

Deuteronomy
(Looking forward and Looking back)

Looking Forward – The Community of Israel

Reading: Deuteronomy 3:12-22

These chapters containing the address of Moses to the Israelites just before their entry into the Promised Land form an important introduction to the bulk of the regulations that follow in the book. The narratives in first few chapters of Deuteronomy form an important platform for what follow.

Old Testament knowledge is very lacking among Christians today. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, children do not have time to come to Sunday School because of various activities, sports being the main one. And even if they come, the Old Testament stories are not often taught. Secondly, it is often taught that Jesus has come to fulfil the Old Testament and hence there is no need to read them. That is half truth. The fact that Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament is true, but the inference is wrong. The Old Testament stories or narratives show to us in practical ways how the gracious covenant of God is worked out in history. Without this historical background we can make up whatever ideas we want to interpret the New Testament and that is continually happening. The story that we have this morning makes that important point.

If we do not have the right lenses to look into the book then we will misread it as so many had done in the past. These laws or regulations were not given in a legal sense but covenantal. The fifth commandment is an example. Do we need a law for sons and daughters to look after their aging parents? Do we need a law for parents to look after their newborn child? If we do, then we have lost that covenantal relationship. It is no longer a matter of the heart.

We have also looked at the way God had something for the descendants of Ishmael, Esau, Moab and Ammon, even though they had not started well in life. That is the grace of God and that is not subject to our determination. We need to see all peoples as God's creation waiting to be restored. That is why our task is to bring the good news to all people.

Our story today deals with the final preparation for the occupancy of the land. There were territories on both sides of the Jordan River. Some of the tribes were to occupy the land east of the Jordan and the rest on the west of the Jordan. We will not be too concerned with the places mentioned as the names have changed over the centuries.

We need to see that the tribe of Levi was not given any territory. They were to be living in and among the other tribes because their role was priestly. So that leaves eleven tribes. In the way the tribes were organised, the firstborn of Jacob had a double portion. The firstborn was Reuben. However, Jacob decided that Joseph, the eleventh son, was to be made the firstborn. Joseph's two sons were Ephraim and Manasseh. They together with the other ten made up the twelve tribes of Israel.

So the twelve tribes of Israel marched up north on the east of the Jordan and on the periphery of the kingdoms of Edom, Moab and Ammon. They then passed Ammon and turned west to take over the territories east of the Jordan. So those who were given the land were allowed to settle there.

What about those who were settled on the east bank – the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh? Were they to pitch their tents or build their houses and farm the land? The answer is a firm no. Only the children and their wives were allowed to settle in. The able bodied men were to go across the Jordan together with the others and helped them to wage war on the inhabitants of the land and to take it over. They were brothers and they were to stand alongside one another together till the job was done.

The task of taking over the land was not left to each single tribe to do its own work. The task was to be achieved by the combined forces of Israel. It is to be accomplished by the band of the brothers of Israel. Joshua repeated this command to the Israelites after he took over from Moses (Jos. 1:12-15). This was an important command to the community of Israel. This is also an important command to us too today. Even after the death of Joshua, the Israelites remembered this command. The land was not totally taken during the time of Joshua. After his death, there was still more work to be done (Jud. 1:1-4). Simeon helped Judah to take the remaining part of the land. Judah did not simply asked Simeon to fight the battle for him. Judah fought alongside Simeon and together they took the land. This picture is important for us to see.

Paul repeated this principle in his letter to the Galatians (Gal. 6:1-5).

This principle of the community was not simply for the people. It includes the leadership. We see that principle operating regarding the king of Israel. When Moses was talking about the monarchy, he laid down this rule for the king (Deut. 17:20).

They were to be one people. Within a community there has to be a differentiation of function, otherwise a community cannot function properly. However, apart for the functional differentiation, they were one people under their God, Yahweh. All men (people) are equal but it is not egalitarianism. We are all the same in the sight of God – sinners waiting for restoration, but we are given gifts to function differently.

We have seen that in the nation of Israel, there is common humanity, a community of people. There is a hierarchy with leaders and a king, but they are one people under Yahweh, their Lord and King. Under the Kingship of Yahweh, no one is above another. That is why Peter wrote,

³ Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. (1 Peter 5:3-4)

The Ideal and the Reality

However, this ideal did not last long for Israel. Human ambition, jealousy and pride soon took over and that led to the disintegration of the community. Israel soon squabbled among themselves and that led to their weakening as a nation. After the reign of Solomon a drastic split occurred in the kingdom of Israel. It split into two – the Northern Kingdom still calling itself Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Judah was made up of the tribe of Judah and Benjamin (1 Kings 11:26-40).

The ideal was not to be as is the case with all ideals. Human sin operates to break these ideals. But amidst the human sin, the covenant of God stands because it is initiated and maintained by God. The covenant leaves room for human misdeeds. That is the graciousness of God.

The Lord will fight for you

Our battle is not against our community of God's people. It is against the principalities and powers of this world – such as the cultural bond, our secular heritage that enslave us to (Deut. 3:22). God fights for us against the enemies, not against one another in the community (Eph. 6:12). Yet God does not commission us to go and fight and He stays behind in the operation room directing the battle. No God is present in the battle. We were told this by Moses. The ark of God symbolizes the presence of God in battle (Num. 10:35). The task of occupying the land was a God-man partnership and the community of Israel is to be of such.

Looking Back – Is God fair?

(Moses prevented from entering the Promised Land)

Reading: Deuteronomy 3:23-29, 4:15-24

A Reflection of the Past

This morning we are looking at Moses' reflection of the past. He had been commissioned by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt. It was not an easy task to confront the might of Egypt in those days. Egypt was the world power in those days. Just consider the pyramids to see how advanced they were. Standing in front of the Pharaoh would weaken anyone's knees. Moses did that. As they left Egypt there was the Red Sea before them and the might of the Egyptian army and chariots behind. God opened up the Red Sea and they crossed as on dry land. God guided them across the desert and spoke face to face with Moses. God gave the Israelites the 'Ten Words' or as we call them the Ten Commandments.

Then they were poised to enter the Promised Land and made an assessment at Kadesh-barnea. Unfortunately, ten of the twelve came back saying that they should not enter because it was too difficult. They people were big and they were no match. That was despite the fact that God had promised them victory. It may be that Moses did not provide the leadership at that time because when Moses reflected on that event, he added,

Even with me the Lord was angry on your account, saying, "You also shall not enter there. (Deut. 1:37)

In this short introduction to the book, in the brief four chapters, Moses mentioned this prohibition of the Lord two other times, i.e. three in all. The second time he mentioned it was in the context of his prayer.

²³ At that time, too, I entreated the LORD, saying: ²⁴ "O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your might; what god in heaven or on earth can perform deeds and mighty acts like yours!

²⁵ Let me cross over to see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon." ²⁶ But the LORD was angry with me on your account and would not heed me. The LORD said to me, "Enough from you! Never speak to me of this matter again! (Deut. 3:23-26)

The third time Moses mentioned this was in the exhortation to the Israelites not to forget the covenant of God.

²¹ The LORD was angry with me because of you, and he vowed that I should not cross the Jordan and that I should not enter the good land that the LORD your God is giving for your possession. ²² For I am going to die in this land without crossing over the Jordan, but you are going to cross over to take possession of that good land. ²³ So be careful not to forget the covenant that the LORD your God made with you, and not to make for

yourselves an idol in the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. ²⁴ For the LORD your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God. (Deut. 4:21-24)

Is it because Moses lacked leadership?

So Moses was barred from entering the Promised Land too. Only Joshua and Caleb, who came out of Egypt, were allowed to enter the Promised Land. They were the only two who believed the promise of God and voted to move in. However, the majority ruled the day. Moses mentioned this prohibition firstly in the context of the event at Kadesh-barnea in chapter 1. As the leader, Moses should have over-ruled the decision, but we were not told what else happened then. What could Moses have done then? Fight the whole leadership of Israel and then together with Joshua and Caleb went ahead. Who would go with them then? Moses did not do that. I am aware that many in pastoral positions faced identical issues as Moses faced. Should a pastor stand against the leadership of the church. One can and we know what will happen next. I told the story last week. Whatever might have been the case, Moses was judged. But it was the people who provoked him. God was angry with Moses. He could not blame it on the people. It was a difficult situation from the leaders' point of view. These situations occur again and again in today's Christian communities because we are locked into the so-called majority rule.

Moses' prayer

The second mention of this prohibition was in Moses prayer in chapter 3:23-26. In the passage we read this morning, Moses prayed to the Lord to let him cross over the Jordan to the land that God had promised the Israelites. He began his prayer by acknowledging the greatness of the creator God. Often in our prayers we ask for so many things and do not begin by acknowledging who God is. Well Moses did it right here. 'But the Lord was angry with me on your account', he said again. Why was God angry with Moses? 'It was on account of the people'. It was a stubborn and obstinate group of people to lead. We have mentioned his lack of leadership at Kadesh-barnea and had not gone ahead against the majority verdict. In his prayer, had Moses prayed harder and more fervently, would God have granted his request to enter the Promised Land?

But there is another reason and a more important one for God's anger against Moses. It was not merely because of his leadership at Kadesh-barnea. It was before that event at the waters of Meribah. Here is the account of what happened there.

² Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron.

³ The people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had died when our kindred died before the LORD!

⁴ Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here?

⁵ Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink." ⁶ Then Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting; they fell on their faces, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. ⁷ The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ⁸ Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.

⁹ So Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he had commanded him. ¹⁰ Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" ¹¹ Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. ¹² But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." ¹³ These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and by which he showed his holiness. (Num. 20:2-13)

Moses was angry with the people and rightly so I would think. He said, ‘Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?’ It was a rebellious and stubborn group of people that he had to lead. They complained and whined against him most of the time. It was very trying for Moses. Having said that, in his anger, he raised his rod and struck the stone twice. What God told him to do was to ‘command the rock before their eyes to yield its water’. Moses was angry and used his rod to strike the rock. We may think that there was nothing wrong in doing that. The people did provoke Moses to anger as the Psalmist said.

³² They angered the LORD at the waters of Meribah,
and it went ill with Moses on their account;
³³ for they made his spirit bitter,
and he spoke words that were rash. (Ps. 106:32-33)

It is not easy to lead as Moses found out, but the Lord knew all that. God provided for Moses some consolation for his punishment. He had a glimpse of the Promised Land and God gave the reason for not allowing Moses to enter.

⁴⁸ On that very day the LORD addressed Moses as follows: ⁴⁹ “Ascend this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, across from Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites for a possession; ⁵⁰ you shall die there on the mountain that you ascend and shall be gathered to your kin, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kin; ⁵¹ because both of you broke faith with me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to maintain my holiness among the Israelites. ⁵² Although you may view the land from a distance, you shall not enter it—the land that I am giving to the Israelites.” (Deut. 32:48-52)

Here God made it clear that it was at the waters of Meribah that Moses ‘broke faith with God’ and ‘he failed to maintain God’s holiness among the Israelites’. What is meant by this is that Moses should have commanded the rock to yield its waters by the word of God and not by human posturing. The holiness of God is what God does by what He said. Moses was angry with the people and struck the rock not once but twice when he should have calmly commanded the rock to yield its water. It was necessary for the people to see that it was the word of God that sustained them. That was not what the people saw. What they saw was human action, but it was still the power of God to bring forth the water. Now we may say that it does not matter as the end result is the same and it is the result that matters. That is how modern humanity thinks – the end justifies the means. Unfortunately, that is not the way God regarded it. It was written that Moses ‘broke faith with God ... and failed to maintain the holiness of God’.

We may think that God was not fair in depriving Moses of entry to the Promised Land, but what was at stake was vital for the honour of God. What sort of image are we giving to the people that we lead? We often hear that this or that pastor did so much for the church and now we can see the result. We don’t often hear that this pastor preached the word and we can see the result. The true life of the church results from the preaching of the word and the people hearing the word – the commanding word of God. It is the word that gives life. Activities may give a semblance of life but is it the result of the preaching or hearing the word? What our people need to know about the God we worship is the real things are the things that happen because the word of God has taken root in the hearts of the people and not because they have a clever pastor who has the know-how to make things happen. It is much easier to be seen to be doing things than to be preparing the word for the people. In his rage, Moses struck the rock instead of commanding it. In so doing he gave the wrong image to the people. ‘Hear O Israel’ is the repeating theme in Deuteronomy. In the next section, Moses then started with the word of God given to Israel.