

ONE

DEUTERONOMY 1:1-3.-29

Catching Up on the Past

Our journalism instructor taught us that the first paragraph of every news article had to inform the reader of the "who, what, where, when, and why" of the event being reported. Deuteronomy 1:1-5 isn't a news article, but it does just that. The people of Israel are at Kadesh Barnea in the fortieth year after their deliverance from Egypt, and their leader Moses is about to expound God's Law and prepare the new generation to enter Canaan. Although Moses himself wouldn't enter the land, he would explain to the people what they had to do to conquer the enemy, claim their promised inheritance, and live successfully in their new home to the glory of God.

God was giving His people a second chance and Moses didn't want the new generation to fail as their fathers had failed before them. Israel should have entered Canaan thirty-eight years before (2:14), but in their unbelief they rebelled against God. The Lord condemned them to wander in the wilderness until the older generation had died, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb (Num. 13-14). Philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,"¹ so the first thing Moses did in his farewell discourse was to

review Israel's past and remind the new generation who they were and how they got where they were (Deut. 1-5). Knowing their past, the new generation in Israel could avoid repeating the sins of their fathers.

1. Israel marching (Deut. 1:6-18)

A grasp of history is important to every generation because it gives a sense of identity. If you know who you are and where you came from, you will have an easier time discovering what you should be doing. A generation without identity is like a person without a birth certificate, a name, an address, or a family. If we don't know our historic roots, we may become like tumbleweeds that are blown here and there and never arriving at our destination.

A father took his young son to the local museum to help him better understand what life was like before he was born. After looking rather glumly at some of the exhibits, the boy finally said, "Dad, let's go someplace where the people are real."

Like that bored little boy, many people have the idea that the past is unreal and unimportant and has no bearing on life today; and like that little boy, they are wrong. The cynic claims that all we learn from history is that we don't learn from history, but the mature Christian believer knows that A.T. Pierson was right when he said, "History is His story." The Bible isn't a boring museum where everything's dead. It's a living drama that teaches us about God and encourages us to obey Him and enjoy His blessings (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1-12). No book is more contemporary than the Bible, and each new generation has to learn this important lesson.

Israel at Sinai (*Deut.* 1:6-8; *see Num.* 1:1-10.-10).² After the nation left Egypt, they marched to Mount Sinai, arriving on the fifteenth day of the third month (Ex. 19:1); and there the Lord revealed Himself in power and great glory. He delivered the Law to Moses who declared it to the people, and they accepted the terms of the covenant. The Jews left Sinai on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year after the Exodus (Num.

10:11), which means they were at Sinai not quite a year. While the nation was camped at Sinai, the tabernacle was constructed and the priests and Levites were set apart to serve the Lord.

Why did the Lord have the Jews tarry so long at Sinai? He wanted to give them His Law and teach them how to worship. The Lord didn't give Israel His Law to save them from their sins, because "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Gal. 2:16). Under the Old Covenant, people were saved by faith just as sinners are today (Rom. 4:1-12; Gal. 3:22; Heb. 11). The Law reveals the sinfulness of man and the holy character of God. It explained what God required of His people if they were to please Him and enjoy His blessing. The civil law allowed Israel to have an orderly and just society, and the religious laws enabled them to live as the people of God, set apart from the other nations to glorify His name. The Law also prepared the way for the coming of Israel's Messiah (Gal. 4:1-7), and the various tabernacle furnishings and ceremonies pointed to Jesus.

Knowing that wars and dangers lay before them, many of the people might have been satisfied to stay at Mount Sinai, but the Lord ordered them to move. Not only did the Lord command them but He also encouraged them: "See, I have given you this land" (Deut. 1:8, NIV). He promised to keep the covenant He had made with the patriarchs to whom He had graciously promised the land of Canaan (Gen. 13:14-18; 15:7-21; 17:8; 28:12-15; Ex. 3:8). All the army of Israel had to do was follow God's orders and the Lord would give them victory over their enemies in Canaan.

Israel on *the way to Kadesh Barnea* (Deut. 1:9-18; Num. 10:11-12:16). It wasn't easy for Moses to lead this great nation because he frequently had to solve new problems and listen to new complaints. Accustomed to the comfort of their camp at Sinai, the people resented the hardships of their journey to the Promised Land. They forgot the distress of their years of slavery in Egypt and even wanted to turn around and go back! They got accustomed to the manna that God sent them from heaven each morning and soon took it for granted, and they longed for the

savory meat and vegetables they had enjoyed eating in Egypt. No wonder Moses got discouraged and cried out to the Lord!³ He wanted to quit and he even asked God to take his life! (Num. 11:15)

God's answer to Moses' prayer was to give him seventy elders to assist him in managing the affairs of the camp. Moses was a great leader and a spiritual giant, but even he could do only so much. He and the elders organized the nation by thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, with competent leaders in charge of each division. This created a chain of command between Moses and the people so that he didn't have to get involved in every minor dispute. He could devote himself to talking with the Lord and helping to settle the most important problems in the camp.

The charge Moses gave to the newly appointed leaders is one that ought to be heeded by everybody who serves in a place of authority, whether religious or civil (Deut. 1:16-18). The emphasis is on character and justice and the realization that God is the judge and the final authority. If all officials made their decisions on basis of nationality, race, social position, or wealth, they would sin against God and pervert justice. Throughout the Law of Moses, there's an emphasis on justice and showing kindness and fairness to the poor, especially widows, orphans, and aliens in the land (Ex. 22:21-24; Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 14:28-29; 16:9-12; 24:17-21). Frequently the prophets thundered against the wealthy landowners because they were abusing the poor and the helpless in the land (Isa. 1:23-25; 10:1-3; Jer. 7:1-6; 22:3; Amos 2:6-7; 5:11; Zech. 7:8). "He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker" (Prov. 14:31, NJKV).

2. Israel rebelling (Deut. 1:19-46; Num. 13-14)

Kadesh Barnea was the gateway into the Promised Land, but Israel failed to enter the land because of fear and unbelief. They walked by sight and not by faith in God's promises. "See, the Lord your God has given you the land," Moses told them. "Go up and take possession of it.... Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (Deut. 1:21, NIV). It has well been said that faith is not

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believing in spite of evidence—that's superstition—but obeying in spite of circumstances and consequences. How much more evidence did the people need that their God was able to defeat the enemy and give them their land? Hadn't He defeated and disgraced all the false gods of Egypt, protected Israel, and provided for them on their pilgrim journey? God's commandment is always God's enablement, and to win the victory, His people need only trust and obey.

Searching out the land (Deut. 1:22-25; Num. 13). The first indication that the nation was wavering in faith was their request that Moses appoint a committee to search out the land. Israel would then know the state of the land and be better able to prepare their plan of attack. This is the approach any army would use—it's called "reconnaissance"—but Israel wasn't just "any army." They were God's army and the Lord had already done the "reconnaissance" for them. From the very beginning, God had told Moses that Canaan was a good land flowing with milk and honey, and He even gave the names of the nations living in the land (Ex. 3:7-8; see Gen. 15:19-21). Surely the people knew that the will of God would not lead them where the grace and power of God could not keep them.

When Moses spoke to God about the people's suggestion, the Lord graciously gave him permission to grant their request (Num. 13:1). God knows how weak we are, so He sometimes accommodates Himself to our condition (Ps. 103:13-14; Jud. 6:36-40). However, doing God's permissive will isn't quite the same as obeying His "good, acceptable and perfect will" (Rom. 12:2). When God lets us have our own way, it's a concession on His part that should make us walk in fear and humility. Why? Because there's always the danger that we'll become proud and self-confident and start telling God what to do! Doing God's express will is the safest course because God never makes a mistake. Sometimes our desires and God's concessions combine to produce painful disciplines.⁴

The twelve men explored the land for forty days and returned to the camp with the enthusiastic unanimous report that every-

thing God had said about the land was true. The report shouldn't have surprised anybody because God's Word can always be trusted.

Rejecting the land (Deut. 1:26-40). But then ten of the spies gave their opinion that Israel wasn't able to conquer the land because the cities were protected by high walls and there were giants in the land. The minority (Joshua and Caleb) boldly affirmed that the Lord was able to give His people victory because He was greater than any enemy. Unfortunately, the nation sided with the majority and became discouraged and even more afraid. Twice Moses told them not to be afraid (Deut. 1:21, 29), but his words fell on deaf ears. Instead of the leaders singing their victory song and marching forward by faith (Num. 10:35), they and the people sat in their tents complaining, weeping, and plotting to return to Egypt. With the exception of four men—Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb (Num. 14:5-6)—the entire nation rebelled against the Lord and failed to claim the land He had promised them. The Lord could bring them out of Egypt but He couldn't take them into Canaan!

What was the cause of Israel's failure at Kadesh Barnea? "They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them.... They did not remember his power" (Ps. 78:11,42,NIV). God had demonstrated His great power by sending the plagues on Egypt and by opening the Red Sea so Israel could escape, and yet none of these wonders had really registered in the minds and hearts of His people. Even the miraculous provision of bread, meat, and water didn't increase their faith. They gladly received the gifts but failed to take to heart the goodness and grace of the Giver. Instead, they hardened their hearts against the Lord and developed "an evil heart of unbelief" (Heb. 3:7-19). If God's blessings don't humble our hearts and make us trust Him more, then they will harden our hearts and weaken our faith. Unless we receive His Word in our hearts and give thanks to God for His blessings, we become proud and selfish and begin to take the Lord's blessings for granted.

There's a difference between unbelief and doubt. Unbelief is a

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matter of the will; it causes people to rebel against God and say, "No matter what the Lord says or does, I will not believe and obey!" Doubt, however, is a matter of the heart and the emotions; it's what people experience when they waver between fear and faith (Matt. 14:31; James 1:5-8). The doubter says, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" God seeks to encourage doubters and help them believe, but all He can do with rebels is bring judgment. At Kadesh, He decreed that the nation would wander for the next thirty-eight years (they had already been in the wilderness two years) until all the people twenty years and older had died. Then He would take the new generation—the children and teenagers whom the leaders said would be devoured by the enemy—and lead them into the land where they would conquer the enemy and claim their inheritance.

Attacking the enemy (Deut. 1:40-46; Num. 14:40-45). When the Jews heard God's judgment declared, they tried to undo their sin in their own way, but they only made matters worse. "We have sinned!" they said, but it was a shallow confession that really meant, "We're sorry for the consequences of our sin." It wasn't true repentance; it was only regret. Then they tried to attack some of the people in the land, but their efforts failed and God brought about a humiliating defeat (Deut. 1:41-46). After all, the Lord wasn't with them and hadn't ordered them to fight. The whole enterprise was a feeble attempt on the part of the men of Israel to accomplish in their own strength what God would have accomplished for them had they only trusted Him. The only thing the sinful nation could do was submit to the discipline of God. They came home and wept, but their tears didn't change the mind of God. The nation wouldn't listen to God's voice, so He didn't listen to their voices.

Caleb and Joshua believed God, so God decreed that they would live through the wilderness wanderings and enter the Promised Land. But later, even Aaron and Moses rebelled against God and were kept out of the land (v. 37; Num. 20:1-13, 24). When God instructed Moses to provide water by speaking to the rock, he struck the rock and said, "Hear now, you rebels! Must we

bring water for you out of this rock?" (v. 10, NKJV) Because he didn't believe God and glorify Him, Moses forfeited the privilege of leading Israel into the land.⁵ His sin wasn't that of the doubter but of the rebel: he deliberately disobeyed God and exalted himself.

When Moses said that God was angry with him "for your sakes" (Deut. 1:37; "because of you," NIV), he wasn't excusing himself by blaming the Israelites. What this means is that the rebellious attitude of the people had provoked him into doing what he did and saying what he said. Moses had been grieved so often by the people complaining and disobeying that it all finally came to a head and he lost the meekness for which he was so well known. Even the greatest spiritual leaders are but frail human beings apart from the grace of God, and many of them failed in their strongest points. Moses' greatest strength was his meekness, but he lost his temper. Abraham is known for his great faith, yet in a time of testing he fled to Egypt and lied about his wife. David's great strength was his integrity (Ps. 78:72), but he failed miserably and became a liar and a hypocrite; and Peter's great strength was his courage, yet three times he became afraid and denied his Lord. "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

3. Israel conquering (Deut. 2:1-3:20)

This is a summary of the record given in Numbers 20:14-31:54, describing the people of Israel defeating nations and kings in their march to the Promised Land. In this speech, Moses gave no details of what Israel experienced while wandering thirty-eight years in the wilderness.⁶ During those years, Israel was out of God's covenant favor, and there's no record that they observed the Passover or even circumcised their sons. After Joshua led the nation across the Jordan River, he took care of those responsibilities and Israel was back in God's covenant blessing (Josh. 5). The people in Moses' congregation who were nineteen years old when the wanderings began were now fifty-seven (19 + 38) and certainly would remember those difficult years and tell their chil-

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dren and grandchildren about them.

Avoiding the Edomites (Deut. 2:1-8; Num. 20:14-21). Moses was commanded by God not to declare war on the people of Edom and try to take their land. The Edomites were descended from Jacob's brother, Esau, and therefore were related to the Jews (Gen. 36). Moses at first tried a friendly approach, but the Edomites wouldn't accept their brothers on any terms; so Moses led the people by another route that bypassed Mount Seir. The Edomites should have shown Israel brotherly love, but instead they preferred to perpetuate the ancient feud between Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27; 32-33). Centuries later, Edom was still angry with Israel and rejoiced when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem (Ps. 137:7; Ezek. 25:12-14; Amos 1:11; Obad. 10-13).

Of all problems we face in life, family disagreements are probably the most painful and the hardest to solve, and yet the Bible records so many of them. Cain killed his brother Abel (Gen. 4); Jacob and Esau were rivals; Jacob's wives competed with one another (Gen. 29-30); Jacob favored Joseph and therefore Joseph's brothers hated their youngest brother (Gen. 37); and David's father-in-law King Saul hounded him and tried to kill him (1 Sam. 19-20). Even in the Christian family, brothers and sisters in the local church don't always love each other. The Corinthian church was divided four ways (1 Cor. 1:12); the Galatian believers were biting and devouring each other (Gal. 5:15); the saints in Ephesus needed to be kind and forgive each other (Eph. 4:31-32); and in the Philippian church two women were at odds with each other (Phil. 4:2-3). Family feuds and church disagreements are at least somewhat confined, but when entire nations cultivate and sustain hatred for one another and wage war, many innocent people are hurt.

Moses did the right thing by obeying God's command and deliberately avoiding a costly and unprofitable confrontation. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (Matt. 5:9). "Let us, therefore, follow after the things which make for peace" (Rom. 14:19). There are times when avoiding conflict is cowardly, but there are other times

when it's a mark of courage and wisdom (James 3:13-18; Matt. 5:21-26). Like James and John, we might feel like calling down fire from heaven on people who reject us, but it's better to follow the examples of Moses and Jesus and take another route (Luke 9:51-56).

One more factor in this "peacemaking" should be noticed: God had graciously cared for Israel and blessed His people even during their years of wandering, so there was no need for them to attack their brothers and exploit them (Deut. 2:7). God would give Israel all the land they needed without their having to go to war. If more individuals, families, and nations were content with the blessings God has given them, there would be less fighting among them.

Avoiding *the Moabites and Ammonites* (Deut. 2:9-23). Just as the Edomites were not attacked and conquered because they were related to Jacob, so the Moabites and Ammonites were spared because they were the descendants of Lot, the nephew of Abraham (Gen. 19:30-38). God is supreme over all nations and assigns their territories according to His sovereign will (Acts 17:26-28; 2 Chron. 20:6). In fact, the Lord even helped these other nations defeat their enemies and take their land (Deut. 2:20-23). God is on His throne and deals with the nations according to His perfect will (Dan. 4:35). Neither the Moabites nor the Ammonites deserved this kindness, but the Lord sometimes blesses people because of their relationship to other people. Israel was certainly blessed because of God's covenants with Abraham and David, and the church is blessed today because of the Father's eternal covenant with Jesus Christ (Heb. 13:20).

It was a turning point in their history when the Jews crossed into the Zered Valley, for now the older generation was gone except for Moses, Caleb, and Joshua (Deut. 2:13-16). With their time of divine discipline ended, Israel could now look forward to defeating their enemies and moving into the land which the Lord had promised to them.

Defeating the Amorites (Deut. 2:24-3:11). Sihon and Og were powerful kings in the region of the Amorites on the east side of

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the Jordan, and the Lord had determined to destroy them and their people. God's orders in 2:24-25 and 31 summarize the pattern Israel would follow in their conquest of the Promised Land. God would tell Joshua which city or people to attack; He would assure them of victory; and He would go with them to help them win the battle. Israel's defeat of Sihon and Og was especially important because it would send a message ahead to the nations in Canaan and bring fear to their hearts (11:25). By the time Joshua was ready to enter the land, the news of Israel's invincible march had already gone before them (Josh. 2:8-11; see Ex. 15:14-16).

As he did with the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites, Moses first made Sihon an offer of goodwill, promising to pass through the land peacefully and pay for whatever food and water the people consumed. However, the Lord wanted Israel to defeat Sihon and seize all his land, so he hardened the king's heart as He had hardened the heart of Pharaoh in Egypt.⁷ When Sihon led his army out to attack Israel, God gave Moses a great victory and all the people of the land were slaughtered. This victory over Sihon gave the Israelites encouragement to confront Og, and they won that battle as well and took over all the land. The fact that the cities had high walls (Deut. 3:5) and that Og was a giant (v. 11) didn't seem to create any of the problems that the older generation had feared (Num. 13:28). God is bigger than the walls and greater than the giants!

Liberal critics of the Bible express concern at the way Israel destroyed entire nations, killed "innocent people," and confiscated their cities and their lands. But how "innocent" were these people? The critics of Scripture (and God) may not realize that the nations Israel encountered east of the Jordan and in Canaan itself were indescribably wicked. They were brutal people who sacrificed their own children to the false gods that they worshiped. Male and female prostitutes served in their temples and sexual intercourse was an important part of the Canaanite religion.

These people were not left without a witness from God in cre-

ation (Rom. 1:18ff) as well as through the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who had lived in Canaan. Furthermore, the news of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues of Egypt, and Israel's deliverance through the Red Sea (Josh. 2:8-11) came to the ears of these people and bore witness that Jehovah alone is the true God. God had been long-suffering with these wicked nations even in Abraham's day, but now their time had run out and their judgment had come (Gen. 15:16). If these evil civilizations had not been exterminated, Israel would have been in constant danger of being tempted by pagan idolatry. In fact, that's what did happen during the Period of the Judges, and God had to chasten His people to bring them back to the true God. Israel had important work to do on earth in producing the written Scriptures and bringing the Savior into the world, and imitating the pagan nations would have polluted Israel and threatened God's great plan of salvation for mankind.

4. Israel preparing (Deut. 3:12*29)

The victories over Sihon and Og, the two mighty kings of the lands east of the Jordan, were themselves preparation for the battles Israel would fight when they arrived in Canaan. The new generation was getting its first real taste of warfare and was quickly discovering that Jehovah could be trusted to overcome every enemy. All that the army had to do was obey God's orders, trust His promises, and courageously confront the enemy.

A second step of preparation for conquest was the settling of the two-and-a-half tribes in the territory that had been captured on the east side of the Jordan. This land was given to the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. They especially wanted this land because they were herdsmen and the territory was suitable for their livestock (Num. 32). The two-and-a-half tribes were allowed to fortify the cities for their families to live in and also to build pens for their flocks and herds. But it was understood that the men of war in the tribes would cross the Jordan with the other tribes and help their brothers conquer the land. Once that was done and all the tribes had been assigned to

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their inheritance, the men of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh could return home to their families (Josh. 22). The fact that Moses gave them the land and that the men were willing to leave their loved ones behind was evidence of their faith that God would give Israel the victory in Canaan.

Moses described this victory as "the Lord giving rest" (Deut. 3:20), a phrase that is used again in 12:10 and 25:19 and frequently in Joshua (1:13-15; 11:23; 14:15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1). The Book of Hebrews picks up the phrase and applies it to the spiritual rest we have in Christ because we have trusted His finished work on the cross (Heb. 3:11, 18; 4:1-11). Israel at Kadesh Barnea wanted to go back to Egypt, and the Jewish believers to whom Hebrews was written wanted to go back to the old life and the old religion. But there could be no rest in the Jewish religion that was about to pass off the scene, so the writer urged the people to go ahead by faith into the rest that only Christ can give (Matt. 11:28-30). Canaan isn't a picture of heaven; it's a picture of our spiritual riches in Christ, the inheritance that we have in Him.

A third step of preparation for conquest was the appointment of Joshua to succeed Moses and lead the nation into Canaan (Num. 27:18-23). At the command of the Lord, Moses publicly laid hands on Joshua and with the help of Eleazar the high priest consecrated him to his new office. Moses also began to hand over some of his authority to Joshua (Num. 27:20, NIV) so that by the time Moses left the scene, Joshua was ready to take charge. However, Joshua was a man of great faith and experience and was fully qualified to lead God's people. He had served as Moses' servant (Ex. 33:11) and as leader of the army (17:8-16), and he had been on Sinai with Moses (24:13). At Kadesh Barnea he proved his faith and obedience by standing with Moses and Caleb against the ten spies and the whole unbelieving nation.

The only cloud over all this celebration of victory was that Moses wasn't permitted to enter the Promised Land because of his impetuous sin of striking the rock (Num. 20:1-13; 27:12-14). But even this sad note brought with it a trumpet call of encour-

agement in what Moses said: "O Sovereign Lord, you have begun to show your servant your greatness and your strong hand" (Deut 3:24,NIV). As wonderful as Israel's victories had been so far, they were just a small expression of the greatness and power of God; and Moses didn't want to miss any of the magnificent things God was going to do in Canaan. The Lord wouldn't permit Moses to enter the land, but before Moses died, he was allowed to see the land from the top of Mount Pisgah (Nebo; see 32:48-52; 34:1-6), Centuries later, Moses stood in the Holy Land in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus and Elijah (Matt. 17:1-3).

All that Moses said in the first part of his farewell address prepared the way for his exposition and application of God's Law, for history and responsibility go together. God had done mighty things for the people, both in blessing them and in chastening them, and the people of Israel had a responsibility to love God and obey His Word. Throughout this address, Moses will frequently remind the Jews that they were a privileged people, the people of God, separated unto the Lord from all the nations of the earth. It's when we forget our high calling that we descend into low living.

The church today needs to catch up on the past and be reminded of all that the Lord has done for His people—and all that His people have done and not done in return for His blessings. If a new generation of believers is to march into the future in victory, they need to get back to their roots and learn again the basics of what it means to be the people of God.