

"Then We Turned and Journeyed"

Are we there yet? If you've gone on a road trip before, I'm sure you've either heard those words before or said them yourself. During long car trips you can get bored, especially if the scenery is pretty bland. But often if we just take the time to look around we can find a lot to enjoy and take in.

Well, in our passage for today we are taken into a pretty long road trip, so to speak. Here's a 38 year journey compacted into some 25 verses. I'm sure Israel probably asked God a number of times, "Are we there yet?" But God had a plan. He had placed them on this journey. He knew where they were going and when they'd get there.

Well, today I want us to reflect on this journey. And I want us to see how God is in control throughout this journey. And so we'll look at this passage from three points. First, we'll see that God *leads* the way. Second, we'll see that God *teaches* along the way. Third, we'll see that God *provides* the way. Again, the three points that we'll look at: God *leads* the way; God *teaches* along the way; and God *provides* the way. And as we consider what God is doing with Israel in this journey, I think we'll learn more about how God works in our life, in the journey that he has us on.

And so let's begin with our first point. God leads the way. For Israel, it's pretty clear that God's the one leading them on this journey. What really stands out in the first couple chapters of Deuteronomy, and especially this passage are all the travel commands. God keeps commanding the Israelites to travel in this direction or that direction. God tells them where to go. They were supposed to obediently follow.

That's what we see in this passage. Remember, last week's passage ended with God commanding the Israelites to turn and head back into the wilderness. Well, finally they begin to obey that in verse 1 of our passage for today. Verse 1 notes that they headed toward the Way of the Red Sea, "as the LORD spoke." Again in verse 3. Another travel command from God: "Turn northward." Verse 13, "Rise and cross over the Valley of the Zered." Verse 24, "Cross over the River Arnon." Again, these are all travel commands. God is very directly leading them on their journey. I bet we wish sometimes that God's commands in our life were that clear.

Now Israel may have wandered in the wilderness, but ultimately their wandering was not aimless. God was leading them the whole time. Yes, it took longer than I'm sure they wanted. God referred to their wandering in verse 7 as "trudging." They "trudged" through the wilderness for forty years. These last thirty-eight years had specifically been God's judgment on the former generation. God had allowed them to wander in the desert during that time so that older generation would die off, just as God had pronounced. And yet despite all the trudging and wandering through the wilderness, God was still leading the people. He commanded each leg of the journey. They followed all these travel commands so that when we end at verse 25 we're basically back where the people were at thirty-eight years before. Right at the edge of the Promised Land, about to begin the conquest. Next week we'll look at how the conquest begins with the conquering of two kings. That will be in a sense just the beginning of the conquest. Those kingdoms were east

of the Jordan, which was *technically* part of the land God had promised them, but the Promised Land proper really lied *west* of the Jordan. The conquest of that land wouldn't happen until after the book of Deuteronomy. That's recorded in Joshua as Joshua would lead the people in the real heart of the conquest of the Promised Land.

But my point here is this. God led the people the whole way on this wilderness wandering. We see the text here emphasize how God was leading them through these travel commands. It was a long journey, but they were finally back to where they were before. A new generation had grown up in that time. Would they respond the way the older generation had - with unbelief and doubt about God's promise to bring them into the Promised Land? Or would they respond in faith, even the faith that they demonstrated throughout the wilderness journey, where they followed after God's command to go here and there?

Well, let me pause from Israel here for a moment with a point of application for us. In the New Testament, we learn that *everybody* has some sort of journey that they are on. Of course that was the case even for the Israelites back then. And I'm not talking about a journey into an earthly Promised Land. I'm talking about one with bigger consequences. I'm talking about a journey to find eternal life. A journey of finding salvation in Jesus. This is a journey by faith. Let me clarify with the words of Jesus. Jesus says in Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Those are pretty powerful words by Jesus, but I think the point is clear. We each are on a journey, but not everyone's journey is going to end up in a good place. That's Jesus' words, not mine. The journey you are on, will either lead you to eternal life, or to destruction, to eternal damnation.

What path will we go on? If Jesus said that the path to life is narrow, then this is a crucial question. Will we follow the path God calls us to go on? You see, when we look at this passage here in Deuteronomy, we see God directing the people with these travel commands. He leads them into the earthly inheritance that he promised them. Well, God promises to lead us into a heavenly inheritance. He offers it before all humanity. It's called the free offer of the gospel. Follow Jesus. Follow Jesus by faith. That's why Jesus is called the good shepherd. That's why Jesus says that he's the door for the sheep. He's the way. What we see here with Israel is a historical picture, a foreshadowing, of how God will lead his people into a heavenly inheritance. And in the light of the New Testament, we see that he does this through his Son, Jesus. Jesus is the way to eternal life. As much as God leads Israel here in this passage, God leads us to eternal life. God takes us on a journey of faith, where Jesus leads us home.

So what that means, especially in light of Jesus' warning, is that we need to follow Jesus. As his sheep, we need to learn his voice. Well, how do we hear his voice? How do we follow him? Well, we hear his voice through the Word. The Holy Scriptures. Both Old and New Testaments are Jesus speaking to us. Sometimes through prophets, and of course when he himself was here on earth. And as we read his Word, his Spirit speaks to us through his Word. His Spirit opens our mind to understand his Word, but also to apply it to our lives. And of course part of how he leads us is even through the undershepherds that he's placed in our lives. The pastors and elders who

have been told to lead and guard the flock. To the extent that they are faithful to the Word and Spirit, then we should receive their guidance as part of the way that God leads us. And so if we are to follow Jesus, it is in these ways that we hear his voice.

I'd like us to turn now to our second point. God teaches along the way. That's what we see here with Israel. Now think about this. God had sent them back out into the wilderness to wander as a form of discipline against the older generation. God could have just said I'll see you in thirty-eight years. But God didn't do that. Instead, God is teaching them along the way. Obviously this instruction is especially for the next generation that's growing up in the wilderness. Let me explain.

What was the reason why the people had to go back out into the wilderness? Well, remember it was because the people saw the giants in the Promised Land and doubted God's ability to give them the land as he had promised. Now of course, you and I probably can sit back from our perspective and think how silly it was for them to doubt God like that. But that's what they did. They doubted God. They didn't trust that he could do what he promised. They had a lesson to learn. If God promised something, he will fulfill it. There is not an obstacle too great for God to overcome.

So amazingly, that's the lesson we see drilled into Israel no less than four times in this passage, at different points in their journey. You know it'd be easy to read over a passage like this and just think it's a bit boring and repetitious. Again, kinda like when you are on that long road trip and the scenery looks all the same. But notice what Israel is seeing and learning here. They go past different groups of people that God tells them not to bother. We then learn that they were not to bother these groups of people, because God had given that people that particular land that they were on. Furthermore, for at least most, if not all of these people, God had used them to drive out giants who were living in their lands before them. Do you see the lesson? Do you see what God is teaching them along this wilderness journey? If God could do this for these peoples, he could do it for Israel!

Let's quickly scan this teaching in our passage. First you have this with the sons of Esau in verse 5 and 12. The Israelites weren't to try to take the land from the Sons of Esau because God gave that to them as a possession. Verse 12 actually makes this connection for us. The descendants of Esau drove out the Horites from before them, just as Israel did. Remember at the time of writing this, Israel had already successfully conquered the land east of the Jordan. And so the Book of Deuteronomy is bringing out the lesson for us. Just as God had done with the descendants of Esau, he had already begun to do with Israel. And he would continue to do that even as Israel proceeded into the heart of the Promised Land on the west side of the Jordan.

Next you have the Moabites in verse 9. God says don't harass them, because their land was a gift from God. And the Moabites had to drive out the people called the Emim, which were giants. The same was the case with the Ammonites in verse 19, whom God had also given them their land, and who they also drove out giants.

Now, these first three groups of people all were in some way related to Israel. Esau was the brother of the patriarch Jacob. God had given this land to Esau and his descendants. The Moabites and the Ammonites were both descendants of Lot, who was the nephew of the patriarch Abraham. God had given this land to Lot and his descendants. Surely these people had some

connection with the one true God through this relationship to the line of promise. These would have been easy groups of people to learn from for Israel. But just to make sure they got the message, even in more general terms, God mentions the Caphtor people in verse 23. It's believed that these are the people who become the Philistines. The implied message here is that God brought them into the land they are in as well, and drove out another people in that case too.

In other words, these are all examples in God's providence of where he brought peoples into lands that he had given them. He helped them to overcome difficult odds. If it's God's plan to do something, it will happen. The take home point for Israel: If God gave them the Promised Land as their own, then they would indeed take hold of it. This would be the case whether or not the place had giants in it or not. But do you see how God teaches them this lesson, while they were on their long wilderness journey?

For us, this means that God will be teaching us on our journey as well. We already mentioned that we all need to be following Jesus on the journey to eternal life. Well, to follow Jesus, is to be his disciple. When Jesus called his disciples, that's what he said to them, "Follow me." When Jesus calls us to follow him, it's a call to discipleship. It means that we are to learn along the way from him. We don't just go on the journey. We grow on the journey.

Isn't that what Jesus said at the Great Commission. At the Great Commission he sent out the apostles to "Go and make disciples of all the nations." And he told them to teach them. If we are going to follow Jesus, it's going to involve learning. He's going to teach us along the way. As much as God taught Israel here on their journey into the Promised Land, God will be teaching us in our journey that leads us to heaven.

There's something remarkable to note here. When we are made disciples of Jesus, we are told to help in making more disciples. And we're told to make disciples of all the nations. Here in this passage, God uses these different nations to teach God's chosen people. Now, Jesus calls his chosen people, the church, to go and teach the nations! To teach them about Jesus. You see back then, these other nations probably didn't even realize how God had worked among them. They probably didn't even know that the one true God is who gets the credit for bringing them into the Land. For example, the Moabites worshipped the false god "Chemosh." And yet despite their pagan beliefs, God was still at work. And his work was used to teach the Israelites, God's people, a valuable lesson. Now God calls his people to go teach the nations the most important truth. Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Enlisting people throughout the world as disciples of Jesus Christ. To begin themselves on the journey that leads to eternal life. To learn themselves of the one true God and how he is at work in our lives.

Let's turn now to our third and final point. God provides the way. Now I'm not talking about God creating the path to go down. That was actually my first point, that God leads the way. When I'm saying that God provides the way, I mean that it is God who is the one that gets us to the final destination. He's the one who enables us to overcome whatever obstacles that would otherwise hinder from completing the journey. He provides the way so that we can finally arrive home.

For Israel, we see God doing that throughout the journey. He provides for them throughout the journey so that they end up making it to the destination.

We see that simply put in verse 7 "For the LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hand. He knows your trudging through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing." Of course we know from books like Exodus and Numbers about things like the fact that God provided manna from heaven to feed them and water from rocks to quench their thirst. We know that their clothes did not wear out. And what's implied here in verse 7 is that they ended their journey, materially speaking, with more than they started. See, it says the LORD blessed all the work of their hands. You wouldn't expect that in the wilderness. But that's obviously what happened, because look at the context. God tells them that he blessed them in the context of the previous verse. The previous verse said that they should purchase food and water from the sons of Esau with money, literally silver. The idea here is that when they pass through the land belonging to the descendants of Esau they shouldn't just live off the land, they should pay them for whatever they needed. And then God basically says that this shouldn't be a problem because the LORD has blessed all the work. In other words, despite this forty years of wandering in the desert, they've been very fruitful in their material blessings. Paying for some food and water wouldn't be a problem.

So the point is that God had provided for their needs during this long journey. They wouldn't have made it on this terrible wilderness journey without this provision. But God had promised to bring this people into the Promised Land. He had promised to see them through this journey. And so God is providing the way for them, even throughout the journey.

Well now that they were on the edge of the Promised Land, God would continue to provide the way for them to fully take hold of it. God would provide the way to complete the journey by removing their enemies before them and bring them into the land. The final stage was here. The people would take hold of the Promised Land by military conquest. But as we already saw when they sent out the twelve spies almost forty years before, they wouldn't be able to do this by their own strength. Their own military might would not be sufficient. But if God was with them, they would not have a problem. Just as God worked in these other nations to displace powerful enemies before them, even more so would God do that with Israel, his chosen people. Well, in next week's passage, we'll begin to see just that. Already by the time of Moses recounting these events the people had already conquered those parts of the Promised Land east of the Jordan River. I already mentioned that. And so if God was already providing the way in military conquest, certainly he would finish the work. Of course the book of Joshua records just that fact. Israel would eventually take hold of the complete Promised Land. God did provide the way for them to complete their journey. Not by their strength or might, but the power of God.

And this was all an expression of grace. That's what it ultimately means for God to provide the way. It's an expression of grace. It was grace that blessed them in all their trudging through the wilderness. And it was grace that enabled them to conquer their enemies and finally take ownership of the Promised Land.

Well for us, and even for them, God ultimately had an even better inheritance to bring us into. That's the eternal life we've already talked about. And we certainly know that this too is journey in which God provides the way. God provides the way for his people to enter the heavenly Promised Land through Jesus Christ. God provides the way to heaven by sending his Son,

Jesus. God overcame all the obstacles so that we could take hold of the Promised Land.

But for us, the obstacles aren't about wicked pagan giants holding down an earthly land. It's our sin that makes us enemies to God, rebels against his kingdom, exiled from the inheritance he desires to give us. Sin that leads to death. And so on the cross, Jesus overcomes that obstacle, defeating sin and death, so that he can give us life. I think of the irony of the way that Jesus accomplished this. For the Israelites, their final victory in taking the land was by earthly strength and might given by God. According to verse 25, God would spark fear and dread into all their enemies because of this. But Jesus conquered sin and death without earthly glory and strength. Jesus' earthly enemies were not full of fear and dread. I think to the Garden of Gethsemane. If anyone had reason to be full of fear and dread it would have been Jesus, in light of the suffering of the cross. But Jesus did not give into his swarming emotions but entrusted himself to God. He endured the shame of the cross and rose again on that third day. The irony of how God provides the way for us to heaven is that it's not by earthly glory but by the lowly service of Christ's sacrifice for us. Christ was the shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. That is how Jesus leads us home. That is how he provides the way. He provides the way by his own blood.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, to follow Jesus is first to start with faith in the work of Christ. It's to start by the means to the end. We can and will get to the end of the journey through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And so God calls us to place our faith and hope in Jesus. He calls us then to this new journey. Not a journey that the world wants to tell you, that almost all roads lead to heaven. But a journey of faith by the way of Jesus. One that he says is narrow. But the one that he says leads to eternal life. Believe in Jesus. Follow him. Learn his voice. He will lead you home.

In our passage today, we see how God was especially teaching and preparing this new generation. Would they make the same mistake that their forefathers made? Would they give in to fear and dread at the sight of the giants of the Promised Land with their cities fortified up to heaven? Or would they trust in God? Would they follow the journey he was leading them on? Would they learn the lesson that God was teaching them along the way? Would they see that they had no reason to fear?

For them, God would lead them in a glorious conquest. They would have an amazing military victory to enter a wonderful land of milk and honey. All of this would be very outwardly glorious. We can see why it would have been attractive to place your faith in these promises, and very exciting to see them begin to be fulfilled before your very eyes.

But what about us? Do we have faith to take up a journey that is not outwardly glorious? To go on a journey of discipleship in which Jesus describes as daily taking up our crosses? To share in the cross of Jesus Christ, one where he gave up the glories of heaven to come here and die for us? Well, if we believe what Jesus promised, then the answer must be obvious. In the words of Jim Elliot, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." Our journey of following Christ may not be outwardly glorious in this life. Today we live by grace and faith. But he has promised that he will come again in glory. And if he has led us in his suffering, he will certainly lead us in his glory. Keep your eyes focused on your shepherd. And certainly he will provide for everything we need along the way. If God provided manna for his people in

the wilderness, he will certainly meet all our needs to make sure that we arrive in our final destination: eternal life in heaven with him.

Are we there yet? No not yet. But God is with us. He's driving the bus, so to speak. Let's not be back seat drivers or get off the bus. Let's trust in him. He knows the way because he made it. There may be some rocky roads ahead, but he will make sure we safely get there. Certainly every moment we are that much closer. Amen.

Copyright © 2009 Rev. W. Reid Hankins, M.Div.
All Rights Reserved.