



HG253: Mountain Top Experiences
Gerizim: Mount Of Blessing

Deuteronomy 11:26-29

Home Group Study Notes

26 February 2023 - Rachel Orford



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins)
Ice Breaker

Count your blessings. Name the first three things (or people) that come into your head that you are grateful for.



Looking Upwards (10 mins)
Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



HG253: Mountain Top Experiences *Gerizim: Mount Of Blessing*

Deuteronomy 11:26-29

Home Group Sermon

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Introduction

Maybe, like me, you weren't familiar with Mount Gerizim until now. But I promise you it is a real place and you can still go and see it; both it and its opposite number Mount Ebal are pretty much in the centre of Israel's west bank territory. It used to be thought that Mount Gerizim was selected as the Mount of Blessings because it was more beautiful than Mount Ebal; lush and fertile with gentle slopes. But in fact the pair of them are both pretty barren and unprepossessing and actually Mount Ebal is slightly the higher of the two. However, because Gerizim's main slope faces East, it looks toward the rising sun, and would receive more light. So symbolically it is perhaps more appropriate as a Mount of Blessings, rather than being particularly beautiful.

This seems a bit of a shame because when I think of a mountain I think of something that is awe-inspiring, breathtaking and striking to look at. I'm not inspired particularly to climb them. In fact I have only been to the top of one mountain - Snowdon in Wales. As luck would have it, I was there on a crystal clear day and I thought it was quite breathtaking. I could see everything including the little holiday home we were staying in, the roads we had come in on and in the distance some of the little villages we had passed through. When I turned the other way, I don't know what I could see. Apparently on a clear day you can see England, Scotland and Ireland from the top of Snowdon, and laid out in front of me were so many places to explore. For me, a mountain top experience is all about the view.

In today's passage we are in the book of Deuteronomy not on top of a mountain but in the desert "east of the Jordan in the territory of Moab" (Deuteronomy 1:5) in what is today part of Syria. The Israelites are finally about to enter their promised land. The whole nation is assembled before Moses and he is in the middle of addressing them.

Symbolically it would also have been perfect if he had been speaking from a mountain top, because the Israelites had also arrived at somewhere truly breath-taking. After 40 years of desert wandering and hardship they were about to come into their inheritance. And Moses could see everything. He had been there since the very beginning. He could see how far they had come on a journey of what should have been 11 days but took 40 years - a painful but necessary journey of rebellion, difficulties and discouragement in which God prepared them for their arrival in the new land as a nation obedient to him. He could see where they were now, spiritually and geographically. And he could see an amazing future for them. But he could also see that this would depend on them.

The Choice

The whole of Deuteronomy is a real mountain top speech in which he recounts their history, ever since they agreed at Mount Sinai, "we will do everything which the Lord has said." (Exodus 19:9). As far as he was concerned this is when the nation really began as they chose to follow God with new accountability. He reminds them of the faithfulness and mercy of God, urges them to obedience with a repetition of the law and commandments and reminds them of the consequences of straying from their principles.

But if you are thinking that Moses' audience had heard all this before, remember that after a journey of 40 years, he was now speaking to people who probably weren't born when the covenant was first established. In fact because of the previous generation's rebellion, God had declared that "not one of them will see the land I have promised on oath to their forefathers." (Numbers 14:23)

So what a perfect time for what is effectively some self-appraisal. History is often concerned with what we have done, but Moses was looking at their history to show what God had done for them. Wouldn't it be a great idea if we did this? How often do we look at our lives and notice where God has been present, the wrong turns we have made, the blessings we have received? Could this help us focus on our faith, give new strength to our walk with God and steer us toward the right choices in future.

The words we have read today are actually a bit of a pivotal moment in Moses' address, because he is setting before them a choice. And it is not just as simple as choosing between a blessing and a curse, because to be honest who wouldn't choose the blessing? It is about choosing a specific way of relating to God and a different way of life. Ours is not a capricious God who just makes arbitrary rules for his own amusement. The law was a reflection of how to live in a way that could not only lead to prosperity and happiness for Israel but to a right relationship with God. Failure to keep the law would mean separation from him. He was like a good parent giving his children detailed instructions because he didn't want them to be in any confusion about how to bring about good things for themselves. He wanted to bless them.

The Blessings

So what were the blessings that the nation could expect if they kept to their part of the agreement? Moses had not only been warning them of the dire consequences of disobedience, but encouraging them with assurances of abundance if they obeyed. We find them summarised a bit later on in 28:1-14. The people would be blessed in both city and country, their children, their crops, their livestock and even the climate would be blessed; basically anything that they turned their hands to! Their enemies would be defeated, they would be established as God's holy people and others would fear them. So pretty much all that a fledgling nation could wish for in its new home.

But we have to mention the curses too. In fact if you read the rest of Chapter 28, you will find they get more than just a mention - around 54 verses of very specific curses in fact. They range from their donkeys being taken and not returned to being defeated by their enemies, cities being laid siege to, having plagues set upon them and their crops failing. It's all pretty grim stuff. Only a fool would risk this happening.

The Ceremony

Nevertheless, through 40 years of bitter experience it was clear that, keeping to God's commands was challenging for Israel, so through Moses, God gives them a ceremony which would not only symbolically renew their relationship with him but reinforce in their minds the resulting outcomes of either keeping their commitment or turning aside. There are in fact quite detailed instructions for the ceremony set out in Chapter 27 which include setting up and altar on which the law should be written, sacrificing burnt offerings, eating and rejoicing and then dividing the tribes into two with half of them on Mount Gerizim and half on Mount Ebal and the blessings and curses being loudly proclaimed from the respective mountains. And the ceremony did take place. We can read in Joshua 8 that Moses' instructions were faithfully carried out to the letter.

So finally the nation is poised to enter the land flowing with milk and honey. They have a new leader in waiting (Joshua), a faithful God who will uphold them as his chosen people, a set of instructions to ensure that they keep on the right path and a ceremony to reinforce the importance of making wise choices. How could it possibly go wrong?

I'm sure I don't need to give a spoiler alert. Despite its auspicious beginnings, in the long term the new nation did not keep to the terms of the covenant and the tension between those blessings and curses and the choices they made is played out in scripture.

The linkage between conduct and consequences was even reinforced later on by the prophets as things more often than not went badly for Israel.

If we didn't know how the story ends, we could conclude at this point that all is lost. We would learn nothing other than that making the right choices is clearly too hard and there is nothing but bad news ahead. But of course we know there is good news.

We can't know whether we are on the brink of something as momentous as the people of Israel. But, apart from this, some things haven't changed:

- The God that was at work at the time of Moses is the same God that is at work today. His nature is unchanging and he still wants to bless us;
- He has not absolved us of our responsibilities. We still have a choice to make; pretty much the same one as the nation of Israel;
- And we still live in a covenant relationship with God.

But for us, because of Jesus and his sacrifice, our relationship with God is very different to the one that the Israelites had with him when they faced each other on Gerizim and Ebal. We live under a new covenant revealed to us in the gospel.

Firstly, this new covenant is not just an agreement between God and Israel. It is for everybody. It is the promise that God makes with all mankind that He will forgive sin and restore a relationship with those whose hearts believe in His Son, Jesus Christ; a personal saviour for each one of us. Jesus himself commissioned his disciples in Matthew 28:19 to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

And because of him we are no longer imprisoned by the law. In Deuteronomy 27:26 the ceremony at Mount Ebal included the words “Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law.” The ritualistic, ceremonial and sacrificial laws had become a curse and a burden for everyone who tried to uphold them. As Paul explained in his letter to the Galatians chapter 3 “Before the coming of this faith, [i.e our faith in Jesus] we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed.

So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.” In his righteousness, Jesus fulfilled these requirements of the law on our behalf and removed the burden from us. Our choice now is also whether to have faith in him and to be obedient to him or not to. He says in John 14 “If you love me, keep my commands”; commands to follow him, trust in him, repent and the greatest commandment of all - “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” as well as our neighbours and ourselves.

Our Blessings

And what blessings are we promised? Can we expect our barns and livestock and kneading troughs to be abundant? Well, maybe. But remember Jesus puts more store on treasures in heaven than treasures on earth and faithfulness does not always lead to a perceived earthly prosperity. In God's culture “the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Matthew 20:16) and in Matthew 5 we hear that his priority is not to bless the the rich and powerful but the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted because of righteousness.

And the rewards? Comfort, fulfilment, mercy, being made children of God and inheriting the kingdom of Heaven. These blessings are available for us and are forever, not just in our earthly lives. Jesus revealed to Nicodemus in John 3 that whoever believed in him should not perish but have eternal life. And we have chosen to believe.

Jesus is, however, as straightforward as Moses was about the consequences of making the wrong choice. Many of his parables show examples of how through disobedience, leading to lack of compassion or humility, people can easily lose their place in the kingdom. His teaching was revolutionary, bold and direct. In Matthew 5:20 he warns that “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” He had seen how these people had led others astray by focusing on the burdens of the law and away from a relationship with God.

Jesus took these burdens from us in return for our faith and discipleship. But still, literally every day we sin and fall short. We long for treasures in heaven but the world just keeps taking us over. Jesus warns us in Matthew 7 that “small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

And we are still inclined to worship other Gods. Maybe not the graven images and gold calves of the Exodus, but anything we give more importance to than God - our possessions, status, celebrity and our own concerns and self importance are today's idols. But the gospel reveals to us that we have been blessed with God's grace; which means we are given the opportunity to make a new choice in every moment, to acknowledge our sins, to receive forgiveness and start again.

A Return To Mount Gerizim?

I haven't forgotten about Mount Gerizim. It does in fact make an appearance in the New Testament, although it isn't mentioned by name. In John 4 we find the account of a conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at a well, in which she refers to a mountain on which their fathers worshipped. This is Mount Gerizim. It may not be in our consciousness, but to Samaritans it was the holiest of places and still is. Believe it or not, there are still Samaritans around today, although less than 1,000 of them; their high priest still lives on Mount Gerizim and most Samaritans live in the surrounding towns and villages. And this is what Jesus said to the woman, “.... A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on the Mountain nor in Jerusalem.....God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth.”

At the cross, the temple curtain was torn in two and we now have our own personal access to God our father. We have been accepted into his adopted family and to us he is limitless, present everywhere. Whilst taking time out to renew our relationship with God and acknowledge how much he has blessed us can only bring us closer to him, there is no need of sacred mountains, holy places, rituals or ceremonies to remind us of these blessings or encourage us to obedience. We need only to look to Jesus as the source of our truth and follow that same guidance that Moses gave the nation of Israel in Deuteronomy 11:22 “To Love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways and to hold fast to him.”

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Emmanuel Church Text for 2023

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. Numbers 6:24-26



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1: Have you ever felt you were wandering in a spiritual desert? How long did it take you to get to your destination? What helped you?

2: What turning points can you identify in your life? How often have you taken the opportunity to think about how you got to where you are? Did you recognise God's involvement?

3: We are often faced with the choice to be obedient to God or disobey. When have you found this choice to be particularly difficult?

4: Read Matthew 5; 3-12. Do you think that knowing these blessings are available to you makes a difference to the way you live your life?

5: Moses urged the nation of Israel not to “turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods.” What other gods might you be tempted to follow?

6: What place or places do you think of as holy or sacred? Does visiting these places help you to feel closer to God?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) *Caring For Each Other*

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) *Concern For Others*

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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