



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

A Most Unlikely Choice

Deuteronomy 7.6–26

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Introduction

It is possible to be so familiar with Bible stories that we can lose our sense of how remarkable they are. For example, consider the main story that weaves its way through Scripture as developed from the three promises recorded after God called Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 12.1–3).

- A land to live in? Abram (later Abraham) would own only a well at Beersheba and a burial plot at Hebron (Gen 21.30–31; 23.1–20). His son and grandsons would own only a little more.
- A “great nation”? Each of the first generation’s mothers of the chosen heirs had trouble bearing children and when Jacob’s family went to Egypt—away from the promised land!—they were a mere 70 strong (Gen 46.27; Deut 10.22).
- The one through whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed”? In time, perhaps, but certainly not in a way that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or even Jacob’s descendants 400 years later would appreciate (see Wenham 2008, 36-37).

But despite many obstacles and often halting faith, “the promise of blessing to the patriarchs and their descendants is abundantly fulfilled within the Pentateuch” (Wenham 2008, 37). Consider just some of their flaws and troubles they experienced along the way.

- Abram/ Abraham lied about his wife to protect himself (Gen 12, 20) and repeatedly questioned God’s plan (Gen 15–17).
- Jacob cheated his father, fled from his furious brother, was cheated by his father-in-law, and dealt with a dysfunctional family. Yet returned a prosperous man only to eventually have to move his starving family away from the promised land to Egypt (Gen 27–50).
- His family grew into a nation-sized people but were hopeless slaves for centuries (Exod 1–13).

- Almost immediately after receiving their freedom, they broke the first two commandments (Exod 32) and refused to enter the promised land from Kadesh (Num 13–14).
- For 38 years, from Kadesh-barnea until they crossed the brook Zered that formed the border between Edom and Moab (Deut 2.14), they waited to enter the promised land.

Although he knew he would not enter the land (Num 27.12–14), Moses prepared the succeeding generation who would go in by presenting three sermons that appealed to them to faithfully serve in covenant loyalty. All are found in Deuteronomy; our text is from the second address.

Analysis of Deuteronomy 7.6–26

Backdrop

After he had reviewed their history (Deut 1–4), Moses repeated the Ten Commandments (5.1–21) and called them to love God totally and above everything else (6.1–19). He then recalled the basics of their amazing story. Anticipating that succeeding generations would ask how it had happened, he told them to tell their children how God had defeated the powerful Pharaoh in spite of his apparent absolute control over them and that their response to his deliverance was to be obedience (6.20–25). He also warned them that other battles were ahead: as God led them into the promised land, they would meet seven nations, all of whom would be “more numerous and mightier” than they. They were never to compromise (7.1–5).

God’s capability

As we focus on our text, we find Moses telling the people that their improbable blessings were the result of God’s work and choice and were not due to anything special about the Israelites (Deut 7.6–11). They were a people who were “holy [separated] to the LORD” because he had chosen them “for his treasured possession” (v. 6). Lest they be tempted to think *they* were capable, they were to remember that greater nations had been defeated and would be again because of God’s love and oath to their fathers (vv. 7–8). Whether or not they would be blessed would depend on the amount of loyalty they demonstrated to “the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments” (vv. 9–11).

God’s future faithfulness

In the next section, Moses promised the people future care and blessings based on their loyalty to their covenant with God (Deut 7.12–16). Verse 12 states the promise in broad terms; verses 13–16 delineate specific promises appropriate for a physical theocracy.

Faith over fear: the expectation of covenant obedience

The final section of the text urges them to follow a different course from the one their parents had pursued (Deut 7.17–26). They were to have no illusions about what they would face: the nations they would encounter *would* be greater than they were (v. 17). But they were not greater than Pharaoh and Egypt (vv. 18–20). Israel was not to lose faith. The same God, in whom was the real greatness, would continue to be with them. Backed by such a “great and awesome God,” there was no reason “to be in dread of them” (v. 21). Even when their progress was slower, they were to know that God was still working and that, in fact, the apparent slowness of their progress was for their good (v. 22). In the end, the LORD their God would overcome all

obstacles (vv. 23–24). Their responsibility was to remain loyal to their covenant agreement (vv. 25–26).

Faith over Fear Today

Our specific circumstances as we follow Jesus differ from ancient Israel's, but there are similarities and therefore lessons we can learn from their experience. First, we are not called to be a physical theocracy, but to be spiritual Israel, heirs of the promise to Abraham (Rom 9.6–8; Gal 6.16; Phil 3.3; cf. Gal 3.7–9). In that role, we are called to serve and thus bless “the nations” (cf. Ps 67, esp. v. 7; Acts 1.8; Rom 10.18).

We often feel overwhelmed at this prospect, distressed at the size of the task, and sometimes in despair over the slowness of our progress. We are also tempted to think *we* are or must be great (cf. Deut 7.7) or that we can succeed by compromising with ideas and ways that can never deliver what they promise. As it recalls just part of the grand story revealed in Scripture, Deuteronomy 7 reminds us that God's ways are always different and his plans are often unlike anything we would expect or plan.

- His view of greatness differs, whether with regard to nations, lifestyles, or plans.
- His timetable is his own and he is under no obligation to submit to ours.
- He is the one who always initiates and blesses according to our covenant loyalty (the biblical term for showing loyalty is *obedience*).
- His promises never fail; we might, and he won't keep us from choosing another way—not even if we persist in it (cf. Rom 1.24–28)—but, if necessary, he will work out his ways despite our choices.

Conclusion

William Cowper (1731–1800) was an English poet who is said to have changed the direction of 18th century nature poetry by writing of everyday life and scenes of the English countryside. An evangelical Christian, Cowper often experienced doubt, depression, and repeated fears of eternal damnation. In collaboration with John Newton, he wrote several hymns, one of which, written in 1774, was published five years later in a collaboration entitled *Olney's Hymns*. It was published under the title, “Light Shining Out of Darkness” (Cowper 2024). We know it as “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plans His footsteps in the sea,
and rides upon the storm.

You fearful saints, fresh courage take:
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord with feeble sense,
But trust Him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain (Wiegand
1992, # 192).

God's ways are not our ways (Isa 55.8–9), but they are always the sure ways. Let us submit and continue in loyal service that we too shall be blessed and be a blessing.

Works Cited

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