible is one long attempt to deconstruct our natural vision of who God actually is.

That's what the Bible is always trying to do. It's trying to get us to see that the heart of God is actually pent up with mercy and love. That's what His heart is like. The Bible is always trying to deconstruct our natural vision of Who God actually is.

So I wonder if that could actually be what made the difference with Caleb? Could this be why an old man at age 85 is still full of vigor and advancing in his faith? Only Caleb and Joshua from that older generation were able to enter the land because, as verse 36 says, "*He remained loyal to the Lord.*" What does the Bible say in 1 John 4:19? "*We love,*" why? "*Because he first loved us.*" Caleb remained loyal to the Lord because he remained fully aware of God's loyal and faithful love toward him. God's steadfast love toward him never ceased and Caleb knew it. He believed it. So with such a leader and example as Caleb, Moses is now calling the Israelites to face the failures of their past, to realize God was loving them through all that mess and taking care of them through all that rebellion. Now God is saying, "Press on toward a future full of blessing."

Friends, we have a Leader whose glory far exceeds Caleb's. We have a Leader Who died for our rebellion and rose again so that rebels could be redeemed. He's gone ahead to prepare a place for us, and our Lord Jesus summons us to follow Him into a glorious future, where eye has not seen and ear has not heard, nor it entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9).

So hear the loving voice of Jesus say to you today, New Covenant Bible Church, "You've been here long enough. I have more to show you. I have more to do in you. I have more people to reach through you." There is more for us in Christ than we have yet apprehended. There is more for us in Jesus than we have yet to lay hold of. We do not want to stay static. We do not want to stay stagnant. We do not want to stay stuck. Instead, we want to respond to the loving voice of Jesus by saying to Him:

Not that I have already reached the goal or am already perfect, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus...I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus. Therefore, let all of us who are mature think this way (Philippians 3:12-15).

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

All Scriptures quoted directly from the Christian Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

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