

DEUTERONOMY 8 COVENANT LIVING (2)

At the recent Ohio Valley Presbytery Men's Retreat, Zack Eswine asked us to ponder this question:

"If you could do anything and know you would not fail, what would you do?"

Or ask the question this way: "If you could get anything and know you would not lose it, what would you get?"

What do you want to do? What do you want to get? The answers reveal what is most important to you. They shine the light on your heart.

As we read through the Old Testament this year, we are in the book of Deuteronomy. Last week and this week, we are settling in chapter 8, as we ponder covenant living.

A covenant is a relationship, and the Bible is about God bringing people back into relationship with himself, through his Son Jesus Christ.

Over these two weeks, we are rooting ourselves in four statements that describe what it means to live in covenant relationship with God. Last week, we learned this: he promises, and we trust, and he provides, and we depend.

The book of Deuteronomy, and all of the Bible, is built upon this truth: no matter what you do or get, nothing is more important than living in relationship with God, and the way to receive that relationship, is through Jesus Christ.

You will lose what you do, and you will lose what you get. But when you have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, you have something that you will never lose, and something that is worth everything.

Moses looked forward to Jesus Christ. We look back on Jesus Christ. Yet God deals with us the same way: he relates to us through covenants.

Covenant living. He promises, and we trust. He provides, and we depend.

HE PROSPERS, AND WE PRAISE.

Last week, we used the image of my ring to remind us of God's promise. Then we used the image of my hand to remind us of God's providing.

Now I offer you the image of both of my hands, to remind us that God not only provides, he sometimes prospers.

HE PROSPERS.

Think of how God will prosper Israel.

Streams and pools and springs of water...wheat and barley...vines and fig trees...pomegranates...olive oil...honey...iron and copper.

Fine houses, a settled life...herds and flocks...silver and gold...and all they have will be multiplied.

He prospers. Does he always prosper? No. Some Christians preach a gospel of prosperity. It says, "If you follow Jesus, God will make you rich."

That is a false gospel. Often the path God chooses for his people, is the path of suffering. But sometimes he will prosper us.

We know this, because we live in the most breathtakingly wealthy nation that has ever arisen on this planet. Even the poorer among us have so much compared to most other people in the world.

If you do not believe me, come to my house and look at our pictures from Tanzania. The average dog here, lives better than the average person there.

He has prospered you. He has prospered me. He prospers.

WE PRAISE.

Now it gets tough. God prospers, but do we praise?

What about Israel? How often in this chapter, and how often in this book, does God warn Israel not to forget him?

Why these words about proud hearts, and why does God warn his people not to declare, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me"?

He knows us! He knows that when we prosper, we want the credit! We want people to see how clever we are, and how resourceful we are, and how hard-working we are, and how skilled we are, and how brilliant we are.

But covenant living shatters that! God's vision of covenant living is for a people whose hearts run in precisely the opposite direction.

When I live in covenant, I seal this on my heart and speak this from my lips, "My power and the strength of my hands have NOT produced this wealth for me. It is the Lord my God who gives me the ability to produce wealth."

How about putting that on your office door? Or on your front door? Or on your Web site? Or on your lunch pail? Or on the bumper of your car?

But how do we get there? How do we write this covenant truth upon our hearts, and express it in our lives? It sounds good, but how can it be so?

I can answer those questions in one word: worship.

Why is worship so important? It's like when most of us get out of bed in the morning. It is usually dark, but even if it is light, we can't get very far anyway, because we need our glasses or contacts.

Without my glasses, the world is blurry. But when I put on my glasses, everything that was so blurry, becomes so clear.

That is a benefit of worship for us. Worship is about seeing clearly.

* Worship is about seeing God clearly. As I walk through this world, he becomes blurry to me. I forget or neglect what I know of him. He sort of seems like a good idea, and I may have a vague sense he is somehow there, but I do not really see him for who he is.

But when I worship him, for all that he is and for all that he has done, I see more clearly again.

I see that he is the Creator who gives life and health and all good things I have enjoyed.

I see that he is the Redeemer of my soul, who has treated me so much better than I deserve.

I see that he is the Provider for each day, who cares for his children like me, for the sake of his child, who died and rose for me.

* So then, worship is also about seeing myself clearly. When I see God more clearly, I see myself more clearly.

I see that I am not a self-made man. I am a God-made man.

I see that I do not prosper, because I am good. I prosper, purely because he is good to me.

I see that I may get something right this week, but not because of my proud goodness, but because of God's perfect grace.

Why do we talk about the importance of personal, family and gathered worship? Why does the CPC purpose statement say that each day, we are supposed to be worshippers?

Is it just to get those attendance numbers up? Is it just to get those seats filled? Is it just to get that budget in line?

No! It is because worship is God's means of putting a lens in front of me, so that I see so clearly who he is, and who I am, and as I see this, I fall on my knees and praise him, for I realize that the power and the strength of my hands has not produced what I am and what I have. It is the Lord who gives me all my ability, and so confirms that I am his, and he is mine, in a covenant relationship, through Jesus.

My brothers and sisters, do you know what breaks or makes the heart of this pastor, and so many pastors? It is your attitude toward worship. This is so important, because I can see how it touches every bit of your life.

I see a casual attitude toward worship, and I see people leading blurry and "praise-less" lives, with hidden or open pride that corrodes their souls. Or I see a passion for worship, and I see people living passionately for the Lord, being used by him in countless ways, and giving him all the glory.

When I live in covenant, I worship. I do it alone, I do it with my family, I do it with the brothers and sisters I love, that I might remember and not forget, all the benefits of the Lord, who prospers me.

Covenant living. He promises, and we trust. He provides, and we depend. He prospers, and we praise.

HE PUSHES, AND WE OBEY.

I give you the image of the ring, the image of the hand, the image of the two hands, and now the image of the hands, pushing you.

HE PUSHES.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God does a lot of pushing.

Think of some of the words early in this chapter.

* "Humble." God humbled Israel in the desert.

* "Test." God humbled Israel in the desert, to test their hearts.

* "Teach." God humbled Israel in the desert, then fed Israel, to teach them about their utter dependence upon God.

* "Discipline." God's humbling, testing and teaching were designed to make his people, his disciples. He would correct them, to push them to honor him.

He pushes. He pushes, because he is concerned about the holiness of his people. In fact, he is far more concerned about our holiness, than we are.

Sometimes he pushes through prosperity. Sometimes he pushes through suffering. But always he pushes, because he loves his people, and he wants them to follow him and his ways, always.

Meet Johnny Lechner. Johnny is a student at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater.

Johnny is now in his 13th year as a student at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. He has over 200 credit hours to his credit, although he needs only a hundred or so to graduate.

But Johnny does not want to graduate. He wants to keep being a student at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater.

The editor of the student newspaper is not too pleased about this. She is said to have said: "It's getting old. For the sanity of the rest of the campus, we want him to get out of here."

God wants to get us out of unholiness, and into holiness! He pushes.

He pushes, AND WE OBEY.

Covenant living is about becoming the disciple that God is pushing us to be. He pushes us to holiness, and we obey.

But wait! What about grace? Isn't it legalism, to ask God's people to obey?

No, because when we live in covenant, we obey for a different reason, and we obey with a different goal.

A different reason...

Legalism obeys to get God to love us. We believe if we follow enough of the rules enough of the time, God will love us.

But covenant obedience obeys God, because he loves us. We know that we cannot follow enough of the rules enough of the time to get God to love us. So we depend upon Jesus Christ to be the One who has obeyed God's rules for us, and has paid for our failures to obey those rules.

Remember: Moses and God's faithful people, looked forward to this!

In legalism, I obey to get God's love. In covenant living, I obey as a grateful response to God's love.

A different reason...a different goal:

Legalism obeys, for the glory of the one who obeys. We make a list of rules that fits with what we think is important, and we obey the list, so we can show everyone how good we are.

But covenant obedience obeys God, for the glory of God. We obey him, because we know that our obedience displays holiness that somehow reflects God's holiness. The world sees him, in us, when we follow his ways.

In legalism, I obey for my glory. In covenant living, I obey for God's glory.

Did Israel get all this? She should have.

The whole book of Deuteronomy grows from God's grace to his people: that is the reason for their obedience.

The whole book of Deuteronomy strives for God's glory in the lives of his people: that is the goal of their obedience.

But many in Israel did not get it. Do we? Do we see that the God who promises, provides and prospers, pushes us toward obedience to himself?

Now some of you may be thinking, where is the list? What are the things I must do to obey?

Lists are not all bad. Some of you have heard me say that if you want to take a "spiritual inventory", pray through the Ten Commandments, or the fruit of the Spirit in the book of Galatians, or the Beatitudes in Matthew's gospel.

But this is about more than lists. This is about giving everything to the Lord. This is about whole-life, whole-heart obedience. Like when...

* You are bored. Young people, we hear that from you a lot, but the truth is that adults get bored, too. Adulthood is not nearly as exciting as some of us thought it would be! You can be busy and bored!

With boredom, the mind drifts...maybe to a dream of getting more and more and more money, or more and more and more stuff.

With boredom, the eyes wander...maybe to that person who looks, or seems, so different than your spouse.

With boredom, the heart strays...maybe to desperate worry, or to burning discontent, over your life.

When I live in covenant, I want to love God in my mind. I will trust his promise to love me even when I fail. I will depend on him to direct my mind into wise paths. I will praise him when I defeat the unhealthy fantasy, the deep worry, or the growing discontent. He pushes. By his grace, I obey.

Whole-life, whole-heart obedience. Like when...

* You know what to do. Sometimes, you know what to do!

You know you should help around the house. You know you should not speak ill of your coach. You know you should pray. You know you should listen to her as she tells you her story. You know you should visit that ill friend. You know you should correct your son, but not act like he has broken a federal law.

You know. But how often will you do the right thing, in the wrong way?

You grumble while you help. The words stay inside, but your heart boils. You pray with thoughtless words and a dead heart. You seem to be listening, but you are a million miles away. You visit, but you resent it. You act as if your son has broken a federal law.

When I live in covenant, I want to obey, in the right way. I want to obey with a heart that loves God, and loves people, and I do not want my obedience to be grudging duty, but glorious delight, as I know my Father loves to see me love in these ways.

Whole-life, whole-heart obedience. Like when...

* God calls you to risky, radical obedience.

This is when you risk the snickers of your classmates, and you are kind to the fellow student who is not good-looking, or athletic, or popular.

This is when you risk the questions of your family, and you join in that mission trip, or that mercy ministry outreach, or that effort to touch the physically, emotionally, or spiritually needy person in your life.

This is when you risk the hatred of the ones who still hate, and you shed such hatred, and you extend grace to an undeserving sinner.

This is when you risk the scorn of people who do not get it, and you tell your friend about your friend named Jesus.

This is when you risk the loss of everything you know and love, to follow God's call to another country, for the cause of the gospel.

He pushes. We obey. Whole-life, whole-hearted obedience. By his grace, we strive to obey with all of our life, and with all of our hearts.

We will fail. So we look to Jesus to make us right before God, and to enable us to keep growing in living rightly before God.

This is covenant living.

Apart from Jesus, we have no hope. In Jesus, he promises, and we trust.

Apart from Jesus, we go it alone. In Jesus, he provides, and we depend.

Apart from Jesus, we live in pride. In Jesus, he prospers, and we praise.

Apart from Jesus, we stay in sin. In Jesus, he pushes, and we obey.

So I ask again:

If you could do anything and know you would not fail, what would you do?

If you could get anything and know you would not lose it, what would you get?

This is real success. This is really worth getting. This is a relationship with the God of all, through the Son of mercy, Jesus the Christ.

When you have this, you have everything.