



Lessons in Trust

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

Today we're starting a Fall series on a book of the Bible that perhaps is preached on less often than any other. If we took a survey, I'm sure it would be right up there with Leviticus for the least preached book of the Bible—Deuteronomy. Even the name sounds boring.

There's a good reason preachers avoid it. The first five books of the Bible are called the Pentateuch. Deuteronomy is the last of those five books. But if you read straight through Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, you could skip to the end of Deuteronomy and be at the same place in the story. Numbers ends with the Israelites on the banks of the Jordan River, waiting to enter the Promised Land. At the end of Deuteronomy, they haven't moved. Skip this whole book and you won't miss a beat in the story.

The reason for that is Deuteronomy is basically all words and little action. It's made up of three rather long sermons by Moses. No one likes long sermons! And most of his sermons are him repeating stories and laws that also show up in the previous four books. That's why it's called Deuteronomy, which means "second law." On the surface, you might think it has nothing new to say. So why is it in the Bible to begin with? And why would anyone do an entire series of sermons on it?

One thing that ought to mean something to us is this was Jesus' favorite book of the Bible. He quotes this book more than any other book. Not only that, the New Testament refers to Deuteronomy more than 50 times. Bruce Waltke, a respected Old Testament scholar, says Deuteronomy "has had greater consequences on human history than any other single book." Maybe we should take a closer look.

But even more important is what this book means for us today. Deuteronomy is teaching for people who find themselves on a boundary—with possibilities and challenges before them. It's not just a rehashing of the old, but it's taking the old and applying it to a whole new situation. After 40 years of wandering, God's people are on the brink of taking possession of the land. But are they ready? Are they prepared to take the land and live there as God's distinct people? Are they ready to move from fear to faith; from being wandering nomads to being people with a home? It won't be easy. There are lots of enemies there; lots of temptation.

That's why we've called this series, Turning Point: Start Fresh-Stay the Course. Often times in our lives we come to a boundary; a turning point. God is calling us to something more. We have to be ready to take hold of it. But it won't be easy. This is true for us as a church. In a few months over a hundred of you will venture out as pioneers in starting a new CPC campus in Millbrae. In order to reach

the lost, God is calling us out of our comfort zone. Are we ready?

But how do we get ready? There is an old saying: "Those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it." This is why Deuteronomy starts with a history lesson. As Moses tries to get the people ready to enter the Promised Land, he doesn't want them to make the same mistakes their fathers made. So in his first sermon he begins with lessons learned from the past generation. In chapter 1 he answers the question, "What went wrong?" Why didn't our fathers go in and take the land? Why did they spend 40 years wandering around the wilderness? But really this is a larger question that we have to answer for ourselves as well. What's wrong with us? Why is it we often don't enjoy and take hold of all God has for us? What is it in the human heart that keeps us immobilized?

In Deuteronomy 1 not only do we learn what's wrong but we learn what that looks like in our lives and what God has done about it.

I. The thing that went wrong is a failure to trust God.

Moses reaches back and speaks to this new generation about what went wrong with their fathers. As we'll see, when Moses speaks to this new generation he speaks as if they were all part of the problem, which is strange because they were just little kids. Someone could say, "Well, it wasn't their fault!" But Moses believes in the solidarity of Israel; throughout this book he speaks to them as one people in solidarity with past generations.

So he goes back and tells them what went wrong. He begins in v.6 by reminding them that when they were at Horeb (Mt. Sinai) God told them they had stayed there too long and it was time to go in and possess the land. Moses says, "**The LORD our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying, 'You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Turn and set your journey, and go to the hill country of the Amorites... See, I have placed the land before you; go in and possess the land which the LORD swore to give to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to them and their descendants after them'**" (vv.6-8).

This was so important that when they came to Kadesh-barnea he tells them again down in v.21, "**See, the LORD your God has placed the land before you; go up, take possession, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has spoken to you. Do not fear or be dismayed.**" But before they obeyed they wanted to send forth spies to check out the land. Here is the first hint that something may be wrong because God said he would go before them but they want to send in a few spies to go before them first. In v.25 he says those spies came back and said, "**It is a good land which the LORD our God is about to give us.**" Now we know from

the book of Numbers that those spies also told them the people there were strong and the cities were fortified and even the Anakim were there. The Anakim were very tall people—giants (Yao Ming sized). The spies said, “They were huge! They made us look like grasshoppers!”

So Moses says, **“You were not willing to go up, but rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; and you grumbled in your tents and said, ‘Because the LORD hates us, He has brought us out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites to destroy us’”** (vv.26-27). Later they said, **“Our children will become prey”** (v.39).

So here is point one: What went wrong with these people? What IS wrong with even us? We sometimes think the problem is people don’t believe in God; that they’ve rejected the idea of God altogether. Or we think the problem is people don’t believe in right and wrong; there are no moral absolutes. There are a lot of Christians who say that’s the real problem in our society and if we let the atheists and relativists run our country we’re doomed. But we see here that’s not the real problem. The real problem isn’t that we don’t believe in him or that we don’t believe in right and wrong. The real problem is we think he hates us. The real problem is we don’t trust him. We don’t believe his intentions for us are good. We don’t believe in his grace. We don’t believe that despite our sin he’s for us, not against us. That’s what’s wrong.

Some of this stems from the fact that we have a poor memory. Starting in v.30 Moses reminds them of what the Lord was to them those years in the wilderness. He says first God was a warrior who fought their battles. He says, **“The LORD your God who goes before you will Himself fight on your behalf, just as He did for you in Egypt before your eyes.”** In other words, have you forgotten the plagues and the Red Sea crossing and how fiercely the Lord fought for you? He can still do that, you know. But that’s not all. He says God has also been a father who carried you. Verse 31, **“you saw how the LORD your God carried you, just as a man carries his son, in all the way which you’ve walked, until you came to this place.”** This reminds me of a birthday card I got from one of my daughters that read, “Because swings don’t push themselves; because shoulders are the best seat in the house; because big hugs need big arms; because every kid needs a hero...there are Dads.” Moses says, “Have you forgotten that he has been like a Dad this whole time. You’ve had the best seat in the house—right on his shoulders!” But there is still one more thing. He says God has also been a shepherd who guided them. In v.33 he says God is the One **“who goes before you on your way, to seek out a place for you to encamp, in fire by night and cloud by day, to show you the way in which you should go.”** He’s guided you each step of the way like a shepherd. Have you forgotten that?

Indeed they had forgotten. In v.32 he says, **“But for all this, you did not trust the LORD your God...”** You see, that’s the basic problem. The problem with the human heart is we don’t trust God; we think he hates us. That’s how it all began, right? Satan comes to Eve and says, “You know, if God really loved you and had your best interest in mind he would let you eat that fruit.” He says, “You can’t

trust God.” By the way this is something even psychologists agree with. Eric Ericson was a leading psychologist in the area of how humans develop socially and psychologically. He talked about stages people have to pass through successfully to become whole. In the first years of life he said the key is trust. If a child doesn’t sense he can trust his parents he’ll have all sorts of problems later in life; he’ll be intensely self absorbed and never really able to attach to anyone.

Now I’m not some kind of follower of Ericson. In some ways he was far too pessimistic because we believe this can be overcome by coming to an understanding of God’s love. In other ways he was far too optimistic because as far as God is concerned this is a problem every one of us has from the start. Deep down we all think he hates us. But Ericson was on to something when he identified trust as central to our lives. The problem with the human heart is we don’t trust God. It shows up in our fears and anxieties about the future. Sometimes it’s not OUR future we’re anxious about, but our kids’ future. What if they fail to get into the right college? What if they don’t make the team? What if they never find a meaningful career? What if they never get married? Spurgeon said anxiety does nothing to rob tomorrow of its problems; it only robs today of its strength.

It’s a waste of emotional energy and it’s a denial of what the Lord has been to us in the past. Have you forgotten the ways the Lord has fought for you? Think of the battles he’s won for you. Has the Lord let you down? Have you forgotten the ways he carried you on his shoulders like a father? That’s a picture of rest and of joy. I remember carrying my two year old son down an entire mountain in the Swiss alps. I never dropped him. We had fun. Have you forgotten the way he’s guided you and brought you to places of rest and safety?

II. Failure to trust God results in two forms of disobedience.

The next question is how does this failure to trust God manifest itself in our lives? And the answer to that question is disobedience. When we don’t trust the Lord we don’t take him at his word and we don’t do the things he tells us to do. That’s why Adam and Eve took the fruit and ate after he told them not to. But the interesting thing in this story is we see how disobedience can take two forms. It can express itself in two ways.

A. Irreligion: The first way it’s seen is what you would expect. Disobedience takes the form of outright rebellion or what we might call irreligion. In v.26 Moses says they **“rebelled against the command of the Lord your God.”** And in the book of Numbers that comes out when they say, “We want to go back to Egypt.” They even wanted to kill Moses. In essence they were saying, “We’re done with God. We don’t want anything to do with him. We want to go back to our old lives.” There are a lot of people who are basically running from God and they erect all kinds of sophisticated arguments about why but at the root of it is they don’t feel they can trust him.

B. Religion: But there is another form disobedience takes and this is far more subtle. Look at v.34. Moses says, **“Then the LORD heard the sound of your words, and He was**

angry and took an oath, saying, 'Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land which I swore to give your fathers.'" Then in v.39 he says, "Your little ones who you said would become a prey, and your sons, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall enter there, and I will give it to them, and they shall possess it. But as for you, turn around and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.'" So God said they won't go in but their children will. They're to turn back to the wilderness.

But then in v.41 the Israelites seem to have a change of heart. All of a sudden they get religious. They say, "We have sinned against the LORD; we will indeed go up and fight, just as the LORD our God commanded us." Gee, that sounds pretty good to me. There is repentance ("We have sinned against the Lord") and obedience ("We will go up and fight"). What more can you ask for? But God says NO. In v.42 the Lord says, "Do not go up nor fight for I am not among you; otherwise you'll be defeated before your enemies." But they went anyway. Moses says in v.43, "you would not listen. Instead you rebelled against the command of the LORD, and acted presumptuously and went up into the hill country. And the Amorites who lived in that hill country came out against you, and chased you as bees do, and crushed you from Seir to Hormah."

What's going on here? Why wouldn't God back down? Why wouldn't he forgive and let them go in? Here is the answer: because irreligion and religion are two peas in a pod. Originally God said "go up" and they wouldn't go up, but now God says "don't go up" and they decide to go up. In both cases, they disobeyed. The first time that showed itself in outright rebellion; the second time in being religious. We think our acts of religion will somehow make up for our sin and force God's hand. It doesn't work.

Notice how the very same action ("go up") can be an act of obedience or disobedience. It all comes down to WHY we're doing it. Are we doing it out of a heart that trusts God or because we want to buy him off; force his hand? It strikes me we can have people sitting side by side in this auditorium Sunday after Sunday who are both doing the same things but for entirely different reasons. One is following Christ out of faith and trust and gratitude for all that God has done for them. The other is doing the very same things and trying to force God's hand; trying to buy his favor; and it's all done out of fear. And believe me these two motivations create very different spirits and very different communities. One is joyful and gracious; the other is uptight, smug and self-righteous.

You say, "But they repented." But I'm not so sure. I don't think they were really sorry for their sin; I think they were sorry about the consequences. I've seen this in marriages. I've heard wives say, "Listen, most of the time my husband treats me like garbage. The only way I can get him to be the husband I want him to be is if I threaten to leave him. Then he changes." But I say, "In that case he's really not the husband you want; he's not changing his behavior because he loves you but because he loves himself." You see, if the people of Israel were really sorry for their sin they would have accepted the consequences and obeyed him when he said not to go up.

I hope you can see how rebellious and religious

people can be both really disobedient because they're both motivated by a lack of trust. They're two peas in a pod. One shows a lack of trust by throwing off all restraints; trying to get as far away from God as they can. The other shows it by trying to be really, really good.

III. God's solution is to remain faithful to his covenant.

The question is what is God's solution to this because all of us really are born with a heart that doesn't trust God. The solution is found right here in this story. Why after 40 years is God still working with these people? Why is he still committed to Israel after all this time? Why not just wash his hands of them? The answer is in v.8 and v.35 where God talks about "the land which the LORD swore to give to your fathers..." God made a covenant with them; he swore to do this. That's why God is still working with these people; that's why NOW they CAN go up and know for sure that he WILL go before them—because he swore he would give them the land.

But do you know what's amazing about this? This is exactly what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus came to make a new covenant with us. He doesn't promise us land, but he promises us eternal life. We wonder, "Well, what about my sin? I'm just like that first generation of Israelites. What if he sends me back into the wilderness?" But here is where the new covenant is so much better than the old one. In the new covenant God himself came to us as a flesh and blood person and he bore the brunt of our sin. On the cross he took the judgment for our sin upon himself so we could be set free to go up and possess all that God has in store for us. But that's not all. He also was raised up from the dead and there is a very real sense in which he's gone before us to lead us into victory. So we don't have to send out spies. We don't have to fear the Anakim. He conquered death; why would he be afraid of them?

The night before Jesus was crucified he said to his disciples, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.'" That sounds bad. It's like he's predicting their defeat before it happens! What a terribly negative thing to say. But in the very next breath he says, "But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee" (Mt.26:31-32). You see, the prediction that he would be stricken and the sheep scattered might suggest that they would all just go back to their homes in Galilee and cry, leaving Jesus behind in a grave in Judea. But Jesus promises that after he's risen, he'll arrive in Galilee before they get there: he'll "go before" them. That's the promise you and I have in Jesus. He'll go before us. Will we trust him? Or do we believe he hates and has brought us this far only to destroy us?

CONCLUSION

I think about this as it relates to whatever it is he calls us to do in following him. Sometimes he calls us to do things or to go places that are every bit as scary as facing the giants in the Promised Land. But will we trust him and go up? He went to the cross and died for us. Then he was raised up and now he goes before us so we can rest assured

that he'll fight for us and carry us like a father carries his son on his shoulders.

I remember so well almost four years ago when our elders sat around a conference room in San Jose and decided that God was calling us out of our comfort zone to start another campus of CPC somewhere on the Peninsula. Now maybe that doesn't sound like a big thing, but it was to us. This church has been around 40 years without trying to do something like that. We had a hard enough time just finding a place to meet for the first 20 years. Now we have this great place and you want to send people off to start all over again? Your people will think you're crazy. They'll never go for this. They'll want to kill you and go back to Egypt.

So it was one of those moments for us elders when we all looked at each other and thought, "Oh my, what have we done? What if the Lord doesn't go before us? What if we fail?" The Peninsula isn't exactly a church-friendly place! As far as I know no church on the Peninsula has ever even tried this. Allen Johansen looked at us and said, "We have spied out the land and there are giants there." And then Dave Vergara quoted that verse that says, "Your wives and your children will be taken as plunder." They didn't really say that, but we all felt it!

But there was also this sense of excitement. Deep in our hearts we believed the Lord was in this and had guided us to this point. We knew that he was willing to come from his throne in heaven and become a man and go to the cross so that lost people could be forgiven and find a home in heaven. And we knew that ultimately that was the reason he was calling us to do this—to reach lost people. So we trusted that in spite of all of our weaknesses he would go before us. We knew if all that is true, we had to go up.

And that's the question I leave you with: will you trust him? For some of you that means facing your rebellion and your irreligion and being willing move ahead in trust and obedience. For others it means facing the fact that your attempts to be good are really not rooted in trust but in fear. The good news is Jesus died for both the rebellious and the religious.