

Focal Passage: Deuteronomy 8:1-10

Background Text: Deuteronomy 8:1-20

Purpose Statement: To remember how God created us as God's people

Deuteronomy 8:1-10

¹You must carefully perform all of the commandment that I am commanding you right now so you can live and multiply and enter and take possession of the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors.

²Remember the long road on which the LORD your God led you during these forty years in the desert so he could humble you, testing you to find out what was in your heart: whether you would keep his commandments or not. ³He humbled you by making you hungry and then feeding you the manna that neither you nor your ancestors had ever experienced, so he could teach you that people don't live on bread alone. No, they live based on whatever the LORD

says. ⁴During these forty years, your clothes didn't wear out and your feet didn't swell up. ⁵Know then in your heart that the LORD your God has been disciplining you just as a father disciplines his children.

⁶Keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him, ⁷because the LORD your God is bringing you to a wonderful land, a land with streams of water, springs, and wells that gush up in the valleys and on the hills; ⁸a land of wheat and barley, vines, fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey; ⁹a land where you will eat food without any shortage—you won't

lack a thing there—a land where stone is hard as iron and where you will mine copper from the hills. ¹⁰You will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless the LORD your God in the wonderful land that he’s given you.

Key Verses: “Keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him, because the LORD your God is bringing you to a wonderful land, a land with streams of water, springs, and wells that gush up in the valleys and on the hills” (Deuteronomy 8:6-7).

Forty-one years in pastoral ministry have taught me that there will always be times of trial and depression. Everything will not always go our way. One of the more depressing times during my career was when I was moved from a full-time appointment to a part-time appointment. (Technically, it was one fourth of the time.)

I didn’t feel that the bishop and the cabinet had it in for me; my district superintendent said that there simply were no other appointments available for me in the conference. It was a drastic financial decrease on the home front and a blow to my ego.

My choice at that time was to go on the attack, call the bishop, and explain that “I can’t accept this”; or I could take what was offered, pray, and hope for the best. It was definitely a trying time. A friend sympathized with my plight, saying that if this had happened to him, he may have seriously considered leaving the church. In short, it came down to me getting an appointment that I thought I didn’t deserve or feeling that I deserved something better. The conclusion: I stayed.

Thankfully, this crisis situation was not only a time of prayer, but also a time of reflection and remembering

God's past acts of provision to me during my ministry. Self-talk encourages the wounded spirit (1 Samuel 30:6, KJV). "Bob," I said to myself, "this is not your first setback. God has always been with you, and I don't think God will abandon you now."

I believe the Lord honored this attitude, as this one-fourth-of-the-time appointment became one of the bright lights of my ministry. I would not have wanted to conclude my ministry without having experienced the extravagant and over-the-top love that this small congregation showed toward me.

The Bible passage for this lesson is a call from the Lord to us to remember who we are as God's people so that we might receive God's wonderful promises.

Keep Your Eyes Open

My youngest son recently graduated from high school. As with my other five children, my wife and I wanted him to go to college. Furthermore, he wanted to go. My college of choice for him was 30 miles down the road, with a student population of 7,000; his college of choice was 130 miles down the road, with a student population of 25,000. No argument and, quite frankly, my wife and I understood, as his last three siblings had gone to his college of choice.

My parting words to him after we had moved him into his dormitory were, "Keep your eyes open." That message of fatherly advice was for him to be aware of his surroundings. His university is huge, and a lot is always going on. I wanted him to do the right thing and remember why he had gone to college. I like to think that these heartfelt words of mine might better prepare him for his new journey in life.

God's parental words to the wandering Israelites were, "You must carefully perform all the commandments . . .

so you can live and multiply and enter and take possession of the land” (Deuteronomy 8:1). This was preparation for the journey into the Promised Land. It would be a new day in the life of God’s people. They had never traveled this way before. Expectations (and fears) would have been understandably present during such a time. The Lord’s command thus was directed and motivated by love for the people of God so that they might be prosperous and successful.

God’s greatest desire seems to have been a holy yearning for the people to know the Lord. How would they come to know God? One way was to “remember the long road on which the LORD [their] God led [them] during [those] forty years” (verse 2). Don’t forget your past, Israel!

If they looked back over their years in the wilderness, the people would see the many miracles that God had wrought on their behalf. First and foremost, they would see their deliverance from Egyptian bondage; they would remember the gift of manna, quail, and water from a rock. They would see divine deliverance from hostile armies that came against them. Do you not see, O Israel?

The Lord’s 40 years of blessing upon Israel showed not only divine favor and love for the people, but also served as a test “to find out what was in [their hearts]” (verse 2). Do you love me, Israel? Hard and difficult times have a way of showing what people believe. Steadfast faith only becomes steadfast after it is tested in the realities of life. Action (and, in Israel’s case, obedience) always speaks louder than words. Jesus affirmed this when he spoke to the disciples, saying, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

Some people have a deep and sincere yearning to be used by God. The idea of teaching, preaching, or being missionaries is particularly appealing to them. They melodiously sing the words to the hymn “Here I am, Lord.”¹

My experience has been that while many people will commit to ministry tasks, others will wane and eventually quit when they discover the costs and responsibilities that come with doing particular ministries. Israel's wilderness experience would show their true commitment and dependence on God.

What specific acts or circumstances in your life show God's love toward you?

Divine Health

God next wanted the people to know eternal and enduring love. This new land was what the "LORD swore to [their] ancestors" (Deuteronomy 8:1). God had set the wheels in motion long before the present generation that Israel would be blessed and remain the apple of God's eye. However, the wilderness became a testing ground to measure the people's faith.

God allowed hunger and some level of deprivation to come upon the Israelites as a prompting tool to show and teach them their need for God. Even though the people had moments of complaining and frustration, the Lord never withdrew love from them.

Verse 4 gives us a closer and more vivid look at God's abiding and longsuffering love toward Israel. Their 40 years in the wilderness were marked by provision and protection, as well as divine health. "During these forty years, your clothes didn't wear out and your feet didn't swell." Wow!

Understandably, some people today might have trouble with this verse. Forty years of walking in the desert, no one's clothes were tattered, and no one ever experienced swollen feet? Exodus 12:37 tells us that, originally, about 600,000 men, plus children, left Egypt. That text does not mention women, though we know that surely women were part of the group, too. Seamstress and physicians may not have been the best career choices during this time!

Scholars differ on how to understand this verse. Because the text does not explain the *how* of this phenomena, we will likely never rise above conjecture and speculation. Some scholars speculate that this verse was later added to the text to create effect; others suggest that the Israelites made good of the spoils they received from defeated armies along the way. Finally, some scholars contend that this was a miracle performed by the God of miracles.

Wherever our theological anchor may fall, the context of this verse makes it clear that God’s protection, power, provision, and presence never left this wandering people. It is an eternal truth that we can embrace today.

Regarding the phrase “your feet didn’t swell up,” again, we are at a theological impasse. However, for me, the mention of this occurrence suggests that God was concerned not only about the people’s material needs, but also about their physical needs. The Lord was mindful of the rough and rugged conditions of the desert, and God’s watchful eye and concern was on something as simple as aching feet. The fact that God knows and is concerned about things as simple as the number of hairs on our heads (Luke 12:7) causes me to love God even more.

Several months ago, my wife and I attended a morning service at a relatively large church in a metropolitan area. One of the main announcements that day was an upcoming health fair sponsored by the church. The theme of the event was “Health Is Wealth.” The understanding, as I perceived it, was that we should not minimize or take lightly the gift and blessing of good physical health.

Nothing is as draining on the mind, body, and spirit as an illness or constant sickness that simply will not go away. God is actively concerned about our health and welfare. We owe it to ourselves as good stewards of the

temple that God has given us to be concerned about our physical bodies.

How do you personally see God working on behalf of your prosperity and health?

A Wonderful Land

Living in a new land would be the highlight and end result of faith and obedience to God. Keeping God's commandments was not meaningless ritual. Neither was obedience the demand of a harsh and dictatorial God. These Israelites had free choice as to whether they wanted to serve God.

Whether they loved God or not, God's abiding love remained the same. The decision of the one making the choice does not diminish the love of the person offering the choice. In other words, the Lord loves us at our best and at our worst. However, and in the final analysis, choices do have consequences.

In Deuteronomy 30:19, the Lord calls heaven and earth as a witness that the people have been offered life or death and a blessing or a curse. The Lord's desire was that they choose life so that they and their descendants might live. Joshua followed up years later with a similar invitation: "Choose today whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15). God's love and desire for the Israelites to go into that "wonderful land" (Deuteronomy 8:7) shows the nature of this stern commandment to them.

God wanted the best for Israel, and the best in terms of blessings would only come by obedience to the divine will. Later in this wilderness story, the Lord told the people, "Watch yourself! Don't forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commands" (Deuteronomy 8:11). God's insistent command comes from God's persistent and abiding love.

What would this wonderful land look like? First, it would be a land unlike Egypt, with its harsh realities; second, it would be a land that would belong to the people. Even though these Israelites would war for the land, nevertheless, the Lord gave them clear title to “take possession” of it (verse 1). There would be “wheat and barley, vines, fig trees, and pomegranates; . . . olive oil and honey” (verse 8). No wonder this was called the Promised Land, and the Lord called it “wonderful.”

And it gets even better! Verse 9 says that, in the Promised Land, the people would “eat food without any shortage.” This would be radically different from the rationed and controlled food distribution system given to slaves in Egypt. We can understand how this new and radically different lifestyle might be a cultural shock to some of the Israelites, thus causing them to forget God. Not only would this new land be plenteous in food (“You won’t lack a thing there,” verse 8), but there would be opportunity to create prosperity and wealth through the mining of iron and copper (verse 9).

God’s holy promise to these weary travelers was that they would be fully satisfied. Hence, the assumption is that, out of gratitude and love, these Israelites would “bless the LORD [their] God in the wonderful land” God had given them (verse 10). Unfortunately (and as history reveals), assuming is not always the best thing to do.

My hope and prayer is that we can see this wilderness story as more than just another episode in Israel’s history. This is our story! It is a picture wrapped in the artifacts of ancient Israel that symbolizes our modern-day journey through life. It is a picture of what the Lord has for the faithful.

Our final destination is good and is available to all who will stay on the journey (tired feet and all). Where are you in the picture? How did you do on the test?

Finally, our promise is wonderful! Our hope is sure! I encourage you to “put feet to the journey” during this upcoming week. Set aside a specific time during the day in which you will reread this story (including the background text) and listen to the sounds of God’s love over against the frailty and often rebelliousness of the human will. Don’t just learn the story, but seek to capture the spirit that comes through the story. It is love worth finding!

May we as disciples of Christ fix our eyes on Jesus and “run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us” (Hebrews 11:1-2).

Are the promises of God wonderful to you? If so, how might you share these promises with others?

Lord, may we always remember that we are your people and the sheep of your pasture. Help us to humbly embrace the wonderful plan you have for us; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

¹*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 593.

The Spiritual Practice of Study

The spiritual practice for these first four lessons calls us to renew our faith by becoming more intentional and serious about our study of the Bible.

Respectfully, my experience throughout the years has been that many Christians have favorite Scriptures they love to quote and read. Reading and studying the Bible at any level is better than not reading it at all. But the tragedy of only reading and studying in our favorite spots and places is that we often miss the context, and we may not get the complete picture of God's revelation to us.

Reading and studying leads us into thinking, reflecting, and meditating; and meditating on Scripture draws us into its truth. No wonder Paul advised, "Focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise" (Philippians 4:8).

We're never too old to learn something new from Scripture, and we're certainly never too old to be changed by it. And that is what happens to us when we move from simply learning Bible information to experiencing spiritual transformation. Spending time studying and meditating on God's Word results in radical changes in our lives.

On Saturday nights when I was a young child, my mother asked me, "Bob, have you studied your Sunday school lesson?" The unspoken question beneath her question was, "Bob, have you mastered the material and digested it to the point that you have grasped its truth?" Beyond merely learning and memorizing the material, my mother