

Reviewing the Past to Understand the Future  
Deuteronomy 1-3

Turn to Deuteronomy 1. At the beginning of Deuteronomy Moses told the Israelites a few stories about their past, stories they all knew very well. This was NOT an old man hoping to entertain people with stories about the good old days, or the bad old days.

Rather, Moses was telling them what would make the difference in the future. Israel needed to be thinking about these stories of the past as they headed into the future. These stories are about fear, and how fear works against us, and about trusting God, and how trust works for us.

The Three Journeys of the Exodus

First we need to review the three journeys of the exodus from Egypt. Israel went on three journeys between leaving Egypt and crossing the Jordan into Canaan 40 years later. Each journey took a few months.

The first journey began in Egypt, Israel crossed the Red Sea almost immediately, and travelled south another couple of months until they came to Mt Sinai, also called Mt Horeb. That was the end of the first journey, about the middle of the book of Exodus.

At Sinai they covenanted with God to be his people, and he gave them the Ten Commandments, and they made the tabernacle, that tent that was a travelling temple. They were at Sinai for the second half of Exodus, right through Leviticus, and up to Numbers 10, about eleven months.

The second journey began at Mt Sinai, and from there they travelled north to Kadesh Barnea, which is about at the south end of Canaan, the Promised Land, which we know as Palestine. Kadesh Barnea was the end of the second journey, less than two years since they left Egypt.

From Kadesh Barnea they were supposed to go into Canaan, but Israel got scared of the armies in Canaan and would not go into Canaan. That was an unhappy time. On these two journeys there had been quite a few times when Israel and refused to trust God.

This story is in Numbers 14. God says there that Israel had tested his patience ten times, and none of the people over 20 years old were going to enter the Promised Land. Israel would wander in the desert about 40 years, until everyone 20 or over had died, and then God would take the next generation into Canaan.

Then for 38 years Israel wandered around in the desert, and we hear almost nothing about those years, except that God took care of them, blessed them, was with them, watched over them.

Third journey: the third journey begins at Kadesh, where the second journey ended, and then Israel travelled east a bit so that they were on the east side of the Dead Sea, and travelled north.

They conquered two Amorite kings, which we'll read about today, Sihon and Og. The third journey ended near the Jordan River, across from Jericho.

Moses died there. But before Moses died, he preached to them, and the whole book of Deuteronomy is that final sermon, Moses' last words.

Deuteronomy begins at the end of the third journey. Deuteronomy 1:1 *These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the wilderness east of the Jordan.*

Deut 1:3 *In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses proclaimed to the Israelites all that the Lord had commanded them concerning him.* So this is at the very end of the 40 years Israel spend in the wilderness.

### The Failure of the Past: 1:27-34

In Deuteronomy 1-3 Moses tells Israel about one of their biggest failures in the past, and then he tells them about significant success in the past. Moses was getting them ready for the future, and they needed to think clearly about what went wrong in the past, and what went right in the past.

If they can get this clear, they will do well in the future. That's why he tells it. What made the difference in the past is exactly the same as what will make the difference in the future.

How do you feel about the future? Excited? Frightened? Some of both? The NT is clear that stories like this in the OT are written for us, as examples for us, so we will be careful what we set our hearts on.

*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us – Romans 15:4. All Scripture is useful for teaching, correcting, and training in righteousness - 2 Timothy 3:16; see also 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11.*

Deuteronomy 1 tells the story of the second journey, from Mt Sinai, here called Horeb, to its disastrous end at Kadesh Barnea. We'll pick up the story where the Israelite spies came back and said that the Canaanites were too big to defeat, and the cities too large, the walls too high.

Deuteronomy 1:26 - *But you were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God.<sup>27</sup> You grumbled in your tents and said, "The Lord hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us.*

"You grumbled in your tents. The Lord hates us, he brought us here to destroy us." People, be careful what you say about God in the secret places. "The Lord might as well hate me. He does not care if I am destroyed." If you do not actually believe that, don't say it.

<sup>28</sup> *Where can we go? Our brothers have made our hearts melt in fear. They say, "The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky. We even saw the Anakites there."* The Anakites were a tribe of giants; being taller and heavier makes a big difference in hand to hand combat.

Fear is a big part of this story. *Our brothers have made our hearts melt in fear. They say . . .*

Fear is not a bad thing on its own. God made us to feel fear when there is danger, so that we would run away or protect ourselves. That's all good, just as it should be.

BUT, what happens when what God has clearly called us to do scares us? When there is no doubt at all about what God wants?

“Fear” in this story, as usual in the Bible, is not really about how we feel. The real question is, which voice guides what we actually do? In our actions, do we obey the fear voice or the God voice? These people obeyed the fear voice, and Moses called that rebellion against the LORD your God (1:26).

So, v28 – *our brothers have made our hearts melt in fear. They say, ‘The people are stronger and taller than we are.’*

<sup>29</sup> *Then I said to you, “Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them. <sup>30</sup> The Lord your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes, <sup>31</sup> and in the wilderness. There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place.”*

You need to feel these two voices. One, our brothers who made our hearts melt in fear. Two, Moses' voice that told them not to fear because of how God had cared for them in the past.

Moses said, “God goes ahead of you, he fights for you, God carries you as a father carries his son, *all the way until you reached this place.* He has done all this before your very eyes.

And people, he's done all this for me and for you, before our very eyes. You don't think so? You think he took better care of those Israelites in the wilderness than he would do for you and for me? Their life was not easy, but everything Moses said was true, as it is for us.

But if we do not thank God for our food, or thank God for clothes and homes, or thank him for health and good people around us, then this is strange. God is taking care of me? Going ahead of me? Carrying me as a father carries a child? Really? Since when? This matters. If we cannot see God's care in the past, up to this day, God cannot encourage us about the future.

So these Israelites had two voices, their brothers stories that made their hearts melt in fear, and Moses' voice that reminded them of how God had been faithful until that very day.

<sup>32</sup> *In spite of this, you did not trust in the Lord your God, <sup>33</sup> who went ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go.*

Again I say it, do you think those Israelites are the only people for whom God did this? Does God not also go ahead of you and me on our journey? To search out places for us, and to guide us? He certainly does. That does not make life easy. It did not make their life easy, nor ours.

But this is our God, as theirs. In spite of this, they did not trust God. They would not go. They obeyed the fear voice, and did not trust God. And because that was rebellion (1:26), and because it was their normal way of responding to God, it made them an evil generation (1:35).

<sup>34</sup> *When the Lord heard what you said, he was angry and solemnly swore:* <sup>35</sup> *“No one from this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your ancestors (except Caleb and Joshua).”*

### Where you may NOT go – 2:1-23

In Deuteronomy 2:1-23 Moses reviews the places that the Lord told them *not* to go. They may not take land that God has given to others. In this case all these other nations are descendants of Abraham, and they got land from God just as Israel was getting land from God.

There is a useful caution here. In Joshua 1:3 God said to Joshua, “I will give you every place where you set your foot.” This all gets dumbed down sometimes to mean that whenever I am scared I should just go straight ahead and God will go ahead of me and give me what I want to possess. Wherever I put my foot, that’s what God is giving me, and I should ignore all fear.

Deuteronomy 2 clears this up. It is a list of places God would certainly **not** give Israel, God had given those lands to other nations, Israel needed to treat those people with respect, pay them for any food or water used, and so on.

In Joshua 1:3 God does indeed say “I will give you every place where you set your foot.” But in the sentence just before that he says, “Get ready to cross the Jordan River.”

**Once they cross the Jordan**, every place they put their feet is theirs, but they have already travelled past many lands that the God had no intention of given them.

Deuteronomy 1-3 is not a story about getting whatever we want, if we only believe. It is a story about God clearly and unmistakably calling us to something that frightens us, and what happens if we do not trust and obey him, and what happens if we do trust and obey him.

### Two Recent Successes 2:24-37; 3:1-11.

Moses told them about a failure in their past, that happened at the end of the second journey, when they would not trust God and obey him and go into the land.

Now Moses goes over two successes that have just happened, during the third journey. These stories of how they defeated two Amorite kings can’t be more than a few months old. Their failure was 38 years back, but these good stories still fresh.

And the point of the recent stories is that the thing they got wrong 38 years ago, when they obeyed their fears rather than God, they got right this time. They obeyed God rather than their fears.

The Defeat of Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon - Deuteronomy 2:24-37- *[The LORD said,] “Set out now and cross the Arnon Gorge. See, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his country. Begin to take possession of it and engage him in battle. <sup>25</sup> This very day I will begin to put the terror and fear of you on all the nations under heaven. They will hear reports of you and will tremble and be in anguish because of you.”*

*<sup>26</sup> From the Desert of Kedemoth I sent messengers to Sihon king of Heshbon offering peace and saying, <sup>27</sup> “Let us pass through your country. We will stay on the main road; we will not turn aside to the right or to the left. <sup>28</sup> Sell us food to eat and water to drink for their price in silver. Only let us pass through on foot—<sup>29</sup> as the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir, and the Moabites, who live in Ar, did for us—until we cross the Jordan into the land the Lord our God is giving us.” <sup>30</sup> But Sihon king of Heshbon refused to let us pass through. For the Lord your God had made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate in order to give him into your hands, as he has now done.*

*<sup>31</sup> The Lord said to me, “See, I have begun to deliver Sihon and his country over to you. Now begin to conquer and possess his land.”*

*<sup>32</sup> When Sihon and all his army came out to meet us in battle at Jahaz, <sup>33</sup> the Lord our God delivered him over to us and we struck him down, together with his sons and his whole army.*

*<sup>34</sup> At that time we took all his towns and completely destroyed them—men, women and children. We left no survivors. <sup>35</sup> But the livestock and the plunder from the towns we had captured we carried off for ourselves. <sup>36</sup> From Aroer on the rim of the Arnon Gorge, and from the town in the gorge, even as far as Gilead, not one town was too strong for us. The Lord our God gave us all of them. <sup>37</sup> But in accordance with the command of the Lord our God, you did not encroach on any of the land of the Ammonites, neither the land along the course of the Jabbok nor that around the towns in the hills.*

The main teaching here is what happens when we DO trust God enough to obey him.

But first: Two things happen here that make us wonder about God’s sense of justice. One, God made Sihon’s spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate, so that Israel would destroy him and take his land. Is that fair to Sihon? Two, the Israelite army was told to destroy every person: men, women, and children. How can that be right?

I do not have a satisfying answer for either one of these. As far as killing women and children goes, I will say that this was not Israel’s normal war practise. But it did happen a few times, by God’s clear command.

The OT calls judgment God’s strange work, his alien task (Isa 28:21). God takes no pleasure in the death of evil people (Lam 3:33; Ezek 18:23,32; 33:11). We should assume what God did was in some ways deeply distasteful to him, painful.

Other than that, I have basically stopped trying to make God look better, when he himself does not seem concerned to look better.

2:24 - The opposite of fear and disobedience – so if we decide that we are going to trust and obey God, what exactly do we do? How does that look?

2:24 - *I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his country. Begin to take possession of it and engage him in battle.*

Pay close attention here. This is the opposite of the Kadesh rebellion. God has already given Sihon and his land to Israel. *Begin to take possession of it, and engage him in battle.* What did Israel actually do? They walked over to Sihon's land, one foot in front of the other, they crossed the border into the land, putting one foot in front of the other in the ordinary way.

When Sihon and his army came out, the Israelites got out their swords and shields and spears, or whatever they were using, and they swung their swords and they threw their spears.

God said, "Engage them. Go over there, and engage them." Nothing miraculous going on here. This is what trust and obedience looks like. God just wanted them to walk over there and begin.

After that, God takes care of it. What God needed from Israel was that Israel would walk onto Sihon's land, and when Sihon's army came out, Israel would stand and fight. God would do the rest. But God could not do the rest if Israel would not do that much.

So here are the two choices. We can listen to the scary voices, the ones that make our hearts melt in fear, and rebel against God, stay in our tents and grumble about God.

Or we can go where he says, putting one foot in front of the other in the ordinary way, and when the enemy comes out we stand our ground in the ordinary way, and keep doing it, and the rest is God's business.

In the rest of chapter 3 they defeated Og king of Bashan, another Amorite king, in the same way they defeated Sihon of Heshbon. And then they made the land of those two kings part of Israel.

I will end with how God took care of the Israelites, which Moses reminded them about. We have the very same God, that exact same God, and he's caring for us in the same way as he did for them. All we need to know about the future is what our God is like.

1:29-31 - *Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them.* <sup>30</sup> *The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes,* <sup>31</sup> *and in the wilderness. There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place.*

1:33 - *The LORD your God,* <sup>33</sup> *went ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go.*

2:7 - *The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything.* Even while suffering the consequences of their disobedience, God blessed them, watched over them, was with them, and they lacked nothing.

What we need to know about our future is what our God is like. Amen.