

THRU THE BIBLE IN ONE YEAR

March 16-20

Old Testament - Deuteronomy 6-26

This week's readings cover the bulk of the magnificent book of Deuteronomy. These chapters constitute the farewell of man who was chosen by God to be the founding father of the nation of Israel.

Having recounted the Ten Commandments in Chapter 5, Moses continues with a commentary on the vital importance of the Law in the life of God's chosen people in Chapter 6. This chapter is especially significant. The well-being of the nation, and every individual within the nation, was directly contingent upon the expression of their trust in God and their grateful love for by their willingness to live in accordance with His Law. Moses introduces his commentary by emphasizing this most basic reality:

“Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules, which the LORD your God has commanded me to teach you., that you may do them in the land to which you are going over to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping His statutes and His commandments which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear, therefore, O Israel and be careful to do them, that it may be well with you and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Deut. 6:1-3)

This introduction sets forth a series of basic ideas which are fundamental to the believer's relationship with God. First and foremost is the crucial recognition that the commandments of God are not a set of rules imposed upon in order to repress and confine us. This lie is the oldest and most effective weapon of the devil. ***“You will be like gods!”*** he promised our first parents in the Garden. Inherent in this lie is a distorted view of God as a cruel master who imposes his will upon us to keep us in our place, to restrain and limit our freedom and our pleasure, and to prevent us from experiencing the liberation of self-realization. This lie denies the nature of God as our loving Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. God's law is an expression of His care and compassion. Willing obedience of His law is the only way to experience the fullness of the life for which we created. It is the only way to experience meaning, satisfaction, and happiness here on earth as the prelude to eternal life in heaven. The key word in expressing this truth is the verb ***“that you may fear the LORD your God.”*** People bristle at the use of this verb throughout the Old Testament because they fail to recognize its meaning. The fear of God is the reverent awe of the sinner in the presence of the Holy One. It is the wondrous recognition of His undeserved love and our absolute dependence upon that grace. It is the humble trust in the truth of His Word and the rejection of the falsehoods of the devil, the world, and my own sinful flesh. That's why Moses connects all of

these earthly blessings to our fear and love of God. The nation had failed to fear love and trust in God above all things 40 years earlier when they panicked over the report of the spies. If they were going to survive and thrive in the promised land it only be by the fear and love of God. Finally notice the strong generational emphasis here. These were truths that were to be taught in word and example from father to son over and over again down across the generations. There is no substitute for diligent parents in Christian families who show the way in word and deed. The greatest threat to the future of Christianity among us is the relentless assault upon marriage and parenting as the keystone of our lives.

The introductory paragraph is followed by the most important summary of the faith of Israel. It is called the “*Shema*” the Hebrew translation of the imperative verb which begins the segment. The verb indicates means more than mere auditory reception. It indicates a listening which results in a pattern of action - to hear and to heed. It has become the Creed of Israel and epitomizes the relationship between God and His chosen people:

“Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words that I command you this day shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you are in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise.”
(Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

The emphasis of this terse confession of faith is monotheism, in stark contrast to the polytheistic nations which surrounded them on every side. It was to be a living faith which dominated and defined every aspect of their existence. This faith was not to be merely and outward verbal profession but it was to consume ***“all your heart and all your soul and all your might.”***

That admonition is followed by stern warning about the challenges they will face as they proceed into the Promised Land. Moses reminds them of their failures in the past despite the wonder which God had performed to deliver them from slavery. Those acts of disobedience had led to the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and the death of the entire exodus generation. They were about to be confronted by an even greater series of spiritual temptations in the years to come. The Canaanite kingdoms steeped in the most corrupt and immoral forms of idolatry built around sexual immorality and perversion. Human sacrifice and temple prostitution both heterosexual and homosexual formed the substance of their cult. The chief deities of the region were El and his female counterpart Asherah. They spawned a family of lesser gods and goddesses the most important of whom were the god Baal and his consort Asherah. They were in forest groves and on the high places of hilltops. Alongside their altars were phallic poles and grotesquely exaggerated images of female sexuality.

“El and his wife Asherah produced a family of seventy ‘elim’, gods and goddesses, the best known of whom were Baal (master or lord) who originated as the god of the

storm. Baal was the god of fertility and was responsible for the germination and growth of crops, the increase of flocks and herds, and the fecundity of human families. Baal worship was the most degrading aspect of Canaanite civilization. Devotees brought wine, oil, first fruits of the fields and firstlings of the flocks to the high places so that the gods in the heavens could witness their antics. Chambers were maintained for sacred prostitution by the male and female whores who served as priests and priestesses in wild orgies of drunkenness, drugs, and sexual degradation.” (Pfeiffer, p. 70-71)

Among the Amorites and the Moabites - Canaanite kingdoms east of the Jordan - the idols Chemosh and Molech demanded the sacrifice of new born infants and virgin girls to grant prosperity and fertility to the realm. The Israelites failed to obey God’s command that these abominations be purged from the land and thereafter throughout their history they were corrupted and debased by their participation in these disgusting things.

Moses reminds them that their selection as God’s people was by grace. They were an insignificant group formed from the unsophisticated descendants of Abram, wholly dependant upon the power and presence of God -

“The Lord your God has chosen you for a people as His treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set His love on you and chose you, for you are the fewest of all peoples. But it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath He swore to your fathers.” (7:8ff.)

This weeks’ continue with the depressing record of Israel’s failures and the additional laws and regulations which are designed to maintain the unique identity and prevent their assimilation into the corruption of the Canaanites. Next week’s readings will complete the covenant renewal ceremonies and Moses’ praise of the blessings God has bestowed.

New Testament - Luke 7-11

This week’s readings from Luke comprise the majority of the evangelist’s description of the public ministry of Jesus, his teaching and his miracles, which comprise Christ’s presentation of Himself to God’s chosen people as the promised Messiah. The consistent theme throughout is the blase reaction of a self-absorbed people who have little interest in a Messiah who has come to bring the forgiveness of their sins. Across the generations their perspective of the Messiah has mutated into a nationalistic hero who will destroy all of their enemies and reward them with worldly glory and power because of their moral superiority over all of the gentile nations of the world. Their blindness is a frightening demonstration of the ability of sinful human beings to twist and distort the truth of the Bible in terms of their own expectations, desires, and self-perceived needs. The root problem here is, of course, the self-righteousness and pride which is the hallmark of our sinful

nature. Christians in every generation have been tragically susceptible to the same temptation in the unique cultural circumstances of their own times. In our day and age, that pattern is revealed in the willingness of much of the church to modify its message and its ministry to the worldly gods of me, myself and I. In order to achieve worldly success and statistical growth this betrayal of Christ has been praised as the wonderful virtue of meeting the felt needs of our constituencies.

This segment also includes the smooth transition of the ministry of John the Baptist into that of Jesus. John is a most remarkable servant of God who is able to set aside all his natural human pride and ambition in the service of his master. When you stop to think about it John's faith, brutally martyred for his uncompromising commitment to the truth of God, serves as a preview and an introduction to the ultimate fate of his divine Master upon the cross. Jesus does not exaggerate in the least when he declared -

“I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John, yet the one who is the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he...To what shall I then compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another: ‘We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not weep!’” (7:28ff.)

The miracles of Jesus are the most prominent feature of this segment of the Gospel. The miracles of Christ persist His life from the Wedding at Cana to His arrest in the Garden. There are four healings of paralytics, three restoring sight to the blind, two healings of epileptics (also exorcism) two cases of leprosy, one of restoring hearing of a deaf man, one replaced ear, five other healings of illnesses not clearly identified, three resurrections from the dead, two calming of storms, two miraculous catches of fish, and two miraculous feedings of thousands of people. The size of the enumeration is indicative of the prominence of miraculous works in His ministry. The role of our Lord's miraculous works is often misunderstood. In his recent study “Jesus According to Scripture”, Daniel Bock offers this helpful assessment:

“The fundamental character of Jesus’ ministry is evident; preached word supported by the evidence of miraculous deed. These deeds are to be neither focused on nor promoted as the main point of His ministry. Rather they are a picture of the restoration which He seeks to bring to fallen man living under the consequences of sin in a fallen world. Jesus’ miracles are ‘power points,’ pictures of the authority He bears and brings. Jesus proclaimed the fulfillment of the promise and of law in His message. He is the One with the authority to forgive sin and to determine what is right on the Sabbath. He also seeks to reach out to the lost, and to those who know their need. He comes to challenge the ravages of sin and of Satan on the earth, His ministry reaches out to those on the fringes of society. He calls the nation to repent and turn to Him in turning back to God...Jesus’ challenge to the Jewish leaders and His direct call to repentance formed a severe critique of the Jewish leaders own way

of walking with God. Jesus presented a real threat to the leaders' own authority... These ministry miracles are more supportive of a central element, namely, the controversy between the authority of Jesus and that of the Jewish religious establishment... Christ's foes did not attempt to deny the undeniable miracles themselves, but the claims of forgiveness which often accompanied them (Mark 2:1-12).. The miracles served to underscore Jesus' claim to have authority from God. Miracles and kingdom teaching serve to point to a Jesus intimately tied to God's rule and promised hope. This is a Jesus who can be trusted even in the face of imposing and powerful opposition."

Luke continues his attention to the discipling of the disciples which continues throughout His public ministry. Although they remain frequently confused, they will be the men who He has chosen to speak for him in the establishment of His church throughout the world. When the intensity of the opposition is noted, and the degree to which the disciples themselves shared the general misconception of the Messiah prevalent throughout Judaism, and the personal danger which loyalty to Jesus posed the betrayal of one disciple should not be as surprising as the fact that there were not more numerous defections among the twelve.

In this context the importance of the Transfiguration can be more clearly perceived. (9:28-36) The sole purpose of this glimpse of heavenly glory on the mountain top was to reinforce the faith of the core group among the disciples, Peter, James, and John. By placing Jesus between the two foremost prophets of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, the disciples were confronted by the most powerful affirmation possible that Jesus was the Word of God made flesh. The effectiveness of the event in making that impression is evidenced by Peter's subsequent reference to it in his preaching (2 Peter 1:16-18)