

Firstfruits

It has been several weeks, a few months really, since we have been in our series from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy that we are calling *God in the Midst*. Does anyone remember that we are in a series from Deuteronomy?



Deuteronomy is really a *sermon*... a sermon from Moses; his last sermon, a final exhortation to God's People who Moses led out of captivity from Egypt's tyrannical rule to the Promised Land.

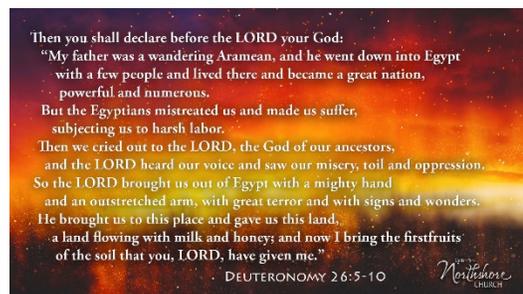
We all know Moses, right?
We've seen the movie.



Am I the only one who can't help but picture Moses as Charlton Heston from *The Ten Commandments*? We can be confident that Moses didn't look like this... nevertheless, this is the way I picture him.

I could give you a *quick review*, but it turns out that there is a review embedded in our text from Deuteronomy 26; starting with verse 5 it says:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. ⁶ But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. ⁷ Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. ⁸ So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. ⁹ He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; ¹⁰ and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, LORD, have given me. ¹



What is going on in this passage? Why was Moses instructing the People of God to rehearse this brief historical account?

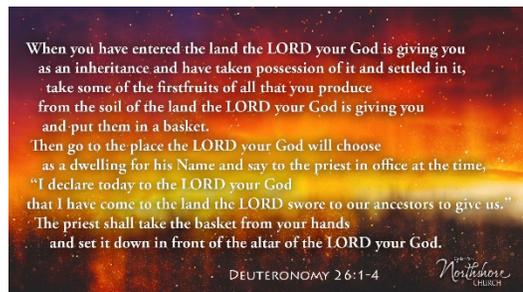
¹ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 26:5–10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Deuteronomy 26 is about *worship*. I don't know what you think of when it comes to the word *worship*... perhaps it is the moments we sing together on Sunday morning's like this, or perhaps you think of the whole Sunday morning service as worship (this worship hour), or it could even be that you think of several moments throughout a typical week as worship, or even your whole life as worship. But from an Old Testament perspective, worship is giving... sacrificial giving.



After wandering in the desert, before they took possession of the land God had promised, Moses sent the People of God with these instructions:

When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, ² take some of the firstfruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket.



Notice the mixture of **grace** and **work**.

Grace is evident in that the offering is the product of the land that God provided. Without God's provision, there would be no offering. Yet... the People had to take possession of the land and settle in it; it was no small thing that cost both blood and treasure. They planted and harvested; there was work intermingled with God's grace. There would not have been an offering without God's grace... but there would also not have been an offering without the work of the people.

And then there is this matter of firstfruits. An offering of firstfruits is an offering that demonstrates **faith**. Why? Because there is no guarantee of second fruits, or third fruits, or anything beyond firstfruits.

A number of us here at Northshore are tithers, routinely giving 10% of our income to God's work here at the church. It is a pretty straightforward plan. We get paid. We take ten percent out and give it. I think most give corresponding to pay periods, some monthly, or quarterly; I know a few people who save it up and give annually. While I have known a few to give annually at the end of the year; I don't think I know anyone who gives first... at the beginning of the year.

I get paid twice a month. It is hard to imagine a *firstfruits* offering... giving my first two and a half checks each year. What about January's mortgage? What if I get canned in July?

But that is the offering prescribed here... firstfruits... an offering of great faith.

We had 30 guys here Saturday morning for breakfast; my friend Merlin spoke. He observed that when Jesus fed the 5,000 with just a few loaves and fishes, ***the one who gave*** those loaves and fishes demonstrated great faith. In the natural, that one could have just thrown his lunch away. But in the midst of what could quickly turn into a hungry mob, that one gave up what he had, putting it in the hands of Jesus with no real guarantees... just faith that Jesus would provide.

It occurs to me that when it comes to God's miracles of provision, He often says to us, "You go next." When we partner with God in these ways, we only bring a little compared to His much... yet He routinely says, "You go next." God draws steps of faith from us to build our faith.

I've been a fundraiser for much of my adult life, mostly raising funds for Christian higher education. It is common that some funders insist on giving the *last* money for a project. There are some very large, well known foundations that will only give the last money. That is awesome; every gift is appreciated. But those who will only give the last money are sending a clear message; they have doubts. Those who will give the *first* money... those are the ones that are the most encouraging because not only are they giving funds, they are demonstrating confidence and trust that the recipient will do what they said they would do.

A gift of firstfruits is a gift that is given with confidence, trust, and faith.

The text goes on to say:

Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name³ and say to the priest in office at the time, "I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us."⁴ The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God.²

² *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 26:1-4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

And then the worshipper recounts their history.

Our confidence, trust, and faith is built when we *audit* the past.

If we want a bank to trust us, for example, they look at our credit report before they make the loan. If they find that we have a history of making payments on time, that builds trust. They want proof that we have capacity and the pattern of behavior to pay back the loan.

How is God's *credit report*? Can we trust Him to perform today and tomorrow based on what we know about His past performance? Maybe you aren't so sure based on your own experiences yet... but what about your ancestors, or your friends. One of the great things about being part of a congregation like Northshore is that all you have to do is ask *out loud* and there will be many who can recount the Lord's faithfulness over the years.

God's great faithfulness, demonstrated through our own histories and the histories of those around us, builds our faith for what He can and will do.

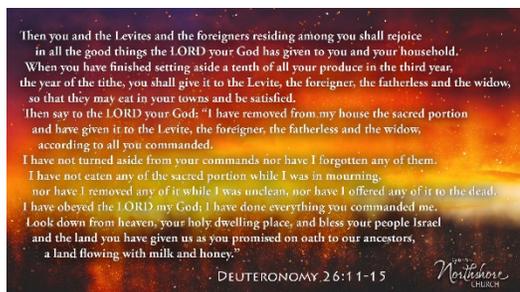
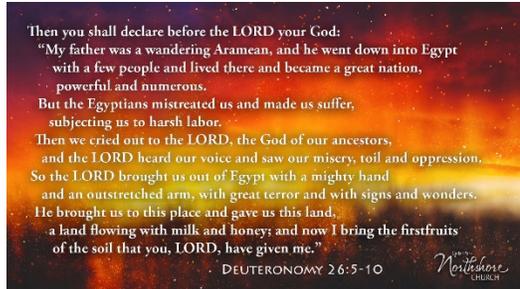
¹¹ Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household.

Second Corinthians chapter 9 says that "God loves a cheerful giver." God loves the stingy and cranky too (God loves us all)...

but it is easy to see how God would delight in the cheerful, generous giving of His People.

This is what is described here. The *Levites* rejoice because they were the ministers, relying on the giving of God's People for both their work and their livelihood. The foreigners rejoice as they are caught up in the celebration, and the blessing. But most importantly, the giver rejoices.

Others benefit too, as we see in the following verses:



¹² When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.

This speaks to the practicality of God's economy. The tithe is the Lord's (the sacred portion as it is described in verse 13), a consistent offering... but here there is mention of the *third* year. This isn't a matter of the tithe only being given in the third year; it is a matter of the tithe being for a special purpose. This third year was designated for the support of the Levites (the ministers) and benevolence. The other two thirds was dedicated to the work and worship at the Tabernacle and Temple.

A mark of the People of God from the beginning that endures even today is that we care for the needs of those who serve in ministry, and we care for the poor. Sure we build buildings and run programs and pay all the bills that go with such thing, but a really big chunk of what we give supports the people who devote their lives to the work, and the people who desperately need our help.

¹³ Then say to the LORD your God: "I have removed from my house the sacred portion and have given it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, according to all you commanded. I have not turned aside from your commands nor have I forgotten any of them. ¹⁴ I have not eaten any of the sacred portion while I was in mourning, nor have I removed any of it while I was unclean, nor have I offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the LORD my God; I have done everything you commanded me. ¹⁵ Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel and the land you have given us as you promised on oath to our ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey." ³

Look down from heaven and bless. It leads us to a question: Do we give to get? I think our text makes it clear that this is not so... that it all starts with God's grace and provision, and we give out of acknowledgement and gratitude.

Our usual way of thinking of things is that we are only rewarded for good behavior, that blessing is a result of obedience. We think of our relationship with God like a business; we think in terms of transactions. We obey and sacrifice, and He pays us back with blessing.

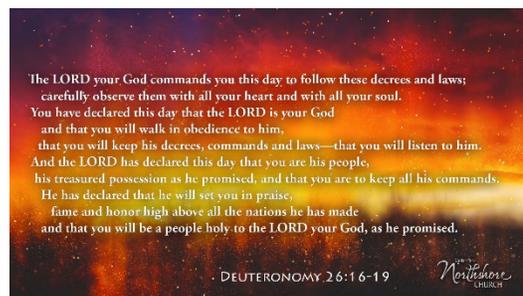
³ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 26:10–15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

But that is not the message of the Bible; that is not the Gospel. It all starts with God's grace. We cannot earn His favor. We can't buy it because our sin-stained currency is no good. All we can do is respond in faith. And when we do, there is blessing. Our sacrifices are met with God's blessings; our generosity is answered with God's generosity. Do we think we can out give God?

Does God need our treasure? Does He even demand our treasure or extract our treasure whether we like it or not?

God is interested in treasure; here these final verses:

¹⁶The LORD your God commands you this day to follow these decrees and laws; carefully observe them with all your heart and with all your soul. ¹⁷You have declared this day that the LORD is your God and that you will walk in obedience to him, that you will keep his decrees, commands and laws—that you will listen to him. ¹⁸And the LORD has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands. ¹⁹He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised. ⁴



God is interested in treasure. You are His treasure... His treasured possession.

This is the way the work of God is supported, but what is most treasured is not the stuff; the treasure is the relationship.

It is not about paying dues or earning favor.

It is not even about the need. We tend to give when we are convinced that there is a worthwhile need; there is no mention of that here. I've had plenty of people tell me, both in my work as a fundraiser and in my work as pastor, that the reason they don't give is they don't think we need it. What does that have to do with anything? I guess we do need it, but where do we see in Scripture that the main reason that we give is to meet a need? The main need we need to meet with our giving is our need to worship.

⁴ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 26:16–19). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

As we move into these last moments of our time together this morning, time that we have reserved for Communion. Allow me to make this observation: Jesus is God's firstfruit. He is described as firstfruit in 1 Corinthians chapter 15.



Jesus is the firstfruit in that He is God's first and best. We are never the first giver. God gives His creation. God gives His blessing and provision. And...

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.⁵

God calls us to be givers by being the preeminent giver.

Furthermore, Jesus is the firstfruit in that He is the promise, the *down payment* if you will, of future blessing. Because Jesus conquered death and lives eternally, so will we who follow Him in belief.

So let's come to the Table today.

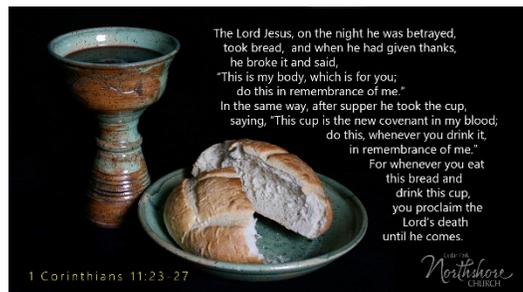
As we celebrate and receive again God's gift, Jesus, the firstfruit, let's consider our giving.

Perhaps you're a giver, but not so cheerful.

Perhaps God is calling you to give something more, something of your best where that is treasure, time, or talent.

Perhaps you're not a giver and today is a day get started. I know that you'll likely never give \$10 until you give \$1. Get out your phone and give right now if you'd like.

And above it all, let's give God our hearts, our plans, and our thanks.



⁵ The New International Version. (2011). (Jn 3:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.