

Giving for the Past and for the Future

Deuteronomy 26:1-15

Turn to Deuteronomy 26. Moses gave Israel two little speeches to make to God when they brought God their tithe. We are Gentiles not Israelites, so God does not tell us to say these things to him. But in these two speeches God show us what is happening when we give part of our income to God. That we still do, that is certainly still taught in the NT.

When Israelites made these two speeches to God, they described their relationship to God. The words Moses designed said it like it was. And so they are a teaching tool. Israelites did not say these things because God needed to hear them.

Israelites said these things because they needed to say them, Israelites needed to learn that they were dependent on God because they WERE dependent on God, but they and we forget that we are dependent on God. And that moves quickly to idolatry, to us moving to different gods.

We don't need to say these speeches, but we have the same kind of dependence on God that they did, so we need to understand them, and we do need to say to God something like these.

First, we learn what to say to God AS we give, about the PAST.

Second, we learn what to say to God AFTER we give, about the FUTURE. (repeat)

Deuteronomy 26:1-15 - *When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, ² take some of the firstfruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name ³ and say to the priest in office at the time, "I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us."*

First Speech - Verse three is the beginning of the first speech, it carries on in v5. "I declare today to the LORD that I have come to the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." In different words, "God has done what he promised." It is about the past – in the past, up to this point, God has done what he promised. That is the core of the first speech.

Jesus makes this kind of promise in Matthew 6:31f: *So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'* ³² *For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.* ³³ *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Food, drink, clothes – the Father will give you these things as well. So here's the question: In the past, up to this point, has the Father given food and drink and clothing to you? Is it true that God has been faithful to the promise Jesus gave, and given these to you?

Then, when WE give, let's US say: God, you have kept an old promise, you have given me and my household food and drink and clothing.

This is a firstfruits gift. This did not come after the harvest was all in, but rather they gave this gift as soon as the harvest began. The first part went to God. When you give to God, make your gift to God the first thing that comes out of your pay cheque, not the middle or the last. That's what firstfruits giving means.

Here's the thing about giving regularly to God, giving enough that it makes a difference in how you live: you can't give this way very long without starting to believe that God is your provider.

Now let's read the rest of the first speech to God.

⁴ The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God. ⁵ Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. ⁶ But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. ⁷ Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. ⁸ So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. ⁹ He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; ¹⁰ and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, LORD, have given me."

This longer part of the first speech to God is just a longer version of the first part – the LORD has kept his promises to me, the LORD has been faithful to me. The “wandering Aramean” would be Jacob. Abraham and Isaac were that as well, but Jacob was the one who went to Egypt.

The first speech says: my ancestors had it bad, had no land, we were mistreated. But the LORD rescued us and brought us to a good place. *And now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, LORD, have given to me.*

So the firstfruits gift is a tribute to God for his faithfulness in the past. God, you've been good to me, you've given me food and drink and clothing, and I am giving you the firstfruits of what you've given me to thank you and give you honour for your faithfulness to me up in the past.

Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him. ¹¹ Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household.

Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down to him. Can you feel what's going on with this gift? It is worship, it is thanks, it is a tribute, it is giving honour to the Giver, giving credit to the Provider.

We actually feel some unease about this, some guilt, and we don't do this easily. That's too bad. We know that others do not have enough food, and so we somehow feel responsible for that.

What's more, we hear that the big companies we buy food and clothing from treat other peoples poorly, mistreat them. So how can we thank God, if we have these things wrongfully?

Justice is a real issue. I am not going to speak about it this morning, but it matters to God. It is not easy for ordinary people to do much about it, but it matters to God.

BUT, that is no reason to thank God. He gives prosperity and power to whomever he pleases. If we have lots of food and clothing, it is because God has provided them: NEVER forget that. Our FIRST response is to give God credit.

Daniel 4 tells us the story of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon who led Babylon to be the world's superpower of the day. The Babylonians were as harsh and oppressive to the nations they conquered as any superpower ever was.

God warned Nebuchadnezzar not to be proud, but to give Him credit, because God gives power and prosperity to whomever he pleases. Nebuchadnezzar did not pay attention to this warning, and kept tell himself how great he was.

God judged him with seven years of madness. For seven years Nebuchadnezzar was a madman, a lunatic. And then God gave him his sanity back, and he ruled Babylon again, and then he did acknowledge that the God of heaven gives these things to whomever he pleases, and can take them away any time he wants.

Nebuchadnezzar had these things by mistreating others. STILL, first of all he needed to give God credit.

In Daniel 5 we read about his successor, Belshazzar. He knew the story of Nebuchadnezzar, but he did not give God credit as the one who gives prosperity and power to whomever he pleases.

So then Belshazzar saw the hand writing on the wall: your days have been numbered, you've been weighed and come up short, your kingdom is gone. That was in the evening, the Babylonian kingdom fell that night, and Belshazzar was dead before morning.

The first thing to do with our prosperity is to honour God with a gift, and to thank the God who gives these things to whom he pleases. Never forget that.

This is how Moses says it earlier in Deuteronomy: *You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me."*¹⁸ *But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.* (Deut 8:17-18)

And according to Deuteronomy 26, we thank and honour God by bringing him a firstfruits gift. In the Bible as a whole, there is no thanking God without a gift. Praising and honouring God as the Provider, without doing it with a gift to God, is empty.

God does not need the gift. We need to give it to straighten out our twisted minds and habits, and to protect ourselves from idolatry, of serving possessions instead of serving God.

That's the first speech: as we bring our gifts we tell God that he has been faithful to us in the past, and provided everything he said he would give. We give God honour and praise for this by giving the gift and bowing before him.

Second Speech

When Israel came into Canaan they got their own land, and became agricultural people. Abraham had not had land since God called him to leave home and go to a new place. Neither had Isaac or Jacob. But in Canaan they had their own land, and they started growing crops, grain and grapes and olives and so on.

Tithing time for Israel was harvest time. In Manitoba harvest goes for quite a while in the fall, some crops ripen before others, some fields before others. I suspect that in Israel, as Manitoba, harvest was spread out over about six weeks. So the first speech was at the beginning, it was a firstfruits offering, and the second speech came after the harvest was over.

It is hard to figure out how tithing worked in Israel. If we look at everything it says from Exodus to Deuteronomy, it is not easy to put it all together. I couldn't put it all together, so I did a bit of reading this week, and I found out the experts struggle with this too.

But it is clear that this second speech comes after the harvest is done, and after the complete tithe has been given to God. The first speech told God about his faithfulness in the PAST, and the second speech asks God for faithfulness in the FUTURE.

¹² When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.

When you have finished setting aside a tenth – the second speech happens after the giving is all over. After we have given the gift, we speak to God:

¹³ Then say to the LORD your God: "I have removed from my house the sacred portion and have given it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, according to all you commanded. I have not turned aside from your commands nor have I forgotten any of them.

I have removed from my house the sacred portion, as you said. The sacred portion is the tithe. Calling it the sacred portion means that it belonged to God. The sacred portion means the holy part, the part that belongs to God.

I removed from my house the holy part, the sacred portion, the tithe. That means it is holy, it belongs to God, before it's given. While it is still in my house, in my barn, in my bank account, it already belongs to God. It did not become sacred when given to God. It was God's all along.

¹⁴ I have not eaten any of the sacred portion while I was in mourning, nor have I removed any of it while I was unclean, nor have I offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the LORD my God; I have done everything you commanded me.

I have removed the sacred part of my income from my house, I have done with it what you said. I have not taken any of the sacred part for myself, not given it to anyone else. I have done with it just as you said. And now we get to the future:

¹⁵ Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel and the land you have given us as you promised on oath to our ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Here is how the second speech works: God, I have done what you asked me to do, now please do what you said you would do. You asked me to give, and I gave. You said you would provide for me, so will you now provide.

The first speech was about the past: God, you have been faithful up until now, I have food and clothing, you've done what you said you would do, and I am giving this gift to you to honour and thank you as my Provider.

The second speech is about the future, and we say it after the gift is given: I have given the gift you asked for, I have done what you said I should do. Now will you do what you said you will do, and provide in the future.

One of the things I realized going through this is that I cannot thank God for his faithfulness without a giving, and I cannot ask him to provide in the future without giving.

It is important to be able to thank God for the past, and to be able to ask him for help in the future. That's what these two speeches are about. They are both built on me bringing a significant gift to God.

The NT never calls Gentile believers to give a tenth. The NT calls us to be generous, and to give, but does not say that it shall be a tenth. Nor does it ever say a tenth is a bad idea. I am sure that all the Jewish believers in the NT churches, and there were many, gave a tenth. I think a tenth is a good starting point, but only that, and we cannot specify.

Underwriting Lower Incomes - I have heard of churches doing this: in a church were some households have lower incomes, and giving a tenth feels impossible, and other households have all they need, a prosperous household underwrites a lower income household.

It works like this: the lower income household wants to give a tenth, but is afraid of what will happen if they run out, if there are bills they cannot pay. So the more prosperous household says, “You give a tenth, and if you have a bill you can't pay, or an emergency, come to us, and we'll give you money for it. We'll catch you if this does not work.”

In the stories I have heard, the lower incomes who begin to tithe rarely need to be caught. They actually find that they manage as well as before.

So maybe those of us who have some to spare should make this offer, and we'll see if there is a household that would like to give a tenth and would like this kind of protection.

Food and Clothing

We have become careless about food and clothing. In our circles we all have this, and we take it for granted. We don't measure income by if we have food or clothing or shelter, we measure it by our toys and how much we can indulge ourselves. If we have food and clothing and hardly anything else, we think we're in a hard place. How did we get so spiritually blind?

It was the Lord's Prayer that woke me up to this: give us today our daily food. Give us food for the day. But I always *have* food for the day. So what does *that* mean? It means God has been remarkably generous and faithful. Every single day of my life.

Paul says if we have food and shelter, with this we'll be content. 1 Timothy 6. I have in the past felt that people who made much of the basics of food and clothing and shelter were spiritually immature, they were juvenile. God is interested in more important things. What nonsense!

If we have food and clothing and shelter, then God has been faithful to us, keeping old promises still today. If we do not recognize this, we are spiritually ignorant and sliding away from God. Food and clothing and shelter only come because God is faithful.

In the Scripture, taking this for granted is a problem. The way to NOT take it for granted, to NOT give yourself credit for this, to NOT ignore God's faithfulness, is to bring back to God a part of what he has given.

As you give, thank him for his faithfulness in the past. God, you have been faithful to me, and I honour with this gift. I thank you and worship you with this gift.

After you give, ask him to provide in the future. God, I have given you the part that belongs to do, I have not held back your part, or given it to another, I have done what you said I should do. And now, since I've done what you said I should do, will you keep providing, will you do what you said you would do.

Amen.