

A Stiff-Necked People

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[0 : 0 0] this is the fourth sermon in the deuteronomy series and the title is a stiff-necked people find it helpful to have in front of you the passage from deuteronomy 9 and that's page 145 in the black bibles in front of you we're preaching through this book of the old testament called deuteronomy and this is about the fourth week that we're looking at this and i shall pray before we start our father god we pray that you will open our hearts to receive your word we pray that we will not be stubborn or stiff-necked as israel was but rather have open and welcome hearts for you and your word for jesus sake amen most of us like to see justice done most of us get annoyed or angry if people get away with things and don't get punished for wrong doing we cry out if somebody gets off lightly somebody goes to court and is found guilty of some offense where we're annoyed and irritated to say the least if they get off lightly we don't like it when people get away with doing things wrong we don't like it when somebody gets something for nothing we don't like it when people are doll bludgers and bludge off the system and get social security benefits in exchange for no interest in doing any work we think it's not fair and indeed it isn't and we want people to have justice we want justice to be done and we want god to be a just god we want a god who is fair and just who will reward the good and punish the bad we want a god who will be consistent in his fairness and justice so we know where we stand with him we know that if we do do wrong will be punished and we want justice so long as we are in the right for nobody who's not in the right wants justice but when we call out for justice and cry out for justice and when we get annoyed that people get away with things that are wrong it's because we think that we are in the right you may have heard or seen the musical les miserables javert is the policeman who's chasing the escaped convict who's come good valjean javert sings out in the dark a fugitive running fallen from grace god be my witness i never shall yield till we come face to face he has his way in the dark but mine is the way of the lord those who follow the path of the righteous shall have their reward and if they fall as lucifer fell then the flame and the sword and so it has been and so it is written on the doorways to paradise that those who falter and those who fall must pay the price javert has a strong sense of justice that those whose way is in the dark they will find punishment but those whose way is the way of the lord will have their reward he had a very strong view of a god who was a god of justice then he couldn't cope with the fact that valjean changed from being a convict to being a good man before his own suicide javert the policeman saying damned if i'll live in the debt of a thief damned if i'll yield at the end of the chase i am the law and the law is not mocked i shall spit his pity right back in his face shall his sins be forgiven can his crimes be reprieved you see if we end up with a god who is just just that is only just we end up with a god who mechanically gives reward for good and punishment for bad

we end up with a god who is a stern father or an impassionate judge and that's a very common view of god either in front of that god we are forever guilty or we are forever self-righteous you see what's lacking in that picture of god is a god of mercy as well and most of us find the justice of god by itself intimidating and so we not only want god to be a god of justice but we also want god to be a god of mercy as well and yet it's very hard in our minds to bring the two together how do mercy and justice fit together so often they're described as though they're pulling god apart that mercy is pulling this way and justice is pushing that way and yet god is both a god of justice and a god of mercy and he's not schizophrenic the trouble is when we hold together mercy and justice in god is that we become unsure about how god will respond to us where do i stand with god will i receive his justice or will i receive his mercy and for some of us we think that that's an issue of chance but as we'll see in this passage it's a false dichotomy for god is consistently merciful and consistently just and fair and that consistency of mercy and justice lies at the very heart of god himself in the passage that was read for us from deuteronomy the scene is uh the by the side of the river jordan in modern day jordan overlooking the land of israel the people of israel are being led by moses it's about 1400 bc they've spent 40 years in the desert wilderness and now they're on the verge of entering the promised land that great promise of god that has stood for 600 years is about to be realized when the people cross the river in order for israel to take this promised land the nations who live there need to be defeated and logically that says those nations are wicked we must be good that's the logic of ancient warfare that those who are defeated are defeated because they're wicked and those who are victorious demonstrate their righteousness in their victory certainly moses emphasizes the fact that the nations in the land are wicked so at the end of verse 4 when the lord your god thrust them out before you don't say it's because of your righteousness that the lord has brought me in to occupy this land it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the lord is dispossessing them before you yes those nations are wicked but the logic does not follow that israel the people of god are righteous indeed the end of verse 6 says the opposite for you are a stubborn people literally stiff-necked people that is people who cannot be pushed around or will not yield to the yoke to the guidance of god the image comes from an oxen on a farm and the farmer with a yoke will steer the oxen to do the work in the appropriate place and to be stubborn or stiff-necked is to refuse to yield to the pressure of the yoke and israel is like that with god it is refusing to yield to the direction that god is giving it israel is stubborn indeed it is no better than the nations in the land so why then is israel being given this land if it's as bad as the other nations why isn't it going to be destroyed along with those other nations why should israel receive favored

treatment from god the end of verse 5 moses says that this is happening in order to fulfill the promise that the lord made on oath to your ancestors to abraham to isaac and to jacob god is keeping a promise he made a promise to abraham 2000 bc that he would give to abraham's descendants this land now 600 years later the descendants of abraham that is the people of god or israel are on the verge of the land and about to enter it god is keeping his promise it's not because israel warrants the land or because they're good or righteous or have done anything to merit it at all but rather purely because god is keeping a promise and when god makes a promise he keeps it this is not a statement of neat justice israel is good therefore it's rewarded with the land the nations are bad therefore they're punished the latter is true but the former is not and it illustrates one of the most important principles in the bible that god does not treat us as we deserve psalm 103 for example says that very thing god does not treat us as we deserve for none of us deserves god's good things none of us is righteous in god's sight earlier in deuteronomy we saw two weeks ago this summary statement of what god wants from people love the lord your god with all your heart and soul and strength and love your neighbor is yourself and in the face of that standard none of us is righteous all of us fail because god's standard is perfect so none of us deserves the good things that god wants to give us sometimes we think of the christian faith as being like a bring and share lunch that we bring along something and god brings along something and you put it together and you end up with christian faith and salvation but the truth is that god provides it all he sends the invitation he prepares the meal we don't actually contribute to it at all it's all of god that's what the christian faith is like we contribute nothing because we cannot provide anything that merits our salvation it's all from god and it's ours even though we don't deserve it moses goes on in this passage to demonstrate very clearly that the people of god israel does not deserve this land that they're about to enter verse 7 at the bottom of that page 145 remember and do not forget how you provoked the lord your god to wrath in the wilderness you have been rebellious against the lord from the day you came out of the land of egypt until you came to this place not just occasionally but consistently and persistently for 40 years israel has rebelled against god and then in verse 8 even at horeb you provoke the lord to wrath and the lord was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you horeb is another name for mount sinai mount sinai is the place where the ten commandments were given mount sinai is the place where god himself came down to the mountain in the midst of fire and cloud and thunder and all of israel heard his voice there and there only in the bible did all of israel hear the voice of god on mount sinai it is the high point of the old testament it is the place where above all other places in the old testament god comes to his people and speaks to them and you'd think that there of all places israel would obey god you would think

that there of all places israel would trust god and respond to him but no moises says in verse 8 even at horeb even at the place where god revealed himself and spoke aloud to you and gave you the ten commandments and so on even there you rebelled against god it's an allusion back to an incident that's recorded in the book of exodus where the israelites who are on the mountain make a golden calf an image of a like a little cow made out of gold molten down and they put it up and they bowed down and worshipped it an act of blatant and deliberate sin idolatry is the worst sin in the bible and this was idolatry at the place where god himself had revealed himself above any other place it is not only the worst sin but it comes at the most insignificant time in israel's history you imagine that you've just got married and you go in to a side room let's say to collect your marriage certificate the ink is not dry you pick it up you walk out and you find your new spouse embracing or having it off with someone else that's the horror of israel's sin here that's the horror of it it's not as though it's years and years down the track it's not as though they got tempted or allured by something else but at the very point where they established this unique relationship with god and the tablets that are mentioned in the passage are like the marriage certificate there israel went after other gods it's horrible and offensive it is not only the worst sin but it happens at the most intimate place of israel's relationship with god which doubles its horror it is the worst sin in the old testament and god was angry with israel doesn't mean that he hated them anger does not mean hate the wrath of god doesn't mean hate but the wrath of god is god's holiness expressed he is ready to destroy israel because they have rebelled against him and done so so seriously and god is very angry the words for wrath and anger in verses 7 and 8 of quite rare words in hebrew they denote especially strong anger on the part of god it is hard to imagine a worse sin and it is hard to imagine god being more angry for he is ready to destroy his own people the end of verse 8 moises had gone up the mountain he'd received on little tablets of stone probably only as big as his hand not like those great big things that we sometimes see drawings of two copies of the ten commandments just like in a marriage certificate one couple keeps a copy and the church keeps a copy two copies of the ten commandments one for god one for israel but they're actually kept together moises comes down the mountain with them because god sends him down verse 12 god said to me get up go down quickly from here for your people whom you've brought out of egypt have acted corruptly they've been quick to turn from the way that i commanded them they've cast an image for themselves they haven't waited long they've been quick to do it it's only a matter of days since they heard god's voice that's how serious is their sin notice that god says to moises go down quickly from here for your people whom you have brought from egypt have acted corruptly everywhere else in the bible virtually god says these are my people but he says here moises they're your people

i don't want to have anything to do with them they're yours take them get out of my sight is in effect what god is saying to mooses verse 14 he repeats the threat to destroy them let me alone that i may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven that's the wrath of god against this rebellious people yes they've just been brought through the wilderness and through the exodus through the red sea they've been saved miraculously all those things god has done count for nothing he's about to destroy them because of their making this golden calf mooses goes down the mountain in verse 15 he saw what they'd done in verse 16 and he took the two tablets of the ten commandments and in verse 17 he smashed them it's like tearing up the wedding certificate and throwing it to the wind mooses has destroyed the ten commandments as a demonstration of the end of the relationship between god and israel and this is not an isolated incident it's the worst of israel's sin but it's not isolated down in verse 22 mooses lists a few places where israel also has sinned in the wilderness tabara was a place in numbers 11 the book of numbers the preceding book of the old testament where israel complained about their misfortunes massah was a place in exodus 17 where israel complained at the lack of water kibroth hatavah was a place in numbers 11 where they rejected the manna from heaven that god had given every day to keep them alive and they said we want meat and then at kadesh barnea in verse 23 that was the place we saw a few weeks ago where israel rebelled against god when they refused to go into the land and they sent spies instead and then chickened out time and time again israel has rebelled against god so verse 24 you have been rebellious against the lord as long as he has known you that's a pretty damning indictment about the people of god and there are no grounds for self-righteousness there remember that this is the people that is that god has just said at the beginning of the chapter i'm about to give you this land it's hardly a good people it's hardly a righteous people they're no worse than the nations they're about to go into go into dispossess in the land look at all the things they've done there are no grounds for self-righteousness on the part of god's people and yet god persevered with them his justice did not come to them he did not destroy them why in verses 25 to 29 the last paragraph of the chapter mooses prays it's one of the most striking prayers in the bible and if you want to learn how to pray for the people of god this is a good example mooses prays for god's mercy knowing the full depth of israel's sin he makes no excuses he doesn't put up any mediating factors he doesn't say to god oh look god they're not very good give them another chance they'll do better next time he doesn't say to god look they're very sorry for what they've done they're not he doesn't say they've repented for their sin for they haven't he doesn't say give them another chance because they will improve they won't it is a simple plea for mercy and the grounds of his prayer are to do with god and not israel they're to do with god's character his purposes his work and his honour so he says in verse 26 lord god do not destroy the people who are your very own possession whom you redeemed in your greatness whom you brought out of egypt with a mighty hand notice the emphasis on what he's saying there god they're not my people

[20 : 05] they're your people save your people this is what you have done for your people they belong to you not to me moses is passing them back to god and he says to god that you have redeemed them you've brought them out of egypt you've saved them from their slavery in egypt so why let them die now god may your redemption for them not be in vain important point to pray for people that christ's death for them will not be in vain when we pray for christian people but then he appeals to the promise to abraham in verse 27 remember your servants abraham isaac and jacob that's appealing back to the promise that i mentioned back in verse 5 god is giving them the land because of his promise god is keeping his promise and so moses prayer is saying to god god keep your promise yes there are unrighteous people yes there are rebellious people yes they're sinful yes they don't deserve the land but you promised it so keep your promise is in effect what god moses is saying in this prayer and the last thing he says in the prayer is in verse 28 otherwise the egyptians that is the land from which you've brought us might say because the lord was not able to bring them to the land that he promised them and because he hated them he's brought them that's israel out to die in the wilderness the last part of his prayer is about the honor of god if israel were destroyed as indeed they warranted because they were sinful the egyptians would mock god their god is not powerful to do what he said he'd do their god doesn't love them he hates them and so moses says for the sake of the honor of god forgive your people and keep your promise god stakes his reputation on his people and when we fail him others mock god it's fairly common for people to say why should i believe in god look at the church and what a failure it is that's god being mocked because we fail him and moses prays an extraordinary thing is that god changes his mind and he doesn't destroy them and indeed he forgives them and the beginning of chapter 10 talks about moses going back up the mountain and getting two new tablets of stone a new marriage certificate if you like and the relationship is resumed not because israel repents not because it does better not because of anything to do with israel at all but purely because god is a god of mercy as well as justice and justice severe was the threat of god to punish israel so also is the mercy of god that deep that he's prepared to forgive the worst sin of the old testament the sin of idolatry at mount sinai how great then is god's mercy to his people who fail him this is extraordinary mercy of god there is absolutely no reason why israel deserves god to forgive it at all and yet he does because that's the character of god what then of the justice of god where is that is it that god is just merciful and always forgiving and doesn't really care what we do well no it's not because god remains just and merciful and it's not till we get to the new testament that we see quite how they fit together even though it's apparent here that god is just and merciful the key that holds them together comes in the new testament in jesus christ justice yes because jesus died for the sins of the world that's god's justice for sin

deserves punishment mercy yes because jesus died so that we don't have to jesus died so that we can be forgiven and that's mercy and that's justice and the two go together because of jesus christ mercy and justice are perfectly in harmony in the cross of christ at calvary it was a high price to pay for mercy the death of god's own son and it's a great salvation which jesus death brings to those who are forgiven and we don't deserve it at all but it's ours because of god's mercy let's pray our great and merciful god we thank you that you forgive us for all our sins even though we don't deserve it even though we're rebellious and even though we fail your perfect standards father help us never to forget your mercy to us in the death of your son amen