

Rejoicing in God's Gifts

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 01] We're continuing a sermon series on the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, and if you want to follow the passage, it's on page 158 in the Bibles in the pews. When Captain Cook landed at Botany Bay, he hoisted the Union flag.

And for every day that the Endeavour was in the bay, the Union flag flew over Botany Bay, claiming the land for George III and England. When the United Nations arrives in a country, it hoists its flag. When the Pope arrives in a country, he kisses the ground. Whether explorers or kings or leaders or armies, when they arrive in a land, some claim for the land is made.

In 1400 BC, the country or the people of Israel arrived in a new land. The book of Deuteronomy is their sort of charge just before they cross the Jordan River to arrive in that land.

Moses had led them for 40 years out of Egypt through the wilderness to this point. He's about to die. And Joshua will succeed him as the leader of the people.

[1 : 12] In this chapter in Deuteronomy, the instructions are given for what Israel is to do once it arrives in the land. A ceremony is to be performed.

But it's not a ceremony to claim the land. It's not a ceremony to say this is ours by right. Or to say that this is ours by might.

Because we've conquered the land, we own it. Nor is it a ceremony to say this is a land we deserve because of our goodness or something else.

But rather, it's a ceremony to acknowledge that the land is a gift from God. So in verse 3, the Israelites are to say, Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.

The land is fundamentally a gift. And the ceremony that is to be performed when Israel crosses the Jordan and arrives in the land is first and foremost an acknowledgement that God has given the land.

[2 : 22] And in the passage that was read, that's a major theme. In verse 1, when you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you. Verse 2, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

And again in verse 3, as I've just read, you've come into the land which the Lord swore to give to you. And then in verse 9, the end of the passage, And he brought us into this place and gave us this land.

Verse 10, so now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me. And verse 11, then you together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

God is a giving God. God gives the land that Israel is about to conquer. Fundamental to this ceremony is that it is God who gives.

Not Israel who earns. Not Israel who conquers. Not Israel who deserves. But God who gives the land. For God is a giving God.

[3 : 37] So it undercuts any statement of pride or boastfulness that the Israelites could have. They don't deserve the land, but it is God who's given it to them.

For God is a giving God. If you were to go to Israel today, you might wonder what the fuss is about such a land. It's full of rocks.

Much of it is very barren. Hardly sustains anything. Most of us would have seen pictures of the desolate hills around Jerusalem, where the Bedouins just eke out a poverty-stricken existence. Hardly any plants or trees. But archaeologists tell us that in ancient times, in Old Testament times, Israel was indeed much more fertile than it is today.

Very forested. Lots of greenery. Lots of fruit-producing trees and vines and so on. In part, the climate's changed. In part, also, it's a result of so many wars that the trees have been chopped down.

[4 : 44] And the land has become desolate. Deuteronomy, here and in other places in the Old Testament, describes this land as a land flowing with milk and honey.

A good land. Milk that would come from goats, mainly. Honey that would come not only from bees, but probably more commonly from fruit. A sort of nectar or syrup from fruit trees.

Before the days of sugar, that was their way of sweetening their foods. But milk and honey became a metaphor for fertility and all the good things. Today, I suppose, if we were to describe a land in such ways, we'd say it's a land full of Big Macs and chocolate.

Or something like that. It's certainly a land of abundance. We've already seen in earlier sermons how it's a land where the cities are already there. The cisterns are already cut out of the rock.

The vines are already planted and bearing fruit. The houses are already built. It's all laid on. This is indeed a fantastic land. God, you see, is not just a giver, but a generous giver.

[5 : 52] He's giving the best to the people of Israel. But even more than that, he's not just a giver, and he's not just a generous giver, but he's a faithful giver as well.

For the land that God is giving to Israel is the land that he had promised to give 600 years before to a person called Abraham, the ancestor of the people of Israel.

God, in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, said to Abraham that I will give you a land. And now, 600 years or so later, Abraham's well dead.

His child Isaac is dead. Grandson Jacob is dead. All his great-grandsons are dead. Generations later, now God is fulfilling that promise. So in that statement in verse 3 that the Israelites were to make as a sort of solemn declaration, Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give.

Not just any old land, but it's God who keeps his promises. That's the declaration that's being made here. God is faithful. It may have been 600 years since he promised, but he hasn't forgotten.

[7 : 10] And he's kept that promise. And he's brought them to the land. For God is faithful and reliable. He can be trusted. We often get impatient with God when he doesn't seem to answer our prayers.

Maybe we should wait 600 years or so and see which prayers have indeed been answered. The same sort of theme comes in verse 5. Verses 5 to 9 is sort of like a little creed.

A statement of Israel's faith. And they were to recite this, it seems, at this ceremony when they'd entered the land. A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.

Referring to Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. He spent much of his life in Aram, which is modern Syria. There he worked for his uncle Laban in order to get his wife and crops.

20 years he worked there. That's him. He didn't ever really settle in the land. He ended up in Egypt, as it goes on to say, and there he died. He went down to Egypt, because of a famine it was, and lived there as an alien.

[8 : 13] The last chapters of the book of Genesis describe that. Few in number. But there he became a great nation, mighty and prosperous, or populous.

And the book of Genesis shows that. For God had promised Abraham not just a land, but a multitude of descendants. When Jacob, his grandson, went into the land, there were 70 of them. Jacob and his family, children, wives of sons, and so on. 70 is hardly a fulfillment of a promise that the descendants of Jacob would be a vast nation.

But if you read on into the book of Exodus, we see how that promise was kept by God. For in Egypt, Israel prospered. And they grew and they multiplied, and they became a great nation.

And God had kept that aspect of the promise. He promised a great descendants, and it's done. And the same with the land that is about to be conquered by Israel.

[9 : 13] So it goes on to say, when the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors.

Not just to any God, but they cried to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because Israel knew the promises that God had made. So they cried out to God, who'd made those promises.

And in effect, called him to account to keep his promises. And what happened? God heard our voice. And saw our affliction.

Our toil. And our oppression. It's not just that God heard them because he had good hearing.

But he heard them because they appealed to his promises that he'd made. And God knew that he had more of those promises to fulfill.

[10:14] And he kept his promise. And he heard the prayer. And he brought the descendants of Jacob, the descendants of Abraham, out of Egypt, under the leadership of Moses, to the edge of the promised land.

That's where we're at here in Deuteronomy 26. Just before they cross into the land. This statement about the ceremony is anticipating the faithfulness of God.

God keeps his promises. He's a faithful and reliable God. And all of Israel's past history up to this point is God keeping promises.

And all of Israel's history subsequent to this point, through the rest of the Old Testament, is God keeping his promises. And all of the history of the New Testament, of Jesus and his death and resurrection, and the disciples and the spread of the gospel, is God keeping his promises to Abraham.

And indeed we can say the same for the 2,000 years of history since Jesus. That God is keeping his promises. That he made to Abraham 4,000 years ago.

[11:24] And one day, we will be able to see that all of them are fulfilled. But there's even more to be said about this God.

Not only is he a giver, not only is he a generous giver and a faithful giver, but also this passage stresses exactly which God is being worshipped in this ceremony.

When Israel would enter the land, they would be confronted by nations who worshipped all sorts of other gods. By and large, as we've seen in recent weeks, they were gods who were to do with fertility, producing crops and animals and children.

The temptation would be that when Israel entered the land, they would say that it's the gods of the Canaanites in the land. They are called the Baals, who provide all these crops.

But this ceremony is making it very clear that it's not those gods, but it is the God they know by the name of Yahweh or Jehovah, the name of God in the Old Testament, that has done all this.

[12:29] For that God is the God who has made promises, who has rescued his people, who is sovereign over history and sovereign over nature as well.

That is the God whom Israel is to worship when they enter the land. God who is generous, God who gives, God who is faithful, and the God who has revealed himself to Abraham, to Moses, to Israel, through their history, guiding them, bringing them into a land, providing them with abundance.

It's that God and no other that has done all this. And they are to worship him and no other. That's the God that lies behind this ceremony that Israel is to perform when it enters the land.

But what is Israel specifically to do? It is to offer first fruits of the produce of the land. When they get into the land, verse 2, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.

You shall go to the priest who is in office at the time and say to him, Today I declare to the Lord your God that I've come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us. When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, then you shall make that following statement.

[14:11] They've come with a sample of all the produce of the land. Later Jewish scholars suggested that it should be about a 60th of the produce.

I've no idea why they thought it should be a 60th. But it seems to be a bit of all the produce of the land. The idea of this ceremony, at least on the surface, is that it's a once-off event.

It's to mark the settlement of the land. But probably it became an annual event. The offering of first fruits every year as a mark of gratitude to God.

Later in Israel's history, in order to remember which was the actual first bit of grain that ripened, they would tie a cord or a blade of grass around that little bit of grain so that as the others ripened, they would know which one was the first.

But possibly the suggestion is also it's not just the first, but it's the best. The word can mean the same or either of those two things. It's the first or the best that Israel is to offer to God.

[15:19] Not the surplus. Not what's left over after their eating and their parties. Not what they don't really want anymore. Not what's left in their wallet on a Sunday morning.

But rather the first or the best. And that I think is a great challenge to us about our response and giving to God. Some people say that oh I can't really give God much because I'm really still a child. I'll give when I become an adult. But when they become an adult they say well I can't really give much because I'm putting down the mortgage on our house. I'll give in ten years time.

But ten years time they're paying for the children's education so we'll give in ten more years time. But in ten years time they're saving up for their daughter's weddings or the children's tertiary education. Or topping up their super.

Oh I'll give in ten years time. And in ten years time they're really saving hard for retirement or that post-retirement trip. And I'll give in ten years time but of course by then they're retired and their income's lower.

[16:24] And I really can't afford to give much to God at all. Well maybe that's a bit of a parody but it's a bit like how many of us I think give to God. What's left over at the end.

Or I'll give in the future when I've saved up enough to guarantee my future. But Israel's giving was to be the first and the best. And indeed if they were to take the first of their produce and indeed the first of their animals and offer it to God they could well do so before the rest of the crop has even ripened.

It's a great statement of faith. It's not a statement of well my future's guaranteed therefore I can afford to give some to God. but if you go and offer the first of your fruits or the first of your crops or the first of your animals before the rest has been born or ripened it's a great statement that God will provide what you need.

But much of us many of us are sort of trying to make sure that our future is guaranteed and certain which actually means we deprive ourselves of exercising faith and trust in God.

giving to God generally is to be a first priority not what's left over at the end but the first and the best because God is so good and indeed the first fruits is not just a little bit that's given because the first fruit is an implication of the rest it's a sort of representative of the rest if you like and to give the first fruits as an offering to God is in effect to say that all of it comes from God and all of it belongs to God and even though I might use the rest of it for myself or my family or whatever it is God's and I'm indebted to him for it and I'll use it for his glory and live for his glory.

[18:22] That's fairly demanding giving I think. That's a fairly challenging attitude for us to have that we give the first and the best as a statement of faith and trust as well as a statement of gratitude to God.

But Israel was commanded to do it because they owned their past history. It wasn't what happened to our ancestors or people in the past but it happened to us and so the creedal statement beginning in verse 5 begins talking in the third person about a wandering Aramean was Jacob my father and so on.

But when you get to the next verse it's the Egyptians who treated us harshly. It's not the Egyptians who treated our parents harshly which was the real case but in effect they treated us harshly because the salvation that God had brought the previous generation and previous generations is really the salvation that God brings us as well.

So for us as Christians we can say that Jesus died for us though we weren't even there 2,000 years ago we own our history when we say Jesus died for me for us.

He didn't just die for people 2,000 years ago he didn't just die for our ancestors but he died for us. We own the past. We own the history.

[19:50] It's a very strong thread in Deuteronomy that the current generation being addressed identify themselves in the events of the past. What God has done for us is far greater than he did for Israel.

the inheritance that Israel had was this land that they were entering a bountiful land but the inheritance that God promises us who are Christians is an inheritance which can never spoil or perish or fade and it's kept in heaven for us.

The land that Israel had was a geographical entity land. But the land that God calls us to is a heavenly land an eternal land a perfect land and it is ours already by faith in Christ.

The redemption that Israel had was a redemption from slavery in Egypt but the redemption which is ours is from sin and it's forever. the redemption which is ours comes through Jesus' death not the plagues that Moses brought to the parting of the Red Sea but through the death of Jesus on a cross 2,000 years ago.

That's our redemption. That's our forgiveness of sins. That's our reconciliation with God. That's our adoption into God's family as his children. All the benefits of Jesus' death are ours.

[21 : 29] Far, far greater than anything that God had done for Israel is what God in his grace and generosity does for us through Jesus' death on the cross.

Sometimes I think we thank God for the small things and we forget these big things. A few years ago at Christmas when my niece was two, she got a whole range of Christmas presents and a couple of big major presents.

But the one that took her interest on Christmas Day was a little teapot. Nothing much really. And all Christmas Day she'd walk around to me and her parents and my mother and my sister offering us pretend cups of tea.

And I've never drunk so many pretend cups of tea in my life. But this little present was the thing that brought her enormous delight and pleasure. More than any of the expensive or the big presents. It was just this little teapot. Some of us I think thank God for the little things but forget the really big things.

[22 : 41] We thank God for our wealth and our health, for holidays, for healing. There are lots and lots of good things to give God thanks for. And it's right that we do.

Don't get me wrong on that. God for God for us. But fundamental to it all is what God has blessed us through Jesus' death on the cross.

Remember those words from my first sermon in this parish. church. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love, he destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. If these benefits of Jesus' death do not stir your heart to joy, then think again about your standing before God.

[24 : 02] If the story of Jesus' death does not move you in your inner being to gratitude for God, then think again about your standing before God.

Israel was to celebrate all the great blessings of God with joy and celebration. The passage ends in verse 11, Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Celebration and joy was to be a mark of the people of God in gratitude for all of God's blessings. And those that are ours in Christ are even greater. So surely our celebration and our joy must be greater even than Israel's.

Grateful giving is grounded in grace, the grace of God. God's grace of God is to be a part of the God's grace of God. But there is nothing that we can offer God that can repay adequately all that God has done for us.

We shall always be in his debt. Even the first fruits of our lives are too small. For love so amazing, so divine, demands our souls, our lives, our all.

[25 : 26] Amen. Amen. Thank you.