

“The Gospel in Miniature”
Deuteronomy 9:1-29
February 16, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

The passage before us today is what I am calling the gospel in miniature. Nothing in all the world is more important or more powerful than the gospel message. It is God’s message of hope and freedom, able to release those in bondage from the strong shackles binding them. The power of the gospel is illustrated in a story told by the great Welsh preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones. One Sunday morning in the early days of his ministry, he was about to stand to preach when he noticed that it had grown very hot in the sanctuary. So as he stood to preach, he asked the elders if they would open the windows to let some cool air in. He then began his sermon. At just that moment, the most notorious drunk and bully in the town, a ruthless and cruel man, happened to be walking past the church on his way to the pub for a Sunday of drinking. As he passed the church, he heard Lloyd-Jones preaching through the open windows, and right then and there fell on his knees in repentance.

Though the gospel becomes clearer after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, it is not missing in the Old Testament. Our text this morning provides us with a picture of the gospel. The people of Israel are about to take possession of the land God had promised to them. They had been afraid to do this because of the heavy fortifications and the giants living there. But now they are ready to do so, especially after hearing from Moses that God will go before them as a consuming fire. He is Israel’s warrior God who will fight for them and prevail. But then Moses anticipates that one of the results of success in the conquest will be some self-righteousness. They will think that the explanation for their success is their superior righteousness in comparison to the Canaanites whose cities they will have conquered. Moses’ message is that they are no better than the enemies they have conquered. They have come within a whisker’s breath of being destroyed themselves, saved only by the intercession of Moses, acting on the basis of God’s grace. This story has the main three components of the gospel, which we are going to look at now.

I. Sin

The essence of Israel’s sin, and of ours as well, is seen here as self-centeredness. Sin turns us all to a version of “Enough about me; what do *you* think about me?” It leads us all to have an immense fascination with ourselves, and that’s a problem. It’s a problem because it departs from reality, a reality which at the very heart of the universe and the heart of our lives puts God in the center. The self-centeredness we see in Israel shows itself in self-righteousness, self-deception and self-salvation.

Israel's self-righteousness can be seen in the explanation they want to give for their military success. They want to say, **"It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land"** (v. 4). Moses has just blocked one avenue of self-centeredness when he reminds Israel that they have been able to defeat **"nations greater and mightier than yourselves"** (v. 1). These cities were heavily fortified, and among their soldiers were giants. Israel was blocked from claiming that their victory was due to their skill and might. But where one avenue of self-centeredness is blocked, another rushes in. If it wasn't because of their power, then it must have been because of their righteousness. If they weren't better in one arena—their military strength—then they must be better in another arena, their moral superiority.

There is a universal tendency to earn our own salvation, and that is the reason so many people don't trust Jesus. Moses is here warning the nation against moving in that direction. He is saying that if you think God will bring good to you because of your righteousness, you are guilty of just another form of self-centeredness. You have maintained for yourself your position in the driver's seat and put God in the backseat. When we lived in Maryland, I sought several times to speak to one of our neighbors about the Lord. But this whole area of trusting in his own righteousness became a stumbling block to him. When I asked him about his hope for getting to heaven upon his death, he replied, "I'm the nicest guy I know. If God doesn't want me in heaven, then I don't want to be with him."

Something I notice about this self-righteousness is that it is something we say in our hearts. Moses warns Israel, **"Do not say in your heart..."** (v. 4). There are many things that we know not to say with our lips that we say with our hearts, and at the top of that list is self-righteousness. How often do you say with your lips, "I am better than you"? That's just not something one says in polite society. But how often do you say that in your heart? There is a smug self-righteousness by which we regard ourselves as better than others. We easily become proud of what we consider our better theology, better morals, better churches and overall just better ways. One of the symptoms of this is when you love to point out the sins of others. If you enjoy sermons that speak much of the sins of our culture, it is likely that you have a problem with self-righteousness. Have you ever noticed how children do this? When caught red-handed doing something they know they're not supposed to do, they will quickly attempt to refocus on someone else's sin. "But Johnny took cookies out of the jar too." Moses here acknowledges the wickedness of the Canaanites, but that is not his focus. He is far more concerned with the sins of God's people. The first step in experiencing the power of the gospel is not to say in your heart that you are better than others.

A second aspect of self-centeredness here is self-deception. The difference in the Israelites view of themselves and God's view of them is striking. They considered their own moral superiority to the Canaanites to be the accurate

explanation of their military victory. God viewed them as no different than the Canaanites. Just in this chapter, Moses calls Israel stubborn (6, 13, 27), rebellious (7, 23-24), wicked enough to provoke God's wrath (8, 18), corrupt (12), idolatrous (12, 16), sinful (16), evil (18), unbelieving (23), disobedient (23) and wicked (27).

In the book *The Perfect Storm*, John Spillane is a rescuer who jumps out of helicopters to rescue those lost at sea. When his helicopter crashes, he is forced to jump into the blackness of the water from an unknown height. The book then says this:

When Spillane treats injured seamen offshore, one of the first things he evaluates is their degree of consciousness. The highest level, known as 'alert and oriented times four,' describes almost everyone in an everyday situation. They know who they are, where they are, what time it is, and what's just happened. If someone suffers a blow to the head, the first thing they lose is recent events—'alert and oriented times three'—and the last thing they lose is their identity. A person who has lost all levels of consciousness, right down to their identity, is said to be 'alert and oriented times zero.' When John Spillane wakes up in the water, he is alert and oriented times zero. His understanding of the world is reduced to the fact that he exists, nothing more. Almost simultaneously, he understands that he is in excruciating pain. For a long time, that is all he knows.

That perfectly describes what this self-centeredness of sin does to us. We become so deceived that all we really know is that we exist and we hurt. We don't know why and we don't know the way out.

There is one more part of this self-centeredness, and it is self-salvation, seen in the golden calf incident that Moses refers to as happening at Horeb. Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai, where God gave to Moses the Ten Commandments and the law of God. God was here entering into a covenant with his people, binding himself to them and speaking to them of his law. At the very moment Moses was on the mountain receiving that law from God, the people were at the foot the mountain making and worshiping the golden calf. This would be like unfaithfulness to your spouse on the honeymoon. Israel couldn't even make it through the honeymoon with Jehovah without going after some other god. It was a self-salvation strategy.

II. Judgment

God's response to sin is always the same. He is a holy God, and it lies within his very nature to respond to sin with holy judgment. He cannot do otherwise. Whether it is sin within the Canaanites or within his own people, God's response will be the same. In a word, that response is expressed in our text by the verb "destroy." We encounter it first in verse 3, with the Canaanites being the object of God's judgment. God **"will destroy them and subdue them before you."** The literal meaning of that word is to exterminate. It is used six

more times in this chapter, and in every single one it is Israel that God plans to destroy. Israel had thought that their military success could be attributed to their righteousness, and God says they need to keep looking. If Israel wanted to talk about what their behavior deserved, they would find that it deserved the judgment of God.

God speaks with great passion when he talks about his response to Israel's sin. After the golden calf incident, God says to Moses, **"Arise, go down quickly from here; for your people whom you have brought from Egypt have acted corruptly"** (v. 12). The pronouns are striking. God had always referred to Israel as *my* people, whom *I* have brought from Egypt. God is saying quite clearly, "These are no longer my people." God wasn't done yet. He says to Moses, **"Let me alone, that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven. And I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they"** (v. 14). What God contemplates here is another judgment like the flood, where God essentially starts over with one righteous man after wiping out an entire nation or a group of nations. This amounts to God's abandoning of the Abrahamic covenant.

III. Deliverance

So here's where we are in this story. The Canaanites will be destroyed because of their wickedness. Israel is no better than the Canaanites, and they also provoke the Lord to such anger that he announces his plans to terminate his covenant with them and start all over with Moses. But he doesn't do that. We read at the beginning of chapter 10 that God tells Moses to make two more tablets on which God will write again the words of the covenant. And God once again leads his people and works through his priests. Things are back to normal. Israel came within a whisker's breath of destruction.

What saved them was the intercession of Moses. In its simplest form, God said he would destroy this people as judgment for their sin. Moses prayed and said, "Please don't." And God said, "Okay, I won't." What was it about Moses' prayer that was so powerful? Moses doesn't do what many today do. He doesn't say, "God, how dare you threaten judgment. You have no right to do so, and if you think you do, I will have nothing to do with you." I have had the occasion several times this week to remind others that mature people deal with the reality that is rather than the reality they would like there to be. I may not like the reality that I have both fair skin and a bald head, but I must deal with that reality by wearing something on top of my head to protect me from the sun. You may not like the reality of God's holy judgment, but you will not change it. Not even God can change it, because to do so would deny his nature. Moses accepts who God reveals himself to be and then appealed to God on the basis of three priorities God himself had. First, he said, "God, these are your people and your heritage" (v. 26). Second, he wanted God to remember his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (v. 27). Third, he didn't want the name of God to be

sullied in the eyes of the nations. What would the nations think about a God who couldn't deliver his people into their land (v. 28)? These are God's interests—his people, his promises and his name.

Here's where it gets good. The New Testament teaches that Jesus is greater than Moses in every way, and one of those ways is that he is a greater intercessor. Jesus **“is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them”** (Heb. 7:25). Jesus' intercession accomplishes the two things spoken of in this passage. He prays away the judgment of God by appealing to the interests of God, just like Moses did. God's interests are his justice and his love. When Jesus intercedes his plea is based on these two interests. He prays for you and me saying, “This one is mine, purchased by my blood, and it would not be just to judge one already judged in me. Now let your steadfast love shine forth.”

Jesus does something else that is like Moses. It is something that was only mentioned as a possibility to Moses. God proposed to Moses that he raise up a new race of people from Moses. In Jesus, God is doing just that. All who trust in Jesus and follow him are members of that new race.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with two applications. First, are there people in your life for whom you need to be interceding? Perhaps it is a son or daughter of the church who has wandered far from Christ. God appoints our prayers to be powerful and effective in bringing the wandering home. In 1844, George Mueller began praying for the conversion of five individuals. He said that he prayed for them every day. The first of those five came to faith 18 months later, the second after six and a half years of praying, and the third at the twelve and a half year mark. The remaining two were in his prayers for the last 36 years of Mueller's life, not coming to faith until after his death.

The second application arises out of the theme of Deuteronomy, our relationship with God. How does this passage deepen our relationship with God? It changes our heart by a new and deeper sense of gratitude to God. Like Israel, we are by nature no better than anyone else. But we have been rescued from judgment by the intercession of Jesus. It is an intercession about which the Son and the Father agree. The judgment of God cannot be altered, but it can be satisfied in the death of a substitute, which is what has happened in Jesus' death. In heaven our hearts will be filled with gratitude, enough for an eternity of praise to God. We will feel afresh the words of that hymn we are going to sing in closing. “While I draw this fleeting breath, when mine eyelids close in death; when I soar to worlds unknown, see thee on thy judgment throne, Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.”