

Hope PCA Sermon: July 21, 2024

“Go! Take Possession of Your Inheritance!” (Deuteronomy 1:6–21)

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Back into Deuteronomy this morning, continuing the beginning here of our series in that book. This morning we’ll be looking at Deuteronomy 1 verses 6 through 21. And as I think I mentioned a couple weeks ago, there’s going to be some shorter sections and some longer sections. And this is one of the longer-ish ones. If you are able, if you would, in honor of the reading of God’s Word, please stand, and we will hear God speak to us through his Word this morning. Deuteronomy 1 verses 6-21. Again, Moses is undertaking to explain or expound the law of God, and this is what he begins by saying,

⁶ “The LORD our God said to us in Horeb, ‘You have stayed long enough at this mountain.

⁷ Turn and take your journey, and go to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, in the hill country and in the lowland and in the Negeb and by the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates. ⁸ See, I have set the land before you. Go in and take possession of the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their offspring after them.’

⁹ At that time I said to you, ‘I am not able to bear you by myself. ¹⁰ The LORD your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven. ¹¹ May the LORD, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are and bless you, as he has promised you! ¹² How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife? ¹³ Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads.’ ¹⁴ And you answered me, ‘The thing that you have spoken is good for us to do.’ ¹⁵ So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officers, throughout your tribes. ¹⁶ And I charged your judges at that time, ‘Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him. ¹⁷ You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.’ ¹⁸ And I commanded you at that time all the things that you should do.

¹⁹ Then we set out from Horeb and went through all that great and terrifying wilderness that you saw, on the way to the hill country of the Amorites, as the LORD our God commanded us. And we came to Kadesh-barnea. ²⁰ And I said to you, ‘You have come to the hill country of the Amorites, which the LORD our God is giving us. ²¹ See, the LORD your God has set the land before you. Go up, take possession, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has told you. Do not fear or be dismayed.’”

Thus far, the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of the Lord our God. May he write it deep in our hearts. May it bear fruit in our lives. Please be seated. Let me briefly pray for us as we come to the Word this morning.

O Lord our God, as we learned a couple weeks ago in the evening service, your Word goes out and does not return to you empty or empty-handed, but rather accomplishes everything which you have purposed for it and is successful in the things for which you have sent it out. May that be true here this morning. May that promise, may that Word be fulfilled that your Word goes out and accomplishes everything that you would have it accomplish. Give us ears to hear give us eyes to see that we may hear and understand, and hearing and understanding put your Word into practice. As with all things we pray it in the name of Christ Jesus our savior. Amen.

Just yesterday I was online somewhere, I don't remember if it was a news page or a social media site, but an ad came across my screen and it caught my attention because it had the actor Ralph Fiennes in it, or Rafe Fiennes if you know him, Voldemort in the Harry Potter series. He was the evil guard, the Nazi guard in *Schindler's List*. For you James Bond fans, he's the new M. a recognizable, talented actor. But what caught my attention was not just him, but he was dressed up in the clothing of a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church. And I thought, hmm, this looks interesting. And so I watched a little trailer that came up. It's a movie based on an apparently popular novel. I had not heard of the author before or the novel. It's called *Conclave*. And it's the story of cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church gathering, as if memory serves they do in the Sistine Chapel, gathering in a conclave to elect a new pope. The pope has died, they need to elect a new one. Full of other well-known actors, Stanley Tucci, John Lithgow, Isabella Rossellini, Ralph Fiennes' character is a cardinal named Lawrence, Cardinal Lawrence, who's responsible for running the conclave, making sure it operates smoothly, and they have to be sequestered. And it's ominous. Clearly there's something wrong going on, a mystery to be solved in the course of this series of votes that will culminate in the election of a new pope. But there's an extended quote from Cardinal Lawrence near the end of the trailer. He says this (apparently he's speaking to the gathered cardinals). He says, "There is one sin which I have come to fear above all others. Certainty. If there was only certainty and no doubt, there would be no mystery. and therefore no need for faith."

What an interesting statement. What do you think of it? Do you agree with that? Without doubt, there can be no faith. Indeed, as he put it, there is no need for faith. Is that what faith does? Embrace doubt? Or press on in the face of doubt? If we were certain about everything, would there be no need for faith? Now certainly Christians deal with doubt, we all do, it's very common. And certainly our faith has mystery, which is something that I heartily embrace. The Trinity is a mystery, we cannot comprehend it fully. Jesus Christ, one person with two natures, We cannot comprehend it fully. The mystery of the relationship between God's absolute true sovereignty and our responsibility before him. The God who elects and chooses his people and yet the responsibility that comes in the call of the gospel to embrace Christ in repentance and faith. Uncertainty can be a danger, especially when it goes beyond what God has revealed to us, and it can lead to great error, *errius pelagius*, heretics of the early church, other errors that arise from trying to explain something in further detail than what God reveals to us.

Now, there's probably more to this quote and more to this scene than what they showed in this little trailer, so I don't want to judge it based on a little snippet. I guess the movie doesn't

come out until November, so have to wait. What does he mean about doubt? What does he mean that we shouldn't be certain about things? But what I do want to say is that when it comes to our relationship with God, and his promises to us, God calls us to assurance. Dare I say God calls us to certainty. The character of God and his promises are things that we can be certain about. The things that God tells us in his Word are certain and true, utterly dependable. And among those things that he tells us are his promises. And we know that we serve a God who keeps his promises. It's certain, it's beyond doubt, that his promises will be kept, that his promises will be fulfilled.

And that's the context of this passage this morning. Indeed, it's really the context of the whole book of Deuteronomy. These speeches from Moses spoken as they're about to enter into the promised land. Israel here is being called upon by Moses to reflect upon a part of that history as they're poised on the borders of the promised land. And in that history before us this morning, there's a reminder of their failure because they doubted God's promise. But in this history, there's also a note of encouragement: an encouragement to faith and to obedience to God's commands. The passage is bookended by almost identical language, verses 6–8 in the past, also verses 19–21 in the past, but spoken and referred to in two different locations. And then in the middle, from verses 9–18, Moses reminds the people of certain arrangements that were made for the leadership of the people, for their governance, put into place even as they wandered in the wilderness.

I want to begin by setting the context a little, remembering that history. Begin with the middle section, verses 9–18, and then conclude with the commands in verses 6–8 and 19–21. So a little history and then a reminder of God's promises. Promises fulfilled in verses 9–18.

Now if we go back to Numbers chapters 10–14, there we have the backstory for what's going on here, what Moses is speaking about. In Numbers 10 verses 11 to 35, God gives the command to the Israelites to leave Horeb, Mount Sinai. "Go up to the Promised Land", he tells them. And the story continues into Numbers 13 where they're at Kadesh Barnea on the border of the Promised Land. They've made the trek, they're on the border of the land, and the people convince Moses to send out twelve spies: "Let's scout out the land and see what's ahead of us." The spies return, as you know the story. Two of them say, "Yes, let's go." Ten: "No, we cannot defeat these people. They are too strong for us." And Israel believes the ten and are punished for their unbelief with forty years of wondering.

In verses 6–8 Moses is reminding them of God's instruction in Numbers chapter 10. And in verses 19–21 that instruction is repeated anew when they have arrived at Kadesh-barnea. He's reminding them of both of those things. And again, what I want to look at first, verses 9–18, he's recounting how the burden of judging the people was organized so that Moses didn't have to do it all himself. That story is first told in Exodus 18, where it's Moses' own father, Jethro, the priest of Midian, who makes the suggestion for how to organize things. So we'll start with those middle verses and that story because I think it has some very interesting implications and I want to bring out three of them.

First, verses 9–18 are a reminder of God's blessing and of God keeping his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Secondly, a reminder of this helpful organization of the people to

decide cases and to keep the peace as a nation and what the implications of that are. And then thirdly, how they have the opportunity to learn God's laws by doing God's laws, even before they get to the promised land. I want to talk about each of those in turn.

Numbers chapter 1 tells us how the Lord instructed Moses to take a census of Israel, but a very particular census. Every male 20 years and older. Tribe by tribe, they're listed there in that chapter, and the total comes to 603,550 men of fighting age. Not included are the Levites. Not included are males 19 and younger. Not included are any of the females. 603,550 fighting men. We can pretty reasonably deduce then that the entire people of Israel was probably around or at least 1.5 million people. That is a host. That is a multitude coming out of Egypt. Of course, the generation is unfaithful, They're going to die in the wilderness and not enter the Promised Land. So in Numbers 26, a new census is taken of the new generation: 601,730 fighting men 20 years of age and older. It also notes that there are 23,000 Levites a month old and up. Again, we can say probably about a million and a half people. That, indeed, would be a burden for one man to deal with. As gifted as Moses was, a million and a half people is not going to happen. His father-in-law's advice was good.

The story is recounted here in verses 9–18. But why? Why remind them of this? I think first, just to remind them, to show them how God had kept his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses says it in the passage, "You have become a numerous people." 10: *"The LORD your God has multiplied you. You are as numerous as the stars of heaven."* That's exactly God's promise to Abraham. God kept his promise. Why would they need to be reminded of that? What else did God promise? To give the land to Abraham and his offspring. They are on the verge of entering into that land. God promised to give it to you. Israel is being reminded, "Look how numerous you are. Look how the promises of God have been fulfilled. Trust that he will keep his promise regarding the land. Don't be like that faithless generation. Enter the land with faith, because God keeps His promises."

A second thing we can learn from this: they were so numerous, they had to be organized. Some way to provide justice, to judge among them their complaints, to have leadership. Note how they're described: *heads, commanders, officers*. It's not just deciding disputes. These are leaders who will govern the people. Verse 13 says they are to be *"wise, understanding, and experienced"*. In other words, men of character, men of wisdom. I think we as the church today can see in this a little bit of a foretaste of the qualities God wants in those who lead his people. We have them explained in more detail in Timothy and Titus for elders and deacons, but at its heart, men of character, men of discernment, of wisdom and experience. They're to be men who are able to judge impartially without fear. In fact, the phrase translated "not be partial" is literally "not recognize a face". Don't recognize a face. It's a Hebrew idiom referring to someone's status. You might recognize it in phrases we use like "saving face". We don't want to lose face. This reminded me as I was looking at it this week of jargon from when I was a teenager. I don't know if others of you about my age would remember, but when someone put down someone else really well, we'd say, "Ah, you just got faced." Or we do this, face. Stupid teenagers. They got faced. Status. Do not recognize status. Do not recognize a face.

Also verse 13 tells us an interesting detail that these men are to be chosen by the people of Israel and Moses will appoint them. That's an interesting two-part process. And I think another foretaste of what we practice today: church leaders chosen by the congregation and yet approved and appointed by the church leadership. We're told even in Exodus that Moses took these men and set them over the people. or even in Exodus 18:25, Moses chose able men. Moses named here as the chooser, but Deuteronomy 1 tells us how that choice happened in detail, happened through the people. And so we have a lesson here about a healthy balance between an interrelationship between leaders acceptable to the people and to existing leadership. That's how Presbyterian government is set up. God provided for their care, for their leadership. He's taken care of them. Not just the manna in the wilderness, the meat that came down, the water from the rock. He gave them leaders, he gave them structure, he gave them governance.

And that leads to the third lesson from these verses: that under these men's leadership, Israel is going to learn, Israel is going to learn and put into practice God's law. It's summarized in verse 18. *"I commanded you at that time all the things that you should do"*, says Moses. This is a broad statement about all of Moses' teaching about God's law. All of it. All the things. Now this is something that I don't think I've ever noticed before, but it stands out, doesn't it? For 40 years as they were wandering in the wilderness, Israel was learning how to do God's law. They're learning what it is. They're learning how to live by it. What is God doing? He's preparing them to go into the Promised Land and live as his people in that land. Now, they weren't able to practice every law, especially civil laws about property or cities of refuge and things like that, but certainly the ceremonial laws, the feasts, the sacrifices, the moral law contained in the Ten Commandments and expounded upon elsewhere. So they're about to enter the land, not as a bunch of newbies who've never had to practice God's law before, but with 40 years of experience. "We've done this. Now let's go in and put it into practice." These are a people prepared to go into the land.

And there I think again is a little foreshadowing of the life of the Church today. As we're led with the wisdom of our elders and deacons and by the preaching and teaching of the Word, as we hear it and as it seeps into ourselves and we put it into practice as we follow Christ, we are being prepared for eternity. This is a foretaste of eternity. This worship is a foretaste of eternity. Our lives, day by day, in obedience to God, walking in faith with him, our preparation for eternity. Like Israel, we're not going to be able to do it perfectly or fully. It's incomplete in this life. But even now, God is preparing us to enter into eternity. That eternity of holiness and joy and peace and rest, the things we learn and put into practice even now. Holiness, joy, peace, and even rest. Resting in God's promises, resting in his gift of salvation in Christ Jesus. The name of the series in Deuteronomy is "Preparing to Go Home". The Israelites are preparing to go home, but friends, we (we!) are preparing to go home as well. We're doing that until Christ comes again.

And then we've got these commands given in verses 6-8 and 19-21. Israel has a fighting force of over 600,000 men. God has kept his promise to make them as numerous as the stars of heaven. He's taught them his ways. He's given them capable and organized leadership. As we noted last time, they've already taken possession of part of the land across the Jordan. They've already tasted victory with God's help. Israel should be ready. But these verses

remind them of that previous time when they were on the verge of the Promised Land, shortly after leaving Egypt in Mount Sinai, commanded to leave. God reminds them of the vastness of the territory he has promised in verse 7. And then he commands Israel to go into the land, given to their patriarchs, but also given to them. Makes it very clear they're offspring after them. That's you, Israel.

And "See", says the Lord. That's a command: see. Apparently it was a common practice when ownership of land was transferred from one person to another, to take them to it and let them look at it: "See, this is what I'm giving you. This is what you're getting from me." The Lord is saying this to Israel. "See. It's right before you. I've set the land before you. It's right there for the taking". "Go in", therefore, another command. "Take possession", another command. "Go in and take possession of the land." That's the prior generation. They did not obey the command of God. They believe the report of the ten spies rather than the faithful two, Joshua and Caleb. They're being reminded: don't do this again. Do not do this again. You see the consequences. None of that generation is left.

And the repetition of that history in verses 19–21 bookends all this and it drives home the point. Repetition always is meant to emphasize something in Scripture. So again, see the land. It's the same kind of language: "See the land. It's set before you. Go up. Take possession of it." And added to it, "Do not fear or be dismayed". In other words: have faith. Trust in the Lord your God. Going into the land and taking possession of it is going to be an act of faith on the part of Israel. You've seen the promises of God fulfilled. Abraham was promised a son through Sarah. God gave it to him in Isaac. Abraham was told his descendants would be in a foreign land, but they would come out a great company. That was Egypt. That was the Exodus. That promise has been fulfilled. You Israelites now see that. You know this. You're numerous stars of heaven. God has kept them and led them for 40 years, even when they were unfaithful, time after time after time. God promised to give them this land. Believe God. Believe the God who keeps his promises. Do not fear. Do not be dismayed.

Pointing to or appealing to the promises of God is a central theme in Deuteronomy that we're going to see time and again. Israel had those promises, but we have promises as well that we look to to be fulfilled. Israel's faith in God and our faith in God is not faith in the face of doubt, though we struggle with doubt. But it's a certain trust in a faithful God who does not change, who keeps his promises. Israel had a history they were reminded of. We have a history to remember God's promises fulfilled for us. Abraham given the offspring, Isaac, as God promised. But we are given the offspring of promise as Galatians 3 tells us: the offspring of Eve, the son of Abraham, the son of David, Jesus Christ who came and lived and died and rose again for us and our salvation. That's history for us. Israel couldn't keep the law perfectly, and neither can we. But here this Son of God came to earth, kept that law perfectly, took the punishment we deserve, died on the cross for our sins, and offers his perfect, obedient life in exchange, a gracious gift freely offered and received by faith, and only by faith. Like Israel, we have a home that we're going to, the new heavens and the new earth that we saw not long ago in Revelation. It's set before us not as a territory to be conquered, but as a new home to be received, the garden in all of its beauty and perfection restored in ways that we can't even begin to imagine. And Jesus Christ himself coming to lead us in to the presence of God and to that promised rest.

The land has been set before Israel, it says in verses 9 and 21. It's there, they can see it. Verse 20: this is the land the Lord is giving us. The land is already there, but it is also being given. There's an interesting tension there, isn't there? Already and not yet. A theme in scripture. Israel is experiencing something that's part of our Christian life as well. Already saved, being saved, will be saved. Scripture talks about us as being already seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2 verse 6). Already, but not yet, until Christ's second coming. We're already raised to new life in Christ by the power of the Spirit, but our bodies will die. The not-yet is that final resurrection, again, at the coming of Christ. God's people live in this tension between the already and the not yet. Israel taking the land. Israel waiting for the promised Messiah. The church today, an innumerable multitude, the sons of Abraham by faith, waiting for the same Messiah, but this time the One who has already come and saved us from our sins, but who is coming again to take us to that eternal home.

Like Israel as well, we have the commands of God right here. This is our guidebook, this is our instruction. It is precious to us. But while we wait for that eternal home, we walk in faith. Those words spoken to Israel are words for us as well. Do not fear. Do not be dismayed. Obeying God's commands takes faith. In fact (I believe I've said this before), obeying God is an act of faith, trusting that if we obey him, he will care for us, not just now, but into eternity. You can't obey God's commands without faith. Faith leads to obedience. It's not the other way around. So let us walk in faith. As we're going to talk about tonight, let us conquer in faith. We'll be looking at 1 John 5 verses 4 and 5. And my friends, do not fear or be dismayed. The Lord is on our side. The Lord who keeps his promises and is faithful. Joshua, Yehoshua, would lead the people of Israel into the promised land. Jesus, our Joshua, our Yehoshua, is coming to lead us home. That is a promise. That's a promise. Believe it.

Let me pray for us.

Oh God, our Father, we look with longing to the coming of Christ Jesus. We pray and hope that it might be soon. As we look at the world around us and the things that are going on, we might indeed fear and be filled with despair. But may it turn our hearts and minds to the promise that you have given. That one day this world will be no more and we will enter into the new heavens and new earth with Christ our Lord and Savior into your presence, into the presence of all the saints who've gone before us and who will come after us. Oh Lord, may that day come and may it come quickly. In the meantime, help us to remain steadfast and faithful in Christ Jesus, our Savior. And with the help and power and instruction of your Spirit that you poured out upon your church, we thank you and praise you that you are a God who keeps your promises. All these things we lift up to you in the name of Christ, our Savior. Amen..