

Training (Deut. 8; 9:5-6; 11:8-17)

My father and I used to be backpackers. As much as I wish I could say that this is still something I do, it simply is not. I did keep a subscription to *Backpacker* magazine for a while, but that is as far down the trail as I've gotten in many years. One thing I remember, however, is that it is a bad idea to simply throw on some new boots, load up the pack, and hit the trail. That is a surefire way to end up with blisters on your feet and a very sore back. Instead, **you must train before your first trip.** You need to lace your boots up and hit the street, so that you can adequately break them in. You need to pack your pack and walk around the neighborhood, so that you can find the most comfortable adjustments to the straps and the best distribution of weight. You need to try out that high-tech camp stove and figure out if you really like the dehydrated taco soup that you bought because the advertisement looked so cool. And you should probably do a day hike before you try to stay out all night. By walking on an actual trail, you are preparing yourself for the conditions of your longer journey.

Training is meant to prepare us for the next stage in our lives. In our texts this morning, we find Moses giving his second speech of the three speeches of Deuteronomy. The second speech begins with a recounting of the Ten Commandments, which we studied last week. Then follow several chapters in which Moses exhorts the people to follow God and keep his commandments. The final part of the speech is Moses's detailing and developing the law of God for life in the land. As we saw last week, the law of God works on more than one level. There is the simple love command; then there is the foundational teaching of the Ten Commandments; and finally, there is the detailed application of the commandments into the situations and circumstances of life. Our texts this morning come from that section of the second speech in which Moses is providing exhortation to faithfulness.

The key idea here is that **God had been training the people in the wilderness.** We know that the wilderness wandering had been a kind of punishment that had befallen the people because they had initially refused to

enter the land. But this is not the whole story. In fact, if we viewed the wilderness period as only punishment, as only retribution, we could potentially develop some wrongheaded notions about God's relationship with his people and even about God himself. Our text instead demonstrates that the wilderness period was a kind of education for the generation that would inherit the land. Verse five is key: "Keep in mind that the LORD your God has been disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son." What was one of the lessons they were to learn in the wilderness? Look again at verse three: "He humbled you by letting you go hungry; then he gave you manna to eat, which you and your fathers had not known, so that you might learn that **man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.**" You should recognize that verse as one of those deployed by Jesus in his battle with Satan during his own time of wilderness testing.

Here is the general picture of life in the wilderness. **God was everything to the people.** They could not live off the fruits of a settled agricultural life. Instead, they had to live by God's provision. He gave them the food and water that they needed to survive. And to fully experience God's provision, they had to first seek God instead of seeking stuff. They had to learn to live by the word of God. As Jesus would later say, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). You could say it this way – **they had to learn how to live by faith.** Therefore, they sometimes wanted to go back to Egypt. Sure, they were slaves in Egypt. But the land had a system. There was a hierarchy and they knew their place in it. Human ingenuity had discovered how to harness the Nile when it overflowed its banks. People had learned how to capture the water and irrigate the fields, thereby assuring that the crops could survive the dry season. Most of us understand this impulse. Sometimes we cling to a dysfunctional system because we understand our place in it. It is scary to change, even if the change would ultimately be for our blessing.

But how could life in the wilderness, following God's word and living by his provision, possibly prepare the people for their inheritance in Canaan? Listen to the description that Moses gives to this land: "For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams, springs, and deep water sources, flowing in both valleys and hills; a land of wheat, barley, vines, figs,

and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you will eat food without shortage, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you will mine copper” (vv. 7-9). This sounds like a far cry from the wilderness to me.

But the difference is less pronounced than we might think at first glance. The key comes in what we read from the eleventh chapter.

For the land you are entering to possess is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and irrigated by hand as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are entering to possess is a land of mountains and valleys, watered by rain from the sky. It is a land the LORD your God cares for. He is always watching over it from the beginning to the end of the year” (11:10-12).

Egyptian civilization developed along the banks of the Nile and flourished in the plain created by the Nile Delta. Capturing the waters of the Nile by human ingenuity and strength was essential. But Canaan was a different kind of land. Its fertility depended not on a river but on rain. If the rains came, then the ground would soak up the nourishment and bring forth fruitfulness. The water would run off from the mountains and course through streams that ran in fertile valleys. But if the rains held off, the streambeds would run dry. The grass would wither. The land would not produce fruit. And it was God who held the rains of Canaan in the palm of his hand. Herein lies the connection with the wilderness. In the wilderness, the people had to cultivate a day-to-day life of seeking God and obeying his word. But **the wilderness was just breaking in their boots for the promised land**. If they did not seek God in the land, if they refused to “seek ye first the kingdom,” then the rains would not come – “Be careful that you are not enticed to turn aside, serve, and bow in worship to other gods. Then the LORD’s anger will burn against you. He will shut the sky, and there will be no rain; the land will not yield its produce, and you will perish quickly from the good land the LORD is giving you” (11:16-17).

Israel had to learn that all the fruitfulness and blessing that they were about to experience was a gift of God's grace. It is at exactly this point that we see that they would be **tempted in two critical ways**.

1. **They might think that all the fruitfulness was because of their ingenuity and work.** "You may say to yourself, 'My power and my own ability have gained this wealth for me,' but remember that the LORD your God gives you the power to gain wealth, in order to confirm his covenant he swore to your fathers, as it is today" (8:17-18).
2. **They might think all the fruitfulness was because of their own moral goodness.** Moses directly refutes this idea. "Understand that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people" (9:6).

No. All the blessing would be because of God's grace. And they would experience the blessing as they continued to depend on him and on every word that came from his mouth. Let us consider the matter from the perspective of our four overarching categories. They were trained in the wilderness to live by faith. They would **inherit** the land by faith in God. If they came to rely on their own strength or moral goodness instead of God or if they turned aside to other gods through **idolatry**, then they would lose the fruitfulness and blessing. This gave them a means to **interpret** their history. Ultimately, Moses's words here were designed to **inspire** their faithfulness.

What of us? Just as Jesus demonstrated to us in the wilderness, **we must learn to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God**. Growth in obedience and holiness is a promise of God's grace extended to his children and the way in which his children enter into his blessings. We are not called to self-reliance or self-justification. Instead, we must pursue faithfulness and let God send the rain. The best place we can be sometimes is the wilderness, the place in which all the props are taken away and we learn to live with God. Our beloved congregation might be called to enter a time of wilderness wandering. But let us learn at that place to seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness. Let us never become reliant on our cleverness, or our endowments, or our education, or anything else. Let us learn to rely on Christ, in whom we discover the spiritual blessings stored up for us.