

Hope PCA Sermon: July 28, 2024

“A Rebellious Refusal” (Deuteronomy 1:22–46)

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We continue this morning in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. We'll finish out chapter 1. It's a bit of a longer section. Again, we'll have a few of these going through this book. If you're able, would you please stand to honor the reading of God's Word, and we will hear from Deuteronomy 1, verses 22 through 46. Let us all attend to the very living Word of our living God.

22 “Then all of you came near me and said, ‘Let us send men before us, that they may explore the land for us and bring us word again of the way by which we must go up and the cities into which we shall come.’ 23 The thing seemed good to me, and I took twelve men from you, one man from each tribe. 24 And they turned and went up into the hill country, and came to the Valley of Eshcol and spied it out. 25 And they took in their hands some of the fruit of the land and brought it down to us, and brought us word again and said, ‘It is a good land that the LORD our God is giving us.’

26 Yet you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. 27 And you murmured in your tents and said, ‘Because the LORD hated us he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to give us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us. 28 Where are we going up? Our brothers have made our hearts melt, saying, “The people are greater and taller than we. The cities are great and fortified up to heaven. And besides, we have seen the sons of the Anakim there.” 29 Then I said to you, ‘Do not be in dread or afraid of them. 30 The LORD your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, 31 and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the LORD your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place.’ 32 Yet in spite of this word you did not believe the LORD your God, 33 who went before you in the way to seek you out a place to pitch your tents, in fire by night and in the cloud by day, to show you by what way you should go.

34 And the LORD heard your words and was angered, and he swore, 35 ‘Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers, 36 except Caleb the son of Jephunneh. He shall see it, and to him and to his children I will give the land on which he has trodden, because he has wholly followed the LORD!’ 37 Even with me the LORD was angry on your account and said, ‘You also shall not go in there. 38 Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter. Encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it. 39 And as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it. 40 But as for you, turn, and journey into the wilderness in the direction of the Red Sea.’

41 Then you answered me, ‘We have sinned against the LORD. We ourselves will go up and fight, just as the LORD our God commanded us.’ And every one of you fastened on his weapons of war and thought it easy to go up into the hill country. 42 And the LORD said to

*me, 'Say to them, Do not go up or fight, for I am not in your midst, lest you be defeated before your enemies.'*⁴³ *So I spoke to you, and you would not listen; but you rebelled against the command of the LORD and presumptuously went up into the hill country.*⁴⁴ *Then the Amorites who lived in that hill country came out against you and chased you as bees do and beat you down in Seir as far as Hormah.*⁴⁵ *And you returned and wept before the LORD, but the LORD did not listen to your voice or give ear to you.*⁴⁶ *So you remained at Kadesh many days, the days that you remained there."*

The grass withers, the flower falls. The Word of the Lord remains and endures forever. Please be seated. Let me pray for us as we come to God's holy Word.

Lord God, prepare our hearts and minds to receive your Word this morning. Open our eyes to see, open our ears to hear. Let all of us who have ears hear what you say to us this morning. Bless us, O Lord, with your Word. Teach us, guide us, and lead us. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 21. It's the parable of the two sons. Now the chapter begins, Matthew 21, with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It goes on to tell about how he cleansed the temple of all the money changers. There's that interesting, somewhat puzzling story of Jesus cursing the fig tree. And then as he's teaching in the temple, we're told that the chief priests and elders question him. They challenge him: "By whose authority are you teaching?" And he asks them a question that forces them to back off. It shuts up their inquiry. And then he asks these chief priests and elders and Pharisees, tells them a parable, and begins by asking, "Tell me what you think. There's a father who has two sons, and he says to the first one, go and work in the vineyard today. The son says, 'I won't'. And yet later he regrets what he said, changes his mind, and goes and works in the field. To the other son he also says, 'Go and work in the vineyard today.' The son says, 'I will do it, sir.' But he did not go, and Jesus asked the question of these Jewish leaders, 'Whose son (or which son) did the will of his father?' And they answer, correctly: 'The first one.' And then Jesus goes on to explain that 'first son is like the tax collectors and the prostitutes who go into the kingdom before you, you chief priests and elders and Pharisees. Why? Because they heard John and believed him. You heard John and did not believe, but even after you saw the tax collectors and prostitutes believing, you did not regret your previous response. You did not change your mind and believe in John."

Matthew Henry says about this parable that there are "some who prove better than they promise, and some who promise better than they prove." It's interesting to me also that Jesus gives the Jewish leaders only two options: the middle two of four possible responses by the son, maybe to make it a little bit more ambiguous, or maybe to make them think about it a little bit harder. But the other two options, I think, are fairly obvious: those who promise to obey and do obey. That's the best response that could be given. But also the worst response: those who refuse to go, and indeed they do not go. That's the worst possible way to respond.

And I would argue here that in the latter part of Deuteronomy chapter 1, as Moses is speaking to the people, he's reminding them that when they first approach the promised land coming up through Egypt to Kadesh-barnea, They fell into that worst category. The Lord God gave

them a command. They said they would not go in, and they refused to go in. They heard the command, "Go in and take possession", and they said they wouldn't, and they didn't. This is utter rebellious refusal. It's like a petulant child who, when a parent says to do something, says, "No, no, no", and then stubbornly refuses to do it. This kind of rebellion before God has consequences. And Moses is reminding the people of what happened before so they won't make the same mistake again.

I want to work through this extended narrative that Moses shares with the people, part of this covenantal historical prologue, kind of section by section, some lessons along the way, and then hopefully some concluding thoughts at the end.

Now last week we saw how God had twice commanded the people to go into the land, while they were at Horeb, Mount Sinai, and then again when they got to Kadesh-barnea. bookending the story of how the people were organized so that they could be cared for and led, shepherded effectively. This week we see the part of Moses' speech here in chapters 1 through 4, where he reminds them of how they got to the very edge of the promised land, and he reminds them what happened there. And this is especially in light of God's command to go in and take possession. That reminder comes in two parts: verses 22–25 and then 26–33. Look at those in turn.

22–25 is the twelve spies and their report that they bring back. And then 26–33 is Israel's rebellion despite Moses' strong encouragement to them. Families like to play the game, "I spy with my little eye." It's a great teaching tool for kids. Unless you're playing in the car and one of the older kids decides to spy something down the road as you drive past it, so that no one knows what in the world they saw. "I spy with my little eye something yellow." Yellow. In Israel's case, their spying was a matter of life and death. Verses 22–25 are a short synopsis of the longer story that we have in the book of Numbers. Moses here recounts the people coming to him with the idea of sending spies or scouts to go up into the land and explore it and bring word of what to do next. Verse 23, Moses agrees, seems like a good idea.

Now, Numbers tells the story differently, and there it appears that God is the one who's initiating the sending of the spies. Seems contradictory, but the most common explanation, and I think it's valid, it's consistent with the way David interacts with God. For example, as king, is that the people have the idea, told it to Moses, Moses conferred with God, and God affirmed the plan as a good one to pursue. So in other words, here in these first few verses, we're reminded that things started out pretty well, on a pretty good footing. Israel's sin is not their request to send spies, but their later response when those spies came back. We're told that the spies go up into the valley. It's actually more like a wadi, a seasonal stream that sometimes has water and sometimes doesn't. The valley of Eshcol. The word Eshcol means 'cluster'. And Numbers tells us that it was from this area that the scouts, the spies, brought back amazing clusters of grapes. Here in verse 25 we're told that they gather the fruit of the land and report back to the nation of Israel, that *"it is a good land that the LORD God is giving us."* Still positive. The land is good. And there's an acknowledgment there that the Lord God who is (present tense) "He is giving this to us." There's the idea there of covenant fulfillment, an acknowledgment of that, the realization of this promise, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob being fulfilled that God himself is giving us this land.

So far, so good. Often in our own walk of faith, we start out pretty well. Maybe when we first repented and believed, fired up and excited, but then that fades over time and we fall into bad habits or a lack of enthusiasm. Could be each day you wake up reared and ready to go, energized, get some Bible reading in, maybe some prayer, but then the cares of the day weigh us down and we soon forget that positive beginning. Or just walking into some new situation or new opportunity with optimism and with trust in the Lord. It's good to start out well, but it's also good to continue well. Israel, as we learn in verses 26 to 33, did not continue well. We're told clearly and concisely in verse 26, Moses said to them, "*You would not go up. You rebelled against the Lord's command.*" And verse 27 describes that rebellion in interesting terms: "murmuring". Complaining, grumbling. In Proverbs, the word has the idea, the connotation of tale-telling or gossip. So you can imagine what is being described here around this great camp of the Israelite nation, the whispering discontent spreads. "The Lord hates us. The Lord hates us to do this to us, to give us into the hand of Amorites, to destroy us." "Our brother spies", they say in verse 28, "have scared us with their description of these terrifying people and their fortresses ascending to the heavens."

Things to observe here. Note how Moses says "*you*". He's recounting a story from 40 years ago, but he's speaking to the present generation. He says, "You did this". Why does he talk that way? Because they're still the people of God. It's a new generation, yes, but it's the same nation in covenant with God. Tells us something about the continuing relationship of God with his people. "You did this. Don't blame it on someone else. You did this." Second, in saying God hated him, they used the covenant name, Yahweh, the LORD, in most Bibles printed in capital letters. Not only is accusing God an insult to him, just in general, but to accuse their covenant God of hatred is even more insulting. They're betraying their covenant relationship by accusing God of something that's patently untrue. Hatred, hatred of them. And then third, why do they accuse God of hatred? Well, there's the accompanying accusation. He wants "*to destroy us*". The complete reversal of God's covenant promise to destroy the nations before Israel, to devote them to destruction because of their sins against God. It's a different word here, but it should echo in their brains. Destroy? No, God promised to destroy the nations, not us. And this has an ironic outcome by the end of the chapter.

So they accused God of hating them, of wanting to destroy them. And Moses recounts in verses 29–33 how he reminded them of God's love and care for them, how he went before them. Saw this in Egypt: carried them like a father through the wilderness, protecting them, watching over them until they reached Kadesh-barnea. He fought for them. He provided places, good places, to pitch their tents and show them the safe way to go, whether by fire at night or cloud by day. And Moses says in verse 32, astonishing: "*despite this word, you did not believe the LORD your God.*" Israel at Kadesh-barnea was very like the chief priests and elders and Pharisees who saw but did not believe. Rebellious sons and daughters before their covenant God and Father.

The next section goes on to talk about Israel's punishment. Israel may have murmured their complaints, but their accusations and rebellious refusal was heard by God, we're told in verses 34 and following. He heard, God hears. We can't keep secrets from the Lord God. And so judgment is swift in verse 35: "*None of the men of this evil generation will see the good*

land". And then we're given a first exception: Caleb, one of the twelve who gave a good report, in verse 36, he encouraged Israel to go up. "The Lord will give it to us." So God gave him the area that he had spied out. From Numbers (we believe that to be that place that's mentioned here), Eshcol, near what's now Hebron. And Moses even acknowledges his own punishment. "*The Lord was angry with me on your account,*" he says. "You people complained and it led me to sin." Moses is referring to the time near Meribah where the people were thirsty. It's the second time they had come there. It's the second time they had complained there. The second time, God told Moses to speak to the rock and water will come out. The first time they were there, God had told Moses to strike the rock, and water would come out, and that's exactly what happened. But this time, instead of speaking to the rock, Moses struck it not once, but twice. 1 Corinthians 10 verse 4 tells us that the rock symbolized Christ himself. Striking it once the first time was a prophetic act pointing to the cross, Christ being struck with death, the judgment of God. Striking it again and twice distorts the meaning of that one-time sacrifice. And so Moses may not go in. We're told Joshua also is going to go in, he will succeed Moses as leader and in fact he will lead the people in their conquest of the land.

And then the irony, at least part of the irony. The little ones who Israel allegedly feared for (at this point in time 40 years ago), "If we take these with us they will be harmed, they will be killed, they will be whatever." At that time they were too young to distinguish between good and evil. God says these are the ones who are going to go in. The ones you were afraid would be hurt, harmed, they are the ones who are going to go in. And the command is given to Israel in verse 40; "Turn around, just turn around, go back into the wilderness toward the Red Sea." God heard their sin. He saw their sin. He pronounced judgment on their evil, wicked rebellion.

Now, the proper thing to do for Israel would have been to submit, to accept that judgment, to obey. But what do they do? Verses 41-46 tell us. They try to make up for their mistake. Having disobeyed the command to go in, they now disobey the command to turn around and go. "*We sinned against the LORD, we ourselves will go up and fight*", verse 41 tells us. Sounds like repentance. But it isn't, is it? This is worldly repentance, which always comes (or at least typically comes) reluctantly, or too late, or dishonestly admits wrongdoing. We hear it all the time from public figures. "I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I offended you." It's hollow. It's worthless. That's what Israel is doing before the LORD God. Repentance unto life (which we'll begin talking about tonight as we get into chapter 15 of the Confession), repentance unto life comes from godly sorrow for sin, which leads to faith and the fruit of faith, which is obedience. If Israel had been truly repentant, they would have obeyed, turned and gone into the wilderness as God commanded. This is proper repentance.

I remember the story, I think it was down in Texas, of a woman who'd been convicted of murdering, I think, her very own children, if memory serves correctly. And during the time of her trial, while she was in prison and then convicted and waiting for the death penalty in her case, she converted to Christianity. And there began to be appeals: "Oh, forgive her. Let her go. She's become a Christian. Have mercy upon her." And the thing that struck me about this woman, she said, "No, I committed these murders. I sinned. The punishment is death. I will take the punishment." That's repentance. That's repentance. "I know I deserve it. I will take the punishment." Now, we give power to governors and judges and even the president to pardon, but that's a different story.

If I'm guilty, what's my attitude? Be willing to take the punishment I deserve. That's true repentance. But instead, Israel boldly proclaims, "*We ourselves will go up and fight.*" They still don't get it. God has promised to go before them and fight. They're not supposed to try and do it in their own strength. "*We ourselves*", by their own determination, their own willpower. It's a picture of how repentance and faith is so often misunderstood and misapplied. Faith doesn't pursue godliness or holiness on our own, by our own strength, salvation by our own works. That's not how it works. Faith doesn't pursue godliness or holiness after God has done his part, now I have to do mine. That's not how it works. Faith looks to the God who goes before us, and has gone before us, who will go before us into eternity. Faith looks to Jesus Christ, "the forerunner" as Hebrews tells us, takes us behind the curtain. Jesus Christ, who is the first fruits of salvation, of life rising right up out of the grave. Faith looks to Jesus who did for us what we can't and won't do for ourselves: perfect obedience, and then offering himself willingly as the perfect sacrifice to pay for our sins. We sinful and wicked disobedient people repent and come to faith in Christ and then Paul can write about such people: "Such were some of you" (1 Corinthians 6 verse 11). You were washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. That's what faith looks to.

Israel didn't get it. They wanted to claim the LORD God's promise by their own effort and by the fruit of their false repentance. And so God speaks to Moses, and Moses speaks to the people in verses 42 and 43, warning them not to go fight, telling them that God is not with them. In fact, again, Numbers tells us that the Ark of the Covenant remained in the camp. What more visible symbol could they have of God not being with them? But they don't listen. So verses 43 and 44 tell us that they do go up, and they are scattered. They're chased as if by bees. What a picture. We've probably all seen the cartoons, right, of someone who pokes the bee's nest, the hive, and the bees come swarming out and chase them. That's Israel before the Amorites, running scared. Verse 44 tells us that quite literally Israel got a "beat down". All the way to Hormah. Hormah in verse 44 sounds a little bit like the Hebrew word harem, the word used to describe nations devoted to destruction by the Lord. The second irony, the children they feared for are the ones who are going to go in and in their disobedience, they were chased all the way to Hormah. Destroyed, beat down.

This is the reality of God's judgment. Not a man is going to see the promised land. This generation, in fact, in effect, was devoted to destruction. Their little military exercise was perhaps a pointed foretaste of that reality. Their sin is great. Verse 43 describes it in powerful terminology: they didn't listen, they rebelled against God's command, and they presumptuously went up to fight. "Presumption" also has that idea of being insolent. and defiant. The repetition of these terms points to how great their sin was and how great their rebellion was. They come back weeping. They had not listened to the LORD, and now he does not listen to their voice. He does not hear them. He does not give regard to their crocodile tears. They remained at Kadesh-barnea, we're told, "*many days*". Maybe they were waiting for the spies to come back, maybe waiting for the military action to conclude, maybe both. But what should have been the launching point for going in and taking possession of the promised land instead became a place of judgment and death because of their rebellion.

The story ought to give us pause, just generally, to think about the things that God has commanded us to do and our willingness to obey. Are we the kind of people who hear and obey? Or as we're warned in the New Testament, are we "hearers only of the Word and not doers of it?" Do we live our lives by faith, trusting God that he goes before us that he will guide and protect us in all things, that even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we need not fear any evil, because God is with us. Do we obey God's commands, trusting that in our obedience, God will be with us and work all things for our good, even if that obedience leads to trial and suffering? Maybe he'll protect us. Maybe he'll give us over into temporal, earthly victory for a time. We don't know. Faith trusts in God, regardless of the circumstances.

A friend of mine posted a quote from Dr. Ian Duguid's work called *The Whole Armor of God*, how Christ's victory strengthens us for spiritual warfare. Israel was fighting a temporal, earthly war. We're fighting a spiritual war. Here's what Dr. Duguid writes, Why would He not also be triumphant over all the lesser trials and difficulties that you face in your life? If even death cannot separate you from the love of God and Jesus Christ, then certainly sickness, failure, abuse, broken relationships, financial difficulties, ongoing struggles with sin and fear, and anything else in all creation surely cannot. God does not hate his people. Israel was blasphemous in that accusation. Everybody's going to doubt. Everybody's going to struggle. But let us not, in our doubt or in our fear, inadvertently accuse God of hate or disinterest. He loves his people. He sent his very own Son to live and die and rise again for us and for our salvation. He cares for us all until we enter into that eternal rest. Can we not follow him confidently? We sang the hymn last week, "We follow not with fear."

And then if I may briefly, a few words on a common fear that I think we all have to some degree or another: sharing our faith. Israel was commanded to go up and take possession of the promised land. The church is commanded to go into all the world. Not to take possession of territory. not to take possession of land, because as Peter told us, we're "strangers and aliens", but we're told to go into all the world and to make disciples, to be Christ's ambassadors in calling his people to repent and believe as we share the good news of the gospel, to be agents, to be laborers who help bring in the harvest that builds Christ's church, against which, again, the gates of hell cannot prevail. We're Presbyterians. We're Reformed Christians. If we truly believe that God has chosen his people, if we truly believe that Christ will build his church, if we truly believe that the Holy Spirit goes out with power to regenerate those who are dead in their sins, to call them to Christ, to create new life in them by grace and through faith, what are we afraid of? Are we the son who says, "Yes, I will go, sir," and then we fail to go? Or will we be obedient?

Now, how we participate in this work may vary greatly depending on our individual gifts and talents. But it is true that all are called to be "ready to give an answer for the hope that we have in Christ Jesus". We saw that in Peter, 1 Peter 3 verse 15. And I would encourage you, you know that answer. It's your very own testimony of coming to faith. And the simplest, easiest thing to do is to share that story. People love stories. Other things we might do: hear a good sermon, send it to someone, or a podcast, or an article, or there's a tract or a book, something that you can pass on to someone that you hope and pray will come to Christ. I would encourage you, don't do this broadly on social media. It's too wide a net, it's too

anonymous, it's too impersonal, but to someone specific, that person you hope will hear and believe. And pray for them. Invite them to church or to a Bible study. Offer to read the Bible with them and talk about what it says. People will have questions. That's okay. You don't have to be able to answer them. You can send them to me. I'm happy to talk with anybody.

Actually, I had this thought this morning as well. Maybe one thing we can do (if you're willing to do this, and I would encourage you to do it, so send me an email or a text or however you want to do it): write down your story of coming to faith. Let's put them on our webpage. Here's how so-and-so came to faith. Here's their story. Here's that story. Here's another story. Wouldn't that be a powerful testimony to put out there for people to see? "The field is white", says Scripture, "and ready for harvest, yet the laborers are few." People out there are hungry. People out there are asking questions that we have the answers for. They're anxious. Anxiety and depression is growing like crazy. People are anxious and worried. They're full of guilt that they don't know how to deal with. They crave relationships with real people, not this online pseudo community. And if that's you this morning here watching, listening later, Jesus says this, "Come to me and I will give you rest. Come to me and drink living water and live forever." There is no magic bullet solution. There is no fountain of youth in Florida or somewhere in the Caribbean. There is no sorcerer's stone that magically grants eternal life. But there is the Rock. who is Jesus, and from that Rock flows water that for those who drink from it, it quenches every thirst and gives life that never ends. My friends, come, drink, live.

Let's pray.

Lord our God, we ask that you would keep us, your faithful servants, in all things. Help us to freely and boldly trust in you and to walk in faith. You have promised to go with us, and you have poured out your Holy Spirit upon your church, upon your people, to equip us, to teach us, to lead us, to make us willing and able to do those things that you've called us to do. O Lord, may we be a willing and able people, not by gening up that desire on our own strength or will or ability, but by simply submitting to your Word and seeking to walk in a manner worthy of the things it teaches us. We do pray that there would be a harvest of souls for salvation, and that you would be pleased to use us, O Lord, in that work. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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