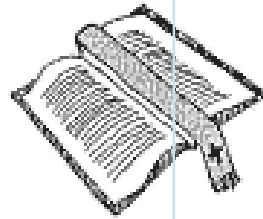


CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Monthly Devotionals

Lessons



LESSONS FROM THE PENTATEUCH

“Pentateuch,” meaning “five scrolls” or “five volumes,” is the name given to the first five books of the Old Testament. These books are also known as The Law or Torah, and sometimes, the Five Books of Moses. While tradition has attributed the authorship of these books to Moses, there continues to be debate among scholars regarding this issue. The books, known as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, contain a wide variety of literary material—narratives, laws, ritual instructions, genealogies, poetry—all designed to tell the story of how humankind become the Children of God. In addition, these books are the Bible That Jesus Read, as Philip Yancey would remind us.

While it may be rather unusual for one to choose some of these books for devotional and inspirational reading, we may be pleasantly surprised at the messages that we find in this month’s readings from The Pentateuch.

The Education Ministry

WELCOME TO GENESIS
A Study in First Things and First Beliefs

Attempts to integrate the content of the Old and New Testaments can be difficult. Efforts have led some to conclude that the doctrines taught are different from or at odds with one another. Some contend that the Bible is speaking of two different Gods or a God that transforms somewhere between Malachi and Matthew. The God of the Old Testament is treated as a God of anger and judgment and the one portrayed in the New Testament as a God of love and forgiveness.

While all these characteristics are accurate, none are isolated to a particular Testament and all the attributes of the same unchanging, complex and multi-faceted God can be found abundantly throughout scripture.

Sometimes a distinction is made regarding the requirements for salvation. Salvation in the Old Testament is seen as achieved through obedience to the Law and in the New Testament through faith in Jesus Christ.

In fact, a saving relationship with God has always been predicated on a belief in God's covenantal promises and the experience of a changed life that results from that conviction.

The book of Genesis is the story of people saved through their belief in a revealed, unchanging God as He works through a plan that He has established to reconcile Himself with those who would believe.

And he [Abraham] believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. (Gen. 15:6)

Tom Virkler

**ADAM – ONCE AND FUTURE
BELIEF**

Born With All the Advantages

What is man's primary purpose?

Man's primary purpose is to glorify
God and enjoy Him forever. (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 1)

Speculate about Adam's thoughts as he first opened his eyes. What was the extent of his "pre-programming"? How much hard-wiring did he have that allowed his untrained and inexperienced mind and body to respond and function in his new home? Enough, it appears, that he immediately moved ably and freely within the role and environment made for him.

He had all the advantages: a body and a genetic makeup that would allow for long life, a superior mental acumen that allowed him to evaluate, catalog and name all the animals presented to him, and an ideal partner in marriage. He was given dominion over a perfect creation.

He also had an inherent predisposition toward his Maker. From the start he had complete and total communion with his God. No Edenic queries ask, "Who am I?" or "Why am I here?" Adam and Eve shared a divine communion as they walked in the garden in the cool of the evening with their God

The first question in the *Catechism* makes clear that this is no longer the case. In our natural state something is terribly amiss. All creation demonstrates an innate sense of purpose, each member going about its work and performing the functions for which it was made. Only man flounders. Only human beings lack direction and struggle for meaning. The *Catechism* must begin its instruction in that which should be most basic and most obvious.

The worm turned with the confusion over who would be God. Referring to the forbidden fruit, Satan cajoled Eve with the tantalizing possibility "... that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God". Both Eve and Adam chose poorly and the rest, as they say, is history.

"Being like God" would no longer be a walk in the park, or garden. Restoration of our relationship with God would come only through a difficult act of self-denial coupled with belief in God's gracious accomplishment of the fact, authenticated through acts of obedience. The Old Testament documents the struggle as God prepares the way and means of reconciliation through His Son.

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your

CAIN – REFUSING BELIEF IN WHAT IS REVEALED

I Did It My Way

And the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why do you look sad and depressed and dejected? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin crouches at your door; its desire is for you, but you must master it. (Gen. 4:6-7)

We struggle over an appropriate gift for every occasion. We seek advice concerning what would be acceptable. The story of Cain and Abel concerns an appropriate gift.

God accepted Abel’s sacrifice from his flock, but not what Cain had brought from the field. It didn’t matter that during those early times the worshippers may not have understood the necessity for the shedding of blood or the symbolism of the lamb. God made clear what was acceptable. Cain took the rejection of his offering as God’s rejection of him, which was correct and was why an appropriate sacrifice was needed. It was God’s desire that Cain be reconciled to Him. He tenderly pleads with Cain to reconsider, the alternative being that he be controlled, crushed and destroyed by sin. Cain would not admit that his efforts were unsatisfactory.

Our gifts to God are, in reality, gifts from Him. C.S. Lewis tells the story of a boy who asks his father for sixpence and then uses the money to buy the father a gift. Despite the fact that the father was “none the richer” for the transaction, the experience brought great joy and closer fellowship to both the giver and the receiver. We do well to remember that all that we give to God is really something that He first gave to us. He is nothing more or nothing less for the activity except for the joy and fellowship that it brings. Why not use what He gives us in the manner that he prescribes so that we can experience the full and abundant life that He promises and that Cain denied to himself?

And Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! Surely You have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me. (Gen. 4: 13-15)

**TERAH – “BELIEF” WITHOUT
WORKS**

You Could Have Made Us Proud

And Terah took his son Abram . . .
and they went out . . . from Ur of the

Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there. (Gen. 11:32)

We always hear of Abram being called by God out from Ur of the Chaldeans. A closer look suggests that there may be more to the story. Terah appears to have taken the initiative to leave Ur assuming responsibility for his immediate family and their vacation from the heathen land as well. When he departs he has Canaan as his destination.

Why didn't he complete the trip?

Immigration is a difficult thing. Many of us tend to forget that we benefit from the advantages of modern American society today because a couple hundred years ago a few daring ancestors took a long, perilous journey on a nasty boat. The only opportunity it provided was to start over with nothing in an unfamiliar land, separated from loved ones that they would never see again. Haran may have represented the last fringe of civilization as Terah knew it. When he reached the edge and looked farther toward unknown Canaan, he couldn't let go. Five hundred year later many of the freed Children of Israel would prefer the security of leeks and cucumbers in Egypt, rather than trust the promises God made concerning Canaan.

Some speculate that Terah may have written the portion of Genesis that dealt with his family. In the tradition of the sacred record keepers he would have passed the book and the duties to Abram when he chose to proceed to Canaan without his father.

After that Terah appears to have maintained a respectable household with some degree of reverence for the God that had called him. Both Abraham and, later, Rebekah saw Terah's household as the only acceptable place for suitable marriage partners or personal safety. But if we don't move forward with God's promises, then we must digress. The reputation that survives for Terah is that of an idolater (Jos. 24:2).

We should let this “patriarch that might have been” serve as an example to encourage us to proceed in the beliefs that we hold, so that our later life does not become one of regret wherein we find ourselves wishing that we might trade all our tomorrows for a single yesterday in which amends might be made and things done differently.

So the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in

LEAH – BELIEF WHEN IT’S HARD

This Isn’t What I Had Planned

Now Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were delicate, but Rachel was beautiful of form and appearance. (Gen. 29:16-17)

A popular song warns, “Lord help the mister, that comes between me and my sister. And Lord help the sister who comes between me and my man!”

Perhaps all Leah wanted was a normal and happy life which included a stable and responsible husband and being blessed with many children. This she achieved, but her life was far from normal and, it would seem, seldom happy.

Scripture gives no evidence of a poor relationship between Rachel and Leah during their formative years. But a sense of tension enters the scripture when a young relative from Canaan arrives and takes to the beautiful younger daughter of Laban rather than the older one with “weak eyes”. For seven years Leah must watch as cousin Jacob’s “brideprice” of service to Laban serves as daily evidence of his love and affection for Rachel.

On the wedding night Leah becomes her father’s pawn in the role of substitute bride as Laban introduces her into the marriage chamber. The honorable Jacob, perhaps to save Leah from mortal embarrassment, raises no objection until morning, making Leah his wife and assuring a polygamous relationship for all, if Jacob is to have Rachel.

Jacob’s heart lies with Rachel. Even Leah’s provision of six male heirs serves only to temporarily garner a greater share of Jacob’s affection. In moments of weakness she contributes to contention within the household and even initiates the introduction of her own handmaiden into Jacob’s growing spousal pool.

She didn’t always act in a spiritual manner. But she played the unfair hand she had been dealt. She cared for and raised her children. She supported her husband in his career decisions. She outlived her sibling rival by many years rendering her the sole matriarch of the family of promise, a position she justly deserved. And she was chosen by God to perpetuate the line that would produce the Messiah. She will always be listed with the great ones in the service of our Lord. Few, with circumstances less trying, have done so well.

There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife, there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah. (Gen. 49:31)



**TAMAR – BELIEF WHEN YOU
DON'T KNOW HOW**
The Wrong Way to Do a Right Thing

So she took off her widow's garments, covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place which was on the way to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given to him as a wife. (Gen. 38:14)

In Genesis 38 Tamar commits a desperate act. She disguises herself in order to seduce her father-in-law Judah. She had married into a troubled family. Judah, possibly to avoid spiritual frustration at home, had moved away and married a Canaanite. His unnamed wife appeared to have more influence on their three sons than her "husband of the covenant".

Judah arranged the marriage between Tamar and his oldest son. When he died leaving Tamar a childless widow, the second son refused to cooperate in providing an heir and was struck down by God. Judah moved Tamar away from his the turmoil of his own home back to her father's house, but then failed in his promise to provide Tamar an heir through his third son.

What would lead Tamar to take the questionable steps necessary to become pregnant by Judah rather than simply find a mate elsewhere? Why did Judah choose her for a daughter-in-law? Having failed spiritually with his own wife, is it too much to speculate that Judah discussed the promises of the covenant with Tamar and found her receptive and, thus, a desirable wife for his son? Is it possible, in talking with Judah, that Tamar caught a glimpse of the glory of his God that sharply contrasted with her worldly existence in Canaan? Did she jump at the opportunity to marry into this lineage of promise? Was her faith in the promise so strong that she would commit incest rather than lose the privilege of family membership for herself and for any children she might have?

Unlike Judah we should not be quick to simply judge Tamar by her outward acts while disregarding her internal motivations. We serve an accommodating God who allows for more mistakes than we would like to admit, especially when committed in our immaturity and when driven by an enthusiasm for Him.

So Judah acknowledged them and said, "She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son. (Gen. 38:26)

WELCOME TO EXODUS

“Sacred history takes on new dimensions with the book of Exodus.”

Nearly 300 years have elapsed since the death of Joseph and the end of Genesis. Things have changed in Egypt. Egypt has become a mighty military and economic power; there arises a Pharaoh “who does not remember Joseph”; and the Israelites, by now numerous in number, provide a ready-made work force for the elaborate projects of the empire. It was in this setting, when “...the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help” that “God heard their groaning” and raised up Moses to be their deliverer.

Historically, the book of Exodus is extremely significant. Although scholars debate the dates of the exodus, ranging from 1200 BCE to 1400 BCE, this occurrence is the story of Israel’s birth as a nation. From this book come the accounts that we listened to as children in Sunday School: Moses in the bulrushes, the plagues that came to Egypt, the escape of the Israelites only to be followed by the Egyptians with their chariots and armies; the parting of the sea for the Israelites to cross on dry land; the wilderness experience with God sending bread from heaven; and the giving of the Ten Commandments. Included also in this book are the laws concerning daily living, the building of the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle, the making of the golden calf, the establishment of the priesthood and the rituals of sacrifice.

Spiritually, the book of Exodus is extremely significant, not only for the Israelites but for us as well. The book helps to trace one’s journey in becoming Children of God. The exodus is the story of deliverance from those things that enslave us. It reminds us that God can use us even when we are reluctant and afraid. It establishes the truth that God will provide in times of “desert” experiences; that God is in our midst; that God is a God of the individual as well as that of a nation.

Sometimes the reading is tedious. For example, the intricacy of the instructions regarding the building of the tabernacle is not particularly inspirational. But there is something very inspirational about the tabernacle—it was portable and went wherever the Israelites went. And so it is with God’s presence.

Thanks be to God!
Jeni Goodwin

I WILL BE WITH YOU

But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” And God said, “I will be with you.”

Exodus 3: 11-12

Piglet, one of the characters in the beloved Winnie the Pooh, comments very poignantly, “It’s hard to be brave when one is very small.” Probably all of us, regardless of stature, age, status or gender, have felt the twinge known as inadequacy, that feeling of lacking the necessary qualities to get the job done, to make the relationship work, to make the right decision, to rear the children, to withstand the daily pressures and stressors, to deal with the problems of aging...sometimes, just to get through the day. The ancient book of Exodus gives us the account of someone else who felt that way, one of the Bible’s greatest persons, Moses.

By chapter 3, Moses, having slain an Egyptian, has fled Pharaoh’s court and is now tending sheep for his father-in-law in Midian. In other words, he has settled into quite a comfortable life. But God has other plans for Moses. Having heard the Israelites’ cries, God decides to use Moses to rescue them and to lead them out of Egypt to a land “flowing with milk and honey.”

As Scripture indicates, however, Moses is a most reluctant servant. His reluctance doesn’t seem to be a lack of reverence for God nor a lack of love for his people. He is reluctant because he feels inadequate. He counters God’s call with statements like: Why would you ask me, God? I’m just a tender of sheep. Or, What if the Pharaoh won’t listen to me? Or, What if the Israelites don’t believe you’ve called me? Or, I’m not articulate. How am I going to find the words to be persuasive?

Undaunted, God demonstrates to Moses that he can perform miracles. But when that is not sufficient, God says what He deems to be the final word: “I will be with you.” Note that God does not promise Moses that the years will be trouble-free, nor even that he himself will reach the Promised Land. But He does give him the most important promise of all: I will be with you.

And so when we bury our loved ones, struggle with our marriages and our jobs, disappoint ourselves and others time and time again, grow old and lose our independence and good health, face obstacles that seem insurmountable, we can count on the same promise that God gave to Moses: I will be with you!

O, God, help me remember this day that nothing can happen that you

HELP! (THE WORK IS TOO HEAVY)

“The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Select capable (people) to help you. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you.” Exodus 18:17, 22

When I was about 10 years old, my cousin Jimmy told me a joke that I thought was the funniest joke I’d ever heard (and the fact that I remember it 50+ years later says something). It went like this: Two farmers met after a terrible, terrible storm. Farmer Brown said to Farmer Jones, “Quite a storm we had last night..” “Yep,” replied Farmer Jones. “Damage your barn much?” inquired Farmer Brown. “Don’t know,” replied Farmer Jones. “Ain’t found it yet.” The impetus for my thinking about this joke was one told by David Roper in his book Out of the Ordinary. A pilot was testing a Huey Cobra helicopter when an accident separated the tail boom from the rest of the aircraft. The aircraft wound up skidding down the runway on its side amidst a shower of sparks. The Tower radioed the skipper, “Sir, do you need assistance?” To which the pilot replied, “I don’t know. I ain’t done crashin’ yet.”

In today’s passage Moses has seated himself outside the camp where long lines of people have gathered to have him settle disputes, give advice, answer questions, etc. It’s obvious that this process will take all day. Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, recognizes a very important truth, which he shares with Moses: “The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.” And Moses, although a well-established leader, listens to the advice.

We all have our moments of “crash and burn.” But the wonderful truth is that we are not in this world alone. The book of Genesis tell us that it is not good for (humankind) to be alone; in the N.T., Jesus sent His disciples out two by two; and Ecclesiastes tells us that two are better than one, because if one falls, there will be someone to pick him/her up. One of God’s greatest gifts to us is the gift of community.

M. Scott Peck in his book The Different Drum defines “community” as “a group that has learned to transcend its individual differences.” He points out that “transcend” does not mean to obliterate or destroy but literally “to climb over.” Certainly in any group, and the church is no different, there are many differences “to climb over.” But we will find as Moses did that the climb is worth the effort. In fact, the climb is a necessity if we are to survive.

Heavenly Parent, Thank you for giving us the gift of community, sisters and brothers with whom to share our earthly and spiritual journey. Help us to climb over our differences.

HE HIDETH MY SOUL

Then the Lord said, "There is a place

TAKE THE BIBLE LITERALLY?????

Very often, in defending one's position on some issue, one might argue, "The Bible says...!" Some strongly affirm, "I believe the Bible word for word!" Many feel that in order to be grounded and firm in the Christian faith, they must believe the Bible literally.

Taking the Bible literally seems like a good idea – UNTIL YOU BEGIN TO DO IT. As soon as one does try to take it literally, serious problems inevitably arise!

Read through the book of Deuteronomy, for instance. It's a wonderful book – UNLESS you interpret it as the literal way God wants us to live out our faith. Take Deuteronomy literally, and you will find that God instructs us to. . .

- tear down the worship places of our enemies who do not believe as we do (12:1—3)
- put to death any "prophet or dreamer" (even if he or she is one of our own family) who tries to lure us away from the Lord our God (13:1-11)
- never charge interest when lending money to a fellow believer (23:19)
- every seventh year, release from financial debt to us, any who are fellow-believers – but we may continue that debt for non-believers (15:1-3)
- publicly stone to death any disobedient and rebellious son (21:18-21)
- lashing (up to forty lashes) is appropriate punishment for criminals (25:1-3)
- not eat meat from camels, rabbits, badgers, or pigs (14:3-8)
- not wear men's clothes, if you are a woman – or wear women's clothes, if you are a man (22:5)

There are many more such questionable instructions for us in Deuteronomy, in the rest of the Old Testament, and even in the New Testament. According to the son of the first Pastor of Central Presbyterian Church, to take passages like these literally is "making the tail wag the dog."

We cannot take every word of the Bible literally! We must interpret Scripture . . .

- ▶ in light of the whole thrust and overall intent of Scripture
- ▶ in light of the historical, social, religious, and language context of any given statements
- ▶ and most of all in light of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

We must be extremely careful NOT to be dogmatic about anything of which Jesus never spoke in his teachings or demonstrated with his life.

ARE WE THERE YET?

(And God) said to (Moses), “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” Exodus 33:14

For throughout all their journeys the cloud of the Lord was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel. Exodus 40:38

Much has transpired by these latter chapters of Exodus: God has rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt; God has provided food and water during their sojourn in the wilderness; the Israelites have experienced moments of total commitment to and dependence upon God; they have witnessed the very presence of God through Moses’ encounters and through the giving of the Law upon Mount Sinai; they have whined and bemoaned their fate, wishing they had never left Egypt; they have lost faith in God and made for themselves a golden calf; they have scored military victories and spiritual defeats; and they have embarked on an eleven day trip that would take them forty years to complete.

It strikes me that these ancient sojourners are not so different from us and our spiritual journeys, for journeys are not linear, each step becoming more perfect each day. Journeys are spiral. Jack Kornfield, a clinical psychologist who trained as a Buddhist monk, remarks in his book After the Ecstasy, the Laundry, “We all know that after the honeymoon, comes the marriage; after the election comes the hard task of governance. In spiritual life it is the same: After the ecstasy comes the laundry.” Regardless of how dedicated and focused we may be, we oft find ourselves losing our way amidst the daily dirty shirts and the mundane muddy socks.

“The only devils in the world,” remarked Mahatma Ghandi, “are the ones running around in our own hearts. This is where the battle must be fought.” The way of the human heart, however, is often bad for our health. The Bible recounts the story of Lot and his family who are told that they will flee safely from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah if they do not look back, but alas! Lot’s wife looks back. Orpheus, the son of the mythological Muses, is able to create the most beautiful music in the world. When his wife Eurydice dies, the grief-stricken Orpheus visits the underworld. His music is so captivating, Hades allows Eurydice to follow Orpheus back to the land of life providing he does he does not look back. But alas! Orpheus looks back, and Eurydice is lost to him forever.

Time and time again throughout Scripture, God reminds the Israelites that He is the same God Who rescued them from slavery, Who fed them when they were hungry, Who comforted them when they were in sorrow, and Who eventually led them to the Land Flowing with Milk and Honey,



even though He was often displeased with their behavior. In fact, God's promise to Moses that "My presence will go with you" occurs at a time when God is most displeased with the Israelites over their "stiff-necked"

behavior.

The story is told of a Middle Eastern man who was imprisoned on a false conviction. A friend visited him and left him a prayer rug. The prisoner, hoping that his friend would instead bring him a hacksaw or a knife, angrily marched back to his cell. "Of what use is this prayer rug?" he muttered to himself. But as the days passed, he decided that since he had the rug, he might as well use it. So he started bowing on the rug to pray. Each day as he became more and more familiar with the pattern woven into the rug, he began to see an interesting image there. It was a diagram of the lock that allowed him to open the cell and escape. Indeed, freedom of the heart and its access to God is as close as a prayer, "woven in colors beneath our feet."

"The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." T.S. Eliot

Dear God, As you liberated the Israelites, so liberate me from all the things that keep me from knowing you. Liberate me, O God, from myself!

ARTICULATE SILENCE

There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush...God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

Exodus 3:2, 4

The Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt...and they will turn to blood.'"

Exodus 7:19

Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you..." Exodus 16:4

Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen

Exodus 26:1

Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.....Exodus 40: 34

Exodus is a book replete with Godly interventions and communications: a commanding voice from a burning bush that is not consumed; a panoply of plagues that finally enable the Israelites to escape Egypt via the Red Sea which miraculously parts for them; manna from heaven that

sustains them; the obvious, visible presence of the Almighty; definitive directions from God in the building of the tabernacle. Yet, we modern-day sojourners, as much as we might wish for it, see no burning bushes and hear few, if any, clearly articulated directives.

And we wonder, where is the God of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar? The God of Isaac, Rebekkah, Joseph and Jacob? Where is the God of Moses, the God of Exodus?

Author James Long in his book Why Is God Silent When We Need Him The Most? explores with us our journey into the “articulate silence of God.” He explores that place “...where God’s silence and God’s voice conflict: where faith and life clash.” Such a place is not unique to us. The embattled Job asked the same questions we ask, and we are reminded that God did not directly answer those questions. The answers, to some extent, were left a mystery. Long tells us what we already really know: “To live is to grope through a labyrinth of distressing questions and partial answers.” But that said, “...silent as God seems, it would be foolish to try to find our way alone, without Him.”

Well, in fact, what do we know of the God of Exodus? We know that God does desire to communicate with us. As the Psalmist said, “The Heavens declare the glory of God.” And so, this God has spoken to us through creation. The method can be debated but the magnificence cannot. This God has spoken to us through Scripture. Admittedly, there are incongruities; not all verses speak with equal clarity; many are open for varying interpretation; and many defy interpretation at all. But the common thread of God’s desire to be involved with humankind begins with Genesis and doesn’t end until Revelation. And God has spoken to us through Jesus Christ, a figure of such significance that our very history itself is dated by His birth.

So, what about the “articulate silence”? Could it be possible that sometimes our daily distractions out shout the voice of God? Could it be possible that our very finiteness itself limits our understanding and conversation? Could it be possible that we care far too much about things that matter far too little to God? And could it be possible that God sometimes whispers?

It is interesting to note that God told Moses to come up to the mountain; I want to talk with you. It is interesting to note that when Moses and Joshua wanted to commune with God, they went to the Tent of Meeting which was outside the camp itself. And it is interesting to note that in the tabernacle there was a place “set apart” for the housing of the Ark, which represented God’s presence ...all intended to say that if we desire more than a monologue, we have to be willing to be a part of the conversation as well.



Intellectual and spiritual honesty demands the admission that sometimes we are ready for the conversation, and yet it still does not seem to come.

And sometimes, we even doubt. If God talked to Moses out of a burning

bush, why not us? I don't know the answer to that question. But I do believe that the opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty. And so in those moments of "deafening silence," we would do well to remember that some of the deepest experiences of communication occur in silence.

"And now I hope too for a silence that makes a difference...For if the words of God will echo in our minds, whether we face the harshest of difficulties or 'merely' the mystery of the ordinary, we will most surely

WELCOME TO LEVITICUS—WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT/

"When anyone presents a grain offering to the Lord..." Leviticus 2:1

When people attempt to read through the Old Testament, they usually get bogged down in Leviticus. They do well in the beginning of the Old Testament. Genesis and the first half of Exodus are full of interesting stories. The second half of Exodus gets a bit dry but they are hopeful for something better soon. Leviticus dashes those hopes. Halfway into Leviticus, they just can not go any further.

No one would ever say that Leviticus is easy to read. That does not mean, however, that it is not important. In fact for the Israelites, it was a vitally significant book. It told them how to present their offerings to God in ways that would be acceptable to him. It explained the different kinds of offerings and why one might offer each one. It gave the people an encouragement to holiness of life. God desired holiness because it reflected his nature. "Be holy, because I am holy", said the Lord, Leviticus 11:45.

There were three primary offerings for sins committed. They were burnt offerings, guilt offerings, and sin offerings. Each was performed at the Tabernacle (or later the temple) by the priest. Each was commanded for a different offense. Depending on a person's financial ability one might sacrifice a bull, sheep, goat, or pigeon. Several other offerings were commanded. Grain offerings fellowship offerings, and offerings of well-being were of the fruits of one's crops. These were more often offered simply in thanksgiving to God for his bounty. To us the types of offerings seem confusing and redundant. To the Israelites of that time, they gave a straightforward way to ask forgiveness for their sins and say thank you to God.

What sometimes escapes notice is that Leviticus is full of spiritual gems. But like all gems, you have to do a little mining to discover them. For example, Leviticus 2:13 notes that all grain offerings must be offered without leaven or honey and seasoned with salt. This regulation may seem curious and arbitrary. What is wrong with leaven and honey? What is so important about salt?

Commentators have wrestled with the meaning of this element of the grain offering. I like what the classic commentator Matthew Henry notes that one reason leaven and honey may have been forbidden was that the pagan nations surrounding Israel used them lavishly in their offerings. God is telling the Israelites that their worship is going to be different from the nations around them. They are going to follow different practices in many ways. Leaven indicates hardship and sadness. Honey symbolizes mirth and frivolity. Henry suggests that the Israelites were to avoid both extremes in their offerings to God. They were not to come before him with undue sadness. Nor were they to come with undue merriment. They were to understand that they approached a holy God but also a God who loved them.

They were also to bring salt with their offerings. This may be a foreshadowing of the statement of Christ that we are the salt of the earth. We cannot lose our flavor if the world is to see God in us. Paul encourages us, in Colossians 4:6, to let our conversation be with grace, but always seasoned with salt. The offering of our lives today is not to be insipid. It is to have flavor. It needs to be such that, like food seasoned with salt, those around us take notice.

*"Lord, let our lives have salt and help us to be at peace with others.
Amen."*

Bob Bohler



THE RITES OF ORDINATION

“He (Moses) poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron’s head and anointed him, to consecrate him.”

Leviticus 8:12

Leviticus contains the account of the anointing of Aaron and his sons to be priests for the people. Aaron and his sons are ordained for the work God has given them to do, caring for the temple and offering the peoples’ sacrifices. In chapters 8 and 9, Leviticus tells the story of this awe inspiring ceremony.

There is one symbolic aspect of Aaron’s priesthood that I find particularly intriguing. Aaron’s clothing as the high priest was different from everyone else. On each shoulder he had a precious stone. In each one was engraved the names of six of the tribes of Israel, the twelve tribes on both. Over his shoulders, he wore a vest. In the front of the vest were twelve precious stones. Each one contained the names of one of the twelve tribes of the nation. In this way, the high priest always carried the people on his shoulders and held them close to his heart.

The symbolism of this should not be lost on us. As we are all priests to God, there are some whom we should carry on our shoulders and hold close to our hearts - our family, our friends, our co-workers, and our acquaintances. We can carry them to God in prayer on a regular basis. We can care for them with extra love. The symbolism of Aaron’s clothing reminds us of the responsibilities we have.

The ordination of Aaron and his sons was for the purpose of setting them apart. They were to have special tasks for the people. Those tasks would require a constant ceremonial holiness. There would be certain things they could not do during their service. It was a unique opportunity for them, but it came with many responsibilities.

As Presbyterians we ordain pastors, elders and deacons. It is a ceremony for setting people apart for special service in the church. It does not make a person suddenly perfect. It does not make them different. What it does is sets them apart for a particular work. It bathes them in prayer. It asks God for all the grace needed for the work to be done. Each of us is called to special service. The great realization of the Protestant Reformation is that the church is a priesthood of believers. This does not refer to just a few special Christians. It refers to all believers. It means we all have important work to do. We all are gifted in the eyes of God.

We all have someone to carry on our shoulders and hold in our hearts. Who has God made you a priest for? Who should you pray for regularly? Who is learning about God because of your life and witness? Aaron and his sons were special. So are you. Do not ever forget just how special. God has made you a priest in his kingdom forever.

A SURPRISING GEM HIDDEN IN LEVITICUS

“You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old, and you shall fear your God; I am the Lord.” Leviticus 19:32

We sometimes think of the subtle distinctions between action and intention as something only found in the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus announces that it is not just the outward action that matters; the attitude of the heart is of at least equal importance. We think of the Old Testament’s laws as rather crude in comparison. Leviticus, chapter 19, is one of the places where we find God spelling out a pattern of behavior that involves both the deed and the heart.

In Leviticus 19:15, we read about how judgments are to be made. This refers to instances in which someone is seeking to settle a dispute between people. It says, “You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your neighbor.” The temptation might be to always judge in favor of the poor. God says not to do so. Judge fairly, no matter one’s social status. We would do well to remember that today. Leviticus 19:11 tells the people not to lie to one another. This sounds like many New Testament commands to speak the truth in love and love one another in word and deed. Leviticus 19:17 admonishes the people not to hate their neighbor in their heart. This has nothing to do with their actions. It intends to encourage a loving attitude of heart. Even in the Old Testament it is not enough to be nice on the outside. One is forbidden to harbor hard thoughts about another. Leviticus 19:31 contains a command to not consult wizards or mediums “to be defiled by them.” The Old Testament assumes that there are some people with “familiar spirits” who might have contact with the other world. But it never considers those contacts to be from God. Rather they always lead people into error and confusion. To seek after guidance from these sources is forbidden. Leviticus 19: 32 instructs the Israelites to honor the aged, to “rise before them” and “defer to them.” It is one of the evidences of the people’s reverence for God. Leviticus 19:18 instructs the people not to bear a grudge or take vengeance on one another. This also sounds much like the New Testament.

The final proof of this chapter’s significance is that Jesus obviously learned from it when he was growing up. Jesus himself quotes from this chapter in one of the most famous sets of verses in the Bible. When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus replied that one should love the Lord God with heart, mind, soul, and strength. Then Jesus added a second command. It comes from Leviticus 19:18. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It is one of the gems hidden in this book. It sums up the entire law in regards to our relationships with others. Take the time to look at Leviticus 19. It has wisdom we can benefit from today.

“Lord, fill my heart with the wisdom of the ages and may my life be lived according to your holy ways. Amen.”

DOES GOD BELIEVE IN VACATIONS?

“It is a solemn assembly; you shall not work at your occupations.”

Leviticus 23:36

One of the peculiar aspects of the Old Testament, at least from our point of view, is the varieties of feasts and festivals. The book of Leviticus lists a number of them. They occurred every year. There were different festivals of different lengths.

There was the feast of the Passover. It remembered the Exodus. This festival lasted for seven days. It began and ended with special services and offerings. The center of this festival was the eating of the Passover lamb to remember how God passed over the children of Israel in the land of Egypt. The people were to bring an offering of the first fruits of their harvest. Before they ate of the fruit of their crops, they were to remember God’s bounty and bring an offering. It reminded them of the source of all their bounties.

Following the dedicating of the first fruits, there was the Festival of Weeks. This came seven weeks after the offering of the first fruits. The people were to bring a sacrifice to the Lord and not work at their occupations. There was another day of rest prescribed in the law. It was the Festival of Trumpets. The people gathered for worship and the day was commemorated with trumpet blasts. On that day, also, the people did no work.

In the tenth month of the year came the Day of Atonement. On this day there was a special service and special offering to God for the forgiveness of sin. On this day also, the people were commanded to do no work. One of the longer festivals was the festival of booths. It lasted for seven days. The people brought their offerings to God. All the family gathered together. They had services of praise to God and did no work for these seven days. They built booths to live in for that time and celebrated with God’s people. In addition, Leviticus 23 reminds people about keeping the Sabbath. One day in seven was to be set aside for the Lord. No work was done on that day.

What do we make of all these festivals? It seems to me that God wanted to provide the people times to gather. He also wanted them not to work all the time. These times were certainly times for extended family to get together, for the kids to play, and for everyone to relax.

It is a good lesson for us. Does God like a good vacation every now and then? From the book of Leviticus, it would seem so. God worked six

REWARDS AND PENALTIES

“Five of you shall give chase to a hundred and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand.” Leviticus 26:8

The Old Testament is clear about the rewards for obedience to God and the penalties for disobedience. The penalties are spelled out in no uncertain terms. They are reminders to the people of the power and majesty of the God they serve. He is full of loving kindness but he is not to be trifled with.

No place is this seen clearer than in Leviticus 26. This chapter begins by spelling out the rewards for obedience. They are many. The rains will come in their seasons. The land will yield abundance produce. The trees will bear much fruit. They are promised that they will still be finishing one harvest when the next one begins to come in. Peace will be theirs and no one will make them afraid. Wild animals will not roam the land. They will defeat their enemies and a small army will defeat a large one. Their families will be large and will have plenty of food to eat. God declares that he will dwell in their midst and be their God. No longer will they be slaves to any person.

The penalties for disobedience are just as profound. In fact there are almost twice the warnings if they choose to disobey. They will be hounded by terror and wasted by fever. Their seed will not come to harvest. What harvest there is will be eaten by their enemies. Their foes will defeat them in battle and chase them down. The earth will become hard and difficult to plant. They will use their strength but have little to show for it. The trees will grow but bear no fruit. The crops will be withered and barren. Their children will be killed as well as their livestock. The people's dead bodies will be laid on the altars of the idols they have worshipped. The land will be devastated and they will be taken away to other lands.

The promises are stirring. The warnings are chilling. There was plenty of reason for the people to follow after God. There many more reasons not to disobey. So why could the people not obey? In the end, their hearts found it hard to turn fully to God.

The New Testament claims to be a better covenant between God and his people. One of the reasons is that it gives us the power to be able to obey. That is one aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. He fills us with the ability to avoid sin and obey God. This does not mean we avoid all sins. We wish we could. It means we have the inner power to win the battle (if not all the skirmishes) against the temptation to live without God.

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The Biblical promises of God to us are still as profound. The warnings are still present. The great gift we have been given is the Holy Spirit. His presence in our lives makes us able, from within, to love the things of God. The more we grow in the life of faith, the more we ought to love what God loves and hate what God hates. May our lives be lived as those who believe all the promises of God, both good and bad, are true.

“Lord, let my life be worthy of the promises you have given for those who follow you. Amen.”

WELCOME TO NUMBERS

Though the Book of Numbers doesn't generally make the "Top 10 List" of most-loved or even most-read books of the Bible, it does have a lot to say to us.

In our English Bible, the 4th book of the Pentateuch is aptly named due to the 2 census' of Israelite men in the book. Our English translation derives the name from the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament). However, the Hebrew word for the book is "be-midbar" which means wilderness. Both are appropriate titles for a book that numbers the people in preparation for military conquest and finds them wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

The book of Numbers primarily recounts the Israelites' long stay in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. In addition to the historical journey recorded here, we find the introduction of more covenantal laws. As we will see when we read the book, God denies the 1st generation out of Egypt the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. It's the 2nd generation since the Exodus that enjoys the privilege of entering the land flowing with milk and honey.

Numbers has a mixture of literary styles and events going on throughout the book – written in both prose and some poetry (The Aaronic blessing in chapter 6, for example), 2 census', an account of the journey toward the Promised Land, preparation for military conquest of pagan lands, and more laws. It can be hard to follow.

One thing that remains clear through all the information given us in this book is that God is working to keep His covenant with Abraham, given back in Genesis. Throughout the book of Numbers – even in the midst of God's anger with a faithless and grumbling people – God continues to work toward the fulfillment of the covenant. It is the people of God who fail to keep their end of the bargain.

This book can also be a challenging read when we take a hard look at the spiritual lives of the people of God. These people had witnessed first-hand God's saving act through the Exodus from Egypt, yet they murmured and complained their way toward the Promised Land. Lack of faith, absence of trust, painting an untrue and rosy picture of their enslavement in Egypt and general grumpiness toward the Almighty make it uncomfortable to read. If we were to place our own lives and spiritual journey alongside those of the Israelites, would we find ourselves faithful, joyful and willing to trust especially during difficult circumstances in our life with the Lord? I believe that is an important question to ask ourselves – honestly – as we read through selected passages from the book of Numbers.

Deb Trimpe

THE NAZIRITE VOW

Numbers 6:1-21

Throughout the first several chapters, we find a sense of joy and anticipation in the people of God. They're preparing for the journey to the land God had promised them. They had a strong army of 600,000+ men. God is good! As they continue their preparations for the journey and the process of becoming a nation, they are instructed to keep their camp and people holy.

Found in chapters 5-6, the call to religious purity finds 3 forms: righting wrongs done, purity and faithfulness in marriage and the vows of the Nazirites.

The vow of the Nazirite is of particular interest. Here in Numbers 6, God invites His children to engage in a period of purification during which they would dedicate themselves wholly to God. The setting in history is noteworthy: as they're entering pagan lands, God calls His people to set themselves apart for a period of time. The Nazirites had a firm vision of the high and holy calling which God gave them.

Looking to the entirety of scripture, we find people of God taking vows in both the Old and New Testament. Most famous are Samson and John the Baptist who were Nazirites from birth and for life – they're calling and commitment is unusual. For most people, the period for being a Nazirite was by *personal choice* and for a finite *period of time*. In addition to the 2 already mentioned, it is believed that Samuel was a Nazirite. However, by the time of the exile to Babylon (c. 597 BC), Nazirites were fondly remembered but absent from Israelite religious life (see Amos 2:11-12) But in the apostle Paul, we find our next recording of the Nazirite vow. In Acts 18:18, it relates that he had not cut his hair due to a vow he had taken. Other laypeople took these vows during the period of the early church, as well (Acts 21:23).

Set apart for a period of time, adhering to a strict set of vows and raised up by God: has God called us for such a time as this? Is God raising you up? Has He called you to be set apart? For what purpose?

While we may not name Nazirites as such today, it's worth remembering their vow to spiritual purity and their call to separate themselves from the godless cultures that surrounded them.

Prayer: Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. Take my moments and my days; Let them flow in ceaseless praise. Take my will and make it Thine; It shall be no longer mine. Take my heart, it is Thine own, it shall be Thy royal throne. (Havergal, Malan).

THE PASSOVER REMEMBERED

Numbers 9:1-14

The Passover is a significant celebration in the life of the Jewish faith. In the 21st century, it continues to be an eight-day festival commemorating the events that led to the freedom and exodus from Egypt of Jewish slaves, led by Moses.

In the newly emerging Christian church, as seen in the New Testament, the Passover continues to be significant to the religious community; it is at the Passover supper when Jesus takes the bread and cup and forever changes the way they remember the Passover.

For the children in the wilderness, their memory of God's great deliverance out of slavery in Egypt is still quite fresh in their minds. And the time has come for the 1st celebration to commemorate that great event. The LORD gives specific instructions - for the celebration, for the unclean, for the non-Jew - and these specifications would continue to be part of the Passover celebration for generations to come.

Interestingly, the Passover celebration is named only once in the Book of Numbers - yet the timeframe for the book is nearly 40 years. Did they only celebrate the Passover ONCE? Did they celebrate every year but felt no need to record the event? While we don't know for sure, there is a good bit of speculation among Bible scholars that, because the event was so fresh in their minds, the children in the wilderness didn't require an annual festival reminding them of God's work in their lives.

Regardless of how often the celebration was actually celebrated during those 40 years, I'd like to respectfully but seriously disagree with the idea that the children had no need for remembering something so fresh. Their actions in the wilderness certainly don't lead this reader to believe that they had remembered, celebrated and continually given thanks for God's redemptive and saving grace! In fact, I'd go on record as saying that perhaps if the Israelites HAD celebrated the Passover annually, they might have been a bit more thankful and faithful in their response to God.

Times of remembrance are important in our journey of faith. When we remember God's redemptive work in our lives, we are more apt to be thankful and to look for His continued work in and through us. The Passover is an annual celebration - for some of us, we need more regular and even daily remembrances of the Lord!

PRAYER ACTION: Take time today to pause and reflect on how the Lord has loved you, encouraged you, saved you and led you.

Record those events - large and small. Keep it handy and visible and offer a daily prayer of thanksgiving for God's work in your own life. Continue to add to your list as you continue to see God daily.



GRASSHOPPERS AND GIANTS

Numbers 13:16-33

Moses and Aaron sent out 12 leaders
– 1 from each tribe – to investigate
the land that God had promised them.

Can you imagine being this close to the fulfillment of all they'd prayed for, hoped for, dreamed of and trudged toward? Surely they were ecstatic to be this close! After the reconnaissance mission, they would surely move swiftly and confidently to defeat those inhabiting the land – after all, GOD had led them to this point, right?

Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way. The 12 spies – 2 of whom were Joshua and Caleb did in fact check out the new land – and it was as wonderful as they imagined it would be and more! Big, beautiful fruit bursting with flavor; lush greenery - truly a land flowing with milk and honey. The spies returned lugging their huge and heavy bounty telling Moses and Aaron the good news – but were also bug-eyed with reports of giants inhabiting the land. *"We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."* (Num 13:33) In the face of a discouraging report, the people allowed their fear and unbelief in the power and promise of God to prevail. They gave up the fight, so to speak.

Then came the other report from Joshua and Caleb – the encouraging one *"We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."* (Num 13:30) Unwritten, but heard in this assertion from Caleb is the reminder that the same God who had brought them out of their bondage in Egypt, led them across the Red Sea, and brought them to the brink of the very land He had promised, was still with them and leading the way in this fulfillment of His promise.

Also key in Caleb's impassioned plea are the words "we should...take possession..." Notice he doesn't say: "Let's conquer the land and its pagan inhabitants." It seems that, to Caleb, God had prepared them for this day and had already conquered the land; it was merely theirs to possess it. Two responses to the same investigation – one based on fear, distrust and unbelief; one based on faith, hope, joy and unwavering trust in the Almighty to fulfill His promise.

In your own daily life, who do you more closely resemble? When you face obstacles and challenges, how do you respond? Do you allow discouragement or doubt cloud your belief? Or do you live your life with the promise and power of God leading the way?

Almighty God, I thank you that you have claimed me as your own. I rejoice in the knowledge that you are guiding me and leading me each day. Help me to keep my focus on You, rather than on human circumstances. May I see you at work even in times of challenge. AMEN.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS?

Numbers 14:1-38

Talk about reactions!! Everybody had them in this chapter: The children of Israel's reaction to the reports from the Promised Land: raised voices and loud weeping. Their words: "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert!" Let's think about that response for a minute – they would prefer the safety of the known enslavement in Egypt to the bright, hopeful, promised, yet unknown, future God had prepared for them. What does that say?

Also, has the phrase, "be careful what you pray for" come to mind for you? In fact, they will die in that wilderness due to their unbelief. The Promised Land will not be theirs to enter, possess or enjoy. That privilege now belongs to the next generation of Israelites.

Joshua and Caleb react to the people's complaining by tearing their clothes. Throughout scripture, tearing their clothes is a sign of deep grief and mourning. This is a significant reaction by Joshua and Caleb. They plead with the people of Israel to listen and keep faith in Yahweh God: "Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them." I have to imagine that, given the depth of their response, their argument was impassioned and persuasive – yet the people considered stoning them!!

Finally, God seems to have had enough with these immature, whiny, complaining children of His. The LORD said: "How long will these people treat me with contempt?" and plans to strike them down immediately. Does this mean that God has no patience with us when we sin? Absolutely not. Throughout Numbers, God shows amazing patience in the face of rebellion, lack of trust and unbelief. Again, think of the number of miracles and signs the people have witnessed since their enslavement! If anyone should understand and know the power of God, it's the Israelites. Here we see a picture of God that may make us a bit uncomfortable – we don't want God to be angry; we want Him to be always loving, sweet and merciful.

Moses steps up to the plate and pleads on behalf of the Israelites – interestingly, though, he doesn't plead on behalf of *their* behavior or characterization; he begs the LORD to spare them to save His own witness. In essence he says: What will people – especially the Egyptians – think if you strike down the very people you saved? Not a great witness, LORD!! Indeed, the Lord relented, perhaps due to the mediation of Moses on behalf of the ungrateful people. Yet later in this same part of Scripture, we find the reminder that the Lord is "slow to anger" – really?



Wasn't he just pretty mad? Remember how long he had listened to the complaining spirits of His children – even the Lord found himself weary of their constant ungratefulness, even in the face of amazing deliverance and

signs from their God.

What do these reactions reveal to us about the character of humanity and God? This chapter is a powerful reminder that, in the face of a fickle, presumptuous, and rebellious group of people, God remains "...slow to anger and abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished..." God continues to discipline His children, bringing all of us more into the likeness of Christ, slowly but surely, if we will but accept His discipline.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you that you love us enough to not leave us unchanged. You continue to lead us, teach us and discipline us. Though we don't always like the process of accepting your discipline, we will thank you even then, knowing that You are making us more like Christ.

LESSONS FROM A DONKEY

Numbers 22:1-28

As a child, I loved animals and always gravitated to the Bible stories with real animals. If they could perform cool stunts, all the better! So it should come as no surprise that Balaam and his talking donkey always topped my list of favorite Bible stories. Unfortunately, the only truth I gleaned was that the donkey talked. I didn't pay attention to the content of the story; nor did I give any thought to its vitality in speaking to 21st believers.

Mentioned at least 3 times in the New Testament – and always with a note of warning – the message of Balaam and his donkey clearly contains an important lesson for us. Balaam is an interesting guy, with a strange mix of supernatural gifts and less-than-stellar personal character. Why would God give special gifts to a man not worthy to use them faithfully?

Balaam was known as a soothsayer – and a good one, too. He could proclaim curses or blessings very effectively. As such, Balak, a neighboring king worried about the possible battle with the Israelites, asked for a curse against God's people. Though not an Israelite himself, it's clear that Balaam does have personal knowledge of God – and in fact, claims faith in “my God”, using the Hebrew form of the word, indicating that he believed in and followed the same God as the Israelites.

At best, Balaam is inconsistent in his faith and his actions. Though expressly forbidden by God to place a curse on the Israelites, he continued to scheme with Balak. More than once, Balaam (the soothsayer) had Balak (the Moabite king) build altars and call on the Lord asking what he (Balaam) should say to the people of Moab. In every instance, saying only what the Lord had told him to say, Balaam pronounced a blessing on the people of Israel.

Balaam's legacy is not a positive one. Continued references to him in the New Testament live this out. Yet Balaam's story has great meaning for us: it's not a story about a stubborn man, nor is it about his donkey. Balaam's story, at the risk of repeating a continued theme again, is about God's character. Toward the end of their 40-year wandering in the wilderness, God continues to protect the people of Israel – more than that, He continues to pronounce blessing on these fickle children of His. What greater picture of God's mercy is there?

PRAYER: Gracious Lord, thank you for the mercy you have shown in forgiving sins both to the children of Israel and to me, today. You are faithful, and you never abandon those who hope in you. Teach me to encourage others so they, too, may seek your tender compassion and come to know You more fully. Amen.

WELCOME TO DEUTERONOMY

Deuteronomy is one of the first five books of the Old Testament. Those five books are commonly called the Pentateuch. The word Pentateuch literally means “five rolls” (or scrolls). Those five scrolls contain the first major segment (the “law” segment) of the Jewish “bible.” The other two segments of the Jewish “bible” are the “prophets” and the “writings.”

Deuteronomy is the last of the five scrolls in the Pentateuch. Literally, the word “Deuteronomy” means “second law.” Not a “second” law as in a “different” law. But a second rendition of most of the laws contained in the first four scrolls.

Traditionally, Moses has been acknowledged as the author of Deuteronomy, though scholars debate the authorship. Regardless of when or by whom it was penned, Deuteronomy’s content is appropriate for the children of Israel as they are nearing their entrance into the “Promised Land.” Finally! After a forty year – seemingly endless - wilderness journey.

In expressing his concerns to the Israelites Moses emphasized that they should never forget their history or that they were chosen and cared for by the Lord of Hosts! He reminds them:

- You were enslaved by the Egyptians, and there seemed to be no possible way to find freedom from slavery!
- God miraculously led you from slavery to freedom, and onward toward a land which would be your own.
- Even when you were dissatisfied and rebellious in the wilderness, God provided food and shelter and cared for you in every way – even though sometimes you were punished because of, or as a consequence of, your disobedience and selfish lifestyle.
- God has given you clear directions about how you should live! Recall those Ten Commandments, which were written by God’s own finger years ago at Mount Sinai. You are expected to obey them!
- You must never let your faith be contaminated with beliefs and practices of the pagan religions of the people around you. In the tradition of your forefathers, remain faithful to the Lord, your God.

A huge portion of Deuteronomy (chapters 5-26) focuses upon specific laws and directions for living as God’s faithful followers. Though the Ten Commandments were basic, there were hundreds of laws and rules of conduct directing the lifestyle of God’s people. Some of those laws raise real questions for us today.

The “scroll” ends with the death of Moses, and his burial in an unmarked grave. Joshua was chosen to lead Israel into the “Promised Land.”

Charlie Cook



WHO ARE GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE?

Who are God's chosen people?

Deuteronomy passages encouraged the people of Israel by reminding them that they were God's chosen ones on earth! They were called for a special purpose. God loved them!

That affirmation was not a new one in Deuteronomy. It hearkened back to Abram (Abraham) when God promised him "I will make of you a great nation . . . I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing . . . and by you all the families of the earth will be blessed." That promise is the foundation for the Deuteronomy statement, and for the Old Testament concept, of God's chosen.

So, when we try to determine who are God's chosen people, we must look to see who are included in the offspring of Abraham – and who are included in "all the families of the earth" who will be blessed by Abraham. We might be quite surprised to discover all those whom God may have included in that promise!

Many tend to read the Old Testament with the idea that God's chosen were only the people of Israel. But is that a fair or accurate assumption on our part?

The apostle Paul, a Jew himself, certainly did not see such limits on that Genesis promise. He asserted to the Galatians (4:26-29):

"for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

So the New Testament says that we who are Christians are also God's chosen people!

The apostle Peter, in the first of his two letters, says to Jesus' followers, "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people"

Does that not sound a lot like Deuteronomy 7:6,

"For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession...."

Making a judgment about who really are God's chosen people is not for us to do. God knows, and we don't.

What is appropriate for us to decide is whether we are going to follow God's leading and seek to live as his people in the world, so that the old promise will be fulfilled – that God will bless others through us.

GET OFF YOUR DUFF!

“Enough already!” “Stop dithering!” “Let’s go!” “Move it!” “Do something!” If Deuteronomy had been written in 2006, it may have started off with the phrase, “Get off your duff!” In fact, the book begins a little more formally, but no less strongly and directly. After a brief statement about who was speaking and the occasion, we find the words, “the Lord our God said to us in Horeb, ‘you have stayed long enough at this mountain. Turn and take your journey and go....’” (1:6)

The people of Israel had stayed much too long in the wilderness. Forty years earlier, they had come to the border of the “promised land.” They were given the opportunity – even the command – to go into the land of their inheritance.

But they were *afraid!* The obstacles looked too overwhelming. The enemy seemed to be stronger than they were. They filed a plan with Moses to check out everything carefully before taking any action. But the plan was only a delay tactic, putting off what they should have gone ahead and done.

They preferred the “status quo.” It was more comfortable. Less threatening. There were times in their wilderness journey when they even wanted to go back to the way things “used to be.” How typical of us human beings.

I’m sure the Lord must want to say to us sometimes (or perhaps many times), “you have stayed long enough at this place in your life! Get off your duff! Go and do something!

So much in our lives we do not get done ...

- that we know we ought to do
- that we know it is right for us to do
- that sometimes we really want to do

But we do not act on the impulse, or the opportunity, or the “*leading*” of the Spirit!

Fear is usually the deterrent (1:17,21). It will be too hard for us. It will take too much time. What will people think of us if we do that? We may fail. It’s easier to leave things as they are. Such fear is a lack of faith that the Lord can use us to move things in a better direction. And a lack of courage to follow what we know is the right path.

Consider your own life. Have you stayed long enough where you are? Find at least one way you can “get off your duff” and do something you know the Lord would like for you to do! Then *do it!*



PASS IT ON!

“I don’t want to brainwash my children. When they grow up they should be able to decide for themselves what their own faith will be.”

“My parents made me go to Sunday school and church. Now that I’m old enough to decide for myself, I’m never going to go again.”

We’ve probably all heard (or even made?) statements like those. While those may be “good-old American freedom of choice” affirmations, they are completely contrary to the thrust of Holy Scripture.

Consider the basic Biblical philosophy found in Deuteronomy 6:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

This is a fundamental life-plan for God’s people! Pass on the faith! Starting right in our own families! With our own children!

We Presbyterians interpret that command to include not just our own physical offspring, but to include the children of fellow believers. Children in our whole congregation! When we baptize infants and children, we ask the entire congregation to take the following vow:

“Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture (these named children) by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ, and to be faithful members of his church?”

Of course, we all say “We Do!” But how easy it is for such vows to be only ceremonial in nature. Do we really know what we are promising to DO when we respond affirmatively to that vow?

Let’s seek to make the church a “life experience” in which children feel loved, cared for, appreciated, forgiven and special. A “life experience” in which they never feel heaped upon them guilt, shame, embarrassment, or rejection – and in which they see Christianity consistently demonstrated in the lives of adults around them at home, in church, and in the whole community!

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Deuteronomy 5:6-21

“And it came to pass that Moses met God on the summit of Mount Sinai. With God’s own holy finger, God inscribed upon two stone tablets The Ten Commandments. And Moses came down from upon the mountain to bring the Divine instructions to the people of Israel.

“The people greeted him with great celebration! They began immediately to make copies of the stone tablets to inscribe upon banners, which would be carried at the forefront of Israel’s armies as they marched into battle. A replica of those holy commandments was placed within each Israelite tribe at the place where the people brought their disputes for judgment by the magistrates. Miniature tablets were offered to all the families who would like to place them at the door of their tents....”

OOPS! That’s the twenty-first century version of the story. That’s not what really happened. What the Israelites actually did with the Ten Commandments was to place them completely out of sight – inside the ark of the covenant! The ark was in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle.

There was another place on which the commandments and the truths of God were to be posted. Not a public place, but a place which was (and still is) a most effective place.

- And these words which I command you this day shall be **upon your heart**; (6:6)
- "You shall therefore lay up these words of mine **in your heart** and in your soul; (11:18)
- But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and **in your heart**, so that you can do it. (30:14)
- **Lay to heart** all the words which I enjoin upon you this day, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. (32:46)

The prophet Jeremiah said it wonderfully, “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it **upon their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Jeremiah 31:33

May our motto be the same as was the Psalmist’s, who wrote: (Psalm 119:11) “I have laid up thy word in my heart, that I might not sin against thee.”



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