

Keeping Promises

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Date: 25 August 1996

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[0 : 00] This is the first sermon in the Deuteronomy series. The title is Keeping Promises. Your word will take deep root in our lives and bear much fruit for your glory.

Amen. I think you'll find it helpful to have open Deuteronomy chapter 1 and because I'll be referring to it a lot, pages 137 and following.

It's very easy these days to hear motivational messages and inspirational addresses. Football coaches at three-quarter time urging their players to pick up and do better than they've been doing. Imagine what John Northey said to Brisbane last night at three-quarter time. Parents to their children before their exams, encouraging them. Bosses to their employees before a sales launch. And even many Christian books and sermons. And they have in common, very often, statements like this. You can do it. Believe in yourself.

[1 : 20] And you can do it. Be positive. And you can win or pass or do whatever you set out to do. Interkab Alam, the Pakistan cricket coach a couple of years ago, said you have to believe in your own ability.

Now if ever there was a need for a pep talk, then the situation facing Israel in Deuteronomy is it. And if ever you want to know about Christian motivation and encouragement, then Deuteronomy is a fine example.

Israel is on the threshold of the promised land. Forty years ago it left Egypt, through those miracles with Pharaoh, crossed through the Red Sea, spent forty years in the wilderness, and has come now to the edge of the promised land that God promised to Israel.

Indeed, promised to Abraham five hundred years beforehand. They are overlooking the land. From this spot, which is in modern-day Jordan, what's called in the Bible the plains of Moab, you can look across to the city of Jericho, across the Jordan River, at the north end of the Dead Sea.

I've been there, I can see in, most days are pretty hazy, you can't see all that Moses saw. But on a clear day you can see to the very northern extreme of the nation of Israel, to Mount Hermon, snow-covered most of the year, south beyond the Dead Sea to the Negev Desert.

[2 : 46] There Israel was anticipating crossing the Jordan River and entering the promised land. It faced three problems. It faced the problem that the towns in that land were heavily fortified, were walled.

It faced the problem that the people living in the land were at least reputed to be giants, tall, ferocious people. And it faced the problem that Moses, their leader, who had led them for the last forty-plus years, was about to die.

Indeed, in the last chapter of this book, we read about his death in the plains of Moab on the top of Mount Nebo. So Israel is about to enter a fortified country, country inhabited by giants, without their leader Moses.

The odds are stacked heavily against Israel. What sort of pep talk is Moses going to give them before he dies? What sort of motivation and inspiration can he convey to them in this, his last hours, and in Israel's critical time?

Believe in your own ability? You can do it? Think positively and you'll achieve what you set out to do? No. In fact, he starts with the opposite.

[4 : 03] Because the bulk of chapter one is given over to recalling an incident in their recent past when they didn't succeed, but rather they failed and failed badly.

The incident is in chapter one, verses 19 onwards, page 138. Israel, in that situation, was on the verge of the promised land.

Not in the same spot, but rather in the south of the nation, in the desert area. But there they failed, and failed badly. And here, trying to motivate the people, indeed, Moses doesn't talk about their

success, but their failure.

Then, verse 19, just as the Lord our God had ordered us, we set out from Horeb, that's Mount Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were given. We went through all that great and terrible wilderness that you saw on the way to the hill country of the Amorites until we reached Kadesh Baniya.

That's where they were 40 years before, and that was on the edge of the promised land. I said to you, you have reached the hill country of the Amorites, that's the land that God promised, which the Lord our God is giving us.

[5 : 11] See, the Lord your God has given the land to you. Go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. Do not fear, or be dismayed. But what happened?

Israel chickened out. Verse 22, 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'll come to.

They chickened out. They wanted to send spies into the land to check out this land. Indeed, what's lost in this translation, but is in the older translation, is the word again. They want word again of how they're going to conquer the land.

You see, God had already given them their instructions. God had already told them where they were going and what they were to do. God had already told them that he would give this land to them. But they doubt his word. They don't take it at its value.

They want some other word to tell them about this land. They failed to take God at his word. They failed to trust what God had already told them. They failed to recognize that God's word is sufficient.

[6 : 20] It doesn't need anything in addition, but is sufficient. As we shall sing later on, 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 for refuge to Jesus have fled? They failed to trust God's word.

And so verse 23, Moses is duped by this. He selects 12 people and sends them in. They went up into the country. They went to the valley of Eshkol, a very fertile vineyard area around Hebron.

They came back with some of the produce of the land in verse 25. And they came and brought a report. It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us. Well, of course it's a good land because God had said it.

But the spies went in and they found out that God's word was actually true. And yet, what happened? But, verse 26, you were unwilling to go up.

[7 : 21] Despite God's word, they were unwilling. And despite the spies' report reinforcing God's word, they were unwilling. You rebelled against the command of the Lord, your God.

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. They doubt God's word and where they end up is doubting God's motives and actually attributing to God the opposite of what is true.

You see where doubting God's word ends up? The opposite of truth. They said that God hates us. What an awful thing to say about a loving God who'd sustained them for 40 years in the wilderness. But they said it because they doubted God's word and it led to them expressing the opposite of truth to stating falsehood about Almighty God. Verse 28, where are we headed?

Our kindred 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 there the offspring of the Anarchy, that is the giants who lived in the land.

[8 : 29] There is their fear. Their fear at the fortified cities and their fear at the giants. They doubted God's word. They in the end ignored it and were afraid.

Moses reassures them in verses 29 to 31. Have no dread or fear of them. The Lord your God who goes before you, he is the one who'll fight for you just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes 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.

But, in spite of all of that, verse 32, you have no trust in the Lord your God. Despite all that encouragement, they fail to enter the land.

God had given them his word, they failed to accept that. The spies had given a report, they failed to accept that. Moses had re-insured them and encouraged them and exhorted them and they failed to heed that.

And they did not trust in God. In essence, what Israel failed to do was they failed to obey and they failed to trust.

[9 : 38] Trust and obey are the opposite sides of the one coin, really. We cannot obey God without trust and we cannot trust him without obeying. It would be nonsense for Israel to say we trust God and sit in the plains of Moab waiting for the land to arrive.

If they were trusting God, they would have to enter and fight and that is to obey. But they would have been fools if they obeyed without trust because who would walk into a fortified country to take it, fearing loss, if they didn't actually trust God's promise.

Trust and obedience go together and they are what God wants of us. He gives us his promises and calls us to trust them and he gives us his commands and calls us to obey them.

And the two fit together like a hand in a glove, the commands and the promises of God and the faith and obedience which he demands of his people. And Israel failed to trust and failed to obey.

That was all in the past. That was 40 years before. Now the question is will Israel act differently?

And Moses preaches the sermon of Deuteronomy to ensure that they do.

[10 : 48] All of what he says in chapters 1 to 3 recounts their immediate history. He doesn't give it to them as a history lesson. He doesn't say now I want you to know what's happened in the past.

They know, they were there.

This is not trying to find out in history books what happened a long time ago. This is the recent past. What's happening is that Moses is selecting a few incidents to make a point.

God is faithful and able to bring you into the land and give it to you. Trust him. Let me illustrate how Moses is doing that.

In the passage that Maureen read for us from chapter 1 verse 6 onwards. Moses is underlining the fact that the land they're about to enter is the land that God promised. So notice in verse 8 See, I have set the land before you go in and take possession of the land what land?

The land that I swore to your ancestors to Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob to give to them and to their descendants after them. This is not any old land it's a land that God promised 500 years before Moses that he would give to the descendants of Abraham.

[11 : 57] That's who Moses and the Israelites are the descendants of Abraham. God has promised this promise. It may have been 500 years ago but the promise still stands. God's timing is so much different to ours.

So often we want God's promises to be fulfilled now if not yesterday. Well this promise was still being fulfilled 500 years later. Maybe sometimes we should be a touch more patient and come back in the year 2496 and see what promises of God are fulfilled if we could.

But notice also what Moses goes on to say in verses 9 and 10. At that time I said to you I'm unable by myself to bear you that's because the nation was big and Moses was the only leader and he says the Lord your God in verse 10 has multiplied you so that today you are as numerous as the stars of heaven.

Now that's a quote. The people of Israel would have known where that came from. My guess is sadly that most of us don't. We don't know our Old Testaments well enough. But it's a quote from Genesis chapter 15 the first book of the Bible.

In Genesis 15 God promises Abram two things. One is the land and the other is descendants because Abram and Sarah didn't have any children and God promised them that they nonetheless would have many descendants as numerous as the stars in the heaven.

[13 : 19] Moses is saying look that promise is already fulfilled. Look and see that you are already as numerous as the stars in the heaven. And the implication is that if God's kept that bit of his promise to Abraham he's going to keep the promise about land as well because God is a God who keeps his promises.

May take 500 years but God is faithful. Trust him. And so part of that promise to Abraham is already fulfilled. So trust him that the rest will be fulfilled as well.

And then in the passage that we've looked at already the second half of chapter 1 about Israel's great failure their failure didn't mean an end to their history. It did mean 40 years in the wilderness and it did mean that the adults of that generation died out in the wilderness.

But God's promises still stood. So in verse 39 of chapter 1 the promise of God still stands despite Israel's failure and sin.

God's faithfulness is greater than Israel's faithlessness. Now how important that is for us as a message to us. for we all fail God and we all fail God regularly.

[14:47] But God is faithful despite us. God's promises stand despite our failure to trust and obey. God's promises are far bigger than our failure.

Our failure will not nullify the promises of God. That's a paraphrase of what Paul says in Romans 3. Can the faithlessness of God's people nullify God's promises?

Not at all Paul says. God is faithful to the end. And even though Israel fails and fails so badly here in chapter 1 God nonetheless sustains them and keeps them and his promises stand to the end.

Yes God takes our sins seriously but his faithfulness and mercy and grace endure forever. What an encouragement that is to us when we fail God to know that God's promises still stand for us today. Then when we move into chapter 2 of Deuteronomy Moses continues to recount the past history of what's happened. It's a strange history lesson really this one.

[16:03] He deals with five nations Edom, Moab, Ammon, Sion and Og. For the first three Edom, Moab and Ammon in the first half of chapter 2 they were three nations that inhabited around the south end of the Dead Sea and Israel was to pass by their land not to fight those nations just to pass by.

And the reason that's given in chapter 2 here is because God had given those three nations their land and a little expression is used in chapter 2 to indicate how God's done that.

in verse 5 he says to Israel that you're not to fight against Edom because I've given Mount Seir to Esau that's talking about their territory to Edom as a possession at the end of verse 5.

When he moves on to talk about Moab the same sort of thing don't harass Moab or engage them in battle for I'll not give you any of its land as a possession since I've given our as a possession to the land of Moab the end of verse 9.

Same in verse 19 talking now about the Ammonites I'll not give the land of the Ammonites to you as a possession because I've given it to the descendants of Lot as a possession is there in the original Hebrew.

[17:13] But the point of saying all that is that the land that God is going to give Israel will be given to Israel as a possession. Verse 12 expresses that. So Moses' point here is saying that God had already given land to Edom to Moab and to Ammon and he's prevented you from fighting against them in the same way he's going to give you land.

Trust him. He's done it for those three so you can trust him that he's going to do it for you as well. Trust him. But there's more to it than that because in the first half of chapter 2 we get a list of odd groups of people.

Just look at verse 20 for example. Maureen will be grateful I didn't ask her to read these verses. It also is usually reckoned as a land of Rephaim. Rephaim formally inhabited it though the Ammonites called them Zamzanim a strong and numerous people as tall as the Anakim.

And it goes on. Verses 10 to 12 are the same sorts of things. Why do we need to know all this detail about who lived in these lands before? The answer because there were giants in those lands before.

The land that God's given Edom Moab and Ammon were formerly inhabited by giants. But God got rid of them and gave those three countries their land. Now the point of that is to address Israel's fear that I've already mentioned in chapter 1.

[18:41] They were afraid to go into the land because in the land were giants. Moses is saying God can deal with giants. He's done it for Edom. He's done it for Moab. He's done it for Ammon.

And he'll do it for you. So trust him. Trust him. He's done it in the past and he'll do it for you in the future as well. Trust him.

There are two reasons why we might believe somebody's promise to us. If I were to promise you that I would meet you at midday at such and such a place you might believe my promise. and you might believe my promise in part because you might think I'm a reliable person and I'm always on time and I'll be on time. Sadly I'm not as on time as I should be. But you might think that I'm reliable and therefore you'll believe what I say.

But if I were to promise you perfect health for the rest of your life until you live to be 99 and I was a very reliable person you wouldn't believe that promise.

[19:46] Not because I'm not reliable but because I'm not able to keep that promise. I can't give anyone perfect health. So you see to believe somebody's promise you actually have to believe two

things about it.

One is that whoever makes the promise is a reliable person and whoever makes the promise is able to keep that promise. Reliability without ability doesn't give us enough grounds for trusting the promise.

Likewise ability without reliability doesn't give us enough grounds to believe the promise. Now Moses recognizes that and in this chapter in these three chapters at the beginning of the book he's addressing that and saying that God is both reliable and able.

So trust him. He's kept his promise already about some other aspects of the promise. He's reliable. He's faithful. So trust him. And he's able to get rid of the giants. And he's able to give you the land. So trust him as well. The other two nations that are mentioned after Edom, Moab and Ammon in the second half of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 are kingdoms ruled by two characters called Sion and Og.

[20 : 52] This time Israel was not to just pass them by they were to defeat them and they did. The point of it is not that Israel had great ability or power or skill but rather that God gave them the victory.

So as just one example to illustrate the point in chapter 2 verse 33 at the bottom of page 139 talking about the defeat of Sion the Lord our God gave him over to us.

It's not talking about Israel's might and power or Israel's brilliance of strategy or anything else it's talking about the fact that God gave them the victory. So you see it's not a self-centered or Israel-centered motivation it's a God-centered motivation.

God gave them the victory. And what a victory it was because Sion and Og are both described as nations that were fortified. Nations that had walls around their cities and moreover nations that involved giants as well for Og if you read chapter 3 verse 11 who's the most odd person was 13 and a half foot tall well his bed was 13 and a half foot tall pretty tall giant I guess but he was defeated because God was able to do that.

Moses is addressing Israel and saying God is powerful and God is reliable and you can trust him trust him.

[22 : 13] Let me finish. this sermon of Moses is not some sort of self-thinking power of positive thinking type motivational message or inspirational address that you hear coaches give or parents to their children or bosses to their salesmen or something like that.

This is God-centered motivation for Israel is a failure and yet in the midst of its failure the faithfulness and power of God is most evident.

God can be trusted and Moses draws Israel's attention to their immediate past to show them just how much God can be trusted how he's been working for them keeping his promises from the past to Abraham how he's got power to bring about the fulfillment of his promises God is powerful and reliable Moses keeps saying so trust him that's why you're to cross the land that's why you're to enter it that's why you're to fight against the inhabitants not because you're powerful not because you're good because you're a failure but God is more powerful and God can be trusted and he's made promises and he keeps his promises there is not a promise of God that will not be fulfilled in its own time so trust him and the same for us today we're not called to go into some land with swords and fight God's promises to us are quite different from that but nonetheless his promises to us stand and he calls us to trust and obey in response to them what sort of things does God promise us he promises to love us every day trust that promise today and tomorrow and the next day he promises to forgive us and to accept us by his grace not by what we do but by his grace and generosity to us so trust that promise don't work as if you have to achieve your salvation with God trust him that he gives it to you by grace trust him

God promises that Jesus' death is big enough for the sins of the world for your sin the worst sin that you could do can be forgiven through Jesus' death on the cross trust him because he's faithful and powerful to forgive through the death of Jesus on the cross don't carry around the guilt of sins that you've committed don't think that you've got to do something to compensate for your failure trust God's promise that in Jesus' death he forgives you entirely God promises that he'll be with us every day of our life he will never forsake us or abandon us trust his promise on the days when you feel that God is far from you trust him that he's with you because he promises that he's with you it's not that when we feel he's absent he is he's with us always my spirit is with you to the end of the age God has given us a spirit of timidity of power not timidity a spirit of boldness and love trust him trust that spirit has been given to you so exercise boldness rather than timidity in your Christian life

God promises that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ trust that promise trust that whatever situation you face is not big enough to separate you from the love of Christ trust God for he's keeping his promise God promises that he is one day going to make you perfect in his sight holy and blameless that's a promise that I find for myself almost impossible to believe sometimes as I look at myself I wonder how on earth that promise will ever be fulfilled but God will because he's faithful and powerful and one day he'll keep that promise and change me into a perfect likeness of Christ as he will do for you as well trust him every day for that promise God promises that history is coming to its conclusion when Jesus comes again and that God will reign over all things it's hard to believe that promise when you read the papers each day it's hard to believe that promise most days of our lives and yet it's true that God rules and one day his son will return and bring all things under him as its head so trust that promise live towards that goal that God will fulfill he promised that two thousand years ago and it's yet to come fulfillment but that doesn't mean it's not happening because God is faithful and reliable and will keep his promise and it may take another two thousand years or it may take another two million years but God will keep his promise because he's faithful reliable and able to do so so trust him it's sometimes hard to trust God

[27 : 14] Israel experienced that difficulty and Moses addresses their attention to the character and the acts of God what God had done for them in their past and why and the same for us as Christian people that's why we need to keep going back to the Bible to see what God has done for us in Jesus Christ's death on the cross and in his resurrection from the dead and why he's done it and to remind ourselves that God is faithful reliable and powerful so trust him as we're about to sing great is his faithfulness every day it may not look as though God is powerful and faithful as it did for Israel but he is and we can trust him for great is his faithfulness let's express our trust and our joy in God as we sing that hymn 260 great is your faithfulness

O God my Father