

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker
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Sunday, October 06, 2019

Deuteronomy 8:1-18 (read vv.1-11) “The Trials of Adversity and Prosperity”

Intro. In this text of Scripture Moses is speaking to the Israelites shortly before they were to enter into the Promised Land. Here is the new generation, standing on the east bank of the Jordan River. So Moses wants to prepare them for the task that lay ahead, and to so live that they will be able to continue to live and prosper in that land for generations to come. As Moses is preparing them to enter the land; he encourages them to obey God. If they would just obey the Lord, and keep His commandments, all would be well. They would be victorious in battle, possess the land, and God would bless them with abundant harvests and prosperity. Yet Moses knew that their prosperity would lead to spiritual dangers, such as failing into pride and forgetfulness of God.

We Christians in America live in a prosperous nation. The land that the Lord has given our ancestors is a land of abundant natural resources. We have been a Christian nation, and with the blessing of God and the biblical work ethic, we have prospered more than any other nation on earth. In fact, the vast majority of U.S. residents rank comfortably in the top 10 percent of world income.¹ So we need to give heed to the principles of this Scripture that apply to us. There are spiritual dangers to the blessing of prosperity. Yet this Scripture passage also talks about the trials of adversity, which the Israelites had already passed through. Even so, our nation has passed through the trials of several great wars, the great depression, as well as others. And so the title of my message today is, “The Trials of Adversity and Prosperity.” We should be aware of the fact that both are indeed trials, or tests, to our faith. Are you going through the trial of adversity at the present moment? Or are things going really well for you? Either way, today’s message should help you.

Now 3 John 1:2 says, “Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.” If we are going to prosper, especially in the spiritual sense of the word, note first of all that we should:

I. OBEY THE COMMANDS OF THE LORD

I want to share two commands of the Lord that Moses gives that are foundational to what he will say in chapter 8:

A. Be Careful to Obey All God’s Commandments – Moses says in v.1, “You must carefully follow every command I am giving you today....” Literally, Moses says you must keep being on the lookout to do what God commands. So they were to “carefully” obey God’s command. They were not to give casual obedience, but be diligent and careful to obey the commandments of the Lord. That was one of the conditions of God’s covenant with them. He also said they were to obey “every” command. They were not to pick and choose which ones to obey.

¹ washingtonpost.com, 2018/08/23.

The primary commandments were not only the Ten Commandments, but also the great commandment given in 6:5, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”

Should we not be just as careful in our obedience today? After all, obeying God goes against the grain of our sinful nature. It is not something you are going to be prone to do. So you need to be careful to obey the Lord. Keep His commandments on your mind at all times.

B. Remember the Lord and What He Has Done – Five times in this chapter Moses challenges them to remember the Lord or not forget the Lord (vv. 2, 11, 14, 18, 19). This suggests that the notion of remembering and not forgetting the Lord is a key theme in the chapter.

Moses says that they should not only remember the Lord, but they should also remember how God has been dealing with them in the past and let that memory impact the present. One of the great dangers we have is spiritual forgetfulness. So always remember the Lord, and how He has worked in your life.

Notice some of the things that we are commanded to remember:

1. He Has Led You – Moses says in v.2, “Remember that the LORD your God led you on the entire journey these 40 years in the wilderness....” He led them through His servant Moses. He led them by giving His Word. He led them by a cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.

Hasn’t God promised to lead us? Don’t ever forget that. He still provides pastors to lead us. He leads us by His Word. He leads us by His Spirit. Romans 8:14 says, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” He leads us by His providence. Don’t forget how the Lord has also led you through the years. Then trust Him to continue to lead you as you face the future.

2. He Has Provided for You - They must remember the provisions which were always granted them.

a) He fed them with manna – Moses says in v.3, “He humbled you by letting you go hungry; then He gave you manna to eat, which you and your fathers had not known....” These same words were repeated in v.16. God’s provision of manna in the wilderness was an amazing miracle! (See Ex. 16:1-30; Num 11:4-9). It was an act so clearly supernatural that the people had to recognize that it was all of God and not of themselves.

God has made the same commitment to us. Jesus said in Mt. 6:26, “Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

b) He sustained their clothing – Moses says in v.4, “Your clothing did not wear out....” As the Lord provided for their nourishment, so did He also in a marvelous way for the clothing of His people during these forty years. After all, their clothing supplies were limited in the wilderness. So God gave them a miraculous durability. I know the ladies would not like this at all. Year after year the wife could tell her hubby that she needed a new dress, and year after year the husband could say that the one she was wearing looked brand new!

There is no necessity to follow some of the Rabbis as to maintain not only that the clothes of the Israelites did not get old, but that as the younger generation grew up, their clothes also grew upon their backs, like the shells of snails.

c) He maintained their health – Moses said in the last of v.4, “your feet did not swell these 40 years.” This was in spite of all their travels through the hot wilderness. A

missionary doctor explained to J. Vernon McGee that out in the Orient where he served; the people had a sameness of diet. They did not get all the vitamins they needed; so they could show the manifestations of beriberi. One of the symptoms is swelling of the feet. There are other diseases and illnesses that can cause that problem. But Israel got all their vitamins and other nutrients as God fed them with manna from heaven. It provided everything they needed for the nourishment of their bodies.

Most or all of these blessings are ours as well, though by a different means in most cases. We have plenty to eat. We have nice clothes, though I don't understand why people will buy new clothes with holes and tears in them! Most of us have good health, or the means to be restored to good health. By the grace and providence of God we live in a good land, similar to the description of the land promised in vv.7-9. We should always remember how good God has been to us. And if He has guided us and provided for us in the past, can't we trust Him to do so in the future? Don't worry, but just remember what God has done in the past, and trust Him for the future.

We gather today to remember the Lord through the Lord's Supper. Jesus commanded, "This do in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19, KJV). This is one way we obey this vital command of the Lord, especially if we do so on a regular basis.

In addition to obeying the Lord and remembering the Lord, the next main truth to learn from our text is this:

II. GOD WORKS THROUGH TRIALS OF ADVERSITY

Moses says in v.5, "You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the LORD your God chastens you." If you are going to bring up a child to become a mature, self-disciplined, productive adult, you must teach your child not only with words, but also by means of discipline. Even so, God does not bring adversity into our lives just to punish us when we have done wrong. His primary purpose is to teach us; and to build character in our lives, much like a father seeks to build character in his children through chastening and discipline.

Moses gives one example of the adversity the Israelites faced. He says in v.3, "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger...." It doesn't say that God allowed them to starve to death, but that He allowed them to hunger. Hunger is not a pleasant experience, especially when you are in the wilderness with no food in sight!

Folks, don't get the idea that if you are a Christian, God will never allow you to go hungry, or get sick, or face a season of poverty. God uses seasons of adversity to teach us, and to test us. Such trials do not demonstrate that God doesn't love you, but that He does,² for after a season of adversity, He provides for your needs and you are now stronger than before and you have learned some valuable lessons.

Now notice the ways God works through adversity:

A. To Reveal Our Hearts – Moses says in the last of v.2 that "God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not."³ His purpose was also to "test" them (v.16b also), by placing them in such positions in life as would drive them to reveal what was in

² Heb. 12:6, "For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives."

³ Likewise, in Ex. 16:4 the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not."

their heart, viz. whether they believed in the omnipotence, love, and righteousness of God or not. You know, testing really proves the metal. Tests will reveal whether or not a person is really a child of God. Unfortunately, the difficulties they faced in the wilderness exposed the shallowness of the people's faith and commitment to the Lord.

When we are squeezed with adversity, what is on the inside tends to be manifested on the outside. Our American churches today are filled with affluent people who have never been tested. I can't tell whether or not they are genuine. But the fire of adversity can certainly reveal much about them.

Now is such testing for God's benefit? Doesn't He already know our hearts? Yes! So I believe this is mainly to reveal the true condition of our hearts *to us*. The fact is, we do not know ourselves as well as we think. Trials and temptations tend to reveal our true spiritual condition. You may remember in Galatians that Paul points out that one purpose of the law is to reveal our sinful condition and our need for Christ. So adversity will teach you a few things about yourself you will not otherwise learn!

B. To Humble Us – That's what he says in v.3. To "humble" means to bring them the means of distress and privations to feel their need of help and their dependence upon God. It is to take the self-confidence out of us, and to bring us to say: "I am nothing and You are everything..." The humiliation in the desert consisted not merely in the fact that God let the people hunger, i.e. be in want of bread and their ordinary food, but also in the fact that He fed them with manna.

That explains why God puts us through the mill. Sometimes He puts us in the furnace and heaps it on very hot. Why? To test us and to humble us. Little man is proud, he's cocky, and he is self-confident. So there are times when God will humble us with adversity.

C. To Teach Us to Trust Him – Moses says in the last of v.3, "that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD." They were to learn that the power to sustain life does not rest upon bread only but to all that goes forth out of the mouth of the Lord. That which "proceeds from the mouth of the LORD" is not the word of the law, as the Rabbis suppose, but, the revealed will of God to preserve the life of man in whatever way He chooses. It also can refer to the promises of His Word. One lesson is this: Full stomachs do not ensure life and that spiritual food is more important than physical. The stark reality was that even though the people had this daily supply of food, none of the adults of that generation survived. They had plenty to eat and their stomachs were full, but they died without inheriting the promises. The key to life is not found in the food one eats, but in the nourishment that comes from the mouth of God. The chapter opens with the challenge to obey the commands of the Lord "so that you may live" (v.1). So don't trust in your bank accounts and storehouses of food, but trust in the promises of God to provide for your needs.

In this sense Christ quotes these words in reply to the tempter (Matt. 4:4). He left it to God to care for the sustenance of His life, as God could sustain His life in extraordinary ways, even without the common supplies of food, by the power of His almighty Word and will.

We must learn to trust God, that His promises are true.

D. To Do Us Good in the End – Do you see that truth expressed in the last of v.16? Often our trials and testings come that the Lord may bring us greater blessing in the end. James 1:2-3

says, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” Heb. 12:11 says, “Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

III. GOD MAY TEST US WITH PROSPERITY

Look at vv.7-9, where God promises prosperity in the good land He is about to give them. “For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper.” This was an expansion of the previous description of a land “flowing with milk and honey” (6:3). They would have all the water, food, oil, and metals they would need. God even added the joy of sweet honey. What a contrast to the desert the Israelites have left behind! Such a land, especially with the blessing of the Lord, would bring about material prosperity. This is described further in vv.12-13, “... when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied.”

Have you noticed what happens to the professional athletes that suddenly become multi-millionaires? Those who have character can handle the prosperity pretty well. But those without Christian or moral character are often ruined by prosperity.

God does not give this same kind of a promise to Christians today, though He may test us with prosperity. There is a lopsided notion given by some preachers that if you are a faithful Christian, God will prosper you in temporal things. God promised to prosper Israel in the land. That was part of the Old Covenant. He does not promise to prosper the Christian in the things of this world. Jesus Himself was poor (2 Cor. 8:9; Mt. 8:20). Some of the finest saints of God have been poor, especially those who are persecuted for their faith. Yet some Christians have testified that they have taken God into partnership in their business, and God blessed them abundantly. He does do that, and we praise Him for it. But this is the promise to the Christian: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). He has promised us *spiritual* blessings. While there are some promises of God to provide for our basic needs (Mt. 6:33; Php. 4:19), there is no verse in the New Testament which promises temporal prosperity to the child of God today.

However, if you become prosperous, I want to call upon you to:

A. Beware of the Dangers of Prosperity - When times are hard and we have to depend on God for our daily needs, we remember Him and look to Him in prayer. But when “things are going good” and we have more than we need, there are several spiritual problems that can bring:

1. Forgetting God – After promising prosperity in vv.7-10, Moses says in v.11, “Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God...” I have already talked about God’s command to prevent this problem, so I won’t say much about it here. I’ve known of people who become prosperous. They buy boats and vacation homes and end up dropping out of church when they become “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,” just as the apostle Paul warned about (2 Tim. 3:4).

2. Pride – Moses says in v.14, “when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God...” Moses knew that when their prosperity increased, in the form of lofty houses, cattle, gold and silver, and other good things, their heart might be lifted up in pride. So he warns them of this danger here.

Illustration: [Tell of my experience with *some* wealthy family members].

3. Ascribing to Yourself Abilities *God* Has Given You – Moses says in vv.17-18, “then you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.’ And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.” God gave strength to prosper in wealth, not because of Israel’s merit and worthiness, but to fulfil His promises which He made on oath to the patriarchs. Those alone who continue humble, not attributing the good fortune and prosperity to which they attain at last, to their own exertion, strength, perseverance; and wisdom, but gratefully enjoying this good as a gift of the grace of God, these are the ones God will continue to bless.

If you succeed in school, always remember that it is God who gave you the intellect you needed to succeed. If you are a good athlete, it is God who gave your such physical ability and talent. If you prosper in business, it is God who has given you the abilities and opportunities you needed to succeed. You have no business being filled with pride.

Now this attitude leads to another problem:

4. Self-sufficiency – This attitude is manifested in v.17, “My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.” When you are wealthy, you tend to rely upon your bank accounts and other storehouses of wealth rather than depend on God for your daily needs.

B. How to Respond to Prosperity - Moses says in v.10, “When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.” The word translated “bless” (*barak*) can also have the meaning of to “give thanks” (cf. Pss. 105:1; 106:1; 107:1) or to “praise.” It is the opposite of forgetting the Lord. Instead, you reflect on His blessings and give thanks to Him. Psa. 103:2 says, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.”

One reason we are to bless the Lord and give thanks for our prosperity is found in v.18, “And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth...”

When was the last time you thanked and praised God for His goodness to you? Most of us have eaten good meals and become full. We live in a good land. We should praise the Lord and give thanks. In fact, as someone said, what if God gave you tomorrow only what you thanked Him for today? Would you have anything?

Conclusion: What about your own life today? Have you been faithful to keep the commandments of the Lord? How have you handled the trials of adversity and prosperity? What have these trials shown you about your true spiritual condition? Perhaps such reflection will cause you to make a commitment to the Lord this morning.

Sources: Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 225-234; Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2019; Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), originally published by 1721; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids:

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