

“Deuteronomy: The Gospel according to Moses”**Sermon 10 – “The Idol of Independence”****Introduction**

I shudder to think how many sermons throughout the years have begun with reference to this quotation, but as I was studying this passage over the past week I couldn't stop thinking about how appropriate and how true these words are: though often misquoted or paraphrased, the American philosopher George Santayana once wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” How often do we as humans make the same mistakes over and over and over again simply because we do not remember what we have learned in the past, simply because we have forgotten lessons that we ought already to have learned? “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Well, here in Deuteronomy 8, Moses echoes this sentiment: he calls the Israelites to remember something about their past so that they will not repeat the same mistakes in the future. The ideas of remembering and of not forgetting recur multiple times in this chapter and really bind it all together: vv. 1, 11, 14, 18, 19. Now, we've already seen Moses urging the Israelites to “remember” things in chapter 6 – to remember general truths about the nature of God like His jealousy, His faithfulness, and His grace – but here in chapter 8 Moses is urging them to remember a very specific lesson that was learned from very specific events in Israel's very recent past. Forgetting this lesson will lead the Israelites down a very dangerous road, a road that Moses outlines for us here and a road that all of us might be tempted to stumble down as well. The steps along this road are quite clear: as Moses points out here, forgetting will lead to pride, pride will lead to idolatry, and idolatry will lead to destruction. So let's take some time to consider each one of these steps now and seek to learn ourselves from Israel's past so that we might not repeat it. First . . .

I. Forgetting Leads to Pride (vv. 1-18).

As I said, this chapter is primarily an exhortation to remember something: so what is that something? Well, again, it's a very specific lesson: read vv. 2-3 (read). Ultimately, the lesson that Moses wants the Israelites to remember is this: their complete and total dependence upon God. Verse 3 is, of course, quite a famous verse – man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God – but I'll be honest with you: I didn't really ever fully understand what it was communicating until I studied this passage in its original context here in Deut. 8. Ultimately it is a statement of man's absolute dependence upon God for everything. This is the lesson that Moses is urging the Israelites not to forget: this is the lesson that God had been teaching them in the wilderness for forty years, and this is the lesson that they are to carry with them into the Promised Land. And this is how Moses develops this idea here in vv. 1-18: he reminds the Israelites of how dependent on God they had been in the wilderness, and he exhorts them to remember that they will still be dependent on God when they enter the Promised Land. These verses are arranged in a chiasm, in that reversed, mirror-

image pattern: first Moses talks about the wilderness in vv. 1-6, then about the Promised Land in vv. 7-10, then more about the Promised Land in vv. 12-14, and then more about the wilderness in vv. 15-16. And by all of this we see that Moses is applying this exhortation in two different areas of life: in times of trial and in times of prosperity.

So first Moses urges the Israelites to remember their dependence on God in times of trial (repeat). The wilderness wanderings were a time of trial for the Israelites. In one sense, yes, it was a time of judgment, but that was for that first generation after the Exodus, for that generation who had refused to believe God's promises and obey His command to enter and take the Promised Land. For that generation, the wilderness was God's punishment, and they all died there. But for the second generation, for the generation to whom Moses is now speaking, the wilderness had been a trial, not a judgment. God had been testing them there. And here in this passage, we learn quite a bit about the nature and purposes of trials within the lives of God's people. Look at v. 2: the trial of the wilderness was meant to humble them and to test them. Here we are told that God was testing them to know what was in their hearts, whether they would obey Him or not. Here Moses is obviously speaking anthropomorphically, speaking of God in human terms. We know clearly from other Scriptures that God already knows everything that is in the human heart: He doesn't need to perform experiments to find that out. But it certainly is true that trials reveal what is truly in our hearts, don't they? Trials really do prove how committed we are to obeying God's commands no matter what. God already knows these things, but often we learn a whole lot – perhaps too much – about ourselves, about our own sinful hearts, in the midst of trials.

But God has a good purpose for the trials He brings into our lives. Read v. 5 (read). Just like a father who truly loves his son will discipline him, so God disciplines those whom He loves, as Hebrews 12 reminds us: God “disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” We need to remember this in the midst of trials: God disciplines, He allows trials, out of love, as a loving Heavenly Father, for our good, which is exactly what v. 16 says (read). And the precise good that God was seeking to teach the Israelites through His loving discipline, by allowing these trials in the wilderness, was to teach them the lesson at the end of v. 3. And here Moses focuses specifically on the matter of the Israelites' hunger in the wilderness and God's provision of manna for them to eat.

Remember when God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and almost immediately they found themselves without food? Well, according to Moses here, God allowed them to hunger on purpose: that was all part of His plan, to humble them and to test them, to find out what was in their hearts. And what was in their hearts? As we were reminded frequently by Dr. Tripp last weekend, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks,” so what was in the Israelites' hearts? Grumbling, murmuring, complaining. Obviously God was not going to let them starve to death in the wilderness, but He did let them get a little bit hungry as a trial, to see whether or not they would still trust Him and obey Him, a trial that they failed over and over again. And when God, despite their grumbings, graciously gave them this manna, this unprecedented food that neither they nor their fathers knew, this bread from heaven, He did so precisely to make them know, to teach them, “that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by

every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord,” in other words, that man’s life is not ultimately dependent on physical sustenance but on whatever the Lord decrees, whatever the Lord wills. Whenever the manna is mentioned in Scripture it is frequently emphasized that the Israelites had no idea what it was – the name “manna” literally means “what is it?” – but that is to point up the fact that it was something supplied directly by God Himself. It wasn’t normal bread: it wasn’t something that the Israelites had planted and watered and harvested and ground up and kneaded and baked – it was something for which they were entirely dependent upon God. That was the lesson of the manna, and that was the lesson of the entire period of trial in the wilderness: for their food, for the maintenance of their clothing and shoes (v. 4), for their protection from serpents and scorpions (v. 15), for their water (v. 15), for every last thing that they needed to sustain their lives, they were entirely, 100% dependent upon God and upon God alone, not upon even upon that most basic staple of human life bread, but every word that comes out of the mouth of God.

This was the lesson that Moses urged the Israelites to remember: their dependence upon God in times of trial like what they had experienced in the wilderness. But he urges them not just to remember that lesson as applicable in times of past trial, but especially as applicable in times of future prosperity. The Israelites, as Moses was speaking these words to them, were just about to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. When they did so, the supply of food directly from God, the manna, was going to stop. From then on, they would be living off of the bounty of the land, a bounty that is beautifully described in direct contrast with the barrenness of the wilderness in vv. 7-10 (read). As we see at the end of v. 10, this bounty ought to have led the Israelites to praise and thank God because he was the one who had given it all to them. But instead, this bounty could have the exact opposite effect: it could cause them to forget their total dependence upon God and to begin to imagine that everything they had was the result of their own strength and hard work: vv. 11-17 (read).

Moses knew the hardness and pride of the human heart: he knew that the lessons learned in times of trial could rapidly be forgotten in times of prosperity. He knew that we as humans are so prone to attribute what comes from God alone to our own strength. And this was not just a temptation for the Israelites, was it? Think about your own life for a moment. Remember a time of trial in your past. Perhaps you lost a job or didn’t know how you would pay your monthly bills; perhaps you became gravely ill or were seriously injured; perhaps your marriage was in trouble or your teenage child was in rebellion or someone you loved very deeply passed away. Remember how acutely aware you were then of your utter dependence upon God? You had come to the end of your own resources, and you knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that without God you would be at a complete loss. Well, that humbling of your own pride, that greater awareness of your dependence on Him – that was one of God’s primary loving purposes in allowing you to experience that trial. That was good for you.

But after the trial had passed, how long did it take you to forget that lesson? You get another job, your bank account is healthy, you are well, your family is strong – how long did that sense of your absolute, desperate dependence on God last? If you are anything like the Israelites, if you’re anything like every human being on the face of the earth, probably not long. The lessons we learn so clearly in the wilderness are so quickly forgotten in the Promised Land, aren’t they? And instead of recognizing that we live only by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, we convince ourselves again that “my

power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth,” when in reality everything we ever have, whether in trial or in prosperity, is ours only by the grace and power of God. Our hearts are lifted up: we forget our utter dependence on God and the inevitable result is pride. And what is the remedy, then? To remember: remember the lesson of the wilderness, remember the lesson of the manna, remember, as Moses writes in v. 18 (read), in other words, remember that everything is a gift of God that comes by His power, not ours, and that is given to us freely by His grace, not as a reward for our works. I love how Moses puts this here: he doesn’t just say, “It is the Lord who gives you wealth”: no, he says, “It is the Lord who give you power to get wealth.” I think we’d have a harder time believing that God simply gives us what we have, especially when we have worked hard for it and saved and been careful with our money. If we’re asked the question, “Where did we get our wealth?” we’d immediately think of ourselves and what we’ve done. But if we’re asked the question, “Where did we get the power to get our wealth?” we are forced to think further back down the chain of events and are more likely to recognize God’s hand. Yes, perhaps the immediate cause of our wealth is our hard work, our intelligence, our skill; but where did our ability to work hard, where did our intelligence, where did our skill come from? The ultimate answer to all of these, we must admit, is God.

But when we forget these things, when we forget how absolutely and completely dependent we are on God for all things, that forgetting leads to pride; and the second inevitable step on this downward road is that such . . .

II. Pride Leads to Idolatry (v. 19a).

Read the first part of v. 19 (read). Forgetting our dependence on God leads to pride, and such pride leads to idolatry; or, perhaps more accurately, such pride is idolatry. One of the reasons why I think we tend to dissociate ourselves with Israel’s tendency to idolatry is that we think of idolatry in crassly literal terms, in terms of bowing down to or offering sacrifices to or praying to some literal block of wood or stone. But the Heidelberg Catechism gives us a very helpful definition of idolatry: Question 95 is, “What is idolatry?” and the answer given is, “Idolatry is, instead of, or besides that one true God, who has manifested himself in his word, to contrive, or have any other object, in which men place their trust” (repeat). In other words, idolatry is not so much a matter of explicit worship as it is a matter of trust. In whom or in what do you trust? If your trust is in anyone or anything other than or even in addition to God, then you are an idolater.

What else then is this pride that comes from forgetting your absolute dependence on God than idolatry? For if you are depending on something, you are trusting in it and therefore making it an idol. If in our pride we are trusting in our own strength and work-ethic and intelligence and skill, then we are making ourselves an idol. But, you might object, the Israelites here were not trusting in themselves here; they were trusting in other gods, in their literal idols. But Moses has just warned them against that attitude that says, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.” And I would argue that almost any kind of idolatry is ultimately just a manifestation of the prideful idolizing of oneself. Sure, the Israelites were bowing down and sacrificing and praying to their idols: but what were they really trusting in? I would argue that with their false worship, as with all false religions, ultimately they were trusting in themselves, in their own ability to manipulate their false gods and earn their blessings

from them. So it is, I fear, with us: almost anything that we can seem to be trusting in other than God is ultimately just another way of trusting in ourselves and making ourselves into idols. Forgetting our dependence on God leads us to pride, and such pride then leads us to idolatry, for we then begin to trust in and depend upon ourselves rather than God. The final step upon that slippery, downward spiral of a road then is that this . . .

III. Idolatry Leads to Destruction (vv. 19b-20).

Read vv. 19-20 (read). Once again we see this sobering warning that if the Israelites act like the pagan nations that they are meant to destroy, they will share in their fate: the Israelites, too, will be destroyed. This, again, is because idolatry is a violation of the very heart of the covenant. We are still in the section of this treaty-covenant of Deuteronomy that is dealing with the basic stipulation, with the central-most demand of exclusive and wholehearted devotion to God. All of chapters 6-11, remember, are just one long exposition of the first and most fundamental of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Stated positively in 6:5, that command reads, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength.” Forgetting our total dependence on God and placing our trust in another, in ourselves, is the exact opposite of this. It is idolatry, it is a violation of God’s covenant at its very core, and it therefore deserves the full weight of the covenant curses: it deserves destruction. Forgetting our dependence on God leads to pride, pride leads to idolatry, and idolatry leads to destruction.

Conclusion

Sadly, despite Moses’ impassioned warning her in Deuteronomy 8, this is the road that Israel nonetheless took, and Israel eventually did reap the consequences. But we must not just click our tongues at Israel: we all have taken this road. We all have lived as though we were independent of God, as though we were sufficient in ourselves. We have all convinced ourselves that everything we have was gained for us by the power and might of our own hands. We have all been proud and trusted in ourselves, made idols of ourselves; and we all therefore deserve everlasting death and destruction as violators of God’s holy covenant.

But there is hope for us; and of course, that hope is found for us in Jesus Christ. We have made this point over and over again in our study of Deuteronomy, but it bears repeating: though we have violated God’s covenant and deserve its curse, God sent Jesus Christ to fulfill His covenant and yet also still to suffer its curse on behalf, in the place of His people, of all those who will trust in Him for salvation. Israel was tested in the wilderness for forty years, specifically tested as to whether or not they would recognize their utter dependence on God or trust in something else, and Israel failed that test just as have we all. But when Jesus was tested in the wilderness for forty days, as the True Israel, he succeeded precisely where Israel and we all have failed. When Satan tempted Christ to trust in Himself rather than depend exclusively on God by turning stones into bread to relieve His hunger, how did Christ reply? By quoting Deuteronomy 8:3: “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” Christ was fulfilling this law, this covenant, for His people. Christ in His humanity refused to trust in His own strength and instead acknowledged His total dependence on God.

So if we would escape the curse of the covenant of God which we have so flagrantly violated, we must trust only in Christ, acknowledge our total dependence upon Him. Just as the Israelites were to trust in God's provision of that heavenly bread for the sustaining of their physical lives, so we must trust in God's provision of the true Bread of Life, the true manna, Jesus Christ, for our spiritual life. For as Christ said on John 6, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh."

May God help us never to forget the lessons of the wilderness, especially in the midst of the Promised Land. May we ever acknowledge our absolute dependence on God for all things in times of prosperity just as much as in times of trial, for everything we need for physical life and for everything we need for spiritual life. May God preserve us from our pride and delusions of self-sufficiency, from the idol of independence; and may He teach us to say with full conviction just as our Savior did, "Man does not live – I do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."