Failure and Success in the barren lands of life

Text: Deuteronomy 1-3

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**Scriptures:** Matthew 4:1-11; Deuteronomy 1:1-8; 3:23-29

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 173, 475, 78, 470, 180

Series: Deuteronomy (#1)

Theme: After forty years in the wilderness during which the entire generation of the men of war who had left Egypt had perished and before explaining God’s law to Israel who were gathered in Moab on the eastern edge of the promised land, Moses reviewed their journey from Horeb and reminded the people of their rebellion against the Lord, their lack of faith in Him and of the blessings they received when they obeyed His Word. Moses also personally reflected on his own sin which had resulted in the Lord denying Him entry into Canaan and instead appointing Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land.

Proposition: Collective and personal humble acceptance of past failures together remembrance of the past successes of Christ and faith in Him prepares the heart for the life-giving Word of the Lord.

**Introduction**

Would you like to hear a long sermon? Well, that is essentially what Deuteronomy is! The **preacher** was Moses. Most of this Bible book records the last sermon he delivered on this earth. The **congregation** was large. They are described in the first verse as ‘all Israel’. They were comprised mainly of the children of those who had been delivered from slavery in Egypt. All the adult men who had been part of the Exodus had died and this was 40 years after the Israelites had crossed through the Red Sea into freedom. The **location** was the land of Moab by the eastern border of the land which the Lord had promised to give to Abraham, about 500 years previously (Gen 17:8). The **sermon** was long; comprising 33 chapters of the fifth book of the Bible (the last chapter of Deuteronomy records the death of Moses). Deuteronomy is essentially a reading sermon, one which would take over four hours to deliver! (at 100 words per minute).

This is not the approach I am planning to take! We would be here until mid-afternoon today. Over the course of this preaching series we’ll be looking at large sections of the text, we will not cover all the individual chapters. My aim will be to explain what this sermon of Moses meant for his own congregation and how it applies for us today.

You can see that word ‘explain’ in verse 5 of chapter 1 and this reveals the topic of his sermon: “*Moses undertook to explain this law*”. The Hebrew word translated ‘explain’ has the sense of making something absolutely clear or plain. That was the aim of preacher Moses and it is my aim also. I’d like us all to come away from this sermon and to be able to say ‘I understood that; it made sense to me, I have learned more about the Lord God, more about Christ and He has ministered to me by His Word and Spirit – I have been changed by the gospel.

Deuteronomy is mainly about Moses explaining ‘this law’.Which law is that? ‘The law’ includes the 10 commandments and other statutes given by the Lord at Mt Sinai (Ex 20-23). These were the basis of the covenant relationship between the Lord and His Old Testament people. Deuteronomy (which literally means ‘second law’ in Greek) is not just a repetition of the earlier legal material known from the books of Exodus and Numbers to which a few new extra rules were added. Here in this lengthy sermon by Moses, the law is explained and applied by Moses to the particular situation of the Israelites who were on the verge of finally entering the Promised Land.

Now in this much shorter message this morning, I will aim to explain the first part of Moses’ sermon from Deuteronomy Chapters 1-3 and to apply this to our own particular situation today as the church gathered on this side of Christ’s life, death and resurrection as we await the time when we, who are in Christ, will enter the promised land of the New Earth (Rev 21:1). There are three points in this sermon:

1. Reflecting on our journey together
2. Reflecting on your journey personally
3. Preparing our hearts with humility and faith
4. **Reflecting on our journey together**

Sermons can begin in a variety of different ways.

I think that it’s always helpful to start by engaging a congregation with a shared experience which connects the preacher to his listeners. This is exactly what Moses does in what could be described as an ‘extended introduction’ in chapters 1 to 3. He begins by reflecting on the journey which he **and** the people of Israel had been on together over their past forty years in the wilderness; a barren land through which they had to pass to get from Egypt, the land of their slavery, to Canaan, the land of God’s covenant promise. The historical introduction with which Moses begins touches on some key events on their travels ‘*from Horeb by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea*’ (1:2).

* **Horeb** (which means ’waste’ or ‘wilderness’) is another name for the area in which Mt Sinai is located, somewhere on the Sinai Peninsula. This is a piece of land which is shaped like an inverted triangle bounded by the Gulf of Suez to the West and the Gulf of Aquaba to the East.
* **Mount Seir** refers to the mountainous region which God gave to Esau and his descendants (2:22)
* **Kadesh Barnea** (which means ‘consecrated’) is the site where the Hebrews camped for most of the time (about 38 years) after leaving Mt Sinai, before they entered the Promised Land. The Old Testament locates Kadesh Barnea between the Wilderness of Paran and the Wilderness of Zin (Num 13:3-21,26).

The specific locations of Mount Sinai, Mount Seir and Kadesh Barnea have been much debated by Biblical scholars. You can read volumes of opinion on this topic in commentaries or on the internet and you’ll find that there is no firm and universally accepted route by which the Israelites travelled through these barren lands.

Here are the **10 key historical events** which Moses touches on in his extended geographical introduction

1. The Lord’s call to His covenant people Israel to go in and possess the land promised to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (1:8).
2. The delegation of authority by Moses to other men who could justly judge in the inevitable disputes which arose within such a large congregation of sinful human beings (1:12-17).
3. The sending out of a group of spies (1 from each of the 12 tribes) who left from their base in Kadesh Barnea to scout out the promised land and returned confirming that ‘*it is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us*’ (1:22-25). The spies also reported that the inhabitants of the land were ‘greater and taller’ than them. As a result, the people feared them and rebelled against the Lord’s command, and did not believe His good Word (1:26-33).
4. In just consequence for their unbelief, the Lord’s righteous word of judgement came to His faithless people (1:34-39): ‘*not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land*’ except Caleb and Joshua, the faithful spies and the children of the first generation (this was later fulfilled when the first generation, the men of war, perished in the wilderness (2:14).
5. Then came the repentance of the people, but also their further sin in not obeying the Lord’s clear command to ‘*turn and journey in the direction of the Red Sea*’ (1:40). Instead they followed their own presumption in going to fight, despite the Lord saying ‘*I am not in your midst*’ (1:43). The result was a humiliating defeat by the Amorites (1:44-46).
6. The people then travelled to the land of Seir, where their relatives, the people of Esau, lived from whom they were commanded to buy food and water (2:1-7).
7. They then went onto Moab and the Lord warned them not to fight the Moabites (2:9).
8. By the Lord’s command the Israelites defeated Sihon, the king of the Amorites (2:30-37) because ‘God gave him over to’ them. All his cities, men, women and children were devoted to destruction. Moses recalls ‘*We left no survivors*’ (2:34).
9. Again, obeying the Word of the Lord, the Israelites defeated Og, King of Bashan because God had ‘given him and all his people and his land into’ their hand. As with the Amorites, Israel devoted ‘*to destruction every city, men, women and children*’ (3:1-6).

The genocide which God commands at times in the Old Testament (e.g. Deut 20:10-20) can be difficult to accept. These truths help our understanding: In these historical cases, the Israelites were God’s chosen instruments of His righteous judgement. In the case of pagan people groups within the promised land, if they remained, they could turn Israel from serving her Lord. This is exactly what did happen. God **does not** command physical warfare today for the establishment of His Kingdom. Our battle is spiritual – being ‘against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places’ (Eph 6:12b).

1. In closing this historical overview, Moses recalls that Joshua was commanded by the Lord to observe the defeat of the two kings: Sihon and Og and not to fear ‘*for it is the Lord your God who fights for you*’ (3:22).

There’s a lot of historical detail here in these first three chapters, what overall truth can we learn from it all? When the people **did not obey the Word** of their Lord, thereby demonstrating their rebellion against Him and their lack of faith in His steadfast love and gracious Word, they failed to receive His promised blessings and instead came under His just and fearful judgement. In contrast, when the people **did believe in, and also obey, the Word** of their Lord, they received the rich benefits of His success in defeating their enemies for them.

I’d like to set us all some homework before we move on. Here is our assignment: reflect on the history of this local church. Trace the key events over the past years looking for the times when the congregation faithfully obeyed the Lord and also the times when there was sin and rebellion, the consequence of a lack of faith in the Lord’s steadfast love and gracious Word. If we are going to profitably reflect on our past journey together to get to where we are now as a congregation then we will need to ‘tell it as it was’, not ‘sugar-coat’ things, nor be over-critical of ourselves. We need to be honest and accurate about our collective past, that’s the way Moses was as he addressed ‘*all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness*’ (1:1) in his last sermon. Having done this, he then reflected on his own journey personally, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Reflecting on your journey personally**

A preacher is both God’s spokesman who is called to speak and explain the Word of the Lord **and** he is also a member of the covenant community of God’s people who are called to live under that holy Word. Being part of the congregation himself, it can be very helpful at times for preacher to speak of his own struggles, his own experience of God’s grace and of his personal acceptance of the sovereign will of his Lord, even when, in God’s perfect providence, the outcome of his life is not what he had expected or desired.

This is what Moses does at the end of his extended introduction; from chapter 3 verse 23 to 28. He records these words: “*And I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying, 'O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours? Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.' But the LORD was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the LORD said to me, 'Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again. Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and look at it with your eyes, for you shall not go over this Jordan”*.

Moses was almost at the end of his life. Having brought Israel out of their slavery in Egypt (Ex 3:12) and having been their human shepherd over 40 difficult years in the wilderness, he was on the brink of realising his great goal and desire: to lead them into the Promised Land. As he recalls his petition to the Lord to allow Him to enter into the good land of blessing, he remembers the Lord’s anger with him. Not only had the people demonstrated a lack of obedience to God’s Word, thereby revealing their rebellion and lack of faith in their Lord, **Moses was also guilty**. The Lord had said to him back at Meribah where there was no water for the congregation: "*Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water*” (Num 20:8). Moses had been a faithful and patient servant of the Lord, one who is described in Scripture as being ‘*very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth*’ (Num 12:3). Moses was a very humble, gentle, long-suffering and peaceful man. Yet in an outburst of frustration, anger, violence and pride; in disobedience to the Lord’s clear command, Moses said to the Israelites: "*Hear now, you rebels: shall* ***we*** *bring water for you out of this rock?" And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them*." (Num 20:10b-12).

It is also true that Moses, as the leader of the Israelites, had a responsibility for the actions of those under him, very much as a wise member of Parliament will accept blame for the mistake of his or her subordinates. It is perhaps this aspect of Moses’ guilt that he refers to in verse 26, saying “*the LORD was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me*”. Entry into the Promised Land was not a right that Moses had earned. His failure to lead Israel consistently well, led to the disappointment of seeing the good land he had been aiming for from afar without ever stepping foot on it.

If Moses, the meekest, most humble person on the earth during his lifetime, could not avoid God’s just judgement, then what hope is there for people like people like you and me? We’ll come back to the answer to that question later.

You and I are not Moses, we live in a different time and place with different callings. However, what overall truth can we learn from his personal reflection? Not one of us can live well enough to guarantee our entry into Paradise with God (e.g. Rom 3:10-12). Just as Moses shared in the rebellion of Israel, so we (in a somewhat similar, but different way) share in the rebellion of our common ancestor Adam (e.g. Rom 5:12).

I’d like to set us all some more homework before we move on. Here is our assignment: reflect on the history of your personal walk with the Lord. Trace key events over the past years looking for the times when you faithfully obeyed the Lord and also the times when you sinned and rebelled, the consequence of your lack of faith in the Lord’s steadfast love and gracious Word.

What, you may ask is the purpose or point of reflecting both on our congregational history together and on our personal past with the Lord? In his sermon, Moses was preaching **to prepare the hearts of his listeners so that they could receive the Word of the Lord**. For us, the reason is the same, which brings us to our third point:

1. **Preparing our hearts with humility and faith**

Have you ever heard a sermon where the preacher’s words fail to move you? Perhaps the message just sounded like a lecture? Perhaps you weren’t actively listening? In Biblical preaching there is certainly a shared responsibility for both the person who speaks and for all of us who listen. In faithful preaching, the human heart is convicted through the work of the Holy Spirit (e.g. John 16:8). {Note: God is certainly able to convict through poor preaching, if He so choses}, but this is no excuse for unfaithfulness or laziness on the part of preachers}.

Using the language of the parable of the sower (Matt 13:3-23), the ‘soil’ of the heart receives the Word best when a person is humbled and wholeheartedly believes in the power and truth of that Word. This is what Moses was aiming for in the extended introduction of his last sermon to God’s people. If the people were to receive the explanation of God’s law for their spiritual, emotional, relational and physical well-being then it was essential that their hearts be humble and believing.

In contrast, think of the Scribes and Pharisees who lived about 1500 years later. They were very focused on the law, separating themselves from the people in order to study and interpret the law in great detail. In the process they developed an elaborate ‘oral tradition’ which added many man-made rules and regulations to God’s Word. However, all their pious activity did not result in greater godliness. Jesus said to them “*You clean the outside…but inside (you) are full of greed and self-indulgence*’ (Matt 23:25).

This sermon series through the book of Deuteronomy will do us no good unless our hearts are prepared by the Holy Spirit to be humble and believing. In fact, this book approached with a proud and/or unbelieving heart could feed the legalism, self-righteousness and self-confidence which lurks in the hearts of all the descendants of Adam. So, when you do your homework after this sermon, reflecting on our journey together as a congregation and reflecting on your own journey with the Lord personally, seek to do so prayerfully, humbly, wisely, carefully, honestly and accurately in so far as you are able.

Beware of some of the dangers which include:

* Conveniently ignoring some key details which are humiliating, shameful, painful and/or convicting.
* Shifting the blame in order to justify ourselves as a church or yourself as an individual.
* Becoming bitter and/or discouraged because our church and/or our own personal lives have not turned out the way we had hoped or expected.
* Failing to see the abundant faithfulness and steadfast love of the Lord throughout our lives.

Instead:

* Accept personal responsibility for failures, both our own as a local church and your own as an individual.
* Be thankful for the Lord’s grace and mercy towards us and you.
* Look forward to the glories of the future with Him.

How are these things possible? Because there is a greater leader than Moses. One who is meeker, gentler, more long-suffering than him. One who is stronger and more faithful. One who is a completely faithful Good Shepherd of His people. One who has wonderfully succeeded where all of us have failed. One who was tested in the barren land of the wilderness. He was tempted by the devil to satisfy his physical needs apart from God His heavenly Father. He was tempted to be proud and call on his rights as God’s Son. He was tempted to gain the world for Himself against God’s will. Jesus wholeheartedly and consistently believed the Word of His Heavenly Father to be truth (John 17:17). Jesus listened carefully to the Word of His Heavenly Father and perfectly obeyed that good Word throughout the journey of His life on this earth. He said, “*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work*” (John 4:34).

Because of Jesus you can safely reflect on the past and admit your failures as you journey through the ‘barren lands’ of this fallen world. You can do this without fear because “*there is…. now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Rom 8:1). You can do exactly what God calls you to do in 1 Peter 5:6-7: “*Humble yourselves…under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you*”.

Through faith in Christ alone, you can share in all His successes. You can share in His death and resurrection. You can share in His complete acceptability to God the Father. You can receive an inheritance that is “*imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*” (1 Pet 1:4). This is the gospel people! It is incredibly good news!

Moses never got to enter the promised land of Canaan. In the words of Hebrews 11:39 “*though commended through {his} faith, (he) did not receive what was promised*”.

At the end of a worship service in our churches the preacher ordinarily stands by the exit so that you can greet him and shake his hand if you want to. Would you like to greet and shake the hand of Preacher Moses? Well, if you have humbled yourself before the Lord and your faith and trust is in Christ alone as your Lord and Saviour then you will be able to in the New Heavens and New Earth. There will be plenty of time there for each one of us, as part of the huge congregation of God’s people, to meet and greet Moses many times! You could thank him for writing his sermon down so that you and I can read it in the book of Deuteronomy! You could thank him for being used of the Lord to help us rightly understand failure and success in the barren lands of life!

AMEN.