

Becoming God's People

Scripture Text: Deuteronomy 29:1-15

Devotional Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15-20. **Background Scripture:** Deuteronomy 29:1-29.

TIME: 1405 B.C. **PLACE:** plains of Moab

Deuteronomy 29:1-15

¹These are the terms of the covenant the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb. ²Moses summoned all the Israelites and said to them: Your eyes have seen all that the Lord did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials and to all his land. ³With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those signs and great wonders. ⁴But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear. ⁵Yet the Lord says, "During the forty years that I led you through the wilderness, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet. ⁶You ate no bread and drank no wine or other fermented drink. I did this so that you might know that I am the Lord your God." ⁷When you reached this place, Sihon king of Heshbon and Og king of Bashan came out to fight against us, but we defeated them. ⁸We took their land and gave it as an inheritance to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh. ⁹Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do. ¹⁰All of you are standing today in the presence of the Lord your God—your leaders and chief men, your elders and officials, and all the other men of Israel, ¹¹together with your children and your wives, and the foreigners living in your camps who chop your wood and carry your water. ¹²You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God, a covenant the Lord is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, ¹³to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. ¹⁴I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you ¹⁵who are standing here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God but also with those who are not here today.

Today's Aim

- **Facts:** to show that Moses was anxious for the Israelites to be aware of God's blessings and determined to be loyal to Him.
- **Principle:** to emphasize the need for believers to recognize and appreciate God's help and dedicate themselves to serving Him well.
- **Application:** to urge Christians to live in covenant with the Lord, who gives them benefits and expects their faithfulness in return.

Introduction

A Thirty-Year Waste

On March 10, 1974, World War II finally ended for Second Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda of the Imperial Japanese Army. Lieutenant Onoda had been drafted into his country's army in 1942, and, evading capture, had survived in a remote part of the Philippines since the war ended in 1945. For the next three decades, Lieutenant Onoda refused to believe any evidence that the war was over. The authorities knew his general location, and tried dropping leaflets, magazines, and newspapers to convince him to give up. Nothing worked. Finally, Lieutenant Onoda's former commanding officer arrived on the scene and personally ordered him to surrender. What should have been two or three years of service to his country turned into a thirty-year waste of time. Onoda's pointless war was finally over. Such blindness is nothing new, is it? Just after Jesus' resurrection, He chastised some disciples on the road to Emmaus when He said, "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken" (Luke 24:25). They had the prophecies, they had the fulfillments, they had the miracles, they had the evidence. Yet they still doubted—just like their forefathers in the desert (Numbers 14:11). Today's lesson is about a people struggling to establish an identity as they recover from forty years of blindness.

Lesson Background

After Moses responded to God's call and led the people of Israel out of bondage, they made their way to Mount Sinai. There God delivered His law to Israel (Exodus 19-20). Before long, however, the people proved to be lacking in faith. When they arrived at Kadesh-barnea, near the southern border of Canaan, twelve spies were sent into the Promised Land. Sadly, the people gave heed to the negative report of the ten doubting spies (Num. 13-14). As a result, God declared that they would not enter the Promised Land at that time. This faithless generation would die in the wilderness (14:29,30). As

we come to Deuteronomy, a whole new generation had been raised up. Unlike their ancestors, they had not been at Mount Sinai or they were very young at the time. The law would be reiterated and the covenant renewed; hence, the book was given the name "Deuteronomy," meaning "second law." Now one hundred and twenty years old (Deuteronomy 34:7), Moses was to die east of the Jordan, leaving Joshua to lead the people to cross the river and conquer the larger part of the promised land (34:9). This week our text brings us a bit of what Moses said to his people before he left them and climbed up Mount Pisgah, never to return.

Remember Egypt (Deuteronomy 29:1-4)

Of those listening to Moses, only two had left Egypt as adults some forty years earlier. The rest of the adults who had begun the trip died in the desert (Numbers 14:29-35; Deuteronomy 2:14,15). Many of Moses' hearers had left Egypt as teenagers and younger children; many others had been born during the desert wanderings. Moses, therefore, is very wise to begin his address by recalling the last days of Israel's long stay in Egypt. A reminder of those days sets the context for what Moses says afterward.

Moses reminded Israel of all God had done on their behalf. This included their glorious rescue from the clutches of Pharaoh. Some of those listening to Moses had been children at the time, but such things as the water turning to blood, the plague of frogs, and the death of the firstborn would have been indelibly marked upon the minds of these young witnesses (Exod. 7-12). Even those who had been born and raised in the desert would have heard about these events over and over again from eye-witnesses. Faith has been defined as the acceptance of testimony. In this case there were those who had actually seen the signs that marked Israel's deliverance. Faith is not wishful thinking and is not based on mystical experiences. Rather, it is rooted in historical fact. Israel could always look back to the decisive acts of God that resulted in their redemption. Similarly, Christians can look to the cross and resurrection as the historical basis for our faith. The word "temptations" (Deut. 29:3) could be rendered "trials," for it refers to the tests that came upon the Egyptians when confronted with the Lord's plea to let His people go.

1. When Moses began to speak to the people, of what events did he remind them (Deuteronomy 29:2,3)?

A secular culture teaches us that we are self-sufficient. When things go well and we have success (whether financially, educationally, in business, or any other area) it's easy to feel that we have accomplished these goals on our own. But truly grateful servants of God realize that our Father is the source of all goodness (James 1:17). We can remember our giving Father in many ways. Prayer at meals is one example. It has been said that if you have a roof over your head, one change of clothing, food in the refrigerator, and twenty dollars in your pocket, then you are more blessed than 80 percent of the people in the world. Truly we are blessed!

2. We often forget the many ways that God has blessed us. What are some things we need to do to remember what God has done for us? Why is this important?

For forty years Moses led the people of Israel. During that time there was grumbling among the people and even active rebellions. All of this indicated that there was a strong propensity among them to doubt the Lord God and His promises. Perhaps Moses could see this tendency among the present generation to whom he now spoke. These words of Moses remind us of the commission given to Isaiah centuries later (Isa. 6:9,10). The Isaiah passage was quoted by both Jesus and Paul to their fellow Jews (Matt. 13:14,15; Acts 28:25-27). This indicates that from the very beginning of her history, Israel had a strong inclination to doubt and disobey God. As Paul stated, "*But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away.*" (2 Corinthians 3:14). We can infer from what Moses said that the people could never understand God's Word until He gave them understanding hearts. Of course God wanted to do this, but they were often unwilling listeners (John 6:64,65). "They needed the enlightenment that Yahweh could give but which, by reason of their disobedience, He had not given to them. Such blindness on the part of those who reject God's revelation is not uncommon. Men may hear but not understand, because of a hardness of heart" (Thompson, Deuteronomy, InterVarsity).

3. What was the state of the Israelites heart (v. 4)? 1

Always "looking forward" without stopping to take an inventory of the past leads to a failure to remember God. It destroys spiritual discernment. When Jesus healed ten lepers, only one took time to come back and give Him thanks (Luke 17:11-19). In celebrating their new status, they apparently forgot the past life of leprosy and the One who had cleansed

them. Remembering the past (but not "living in" it) is essential for being able to give God the glory for His leading. Brainstorm some ways to do this.

4. The people of God seem to forget rather quickly God's gracious leading in the past. Why is this, and what can we do to keep in remembrance the leading of God?

God's Provision (Deuteronomy 29:5,6)

Those who remember what great things God had done for them in Egypt ought to be ready to trust Him and obey Him without fear. But events in the wilderness had been even more encouraging: God had led His people and provided for them all the way.

All through those "forty years in the wilderness" God led His people, going before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 40:38; Numbers 14:14). Throughout Israel's wilderness wanderings, God had provided for every need of the people. This included supplying water in a miraculous fashion (Num. 20:11) and manna from heaven (Exod. 16:4,14,15) and other miracles as well. To have both clothing and shoes that did not wear out during these forty years (Deut. 29:5) was not just God's providence; it was miraculous! This shows us that God is concerned about the Israelites' physical needs on top of their spiritual welfare. Living a nomadic lifestyle in the wilderness meant that the people had been unable to plant fields of grain or vineyards. Thus, they had not eaten bread or drunk wine during this time. Though these products of human endeavor were unavailable to them, their needs had been provided; nevertheless, there were times when they had complained about the Lord's provision (Num. 21:5). God's provision for the people was evidence of His care and concern for them. More important was the fact that God's provision proved that He is the Lord.

5. What amazing thing happened to the clothing and shoes of the Israelites (vs. 5,6)?

Victory Over Enemies (Deuteronomy 29:7-9)

First, Israel defeated Sihon, the king of Heshbon. The people of Israel simply wanted to pass through Sihon's territory on the highway. This Amorite king, however, refused to allow them to pass through and mustered his army against them. Israel put Sihon's army to flight and captured his territory (Num. 21:21-31). Next Moses turned his attention to Og, the powerful king of Bashan, a neighbor of the defeated Sihon. Again, his army was no match for the armies of Israel, which had the blessing of God (Num. 21:32-35). The land that was captured from these two Amorite kings became part of the inheritance of the people of Israel. This territory was on the east side of the Jordan River and is mostly part of the present-day country of Jordan. The tribes of Reubenites and Gadites, and part of the tribe of Manasseh have many cattle, so they had asked Moses to let them have that area as their share of the land. Moses granted that request, with the provision that the men of those tribes would not settle down on their new land until they had crossed the Jordan River and helped the other tribes capture the land on the western side (Numbers 32).

6. What two kings were defeated by Israel (vs. 7,8)?

Here in verse 9, Moses offers advice based on the facts he has been reviewing: the people must be faithful to the covenant now being made. This is not a different covenant to replace the one made at Sinai nearly forty years earlier (Exodus 24). Rather, it is a ratification and renewal of that former covenant. The people needed to be constantly reminded to keep it. To keep the covenant was to obey the stipulations contained therein. We understand, of course, that no one can perfectly obey God's commandments (Romans 3:23). In fact, one of the purposes of the law is to bring people to a consciousness of sin (v. 20). This is why Christ came and died (Galatians 2:21). If we could save ourselves, salvation would be the result of human effort, not God's grace (Ephesians 2:8). The fact that we fail to measure up to God's perfect standards should not be used as an excuse to sin (Rom. 6:1,2). Just as Israel was enjoined to obey God, so are we (Matthew 7:21; John 14:15). For Israel to keep God's covenant not only would please Him but also would open the door for God to prosper them in all they did. In the Mosaic covenant, such prosperity included fruitful harvests and protection from enemies. While Christ did promise that our needs would be met (Matt. 6:25-34), we should not be deluded into thinking that material prosperity is always God's will for every believer. Neither Christ nor His apostles experienced the financial security promised by some teachers today (Matt. 8:20; Acts 3:6; Phil. 4:12). However, God does want to bless us. These blessings may come in many different forms. Far more important than material prosperity is a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, for "all spiritual blessings" (Eph. 1:3) are found in Him (Hebrews 13:5).

7. Why was Israel told to keep the covenant (v. 9)?

Honor the Covenant (Deuteronomy 29:10-15)

A covenant with God is not an alliance of equals. It recognizes that God is supreme and we are His servants. Our duty and our pleasure is to do His will, and that is for our good. Moses stresses that God's people must accept the fundamental principle that God is Number One in the covenant. They must shape their lives in accord with that principle.

The covenant was being renewed with the people of Israel here. We note that it was not just the leaders, or even the men, who were present. The entire nation gathered "before the Lord." The leaders of the people, along with entire households, and the servants gathered on this auspicious occasion. It is also noteworthy that the "*foreigners living in your camps*" also participated in this renewal. Not only were individuals binding themselves to obey the Lord, but they also were doing so as a community of believers. To be in relationship with the Lord is also to be in relationship with His people. As Paul declared, "*For none of us lives for ourselves alone*" (Rom. 14:7). Those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters in Christ (1 John 4:21). As mentioned above, the "stranger," or non-Israelite, was also included. These resident aliens were to be given similar rights and protection under the Mosaic law.

They may have been from among the "mixed multitude" (Exod. 12:38) of other slaves who left Egypt when Israel did. The Israelites are not to oppress these resident aliens because the Jews themselves know what it was like to be in that position (Exodus 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:19).

8. Who was present when Moses renewed the covenant with the people of Israel (vs. 10,11)?

Each generation seems to have its own sources of prejudice or unhealthy pride. The early church was no exception. Paul confronted Peter because of the prejudice he displayed against Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-13). This was after God already had revealed to Peter that no one was to be considered unclean (Acts 10:9-15)! See also Galatians 3:28. When it comes to accepting others into our local churches, it is imperative to have the heart of God. No distinctions based on appearance, status, race, background, nationality, or gender can be permitted or tolerated. See James 2:1-9.

9. God does not show preference toward one group of people over another. How should this attitude of God affect how we view others?

The people meet for the purpose of entering into the covenant that is being offered. By that covenant the Israelites have the added assurance that they are God's people. God intends to keep his oath—will they keep theirs? Though the words of our text may sound as if this were the first time God was entering into a covenant relationship with Israel, this was, as noted previously, a renewal of the covenant with a new generation. What was happening here was actually a fulfillment of the promises that were made to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (all three now having been dead for hundreds of years). Canaan had been promised to them and their succeeding generations; so Israel was to lay claim to this promise when they invaded the land. Unlike modern treaties and agreements that are made by national representatives, this covenant was made with the whole people of God.

10. What promise was God fulfilling at this covenant renewal (vs. 12,13)?

Interestingly, the covenant made with Israel that day was not just for those present on that occasion. It was, in fact, for future generations of the people of Israel as well. The obligations of the covenant would be passed on to each succeeding generation. "There is a genealogical continuity to the covenant, not because God's covenant mercies are an inalienable family right, but because God is faithful to His promise to extend His blessing to all who love Him and obey His commandments. Each new generation must renew the covenant for itself and take its stand before Yahweh as did Israel of old" (Thompson). Similarly, when the gospel was preached on Pentecost (Acts 2:14-38), the promise of forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit were not just for that generation. Peter said, "*The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call*" (v. 39). In lesson 7 we will see that God envisioned a new covenant with the people of Israel (Jeremiah. 31:31-34). Under this new covenant, the forgiveness of sins would be offered in a way that was unrealized under the old covenant (Heb. 8:7; 10:1-4, 19-22). This good news is to be preached to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike (Mark 16:15,16; Rom. 1:16).

11. Who else was included in the covenant, though not present (vs. 14,15)?

Conclusion

Two Important Principles

The covenant mentioned in today's text is definitely according to the earlier covenant, the one made at Sinai just after God brought His people out of Egypt. But in Jeremiah 31:31-34 we read God's promise of a new covenant that is not according to that covenant made in Sinai. That new covenant is promised to the house of Israel and the house of Judah: those two houses made up the descendants of Abraham, and now faithful Christians have replaced them as Abraham's children (Galatians 3:7-9). Lesson 7 of this series will bring us more thoughts about Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant, and lessons 10 to 13 will be drawn from the New Testament itself. For the present, however, let us take note of two principles that belong to all of the covenants that God has made with humanity. Our first principle is that God is Number One in every instance. He commands us, we do not command Him. He instructs us, we do not instruct Him. He leads, and we follow; He sends, and we go. He is the potter; we are the clay.

The second principle is that the covenant is for our good. Keeping it does us good; breaking it does us harm. The blessings and curses described in Deuteronomy 28 may seem extreme, but they are verified in centuries of Israel's experience. Today we do well to ask ourselves, ²*For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?"* (Hebrews 2:2,3). Sin promises to pay, and in the short term it may seem to be paying. May we never forget, however, that we have a covenant with God. Sin has no place in this covenant that leads us into life eternal.

Thought to Remember

Focus on the promised land of Heaven!

Prayer

Our Father in Heaven, we know that You alone are God. We know You are wiser and stronger than we are. Thank You for Your Word, the sure guide in the right way of the new covenant. Forgive our foolish wandering from that way, we pray, and help us to wander no more. In Jesus' name, amen.