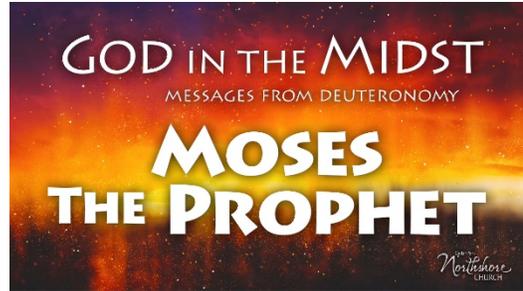


Deuteronomy 27-30: Moses the Prophet

We started a series from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy almost a year ago. In fact, it will be a year next month because we started it on May 7... and right now I have things scheduled so that we will finish this series on May 6, just *under the wire* for a year.



Of course it hasn't been one of those every-Sunday sorts of series... but rather a series that we have *peppered in* from time to time among other series.

We've called the series *God in the Midst*. It is a final sermon from Moses to God's People, just before they were about to possess the land God had promised. With the leadership of Moses, God delivered His People from the tyranny of Egypt's Pharaoh. But the generation that left Egypt did not possess the land God promised; rather than being filled with faith in the God who delivered them and promised a land flowing with milk and honey, they feared. So Moses led that generation for 40 years, until they passed away, and a new generation could receive God's promise. Before that new generation commenced with God's plan, Moses had these final words, contained in the Book of Deuteronomy... instructions on what it means to live as a people with *God in the Midst*.

We want to be a people with *God in the Midst*... so there are lessons for us here in these pages.

Today I have in mind to look at four chapters of Deuteronomy, under the title *Moses the Prophet*. Moses was a great leader, a sort of king and judge and even military tactician, **and** He was also a prophet.

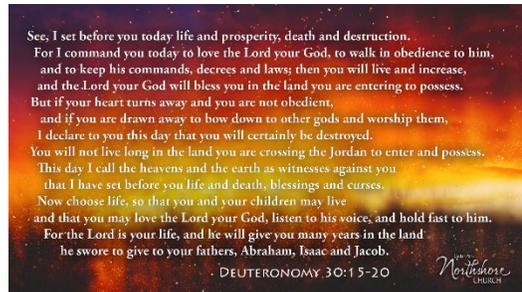
It seems we often associate the word **prophet** with someone who can foretell the future... a **seer** who can tell us what will happen tomorrow, or next year, or maybe many years in the future. But in the Bible, a prophet is characterized as something more than a mere fortuneteller. While **foretelling** might be part of the role of a prophet in the Bible, **forthtelling** is more prominent on the *job description*. In the Bible, a **prophet speaks on behalf of God**. When there is *foretelling*, among the *forthtelling*, it is because the prophet is delivering the Word of God... and God, of course, stands outside of time and knows our future.

Chapters 27-30 are marked with **forthtelling**... Moses speaking to the People on behalf of God. The final verses in chapter 30 provide a summary; let's read it together.

¹⁵ See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶ For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹ This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. ¹



If we are not careful, I think it is easy for us to fundamentally misunderstand what Moses proclaimed on God's behalf.

I would hope that most Christians understand and believe that the **Gospel** is all about God's **grace**; we cannot **earn** God's favor or any part of our salvation, that we have right standing before our holy God only because of what Jesus accomplished, making the way for us when we believe and trust Him.

But I think we Christians often get it wrong when we think that this was some *invention* of the New Testament... that grace is only found *post Easter*. We seem to think that before Jesus there was no grace, just the impossible-to-fulfil Law... a transaction based on obedient behavior spelled out in the Old Testament.

If we carry that mindset into the reading of the text before us, we see the transaction:

- If we love God, obey Him, and keep His commands, decrees, and laws, then God will bless us, but

¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 30:15–20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

- If we turn away and are not obedient, then we will be destroyed.

We read this, and much of the Old Testament, as this simple transaction... *coin operated*. We plunk in obedience and out dumps the jackpot. And if we don't, we suffer.

This is not an accurate understanding of the Truth; it is a lie meant to destroy us. Do you know that there is a **battle** raging... a battle in which evil is intent to destroy people like you and me. It is a **spiritual** battle; the enemy is spiritual, and the enemy is after our souls.

The devil's favorite weapon is lying. Sin entered the world through a lie, that God was somehow keeping something from His people. Even though God had provided a paradise, Adam and Eve believed the devil's lie and brought destruction on themselves, and for us who follow.

The devil's lie in the Garden was "God doesn't love you; he's keeping something from you." Here's another favorite lie of his: "God doesn't love you; you have to **earn** it." Believing that lie (like so many of us do) inevitably leads to one of two destructive results:

1. We think we can **earn** it (so we are consumed with the effort), or
2. We think we must, but can't **earn** it (so we give up).

We read a passage like this and think "OK... perhaps I can get it together and follow the rules. I can prove that I'm worthy of God's love and favor." So we turn inward, and devote our attention and energy to proving how holy we can be.

Or we read a passage like this and think "there is no hope." So we give up. Perhaps it is because we simply can't make the grade. Or perhaps it is because we interpret our circumstances as evidence that we have already failed the test.

But examine the text and ask "is it transactional?" Is this text prescriptive or descriptive? Is it a proclamation that prescribes the conditions of the deal, or is it merely a text that describes reality? When I read it carefully, I'm not seeing a transaction.

One way to detect a transaction (cause and effect) is with a pair of statements like **if-then**. When it comes to God's blessing in this text, notice that there is no **if**. I suppose one could argue that it is *implied*, and some translations do put an **if** in there. But I think the translation I have on the screen agrees with the most reliable translations, there is no **if**... just a **then** that describes blessing.

I think there is no **if** in this passage when it comes to God's blessing because blessing does not start with our behavior. **Blessing is not rooted in our behavior. The foundation for God's blessing is the Grace of God.**

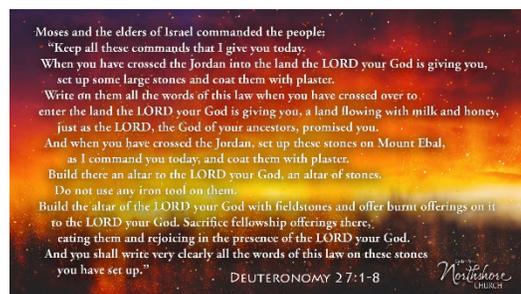
Just as God provided all of Creation, every blessing, in the beginning, the Grace of God is the foundation of every blessing now.

We understand from the Creation narrative in Genesis that His most prized creation is the one made in His own image, the creatures He designed for fellowship with Him; humans are His most prized creation. Yet He did not **start** by creating humans and then rewarding them based on their behavior; He created everything else first. God took every first step, not as a response to anything we did or could have done; He provided everything, then made his favorite, us humans, last (saving the woman for the very last; *draw your own conclusions*).

The same holds true in the circumstances surrounding our text. Here are God's People, on the edge of the land they are about to possess. Where do we read that the Promised Land was ever a *payment* for good behavior? We simply don't. The Promised Land was God's provision for the People He chose to demonstrate His grace and faithfulness. The land, and the prosperity, and the victories, and the provision were all a matter of God's grace.

This is the way Christopher Wright put it: the law is grounded in grace.²

He was specifically referencing Deuteronomy 27, the beginning of our text.



² Wright, C. J. H. (2012). *Deuteronomy*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.) (p. 276). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: “Keep all these commands that I give you today. ² When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the LORD your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. ³ Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you. ⁴ And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today, and coat them with plaster. ⁵ Build there an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones.³

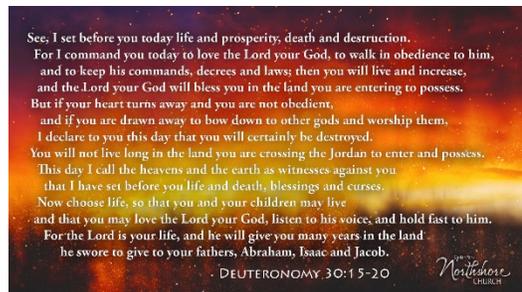
As soon as they crossed the Jordan River, into the Promised Land, the people were to **mark** the land with these memorials of the Law, and altars for worship. What was the most significant witness of God’s faithfulness in this scene? Was it the stones that bore the Word of God? Or was it the altars built for worship? It was neither. It was the Land itself. God’s faithfulness demonstrated by the Land was sounding the chorus we would sing thousands of years later: Great is Thy Faithfulness!

Here’s more of what Wright has to say about it:

The land itself will be an even greater monument to God’s grace than the stones erected upon it. The stones will bear witness to God’s covenant law. The land they stand on will bear witness to God’s covenant faithfulness. Even in physical symbolism, the law is grounded in grace.⁴

Grounded in grace... the Law is meaningless unless it is grounded first in the grace of God. Grace comes first. Faith comes first. God’s love comes first. Trusting Him comes first. God’s grace is far more substantive and expansive than any law given as a response to that grace.

There is no *up-front* payment from us.
God is the provider; His covenant with us
is all based on His provision, His grace,
His love and action toward us.



³ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 27:1–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ Wright, C. J. H. (2012). *Deuteronomy*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.) (p. 276). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

I've been thinking about it like this. It seems that there are a couple of approaches when it comes to **teachers**. We've all been in classes, earning grades. I have a couple of degrees... so I've spent *maybe too much* time in classrooms. There are some teachers that make it clear that we are starting at **zero** with them... that to get the grade we are going to need to impress... to get the **A** we're going to need to really impress. And then there are others who start with the **A** (we have some teachers with us today... I'm not going to ask which kind of teacher you are). There are those that make it clear that what they require is doable... and that if we'll simply stick with the program, and apply ourselves, that **A** will remain ours.

Which kind is God? Is God the kind that starts at zero with the impossible task of earning the top grade? Or is God the kind that starts with the blessing of the top grade, and the only way it will be less is by our action? Is God the kind that starts with abundant blessing that only He can provide?

It seems that our text indicates that God is more like the later.

I don't have it on the screen, but Deuteronomy 30:11 says it plainly:

¹¹ Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.⁵

When we believe the Gospel and trust God, blessing is ours to enjoy. It is up to us to obey and enjoy God's blessing. Obedience is the means of *appropriating* God's grace and blessing, not the means of *deserving* it. Obedience is how we enjoy God's blessing, not earn it.

God's blessing on God's people is already *there* in the very fact that they are God's people at all. It is intrinsic to the promise to Abraham and to the covenant relationship. Blessing is the prior reality of God's grace. It is there to be enjoyed, but can be enjoyed only by living in God's way in the land God is giving them. Obedience, therefore, like faith, is the means of *appropriating* God's grace and blessing, not the means of *deserving* it.⁶

So we see that the **if-then** statements come with **not** enjoying God's blessing. If our hearts turn away from God, if we choose disobedience, then we are actually choosing destruction.

¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.⁷

⁵ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 30:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ Wright, C. J. H. (2012). *Deuteronomy*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.) (pp. 280–281). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

⁷ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 30:17–18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The pages that precede these verses, chapters 27-29, spell out blessings and curses... and we might notice that there are more **curses** listed than blessings. What is up with that?

Scholars have noted that the form of Deuteronomy is similar to the form of a **treaty**. It is a sort of **contract**.

I was reviewing a contract last week, specifically the lease that we need to renew with Creekside Church, a Korean congregation that meets here on Sunday afternoons. It is a fairly simple arrangement. We allow a congregation to use our space when we are not on Sunday afternoons, and they pay a little rent. But since a lawyer put together the lease, there are several pages in the contract. Like any contract, there are large sections of detailed descriptions on what will happen should the agreement *go sideways*. There are descriptions of penalties and remedies and how disagreements will be negotiated and such. Word-for-word... there are more negative words than positive. In my experience, that is just how such contracts are.

Why so much *negative* in a contract? Simple. The assumption is that all will go well; we don't need contingencies and remedies and such when all is well. Contract language is mostly there for when things are not going well; contract language is there to anticipate problems and describe the consequences of not *living up* to the deal.

So if Deuteronomy is like a contract, then of course, word-for-word, there is going to be more negative than positive, more curse than blessing.

Blessing is the assumption and expectation, the contract language is there in case things *go sideways*.

In the case of Israel, the description of what could go wrong and the consequences were **foretelling**. From our perspective (when what was future when Moses preached is now our past) we can see how the curses described in chapter 28 happened, just as prophesied. Just as God's People lived for a time under blessing, they also bore the consequences of their disobedience.

Yet, even though they were disobedient, God's plan was still in place and He would accomplish His purposes through His people. In these chapters we also find God's promise that He would gather His People back, restoring Israel to the Land, and blessing all people through them.

Just as the generation that first refused to possess the land could not thwart God's plan, nor could their descendants who would also turn from God. God's grace is foundational, and God's grace always proves to be victorious in the end.

Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back.⁵ He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.⁶ The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.⁸

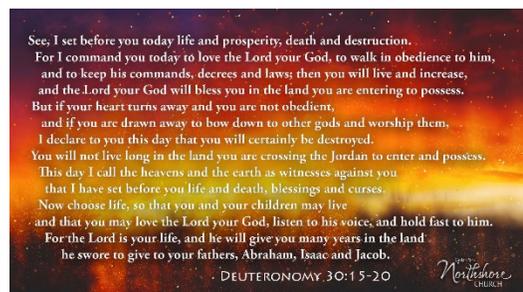
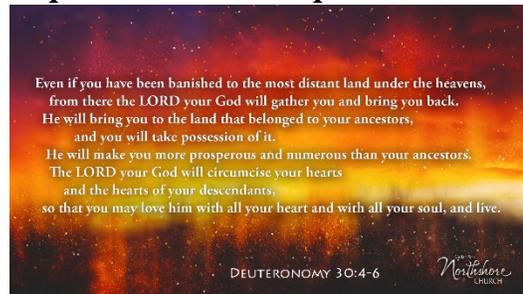
Here is the conclusion:

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life⁹

Now choose life!

God's grace will be victorious. He will have a People that are His own, enjoying His blessing. Choose *that* life.

We can't earn God's favor; salvation is a matter of faith alone. It is by His grace that we are saved... no question about it. But we sure do have a lot to do with how we are going to enjoy this life. Our choices have everything to do with how we are going to enjoy His blessing.



⁸ The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 30:4–10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁹ The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 30:19–20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Here it is simply put:
believe God and act like it.

Receive God's grace and respond with a life that lives up to God grace. Fully enjoy God's grace.

Choose life, so that you and your children may live; the consequences of our choices reach beyond us, to our families and those who come after.

Choose life so that you may love the Lord your God; when we are choosing His ways, our hearts more easily align with His.

Choose life so that we can hear and listen to His voice. The more we listen the more we hear; as we walk with Him our steps are more clearly marked out, leading to blessing.

Choose life so that we can hold fast to Him. We grab Him, and He, in His great love and power, grabs hold of us.

The Lord is our life!

