

Deuteronomy 9:1-14
Dr. Steven R. Cook

“Hear, O Israel! [the second generation of Israelites since the exodus] You are crossing over the Jordan today to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, great cities fortified to heaven [hyperbole – see Num 13:28],² a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim [giant men], whom you know and of whom you have heard *it said*, ‘Who can stand before the sons of Anak?’ [greater from the human perspective]³ “Know therefore today that it is the LORD your God who is crossing over before you as a consuming fire [God will lead them]. He will destroy them and He will subdue them before you [God will do it], so that you may drive them out and destroy them quickly [God will use His people to accomplish Canaanite judgment], just as the LORD has spoken to you [His Word is true].⁴ “Do not say in your heart [faulty self-talk] when the LORD your God has driven them out before you, ‘Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,’ [i.e., don’t wrongly assume it’s because of personal righteousness] but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the LORD is dispossessing them before you.⁵ “It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the LORD your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob [Gen 17:7-8; 26:24; 28:13-14].⁶ “Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness *that* the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people [Ex 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deut 9:13].⁷ “Remember [a past event], do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place [forty years later], you have been rebellious against the LORD.⁸ “Even at Horeb you provoked the LORD to wrath, and the LORD was so angry with you that He would have destroyed you.⁹ “When I went up to the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the LORD had made with you, then I remained on the mountain forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water.¹⁰ “The LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God [anthropomorphic language]; and on them *were* all the words which the LORD had spoken with you at the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.¹¹ “It came about at the end of forty days and nights that the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant.¹² “Then the LORD said to me, ‘Arise, go down from here quickly, for your people whom you brought out of Egypt have acted corruptly. They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them; they have made a molten image for themselves.’¹³ “The LORD spoke further to me, saying, ‘I have seen this people, and indeed, it is a stubborn people.¹⁴ ‘Let Me alone [i.e., don’t intercede of Israel’s behalf – which actually prompted Moses to do that very thing], that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they.’

Observations:

Moses opens this pericope by calling for Israel's attention, saying, "Hear, O Israel! You are crossing over the Jordan today to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, great cities fortified to heaven" (Deut 9:1). The phrase, "Hear, O Israel", was a call to attention with the idea of obeying what followed. This is normal, because faith comes by hearing God's Word (Rom 10:17). The second generation of Israelites were about to cross over the Jordan and into Canaan. The word "today" does not refer to that exact day, for the nation would not cross the Jordan for another forty days. Rather, it refers to the day when God was going to work among His people. And the work God was going to perform referred to the dispossession of the wicked Canaanites from the land. Moses described the Canaanites as "greater and mightier" than Israel. And as people who lived in cities "fortified to heaven", which was hyperbolic language (Num 13:28). And the people who lived there were "a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know and of whom you have heard *it said*, 'Who can stand before the sons of Anak?'" (Deut 9:2). This was intentional language that reflected the Israelites' human perspective of the situation.

But rather than focus on what they perceived as an impossible situation, Moses called them to focus on God, saying, "Know therefore today that it is the LORD your God who is crossing over before you as a consuming fire. He will destroy them and He will subdue them before you, so that you may drive them out and destroy them quickly, just as the LORD has spoken to you" (Deut 9:3; cf. Pro 21:31). What Moses communicated was to flow in their stream of consciousness as they advanced into Canaan. And what Moses emphasized was God's role in leading them to subdue their enemies. But Israel had a part to play, as they were to "drive them out and destroy them quickly." Both God and Israel worked together. God would lead them as a General into battle, ensuring their victory, but they had to follow Him and obey His commands. However, after they'd defeated their enemies, there was a danger that Israel might become prideful. Moses warned them about future pride, saying, "Do not say in your heart when the LORD your God has driven them out before you, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the LORD is dispossessing them before you" (Deut 9:4). For a second time, Moses states, "It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the LORD your God is driving them out before you" (Deut 9:5a). God would lead His people to victory, but it would not be because of their righteousness, but because He was using them to judge the wicked Canaanites. But God was also doing it "in order to confirm the oath which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Deut 9:5b). God had made a promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give the land of Canaan to their descendants

(Gen 17:7-8; 26:24; 28:13-14), and now was the time to fulfill His word. For a third time, Moses reminded them that coming victory was not because any goodness found in them, saying, “Know, then, *it is* not because of your righteousness *that* the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people” (Deut 9:6). The Hebrew word *stubborn* (קָשָׁה *qasheh* – *obstinate, stubborn, stiff-necked*) refers to an unsubmitive animal that refuses to bend its neck downward in order to pull the cart or plow. Several times Israel is described this way (Ex 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deut 9:13). Eugene Merrill states:

With his verdict of “stiff-necked” Moses pricks Israel’s balloon of inflated self-esteem and sets the stage for his portrayal of the Israelite’s fundamentally flawed character. They have nothing to commend themselves to God: no physical greatness (7:7), or power (8:17), or moral character. Their election, occupation of the land, and prosperity within it are all gifts of divine grace, granted to them in spite of their lack of merit.¹

Warren Wiersbe adds:

Once again, Moses reminded the nation that the land was a gift from the Lord, not a reward for their righteousness. God had graciously covenanted with Abraham to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–17; 15:7–21), and He would keep His promise. The people in the land were wicked and ripe for judgment; and even though Israel wasn’t a perfect people, God would use them to bring that judgment. The emphasis is on the grace of God and not the goodness of God’s people, and this emphasis is needed today (Titus 2:11–3:7). When we forget the grace of God, we become proud and start thinking that we deserve all that God has done for us, and then God has to remind us of His goodness and our sinfulness; and that reminder might be very painful.²

Then, to drive the point further, Moses cited specific events when the Israelites failed. First, Moses called for them think about the past forty years, saying, “Remember, do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD” (Deut 9:7). The Israelite’s defiance was not marked by a single event, but by a long history of failures that spanned forty years. This defiance started from the very beginning, as Moses recalls, “Even at Horeb you provoked the LORD to wrath, and the LORD was so angry with you that He would have destroyed you” (Deut 9:8). Horeb

¹ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 246.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 65.

was the occasion where God met the Israelites and ratified the Mosaic Covenant (Ex 19:1-25). Moses recalled his part at that time, saying, “When I went up to the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the LORD had made with you, then I remained on the mountain forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water” (Deut 9:9). Moses was humbling himself before the Lord by fasting for a period of forty days and nights. After which, he says, “The LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God; and on them *were* all the words which the LORD had spoken with you at the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly” (Deut 9:10). The two tablets represented the codification of the Law from God to His people. These two copies were to be kept with the Ark of the Covenant as a record of the contract. Moses states, “It came about at the end of forty days and nights that the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant” (Deut 9:11). But during the forty days Moses was on the mountain conversing with God and receiving the tablets of the covenant, the people of Israel had turned away from God and were engaging in idolatry. Moses recalls, “Then the LORD said to me, ‘Arise, go down from here quickly, for your people whom you brought out of Egypt have acted corruptly. They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them; they have made a molten image for themselves’” (Deut 9:12). Warren Wiersbe states:

Israel committed a very great sin when they worshiped the golden calf (Ex. 32–34). Behind them was the history of their deliverance from Egypt, a demonstration of the grace and power of the Lord; and yet they rebelled against their Redeemer! Israel was the people of God, redeemed by His hand, and yet they manufactured a new god! Before them was Mount Sinai where they had seen God’s glory and holiness demonstrated and from which they had received the law of the Lord. In that law, God commanded them to worship Him alone and not to make idols and worship them. They had accepted that law and twice promised to obey it (Ex. 24:3, 7), and yet they broke the first and second commandments by making and worshiping an idol, and the seventh commandment by engaging in lustful revelry as a part of their “worship.”³

God called for Moses to leave the mountain and return to camp. God said the reason was that Moses’ people were acting corruptly and had turned aside from doing God’s will and were engaging in idolatry. Here we see the beginning on an exchange between God and Moses, as God starts off by referring to the Israelites as Moses’ people. The question naturally rises as to whether Moses would identify with his people, even though he was not personally guilty of the sin of idolatry. Moses said, “The LORD spoke further to me, saying, ‘I have seen this people, and indeed, it is a stubborn people’” (Deut 9:13). Here was another rebuke against the Israelites, as they were described as a stubborn people. Then, as if Moses were in God’s way, the Lord said, “Let Me alone, that I may destroy

³ Ibid., 66.

them and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they” (Deut 9:14). Concerning this pericope, Jack Deere writes:

The emphatic exhortation, **Remember this and never forget**, underscores the absurdity of Israel ever supposing that the land was given them as a reward for their righteousness. Moses used one incident from their past, the worship of the golden calf, to illustrate that Israelite history has nearly always been one of rebellion (v. 7) against God’s grace. This incident (Ex 32), perhaps more than any other until that time, illustrates Israel’s sinfulness on the one hand and God’s grace on the other. While Moses was fasting for **40 days and 40 nights** on Mount **Horeb** (Sinai; cf. Deut 1:2) and therefore was completely dependent on God, the **people** were feasting. While Moses was receiving the Ten **Commandments (the tablets of the covenant, 9:9, 11) by the finger of God**, the people were breaking several of them by worshiping the golden calf. As **the LORD** had given **the covenant** to Moses, the **people had become corrupt and turned away quickly** (Deut 9:12). Even God Himself proclaimed that the people were **stiff-necked** (v. 13). Their rebellion was so great that He wanted to **destroy the nation** and start all over with Moses (cf. Ex 32:9–10).⁴ (emphasis his)

When God said to Moses, “Let Me alone,” it reveals the close relationship between the two of them. In effect, God was telling Moses He wanted to destroy the nation because of their sin, but would not touch the Israelites without his permission. God even promised Moses that He would start over with him and fulfill His promises through Moses’ descendants. The question here was whether Moses would agree to God’s proposal and not intervene for the nation?

Moses wanted this second generation of Israelites to understand the gravity of the situation they were facing and to live by faith. He did not want them to be stiff-necked and faithless like their parents, but to humble themselves before the Lord that He might lead them into battle and give them the victory and blessing. As Christians, we are not called to face physical enemies such as the Canaanites, nor to fight for promised land possessed by pagan peoples. As Christians, “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). In this struggle we are to stand firm against Satan, his world-system, and our flesh. And we are to be strengthened by God’s Word, live by faith, pursue righteousness, share the gospel and biblical truth with those who will hear, and pray always.

⁴ Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 279.