

Priorities and Power: Lessons from Deuteronomy

Imagine it.¹ You are a Hebrew, standing in Moab, shoulder to shoulder with your fellow-Hebrews, poised to cross the Jordan. All your life thus far – this past forty years or so – has been spent – wasted – in a nomadic existence, wandering in a howling wilderness until the last of the adults who had come out of Egypt under Moses (except Caleb and Joshua) died (as God’s judgment for their unbelief and rebellion, especially at Kadesh Barnea). Now, at last, you have reached the east bank of Jordan. What thoughts are racing through your mind?

The crossing of that river, and doing so without Moses! How heavily you have depended on him this past forty years – and now, when you need him most, no longer will he be there! But that’s not all! Having got across the river – if you do! – what horrors are waiting for you on the other side? Militarily speaking, you know that you are totally unprepared to face the enormous odds confronting you: walled cities occupied by a settled people with hostile armies who know you are coming.

Imagine it! Especially if you are one of the leaders; Joshua, above all – see later.

Your pulse is racing, your heart thumping, a thousand anxious thoughts hurtling through your fevered brain. Numbed with paralysing fear, you take some deep breaths, trying desperately to pull yourself together to clear your mind so that you can sort out the necessary tactics you need to come up with, the schemes you need to devise in order to survive the coming days – let alone come through it all victorious. True, God has given you copper-bottomed guarantees; true, he has never failed you; true, he has

¹ For the background to this article, see my ‘Thoughts On Deuteronomy’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

rescued and blessed you again and again as you have met disaster after disaster ever since those days in Egypt. Even so...

Pure speculation!

Is it? These Hebrews were real people, real men and women like us, men and women (with their children) made of flesh and blood, real people who had the same feelings as us, facing real, huge obstacles. Have you never known what it is to sit in a dentist's waiting room, knowing that within a few minutes you will be undergoing a serious piece of oral surgery? Have you never gone to bed, keyed up because you know that tomorrow morning you will be taking your final exam, the culmination of years of study, so much hanging on it? Have you never been all-fingers-and-thumbs as you tried to open some letter that contains life-affecting news? Perhaps you have never been sitting across from a medical consultant who is giving you a fateful prognosis – but you almost certainly know somebody who has.

Of course you have; we have all been through this – or something very like it.

As for the Hebrews, we have their track record written out for all to see. How quickly they descended from the heights of euphoria to the depths of darkest depression, and that right from the start of the exodus (Ex. 15)!

Hush! Moses is speaking. God, through Moses, is addressing you all. What's he saying?

You can hardly believe your ears! Not a word about any of this – as far as tactics go. Not a word. No! God is spelling out your priorities, the things you must have uppermost in your mind, the settled principles you must fix on when you get into the land he promised Abraham and his descendants. This – not any of the above – has to be your concern. Forget the river, forget the enemy, forget their armies, forget the walls, forget the difficulties. Think about your real priorities.

And what are these priorities? The law, the covenant – the centrality of that covenant, the keeping of the covenant and its law – that has to be your priority. What? Yes, indeed – the covenant,

the law. This must be uppermost in your mind. Not the crossing of the river, not the coming wars, not the fear of being wounded. The covenant, the law: you must keep it; you must be careful to keep it. This is what you must be thinking about, this is your duty, this is your responsibility. This must be your concern, even now – and top of the list!

This has been God's constant theme throughout the entire book of Deuteronomy, the message he has been reinforcing time and again in his addresses to the Hebrews through Moses just before they crossed the Jordan (Deut. 8:11-20; 29:2-9; 31:1-13,23, for instance). The covenant, the law – above all else, keep both!

According to God, the great concern for the Hebrews was not how they were to conquer the land and subdue their enemies. Plans, tactics, strategies, programmes and schemes? None of that! Leave all that to me, he was telling them. Think of the covenant and the law. And be determined to keep fast to both, thus keeping close to me. Such was God's word to his people just before their crossing of the Jordan. No need of a committee to devise the best way to cross the river and subdue the land, and all the rest of it. Leave that to me! Make me, my covenant and its law your number-one priority.

Let me stress this – as God did, again and again, during all the events recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. The problem for the Hebrews was not the river, not the walled cities, not the enemy hordes. It was themselves – their failure to keep the covenant and its law, their turning to pagans, their adoption of pagan principles and the worship of their gods. The Hebrews were to remember at all times that they were to be a separated people: God had drawn them clear of Egyptian slavery, giving them his covenant and its law, something he had done for no other people (Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; see also Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5, and so on). Although they were entering a pagan land to settle it, their great concern was to be careful to avoid all pagan contamination.

Not only that – they had to remember that it was not by their cleverness, their schemes and plans that they would succeed in all that lay before them – it was the presence of God – and,

consequently, the power of God: that was key. As Moses made clear to Joshua (the new leader) and all Israel:

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: 'Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall put them in possession of it. It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed' (Deut. 31:7-8).

The point could not be missed: Israel must keep the covenant; God would keep his promise. God reinforced it right from Joshua's inauguration, telling him:

Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go (Josh. 1:2-9)

However, despite all the encouragements and warnings he was now giving them, God knew that the Hebrews would, almost from the word 'go', utterly corrupt themselves, abandon him and the covenant, and turn to paganism and idolatry. He not only told them about it – he put it into a song which he made them learn, a

song they had to repeat to themselves down the coming years (Deut. 32:1-47).

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So what? All that was more than 3000 years ago – old hat!

True, all this did take place three millennia ago, but the lessons of this history outlast the experience of Israel under the old covenant: those lessons apply to us evangelicals today. Paul told us so:

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4).

Moreover, the apostle, when addressing the Corinthians, took them back to Israel's history as recorded in Scripture – especially Israel's sinful failure and consequent judgment. God recorded these things, the apostle declared:

...as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did... These things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:6,11-12).

And we have the cardinal passage:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

All Scripture – including Deuteronomy – is profitable for us today!

Believers are in a covenant: the new covenant. Believers are under a law: the law of Christ. Just as God's priority for Israel was their keeping of the old covenant and its law, so believers are under obligation to obey Christ in his covenant and law.² In particular, they have no right to tamper with the *ekklēsia*: as God spelled out the covenant and its law for Israel, he has done the same for

² I have written and spoken extensively about this. See, for instance, my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law; Liberty not Licence*.

believers and the *ekklēsia*. Moreover, just as Israel was facing a huge task – subduing and settling the land, and, throughout, steering clear of paganism, observing the covenant – so believers are faced with the huge responsibility of taking the gospel into all the world (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47-49; Acts 1:8), while keeping Christ’s covenant and law intact.

Contrary to common practice today, there is no scriptural evidence that this evangelism ever took place within the *ekklēsia*. Nor was it accomplished by the apostles setting up a committee to devise a plan of action. Not at all! As for the adoption of pagan ideas, consulting Greeks and Romans for advice and tips on how best to fulfil Christ’s command...! As the book of Acts shows, the advance of the gospel overwhelmingly was through spontaneous conversations, personal witness and preachings (using the word ‘preaching’ in its widest, new-covenant sense) *outside* the meetings of the *ekklēsia*, under the direction and empowering of the sovereign Spirit. Indeed, it could be argued that persecution of the saints was one of the main means the Spirit used to advance the spread of the gospel (see Acts 4:1-31; 5:12-42; 8:1-40, and so on). And all was in accordance with Christ’s promise (I paraphrase): ‘Stay... until you are clothed with power from on high... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and [only after that and in this way] you will be my witnesses’ (Acts 1:4). There was nothing of human planning about it. The apostles did not control the way the events of Acts unfolded. Indeed, the evidence tells us that the advance of the gospel took the early believers completely by surprise. Spontaneity is the word; not professional organisation.³

To return to Israel: within a few short years of their entering the land, as God had foretold them (and, as we have seen, made them sing about it in order to drive home the sense of their sin), the Hebrews utterly corrupted themselves, abandoned God and his covenant, turned to pagans and paganism, and became idolaters. Eventually, after repeatedly refusing faithful prophet after faithful

³ See my *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*.

prophet who warned them of their sin and impending judgment, after repeatedly closing their ears to those prophets who called them back to repentance – preferring instead the smooth talk of the false prophets – the northern kingdom was taken into captivity under Assyria, and the southern kingdom into captivity under Babylon.

Alas, as with Israel under the old covenant, so for believers under the new. Believers – like Israel – very quickly became guilty of breaking their covenant and law. The New Testament clearly warned of it (Matt. 24:5,24; Acts 20:29-30; Rom. 16:17-19; 2 Cor. 11:13; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; 2 Pet. 2:1-3, for instance); Christ’s searching and solemn words to the churches (Rev. 2 – 3) leave no room for doubt. Church history is replete with the record of the apostasy of believers, and the consequences of it – the Fathers, the years under Constantine and Theodosius, the rise of Rome, the fate of the once-thriving churches of North Africa, the Dark Ages... As for our day, many contemporary evangelical churches are playing fast and loose with the covenant – blithely remodelling the *ekklēsia* to make it suitable for their schemes, plans and programmes to maximise what they consider to be evangelistic opportunity – attracting and holding pagans in long-term church attendance.⁴ The cost of this betrayal of the covenant will be immense. The price will have to be paid – it may take a generation or more, but chickens have not lost the habit of coming home to roost.

The question is, will we – before it is too late – come to our senses, trust God, trust his word, trust his promise, rely upon his power? We are becoming more and more adept at organising and administrating the church and evangelism as we see fit – so much so, we soon won’t need the Spirit! Yet we know the scriptural principle – that it takes God’s sovereign intervention in power to prosper his cause:

⁴ I have written and spoken extensively about this. See, for instance, my *Evangelicals Warned: Isaiah 30 Speaks Today*; *Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder*; *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*; *The Evangelical Dilemma: Evangelistic Addresses (Apostolic and Modern) Compared*.

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts (Zech. 4:6).

The cleverest schemes of human devising are spiritually impotent. Vain is the help of man.

Take Israel, once more. The spiritual men and women among the Hebrews would sing the following with understanding and feeling:

You are my King, O God; ordain salvation for Jacob! Through you we push down our foes; through your name we tread down those who rise up against us. For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. But you have saved us from our foes and have put to shame those who hate us. In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever (Ps. 44:4-8).

Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go forth, O God, with our armies. Oh, grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man! With God we shall do valiantly; it is he who will tread down our foes (Ps. 60:10-12).

Oh, grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man! (Ps. 108:12).

It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes (Ps. 118:8-9).

Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God (Ps. 146:3-5).

The same goes for the new covenant. As Paul declared:

I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience – by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God – so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ (Rom. 15:18-19).

I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of

wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:3-5).

The kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power (1 Cor. 4:20).

Not ‘by the cleverness of our plans, schemes, courses, organisation’!

If I may accommodate the words of Charles Wesley – the quicker we learn to sing such words as these the better:

*Schemes and plans and programmes fall;
'Tis the Spirit's all in all!*⁵

Here is the question we need to answer: Will we go on, depending on God alone, preaching the gospel to the ungodly – that is, biblically preaching the biblical gospel, the only true gospel – despite its inbuilt seeming foolishness? Foolishness? Yes, indeed! To confront sinners, to probe sinners, to insist on the necessity of their regeneration, to warn them of judgment and condemnation – both a present reality and an impending eternity – to seek to convict and persuade them to repent and trust Christ alone, seems utterly counter-intuitive today, when the great shibboleth is doing all we can to attract pagans to church, and hold them in life-long attendance.

The truth is, plans, schemes, strategies, courses and programmes may attract pagans, amuse and entertain them, instil ‘Christian principles’ into them, boost their self esteem, but it is only the biblical gospel preached in the power of the Spirit that can effectively regenerate dead sinners who are under the wrath of God (Eph. 2:1-3), regenerate and convert sinners who naturally and inevitably dismiss the gospel as foolish (1 Cor. 2:14), sinners who hate God and all to do with him (Rom. 8:7). Here is Paul’s persuasion:

⁵ Wesley, of course, wrote: ‘Names and sects and parties fall;/ Thou, O Christ, art all in all!’

Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God... I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God (1 Cor. 1:17-18,23-24; 2:2-5).

Until – unless – we get back to that, all will be lost.