

Advance!
Deuteronomy 1:5-18

Introduction

Isaac Newton's first law of motion (known as the law of inertia) stated that "an object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion unless acted upon by another force." This morning, we are going to witness an object at rest being set in motion by God Himself...

Deuteronomy 1:5-18

⁵ East of the Jordan in the territory of Moab, Moses began to expound this law, saying:

⁶ The LORD our God said to us at Horeb, "You have stayed long enough at this mountain. ⁷ Break camp and advance into the hill country of the Amorites; go to all the neighboring peoples in the Arabah, in the mountains, in the western foothills, in the Negev and along the coast, to the land of the Canaanites and to Lebanon, as far as the great river, the Euphrates. ⁸ See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land the LORD swore he would give to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to their descendants after them."

⁹ At that time I said to you, "You are too heavy a burden for me to carry alone. ¹⁰ The LORD your God has increased your numbers so that today you are as numerous as the stars in the sky. ¹¹ May the LORD, the God of your ancestors, increase you a thousand times and bless you as he has promised! ¹² But how can I bear your problems and your burdens and your disputes all by myself? ¹³ Choose some wise, understanding and respected men from each of your tribes, and I will set them over you."

¹⁴ You answered me, "What you propose to do is good."

¹⁵ So I took the leading men of your tribes, wise and respected men, and appointed them to have authority over you—as commanders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens and as tribal officials. ¹⁶ And I charged your judges at that time, "Hear the disputes between your people and judge fairly, whether the case is between two Israelites or between an Israelite and a foreigner residing among you. ¹⁷ Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of anyone, for judgment belongs to God. Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it." ¹⁸ And at that time I told you everything you were to do.

Background

Last week, we considered how Deuteronomy 1:1-5 served as an introduction to the whole book of Deuteronomy. We learned about the consequences of sin, the patience of God, our need for God's instruction, and the importance of recalling God's faithfulness in the victories that He has already won in our lives. All of this instruction was serving the purpose of preparing us to enter into God's promises through faith in Christ as the People of God.

This morning, we are continuing our study of Deuteronomy by entering into a historical review of the life of Israel prior to entering the Promised Land. God is going to set His people in motion as they advance into the land. Last week, I briefly summarized these events, but now, over the course of the next few weeks, we are going to slow down and consider what the story of Israel's history teaches us about our own journey that God has called us to as followers of Christ.

Exposition

Before I draw out the parallels and applications for us from this passage, I want you to understand why and how it is possible for Christians to interpret and apply Old Testament passages that were originally written to an Old Covenant audience. Consider Paul's words in **1 Corinthians 10:13**, where we are told that "*Israel's history* happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come." Elsewhere, in **Romans 15:4**, Paul wrote, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope." These Old Testament words were recorded for our benefit that we might be encouraged and endure as followers of Christ.

Thus, what we encounter in Deuteronomy 1:5-18, which recounts events from Israel's history, exist as examples and warning to us. For, as we turn our attention to Deuteronomy 1:5-18, we see a people who are being commanded and organized to advance as the people of God in order to inherit the promise of God.

As His People Advance,

I. God blesses us with His Presence that we might believe in His Power. (Vv. 5-6a)

Look with me at the beginning of Deuteronomy 1:6, which reads "The LORD our God said to us at Horeb (Mt. Sinai)..." Imagine what the imagery of Horeb evoked among the people of Israel. The stories that these children (now adults) must have heard about the voice of God from the mountain. The God who miraculously delivered the people from Egyptian bondage. The God who provided manna and meat from the heavens while they sojourned through the wilderness. This God was the LORD over all. He was no regional deity like the neighboring nations. He was the LORD most high. Furthermore, this God is not just "a god" or merely "the God," but the "LORD **our** God." To evoke the covenant name of God, "the LORD," reminded the people of His presence among them, and with His presence comes His power (Exodus 33:14-23).

When we read about this blessing of God's presence and its relationship to belief in His power, I cannot help but think about Christ's Great Commission, which is recorded in **Matthew 28:18-20**. It reads

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Notice how Jesus relates His power to His presence. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." The One who is with us is also the One who is able, who is powerful (Isn't that good news?). He is blessing us with His presence that we might believe that His power is with us as we advance, as we move forward as God's people. Awareness of His presence and power are foundational to our willingness to move forward as God's people. (See Exodus 33:15; Cf. Hebrews 13:5)

As His People Advance,

II. God prepares us with His Word that we might progress toward His Will. (Vv. 6b-7a)

Look at the end of verse 6 and beginning of verse 7: “Said to us, ‘You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Break camp and advance...’” Based on what we know from the books of Exodus and Numbers, the people stayed at Horeb for about a year. During that time, they received instruction from Moses in light of the revelation of God’s Word on Mt. Sinai. God was preparing His people with His Word so that they might move, that they might progress forward, toward the fulfillment of His will for them. That they might enter into the fulness of His promises. The people had work to accomplish. They had been assured that God was with them and that His power was direct toward their success. It was time to break camp and advance. No more waiting. No more looking up into the sky at the top of the mountain. There was a call to fulfill.

We see a very similar scene in the book of Acts, which recounts what happens with the disciples following Jesus’ great commission. Jesus tells them that He has been given all authority and that He will be with them until the end of the age. In Acts 1:6-9, we read that Jesus is going to send His power through the Holy Spirit, and as a result, the disciples will “be His witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Then, according to Acts 1:9, Jesus was taken up before their eyes. And how did the disciples respond? Verse 10 tells us, “They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going.” That’s pretty understandable, right? But then what happens? Two men dressed in white stood beside them and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

In other words, “Hey fellas, did you not hear what Jesus said? He’s taught you what you need to know. He’s sending the Holy Spirit to prepare you to be His witnesses, not so that you will stand here looking into the sky, wondering about when and how He is going to return. Let’s go! There’s work to be done!” Or, put it another way, “break down the camp and advance.” Don’t get comfortable here.

I wonder how many of you are waiting until the “right time” to “break down the camp and advance?” How many want to sit and wonder, debating about the when and how of Jesus’ return when He has given you His Spirit to be His witnesses in your homes, at your jobs, in your neighborhood? How many of us are waiting to trust and obey, saying things like:

Once I get a chance, then I will invite my neighbor to church or share the gospel with my co-worker...

Once I get this much money saved or get this promotion at work, then I will start to give...

Once I get past this difficult season of work, then I will start communing with God again through His Word and prayer...

Once I get a few more things accomplished around the house, then I will start attending church more regularly again...

Once I get some more time, then I will volunteer to help in the Kid’s Ministry at church...

Brothers and Sisters, we can play the “once I get” game until our dying breath. We are experts are rationalizing away our need to obey right now! The devil doesn’t have to makes us commit heinous, publicly disastrous, instantly-life-destroying sins if he can just make us content to put off obedience until another day. As C. S. Lewis stated in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, “the safest road to hell is the gradual one.” In fact, we might even be so deceived that we begin to think that our hesitance to act is an example of humility. I can almost hear it: “I’m not ready to serve as a volunteer at church. Maybe in a few years when I’ve learned more.”

Yet, such responses are like disciples insisting to look into the air or the Israelites insisting on remaining camped at Mt. Sinai: they ignore what has clearly been revealed in God’s Word regarding the His people moving forward. The time for staring into the sky and standing at the foot of the mountain has passed. It’s time to advance as the people of God in trust and obedience.

As His People Advance,

III. God reassures us with His Promise that we might rest in His Providence. (Vv. 7b-8)

As the Israelites advanced, Moses reports that they will be travelling through different lands. In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Telford Work, regarding the regions mentioned in these verses, writes, “The Amorites live in the heart of future Israel, but the Arabah is Edomite territory, the Negev is a desert waste, the coastal lands are Philistine, and Lebanon and the Euphrates become troublesome borders. God is calling Israel to a life of trust in all situations – better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness or health.” What reassure the people was they advance on the Promised land is the promise of God in verse 8: See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land the LORD swore he would give to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to their descendants after them.

As God reassures them with His promise and details the types of situations that they will find themselves in, it allows the people to find rest and peace in His providence. To speak of God’s providence is to speak of what John Piper calls, “God’s wise and purposeful sovereignty.” In other words, God declares the end from the beginning. He is working out all thing for His purpose. He does not rule over the world in an arbitrary manner. There is purpose in His plan, which even includes our pain. If it did not, how could we ever agree with a passage like Romans 8:28, which tells us that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose?”

As the Heidelberg Catechism, in answer to the question: “How do you understand the Providence of God?”, states

The almighty, everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were, by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.

Obviously, this is incredibly important for those who are moving forward, who are advancing on the promises of God. We need to be reminded that when things get hard in our lives, it is not because God has fallen asleep or lost control. When we find ourselves wandering through our own Negev, a desert wasteland, we need to be reassured of God's promises that tells us that He is with us and that everything we go through in this life has meaning, our suffering and pain is not without purpose, and that He WILL accomplish the purpose that He intends for His glory and our good.

The fact that we are passing through hard times in foreign land is not evidence that God does not care, but rather that God has something far better than this life to offer us. An eternal weight of glory is waiting for all who persevere and press on toward "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). As Billy Graham once declared, "The will of God will not take us where the grace of God cannot sustain us."

When we live with an awareness of this promise reassured in our hearts, we can rest in his providence, knowing that nothing will ever come our way due to God's inattention or lack of care. As our heavenly Father, He is at work, even when we pass through the dry and foreign lands, and He will bring us safely home to glory!

As His People Advance,

IV. God equips us with His Strength that we might exult in His Salvation. (Vv. 9-13)

As we move from the first few verses that address the call to advance, we now come to some of the logistics of the move. As God faithfully fulfilled His promise, the fulfillment of the promise strained the logistics of the mission. There were too many people with too many problems for Moses to address all of the issues. So, what does God do? Though the increase of the people results in an obstacle to be addressed, God also provides for the obstacle to be overcome. Or, to put it another way, the blessing of God that brings the obstacle (so many people) also supplies the solution to the obstacle (wise, respected, and understanding men). There was provision in the midst of the blessing. God gives what His people need, even when the need results from His blessing.

As the church, there are times when we experience similar situations. Sometimes we encounter needs that have resulted from God's blessing on us. For instance, God has blessed our church with dozens of families with children and students. This is God's blessing! We should not begrudge the sound of babies crying or little children running through the atrium with loud screams of glee. (Parents, your kids can cry, scream, laugh, squeal, and run all they want here!) God has done this, and we should thank Him for it. Yet, with an increase of children, there is also a need for volunteers and finances to care for and adequately staff our Kid's Ministry.

As a congregation right now, as a result of COVID, we are weak and somewhat disoriented. Our finances, our volunteer numbers, and our attendance is not what they were over a year ago. There is no shame in acknowledging these realities. When Moses was overwhelmed, feeling weak, he didn't hide it. He confessed it. Admitting weakness and need is fundamental to seeking God for help. It is good to be confronted with our limitations because it exposes our need for God.

But what a wonderful promise that we have that *when we are weak, our God is strong*. Could it be that God in His kindness has stripped away the comfort of surplus that we grew accustomed to so that He might demonstrate His incredible power in this moment of need? Could it be that God has brought us to this moment as a congregation that He might raise up the wise and understanding servants who will say, “I believe that God is calling me in this moment of need to step and meet the needs that have resulted from God’s blessing?”

Maybe God has blessed you with a surplus of finances or a surplus of time that you could use to meet needs in our congregation? Or maybe God has not blessed you with a surplus, but you can tell that even now He is calling you to give sacrificial of your time and finances to help raise up the next generation that God has blessed our congregation with?

I believe that what we need has already been provided. I believe the manpower and the money that are necessary for discipling the kids that God has blessed Copperfield Church with is already here. God has already provided what we need, what remains is whether or not we as God’s people will stand up like the wise and understanding among the people of Israel, who aided Moses, and commit to serving God in the strength that He provides so that we might exult in His salvation.

When we step-up and serve in the strength that God equips us with, we will exult in His salvation, proclaiming His greatness while acknowledging that God will provide everything that we need exactly when we need it for His glory and our good!

As His People Advance,

V. God organizes us for His Purpose that we might operate according to His Plan. (Vv. 13-18)

If the people are ever going to enter into the land, they must do so in a manner that is organized. In the mercy of God, Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, share some common-sense wisdom regarding how he might organize the people of Israel. Through recognizing other leaders in their respective communities and tribes and delegating certain responsibilities to them, Moses’ leadership would be able to function with greater efficiency and effectiveness. The leaders that were to be selected had to value the righteousness and justice of God while fearing God and refusing to show partiality.

There are many ways that such a principle of organization applies to the church of Jesus Christ. One example comes from the book of James, where the Christians are commanded to not show partiality to the rich when the poor are in attendance at church. (James 2:1-13)

Another example comes from the way that 1 Corinthians 6 speaks of the need for churches to be able to judge and handle civil disputes amongst themselves without having to resort to the courts of the land. (It is important to note here that Paul would not have believed it was right for congregation to handle matters of criminal acts internally. The authority to judge criminal acts belongs to the state, not the church.)

Another example of how this principle of organization and operation related to God's purpose and plan for the church is seen in the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. The body of Christ has been equipped with individual members who all play vital functions in the church for its edification. (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

And as the church is organized correctly in order to fulfill God's purpose in the world according to His plan, we, like the Israelites advancing forward, will function with greater efficiency and effectiveness, sharing the burden of ministry as ministers of the great gospel, so that the whole world will hear the great news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

Conclusion

As the people of God, we have been called to move forward, to advance, to run the race that is set before us as those who want to win the prize. We have not been called to apathy, nor have we been called to advance alone. If we are objects at rest, God intends to set us in motion!

From this morning's passage, we have been reminded of our need for God's presence, Word, promise, strength, and purpose as we believe, progress, rest, exult, and operate as people engaged in the work that He has called us.

What is that work? It is the work of announcing the good news of what God has accomplished for our salvation through Jesus Christ. This is the work to which we have been called as the people of God. God's power is with us! His will is clear! Though the path may be difficult at times, His providence is good! His salvation is sure! And His plan will be fulfilled!

And you know the beautiful thing? God is still inviting people like you to be a part of this work. In fact, Jesus Christ came into this world to deliver you from your slavery and bring you into good land of God's promises so that you too might participate in this plan.

It's interesting. As we read this passage this morning, there was a glimpse of our own redemption. In verse 8, we read, "See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land..." You see, the land, in one sense, already belong to the people of Israel because the LORD "had given" to them. Yet, they are commanded, "Go in and take possession." In many ways, this language is a picture of Christ's work on behalf of sinners.

The apostle Paul talks about this in 2 Corinthians 5, when He is dealing with how sinners are reconciled to God. Paul tells us, "God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them." This is the equivalent of saying, "See, I have given you this land." In Christ, God has accomplished everything necessary for our salvation. "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God." God has done it. Yet, one thing remains, "Be reconciled to God." "Go in and take possession" of what God has accomplished for you in Jesus Christ!

If you have not taken possession of the reconciliation that God has accomplished in Christ for you, then today, right now, I urge you, on behalf of Christ: Be reconciled to God. Advance! Move forward! The time of waiting has come and gone. Today is the day of your salvation.