

"Ask Now Concerning The Days Past"

This morning's passage brings up two topics that we won't spend a lot of time on today. That's because we'll revisit them when we look at the Ten Commandments when we get to the next chapter. There's a lot in this passage about idol worship, which of course is a breaking of the second commandment. The last three verses of our passage talk about cities of refuge setup in the event of someone accidentally murdering someone. That obviously is connected with the sixth commandment, the command to not murder. And so when we study those commandments when we get to the next chapter, then we'll look at those parts of this passage again.

But for today I want us to think about how God is describing himself in terms of history. God describes himself here as the God of history. He is the God of the past, the present, and the future. Well, of course we know that's true, just by the fact that he's God. God is eternal, he's the creator, and he's in control of all things. Surely he's in control of human history.

But this passage gives us a more specific perspective than that. What's presented in this passage is that God has worked, and will work, in some very *unique* ways. One of the things that is so unique according to this passage is how God's engaged a specific people. God made a special relationship with the nation of Israel. And God said back in Genesis to Abraham that through this special relationship, all the nations on the earth would be blessed. Well, what we see in this passage is God talking about what he's done in the past with Israel, and what he'll do with them in the future. And not only that, this passage also talks about what that means for the present for Israel. And so this passage has past, present, and future in it. And it's the uniqueness of what God is doing in history for Israel that we're going to look at today.

You see, that's because it's the very uniqueness of this revelation and heritage that we now benefit from as Christians. And as Christians we've seen so much of this rich history and heritage come to a culmination with the coming of Jesus. God is not only the God of history, he's the God of salvation. History and salvation are intertwined in God's plan. God's been working out his plan of salvation in the special history between him and his people. It's that history of salvation that we'll be investigating today. And that means that the history we see in this passage is just as much our history as it was Israel's. We've been brought into their story. This is part of our heritage now as God's people. And so as we look at what God did in their life, we can't help but think about what even greater things he has done since then. And it's in that, that we'll find our application from this passage.

Well, let's dig into this passage. We're going to look at what this passage says about the past, future, and present, in that order. So let's look first at God's work in the past here. Of course, it's common to find God in the Old Testament appealing back to the past for what he did with Israel. We see that again in general terms in this passage. Look at verse 15. God points back to Mount Horeb, aka, Mount Sinai. That's of course where God gave the people the Ten Commandments and spoke to them. Look at verse 20. God points back to Egypt and the Exodus, how God freed them from their slavery and brought them out of that oppression. What God did at Horeb and Egypt were foundational for the Israelite's faith. These were defining moments in their relationship with God. They were points where God revealed himself to them and where he saved them.

Now these are events, as I said, that God looks back on all the time. We see him reminding Israel of these events in numerous places. But I wanted us to especially think about what God did in the past today with Israel, because this text really emphasizes the uniqueness of what God did in the past. It really tries to show how

amazing this is. This comes out especially beginning in verse 32. Look at the powerful questions and logic that God brings out here. Verse 32. "For ask now concerning the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether any great thing like this has happened, or anything like it has been heard." That's an amazing question the way it's put. But it's a rhetorical question, isn't it? We know the answer. It's "No." Since the very creation, nothing like this has ever happened with any other people. Not what had happened to Israel.

God goes on to clarify in the next two verses with more rhetorical questions. Verse 33 "Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live?" God's obviously referring to Horeb here. And again, the implied answer is, "No." This passage drives home how amazing of an event that was. Verse 15, 33, and 36 all drive home the same point. The people at Horeb heard God speak from the heavens! Out of the midst of the first the people heard the voice of God. They saw the fire and they heard the words. What nation had ever witnessed such a thing? None before! And look at the end of verse 33. It says "and live." It was amazing that they heard and saw all this. It was even more amazing that they survived it all. They came into a very direct and profound contact with the all holy God; and they survived to tell about it!

Then verse 34. "Or did God ever try to go and take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?" Again, the answer is "No." God reminds them how awesome the Exodus really was. All the miracles that they saw. They witnessed the power of the LORD working on their behalf. God says that he removed them from the iron furnace of Egypt. But had God ever done this before? No. There was something unique that God was doing here. It was wonderfully unique.

The last thing God reminds them is of the conquest. Verse 38. God was bringing them into the Promised Land with his strength. Of course at this point the conquest is only just begun. And yet they had already begun to see God starting to drive out the nations from before them.

I hope you recognize how amazing this is! God's work in Israel's history was unique. No other people had seen the hand of God in such direct miraculous ways, and so consistently over time. What God had done in the past for them was foundational for their relationship with God. It demanded belief. It demanded obedience. It demanded faithfulness. But of course this is more than about God demanding. What God had done for Israel was an expression of his love. Of God's faithfulness. Of God's plan to save a people.

Well for us today, we know that the story didn't stop there. The story continued to be told. God continued to work in mighty ways. The climax of that was the cross. When we look back at our own spiritual heritage, the stories of the Exodus and Mt Horeb are part of that heritage. But we especially look back at the triumph of the cross. That was the most unique moment in human history where God worked to bring salvation to his people. Every act of God with his people beforehand was like the opening acts in comparison.

Let's continue looking at this passage, now to see how God was promising to work in the future for Israel. We've just seen how profound God worked in the past for Israel. Now let's see what this passage has to say about God and Israel's relationship in the future. Well this is also very profound.

This passage turns to look toward the future beginning in verse 25. God speaks about the people having children and grandchildren and growing old, *in the land*. That's the key. God's envisioning the time in the future when the people will be fully possessing the Promised Land. At that time, should the people disregard the warning given in this passage about idol worship, it will provoke God to anger. And look at

the outcome of this. It's basically a reversal of God's blessings with cursing. Look at the curses that will find Israel at that time. Verse 26. Instead of being blessed with long life in the land, they'll utterly perish from the land. Verse 27. Instead of possessing the Promised Land, they'll be scattered among all the nations and lands on the earth. Instead of being multiplied as numerous as the stars in the heavens, they'll be few in number at that time. Verse 28. Instead of having the opportunity to serve the one true God, they'll be forced at that point to serve the idols and false gods of the other nations that they find themselves in.

Now, in my description just now of this, I put Israel's disobedience a little more conditionally than how the text actually describes it here. You see, this is not worded so much as an "if", but as a "when." Verse 25 starts it out. When all this happens. In other words, this is a prophecy. Moses is telling the people ahead of time what's going to happen with Israel. Now this sort of thing actually happened on a smaller scale a number of times with Israel. Just read the book of Judges and you see how the people found themselves afflicted by the pagan nations a number of times because of their disobedience. But of course this prophecy finds its greater fulfillment when the nation of Israel is destroyed and brought into captivity by the Assyrians and Babylonians. And so God is telling them ahead of time that this is going to happen. This is the future of the relationship between God and Israel. Pretty sobering. The end of the Book of Deuteronomy will revisit this prophecy and only make it even more clear.

But God's prediction of the future doesn't stop there. Verses 29-30 give great hope. They give the hope of a restoration during that time. When all these bad things fall upon Israel in the future. When all their blessings turn into curses; when they find themselves again as slaves outside the Promised Land, then God will act again to save them. These words will be their hope. That the Lord is there for them. They but need to cry out to him and he will hear them and he will deliver them. The English translation in this passage places it a bit more conditional than how it's actually worded in the Hebrew. Again, it actually places this all in the "when," not the "if." When Israel finds itself in trouble, they will ultimately seek the Lord wholeheartedly and look to him to save them. And God will hear that call and indeed save them. That is the future work that God will do for them.

And why would God do that? Why would God restore them after they rejected God by turning to false idols? Well the answer is in verse 31. God is a merciful God. He will not forsake them. He will not destroy them. He will not forget the covenant he made with their fathers. These are all promises by God. What great promises. Promises they could trust in. And all these promises come back to that last one: the previous covenant God had made with their fathers. God had promised to Abraham to bless all the nations through his offspring. He would keep that promise. And that would require graciously restoring them. God's work in the future with Israel would involve grace and mercy just like it did in the past. By the way, no one can say that the Old Testament was only about law, as if you have to wait until the New Testament to learn about God's grace and mercy. It's right here.

Of course, this future promise to restore Israel ultimately rested on Jesus Christ. God promised Abraham that through his offspring all the nations would be blessed. That couldn't happen if his offspring was wiped out through death and exile. So God would have to restore them. And when he did, he then brought forth Jesus from Israel. Jesus was a Jew, and through Jesus the promise to Abraham was fulfilled. Jesus died on the cross so that God could extend grace and mercy, not just to the Jews, but to all the nations. The work of future mercy that God promises Israel here, looks forward to the final work of mercy in Jesus Christ. The beauty is that God would bring forth Jesus through his act of mercy that he would do in the future with Israel. He'd restore wayward Israel so that Jesus could come forth and offer restoration for all God's wayward people. That's again how we as Christians find connection with this history of Israel. The restoration of Israel from exile is part of our history now, because it's part of the history of how God saves us.

So we've seen in this passage what God did in the past for Israel. And we've seen the future for Israel as well. God is a God of history. These things really did happen and really would happen. But we don't live in the history books. We live in the here and now. Well, God also addresses that in our passage. He lets Israel know that all this has ramifications for how they live today. We see that in several places.

Just notice how the passage starts out. Take careful heed to yourselves. Again in verse 23. Take heed to yourselves. What God's telling them about their past and their future has importance for them today. Because of what this God of history is doing in their history, they must take heed. They must stay alert and be on the watch for temptation. Verses 16-19. They must not let the nations around them influence them with their idolatries and their astrology. Don't be turned away from the one true God. That's the temptation that's going to be there for them. Would they stay faithful to the one true God and the one true religion? Think about what's being said here. There's something very unique about how God has revealed himself and his salvation to Israel at this point. Such that the other nations haven't had that sort of revelation. Instead, the other nations are living in darkness, worshipping the created things; man-made idols and the stars of the heavens. But Israel is not in darkness. They've seen firsthand who the real God is.

Moses drives home this point in verse 26. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day." This day. Again, the past and the future have ramifications today. Moses is talking about the future falling away of Israel, but in light of that he calls heaven and earth *this day* as a witness against them. Now heaven and earth aren't alive, but think of the context. The temptation for Israel is that they will take things either from heaven or from earth and worship them. They'll either take idols made in the form of things from the earth, or they'll take something from the heavens, sun, moon, or stars, as their object of worship. That's what the nations around them were doing. But would they be influenced by the ignorant nations, or would they influence the nations instead? You see that was the temptation for them, and it still exists today. That man begins to worship some part of the creation. But nothing in the earth or in the heavens ought to be worshipped. God is distinct from the creation. God is not the creation. He's the creator. We would all do well to really realize that distinction. How many religions do we still face today that don't make that distinction well enough, and the end result is always some sort of idolatry. That we end up worshipping some part of the creation instead of the creator.

Again, the point is driven home in verse 39 about how they are to act today. Verse 39. "Therefore know *this day*.. that the LORD himself is God." Therefore, verse 40, they are to keep his commandments; today and into the future; even to teach your children and your children's children.

Do you see the point that this passage is making? The unique reality that God has revealed himself so clearly to Israel means that they are without any excuse. They are not ignorant of the one true God. It has been abundantly revealed to them. They have tasted and seen that the LORD is good. What God did in the past and would God would do in the future is the basis for how Israel was to live today. If this was true for Israel, isn't it all the more true for us?

Saints of God, the God of history has been at work. Not just in general terms, but in the history of salvation. It's the history of salvation that we've been really talking about today. That amazing story that God uniquely intruded into the lives of Israel. That he called a people to himself as his inheritance, and that he's given them a wonderful inheritance called the Promised Land. But the New Testament makes clear what is in shadows in the Old Testament. That God's plan of salvation was much bigger than just one nation and one plot of land in the Middle East. The history of salvation had a bigger story to tell. A history that includes you and me. A history that involves bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. We've already mentioned this. This is a history that would bring forth Jesus from Israel. A history that

would secure salvation for any that would turn in faith to Jesus. That all who belong to Christ could be God's people, God's inheritance, his special possession. That all who are his, would be brought into an eternal heavenly inheritance. If you not yet done turned to Christ before, I invite you today. Repent of your sins and turn to Jesus in faith. Trust your life to him, to the forgiveness that he offers. If you do call from your heart and soul to Jesus, you will find the God of grace and mercy that's pictured right here in verse 39. If you belong to Christ, God will not forsake you, nor destroy you, but he will bless you and keep you.

I hope we've been reminded this morning that our God is a God of grace. That's true according to this passage. And it's all the more clear since the coming of Jesus Christ. And saints, this is a God who's worked his grace *in history*. We have a God who has worked in history to save us. The stories that we read about in the bible are not myths. They are not fables or fairy tales. These things really happened. We have a historical faith that's based on historical events. God really did free the Israelites from Egypt with mighty miracles. God really did speak to the Israelites out of a blazing fire on Mount Horeb. God really did conquer the Promised Land so that Israel could dwell there. These things really did happen.

But even more importantly. God really did come to earth in the person of Jesus. He was really born of the Virgin Mary. He really did live a 100% perfect life of righteousness. He really did die on the cross from our sins. He really did rise from the dead on the third day. He really did ascend after that up into heaven. This is what is now part of our past. These things really did happen. But has *that* ever happened before? Since the beginning of creation, has anything ever like this happened before? Will it ever happen again? That God would become man, take on our plight, die and rise again, so that we could be saved? So that sin and death would be conquered. So that we really could be forgiven of our sins? That we could be restored to real life? That we could be God's special people; we his inheritance, and he ours? No, nothing like this has ever happened before, nor will it happen again. This is a unique occurrence in history. God intruded into history in this way to save us. This is our past.

And what is our future? Jesus Christ will come again. Before that, the gospel will be preached to the ends of the earth. The nations will have an opportunity to turn away from their idols and their astrology and call with all their heart and soul on the one true God. The God of mercy and grace will be shown to the world, that salvation can fill the nations. Yes, we know many will not turn and believe. But we will faithfully give the good news to all that will hear. And then Christ will come again. He will come again so that we who belong to him will be taken into glory. That is our future. It is a certain future.

Do you see our past and future? Do you see how it's connected and related to Israel's past and future? And do you see how we've been given even more light than them to know the ultimate timeline of God's plan of salvation? It is a wonderful plan. And you and I are a part of it, since we belong to Jesus. Praise God.

So what does that mean for our present? Knowing our past and future, how ought we to live today? Well in general, I'd say we should strive to live out God's laws. That's what Israel was told to do in verse 40. Of course, as we said last week, we don't do that in order to earn our salvation, but because we're saved. I think that's clear again in our passage.

But more specifically, I think we ought to learn how this passage contrasts Israel's experience and knowledge with the rest of the nations. Because Israel had this unique relationship to God, they ought not to follow in the ignorance of the pagan nations around them. They shouldn't engage in idolatry and astrology. They should be faithful to the one true God. Well, is that any different for us? Just look around this area. The nations back then worshipped idols and the heavens. But today do people do anything different? Just think of all the crazy religions that you hear of in this area. We're surrounded by people that live in spiritual darkness and

ignorance. This might sound arrogant to some, but this passage tells us that not everyone has had the light of God's revelation.

We as Christians have been given this light. Others around us have not seen what we've seen, or known what we've known. So many of us have had the benefit of reading and studying and experiencing God's Word for years and years. We know who God is and we've seen him at work in our lives. We must not let the spiritual ignorance of the surrounding culture lead us away from God. The influence must be the other direction. We must influence the culture around us with the unique revelation that we've been given. Just take the Apostle's Creed for example. That's such a short summary of an amazing truth. Of how God's worked in history to save us. That's what we need to share with a dying world around us.

And so may the God of our past and of our future empower us to live today for him. And as we live today for him, may we be a witness to him. May we influence the cultures around us with the revelation of the one true God, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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