

Deuteronomy 9:15-29

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“So I turned and came down from the mountain while the mountain was burning with fire, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. ¹⁶ “And I saw that you had indeed sinned [אָפַתְּ *chata* – *to miss, go wrong, sin*] against the LORD your God. You had made for yourselves a molten calf [in violation of the covenant agreement; see Ex 20:1-5]; you had turned aside quickly from the way [דֶּרֶךְ *derek* – *way, road, path of prescribed conduct*] which the LORD had commanded you. ¹⁷ “I took hold of the two tablets and threw them from my hands and smashed them before your eyes [visualizing the breaking of the covenant]. ¹⁸ “I fell down before the LORD, as at the first, forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sin which you had committed in doing what was evil [עָרַף *ha-ra* – *lit. the evil*] in the sight of the LORD to provoke Him to anger [Moses advocated for them]. ¹⁹ “For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the LORD was wrathful against you in order to destroy you, but the LORD listened to me that time also [God turned from His anger because Moses interceded for Israel]. ²⁰ “The LORD was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him; so I also prayed for Aaron at the same time [God turned from His anger because Moses interceded for his brother]. ²¹ “I took your sinful *thing*, the calf which you had made, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it very small until it was as fine as dust; and I threw its dust into the brook that came down from the mountain [destroyed beyond recovery]. ²² “Again at Taberah [see Num 11:1-3] and at Massah [see Ex 17:1-3] and at Kibroth-hattaavah [see Num 11:4-10] you provoked the LORD to wrath [by constant complaining and disobedience]. ²³ “When the LORD sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, ‘Go up and possess the land which I have given you,’ then you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; you neither believed Him nor listened to His voice [i.e., failed to live by faith]. ²⁴ “You have been rebellious against the LORD from the day I knew you. ²⁵ “So I fell down before the LORD the forty days and nights, which I did because the LORD had said He would destroy you [Moses fasted and prayed for the nation]. ²⁶ “I prayed to the LORD and said, ‘O Lord GOD, do not destroy Your people, even Your inheritance, whom You have redeemed through Your greatness, whom You have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand [Moses argued that God had an investment in Israel]. ²⁷ ‘Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [think about the covenant made with them]; do not look at the stubbornness of this people or at their wickedness or their sin. ²⁸ ‘Otherwise the land [of Egypt] from which You brought us may say, “Because the LORD was not able to bring them into the land which He had promised them [implying God’s weakness and failure] and because He hated them [hate = reject] He has brought them out to slay them in the wilderness.” [Moses is concerned about God’s reputation] ²⁹ ‘Yet they are Your people, even Your inheritance, whom You have brought out by Your great power and Your outstretched arm.’

Observations:

The central idea of this passage is that Moses interceded on behalf of Israel, who had a history of complaining and rebelling against God, and God spared the nation from destruction. This was intended to humble God's people and make them aware that His goodness toward them was more a matter of His integrity and grace than their personal righteousness.

After Moses had recounted Israel's sin of making the golden calf and violating God's covenant, he said, "So I turned and came down from the mountain while the mountain was burning with fire, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands" (Deut 9:15). This was in response to God's command to go back down to the camp because the people had made a golden calf and were worshipping it. This was a clear violation of the covenant, which the people had previously sworn they would keep (Ex 19:7-8; 24:3, 7). Moses recalled what he saw when he came into the camp, saying, "And I saw that you had indeed sinned against the LORD your God. You had made for yourselves a molten calf; you had turned aside quickly from the way which the LORD had commanded you" (Deut 9:16). The nation had not kept their word. They had sinned by making a golden calf and worshipping it. This was a violation of the conduct God had prescribed for His people; the path He desired they would walk together. Israel was a theocracy and God was their Ruler, Lawgiver, and Judge (see Isa 33:22). The Lord had liberated His people from Egyptian slavery and offered them a binding covenant relationship which they accepted (Ex 19:1-9). As their good King, God had every right to issue commands and direct their lives; not because He was a brutal tyrant who sought to subjugate and oppress them, but rather, that they might walk with Him and be blessed. Here was failure on the part of the nation to uphold its side of the contract. They had sinned, which meant they had disobeyed God's commands. The apostle John tells us, "Everyone who commits sin also breaks the law; sin is the breaking of law" (1 John 3:4 CSB). Moses demonstrated Israel's breaking of the law by smashing the two tablets which he'd brought with him when he descended from Mount Sinai. Moses said, "I took hold of the two tablets and threw them from my hands and smashed them before your eyes" (Deut 9:17). Daniel Block writes:

These actions were both legal and symbolic, analogous to the Mesopotamian custom of breaking tablets on which contracts were written when the agreement had been violated. As the representative of Yahweh, by smashing the tablets

Moses declared the covenant null and void even before the people had a chance to see the divinely produced written documentation.¹

But Moses advocated for the nation by fasting and prayer, humbling himself before the Lord and pleading on their behalf. Moses said, “I fell down before the LORD, as at the first, forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sin which you had committed in doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD to provoke Him to anger” (Deut 9:18). Moses mentions the evil (עָרָר *ha-ra* – lit. *the evil*) Israel did was specifically the act of idolatry. Here was spiritual infidelity on the part of the nation, which provoked the Lord’s anger at their unjust behavior. The covenant relationship was between God as the sovereign Lord who had the right to direct them as their King. Since the Mosaic covenant was a bilateral covenant, with blessing and cursing being conditioned on obedience, God had every right to be angry and to punish them. Moses knew this and said, “For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure with which the LORD was wrathful against you in order to destroy you, but the LORD listened to me that time also” (Deut 9:19). Like other times, Moses had pleaded for the nation that God would show mercy, and the Lord listened to him. Here we see where “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (Jam 5:16).

Not only was God angry enough to destroy the nation, but here we learn that “The LORD was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him; so I also prayed for Aaron at the same time” (Deut 9:20). Moses’ brother, Aaron, was with the people during their rebellion, and he should have resisted their call to make an idol. Rather than take a leadership position and try to stop the Israelite nonsense, Aaron let himself be led by the people, even helping them construct the golden calf. Not only was Aaron a bad leader, he was also a bad liar, trying to convince Moses that the golden calf just jumped out of the fire all by itself (Ex 32:22-24). God spared Aaron because of Moses’ request. However, Aaron’s failure brought judgment by God, and he was not permitted to enter the land of Canaan. Aaron, by disobedience, forfeited his reward of going into the land of Canaan.

Moses recalled what he did with the golden calf, saying, “I took your sinful *thing*, the calf which you had made, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it very small until it was as fine as dust; and I threw its dust into the brook that came down from the mountain” (Deut 9:21). By crushing the idol very small and throwing it into the brook, Moses was destroying it beyond recovery. In Exodus we learn Moses “took the calf which they had made and burned *it* with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water and made the sons of Israel drink *it*” (Ex 32:20). In this

¹ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 250.

way, the remnants of the idol—the thing they worshipped as a god—would pass through their system as fecal matter to be discarded.

In describing Israel’s unworthiness concerning God’s goodness, Moses cites other examples of their failings, saying, “Again at Taberah and at Massah and at Kibroth-hattaavah you provoked the LORD to wrath. When the LORD sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, ‘Go up and possess the land which I have given you,’ then you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; you neither believed Him nor listened to His voice” (Deut 9:22-23). Moses uses the names of various places— Taberah, Massah, Kibroth-hattaavah, and Kadesh-barnea—as code words packed with historical significance. Taberah means *burning*, because God’s anger had burned against them because of their complaining at His provision (Num 11:1-3). Massah means *testing*, and refers to the incident when Israel complained about no water to drink and tried the Lord (Ex 17:1-3). Kibroth-hattaavah means *graves of desire* and refers to the time when they craved food beyond what God had already provided (Num 11:4-10). And Kadesh-barnea was the place where Israel failed to live by faith, not believing God could bring them into the land of Canaan and defeat their enemies (Numbers chapters 13-14). The NT describes them as having “an evil and unbelieving heart” (Heb 3:12). In each of these places, Israel failed to live by faith, and complained against God’s guidance and goodness. God’s people should be marked by faith and gratitude, not complaining (1 Cor 10:10; Phil 2:14-15).

Moses concluded his argument by giving a summary statement about Israel’s history for the previous forty years, saying, “You have been rebellious against the LORD from the day I knew you” (Deut 9:24). Moses’ reason for recalling these other failings was to demonstrate that the golden calf was not an isolated event, but rather, part of a long history of rebellion. But as one who loved God’s people, even though they were rebellious and marked by many failures, Moses pleaded for them, saying, “So I fell down before the LORD the forty days and nights, which I did because the LORD had said He would destroy you” (Deut 9:25). Here is a picture of humble and loving leadership. What follows is a beautiful picture of how Moses pleaded for the nation, as he sought to protect God’s glory and the wellbeing of Israel. There are three parts to Moses’ prayer. First, Moses said, “I prayed to the LORD and said, ‘O Lord GOD, do not destroy Your people, even Your inheritance, whom You have redeemed through Your greatness, whom You have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand’” (Deut 9:26). Here, Moses advocated for Israel, not because of any goodness found in them, but because God had invested Himself in them by redeeming them from slavery. Moses did not want God to lose any of His investment into the lives of those He’d redeemed from captivity. Second, Moses prayed, “Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; do not look at the stubbornness of this people or at their wickedness or their sin” (Deut 9:27). Here, Moses advocated for Israel because of God’s promises to their

forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses might be referring to God's promise to multiply their descendants and to give them the land of Canaan (Ex 32:13). Moses knew God was faithful to keep His promises, so He asked the Lord to spare the nation because of His integrity, to keep His word, and not to look at the stubbornness or wickedness of Israel's sin. Third, Moses prayed, "Otherwise the land from which You brought us may say, 'Because the LORD was not able to bring them into the land which He had promised them and because He hated them He has brought them out to slay them in the wilderness.'" (Deut 9:28). Here, Moses advocated for Israel in order to protect God's reputation among those who saw and heard about God's deliverance. Moses did not excuse Israel's sin. He knew he could not plead to the Lord because of any goodness in them. Rather, Moses argued on the basis of wanting to protect God's reputation among the nations; specifically, the Egyptians. Moses argued that if God destroyed His people, the Egyptians might conclude that either God was not able to keep His promise to them, or that He had intentionally deceived them and brought them into the wilderness for no other reason than to destroy them. But this was not the case. Moses declared, "Yet they are Your people, even Your inheritance, whom You have brought out by Your great power and Your outstretched arm" (Deut 9:29). In these arguments, Moses pleaded with God, not on the basis of Israel's righteousness and goodness, but in order to protect God's investment in His people, to uphold His character as One who keeps His word, and to promote His reputation among the nations. Moses' prayer reflected a desire to promote God's glory, as other godly persons have done (Psa 86:12; Rom 4:18-21), and as we should do as well (Matt 5:16; 1 Cor 10:31; cf., Rom 15:17; 1 Cor 6:19-20; 1 Pet 2:12). Warren Wiersbe states:

We can't help but admire Moses as the leader of God's people. He spent forty days on the mountain, learning how to lead the people in their worship of God; and then he spent another forty days fasting and praying, interceding for a nation that complained, resisted his leadership, and rebelled against the Lord. But leaders are tested just as followers are tested, and Moses passed the test. He showed that his great concern wasn't his own fame or position but the glory of God and the good of the people. In fact, he was willing to die for the people rather than see God destroy them (Ex. 32:31-34). A true shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11).²

There is a parallel between Israel's history and our own. As people made in God's image, we have demonstrated on many occasions our rebellion and wickedness before the Lord. But God has not judged us as our sin deserves, nor treated us according to our failures. David knew this very well and said of God, "He has not dealt with us

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, "Be" Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 67-68.

according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Psa 103:10-12). And the apostle Paul wrote:

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and *His* love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men. (Tit 3:3-8)

The Bible reveals, “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” (Psa 103:8). However, His grace and love toward unbelievers does not last forever. As long as a person is alive, he/she may humble themselves and turn to Christ as Savior and receive forgiveness of sins (Eph 1:7), eternal life (John 10:28), and the gift of God’s righteousness (Rom 5:17; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9). But if the unbeliever rejects Jesus as Savior, there is no other way to be forgiven and brought into the family of God. Jesus is the only way (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). As believers who have trusted in Christ as Savior, we must continue in our walk with the Lord (Eph 4:1), living by faith (Heb 10:38; 11:6), and advancing toward spiritual maturity (Eph 4:11-16; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:2). And this we will do when we humble ourselves daily, seeking God’s will, and prioritizing His glory above our own ambitions and interests. Humility is not a sense of worthlessness, but unworthiness of God’s goodness. It is not just thinking less of self, but in many cases, not thinking about ourselves at all. Rather, we seek God’s glory and the benefit of others in all we say and do.