

The Danger of a Complaining Spirit

Deuteronomy 1:19-33

Phil. 2:12 “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”

In that one sentence, Paul addresses and resolves the common tension many people feel between a God’s sovereignty and our own human responsibility. Which is it? And the answer has to be a healthy sense of both. Neither cancels the other, but they work together just as Paul defines. God “works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” That’s his sovereignty, and you can do nothing good yourself without that work of God in you. But you and I are addressed very personally as well, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” That’s our responsibility.

My emphasis this morning is the next verse in Philippians 2, the first thing that Paul mentions in regard to working out your salvation. What does that mean? What do you do, when you work out your salvation?

Phil. 2:14 “Do all things without complaining and disputing, 15 that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast the word of life.”

So application number 1 of what it means to work out your salvation. Not earn your salvation. Not perform some meritorious action for which you are rewarded with salvation. No, you are saved by grace, through faith. Grace alone. Faith alone.

Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

But now, you who are saved by grace through faith, work out that salvation by doing all things without complaining. And that’s the point we reach this morning in Deuteronomy 1. We see the danger of a complaining spirit. And yet, let me be careful. This is not must a moralistic lesson about people who complain a lot. This point about complaining is not separated from the gospel, nor from the promise of salvation, the promise of redemption. Because the people of Israel here in Deuteronomy are the people of God. They have been redeemed, rescued out of the land of slavery and the house of bondage called Egypt. They have been saved, and established as the people of God, saved by grace through faith, just like you and me.

As we go through Deuteronomy, I want you to constantly remember that point. This history of this particular nation is a type and symbol of the whole of God’s work of salvation. Our salvation, that work of God by which we are given the promise of heaven and the forgiveness of our sins, that work of salvation is pictured for us in the God’s work of redemption in the life of the Old Testament nation of Israel. When they were delivered out of Egypt, they were redeemed. They were saved. And now they are about to enter the promised land, having spent 40 years in the wilderness. Those 40 years correspond to the whole of our lives in this age, and that promised land is ultimately nothing less than a symbol and type of our eternal inheritance in heaven.

So the people of God ARE the people of God, and the danger of their complaining spirit is not simply the act of grumbling about their circumstances, but it is, ultimately, a rejection and denial of God’s promise of redemption. So let’s start there.

I. GOD HAS GIVEN HIS PEOPLE THE PROMISE OF REDEMPTION.

I've emphasized that point in each sermon so far in Deuteronomy, and I will continue to do so. So just look at, v.19-21

God has led them out of Egypt, first to Horeb, or Mt. Sinai, where he gave them the ten commandments. And remember how those commandments begin. What is the preface to the ten commandments?

Ex. 20:2 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

"I am the Lord your God, who saved you." "Now, work out your salvation with fear and trembling." Or as Paul puts it in,

Eph. 4:1 "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called."

So God led his people out of Egypt to Horeb, then through the wilderness. And now, in the context of Deuteronomy 1, to the promised land. Notice the emphasis of, v.20

The Lord is giving you the land! It's a gift, a gift of grace. Then, v.21

God has given his people the promise of redemption, and that...

A. Redemption is represented by the possession of the promised land.

The Lord promised them the land. He is now giving them the land. And they are about to take possession of the land.

Do you remember the original promise of the land? It was made to Father Abraham.

Gen. 12:1 "Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. 2 I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

And we are told in Hebrews 11 that Abraham understood the spiritual nature of that promise, that the land was not simply the land of Canaan, but the promise was the promise of heaven itself.

Heb. 11:8 "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

So the land, the promised land, represents the eternal inheritance which is now reserved in heaven for us who believe in Jesus. And so as a type, as symbol of spiritual truths, we live today with the same status as the people of Israel on the banks of Jordan here in Deuteronomy 1. We, too, are promised the possession of this great land.

Then look at the encouragement that God gives to his people. Through Moses, he urges the people not to be afraid, the end of verse 21, "do not fear or be discouraged." If you remember the next stage, when Joshua is the newly ordained leader of the people as they actually conquer the land, we see that same encouragement,

Jos. 1:6 "Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them."

Here is Deuteronomy 1, God provides that encouragement in a very practical way. Let's send spies into the land to get a first-hand look. They didn't have to believe God's promise without the encouragement of this evidence, so the plan was established and carried out.

v.22-25

That's the encouragement. It is a good land! And God allows them to receive that encouragement, which really is nothing less than God's own assurance.

B. Redemption is promised with God's own personal assurance.

The spies provided that assurance. God gave them the evidence they needed. The spies saw the land and it was a good land.

The fuller description of the spies entering the land was given in Numbers 13.

Num. 13:26 "Now they departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. 27 Then they told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit."

So...the promise of redemption is given personal, first-hand, eyewitness assurance. It really was a good land that the Lord had promised. But, if you remember from Numbers 13, the spies also found a problem.

Num. 13:28 "Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. 29 The Amalekites dwell in

the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan."

One of the spies, Caleb, offered the appropriate response.

Num.13:30 "Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it."

But it wasn't enough.

Num. 13:31 "But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." 32 And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. 33 There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

And there is the problem. God has given his people the promise of redemption. But,

II. GOD'S PEOPLE ARE PRONE TO UNBELIEF.

They saw the good land. They received that encouragement. But they were afraid of the big people who lived there. And that fear that kept them from entering the land is called unbelief!

v.32

And so we read in,

Num. 14:11 Then the Lord said to Moses: "How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them?"

And Ps. 106:24 “Then they despised the pleasant land; They did not believe His word, 25 But complained in their tents, And did not heed the voice of the Lord.”

Let’s look a little closer at that spirit of unbelief, because human nature hasn’t changed. As we identify the unbelief of God’s people in Deuteronomy 1, it is easy to recognize how that same unbelief can tempt us as well. And Moses doesn’t take it lightly. It was no small matter. Because it was,

A. The unbelief of a rebellious spirit.

They weren’t just timid or shy. They were rebellious! They wouldn’t go up to enter the land. They were disobedient. That’s rebelliousness.

v.26

It is helpful, edifying, to identify our sins in this way. Today we like to downplay the seriousness of sin, and call it just a mistake. Or an error. Sometimes we just label it as a disease, and we seek therapy instead of repentance. We use words that minimize or even excuse our disobedience, but God doesn’t. This is disobedience. This is a rejection of God’s promise. And this is rebellion! A rebellious spirit.

That is the spirit that goes all the way back to the garden of Eden. The first sin. It was an act of rebellion against God.

Gen. 3:6 “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.”

That’s rebellion. They claimed the right to be autonomous, to be their own law and their own authority. They chose to disregard and disobey God in order to make their own decisions. And that

spirit lurks in all of us, to some degree or another. It is part of that flesh against which we must all wage war. So search your own heart, and beware the unbelief of a rebellious spirit.

Closely associated with that rebellious spirit is,

B. The unbelief of a complaining spirit.

You see, complaining against God is a practical expression of unbelief. Complaining against God is a practical expression of rebellion.

v.26-27

Notice the essence of the complaint, that God’s purpose was malicious, anything but good. They complained about their present circumstances by accusing God of delivering them out of Egypt just to destroy them. Indeed, such a complaint is very much an expression of unbelief. In their unbelief they accused God of hatred. They accuse God of failure, because he has failed to provide for them as they would have expected. Life was hard in the wilderness, and rather than see God’s hand at work in the midst of their struggles, they gave in to their own selfish, self-centered perspective, and they grumbled!

When Paul writes to the struggling church at Corinth, he uses these events in the life of the nation of Israel as a warning for us, an example.

1 Cor. 10:1 “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, 2 all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. 5 But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. 6 Now these things became our examples, to the

intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted.
7 And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.” 8 Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; 9 nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; 10 nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. 11 Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

He identifies four characteristic sins—idolatry, especially in the form of drunkenness; sexual immorality; testing Christ in unbelief; and complaining! You can see the significance of that complaining spirit. The danger of grumbling. It is no small matter, for ultimately a complaining spirit express unbelief.

And then, very much related to all of that, is,

C. The unbelief of a fearful spirit.

They complained about the hardship of what they saw in the promised land, and they froze. They refused to go in. They disobeyed. Making excuses in fear.

v.28-29

They saw the obstacles, and rather than trust God to help them, they gave in to their fears. And all of that is the immediate presence of God’s promises to them. Specifically, as we read here,

III. GOD PROMISES TO FIGHT FOR HIS PEOPLE.

That’s a marvelous expression.

v.30

Do you remember how he fought for his people in Egypt? What did he do for them? Do you remember the ten plagues, designed by God so that Pharaoh would let them leave. God fought for his people, to free them from the bondage of slavery. God fought for his people, to redeem them.

Moses mentions other historical examples here.

A. Historical examples.

Not just in Egypt. But in the wilderness. Do you remember the manna? And the quail? The water from the rock. Do you remember that their clothes didn’t wear out.

These words are part of Nehemiah’s corporate confession of sin in,

Neh. 9:20 “You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, And did not withhold Your manna from their mouth, And gave them water for their thirst. 21 Forty years You sustained them in the wilderness; They lacked nothing; Their clothes did not wear out And their feet did not swell.”

The wilderness journey is not just about the trials and troubles of Israel. It is about God’s promise to fight for his people in the midst of those trials and troubles. And he did so with,

B. Personal care and sustenance.

According to our text here. He fought for his people, and in verse 31, he carried them.

v.31

We read a fuller description of that personal care in, Deut. 32:10 “He found him in a desert land And in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. 11 As an eagle stirs up

its nest, Hovers over its young, Spreading out its wings, taking them up, Carrying them on its wings, 12 So the Lord alone led him, And there was no foreign god with him. 13 “He made him ride in the heights of the earth, That he might eat the produce of the fields; He made him draw honey from the rock, And oil from the flinty rock; 14 Curds from the cattle, and milk of the flock, With fat of lambs; And rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, With the choicest wheat; And you drank wine, the blood of the grapes.”

The apple of his eye. The eagle hovering over its young. The father carrying his child.

I have a relatively noticeable scar on one of my knees, from the time I was a young child, playing next to the baseball field where my father was coaching his team. I fell on a piece of glass, and it bled a lot. I don't remember how the glass got out, if there was doctor present or if I was taken somewhere for medical help, but the memory my mind has retained of that event over 50 years ago was my father coming to me and carrying me away to get help. My father did a lot for me as a young child, but that is my only memory of him carrying me.

That's what God does for his people. He carries them, as a man carries his son. That's how he fights for them. That's his promise. And God does all of that with a very...

C. Personal leadership.

v.32-33

God led the way. He went before them. The fire by night. The cloud by day.

We don't have that fire anymore. We don't have that cloud. But we have Jesus. And we have the Holy Spirit. And God still

leads us. He still carries us. As we walk by faith not by sight, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith.

We are still in that wilderness, as were the people of Israel of the Old Testament. And we, too, have the promise of redemption. We can see the promised land. And we have something better than spies, for we have the word of prophecy that speaks to us about that eternal inheritance. And because we, too, are prone to unbelief, we need that encouragement. Because of the temptations of our rebellious spirit, our complaining spirit and our fearful spirit, we need these words of encouragement ourselves. Today.

And the words of Moses speak to us today just as plainly as they did to the people on the banks of the Jordan in Deuteronomy,

v.29 “Do not be terrified, or afraid of them. 30 The Lord your God, who goes before you, He will fight for you, according to all He did for you in Egypt before your eyes, 31 and in the wilderness where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place.”

Let me end with this description of our promised land, with the encouraging reminder that this is where our God is leading us, we who are now still living in that wilderness.

Rev. 21:2 “Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. 4 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have

passed away.” 5 Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.” 6 And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. 7 He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.”

Rev. 22:1 “And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. 4 They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. 5 There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.”