

On the Threshold

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[0 : 00] Well, let's pray. God, our Father, speak to us from your word tonight, we pray, that we may believe it and obey it for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Well, the reviews and the predictions have begun. Looking back at 2006, the highlight of this aspect of life and society, the great business venture, the significant people who've died, the great sporting achievements and all that sort of stuff, the looking forward to 2007 and all the predictions, we stand on the threshold of a new year.

And inevitably, we do ponder, well, what lies ahead in the year to come? I wonder what resolutions you have made, if any. It might be never to make any more again.

The top ten resolutions, as Rod intimated also this morning on some website, include things like giving up eating or at least too much chocolate.

Not eating generally, but giving up eating too much chocolate. giving up drink, smoking. The last of those is fairly easy for me. People wanting to do more study, lose weight.

[1 : 29] That's the big one. It might be that your resolutions are to read the Bible more, to pray more, to be part of church more. And I guess at this time of year, we look back and we think, it's the same old failures.

And probably in 12 months' time, we might well say, well, it's the same old failures. All my New Year's resolutions came to naught, at least by the end of the year, if not even by the end of January. Looking back and learning is an important thing for Christians to do.

Just as is looking forward with anticipation and expectation and resolve. That's also important to do. And on those two scores, the looking back to learn and the looking forward with expectation, Deuteronomy is an important book to teach us with both those directions of thought.

For in Deuteronomy, the people of Israel, under the leadership of Moses, stand on the threshold, not of a new year particularly, but certainly of a new land, a promised land.

They stand on the threshold of fulfillment of promise. They stand on the threshold of moving from wilderness to their own secured land and inheritance. In Deuteronomy, there is a lot of looking back.

[2 : 40] Looking back not just to the year past, but indeed to the 40 years past, the wilderness 40 years, which began with the conquest of Egypt, or at least the deliverance from Egypt, the conquest of Pharaoh's army and Pharaoh's might and so on, again under the leadership of Moses, and looking back to seeing what had happened over those previous 40 years.

Indeed, Deuteronomy even looks back further because one of its constant refrains through the book is to look back to the promises that God made to Abraham, which is something like 600 years before Moses preached these words in Deuteronomy.

And all the looking back in Deuteronomy is for the sake of the looking forward, the going ahead, the stepping out into the promised land.

The looking back looks back to what God has done and to what Israel has and has not done with the aim of looking forward to what God will do and what perhaps this time Israel will also do.

How will Israel act in the future? The same as in the past? Typically badly? Or different from in the past? Moses recounts the previous threshold experience in this chapter.

[4 : 02] That is, 38 years before thereabouts, soon after the exodus from Egypt, Israel arrived at the threshold of the promised land. It was a few months after leaving Egypt.

The armies of Pharaoh had been swallowed up in the waters of the Red Sea after that sequence of plagues. They'd come a few weeks later to Mount Sinai where they stayed for some time receiving the laws with that great theophany of God at the top of the mountain, the cloud, the voice, the thunder, the lightning, and so on, the trumpets blaring.

They'd received there the Ten Commandments, all the other laws, the laws to do with sacrifices and morality and so on. They built the tabernacle under instruction from God. They conducted some sacrifices and then they'd moved on to the threshold of the land at a place called Kadesh Barnea on the southern border of Israel looking south to the Sinai Desert beyond which lay Egypt.

So in this chapter, Moses focuses back on that previous threshold experience when Israel stood on the verge of the promised land soon after, within a year or so, of coming out of Egypt but failed. It failed then to take the land. The land awaits its conquest. It was all there for it to walk in and take and that's how the reading tonight began.

[5 : 30] Verse 19 of chapter 1. Just as the Lord our God had ordered us, we set out from Horeba, another name for Mount Sinai, and went through all that great and terrible wilderness that you saw on the way to the hill country of the Amorites.

That is another name for the promised land, the land of Canaan until we reach Kadesh Barnea on the southern border of the land. I, that is Moses, said to you at that time, you've reached the hill country of the Amorites.

That is, you're on the border. You're about to conquer it. It's the land which the Lord our God is giving us. That is, walk in and receive the gift is behind that sort of terminology.

It's there for the taking. See, see, an important word actually, look, we'll come back to that, the Lord your God has given the land to you.

All you have to do is unwrap it virtually. Go up, take possession as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. Do not fear or be dismayed. Well, they're there.

[6 : 39] In effect, the lands there, the emphasis in those words of Moses to Israel 38 years before was, God's giving you this land. God's giving you this land. It's there.

It's the promised land. Take it. God gives it. He's promised it. But in the very next verse, we see the first signs of, at best, prevarication, at worst, unbelief.

All of you came to me and said, let us send men ahead of us to explore the land for us and bring back a report to us regarding the route by which we should go up and the cities we will come to. I am on lots of committees in my life and in my job and whenever they want a report, it's usually a sign of prevarication.

Not always. Sometimes reports are important. But usually it's somebody trying to sort of stall the process to delay the decision. They're trying to stop the decision being made against what they want.

[7 : 43] And that's in effect what Israel's doing here. Before we go, let's get a report. Let's get a second opinion. I mean, God's words to us have been go in and take the land. He's promised it. He's giving us.

Maybe we should just check it out. And even Moses thought this was a good idea. Maybe he's the chairman of the committee and he's trying to sort of keep everybody happy. But the plan in verse 23, he says, seem good to me and I selected 12 of you, a little subcommittee of the group, to go, one from each tribe, that is to keep them all happy, and to go into the land to get a report of the land.

Now, spun positively, we might say this is godly caution. That is, yes, we're just wanting to work out the best way of approaching the land to take the gift that God is giving us.

Maybe wise preparation, some might spin it. I would say it's none of that. The promise of the land is clear. The promise of God's gift is clear.

The promise of conquest is clear. It's clear from earlier on through the books preceding Deuteronomy and here in this chapter as well, that God is the one who will lead the people into the land.

[8 : 57] That comes up again later in today's passage in verse 30, the Lord your God who goes before you. So when they say in verse 22, let us send men ahead of us, it is actually a rejection of the leadership by God when he says, I will go ahead of you through the wilderness and into the land.

This is not godly caution and preparation. This is actually a statement of some rejection of God's leadership. It's actually an expression of fear and not faith.

You see, the threshold is a test of faith. Will Israel trust God's promises? Will Israel obey God's command?

It's actually the same question, flip side of the same coin. Trust and obedience go hand in hand. If Israel is to trust a promise, they will obey the command.

If they obey the command, that's an expression of the trust of a promise. On any threshold, it's a test of faith. On the threshold of a new year, will we trust God's promises in the year to come?

[10:13] Will we obey God's commands? Will God's word for us be sufficient to lead us to trust and obey him? That's the dilemma that Israel faced on the threshold of the land.

And Israel's doubt is further exposed in the verses that follow. The spies, as they're called, usually go out into the land and they bring back their report.

They go up into the hill country, verse 24 says, they come to the valley of Eshcol, which is roundabouts near Hebron, south of Jerusalem, which even today is a fairly lush land for grapes, among other things, and fruits.

And they gathered some of the land's produce, which they brought down to us. Here's the evidence, they say. They brought back a report and said, it is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us. Notice the two things there. God is giving it to us. It's a gift again. That idea, it's a gift, all you need is to do is accept it. But in addition to that, it's a good gift.

[11:21] It's a good land. Here is the evidence in the fruit that they've brought back from the valley of Eshcol to the rest of Israel standing at the border on the threshold. And the words that they say, it is a good land, are almost words that suggest, was there really any doubt?

God's already promised it would be a good land flowing with milk and honey, that sort of language goes way back into Exodus. Was there any doubt? The spies report is unequivocal.

We should go in and take the land. It's the high point of this little section. From now on, Israel in a sense beats retreat fairly strongly.

Their reaction in verse 26 as Moses recounts that episode was, you are unwilling to go up. not only unwilling, you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God.

You grumbled in your tents. Verse 27 at the beginning. Three ways of expressing their lack of faith. Unwilling, rebelled, grumbled.

[12:29] Verse 32 describing the same thing says you did not trust God. Again, it's the faith and obedience are the flip sides of the same coin. They didn't have faith, therefore they rebelled.

They rebelled, it shows that they didn't have faith. But see where the grumbling leads. See, we're often prone as Christians even to grumble like ancient Israel did.

Ancient Israel did it so persistently, but sometimes we're a little better. Grumbling's actually dangerous. And their grumbling is seriously dangerous. Verse 27 goes on to say you grumbled in your tents and said it is because the Lord hates us that he's brought us out of the land of Egypt to hand us over to the Amorites to destroy us.

You see, when we grumble we actually in a sense totally pervert the motives of God. A God who is supreme in love is here ascribed by a grumbling Israel to be a hater not a lover.

You see, if you grumble against what God does you end up impugning to God absolutely opposite motives of what God is actually on about.

[13:46] Far from seeing God as a God of love and gracious and generous provision through 40 years in the wilderness through the miracle of coming out of Exodus he just hates us.

beware the grumbler beware grumbling yourself against God even when things may not seem to go as well as you hope their grumbling has led them not only to unbelief but actually wrong belief the exact opposite of what God is on about.

God and that's expressed then in verse 28 where are we headed our kindred that is the spies from the 12 tribes have made our hearts melt by reporting the people are stronger and taller than we the cities are large and fortified up to heaven we actually saw they're the offspring of the Anakim a people reputed to be giants now if we're reading this for the first time we might say where does this come from the spies simply said it's a good land that the Lord our God is giving us have they just made this up well this whole episode is recounted back in the book of numbers there the spies said yes there are enemies in the land they are strong they are giants they're in fortified cities but it's still a good land that the Lord our God is giving us is in effect the package of the report by the spies how it's reported in Deuteronomy doesn't contradict that but the selection of material to show the spies report to be unequivocally good heightens the guilt of Israel the way it's told here in Deuteronomy chapter 1 it's true that the promised land was inhabited by strong nations more numerous than Israel in fortified cities some of whom were reputed to be giants that is all true the

opposition was in fact significant the point is that's no reason to chicken out it is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us is the bottom line of the report and yes the opposition is strong the Bible never ever downplays the opposition to God and his people but the strength of opposition serves merely to show the greater strength of God you think about the scriptures and how it portrays Satan the devil never as a weakling always with strength but the purpose of that is to make us realize even more clearly just how strong God is even in contrast to a powerful

Satan so the strength of the nations in the land is not underplayed it's not dismissed it's not like a football coach at three quarter time and says those guys out there they're wimps it's not like John Buchanan saying this English team are the worst to ever come out from England that is that actually doesn't show how good Australia is and in this case the opposition is strong the fact is that God is stronger and we'll see more of that on Wednesday night this week there's an interesting tension here too between faith and sight you see they have seen evidence of the land that the spies have brought back and their report of verse 8 that the people in the land who are fortified that does come ultimately from what the spies have seen in the land they've seen the opposition and we often think perhaps like they did that what you see is the test of ultimate reality but it isn't you see the bottom line is not not in a sense absolutely rational at that point or absolutely what you can see physically the bottom line is seeing with the eyes of faith go back to verse 21 see the

[17:52] Lord your God has given the land to you yes see the opposition sure it's there it's real but the ultimate reality is seen with the eyes of faith that this despite the opposition is a land that the Lord your God is giving you because God is stronger and more powerful and able to keep his promises you see reality is best perceived not rationally and by physical sight but through the eyes of faith that see God at work that's actually what the Bible is there for fundamentally is to help us have the eyes of faith to see the world truly as it is where God is at work where things are not simply explained rationally or scientifically but to see that God himself is powerful and at work and so in the end faith takes precedence over sight that is not that what you see physically is unimportant but faith puts it into the right perspective and the right framework yes there is opposition in the land and we've seen the good produce of the land but the big picture the big framework within which that sits comes through the eyes of faith this is a land that

God is giving us see the land that God is giving us verse 21 said it's the same principle at the end of John's gospel if you remember Thomas demanded to see fell down and worshiped Jesus when he saw the marks in his hands but as John wrote in his gospel blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed in 2007 what will you see in the world will you just see problems ill health economic difficulties debt failure sadness bereavement opposition hardships or will you see all of those in a framework in which nothing is impossible for God in which God is still working his promises out and still fulfilling his good purposes for you day by day week by week year by year well Moses goes on here to try and bolster Israel's faith verses 29 and following he said 38 years before to them and he's reminding them of it now have you no dread or fear of them rather have no dread or fear of them that is the opposition in the land for the

Lord your God who goes before you not the men who you want to go before you as reporters is the one who will fight for you just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes so even there their physical sight ought to have told them what their faith eyes should have told them and in the wilderness where you saw how the Lord your God carried you just as one carries a child all the way that you travelled until you reach this place that is look back and learn and see with the eyes of faith what God has done in his mighty act of bringing you out of Egypt in his gracious provision through 40 years in the wilderness see with the eyes of faith you see faith in God is not blind faith it's not faith that just dismisses what you can see physically at all faith in God is not a jump or leap in the dark either faith in God is always based on solid evidence the scriptures is basically an evidential book for us so that we have faith in God who acts so consistently and faithfully so look back to the victory over

Egypt look back to the 40 years of provision in the wilderness the trouble is that without faith you're actually blind to reality people think that Christian faith is blindness to reality it's the opposite that's true the lack of faith means that you've got such fear that you're blind to the reality that God is more powerful than the opposition in the land and that was Israel's problem verse 32 in spite of this you had no trust in the Lord your God who goes before you on the way to seek out a place for you to camp in fire by night and in the cloud by day to show you the route that you must take fear has overcome there's no faith and thus they are blind to what God has done is doing and will do now

don't think that God treats lightly a lack of faith punishment awaited Israel for this a severe punishment they were condemned to 40 years in the wilderness as verses 34 to 36 made clear not one of these not one of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your ancestors right you've rejected the spies report you're out you're not taking the land that's a severe punishment condemnation to the wilderness now even Moses verse 37 tells us was refused entry into the land as well but the punishment is limited you see if the punishment was right the gates to the land are closed forever and you will forever walk in the wilderness

God's promises would have crumbled into nothing the punishment is limited this generation shall not see the land that includes Moses only Caleb and Joshua shall see the land verses 38 and 39 make clear the next generation shall enter with them that is God's promises still stand but punishment is real and indeed severe what it tells us is that Israel's sinfulness persistent though it was does not cancel out or annul the faithfulness of God ultimately of course that's why in the end Jesus came when Paul argues in Romans 1 to 3 about the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ beginning of chapter 3 he raises the dilemma does then the sinfulness of humanity really cancel out the faithfulness of God not at all that's why

[24 : 12] God ultimately sent Jesus so God's faithfulness is not under threat even by human sinfulness and faithlessness well sin stubbornness is nowhere more seen than in the last paragraph of Deuteronomy chapter 1 having been told no you're not going to enter the land they say oh we confess we've sinned verse 41 it's the only confession of sin in the book we're ready to go up we're going to go let's go up we get let's fight and God says tell them God said to Moses tell them don't go I'm not going to be with you but they still go they don't understand obedience to God they don't understand faith in God's promises they've missed their chance and now it's too late and their vainglorious attack on the land is actually in vain as the last verses of this chapter make clear they're soundly defeated they're beaten back in retreat back to the wilderness and out of the land see we can't presume upon

God's time upon God God's timing in a sense and that's what they were trying to do they thought oh if God wants us to go let's go now I'm not going God says victory will only come if God goes all of this so far in Deuteronomy 1 is a rehearsal of what had happened 38 years before the people who were listening to Moses speak these words they knew this story they're not at Kaddish Baneer on the southern border they're around the corner north of the Dead Sea in the plains of Moab on the south eastern border of the promised land they've had their 40 years in the wilderness and now they're back on the threshold and Moses is speaking now to the next generation and reminding them of the previous threshold experience and failure of the parents of those to whom he speaks they know the story some of them would have been children then others born since the story would have been known he's not telling them for their information he's telling them to inculcate faith and trust in God's promises so that they obey his commands will they make the same mistakes as their parents why should we think otherwise or will they murmur and grumble will they disobey and rebel you and I know how hard it is to keep our resolutions whether it's a new year's resolution or any other promise that we make whether it's to give up chocolate to exercise more to take a regular day off in a week to read more of the bible to pray more to be more disciplined and dedicated all those sorts of pledges and promises and vows that I make periodically they keep crumbling down and I can make them all again tonight and think well why should I think in 12 months time I'll stand on the edge of another year and look back and say

I've kept all my new year's resolutions for a change why will this generation now succeed where their parents failed faith or fear is a way of summarizing the options the dilemma the crossroads in effect of standing on the threshold for ancient Israel or even for us at the start of a new year a fear of all that lies ahead a fear of failure fear of hardships health decline or opposition or is it faith that in the midst of all of those difficulties that may or may not arise we have an unswerving faith in a God of gracious provision a God who's abundantly able to keep all his promises and more a God who's able to do the impossible and more than we can imagine don't be fooled into thinking that rational sight is the best observer of reality you see the thing is God is active

God is working in our world as he was then so is he now in one sense God often works in unseen ways not in flashy miracle ways the miracles of the exodus and of Jesus are actually in one sense rare compared to the normal ways in which God works through the scriptures faith in God's promises is the best observer of reality faith in a God who is active in the world faith you see are the right glasses that we need to observe the world as it really is faith that God's word is powerful to

save us faith that Jesus death is sufficient atonement for our sins faith that forgiveness is real faith that Jesus really is coming again and soon faith that God will judge and therefore vengeance is his and not ours faith that obedience is worth the effort and worth the cost and indeed worth the risk that's what faith's about

Israel's faith under Joshua successor to Moses was no easy journey of course you read the book of Joshua at one level it looks as though they just sort of walked in and everything fell down around them but the opposition was significant the wilderness years were times of deprivation faith requires risks at least in inverted commas risks and courage faith drives out fear faith means that we take obedient and trusting steps in discipleship of God faith will mean that we're counter cultural because our culture sees without the eyes of faith faith is prepared to count the cost of discipleship faith is prepared to shun the fleeting pleasures of sin how do we strengthen that faith how might we expect this next generation to whom

[30 : 24] Deuteronomy is addressed to be different from their predecessors what's going to change it for them it's not going to be the power of positive thinking in their heads it's not going to be always look on the bright side endless mindless songs it's not going to be some sort of blind happy optimism how do we strengthen faith so that it issues in obedience in our lives God's the simple and sufficient answer is God's word so Deuteronomy shows us how Moses addresses the next generation to instill in them faith that leads to obedience to conquer the land and the one thing that will do that if anything is God's word to them you see Deuteronomy is itself of course

God's word but the point I'm saying is that how Moses preaches to the new generation of Israel is that he preaches to them God's word from the preceding books in effect he preaches to them the promises of Abraham he preaches to them the books of Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers in effect that is he reminds them of God's word so that might take root in their lives and so that they will see with the eyes of faith you see Deuteronomy is steeped in reference back to God's words and promises and we'll see more of that again on Wednesday night this week you see in effect Deuteronomy exhorts us to meditate on God's word day and night without actually saying that explicitly we find it in Psalm 1 and Joshua 1 that's in effect where Deuteronomy is driving us to that if we are to have the faith and obedience required we're to meditate on God's word for it's God's word alone that will strengthen us the faith to see reality as it really is how firm a foundation you people of God is laid for your faith in his excellent word what more can he say than to you he has said to you who to Jesus for refuge have fled Amen