

Moses' History Lesson



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Deuteronomy 1–3, Exod. 32:29–32, Numbers 14, Eph. 3:10, Gen. 15:1–16, John 14:9.*

Memory Text: And they “all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (*1 Corinthians 10:3, 4, NKJV*).

These are the words which Moses spoke” (*Deut. 1:1, NKJV*). Thus begins the book of Deuteronomy. And though, yes, Moses and the presence of Moses dominate the book, from these opening words to his death in the land of Moab (*Deut. 34:5*), Deuteronomy (as the whole Bible) is really about the Lord Jesus. For He is the One who created us (*Genesis 1, Genesis 2, John 1:1–3*), sustains us (*Col. 1:15–17, Heb. 1:3*) and redeems us (*Isa. 41:14, Titus 2:14*). And, in a looser sense of those words, Deuteronomy reveals how the Lord continued to create, sustain, and redeem His people at this crucial time in salvation history.

Basically, just as the children of Israel are finally to enter Canaan, Moses gives them a history lesson, a theme that is repeated all through the Bible: *remember what the Lord has done for you in the past.*

This admonition should mean something to us, we who are on the borders of a better Promised Land: “In reviewing our past history, having traveled over every step of advance to our present standing, . . . I am filled with astonishment, and with confidence in Christ as leader. We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.”—Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches*, p. 196.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 9.

The Ministry of Moses

All through the Bible, the presence of Moses is felt. And though he's not mentioned until Exodus 2:2, he had written the book of Genesis, God's authoritative and foundational story of who we are, how we got here, why things are as bad as they are and, yet, why we can hope anyway. Creation, the Fall, the promise of Redemption, the Flood, Abraham, the gospel—all have their roots in Genesis, and its author was the prophet Moses. It's hard to gauge adequately the influence that this one man, hardly flawless, was nevertheless able to exert for God because he loved the Lord and wanted to serve Him.

Read Exodus 32:29–32, which records the conversation between the Lord and Moses after the terrible sin of the golden calf. What insight does this story give us about the character of Moses and why, despite whatever flaws he had, the Lord was able to use him in such a mighty way?

Even though Moses had nothing to do with the sin, he sought to intercede for this sinful people, even being willing to lose his own soul on their behalf. Fascinatingly enough, in Exodus 32:32, when Moses asks God to “forgive their sin,” the verb actually means “to bear.” Thus, Moses—understanding the gravity of sin and what it took to atone for it—asked God indeed to “bear” their sin. And that is because this is the only way, ultimately, that their sin, any sin, could be forgiven.

Thus, here we have, early in the Bible, a powerful expression of substitution, in which God Himself, in the person of Jesus, will bear in Himself the full brunt and penalty of our sin—God's preordained way of salvation for humanity while remaining true to the principles of His government and law.

Indeed, many centuries later Peter would write about Jesus: “who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed” (*1 Pet. 2:24, NKJV*).

Meanwhile, what we see in this story of Moses and his reaction to their sin is Moses in the role of intercessor on behalf of a fallen, sinful people, a precursor to what Jesus also will do for us (*see Heb. 7:25*).

Willing to lose his own soul for his people? Think more about the implications of those words. What can we learn from them for ourselves about what it means truly to love others?

Fulfilled Prophecy

Despite some of the error that modern science tries to promulgate as truth (such as that our universe by itself arose from “absolutely nothing” or that all life on earth arose by chance from simple chemicals), science has nonetheless given us some astonishing insights into God’s creative power. The harmony, the balance, the precision of many aspects of the natural world, even in its fallen state, continue to astound those who study them.

And if God can be so precise with physical things, He certainly will be precise with spiritual things, as well. Hence, in the opening verses of Deuteronomy, we can see more of God’s incredible precision.

Read Deuteronomy 1:1–6. What is the prophetic significance of the fact that Deuteronomy 1:3 talks about the “fortieth year”?

After the fiasco, when Moses sent spies from Kadesh Barnea to check out the land, and the people rejected the call to take the land—what happened? They were told that they would not enter into the Promised Land as they had hoped. And for how long would they wait before entering? “ ‘According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years, and you shall know My rejection’ ” (*Num. 14:34, NKJV*).

Hence, Deuteronomy takes up the story of God’s people in the fortieth year, exactly as God had told them. In other words, God’s prophetic Word is as trustworthy as God Himself, and what we see here in the opening verses of Deuteronomy is more evidence of that trustworthiness; that is, God will do what He says and will do it *when* He says that He will do it.

Of course, this isn’t the only prophetic time period that was fulfilled as God had said. Looking back from our vantage point today, we can find in Daniel 9:24–27, for instance, the time period for Jesus, fulfilled just as the Lord had said. We can see that the “time and times and half a time” (*Dan. 7:25, NKJV; see also Rev. 12:6, 14; Rev. 13:5*) has been fulfilled in history, as well as in the 2,300 days of Daniel 8:14.

And besides the precise time elements, the prophecies of Daniel 2, 7, and 8, which so precisely and accurately predicted world history, have given us overwhelming evidence of God’s foreknowledge, control, and trustworthiness.

We can see that the Lord faithfully fulfilled these past prophecies just as predicted. Why should this give us confidence that we can trust Him on the things He said would come that are yet in the future?

A Thousand Times More Numerous

After the long trek in the wilderness, Moses, speaking for the Lord (he was a prophet, though, indeed, more than a prophet), said: “See, I have set the land before you; go in and possess the land which the LORD swore to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—to give to them and their descendants after them” (*Deut. 1:8, NKJV*).

Notice, however, what comes next.

Read Deuteronomy 1:9–11. What is the significance of these words, especially in light of the fact that, in a real sense, they were being punished by God for the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea?

Here we see another example of the graciousness of God. Even amid the wilderness wanderings, they were blessed: “ ‘Forty years You sustained them in the wilderness. . . . They lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell’ ” (*Neh. 9:21, NKJV*).

And Moses, again showing his love for his people, asked God to multiply them a thousand more times than God already had done!

Read Deuteronomy 1:12–17. As a direct result of God’s blessing upon the people, what happened, and what steps did Moses take to deal with the situation?

Thus, even when the Lord was so powerfully present among them, there was the need for organization, for structure, for a system of accountability. Israel was a *qahal*, an organized assembly (*see Deut. 31:30*), a precursor to the New Testament *ekklesia*, Greek for “church” (*see Matt. 16:18*). And though working in a different context, Paul was never far from his Jewish roots, and in 1 Corinthians 12 we see him clearly delineating the need for qualified people to assume various roles for the proper functioning of the body, just as we see here in Deuteronomy and the *qahal* in the wilderness. The church today, as the *qahal* back then, needs to be a unified body with people fulfilling various roles according to their gifts.

Though we sometimes hear people rail against “organized” religion (what would they prefer, “disorganized” religion instead?), the Word of God, especially the New Testament, acknowledges no other kind but an organized one.

Kadesh Barnea

A specter has been haunting the early parts of the book of Deuteronomy, the specter of Kadesh Barnea. This unfortunate story, as we have seen, set the immediate background for the book of Deuteronomy, and it's worth taking a closer look at it.

Read Numbers 14. How did the people react to the report of the spies, and what were the results of their reaction? (See also *Deut. 1:20–46*.)

We can derive many important lessons from this story, but one important lesson, which will appear again in the book, can be found in Numbers 14, as well.

Read Numbers 14:11–20. Though we see Moses again in the role of intercessor, what is significant about his line of reasoning with the Lord regarding why the Lord should not destroy them?

Think about what Moses was saying to God. *If You do this, look at how You will appear in the eyes of the Egyptians and the other nations in the area.* This point is important because, ultimately, everything that God had wanted to do with Israel wasn't just for the sake of Israel; it also was for humanity as a whole. The nation of Israel was to be a light to the world, a witness to the ancients about the love and power and salvation found in the true God and not in the worthless idols that these people had worshiped.

However, as Moses said, *If You wipe this people out, then what?* The nations will say: "Because the LORD was not able to bring this people to the land which He swore to give them, therefore He killed them in the wilderness" (*Num. 14:16, NKJV*).

In other words, what we see here is a theme found all through the Bible: the idea that God is to be glorified in His people—that the glory and goodness and love and power of God are to be revealed in His church, through what He does through His people. Of course, His people don't always make it easy for Him to do this, but ultimately God will be glorified through His people's actions on earth.

Read Ephesians 3:10. What is Paul saying here, and how does this happen? How is the "manifold wisdom" of God made manifest to the cosmos? What role, if any, do we have as individuals in bringing this about?

The Iniquity of the Amorite

In Deuteronomy 2 and 3, Moses continues to recount Israelite history and how, with God's blessing, they routed their enemies; when they were faithful, God gave them the victory, even over "giants" (*Deut. 2:11, 20; Deut. 3:13*).

Of course, this brings up the difficult topic, which we must at least touch on, regarding the destruction of these people. Though the children of Israel would often speak peace first to a nation (*Deut. 20:10, 11*), yet if the people didn't accept that offer, sometimes the Israelites would go in and destroy them, including women and children. " 'And the LORD our God delivered him over to us; so we defeated him, his sons, and all his people. We took all his cities at that time, and we utterly destroyed the men, women, and little ones of every city; we left none remaining' " (*Deut. 2:33, 34, NKJV*).

Some try to get around this simply by saying that these stories are not true. However, because we believe that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (*2 Tim. 3:16, NKJV*), that's not a viable option for Seventh-day Adventists. Thus, we are left with a difficult question regarding these incidents.

Read Genesis 15:1–16. What did God say to Abram in Genesis 15:16, and how does it shed some light on this difficult topic?

There's no question that many of these pagan nations were exceedingly brutal and cruel people who justifiably could have faced the wrath and punishment of God long before then. That's true, and even if God waited patiently for them to change their ways, and they didn't change—this still doesn't alter the hard reality about the killing of everyone, including children. (Of course, probably many more children were killed in the Flood than were killed by the Israelites.)

The fact is that, for now, given the limited information we have about the full context of the events, we just need to accept this hard reality and trust in the goodness of God, which has been revealed in so many other ways. Faith isn't just about loving God on a beautiful day in a pretty forest full of wonderful sights and sounds. It's also about trusting in Him despite what we don't fully understand.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:1–4 and John 14:9. How do these verses, and many others like them, help us learn to trust in the love, justice, and goodness of God, even when we see things that seem hard to square with this understanding of God?

Further Thought: Here's how one scholar seeks to answer the hard questions about what the Israelites did to some of these nations:

“As Creator of all things and all human beings and as sovereign over all, God can do anything [He] wants with anyone and be right in doing so. . . .

“The ways of God are a mystery. Since we will never completely understand [Him], we might as well relax with the questions in our minds. Isaiah 55:8–9 offers some consolation.

“According to the biblical picture of the Canaanites, these peoples were extremely wicked, and their annihilation represented God’s judgment for their sin. The destruction of the Canaanites was neither the first nor the last time God would do this. The differences between the Canaanites’ fate and the fate of humanity (except for Noah’s family) as described in Genesis 6–9 involve scale and agency. . . .

“God never intended for the Israelites to make the policy of *herem* [the total destruction] as a general policy toward outsiders. Deuteronomy 7:1 expressly identifies and thereby delimits the target peoples. The Israelites were not to follow these policies against Aramaeans or Edomites or Egyptians, or anyone else (cf. Deut. 20:10–18). . . .

“The Canaanites suffered a fate that ultimately all sinners will face: the judgment of God. . . .

“God’s elimination of the Canaanites was a necessary step in the history of salvation. . . .

“Although the Canaanites as a whole were targets of God’s judgment, they had at least forty years of advance warning (see Rahab’s confession in Josh. 2:8–11).”—Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 98, 99.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Think about our understanding of the millennium, in which we will have a thousand years to have all our questions answered. How can this understanding help us to learn to trust in God despite whatever hard questions we have now?
- 2** What are some of the ways that God led you in the past that can help you learn to trust Him for the future? Why is it important not to forget how God has worked in our lives?
- 3** In class, go over the question at the end of Sunday’s study, about Moses’ willingness to lose his own soul for the sake of his people. Is that a right attitude to have? What, if anything, is worth losing one’s soul over, especially considering what it cost to redeem it?