

The Desert's Classroom

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[0 : 00] Well, right then, we are looking at the book of Deuteronomy over the next month or two. And the book is basically three sermons that Moses preached.

And he's preaching to the people of God who, you know, after wandering for 40 years in the desert, are just about to enter the promised land. So God, he speaks through Moses and he says to his people, he says, I bought your ancestors out of Egypt, out of slavery.

And your parents didn't listen to me, which is why you were there for 40 years in the desert. And now I'm speaking to you, this next generation, and I'm speaking to you. And what you do with my words will make things go well for you or badly for you.

So that's the big context. Let's zoom in a little bit. So tonight we're specifically looking at Deuteronomy chapter 8. So this is partway through Moses' second sermon.

And in this section of the sermon, Moses does two things. He looks back. He looks back at what happened in the desert and he looks forward to the promised land.

[1 : 16] So he looks back at what happened in the desert and he looks forward to the promised land. And his basic message is this. He says, if you forget the lessons of the desert, things are going to go sideways for you in the promised land.

If you forget the desert, what you learned, it's going to go badly for you in the promised land. So that's the story of this part of Moses' sermon. Let's dig into the details.

So we'll start with Moses telling his people to look back to the lessons of the desert. So deserts are interesting places. I mean, but there's nothing really there, right?

I mean, there's nothing there. There's no food. There's no shelter. There's no water. You can't sort of just stop and, you know, homestead, you know, set up a house and, you know, start a garden. And like it's, it's like searing heat during the day, freezing cold at night. Maybe like eight o'clock in the morning, it's really pleasant. But apart from that, it's just terrible.

[2 : 15] Like it's terrible. It's terrible there. I mean, you could say it like this. You could say a desert is a place where you cannot survive without outside help.

You can't survive there without outside help, which is exactly why God put them there. So why were they there for 40 years? Look at verse 2. Verse 2. Testing to know what's in your heart.

God says, do you realize that in the desert you were in a classroom? You're in a classroom and I taught you a couple of things there. You know, the big one was this. I taught you to trust me.

And God did that by removing all of life's props, all of life's supports, all the things we normally rely in and trust on were taken from them.

So all they had was God. So in the desert, self-sufficiency was not an option for them. They existed in this place for 40 years where everything they had was from God.

[3 : 27] You know, God would just speak their needs into being manna from heaven, water from rocks. God was central to every aspect of their life.

And they had to learn this lesson, that God was central to every aspect of their life before they went to the promised land. So they wouldn't just push God off to the side when they got there.

So the desert was a place of testing for God's people. And God still tests us today, doesn't he? God sometimes puts us in deep water.

So we learn to swim. We learn to swim. Perhaps this is what the whole COVID crisis is doing for you. And this is going to sound very harsh, but for some of us, the crisis is...

It's like the shallowness of our trust in God is being exposed by this pandemic. The shallowness of our trust in him is being exposed.

[4 : 30] And this is a good thing. It's God's plan to bring that kind of stuff to the service so our faith will mature. And it doesn't feel like it, but this is how God loves us. He does it because he loves us.

He puts us in deep water because he cares. Remember, just remember early on in the Gospels, the stories of Jesus. After he was baptized, God spoke from heaven and said, This is my son in whom I'm well pleased.

Remember that, right? Like it was really lovely. It was this beautiful moment. And then what's the next thing that happens? Straight to the desert. Straight to the desert.

I love you, son. I'm so happy with you. Now straight to the desert. The Father sends Christ to the desert to be tempted by the devil.

So, you know, Jesus went out into the wilderness to... What was he doing there? He was cultivating humility. He was being tested. And actually in his test, you probably picked up on this.

[5 : 32] In his test, he actually quotes a passage from Deuteronomy 8, the man doesn't live by bread alone part. So what am I trying to say here? I'm just saying don't resent these difficult times in your life.

Don't... This will sound odd, but don't waste your pain. Ask the Holy Spirit to expose what's going on in here. Bring it to the service so your faith can mature.

Now, let's keep going. Have a look at verses 7 to 10 there. So after looking backwards at the lessons of the desert, Moses looks forwards.

Verses 7 to 10. It's really lovely. It says, Doesn't that sound great.

So after 40 years in the desert, that would have sounded amazing to these wandering people. And they're probably thinking this is brilliant. The test is over.

[6 : 43] We can put up our feet now. We can just live it up. But that's not really what Moses is saying here, is he? Yes, the promised land will be incredible. Be amazing. But it will also be a place of testing.

So what is the test? Well, let me read a couple of verses from later in Moses' sermon. Verse 17. So the great temptation of the promised land is taking credit for all the good things.

But it's more than that. It's God saying, it's God's people saying, This place is great. And it's great because of me. I did it.

It's for us like today. It's like saying in our hearts, My career success, My academic success, My relational savvy, My family, My abilities, My talents.

It's all me. It all comes down to me. And I deserve it all. Folks, the truth God reminds us of here is that, Just a couple of examples.

[8 : 09] If you're good with money, It's the Lord that gave you that ability. If you can sing or you have tremendous talents or you're financially secure or whatever it is, It's the Lord.

It's the Lord gave you those things. You know, It's a great temptation to put ourselves at the center of our success. So back to the passage.

Moses warns his people. He says, The test is coming. You're about to enter the promised land. It's just over the river there, Just over the river Jordan. And he says, You're about to enter into a whole lot of prosperity.

You didn't earn it. You didn't manufacture it. It's a gift from God. It's a gift from me. It's interesting, this lesson, isn't it?

That prosperity doesn't automatically lead to gratitude in God. It can actually lead you to push God off into the margins.

[9 : 10] I mean, think about this in relation to COVID-19. So at the moment, perhaps, perhaps at the moment, You're going through this really difficult time. And as a result, you know, maybe for the first time in a really, really long time, You're pressing into Jesus.

And you're learning to trust Him more than you have in a long time. And you're really deepening, you know, you're deepening this relationship. And it's wonderful.

But a few months, a few months into the future, And the restrictions lift. Life looks really good again. Your career gets back on track.

Money starts coming in. And your attention is taken away from Jesus. You begin to drift. Using the language of this chapter, you forget what happened in the desert.

You forget the lessons of the desert. Where God tried to teach His people, I am your good, good Father. And I will provide you everything you need.

[10 : 16] And I should be at the center of your life. But, you know, man, when the immediate reality starts to become more pleasant, We can forget those lessons.

We can forget those truths. And God can sort of fade. Just sort of fade out. This is just a, you know, this is a constant danger for Western Christians, I think. So what do we do about all this?

What's the antidote to sort of drifting during times of prosperity? Well, in the passage, Moses sort of maps out the drift.

He shows us how it happens. And there's kind of a sequence. It starts with forgetting. Forgetting is mentioned a lot in this passage. It starts with forgetting, right?

Forgetting. And that results in presumption. We see that. That's the sort of like all the stuff I've got, all the abilities, all this prosperity. It's all me. It's all me.

[11:12] It came down to me. I deserve it all, right? So forgetting leads to presumption.

Presumption leads to idolatry. That's in verse 19. You forget the Lord your God and go after the other gods.

It's the next thing that happens after presumption. And after that is spiritual death. So if the root problem is forgetting, then the antidote is remembering.

Now, this is important. Just a detail here. What does the passage mean about forgetting and remembering? What do those two words actually mean?

Well, when God's people forgot about God, it's not like they couldn't remember God. It's not like they couldn't remember the things God has done for them. It's not like you'd say to them, how about that Exodus?

And they'd be like, Exodus what? What? I'm not sure what you're talking about. No, they know this stuff. It's more like the memory of the Exodus, for example, has no impact on their life right now.

[12:13] It doesn't change how they live. That's what it means when it talks about forgetting. On the other hand, remembering is not just recalling. And the passage keeps talking about remember, remember, remember.

It's not just recalling something. It's a living memory informing us how we live and feel now. That's biblical remembering.

So, for example, we can recall the cross. Oh, this thing happened. You know, the cross happened. Or we can remember the cross. And when we remember it well, we know, for example, shame has no place in the life of a Christian.

That's biblical remembering. Just to dig a little bit deeper here for a moment before we finish. This is why the passage so closely connects obedience with remembering.

I don't know if you picked that up. It links obedience with remembering. See, when we have a living memory of what God has done, that's like this engine room in our hearts.

[13:15] It's the drive to live in a way which pleases God. So, in the passage, obedience is like the litmus test for knowing if you're properly remembering what the Lord has done in your life.

Let me finish. Let me finish by just saying this. Obedience does not come naturally to us. It's a daily battle. So, every day, remember what Christ has done for you.

And then consider how you will live that day. And cast yourself on Jesus every day, knowing that he forgives when you don't remember well.

Ask for his help each day. Amen. Amen.