



THE STORIES THAT SHAPE US

Scripture Passage: Deuteronomy 8:17-18, NRSV

(17) Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." (18) But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Introduction

What a great reminder this passage is for the people of God today. What a great reminder it was for the people of Israel. The person who spoke these words was Moses and his audience was the people of Israel. He was speaking to the people of Israel at a critical point in their history since leaving Egypt. God's chosen people were about to enter into a beautiful space that they had been waiting to enter for forty years while wandering in the desert wilderness (vs. 2). They were finally about to enter into the Promised Land God has promised them. If we look at Deuteronomy 8:7-10, we hear again the wonderful description of the land that God promised:

(7) For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, (8) a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, (9) a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. (10) You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

How exciting does that sound! No more wandering, no more tents, no more manna, no more dusty sandals (okay, maybe there will still be some dust) but no longer will the people have to worry about what to eat, what to drink, or where they will be in the future. God is finally bringing them to this beautiful oasis where they “will lack nothing” (vs. 9) and can live faithfully to Yahweh for all their days. However, after the reading of Deuteronomy 8:17-18, we get this sense of a “warning” from Moses. But what is this warning about?

In Deuteronomy 8:1-6, Moses gives a command to the people of Israel:

(1) This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. (2) Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. (3) He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (4) The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. (5) Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the LORD your God disciplines you. (6) Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him.

When we look at the beginning of Deuteronomy 8, we hear Moses start out by telling the people that he is about to give them a commandment and, if they observe this commandment, they “may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised” them (vs. 1). In verse 2, Moses reminds the people once again how their years of wandering about the desert was a way the Lord was trying to humble them and test their hearts to truly see if they would follow the commandments the Lord had given them. In verses 3-4, Moses shares with the people what God has done for them these past forty years in the desert and how God has cared for them during this time of wandering and waiting. In verse 5, Moses reminds the people why they have been wandering for the past forty years. They were being disciplined as the beloved children of God, in order to prepare them for this wonderful Promised Land where they will lack nothing

when they fear the Lord and following the commandments the Lord gave to bring life to the people of Israel (vs. 6). The first time they were going to enter the land that God had promised them, they were afraid and did not trust God to provide for their safety and well being. So the people must keep the commandments the Lord has given them and fear the Lord to truly enjoy the Promised Land and life that God wants to give them.

I know we have covered a lot of Deuteronomy 8, but if we continue past verses 1-10, we enter into another section, where Moses calls the people to not forget the Lord their God. He is reminding Israel what God has done for them throughout the years and why it is important to remember what the Lord has done for them, because life is about to become very different from what they were used to.

Deuteronomy 8:11-16, NRSV:

(11) Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. (12) When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, (13) and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, (14) then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, (15) who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, (16) and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.

In this section of Deuteronomy, Moses begins to describe how life is going to be different for the Israelites. They are going to have ample food and water. Like I mentioned before, there will be no more tents and no more roaming, instead they will be able to build fine houses to live in. Their flocks are going to multiply, along with their other resources, so there will be economic growth and financial sustainability. But in the midst of that, Moses is warning the people of Israel that, though these things are great and beneficial, they cannot forget God, the one who has provided for them all these years while wandering the desert. The God

who broke the bondages of slavery in Egypt is the same God who has provided for Israel's every need and will now continue to provide for the beloved children, where they will lack nothing (vs. 9). Then we look at verses 17-18 and we find the main concern of the passage, which is, "prosperity might weaken Israel's dependency on Yahweh."

Today's realities:

The question we must ask ourselves today is, "How does this biblical text hold relevance in our lives?" When looking at current context, I felt like Dori Zerbe Cornelson, a stewardship consultant from Canada, said it well: "We are daily awash in choices and opportunities, and many of us are affluent enough to be able to choose among many options...Our stomachs are full, we have built fine houses and live in them, our income and assets have grown, our retirement funds are increasing, and our possessions keep multiplying."¹

Aren't these things great? I think today a lot of us have the goal to have enough to eat, to have an HGTV home life, to have an abundance of assets, and secure financial stability. We long to not have to worry about tomorrow. The wonderful news is that God does provide for us, but the issue we have, the issue that the Israelites would have, is we tend to give credit to ourselves for our great accomplishments in life and rely on those accomplishments instead of relying on God and remembering that anything we have or have accomplished is a reality for us because of God. This is the major concern Moses has for the people of Israel and why he says in Deuteronomy 8:17-18:

(17) Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." (18) But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Say your friend was going away on a trip for six months and they were letting you borrow their car, which is a stunning 2015 Chevrolet Corvette Coupe. Every time

¹Cornelsen, Dori Zerbe. 2014. "Full stomach, faulty memory: a sermon on Deuteronomy 8:6-18; 15:1-11." *Vision* (Winnipeg, Man.) 15, no. 1: 45-51. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost, 45.

you get into this Corvette to drive around you think, "I could totally see myself owning this car!" You continue to drive and take care of this car, caring for it as your own. Washing it regularly, changing the oil, checking the tire pressure, and detailing it frequently while your friend is away. Finally, the six months are up and your friend comes home and wants to pick up his prized car and you say, "Nope, it's mine now. I have been taking care of it for the past six months and I am going to keep it because I have put so much time and dedication into this car and you gave it to me in the first place."

Not only are you going to cause tension in your relationship with this friend, but you have also forgotten the kindness this friend extended you by letting you borrow their 2015 Corvette Coupe in the first place. I think Walter Brueggemann says it well in his commentary on Deuteronomy, when he says, "**A gift kept long enough begins to seem like a possession.**"² When we forget that everything is a gift, we can begin to slip into this mindset that whatever we have gathered is ours, because we have worked hard for it, we earned it, and we can do with it whatever we please.³ We can start to feel entitled to the things we have and our compassion can start to fade. We are *good hard working Christian people* who have followed the Lord diligently, paid our tithes, gone to all the church gatherings, and volunteered to help those in need; so, since we have done these things, we should have our dream home, plenty to eat, and enough financial stability to live comfortably. We feel entitled to the good life or we think we deserve the good life that we have inherited. Why should we feel obligated to share in that?

There is nothing wrong with wanting to do well and work hard for what you have, but the main issue that tends to come when we accumulate an abundance of wealth is that we think that wealth is a result of *our* hard work and *our* efforts; that we have succeeded and that it is not because of God's provision for us. Our identity starts to shift from trusting God fully to trusting ourselves: "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth" (vs. 17). When we enter into this mentality, we start to live a life where generosity is not the norm, where our hearts become a little harder and our fists become a little tighter.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 109.

³ Cornelsen, Dori Zerbe. 2014. "Full stomach, faulty memory: a sermon on Deuteronomy 8:6-18; 15:1-11.", 47.

So, in Deuteronomy 8:17-18, Moses is reminding the people to not shift into this mindset, but to “remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm the covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today” (vs.18). Moses is not condemning wealth. This passage of scripture is saying wealth is inevitable, as long as we stay rooted in God, and that we should remember that all blessings flow from God. To remember the gifts we are given is to remember the giver, which is God.

In 1 Timothy 6:17-19, it says, “(17) As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. (18) They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, (19) thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” We are to set our hopes on a God who richly provides for us. God wants to bestow gifts upon us so we can share them with others and reflect the goodness and kindness of the Lord with those to whom we give.

Conclusion:

If we are truly to live as God’s people and live into our calling of making Christ-like disciples in the nations, we must first and foremost remember what God has done for us and done for those that have come before us. In Deuteronomy 8, Moses constantly tells the people of Israel to remember the Lord their God – to remember what God has done for them, what God has promised them, and to remember to obey the commandments of the Lord in order to live and prosper in the Promised Land. They mustn’t forget the hardships they endured during their time in the wilderness after they enter the Promised Land and finally have an abundance to eat, fine homes to live in, and economic wealth and power.

When we enter into a state where comfort is the normality of our lives, we start to become forgetful about the hardships of the past. We start to forget the power and might of God and where God has brought us as a people. We start to become more focused on ourselves and, instead of saying look what God has accomplished, we start to say, “Look at me and what I have done.” So let’s not

forget to share our stories – stories that stir compassion and awake us from our complacent slumber; stories that teach people the power and might of God; stories that remind us it is because of God that we are able to do what we do and be filled with compassion; stories about how we are able to give out of the abundance that has been given to us, where we use our wealth and power to help those in need, instead of using those things to benefit ourselves.

We as the church need to spur one another to stay humble in heart and to always freely and generously give to others what God has given us. We mustn't keep and covet the gifts we have been given. We must share what we have to truly live life fully and lack nothing (vs. 9).