

Deuteronomy 12

A Warning Not to Forget God in Prosperity

Deuteronomy 8:1-9:7

Moses began this again by reminding the people of their deliverance from Egypt and God's provision for them in the wilderness. They were not to forget that.

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. 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. (Deut. 8:1-10)

This passage contains the well-known words quoted by Jesus, 'man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'. We will come to that a little later. First of all we need to note again that Moses was here emphasizing the *shema* and the importance of keeping the word. Moses did not lean on the people to make every effort to keep the word. Instead, he started off with reminding them of what God had done. He asked them to remember (v. 2). It is because of what God had done, therefore (v. 6), they keep the commandments of God. Following that, Moses told them in advance the blessings that they would receive from God in the land that they were going to. Again we need to note that the blessings were not conditional on their obedience, but rather the continuation of the creational blessings flowing on along the paths the God has ordained in the Ten Words, i.e. they need to be obedient to the word of God.

The wilderness experience of the Israelites was to help them to understand that 'man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'. Jesus quoted this in response to the temptation of the devil, the temptation of bodily satisfaction. Ultimately it is God who satisfies the human needs. This saying is a reference to the desert experience of the Israelites. They were a nomadic group of people and did not have any established property. God fed His people with manna in the wilderness. He provided for them when they were not able to farm animals or grow vegetables. The Israelites were repeatedly reminded of this desert experience. Now how is this desert experience related to the giving of the Ten Commandments and the keeping of the commandments?

Not having the ability to growing crops or husbandry, they were not able to depend on their resourcefulness or their efforts for survival. God provided for them and this was the lesson they had to learn. This was the continuation of the creational blessing from God to His people. They had nothing to offer God, no animal sacrifice or anything that they could give out of their own effort or doing. They were to live in dependence on God, on the promise or word of God, and not because they could produce something from the land. This pre-empts what Moses was going to say later.

It is the relational that comes before the deeds. Christianity seems to have misplaced this understanding when the emphasis is on deeds and results. The emphasis should be on knowing God and this comes by His words. Life is only meaningful in the presence of God and His word. However, sometimes we seem to put more emphasis on the bread or rice rather than the word.

I suppose it is easier for us who are older to reflect on what God has done for us. Those of us who are looking towards a future may focus on getting there. While we may do that, we need to be mindful that it is the Lord who provides for us that future. We need to trust Him for that.

This reminder has already been mentioned in chapter six of Deuteronomy. We need this constant reminder as Moses realised.

¹⁰When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, ¹¹houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, ¹²take care that you **do not forget the LORD**, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ¹³The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. ¹⁴Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, ¹⁵because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the LORD your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth. (Deut. 6:10-15)

Moses continued.

¹¹Take 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. ¹²When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then **do not exalt yourself**, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who 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, ¹⁶and 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. ¹⁷Do not say to yourself, **“My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.”**¹⁸But 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. ¹⁹If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. ²⁰Like the nations that the LORD is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God. (Deut. 8:11 -20)

Here Moses not only reminded them not to forget the Lord, but also brought in a further injunction to the Israelites. Soon, they would have entered into the Promised Land and prospered. They would have owned their houses and accumulated a good amount of wealth. They then sat back and claimed that their own efforts had brought them this wealth. No, no, no. ‘It is the Lord who gives us the power to get wealth.’ We must never forget that. In my early days working in the hospital system, I had struggled in praying the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’ I had my salary deposited in the bank and whether I pray this or not, the money would be there. I needed to realise that it is God who gives me the ability for eye hand co-ordination without which I could not do what I was trained to do. Give me this day my daily bread and it is the Lord who gives to me the ability to do that. We will claim that our effort has brought us our success when we do not have the sense of the transcendence of God in our lives.

It is not because of my righteousness

Deuteronomy 9:1-7

We have been reminded by Moses that we are not to forget the Lord and not to claim credit for ourselves when we are successful in life. We are in the section of Deuteronomy where Moses got on to the postamble after the Ten Words. While the preamble to the Ten Words highlighted the grace of God to His people, the postamble section stresses the importance of obedience to the Words. It is all about the grace of God to His people and the second chances rather than second law.

I have spoken on the topic of righteousness before. For those who have gone through this study in the past will know full well that we have no righteousness and that righteousness in the scripture is relational, i.e. we are only righteous only when we are in a trusting relationship with God. Righteousness is not a quality that humanity can attain to on its own accord by deeds. We also know from the story of Abraham that he was reckoned as righteous because of his faith in God. That is all very good. We are all good theologians here, but being good theologians is not enough. We need to engage the business of living in the community and work it out there.

We have mentioned the setting of Deuteronomy. The Israelites were on the verge of entering the Promised Land after having wandered in the wilderness for forty years. The previous generation paid the price for their refusal to trust the Lord. This next generation was then given a second chance. Moses was making sure that they did not blow it this time. That is why in his parting address, he repeatedly cautioned the people of their need to depend on the Lord and to trust in His promises. It is the same for us.

Another title for this study could be 'Claiming credit before God'. I am going to tie what we have said previously on righteousness and what we have said previously on blessing. Moses reminded the Israelites not to forget the Lord. Not only that, they were also not to claim any credit for their victories and their prosperity. Of course they worked hard to till the land and to grow the crops. However, it is God, their creator who gave to them the ability to do all that. They were to remember their creator God who had created them and sustained them in life. That is why Moses reminded them that man does not live by bread alone, but by the word of God, the word that sustained them. That is an important admonition for us.

There is a popular thinking among Christians that if we do good God will bless us and if we do evil, God will punish us. Is that true? Yes and no. We need to take both answers together.

Let us take the second half first. Surely, God will not tolerate evil. He will not tolerate disobedience and those who did not trust Him. The Israelites paid for their mistrust in not going into the land from Kadesh-barnea. They were punished and left to wander in the desert for forty years. The next generation was then given the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. Yes, there will be punishment or discipline for not doing good. We need to be aware of that. Sure, those who do evil may seem to prosper for a time, but that will not last long. Their prosperity may last a generation or two, but the destruction will come by the third or fourth generation. History affirms that pattern.

So if we do good, will God bless us? Surely He will as He has promised. However, we need to consider seriously the reason for doing good. Is it to honour God and to live according to His will or are we merely doing it for the blessing? Well, I will not know that because I cannot see into the heart, but God does and He is not fooled by our ulterior motives.

There is another consideration and that is from the account of Job. He was a godly man and yet misfortune and suffering befell him. Why? Because God permitted that. These issues are multi-faceted and we cannot give simplistic answers.

What we need to know is this from what Moses said here in this passage. There are two words that we need to add to our vocabulary. One is sovereign and the other is participation. Let us take the first – sovereign. Our God is sovereign meaning that His will and His actions are His own and are not subject to our logic or principles. Therefore, the idea that only by doing good it will bring about God's blessing cannot be applied in our dealings with God. God is sovereign and He will bless whom He will and that is not subject to our determination. I am not saying that we should not seek to do good. That is what we should be doing as children of God but it should not be tied to the blessing of God.

Take the cases of Esau, Moab and Ammon. Though they had not done according to the will of God, God still blessed (gave) them land. Even the patriarchs of old, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had not been perfect models for us to follow. What about King David? We know the stories regarding him. Despite the fact that their walk had not been perfect, yet they remained the chosen ones of God.

The other term we need to consider is participation. Participation is not an endeared term for us because of our egocentricity. We want to control and determine things according to what we believe - rightly or wrongly. We want to do it on our own so that we can claim the credit for ourselves. We do not often want to share that credit with others. That is why it is very difficult to get people to participate without giving them some form of control. This is the principle used in the work place to gain participation. But in God's scheme of things, participate we must while at the same time God remains sovereign.

While we may work hard and won victories as in the case of the Israelites, it is God who is working. We fail to see that because we are so full of ourselves. We do not see anything beyond the immediate. We have lost the sense of transcendence – another word that we need for our vocabulary.

While we may live righteously, yet it is not something that we do in our power. We can only do that by the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Remember the Sabbath that is made for man. The Sabbath is made for our rest in God, for us to come into the presence of God so that His word can come to us and to transform us. We are transformed by the word of God and not by our accomplishment. Sure, I do need to read the word and spend time there, but it might only be a mere academic exercise had God not be there to turn the word into living words. That is His gift to us – the Sabbath that is made for man.

Egocentricity is not compatible with the gospel. It is not compatible with the teaching of scripture. We must not tie our human efforts to what God gives. If we do then God is not sovereign. He becomes dependent on our good works. He does not. What He gives is His gift to us. It will remain unsolicited. Let us run through this passage before we finish.

¹ Hear, O Israel! You are about to cross the Jordan today, to go in and dispossess nations larger and mightier than you, great cities, fortified to the heavens, ² a strong and tall people, the offspring of the Anakim, whom you know. You have heard it said of them, "Who can stand up to the Anakim?" ³ Know then today that the LORD your God is the one who crosses over **before you** as a devouring fire; he will defeat them and subdue them before you, so that you may dispossess and destroy them quickly, as the LORD has promised you. (Deut. 9:1-3)

Moses reminded the Israelites of their victories over the Anakim, a subgroup of the inhabitants in the land so far. Is it because of their superiority in warfare? Is it because of their righteousness before the Lord? No. It is because God went before them in warfare. Remember how the

Israelites went in on their own after they failed to go in the first time. They were utterly trounced because God was not there with them. We may have great plans or strategy in ministry. It is good to have plans and strategy, but if God is not there before us, then failure is guaranteed.

⁴When the LORD your God thrusts them out before you, do not say to yourself, "It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to occupy this land"; it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is dispossessing them before you. ⁵It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the LORD made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut. 9:4-5)

Do not claim any of our righteousness before God or before His people. If we happen to be successful in any area of life, do not put it to our efforts or righteous living. It is all due to the grace of God to us. Of course I did work hard and study hard, but it is God who gives me the mental capacity to do so. Had He not, then where would I be and what could I do. God's grace to me is not because I am good and obedient, but because it is to fulfil His will to His creation.

⁶Know, then, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people. ⁷Remember and do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness; you have been rebellious against the LORD from the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place. (Deut. 9:6-7)

And just before Moses finished this part of his address, he reminded them of their failure again and also of their stubbornness despite the deliverance from Egypt. We need to be reminded of our failures and not of our successes, because we need to be dependent on the Lord at all times.

I find it hard to understand why Christianity has gone the way it did, emphasizing the merit of works before God. Is this not the way of the world? We have an honours system to acknowledge the work of people in our community. That is the way of the world. They need it to encourage people to continue doing that. I think that much of the good work done in the social scene is to get to the honours list rather than serving the people. Does that not also happen in the church? Why do we need to seek the applause of man when the only applause that counts is the one from God – 'Well done, good and faithful servant' (Matt. 25:24, ESV). Christianity has gone this way because so many people have forgotten the Old Testament and the importance of this passage from Deuteronomy.

We can see the importance of what Moses was emphasizing here. Having given the commandments he did not simply tell them to keep them. Instead Moses was emphasizing the importance of what God had done and was doing for them. They were not to forget that. It is in this acknowledgment of God's continuing work that keeping the commandments became possible. It is totally different from the way of the world. It is the grace of God.

I think it was Spurgeon who said this. When you have done your utmost, and you said, 'It is all of grace', then you have understood grace.

Another quote from Spurgeon is this. Grace puts its hand on the boasting mouth, and shuts it once for all.

It would be good to finish by reading a few verses from Psalm 44.

¹We have heard with our ears, O God,
our ancestors have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,

in the days of old:
² you with your own hand drove out the nations,
 But them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples,
 but them you set free;
³ for not by their own sword did they win the land,
 nor did their own arm give them victory;
but your right hand, and your arm,
 and the light of your countenance,
 for you delighted in them.
⁴ You are my King and my God;
you command victories for Jacob.
⁵ Through you we push down our foes;
 through your name we tread down our assailants.
⁶ For not in my bow do I trust,
 nor can my sword save me.
⁷ But you have saved us from our foes,
 and have put to confusion those who hate us.
⁸ In God we have boasted continually,
 and we will give thanks to your name forever. *Selah*