

“For You Are a Stiff-Necked People”

Israel was just about to take a hold of the Promised Land in military victory. They'd conquer the unconquerable giants. They destroy cities that are fortified up to heaven. They would drive out the inhabitants of the land like a consuming fire. They would have great success.

Well, if you were Israel, what might you be tempted to think? Of course you might first think it was because of your own strength. But let's assume you recognized divine intervention. You recognized that the giant people and the giant cities couldn't have been conquered with anything short of a miracle. Let's assume that you believed all of Moses' words that it was God who enabled you to victory. If that was the case, if you truly believed that God was on your side against these people living in the Promised Land, what might you be tempted to think?

You might be tempted to think that God was with you and not these other nations because somehow you are better than them. That's what it says in verse 4. You might think that you are more righteous or godly. That you've pleased God better than them. That God is with you and not them, because of how good you are. Well, here Moses makes a definitive case to Israel that this sort of thinking was incorrect. He makes a deafening case against them. Moses points them again to God's grace. Again, you don't have to go to the New Testament to find a gracious God. He's right here again. God graciously chose to give Israel the Promised Land. It was grace. A gift. Not because of something they deserved. Their salvation from their enemies in the Promised Land was a gift of God. And if that is true for Israel, it is *certainly* true for us as Christians. We are saved by grace not by works. There is no part of our Christian life that can be a cause for arrogance or boasting. We are saved by grace and not by works. So this morning we'll delve into what this looks like for Israel, and ultimately we'll be reminded again of our own story of salvation. A story of God's wonderful love for us that has graciously chosen to save us, even despite all our stubborn waywardness.

And so let's begin by looking at the reasons why God is giving Israel the Promised Land and taking it away from the existing nations. The reasons are summarized in verse 5. There are few reasons given here. One main reason, it says, is because of the wickedness of these nations. We've talked about this before. God wasn't unjust in destroying these nations. We said that this was similar to the flood and to what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, that God was bring a sort of final judgment ahead of time to these nations. You can get a taste of their wickedness in chapter 7. That's where God described all their idol worship. That's why when Israel conquers them, God would have them completely destroy all their idols as well. Surely their wickedness was expressed in a number of ways, but chapter 7 summarizes it all up in terms of their idol worship. They worshipped man-made idols instead of the one true God. That was the most serious crime you could make against God. That was a fundamental reason why God was bringing judgment upon them right now through Israel.

A second reason given in verse 5 for why God is giving Israel this Land and removing the current nations is this: It says that God was fulfilling the word which he had spoken to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In other words, God was establishing the promise he gave to the patriarchs. God had promised long ago to give this land to the offspring of Abraham. God is now keeping that promise. But again, this is always done in divine justice. The reason why God hadn't fulfilled the promise right away to Abraham is found in Genesis 15:16. That's where God told Abraham that he'd have to wait until the sins of these nations had come to their full measure. Then, and only then, would God use Abraham's offspring to conquer these nations. So again, this second reason comes back to the first. It was fundamentally the continual wickedness of these pagan nations that was the reason why God would have Israel

conquer them. God was just to take away this land from these wicked nations. And it was God's unearned kindness that would then give it to Israel in fulfillment of his previous promise.

What this means is that none of the reasons why God was taking away the land from these nations and giving it to Israel had to do with Israel's righteousness. That's also what verse 5 says. Verse 4 says that same thing. In other words, God's repeating this to make the point abundantly clear. There is no way in which Israel is to think that they are getting this land because of their works. It's not about their righteousness. It's not about their uprightness of heart. It's about the wickedness of these other nations. In other words, God graciously chose them to inherit this land, even when they hadn't earned it. God's strict justice would come upon these pagan nations while at the same time he chooses to show grace to Israel.

The point is made a third time in verse 6. God repeats it again through Moses. God is not giving them the land because of their righteousness. Three times in a row now! God's point is made abundantly clear. God instead has a different assessment for them in verse 6. Not only is Israel not all-righteous, but they are a stiff-necked people. So let's spend some time thinking about that. What does this mean for Israel to be stiff-necked? What picture does this passage paint of Israel in terms of righteousness? If it's not their righteousness that is bringing them into the land, what are their actions like?

Well, let's think first about this image of having a stiff-neck. This is essentially a Hebrew idiom for being stubborn. When you stiffen up your neck, it means you are not willing to turn to the right or two the left. Imagine a horse not wanting to respond to the bridle in his mouth as you try to turn him, but instead defiantly stiffens his neck. Or think of the young child who doesn't want to do what Mom or Dad wants them to do, so they stiffen all their muscles in defiance. In the spiritual sense, this is being unwilling to turn from the course that you are on, in order to follow God's will for your life. It's saying that you prefer your own course, over God's course for your life. When you are confronted with God's path, you fight against it, choosing what seems best to you. You choose the direction you *think* will be best. That's spiritual stubbornness. That's being stiff-necked spiritually. It's doing things your way instead of God's way. That's how Israel is described here.

But God's description of Israel doesn't end there. This description of their stiff-necks is just a summary of their spiritual condition. Just quickly scan this passage about Israel's poor spiritual estate. Verses 4-5 say they are not righteous or upright of heart. Verses 7, 8, and 22 describe how Israel provokes God to wrath. Verses 7 and 22 speak of how the people are rebellious toward God. Verse 12 says that they acted corruptly and broke the second commandment. Verses 12 and 16 speak of how quickly they turn aside from obedience. Verse 27 says that they are sinful and wicked.

And Moses goes on to say that this is characteristic of the people. They are chronically stiff-necked. This is not just a one-time thing. It's not just an every now and then thing. It describes their normal way of life. Look at verse 7. It says from the day they came out of Egypt to that day right then, they had been this way. Moses gives example upon example in verse 22. At Teberah they complained against God. At Massah they complained about not having water. At Kibroth-Hattaavah they complained about not having meat. At Kadesh-Barnea they refused to go up to take the Promised Land after the spies came and gave them a bad report. Instead they accused God of malicious intent against them. Moses gives these examples just in passing, but he sums everything up pretty clearly in verse 24: "You have been rebellious against the LORD from the day that I knew you." Israel was chronically sinful and stiff-necked.

Of course the main example Moses gives of this is the golden calf incident. Israel made an idol, a golden calf to worship. Look at verse 8. At Mount Horeb the people

showed how stiff-necked they were. While at the same time Moses was up on the mountain having God enshrine the terms of the covenant on the two tablets of stone, Israel is down the mountain breaking the covenant. They break the second commandment in the most literal way. That's why it points out in verse 17 how Moses came down and destroyed the two stone tablets. His destroying them symbolized their breaking of the covenant. And this sin happens even at the hand of their leadership. Aaron the High Priest, the one who's supposed to lead the people in worshipping God, led the people in this sin of making this golden calf. The people as a whole, from their least to their greatest, show themselves to be stiff-necked, rebellious, and sinful.

So, again, think about this in terms of the start of this chapter. The question that's been raised in this chapter is why God is giving Israel the Promised Land instead of these pagan nations. God says that fundamentally it's not because of Israel's righteousness but because of these nations' wickedness. You know, there's a temptation here. Israel could think, we'll, I guess relatively speaking we are more righteous than these other nations. That comparatively their lacking righteousness must be better than the even worse righteousness of these wicked nations. Now to be fair, this passage doesn't tell us enough to contrast in detail Israel versus these nations. But what it does tell us is very suggestive. This passage *doesn't* give us much to suggest that Israel was comparatively better than these nations. You'd be hard pressed to make that case from this passage. Arguably, you might make the case that they are worse; that they've have the great privilege to experience God so personally, and yet are still so stiff-necked and rebellious. But, if anything is clear in this passage, is this. This passage paints the picture that Israel's unrighteousness is actually *similar* to that of these wicked nations. That they really aren't much different than them. That's about the only thing this passage tells us in comparing Israel with these nations.

Just remember what characterizes the wickedness of these nations. We said chapter 7 put it in terms of idolatry. Well, what's the primary example that Moses gives here of Israel's sin? It's their turning to idolatry. It's that action that says they are not that different from these wicked nations. I think chapter 7 also clues us in on this similarity when we look back at chapter 7 verse 25. That verse says that Israel is to completely destroy the idols of these nations when they conquer them; that they are supposed to burn the idols and get rid of the silver and gold. Well, what does Moses do here with their golden calf in chapter 9 verse 21? He burns it, and then grinds up the gold and throws it away. Moses treat's their idol in the same way Israel is supposed to treat the idols of these wicked nations.

The picture is clear. It's spelled out in verse 27. Verse 27 says that Israel has been wicked. Verse 5 says that these nations have been wicked. This passage doesn't paint us any hope that Israel's wickedness is any better or worse than these pagan nations in the Promised Land. So, what's the difference then? Why does God choose to judge these nations but instead give the land to Israel?

The simple answer is God's grace and mercy. God chose in his justice to give to these nations what they had earned. And God chose in his mercy to not give Israel what they deserved. Israel can't credit this to themselves. They can't think that the Promised Land was a right or something they earned. No, it was a gift of God's mercy to them.

Though this is the simple answer, that it was God's gift of mercy to them, this passage does tell us a little bit more about Israel's situation. There was *something* different between Israel and these nations. Israel had the benefit of Moses' intercession for them. You see, we have to ask, why doesn't God just wipe out Israel as well at Mount Horeb? In one sense, God was ready to do that. Just look at verses 13-14. God said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and indeed they are a stiff-necked people. Let Me alone, that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven." God threatens to destroy them right then and there. But it seems Moses understood God's words of "Let me alone," as God's way of calling Moses to intercede for the people.

And that's what Moses does. He intercedes for the people in general and even for Aaron specifically. And look at what Moses asks for. In general he's asking that God not destroy them according to verse 25. But he's actually more specific than that. He's asking for a specific reason why God wouldn't destroy them. In verse 27 he asks that God would forgive the people for their sins. He pleads, "Do not look on the stubbornness of this people, or on their wickedness or their sin."

That's a bold request. But that's what the people need. If their sins are forgiven, then that would place them in a different standing than these wicked nations. But on what basis can Moses ask for this? On what basis can Moses ask that the people be forgiven? He's not really asking that God would forgive them on the basis of a sacrifice. What I mean is he's not coming before God with animal sacrifices here. There's not a request for atonement being described here. In fact, that'd be hard to do, because it was the high priest who usually offered the sacrifices for the people, and here it's Aaron the high priest who himself needs forgiveness. Moses really has no sacrifice to offer here. Really, Moses has nothing in himself to offer God that he would forgive the people. What case could Moses make?

And so Moses does the only thing he can do. He appeals to God. He bases his request on God's promise and on God's glory. Verses 27-28 list out the only things Moses can offer. For God's promise he appeals back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses appeals to God - don't forget the promise you made to them. So Moses appeals to the promise of the Abrahamic covenant. Surely God has an interest in keeping his word and promise. And as for appealing to God's glory. Moses basically says to God, "Look, if you wipe out these people in the wilderness, the Egyptians might think it's because you are unable to bring the people into the land. They might think you had evil intentions against Israel the whole time. And so for your glory's sake," Moses appeals to God. "Forgive Israel and bring them into your land, to keep your promise to Abraham and to show your glory to the nations."

Moses in himself really had nothing to offer God. He had no compelling reason in himself to ask for Israel's forgiveness. And so Moses appeals to what he knows he can trust in. God's promise and glory. And this is something that distinguishes Israel from these nations. Though Israel and the nations are both described as wicked in this passage, here *Israel* is interceded for. Here a servant of God pleads that Israel's problem of sin be dealt with. Moses calls out upon God's promise and glory to bring this about.

And ultimately that is what will bring about the forgiveness for God's people. God's promise to Abraham would lead to one born from Abraham's line who could *really* intercede for God's people. Ultimately there would come an intercessor who does have something he could really offer to God for the forgiveness of his people. I'm talking of course about Jesus.

Jesus came to this earth and lived a fully righteous life. He's the only one who could earn an inheritance by his own merits. His heart was upright. And yet he offered up his life on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. So that when he rose again the third day and ascended up into heaven, he now sits before God the Father interceding for his people. And he has something to offer. His sacrifice. His atonement. He can plead for the forgiveness of our sins and have a reason to give - because he himself paid the price for the sins. He tasted of God's judgment and wrath on the cross. He did that for his chosen people, for all who will turn to him in faith.

Jesus is now the righteous high priest who intercedes for us. He's not a high priest who needs himself to be forgiven like Aaron. He's not a mediator with nothing in himself to offer like Moses. He's a righteous high priest who offers himself in atonement for our sins.

It is by Christ that we believe, and it is Christ that we are saved. Christ intercedes for us that we would come to faith and find forgiveness. And it is Christ who intercedes for us to continue to grow as Christians. As we believe in Jesus, we find an eternal inheritance. The heavenly equivalent of the Promised Land. That is ours by faith in Jesus. Jesus who intercedes for our own sinfulness and spiritual stubbornness.

Saints of God, I hope you are beginning to see the take home point for today. Salvation is an unearned, undeserved, gift. Our salvation is not a right or something we earned. What we had earned was damnation. What we had earned was death. That's the testimony of Scripture. We're no different than Israel in this passage or these wicked nations. But if we have become part of God's people through faith in Christ, we find salvation instead of judgment. We find eternal life instead of final judgment. This is all a function of God's grace. It's *not* a function of our works.

I think we like to make our salvation about our own works. We find it hard to believe at times that our salvation isn't somehow about us. We want to compare ourselves to others in the world and think more highly of ourselves than we ought. But my friends, there is something freeing and refreshing to know that your salvation is not about your works. No, we're called to trust in Christ who worked for us. Were called to faith. And that don't make faith a work either. Faith doesn't deserve eternal life. Faith doesn't earn heaven. And besides, faith itself is even a gift from God according to Scripture. Our salvation is that God has chosen us to receive eternal life, in spite of ourselves. This is how great God's love is for us. That somehow, for some reason only in himself, and in his glory, God has chosen to save us, even when others around are left to their sins.

But it's that inner desire to earn our salvation that tells us something important about the gospel. The tendency we have to want to look to works to be saved tells us something about our salvation. We are right that salvation has to be earned. But we need to realize that Jesus earned it for us. And it's this Jesus who then intercedes for us, that God would forgive us of our sins. That God could then justly and rightly forgive us and grant us a heavenly inheritance.

This is humbling. But this is a reason to praise and thank God. To thank him for how much he has loved us. To thank him that he has showered us with his grace. And so let us throw aside anything that would make our salvation about ourselves. Instead, as we thinking about Christmas during this advent season, may we remember all the more why we needed Christ to come to this earth.

And so if our salvation is not about us; if it's not about our works, then let's make sure we don't act like it is when we talk with non-Christians. Often people are turned off from the Christian faith when they get the sense that Christians are arrogant about their faith. If they feel judged and condemned by Christians because we make it sound like we don't struggle with sins, then we've betrayed the point of this passage. As Christians, we're not saved because of our godliness. And so it would be wrong to act like we were to others. If we're saved by grace, let's instead model grace to those who are not Christians. People are saved by grace not by the law. That's what we must point them to. And that's what we must live out. Never think your salvation is about your works. Instead keep giving God the great praise for such love that he has shown us.

Amen.

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