

LOOKING BACKWARD

Deuteronomy 8:2

Intro: The new year seems to be always a time when people are inclined to look back over the past. We reflect on the events of the past year. Business take inventory at this time of the year. And comparisons are made with previous years so that the health of the business can be determined. And such inventories are made with the hope that business has been good and that the prospects are there that it will be better in the new year.

Many people do the same thing with respect to their lives. We “take stock,” so to speak. And this is especially true of Christians. We look back over the past and mark especially how the Lord has been dealing with us. We all have to think of things that we wish we had not done, and things that we wish we had not said. But outstanding in all of our lives are the ways in which the Lord has blessed us, and the ways He has led us, and what He has taught us. None of us can undo the past, but we can learn from the past, and we the faithfulness of the Lord in spite of those times when we have not been faithful to Him.

The Bible encourages LOOKING BACKWARD. We have verses like Psa. 105:1-2 which tell us this:

- 1 O give thanks unto the LORD; call upon his name: make known his deeds among the people.
- 2 Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works.

We don't do this as much as we should. The Bible is really a record of what God has done in the past. Even the predictions which are made in Scripture as far as the future is concerned, were all made in the past. The Bible give us the history of creation. It traces God's dealing with His people from Adam down to Christ. And then from Christ to the end of the first century. All of Scripture declares “His wondrous works,” and we must know them, and speak of them, and give thanks to God for them.

But the passage that I want to consider in particular today is found in Deut. 8, verse 2. Moses was speaking to the whole nation just shortly before his own death, and he was seeking to prepare the people for the trials and testing which were before them as they entered the promised land, and then took possession of the land. And this is what he said to the people in this one verse, Deut 8:2:

And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led

thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldst keep his commandments, or no.

This verse has attracted the attention of the people of God, I am sure, from the time that it was first spoken, and then from the time that it was first written. The people were about to enter the promised land, and while Moses, Joshua, and Caleb were the only ones who started out on what was to be a forty-year journey, the way was well-known to all of them. And the record has been written and preserved for us to enjoy even today. The burden of Moses' message to the people of God he stated in one word:

I. "REMEMBER."

This turned out to be a very important word in this series of messages which Moses delivered to the children of Israel before his death and before the people entered the land. You will find it again *in the latter part of this chapter*, with its companion stated negatively, "forget not," found beginning with verse 11. To "remember" is to "forget not." (Read from verse 11 to verse 18.) You will see both words in 9:7. (Read.)

We all stand in the present, and can look in three directions. We can and should look at the present, but we must not forget the past, nor should we neglect the future. And I am speaking especially to those of us who, like the Israelites, are acquainted with the Lord.

We run into the word "remember," or "remembrance," in the observance of the Lord's Supper. We are not to forget the Lord, nor are we to forget what He has done to save us from our sins. Memory is a very important ability that we all have, and it can minister to us in countless ways. We remember those who used to be with us, but are now with the Lord. We remember good times that we have had in the past. Our memory also brings regrets to our minds, things which we would probably prefer to forget, but which have been planted indelibly upon our minds. And it is always sad when people lose their ability to remember.

But Moses was speaking of a very practical matter which ought to occupy the memory of the people he had led and for which he carried such a deep and abiding love in his heart. And he said that it had to do with remembering. If you want to know all that he said to his people, you will have to read the whole book, but first of all today I want you to notice this word, and I hope that our time in this verse today will cause you to notice the word as it appears in other parts of the Word of God—both "remember,"

and “forget not.”

But what at this particular point did he want them to remember?

II. WHAT THEY WERE TO REMEMBER.

You have it in the words, “all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness.”

Now we know that it should not have taken them forty years to make the journey from Egypt to Canaan, but it did! And it took them forty years because of their unbelief when the Lord wanted them to enter the land at Kadesh Barnea. You will find that account in Num. 13 and 14. And Moses himself was not permitted to enter the land because he disobeyed the Lord at Meribah by striking the rock to get water instead of speaking to the rock. So some of the events which they had to remember were not good, because they were times of disobedience, times when the people had disobeyed the Lord.

But I want you to pay particular attention to the way Moses referred to the past forty years. He put it all within the scope of the sovereignty of God, and described their history in the wilderness as “all the way [singular] which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness.” There was not a moment in their whole journey that the Lord was not leading them. He was not responsible for the many times they disobeyed the Lord and rebelled against Him, but He never ceased to lead, and never ceased to bless, never ceased to provide, and never ceased to protect His people. And so it was not a case of just remembering the bad things, but they were to remember what the Lord their God faithfully did for them and their parents all through those forty years.

Now as we apply this verse to our lives, the time is different with each one of us. With some of us it is more than forty years, with some, it is less, but the fact that the Lord has been leading remains the same.

Notice, too, that Moses did not speak of “the ways” [plural] that the Lord had led, but of “the way.” It was God’s plan to get His people to Canaan. In their case they all went the same way. God’s purpose even for all of us is not many ways (as we are going to see tonight), but one way. God’s varies His way with us at different time, but He never changes what His main purpose is.

Obviously if you and I are going to appreciate this verse, we need to know

that story that is recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, especially the first three. The bad parts have to do with the sins of the people, but the good parts, the truly amazing parts, have to do with “the way,” “all the way” that the Lord their God led them.

But why was it that the Lord wanted them to remember what He said? Was it just that he wanted them all to be historians? No, it was not that although the more we know about the history of God’s dealings with His people in any generation, the better off we will be. One of our great problems in the church of the Lord Jesus today is that as a general rule the people of God don’t know Bible history, nor do they know church history. If they did, they would not be so upset when they hear about election and particular redemption and the other doctrines of grace. But here in our text the Lord told them why He wanted them all to remember “all the way” that He had led them. And this bring us to:

III. THE PURPOSES OF THE LORD IN THE WAY OF THE LORD.

One of the problems that the children of Israel had, and one of the problems we have even today, with the way the Lord leads, is that we do not understand the purposes that the Lord has in the way He leads. We all get discouraged with unanswered prayer. We don’t understand why we go through many of the trials that we experience. The suffering of the people of God has always been a mystery to the Lord’s people. We often see how good people suffer, and evil people seem to get away with any evil thing that they want to do.

Well, this is where our Bibles help us, and this is how Moses was seeking to help his people—even help them deal with the fact that Moses, that godly man, was not going to be able to lead them into the land of Canaan.

Moses, speaking by the Holy Spirit, here gives us three purposes, or possibly four (depending upon how we related the last two to each other). Let me deal with each one briefly.

A. “To humble thee.”

Do you know what is your greatest problem in walking with the Lord? And do you know what is my greatest problem in my walking with the Lord? It is the same for all of us: **p-r-i-d-e**! *And have we learned that pride in one way or another is involved in every sin we commit?* You think about that, and I believe you will agree with me. The children of

Israel rebelled time and time again against the Lord because He did not do things their way. It is pride which makes us determined to have our own way, not only with God, but also with other people. When you hear someone say, “Nobody is going to tell me what to do,” they are declaring loud and clear that they have a proud heart. That is why people don’t want to be told that they are sinners and in need of a Savior. Their pride has blinded them to what their main problem is.

And God hates pride! The Bible tells us that “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble (James 4:6). And you find that again in 1 Pet. 5:5. And both of these statements are a quotation from Prov. 3:34 as it appears in the LXX.

God hates pride. Listen to Prov. 8:13:

The fear of the LORD is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.

Prov. 11:2 tells us:

When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom.

Read the prophetic books of the OT, and you will see that the great nations of the past all fell because of their pride. Prov. 16:18-19 tell us,
18 Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

19 Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.

Our Lord Jesus Christ issued the invitation,

28 Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls (Matt. 11:28-29).

What was God seeking to do in all of those circumstances which He brought His people into? He was seeking to show them what they really were—how foolish, how determined to have their own way, how selfish, how proud!

Jacob was giving evidence that the Lord had humbled him when he said in his prayer as he feared meeting Esau,

9 And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee:

10 I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the

truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands (Gen. 32:9-10).

That is the prayer of a humble man. The Lord led Jacob the way He did that Jacob might cease being a proud man, and become a humble man.

So let us remember that when God's way differs from ours, and we are inclined to feel resentful, resent is pride, and the Lord is leading us in a way to remove pride from our hearts. The Lord in His prayer in Gethsemane was manifesting the deepest humility when He said, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done" (Luke 22:42).

What was the Lord's second purpose with the Israelites?

B. "And to prove thee."

God never tempts us to sin, but He does test us. We have many illustrations of this in Scripture, but we all know something about this in our own experience.

Charles Simeon, who spent a good part of his life, perhaps most of it, ministering to students at Cambridge University in England, had this to say about the way the Lord tests us:

It is easy to obey God at some times and in some respects in comparison of what it is at other times and in other respects. God therefore puts us into a variety of situations, to try whether we will make him the supreme object of our regard in all. At some times he gives health, and affluence, and honor, to see whether we will suffer these things to draw away our hearts from Him, or whether we will improve them all for Him. At other times He lays affliction upon our loins, to see whether we will retain our love to Him, and bless Him as well when He takes away as when He gives. At some times He permits us to be sorely tempted by Satan, and by the corrupt propensities of our own hearts, to prove whether we will prefer the maintenance of a good conscience to any of the gratifications of sense. At other times He permits persecution to rage against us, that it may appear whether we will sacrifice our interests, and life itself, for Him. In fact, every change of circumstances is sent by Him, precisely as the command respecting the sacrificing of Isaac was sent to Abraham: by that command "God tempted [tested] him"; and by every circumstance of life He tempts [tests] us, to "prove whether we will obey his commandments or no" (Vol. 2, pp. 302, 303).

But let me hurry on to the third purpose.

C. “To know what was in thine heart.”

How easy it is for us to say good things to the Lord about our love for Him which we cannot back up when the tests and trials of life come along. Do you ever get angry with the Lord because He doesn't do what you want Him to do, or because He doesn't do something when you want Him to do it, or when it seems like He is not even paying any attention to you. When we look back over our lives up to the present, however many years that might be, do we see how the Lord through trials He brought into our lives was bringing things to the surface which we did not like to admit were there? He knows our hearts, and He wants us to see what is in our hearts so we will look to Him to make the changes that need to be made.

Peter is a perfect illustration of a man who did not really know what was in his own heart when He said, “Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death” (Luke 22:33). And what was the Lord's response? “I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me (Luke 22:34). Who was right? The Lord was, and Peter was to weep bitterly (see Luke 22:62) when in experience he learned that he didn't know as much about his heart as he thought that he did.

Have you seen things come out of your heart that you didn't know were there, things that made you ashamed of yourself? I don't like to say so, but I have.

And what was always the big test throughout the forty years that the children of Israel were wandering in the desert? It was **“whether thou wouldst keep his commandments, or not.”** That is always the test: the Lord's will, or mine!

Concl: Today as we approach the end of 1997, will you LOOK BACK-WARD with me? You look at your life, and I will look at mine. And perhaps we can see our needs even as we look at ourselves today, and the testing that we may be experiencing at this very moment. Remember that the Lord our God has placed us where we are. He knows our needs spiritually as well as physically and every other way. He is preparing us for better days when we will be better people, more holy, more humble, and more obedient to His will, joyfully obedient. It is not an accident that we are where we are, facing perhaps some hard situations. Let us look upon our trials and our blessings as especially designed for us because the

Lord is working in us “to will and to do of His good pleasure.”

We need to LOOK BACKWARD so we can learn from our past, learn more about the Lord, and learn more about how much we need the Lord, and how we need to trust Him more than we do. May Deut. 8:2 become a permanent part of our lives for the rest of our days! If it is, we will learn to see God in our trials, and to trust Him as the One Who loves us, and is making us day by day more like His beloved Son. The Lord does not try us because He enjoys seeing us have a difficult time, but He tries us because He loves us, and seeks our highest good and our greatest joy.