

Parashah One Hundred Thirty-Three
Deuteronomy 9:1–29; Jeremiah 2:1–13; James 4:1–10

notes by Tim Hegg

Israel's Greatness is God's Faithfulness

Recounting history is important but not always pleasant. In this recap by Moses, the story of Israel's covenant relationship with God since her miraculous exodus from Egypt is retold, and it's a pretty one-sided story. Looking back upon the past 40+ years, Moses paints a picture of God's utter faithfulness against the dark background of Israel's disobedience and idolatry. If there is any pride left in the hearts of this beleaguered people, Moses deflates it here.

Let us note first of all the scenario which requires such a rebuke as Moses gives: Israel is about to cross the Jordon River to possess the promised Land, to destroy the warring peoples who live there. And note the description Moses gives of these people: "great and tall, sons of the Anakim, whom you know and of whom you have heard it said, 'Who can stand before the sons of Anak?'" Israel is about to face the greatest military challenge of her existence. In the face of such a battle, Moses wants them to make an honest assessment of their own strength and power. And rather than building them up with all kinds of "you can do it" hype, Moses makes them look honestly at their failings! He knows that God gives grace to the humble, but He resists the proud (cf. Prov 3:34; cp. 1Pt 5:5; Jms 4:6).

Moses presumes that they will be victorious because God has promised they will be. Yet he immediately warns them about what he figures might be their response after victory—one of pride and self confidence. "Do not say in your heart . . . because of my righteousness Adonai has brought me in to possess this land" (v. 4). It is easy to look at those who have no relationship to God, who have rejected Yeshua and who despise the Torah, and then to put oneself in a higher category—to think that somehow our own favored status as God's people is somehow our own doing—that when confronted with the gospel, we were smart enough to make the right choice and are therefore worthy of God's blessings. Moses reminds the people then, and us now, that we do not deserve God's blessings, that His rewards are still a matter of His own mercy and grace. When we have embraced Yeshua as our Savior, followed the Torah and reaped the rewards of righteous living; when our families are blessed because we have, in accordance with the Torah, kept away from the abominations of the nations; when we have enjoyed the blessings of the festivals and of the Shabbat, what is our response? That we deserve this life because we have obeyed—because we've earned it? That we are better than the masses because we have kept God's charge? *Watch out!* Our desire to obey and honor God is something we have been given as a matter of God's grace, because He chose us to be His as a matter of His grace, and because He has shown us the Messiah and given us the Ruach as a gift of His own infinite grace. The fact that God rewards those who obey Him is first and foremost an extension of His own gracious work within us. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work within you both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:12-13). Thus, when we are blessed by God, we cannot take any of the credit. We are all jars of clay holding the treasure of God's unspeakable greatness. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves (2Cor. 4:7). "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom 11:36).

Consider now the words which Moses uses to describe Israel: they provoked God; they have

been rebellious; they have acted corruptly; they are stubborn (stiff-necked); they sinned against the Lord; they did evil in the Lord's sight; they rebelled against the command of the Lord; they did not believe the Lord; they did not listen to the Lord. What a list!! What a sobering reflection in the face of going in to possess the Land.

What right did Israel have to believe that God would fight for her and give her the victory when they could reflect upon 40+ years of provoking Him, rebelling against Him, disobeying Him, and generally neglecting what He had said?

Here we come face to face with one of the most important lessons in Scripture, namely, that God acts according to His sovereign will to accomplish His eternal plan so that the glory for it all will be His. He is the all-glorious One, and acts in faithful loyalty to all that He is and all that He has decreed. God does not work in reaction to mankind's successes or failures. God is not shut up to accomplish His will through the "maybes" of human fickleness. Even more, God is not left with His hands tied behind the backs of His people. He accomplishes His will among the host of heaven and the inhabitants of earth, and no one stays His hand or requires of Him "what are you doing?" (Dan 4:35). God, the Almighty, the commander of the Hosts, will accomplish His plan, and how blessed are the people through whom He sovereignly wills to accomplish it!

Here, as well, we are reminded that while the covenant made with Israel at Sinai was, indeed, a two-sided covenant, one in which Israel was required to obey in order to be blessed, and was promised punishment for their disobedience—here we are reminded once again that all is, in the end, the result of God's sovereign grace. In the face of Israel's blatant disobedience; after her foolish and stupid acts of spiritual adultery; in spite of her desire to be like all the nations round about her, God still blesses her with His presence, with His word, and with His victory. Why? Why would God act in this way?

The dialog He has with Moses highlights this very question. When He suggests that Israel be destroyed and that He begin afresh with Moses by making a nation out of him, the question is whether this would befit a God who is all glorious while at the same time always faithful. In this exchange Moses wants us, the reader, to see that God was not, in the ultimate sense, shut up to Israel. There were many other possibilities—many other peoples upon whom He could have just as well set His love and through whom He could have shown His glories. But the point is that God made a promise, a covenant, and that He will always, without fail, keep His word. "Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" is Moses' first plea (v. 27). Here, the word "remember" clearly has covenant connections. To "remember" in a covenant context is to be loyal to the covenant, to take into account the full weight of what was agreed upon in the covenant, and then to act upon it. The same sense may be found in Gen 8:1 where God is said to "remember Noah." It is not as though He had forgotten him, but rather that God acted in loyal faithfulness to the covenant He had made." So God, here in our *parashah*, through the mediation of Moses (who, it would appear, prefigures Yeshua as the mediator between God and man), reveals to us the heart of One Who will not, yea, cannot abandon the promises He has made.

Do you notice that Moses appeals to the fact that Israel is God's inheritance (cf. vv. 26, 29)? What is the meaning of this? A story is told of a wealthy prince in India, who, in order to get revenge upon a family member whom he hated, bequeathed an albino elephant to that person. Upon his demise, and the settling of his estate, the white elephant was duly delivered to the relative. Since elephants, and especially the very rare albino elephant is sacred in India, the recipient was obliged to care for it and feed it without every requiring it to work. It goes without saying that this

led to inevitable poverty. So who needs an inheritance with a pedigree like Israel's? Who would want this "white elephant"?

But God knows what He can make out of nothing! Israel, in spite of all her sin and failings, will one day shine as the morning star, for she will be washed clean of her sin (Ezek 36) and be the *Am Segulah* ("treasured people") she was always intended to be. What is more, her glory, the outshining of the presence of her God within her midst, will draw the nations to her and to her God, and in the end she will be a precious jewel in the crown of HaShem!

How is this possible? How can a people, characterized by stiffneckedness, rebellion, idolatry, disobedience, a people well trained in provoking God—how can a nation like this become a shining gem? She can become this, and will become this, because God has decreed that it will be so. He has committed Himself to her good, and to her spiritual rebirth. What is more, He has promised to bring the chosen ones of the nations to join her, to participate in her covenant blessings and privileged status as God's own children.

What may we apply from this section? First, let us never think that God's blessings in our lives are because we are more righteous than others. Surely God's blessings come as we obey Him, but even our obedience is ultimately the result of His work within us. Secondly, let us never forget that our position of "forgiven" in Yeshua is a matter of His pure mercy and grace, and not something we have earned. Like Israel of old who, when they had finally possessed the Land, knew it was entirely by God's power that it was so (even if they didn't always admit it), so we know that our standing in Yeshua is, today, entirely of Him and not of our own strength. Thirdly, having this understanding within us will produce a thorough-going life of worship and praise to the One Who so graciously works within us to accomplish His purposes. We will not be ashamed to tell others that there is One God, and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Messiah Yeshua. And finally, we will patiently bear with our unbelieving brothers and sisters, recognizing that God's mercy is still active, and that He is still faithful to the covenant He made with the fathers. Though enemies to the gospel, they are precious in the sight of the One Who always keeps His word. He will bring Israel to faith—may we be worthy to be His servants in proclaiming in word and deed the good news of the Gospel of Yeshua.

Our *haftarah* portion contains the prophet's inspired words, detailing in poetic exactness the wayward heart of Israel. How his words sting and smite the heart of pride! Israel is first described as the new bride of Adonai, betrothed in fidelity and love. She was devoted to her Husband, and He protected her. "Israel was holy to Adonai, the first of His harvest. All who ate of it became guilty; evil came upon them," declares Adonai" (v. 3). But such covenant fidelity was soon abandoned. God, as Israel's husband, is portrayed as scratching His head to figure out why Israel could have so quickly become an unfaithful wife: "What injustice did your fathers find in Me, that they went far from Me and walked after emptiness and became empty?" (v. 5). The people forgot in a moment the miracles and wonders wrought by the hand of God to effect their deliverance from Egypt. The priests themselves failed to seek God; the teachers of the Torah had no personal fidelity to the Giver of the Torah (they "did not know Me," v. 8); even the prophets turned to pagan mysticism rather than hearing and delivering to the people the word of God, and led the people into idolatry.

Yet in spite of all of this, hear the word of Adonai: "Therefore I will yet contend with you," declares Adonai, "And with your sons' sons I will contend" (v. 9). Rather than destroying Israel, God contends with her as a jealous husband, seeking to be faithful to His estranged wife. He seeks to awaken her to the folly of her rebellion, and the incredible stupidity of exchanging His glory for

the worthless idols of the nations (v. 11). He calls the witnesses of the covenant, heaven and earth (cf. Deut 4:26; 30:19), to testify against Israel who has broken the covenant established at Sinai.

And then, through the words of the prophet, Adonai summarizes Israel's failure (v. 13): "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water." The two evils are: 1) a failure to be thoroughly satisfied with God, and 2) seeking to fill this dissatisfaction with self-made significance.

Deep within the created consciousness of mankind are two driving needs: to be satisfied, and to find true significance. Obviously, the two are intertwined. Satisfaction is that sense of pleasure and joy we receive when things go well, when we experience happiness instead of sorrow, pleasure instead of pain, a smile instead of tears. We long to have our souls satisfied, to fill the emptiness with meaning and purpose, and this connects with the need for significance. No one can long exist with the sense that one's life has no significance. To rise in the morning, fulfill the daily routine, go to sleep at night, and then do it all over again the next day, all the while thinking that what I do has no temporal or eternal meaning—this is existing but not living. If I believe that my life makes no difference whatsoever in this world; if I think that no one would be the better or worse if I lived or died, that my doing and being contributes nothing in this world, then life has become the chore of existing, the daily meaningless grind.

But we all know intuitively that such is not the case. We have been created with an eternal soul that longs for eternity (Ecc 3:11), and in that very longing we know that we were created for a purpose, and that in finding and fulfilling that purpose, we will gain personal satisfaction and significance. Our drive for such satisfaction and significance is therefore cast between two opposites: God and man, the Creator and the created. In our fallen nature, we seek to find satisfaction and significance in ourselves, in our own accomplishments, and in our own strength. We strive to mask the hunger of our souls by feeding upon what gives momentary pleasure and by manufacturing purpose or significance by building with wood, hay, and stubble rather than with gold, silver, and precious stones (1Cor 3:12–14).

The soul renewed by the gracious and redeeming work of God, however, knows differently. Satisfaction is found in knowing and serving the Creator, and significance for life comes from acknowledging that we are His chosen servants to accomplish His purposes. We have been chosen to be His close companions, to find in Him the satisfaction of being who we truly are. And we have been assigned the greatest responsibilities—to make His Name glorious—to be living witnesses of His greatness; to prove to all, even the angelic hosts (cf. 1Pet 1:12), that God is good and that His eternal purposes have and will gain the victory. "You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Psa. 16:11).

Thus, God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied with Him. When our souls are satisfied in Him, we are enabled to fulfill the very purpose for which we were created, and in this we find deep and lasting significance. But how easy it is, like Israel of old, to disregard the true glory of God and seek to manufacture our own. Yet when we do, we make broken cisterns—cisterns that hold no water. In the ancient world of Israel, cisterns were chiselled out of the soft limestone so common in that region. But limestone is porous, and therefore unsuited for holding the water that would inevitably gather during the seasonal rains. The cisterns were therefore plastered. Any crack in the plaster, however, made for a leaky cistern. When it would fill with water, it could hold it for only a short time. When the dry season came, the broken cistern showed up empty.

And so it is with our self-made satisfaction and significance. Like pouring water into a leaky bucket, our attempts to manufacture our own meaning and significance end up empty. Yet all the while God is the true cistern, in which the water of life is always available. To exchange the one for the other is pure folly. To “walk after emptiness” is to “become empty” in oneself.

How easy it is to think that satisfaction and significance is to be found in “broken cisterns!” Like hucksters at a carnival, each compelling the passers-by to try their hand at their booth, the world calls out to us to spend our lives for meaningless trinkets. We see cisterns all around us, but when our souls are thirsty and we go to these cisterns to find the water to quench that thirst, they are empty. Why do we strive for such emptiness? Why do we flirt with the glitter of the world, thinking that it contains genuine gold when in fact, it is just polished plastic? The words of Jeremiah call us back to drink fully from the water of life, and find in Him true satisfaction and significance.

In our Apostolic portion, Yaacov (James) likewise exhorts us along these same lines, to find all that we need in God Himself: “you do not have because you do not ask” (v. 2). We fail to realize that God is the source from Whom all our needs can be met. And even when we approach God, we do so with the wrong motives, being self-absorbed (v. 3). Then Yaacov, like the prophets of old, puts his finger on the root problem, and in doing so, touches the festering wound of our conscience:

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (v. 4).

But listen to Yaacov’s remedy for our worldly hearts:

Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”? But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” (vv. 5–6)

He draws us back to right thinking by quoting the Scriptures! First, he gives a general sense of the Scriptures, that God jealously desires to have the allegiance of the spirit of man which He breathed into him at creation (Gen 2:7). So Ezekiel proclaims the word of Adonai: “Behold, all souls are Mine” (18:4). And that the term “soul” (ψυχή, *psuche*) and “spirit” are often used with similar meanings, we may note from the concluding verses of Ezekiel’s exhortation:

Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! (πνεύμα) For why will you die, O house of Israel? (18:31)

And then Yaacov quotes Prov 3:34 (Lxx), “The Lord opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” His conclusion is that true exaltation (which is another way of saying “satisfaction and significance”) is achieved through drawing close to God: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (v. 8). And how are we to do this? Yaacov gives us the answer: 1) submit to God, 2) resist the Devil, 3) do *teshuvah* (cleanse your hands/purify your hearts), and 4) humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord.

Is such a life one of drudgery? Hardly! God’s ways are not our ways. In humbling ourselves

before Him, and submitting to Him, he offers to us a life of true meaning and significance. He longs to pour out upon us joy and happiness beyond our wildest dreams, to do for us “far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think” (Eph 3:20).

Nor does living a life of humble submission to God mean that we resign ourselves to being different for difference sake. He doesn’t ask us to be “weird” (though the world may think we are) or to go about in drab cloaks with our hands behind our back, contemplating the ground. He calls us to walk as children of light, dressed in the clothes of royalty as those who regularly dine with the King. He expects that our joy will be contagious; that others will see us and declare:

Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is Adonai our God whenever we call on Him? Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole Torah which I am setting before you today?