

Lest You Forget

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As all of us know, life is a learning process. Sometimes, this takes place in an academic setting, but more often, the most important lessons we learn come to us outside of the classroom. Every time we try something and it has a good result, or, just as significantly, when we try and fail, every one of those moments has something to teach us if we only pay attention. If we don't learn from what has gone before, we will surely repeat our previous mistakes.

Many of these opportunities for learning arise by chance, but I suspect that just as many of them are the result of the providential intervention of God. After all, Christianity itself is not some kind of abstract, ethereal religion that we're able to grasp through study that is unconnected to the real world. Instead, we learn discipleship by doing. It's only logical, then, that God would help us in our quest by ensuring that our lives are filled with spiritual lessons. Some of these lessons are positive; others are negative. As any parent knows, sometimes children need to learn from reward and praise, but at other times they need to learn from punishment. Our heavenly Father does the same thing with us. He teaches us about both righteousness and sin by letting us learn from their consequences.

This is especially evident from His interactions with the children of Israel in the wilderness. If any group of people ever shouldn't have needed to be taught, it was the Israelites. They had seen the glory and terror of God atop Mount Sinai, and that sight ought to have been enough to keep them loyal to God for the rest of their lives. Of course, it wasn't. They too needed to learn by experiencing, even if what they experienced was the wrath of God poured out on the disobedient. Now, forty years later, Moses is reviewing with God's people what they should have learned and what they must remember. We need to learn the same sorts of lessons, so let's pay attention when he says, "Lest you forget".

God's Blessings.

Moses begins this segment of Deuteronomy by reviewing **GOD'S PAST BLESSINGS**. This list appears in Deuteronomy 8:1-5. To me, this is one of the most fascinating passages in all of Deuteronomy, because it explains what God has been doing. We're very used to the story of Moses and the wilderness wanderings, but I think that if we came to it for the first time as adults, we would be rather bewildered by it. God has just brought His people up out of the land of Egypt, but because of their unbelieving hearts, they refuse to enter the land that God has promised them.

Here's where the weird part starts. God doesn't destroy these wicked people. He doesn't send them back to Egypt. He doesn't even punish them a little bit and let them slip into Canaan six months later. Instead, He sends this national migration back out into the desert. Millions of men, women, and children spend the next 40 years following this irrational, aimless course through some of the most inhospitable country on earth. They can't provide for themselves, so God sends this shower of seed-like particles of bread from heaven that they have to go out and gather. They can't make new clothes or protect themselves from epidemics of disease, so God keeps them healthy and miraculously renews their possessions. However, this doesn't mean that they're safe. Every so often, they rebel against God, and God Himself strikes down another 15,000 men at a time. It's like God can't make up His mind whether He wants to bless them or not.

Of course, what's going on here isn't that God is making up His mind. It's that He's making up the Israelites' mind. By their disobedience, they've proven that they aren't wise enough to handle real life yet. What God is doing is putting them through a simplified practice version of real life so that they can learn from it. They weren't spiritual enough to understand that God was providing for all their needs, so God had to rub their noses in it. He made them go out and get food every day for which there was no possible explanation but God's provision. They weren't spiritual enough to understand that sin had evil consequences, so God had to rub their noses in that too. He killed them in all sorts of spectacular ways, from being bitten by fiery serpents to being swallowed up by cracks that opened in the earth. There was no other possible explanation for that but God's discipline. God kept on doing this, over and over for 40 years, because they had to get it before they moved on. They had to understand before God took the training wheels off.

Brethren, this understanding is just as important to us. It's why New Testament writers from Paul to the author of the book of Hebrews spend whole chapters hammering these points home. We need to learn from the example of the disobedient Israelites so that we don't have to walk the path that they walked. If we don't understand that we have to look to God to provide for us physically and spiritually, God will do the same thing to us. He will humble us and make us know that we live not by bread, but by the words that come from His mouth. If we don't understand that sin has consequences, God is going to make sure that we start seeing them. I clearly remember times in my own life when I was being wicked and unrepentant, and God clobbered me for it. He didn't give up on me, thankfully, but He did discipline me in ways I could not mistake. Let's learn our spiritual lessons so that God doesn't have to make us learn them.

From there, Moses turns to a discussion of **GOD'S FUTURE BLESSINGS**. Let's read about these together in Deuteronomy 8:6-10. Basically, this is Moses' description of what the Israelites are going to get once God takes the

training wheels off. Now that they've proven that they can understand what God is shoving in their faces, He's going to let them back out into real life. He's still going to be providing for them, but it's not going to be as blatant as manna falling from heaven. Instead, He's going to provide for them by giving them a land that contains everything they need. However, even though God isn't going to be intervening as openly anymore, they still must carry out two critically important spiritual tasks. They must be thankful to God, and they must obey Him. That's how they can survive.

Even though we aren't coming out of literally wandering in a literal wilderness, this is also how we can survive. If the Israelites thought Canaan 3500 years ago was a land flowing with milk and honey, just imagine what they would have thought of the modern day U.S.! Who needs milk and honey when you've got Culver's? All joking aside, we live in a land of unimaginable prosperity. We don't have a lot of trouble with keeping food on the table. In fact, we're more likely to struggle with keeping food off our waistlines. Even though we're a long way away from that elemental, day-to-day fight for survival, we still must remember to bless God as our provider, and to be obedient to His will.

Future Obstacles.

As we strive to maintain our spiritual focus, we must be wary of the same spiritual obstacles that faced the ancient Israelites. First on this list, we must **BEWARE FORGETFULNESS**. Moses explains why this was going to be a problem in Deuteronomy 8:11-16. The Israelites were about to experience a big jump up in standard of living. They were going to move from homeless desert nomads to wealthy city dwellers, blessed with the best the Fertile Crescent could provide. That was the good part. The bad part was that the longer they continued to live this luxurious lifestyle, the more likely they were to forget God and the lessons He had taught them in the wilderness. They weren't going to keep their focus on the manna and the water from the rock and the fiery serpents and all the rest, especially the way that God had ground their noses in the dirt and made them humble themselves before Him. If that happened, they were in trouble.

Today, it's just as easy for us to forget. We learn from God in two ways, from His word and from our lives. As we study the Bible, we can quickly slip into the it's-just-a-Bible-story mindset, so that the word becomes just a bunch of weird stories about people who lived a long time ago, stories that don't have any relevance for us. We can just as easily forget the lessons we learn from our own personal experiences. When we've been out of work for a year, and we don't know where the money to pay the light bill is going to come from, sure, it's easy to remember God then. It's easy to wear out the knees on our pajama pants from praying all night long, telling Him about how hopeless we are without Him and how much we need Him. It's easy to remember God when the consequences of our sins hit us like a 2x4, and we see how foolish we are and how desperately we need His grace. But then, we get a job, and we begin to enjoy a prosperous life again, free from financial stress. The physical consequences of our sin fade back in the rearview mirror, and those bad memories lose some of their force. That's when it becomes harder to remember God and all too easy to forget. However, if we do forget, we're no better off than those Israelites. Let's keep God on our minds both in bad times and good.

The real problem with the children of Israel, and indeed the real problem with us, is that we need to **BEWARE PRIDE**. Moses describes this problem vividly in Deuteronomy 8:17-20. The Israelites were going to look around, at their houses and vineyards and flocks, at all that their hands had made, and they were going to start believing that only their hands had made it. They were going to start trusting in themselves, not giving the glory to the One who had blessed them so richly, they were going to turn aside to other gods, and the God whom they had abandoned was going to strike them down in His wrath, so that they perished like the nations around them. Moses, of course, was one of the greatest prophets of God's people, and his prediction here took place to the letter. The Israelites forgot the lessons of the wilderness, started trusting in themselves, and forsook the law of God. They became just as wicked as their ancestors had been in the desert. In response, God put the training wheels back on. He brought in the Assyrians and the Babylonians, who punished His people and carried them away captive. In that captivity, the Israelites had decades to consider how foolish they had been and how much they actually needed God. They learned the humility they needed to obey Him.

Sadly, Moses' words here predict much of the recent history of our nation just as accurately as they predicted the arrogance of Israel. All of us know people who trust in nothing higher than themselves. They may pay lip service to the notion of a higher power, but they don't believe that they need Him. They think that they can go on earning riches for themselves, just because they choose to, and they think that they can live good lives without the grace of Jesus, lives that impress God into letting them go to heaven. What a disaster it is when we conclude that we don't need God!

The reality, of course, is that we do need God, and that putting our trust in ourselves is like building a house on a foundation of sand. Sure, as long as the dice keep turning up sevens, as long as no misfortune comes our way, we'll be fine. However, sooner or later, disaster is going to strike, and it's going to find us unprotected and unprepared. As the recent tsunami in Japan stands to witness, we can lose everything we have in a matter of moments. When that's our situation, how can we possibly trust in ourselves? How can we possibly tell God that we don't need His help? If we reach that conclusion and we're blessed, God will give us an unmistakable reminder so that we can repent before it's too late. Security can only be found in the Almighty. We must always humbly obey Him and trust in Him to save.