

Deuteronomy 3:21-29

The Greatness of God Past and Future

Thou hast begun to show thy servant thy greatness – v. 24

For a man who complained about not being eloquent we sure find Moses demonstrating great eloquence in this section of Deuteronomy. The first four chapters of Deuteronomy contain a sermon by Moses – perhaps the longest sermon in the Bible – in a sense a farewell sermon. Some analysts refer to this section as an historical review and it is true that Moses is recounting the past but it's also true that this section is filled with many exhortations that apply to the present, hence the idea that his address is a sermon and not just a history lesson.

Listen to these words from the ESV study Bible: *Deuteronomy is largely a sermon, or set of sermons, preached by Moses to all of Israel shortly before his death and not long before the conquest of the land under the leadership of Joshua. It is a motivational sermon, urging Israel's faithful obedience to the covenant laws of Sinai given 40 years previously.*

So Moses was a motivational speaker – that's a good thing to keep in mind the next time you read through the book of Deuteronomy. This book's primary aim is to motivate the child of God to steadfast obedience. We know, of course, that there are different ways to motivate. Some preachers seem bent on trying to motivate Christians by guilt – others seek to motivate by fear. There is a place for both kinds of motivation. In fact when you get into the later part of the book of Deuteronomy – on into chp. 27 and 28 you find Moses elaborating the blessings of obedience but also spelling out in awful detail the curses of disobedience. So we must be careful not to dismiss outright the negative forms of motivation.

Dr. Cairns once used a very good illustration to demonstrate how you must consider the positive and negative aspects of religion. He asked a simple question – *have you ever seen a car that could run with only one cable connected to a pole of the car battery? You must have the cables connected to both poles – the positive and the negative.*

In the portion of Deuteronomy we're now considering, however, I think we see an emphasis on positive motivation. I personally prefer positive motivation as I'm sure most people do. I don't dismiss the need for the negative – unfortunately we all need what amounts to a kick in the pants on occasion but positive motivation is much more inspiring. And the thing that Moses draws from for that positive motivation is the greatness of God.

Notice the words of vv. 23,24. Moses is reflecting on one of his times of prayer. So we read *And I besought the LORD at that time, saying, 24 O Lord GOD, thou hast begun to shew thy servant thy greatness, and thy mighty hand: for what God is there in heaven or in earth, that can do according to thy works, and according to thy might?*

This petition is more than theology – it is that. The doctrine of God's covenant faithfulness and the doctrine of God's omnipotence are found in this petition – but the

petition is more than theology it is also experience – *Thou hast begun to show thy servant thy greatness*. That certainly takes theology out of a text book and brings it right into the life of Moses and the life of all the Israelites. Moses not only knows the greatness of God in theory – but he’s seen that greatness manifested in God’s greatness to him.

And can you see in Moses’ petition his anticipation of greater things to come? *Thou hast begun to show thy servant thy greatness*. All that Moses had seen and experienced he regarded as only the beginning which would indicate, then, that there was so much more to come.

I wish every Christian would learn to view life from this perspective that Moses demonstrates. It is true, you know, that every Christian has been the recipient of God’s great power and God’s great love and God’s great salvation. It is true that every Christian has been loaded with spiritual benefits. And it’s also true that all that you’ve known and experienced is but the beginning. There is so much more of God to know. If I could borrow a statement from the book of Joshua for its spiritual application - *there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed* (Josh. 13:1).

I’d like to focus on this text this morning – *Thou hast begun to show thy servant thy greatness*. I would give this message a title:

Viewing God’s Greatness – Past and Future

In thinking on this text we’ll follow the pattern of considering what Israel had seen, considering what Israel would see and the grace of God that underlies both. Let’s begin, then, by considering:

I. The Greatness of God that Israel Had Seen

Moses could have made his sermon much longer had he decided to begin his history review from the time the Israelites had been delivered from Egypt. It’s interesting to note that in the book of Deuteronomy Moses is addressing a new generation of Israelites. He’s addressing those that had either been born in the wilderness or were young when the Israelites had been delivered out of Egypt.

He could have reviewed the history of their parents or the history of preceding generations that had for many generations known nothing slavery. Moses actual audience in Deuteronomy were those whose heritage had been a heritage of hardship and the bondage of slavery.

Spiritually speaking you could say that we share a common heritage with them. We too were slaves to sin. Paul says as much in Rom. 6:17 *Ye were the servants (slaves) of sin*.

It’s important to reflect on this heritage of captivity and bondage because it serves to magnify all the more by way of contrast the greatness of God. So the Israelites had seen God’s greatness against such a backdrop. And then they saw God move with power as God plagued the Egyptians while protecting the Israelites. And when the time for the 10th and

worst plague arrived the Lord first ordained the precursor to our communion time by instituting the Passover feast.

We sang the hymn earlier in the service – *When I see the blood, I will pass over you*. The Israelites did not know the way we know today that in that Passover feast the greatest of God's mighty acts of power was being typified. They were to take that spotless Passover lamb and slay it and apply the blood of the lamb to the door posts. We know that in the performing of that act there was a pointing to Christ. Indeed, the very first message that's preached in the New Testament upon the arrival of Christ into his earthly ministry is to *Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world* – an obvious reference to Christ as that Passover lamb.

So there's a sense in which the foundation for redemption was typified to the Israelites and following that Passover feast they would depart from Egypt. Think of it – they left their heritage of captivity and bondage; They left the realm of cruel task masters that demanded of them more than they could deliver; They left the place where their children (the very ones Moses is addressing in Deuteronomy) were targeted for destruction.

And when the way forward was impossible, God had done the impossible for them – he had opened a pathway through the Red Sea and had destroyed their enemies when their enemies had attempted to pursue them. Now keep in mind that all I've reviewed for you just now could have been sermon material for Moses but such was the vastness of the great acts of God toward his people that Moses doesn't reference any of these great acts of God.

There's two things, you know, that can frustrate a preacher – one is where he's racking his brain in his sermon preparation because his mind is so dull that he strains his brain for each thought. The other thing, which is by far the more preferable, is where his mind is so full that he hardly knows where to begin or how to sort out all the thoughts he has on Christ that the Lord gives him. The latter of these two things would have been the case with Moses. There was so much for him to draw from because the Lord had been so great to the Israelites and his power had been so magnified.

Where Moses begins his sermon, however, is at that point in time when officers had been appointed over groups of thousands and hundreds and fifties and tens. Was that the beginning of Presbyterianism? – I leave it to your meditations. But Moses then reflects on the colossal failure of the Israelites to enter the promised land. It was at Kadesh-barnea where their lack of courage was manifested and that led to the 40 years of wilderness wanderings. Now, nearly 40 years later they were ready to embark on the mission of entering the promised land again. And I think one of the purposes in Moses' sermon was to so encourage them that they would not fail this time the way their parents failed earlier.

They had begun to see great victories already in their conquests of Sihon king of Heshbon and Og the king of Bashan. I think that these conquests are exactly what Moses had in mind when he said in his prayer *thou hast begun to show thy servant thy greatness*. There is, of course, a spiritual counterpart to this history in the life of every believer. Your salvation is nothing short of a great deliverance from slavery to the devil and the bondage

of sin. It can be said of you that you've been delivered by a mighty hand and a stretched out arm. You too have left captivity and bondage. You have done the impossible by repenting of your sins and believing in Christ. The way of salvation appeared to you the way the Red Sea appeared to the Israelites and by God's grace you've taken that impossible path that was opened to you.

I cited Romans 6:17 earlier to make the point that you were once a servant to sin. Listen to the entire verse with v. 18: *But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. 18 Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.*

This is your triumph – this is your victory over strongholds – this is your crossing of the Red Sea and it is to be attributed to the greatness of God. Indeed Christ himself laid the foundation for your victory by the victory he gained in his atoning death over death and over sin's dominion. And so as we remember Christ today around his table let's be sure that we, as Moses, ascribe greatness to our God. *O Lord GOD, thou hast begun to shew thy servant thy greatness, and thy mighty hand: for what God is there in heaven or in earth, that can do according to thy works, and according to thy might?*

Having considered, then, what Israel had seen let's think for a moment next on:

II. The Greatness of God that Israel Would See

Thou hast begun to show thy servant thy greatness our text reads. And as I said in my introduction the implication in Moses words is that there would be so much more of the Lord's greatness to see.

These sermons of Moses in Deuteronomy came shortly before Moses' death and shortly before the Israelites would enter Canaan under Joshua and would conquer the promised land. Moses was certainly right to reference what he had seen as being only the beginning. Soon the Jordan river would be divided, just like the Red Sea had been divided and the Israelites would cross over into the promised land.

Not long after that the walls of Jericho would fall and one city after another would fall before the Israelites. The very sun in the sky would hold its place until the Israelites conquered their enemies. We've heard in our day the World War II generation referred to as *The Greatest Generation*. There's a book with that very title. In many respects they have certainly earned that title. And young people especially should take advantage of every opportunity to learn all they can from what is now a vanishing generation. It can certainly be said of that generation that they did great exploits against insurmountable odds.

I think the same designation could be given to those Israelites who entered Canaan under Joshua's leadership. They had the courage of faith to trust the Lord to do what their parents had been too afraid to do. They would take on the giants – they would attack the cities with high walls. They would succeed in establishing themselves in the promised land so that Joshua could say to them in his final address to them near the end of his life: *And,*

behold, this day I [am] going the way of all the earth: and ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the LORD your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, [and] not one thing hath failed thereof (Josh. 23:14).

Truly what Moses had witnessed was only the beginning of God's greatness in terms of what would yet come to pass. And here again there is a spiritual counterpart to what is history to us but what was future to Moses. We too can say that we have only begun to see the Lord's greatness.

There is much more to learn and there is much more to experience. There are more battles to fight and we are to be more than conquerors through him that loved us. And the degree to which we are persuaded *that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, 39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord* – I say to the degree we are persuaded of the truth of Rom. 8:38,39 to the same degree we will be strong and do exploits.

I've pointed out in the past whenever I've made reference to the colossal failure of the Israelites at Kadesh-barnea, the failure that led to their wilderness wanderings, that the thing that contributed most to their collapse of faith was their unbelief that God delighted in them and would favor them. The minority report of the spies was given by Joshua who said in Num. 14:8,9 *If the LORD delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey. 9 Only rebel not ye against the LORD, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the LORD is with us: fear them not.*

Do you see how seeing the greater things became contingent on believing that the Lord delighted in them – and they didn't believe it, in spite of all the great things that they had already seen and experienced – still they didn't believe.

The Lord's table serves the purpose of conveying to you and to me that the Lord delights in us. He delighted in us enough to become one of us – he delighted in us enough to shed his blood for us – he delighted in us enough to pay what is arguably the highest price God could pay in the blood of his Son.

Do you believe this morning that God delights in you? If you find yourself filled with doubts and fears that arise from a sense of your own sinfulness then look again at where the communion elements point you. Isn't it interesting that there's nothing of yourself portrayed in these communion elements. They point entirely and exclusively to Christ – his broken body and his shed blood. These are the things that should convince you that God delights in you.

And to those who do believe that God delights in them – they will be able to say as Moses says in our text *Thou hast begun to show thy servant thy greatness*. So we've seen how the Israelites looked back at God's greatness – we've considered briefly that Moses realized that there were great things to come.

I'm aware that all of what I've said to this point pretty much pertains to our time in this world. The greatest things that we'll see are yet on the other side of our Jordan. And I'll take up those things a little bit in my final point which is simply this:

III. Underlying Our Look Back and Our Look Ahead is God's Grace

You will have gathered from the section of this chapter that we read today that Moses was praying that he might yet cross Jordan with the Israelites and have a part in the great things they would see and experience. In recounting this prayer Moses says in v. 26 *But the LORD was wroth with me for your sakes, and would not hear me: and the LORD said unto me, Let it suffice thee; speak no more unto me of this matter.*

In the physical realm of this world Moses was denied but in the spiritual realm or perhaps I should say in the ultimate realm of reality he did go over. We know that he went over because we see him with Elijah in the presence of Christ on the mount of transfiguration.

But in the physical realm of this world he was denied because in his pride he had sinned against God by not following God's instructions in the matter of drawing water from the rock. He sinned – the man that was very meek above all men which were upon the face of the earth had sinned (Num. 12:3). And the Israelites had sinned and would sin even in the conquest of Canaan.

But still the greatness of God's faithfulness and God's power would be displayed. How great will his faithfulness and power appear when you are resurrected from the dead and brought to stand before him? John gives us a hint at how great his faithfulness and power will be when he writes in his first epistle 3:2 *Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*

Now are we the sons of God and that's certainly indicative of the truth that we have already seen the greatness of God's love and grace. *But we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him* – there's a sure indication that the greatest blessings are ahead for us. He shall appear and when he does we will be conformed to his image. Our sanctification will see its way through to glorification. And if God's grace is magnified in you being a child of God now, how much more will it be magnified when you are conformed to the Son of God? How much more will his grace be magnified when you enter into the joy of the Lord?

This time around the Lord's table, then, is designed to have us look back – especially are we to look back to that time of Christ's passion when he endured the cruel agony of Calvary's cross. It is his finished cross work that lays the foundation for everything. We should also look back with grateful hearts to that time when his Spirit came upon our hearts with power and parted the Red Sea for us, as it were, enabling us to leave the estate of sin and misery and enter into the estate of salvation. What a manifestation of the greatness of God and the greatness of his grace. But our time around the Lord's table also

leads us to look ahead. The words of institution in 1Cor. 11 tell us that we proclaim his death *till he come*.

The fact that he is coming and that redemption will be consummated and that there will be a new heaven and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness where there will be no more sin and no more struggles against sin and no more tragedies that are due to sin but there will be instead perfect peace and joy and bliss – the fact that such blessings do yet await us leads us to say – *O LORD God, thou hast begun to show thy servant thy greatness*.

May we be reminded of our Savior's greatness today in terms of what he has done and in terms of what he will yet do.