

Milestones

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[0 : 00] Well, now you could call Deuteronomy 26 Milestones. It's about two annual festivals all the people of God in Israel have to go to the central sanctuary for.

And it's the final words of Moses in his second big sermon, as the people of God are on the edge of entering the promised land. And chapter 26 takes us inside two celebrations that happened in that central sanctuary.

The annual feast of weeks, which we call Pentecost, and then the tithe festival, the special tithe festival. So you give tithe a tenth every year, but every three years there's a special festival where you give a tenth of all you have and all your grain to those who are marginalised and those who are hungry in your local town.

And then you go down to the central sanctuary and there you have a feast together before God. Now, in both these festivals, when you come before God, God gives words to say, a fixed liturgy that they have to speak and repeat in the presence of God.

So I want to go at it this way. I want you to imagine that you are a boy named Zach living in Israel 85 years after the book of Deuteronomy. So five years on from last week, if you were with us then.

[1 : 30] You're nearly 18 and you still live on a farm now with eight uncles and aunts and nine younger brothers and sisters and too many cousins to count and three grandparents and assorted sheep, goats, dogs, chickens and various things.

And on the farm, there is a growing number of people who just seem to have latched onto the farm and started to live on the farm. They help out, including Uncle Amenhop from Egypt, who's now brought his whole extended family from Egypt to be with him.

And his two twin daughters, who you now think are absolutely beautiful, no longer tease you, but you wish they would. And two years ago, your mother died.

And during that year, you didn't go up to the festivals in the sanctuary. Last year you did, but it was different. Your father just didn't seem to be the same. And the boys from the tribe of Reuben called you juvenile for raiding their tents.

And it's the Shabbat meal before you leave to go to the sanctuary for the Pentecost feast, where you offer your first fruits.

[2 : 42] And you're all ready, but you don't really want to go. As the 18-year-old Zach, you don't want to go. And you're sitting around the table with everyone there. And you say to your father, Father, I have some questions.

Can I ask questions? And everybody around the table shakes their heads and looks to the sky. And uh-oh, say the cousins. Your father raises his hand and he says, Son, ask.

He says, Dad, I've got three questions. Question number one. Do I have to go? I don't get anything out of it. And your father looks at you strangely.

Zach continues, I mean, why do you even say that liturgy? It's so old. I mean, that liturgy doesn't have anything to do about the fruits or the harvest. And when the Levites sing it, it's the tunes are so boring.

I mean, I can understand why we take the first fruits, although I know they're the best of the veggies and they're the best of the fruit. And we have a bang up feast with everyone. That's great. And I know it's God who gave us the land and the rain and the crops.

[3 : 45] I can understand the first part of the liturgy where you say that God gave us the land. But it's the second part, the long history lesson. It just leaves me cold. You say this, Deuteronomy 26, 5 to 7.

You say, a wandering Aramean was my father. When he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number. Then he became a great nation, great, mighty and populous. And the

Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid in us hard labor. And we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers. The Lord heard our voice, saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression. Come on, Dad. It's the same every year. I know it by heart. It's tedious. It's dreary. I get nothing out of it. Can I stay home? And your father looks to the ground. He's quiet for a long moment. Then he shakes his head and he says, My son, the question is not what you get out of it.

The question is what God gets out of it. The question when we gather at the sanctuary is not what you want. It's what God wants. And he's commanded us to go.

[4 : 52] It's not about what you like or don't like. It's not about your preferences. It's what God desires. And, Zach, if you stopped and listened for just a moment, the words are astonishing. They tell us who we are.

You know that as your mother lay dying, you heard us. Each night we used to sing two songs to each other, the Shema from chapter 6 and these words, the words that I'm going to say next week at the sanctuary.

Because it's not just about food. It's about our story. I mean, this harvest, this first fruit is a window into God's love and into his goodness. He set his love on us and he saved us and he's made us a precious people.

And when I say those words in the presence of God, they connect you and me to Abraham and to your mother and to all of God's people who've ever lived.

They're a deep assurance to me that she's in the hands of Yahweh. And as I say the words, I become part of the story. My words kind of put flesh on what is invisible and real.

[5 : 55] And when I sing them, I'm in tune with God and all his people. And one day you will say them, Zach, perhaps when you get married. And Zach says, I'm not getting married, Dad, for a very long time. And the cousins burst out laughing and the twins look indignant.

Son, these last two years have been tough. Yes, says Zach, I know. His father says, the words of the liturgy are very honest about our suffering and difficulty.

But what they do is they flip our difficulties on their head so we see how God works even through our difficulties, not just when things are going well but when things are at their hardest. You see, you think about a wandering Aramean.

Wandering is not just lost. The word you know means he's dying. He's got no life in him. He's homeless. He's got no hope. It just makes the work of God more wonderful. I mean, when Father Abraham was way beyond having children before God called him.

Now look at us. And when famine struck and Jacob's family had to go down to Egypt and over time, Egypt made us slaves with terrible suffering.

[7 : 04] What do the words say? God used Egypt and our suffering as a sort of an incubator and we became a great people. And it was there he showed his love by rescuing us.

He brought us out to bring us in. You know the song. And only in the last line do I say, and behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground which you, O Lord, have given me. And then I fall on my face and I worship Yahweh.

Okay, says Zach. If that's so, it raises my second question. You know, at the end of the third year tithe, which we're going up to later in the year, why then do you have to get up and talk about yourself so much?

Remember what you have to say in Deuteronomy 26 verse 13? It's all about you. You say, I have removed the sacred portion out of my house. I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless.

I have not transgressed, nor have I forgotten them. I have not eaten of the tithe while I was in mourning or removed any of it while I was unclean. I have obeyed the voice of the Lord my God.

[8 : 07] I have done. It's all about you, Dad. I mean, it just sounds a bit braggish, a bit boastful. I mean, doesn't God see everything? I mean, why does he need us to say these words?

And Zach's father laughs and he says, yes, it is all about me and what I've done. And that's what I love about it. Because God doesn't treat me as a piece of dirt. He gives us all, you know, the great dignity of taking our choices very seriously.

And at Pentecost, the words were all about him. But in the third year of the tithe, the words were all about us. Honestly, son, I don't always know what is in my heart.

But when I say these words out loud before God, before the face of God, I inhabit these words. And I come to know who I am before God. It is a form of accountability.

It's not braggy. You know, Zach, when your mother died, I was in a complete mess. For a whole year, I gave no offerings to God. I didn't go to anything. I tried to put aside a tenth of all I had that year.

[9 : 14] I just couldn't do it. Oh, I remember that, Dad. Yeah, I felt pretty miserable about it. And I went to see Lemuel, the local Levite. And this is what he said.

First, he reminded me of the name of God he'd given Moses, a God who is overflowing in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving all our sins right through the family. And then, you know what he said to me?

Oh, he said, you think God can't forgive you? You should hear what I did last year and he's forgiven me. And then he told me something he'd done last year and I was greatly surprised.

And then he explained holiness to me. I've believed Yahweh and I've followed him all my life, but I never knew this. You know, I knew we were a holy people who worshipped a holy God and we go to a holy place to worship him.

But apart from having something to do with God, I didn't have a clue what holiness really was. In the first line in that tithe speech, I say this, I have removed the holy portion out of my house.

[10 : 16] What makes it holy is not that I set it aside. It's that I set it aside for a special use, for a function, for a purpose.

And when I freely give that to the Lord, somehow it's caught up in the Lord's holiness. It joins his holiness. I'm just amazed by that. It's not just that those gifts are used to bless others for food and for feasting.

It's by the promise of God, he transforms, he changed my gift into something holy. And this year, son, you're going to give a number of sheep out of your tithe.

And those sheep are a means of holiness. And this year, you're going to say the words before the Lord. You will tell him who you are. And the Lord will look down from his holy dwelling place from heaven.

And he will smile. Father says, do I have time for one more? His father says, I'm on a roll. Go for it. So here is my third question, Dan.

[11 : 18] You and mother used to keep a small box, which you called your segula, your treasured possession. And I've asked you about this every year.

What's in that box? And you said, I had to wait until I became a man. Now I am a man. And the cousins laugh, but he ignores them. Dad, what is in that special box?

And his father smiles. He says, that's a good question. It's a good time to ask. Your mother's great, great grandfather was in the generation that came out of Egypt.

And when they camped at Mount Sinai, he reckons that he worked out which bush was the burning bush that Yahweh had appeared to Moses in.

So he snuck out and he took a little branch and some of the leaves and put it inside a special box. And that box has come down your mother's line. And your mother always believed it was part of the burning bush.

[12 : 19] I don't think it was. I don't think there's any truth to it. However, when I married your mother, it was her most treasured possession. It was her segula.

And it's probably just some dried old leaves now. Okay, Dad, you say, can I see inside? No, you can't. Oh, Dad, no, no. I promised your mother I would give it to whoever you married.

That's why you've got to get a move on, Zach. Ah, Dad. Then why is it such a good time to ask the question? It's a good time, Zach, because when you come with me this year and offer your portion of the first fruit to God and you say the words, you will declare that the Lord is your God and you will hear these words of God declaring that we are a people of his treasured possession.

We are God's segula. And who knows? Perhaps you might meet a nice young woman at the sanctuary who's willing to marry you because I need grandchildren, son.

That's Deuteronomy 26. And we just have time for two quick lessons at the end of it. The first is a lesson on worship. The passage teaches us that our view of worship is almost the opposite of God's.

[13 : 45] And what I'm going to say now, I know is going to cut against the grain and you may not be able to receive this. Worship is not something put on for us.

It's not something we attend and then we judge by whether we got anything out of it or not. You know, how was worship? Well, I got a lot out of it. I haven't been getting anything out of it the last few months.

Worship is not about what you like or do not like. It's about what pleases God. It's about obeying God's commandments.

It's about doing what he desires. And I think we're almost... It's almost... We're so self-centred we can't see it. Now, to be fair, there are some gatherings just thrown together that are not helpful. They're not focused on Christ. They're hard to understand. But we're all consummate consumers and we're very individualistic. And the idea that my personal preferences is irrelevant in worship is deeply offensive to my pride.

[14:50] But what if it really does not matter to God what kind of music you like? God commands us to bow before him and worship, to gather with his people, to call on his name, to be altogether joyful before him.

It's not the role of liturgy to make you joyful. It's your role to make worship joyful. Do you know in chapter 28, when God warns his people that he will evict Israel from the land, one of the key reasons is their lack of joy and their lack of gladness of heart?

Have a look at chapter 28, verse 47. He says, Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies.

The question is never what you get out of worship. It's what you put into it. And what God does in chapter 26 is he gives his people a gospel-shaped liturgy, which shaped them year by year, raising them into the story of God.

And we have way more to give thanks to God for than they did in Deuteronomy's day. We've seen the face of God in Jesus Christ. We've seen the fulfillment of the Exodus in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

[16:13] We've experienced the great Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit when he came into our lives, to make us new, to give us fire. And every week, our gatherings are deliberately shaped by the gospel.

We present the gospel to each other and back to God in repentance and forgiveness. We bring the past and the present before God and God opens a new future for us.

When we confess the creed, we proclaim our faith in the God who saves us in the middle of danger, in the middle of difficulty, despite our doubts.

And when we pray and praise God, it erodes our consumerism and individualism because we're entering into the story of God. That's worship. And secondly and finally, giving.

God seems completely unapologetic when talking about money in the scriptures. It may be because he gives us so much. In fact, if you go back over chapter 26, six times God is called the giver.

[17:18] He gives, he gives, he gives, he gives, he gives, he gives. He's rich in grace and kindness. We're very secretive and cagey about our money. We think it's bad form to talk about it, particularly when we talk about it in church land in the response of God's grace.

And it's understandable. We've got many large corporations who signal their virtue by announcing they're giving a lot of money away and then they spend even more money on advertising it. That's not what the spirit of God desires.

God desires that our giving be sacrificial. This is the point of the first fruits. If you farm crops, when they become ripe, you actually don't know what the final harvest will be, how big it will be.

But God says, that's when you give. You take the best, the first stuff, and you give it. And the first fruit is not the surplus. It's not the excess.

It's not what you don't need anymore. It's the best. And giving it cuts into your earnings. The first fruit is not giving what you can afford just so long as your lifestyle stays the same.

[18:27] What God is doing here is saying that giving has to cut into your lifestyle. Otherwise, it's just leftovers. When it does cut, it's a holy thing.

C.S. Lewis has a wonderful quote on this. C.S. Lewis is a famous Christian writer. Last century, he said, I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give.

I'm afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comfort, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we're probably giving away too little.

If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them. Interesting quote. Well, this is an essential part of worship. It's something all of us as individuals have to be honest with God about. And giving in this way is a gift to us because it erodes our sense of entitlement.

[19 : 39] And it helps us to make the grace of God concrete in our lives and in the lives of others. It's part of loving God with all our heart and all our soul and all our all. And it can only come from a heart that's occupied and preoccupied with the greatness of our God.

And that's why we're going to sing this hymn together. We stand in the presence of God. We declare who we are and who he is and we bind ourselves to him. O great God of highest heaven, occupy my lowly heart.

What? What's the■■ Dawson's name? We'll be right back.

We're the only one. We're the only one.