

Deuteronomy 13

Rebellion against the Lord I

Deuteronomy 9:8-10:11

We are still in the section of the postamble after Moses had reminded them of the Ten Words of the covenant relationship. What Moses was saying in this section was to emphasise the importance of the words of God. We have seen the authority, finality and permanence of these words given to the people of Israel through Moses. They are important to us for our living and we ignore them to our own detriment.

Prior to this account Moses was telling the Israelites not to forget the Lord. He also reminded them of all that the Lord had done for them and that they were not to boast of their victories or successes. They were not supposed to tie together their efforts and the results. Much as we would like to do this for the satisfaction of our ego, we must resist that, even more so with spiritual things. Why? Because it is the Lord who fought for them and given them the ability to survive. Our lives and abilities are the gifts from the creator God. Not only that, Israel was reminded time and again of the redemptive God who brought them out of Egypt. They were to have no other god except Yahweh and how soon had they forgotten that.

Our story this morning follows from the warning not to give credit to our efforts or our righteousness. In order to emphasis the point, Moses returned to the past to tell the stories of their forgetfulness and rebellion against the Lord. Is that not the story of our past as well?

Moses was not a nagger. The history of the Israelites is a history of forgetting the goodness and mercy of God. It is also a history of faithlessness of the Israelites contrasted with the faithfulness of Yahweh. The book of Deuteronomy recounted the failures of the Israelites. The book of Deuteronomy opens with the failure of the Israelites at Kadesh-barnea. Moses also repeatedly talked about his own failure in not showing the people of Israel the power of God's word when they had no water to drink at Meribah. He struck the rock with his rod instead of commanding the rock with the word of God. What the people saw was the action of Moses when they should have been the power of God's word in bringing the water out of the rock. In our passage this morning, Moses recounted another failure of the Israelites, a drastic one, the incident of the golden calf.

It is only too easy to forget the goodness of the Lord to us. The incident of the golden calf happened soon after they left Egypt and were encamped at the foot of Mt Sinia (Horeb). Mt Horeb is another name for Mt Sinia. It was the place where the Ten Words were given. This is often referred to as the covenant made with Israel. We have spoken on the covenant before. We need to note that the term covenant is not synonymous with contract. Contract is a legal arrangement and is mutual. Two parties come together and agree on the terms of the arrangement. A covenant is not a legal arrangement and in the bible, it is unilateral, i.e. made by God, and initiated by Him. Humanity is not a signatory to the covenant. Humanity cannot decide on the terms of the covenant. **Humanity is the respondent to the covenant.** While the Ten Words are commonly called the Sinaitic covenant, I think it is better to refer to this as the Ten Words of the covenant relationship. As we have said regarding the Ten Words, they are words that set the boundaries of the relationship between Israel (and us) and Yahweh. Here Moses referred to them as the 'tablets of the covenant'. This is an interesting expression. The tablets refer to the stipulations that were written on them. But they are also stipulations of the relationship (covenant). Thus what is referred to is not only the stipulations but also the presence of the Lord. The tablets were written on by the finger of God. It is a relationship. A contract does not do that and it does not have that presence attached to it.

Moses went up to the mountain (Mt. Sinia) to receive the words of God. He did this on behalf of the people of Israel. He was on the mountain for forty days and in forty days how quickly the mind of the people had turned. At the foot of the mountain, Aaron collected the gold and silver from the people and cast an image of a calf. They turned from the worship of Yahweh to the worship of an image – the golden calf. This event is recorded in the book of Exodus with a little more details (Ex. 32:1-6).

When Moses came down from the mountain and saw what had happened he smashed the two tablets of stone.

The image of the golden calf and the tablets of the covenant cannot exist side by side. It is one or the other. This message has not got through to our people as yet because so many Christians claim to worship God but they also have something on the side that they give priority to. Well if the people want the image of the calf then they might as well throw away the tablets of stone. If you want the tablets of stone, then destroy the image of the golden calf. What are the golden calves in our lives? What are the priorities in our lives? Do we worship the one and only God or is the God we worship merely a means to an end?

Thus Moses came before the Lord for another forty days. The image had to be destroyed and reduced to dust and the dust washed away as given to us in this verse.

²¹ Then I took the sinful thing you had made, the calf, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it thoroughly, until it was reduced to dust; and I threw the dust of it into the stream that runs down the mountain. (Deut. 9:21)

This is another important imagery for us. We need to take notice of the way in which the sin of the golden calf was dealt with. When Moses smashed the tablets into the golden calf, it was not merely done in a fit of anger like some people smash a glass or bang a door in anger. The destruction of the golden calf was not done by repentant men and women as if they could remove the sin that they were entrapped in. No, in the story given to us, Moses did not command Aaron and his followers to remove the golden calf. He smashed the tablets, burned the golden calf and ground it into dust. Then he washed it away, never to be put together again. So what about the gold? Should it be recovered? It had become a sinful thing and had no place in the life of Israel.

Sin has to be dealt with. Sin cannot be dealt with simply by acknowledging it and turning over a new leaf. Sin is not merely the action that we do. I have said that the Ten Words of the covenant relationship are matters of the heart. That is why the tenth commandment closes the Ten Words by telling us not to covert. Sin is the corruption of the heart and it begins with the denial of the creator and redeemer God. Only the word of God can destroy sin and crush it and wash it away. John was given the revelation that Jesus came as the word of God to destroy sin. The way John went about showing to us this revelation was to restate what Jesus' said regarding His relationship with the Father. When we turn the cross into a mere legal transaction, we have violated the gospel.

The psalmist affirmed for us that it is the word of God that has the power over sin, not our will or determination (Psalm 119:11).

We need to see the details of this story told to us again by Moses. It is not simply that Moses in anger threw the tablets of the commandment and set up a fire. It is more than that. It is the power of the word of God in dealing with sin, destroying and washing it away. Remember the price Moses paid for not demonstrating the power of the word of God in bringing water out of the rock at Meribah. He was denied entry into the Promised Land.

We must not continue to see sin as merely our actions. Sin is a matter of the heart and it needs something (someone) beyond ourselves in order to deal with it. The word of God will crush it.

Murmurings against Moses and the Lord

Deuteronomy 9:22-29

Moses continued with the stories of the rebellion of the Israelites against the Lord who brought them out of Egypt. He had recounted the dreadful incident of the golden calf while he was up on the mountain with the Lord and there were more.

Here Moses recalled the stubbornness of the Israelites throughout their journey from Mt Siniai to Kadesh-barnea. Again we must not see Moses as complaining against the people, difficult though they may be. We need to see in recounting all these events, Moses wanted to highlight the grace of God to a stubborn people and that is what we need to see from this account. The references here are to the journey between Mt Siniai and Kadesh-barnea.

There are four places mentioned here in relation to the rebellion against the Lord – Taberah, Massah, Kibroth-hattaavah and one we know well, Kadesh-barnea. We will firstly look at these four incidents in turn.

Taberah (Numbers 11:1-9)

There is a play of words here in reference to Taberah. The meaning of Taberah is a place of burning. The burning of the hot scorching sun was not unusual in their journey across the desert in the Siniai peninsula. There was a general murmur against Moses and the Lord. In a play of words, Moses said ‘...the fire of the LORD burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp’. They were complaining because of the lack of meat. God provided for them. Having been released from their slavery in Egypt, they then had the longing to go back to Egypt. What was in their sight was the meat, the material things and not the graciousness of God in their deliverance from slavery. It is very much the same with people today. Many would rather be in bondage and enjoy the luxury of this present world than to turn to the things of God. We need to check ourselves whether we are in the same situation.

God provided manna for them. We do not really know what it was like. It is called manna, the term being derived from Hebrew, *man* meaning what is it? Even having provided for them the people of Israel were still not satisfied with what they had.

Massah (Meribah) (Exodus 17:1-7)

This second murmuring was about water. It was at Massah. We cannot be sure whether Massah is the same as Meribah because of the reference to both places in verse 7. Whichever it may be, the issue was about having water to drink – a necessity for life. Again the people reflected on Egypt. They would rather be in slavery and have water to drink than to have to look in faith to the Lord to provide for them. This is a testing issue in life, and so the name Massah means testing.

Kibroth-hattaava (Numbers 11:31-35)

The name of Kibroth-hattaavah means graves of craving. The craving here was about having meat to eat. In response to the complaints of the people, the Lord provided an abundance of quails for them so much so that the people became so greedy that they had more than they could consume, with meat between their teeth.

Why did Moses pick on these accounts to remind the Israelites? What these accounts are saying is that despite the murmurings and the longing for the old Egypt, God did not abandon the people of Israel and continued to provide for them. What the Israelites should have done was to come before the Lord in faith expecting the Lord to provide. Instead, they did the opposite by complaining and murmuring against the Lord rather than to come in trust.

Kadesh-barnea – (Numbers 13:1-14:45)

We have said enough about Kadesh-barnea. This place should be on our lips now reminding us of the failure to trust God and the promise He made with the people of Israel. The punishment here was the wandering in the desert for forty years. This failure to trust has to be taken more seriously than the other murmurings. This failure to trust goes right against the word of God and therefore justifies the severe punishment. We need to take note of this.

Moses brought up these events in history to remind the Israelites of their sins, i.e. their lack of trust in, and continued rebellion against, the Lord. In all these events, it is the faithfulness of God that is highlighted in contrast with their failures. That is why we say that Deuteronomy is more about grace than about the law.

Prayer of Moses

We must now look at the prayer of Moses and this prayer is often misinterpreted, as prayers often are. One area of needed reform in the church today relates to the matter of prayer. Let me say at the outset that prayers today have a secular or even a heathen background. We think that we need to pray so that God may act. We think that we need to ask so that God will give. If that is how we think of prayer, then is that not what the other religions think? Take someone going to the temple to pray. Is this Christian attitude any different? One may say that our gods are different. That is true but if that is our attitude to prayer, then are not the gods the same?

Let me argue that from the prayer of Moses. There are three elements in Moses' prayer. He referred to,

1. the exodus and redemption of God's people,
2. God's servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—recipients of God's covenantal blessing (remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), and
3. overlooking the sins of Israel – (pay no attention to the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin).

Prayer is often understood as getting God to act or to move the hand of God to act. This is a very humanistic approach and the understanding is more like to heathen religion than Christianity. We think that God will not act unless we pray. The very basic and wrong assumption is that God responds to human action. Rather it is humans who respond to God's action. We must make that distinction and a very important one too.

One other remark I want to make is that we very often give a list of details to God in our prayers as if unless we mention them God might not know what is going on. Let me ask a few questions before going on. When we pray for forgiveness from God, have we to mention every single sin in order to obtain forgiveness for that sin? What if we forget to mention one particular sin, would we have obtained forgiveness? What if we are not even aware of that one sin, would we be forgiven? We know the answers to those questions. We are forgiven

by the grace of God. If the answer is that we don't have to in those scenarios, then what about our petitions. Would that not be the same?

In what Moses prayed, he first recalled the exodus and the redemption of God's people. That is a fact of history. That is an acknowledgment of what God had done. We can understand that.

Next, Moses then asked God to remember His covenant and to overlook the sins of Israel. My question is this. Would God ever forget His covenant? Does God require this prayer of Moses in order to do that? Has He not already overlooked the sins of Israel and taken note of the covenant that He made with Israel unilaterally? If God had already overlooked the sins of Israel and took note of the covenant that He made, then why is it necessary for Moses to pray thus?

These events happened forty years ago and what Moses was doing was to remind the Israelites of the grace of God without which they would not be at this stage of entering the Promised Land. We can see that Moses was repeatedly reminding the Israelites of the grace of God.

This prayer of Moses in acknowledging God's historic action in the exodus and redemption of Israel is also the acknowledgment of the person of God, i.e. who God is. This is an important premise in prayer. If we do not know who God is, then we really do not know how to pray. We often do not acknowledge who God is in our prayer. Many people feel that they have to awaken their god to act. Not so with our God. In praying for God to act, we are praying for what God already has said He will do. That is the acknowledgement of who God is.

I prayed for the church to come into a more intimate relationship with God. It is not that God will not do it unless I pray. I know that that is the heart of God and it is His desire that we come into that intimate relationship with Him. In my prayer, I am only acknowledging what God said He will do. I do not consider for a moment that I will move the hand of God because of my prayer or because I prayed more loudly or more fervently.

We need to see that in the three issues raised in Moses' prayer, Moses was not asking God to act. He was acknowledging who God is. The God who spoke is the same God who acts. This is the unity of word and action. If we do not have that, then the separation of word and deed will result in the kind of mindset we have to prayer, trying to get God to act. In doing that we only show that we do not know who God is and the promises He has given to us.

Let us see that in what Moses prayed.

1. the exodus and redemption of God's people (the action from a prior promise),
2. God's servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – recipients of God's covenantal blessing (promise of God leading to below),
3. overlooking the sins of Israel – (the action from the promise above).

So if that were what God had promised and what God would do, then why the need for Moses to pray thus. Prayer is the expression of the relational and not to get the hand of God to move. The former is Christian. The latter is heathen.

It is so important to express our covenant relationship in prayer. It is communion like two people talking together. It is like me talking to a friend saying, 'I would like you to help me with this.' In no way am I trying to twist their arms in asking thus, but making known to them that I indeed need help in that area and I know for certain that they will. It is an expression of

our interdependence on each other. So with prayer, we are expressing our dependence on our Father, not just making Him an accessory to what we are spearheading.

We have sung the song, 'O Lord, You hear my voice each day'. In the last verse, 'Thus Lord, in patience now I wait, nor hammer fierce on heaven's gate'. Much of Christian prayers is a hammering on heaven's gate, banging on God's door to awake Him to act. We need to move away from that.

What is so wrong in our praying attitude is that we think we can get God to do things for us. I am not under-rating the importance of prayer. Would to God that we pray more. Praying is an important part of Christian life and we should spend much time in prayer, not that by doing so God will do more for us, but as an expression of the relationship we have with God and to acknowledge the love and graciousness of the Father.

The Second Pair of Tablets

Reading: Deuteronomy 10:1-11

We now move on to see the receiving of the second pair of the tablets of the covenant. This has great importance and symbolism for the people as we shall see. What was written on the tablets remained the same. There is no change to the words of the covenant on the tablets. However, the manner of the giving of the second pair of tablets was not the same as the first and a comparison of the first and second giving of the tablets will highlight the difference and there are implications to that.

First pair of tablets	Second pair of tablets
I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you, (9:9)	Carve out two tablets of stone like the former ones, and come up to me on the mountain (10:1), ... (I) went up the mountain with the two tablets in my hand (10:3)
And the LORD gave me the two stone tablets written with the finger of God; (9:10)	Then he wrote on the tablets the same words as before, the ten commandments (10:4)
I turned and went down from the mountain, ... the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. (9:15)	I turned and came down from the mountain, and put the tablets in the ark that I had made (10:5)

Moses went up the mountain the first time to receive the two tablets of stone, the word of the covenant. God prepared the tablets of stone. With the second time, Moses had to carve out the tablets of stone and bring them up the mountain. However, on both occasions, it was the finger of God that wrote the same words on the two tablets of stone. The means of delivery were different but the author and the contents remained the same.

Moses came down from the mountain the first time with the tablets in his hands. The second time he came down from the mountain to put the tablets into the ark. When Moses came down from the mountain the first time with the tablets in his hands, it was meant to show to the people this covenantal gift of God but the sin of the people prevented this from happening. They had broken the covenant and hence the smashing or breaking of the twin tablets. However, this was not the end of the covenant as that would be unthinkable. The covenant of God will be fulfilled by the hand of God. Again we see that Deuteronomy is all about second chances, the grace of God. Hence, we have the second pair of tablets of the covenant.

We need to say a little more about placing the second pair of tablets into the ark. This second time, Moses was not taking the tablets down to show to the people of Israel. Instead, they were not to see them. Moses was to put them into the ark, never to be seen again. The

ark was a chest in which were put the two tablets of the covenant, the manna and Aaron's rod. It is symbolic of the presence of God. On top of the ark is a seat called the mercy seat where God sits (Heb. 9:4).

The ark with all its contents is testimony to the gift or grace of God to the people of Israel. They are there as a witness of God's providence for His people. Aaron's rod is testimony to the deliverance from Egypt as it challenged the authority of the Pharaoh – the deliverance grace of God. The manna is testimony to God's provision to the Israelites in the desert – the sustaining or providential grace of God. The two tablets are testimonies to God's continual guidance to His people – the shepherding grace of God. And it is not just historical and material testimonies, but the ever presence of God as He sits on the mercy seat on top of the ark. What it is saying to us is that God is ever present continuing His gracious providence and guidance of His people. The deliverance has already been accomplished by Christ.

Now in the middle of the passage detailing the receiving of the second tablets of the covenant, we find a curious reference to the death of Aaron.

What has this to do with placing the tablets in the ark? Scholars who do not see the relevance of this said that this was put in later by an editor. Not so. This reference to Aaron's death is an important entry.

God instructed Moses to make the ark. This ark was to become the symbolic presence of God (Ex. 25:22).

The ark was to go before them in their journey through the desert. This ark containing the words of the covenant was to be carried by the Levites (Numbers 10:33-36).

In Deuteronomy 31:24-26 we find a short passage in which the ark containing the tablets of stone is mentioned again. Moses had recorded the laws of God and written them down for posterity. This book of Moses (Deuteronomy) was then placed beside the ark. It is also a record of the failures of Israel and this record of failures was to lay side by side with the testimony of the gracious acts of God to Israel. It remained a testimony or witness to the faithfulness of God against the faithless of Israel. This is now the testimony of Moses that is seen. The words of the covenant would now remain hidden and its meaning and teaching carried out by the Levites, the priestly class. Of course this pattern is now superseded by our great high priest Jesus Christ.

Let me sum up the meaning of all that is implied in this passage. I realise that there are lots of Old Testament symbolism involved here, but we need to wrestle with these things. If not we will have only a very superficial understanding of these things of God.

With the second pair of tablets, we see the human element involved when Moses brought the two tablets of stone up the mountain for God to write on it again. This pair of tablets was then put into the ark and concealed. The ark symbolises the presence of God and human instrumentality is involved. The Levites (priests) were appointed to be the custodian of the hidden stone tablets. Thus, the meaning and significance of Ten Words on the two tablets of stone then remained on the side of human instrumentality to teach it and to make it known. The Levites were given the task of teaching it and with their ritual in the tabernacle worship, revealed the meaning of the word to the people of Israel.

The significance of this is immense. The Ten Words written on two tablets of stone and hidden in the ark on which is the mercy seat where God sits have now become the medium through which we come to God. The word has become the means through which we approach God. The meaning of the Word is now made known through human channels, through the priests who were charged with carrying the ark. Jesus is now our great high

priest and He now takes over this human priestly function. Of course this is now facilitated by the coming of the human channel, Jesus Christ, who now mediates Himself as the Word of God to us. This is because He is now our great high priest fulfilling the purposes of God. The giving of the Holy Spirit complements this revelation to us by His indwelling in us. We are now in Him as He continues to teach the reality and intimacy of this covenant to us.