

Part 1: How We Got to Now: Stories of Failure

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This past week marked the first day of fall. Another season has gone and another season has arrived. In Montana this means changing how we spend our Saturday afternoons, be it at the stadium or in a hunting blind. It changes our wardrobe from shorts to sweaters.

As much as we prepare for fall, in a number of months we will prepare for winter, then we will prepare for spring, then we will prepare for summer. And inevitably, next year, the whole cycle will start again. Change is naturally unavoidable.

We know this in our own lives. Things are always changing. Sometimes change is due to what is good like a new wardrobe to fit a trimmed down body. Sometimes change is bad such as stairs swapped out for ramps due to a lack of mobility.

The truth is, no one changes for change sake even if we think we are. Behind any intentional efforts to mix things up is the hope that it would change something. It could be thinking that a new boyfriend might do the trick. A new job might bring me peace. A new context might rejuvenate. But are you certain that any of those changes can actually accomplish what you want?

Even when we make wonderful and wise changes, are we certain that the way in which we have changed as the ability to protect us from what we want to avoid and preserve us into what we want to have?

This is the same dilemma the people of Israel faced as they stood on the stoop of the Promise Land. Looking back they saw good changes and bad changes, and looking forward they saw seasons that were going to demand new things from them. Would these changes be for the better or for the worse? Would these changes finally allow them to have the life they always wanted? Or would they need to change their plans in order to reach that goal?

The whole book of Deuteronomy is a book about change: why we need it, where we can get it, and what it means for us. What we are going to see today is this: **Deuteronomy is a sermon about our need and how God is going to change us.**

What I want to do with our time this morning is to give a longer than normal intro into the book of Deuteronomy and then spend the rest of the time seeing at how the first chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book.

If you have a Bible, this series will be a good series to bring it to. Our passages are likely going to be too big to fit in the bulletin, and the book is so large that there are often times that we are going to deal with multiple chapters at time while only focusing on a couple key texts inside each of them.

Being able to follow along will be pretty important because we often struggle with reading the Old Testament. We get worried that every page is just legalism. Our college professors quote it to try and

convince us that the Bible is archaic, outdated and inconsistent. Sometimes we even wrestle to read it through any lens beside the lens of moralism: be like Joseph, be like Moses, be like David.

To get hung up on things like this is to miss the beauty of this book. This book, like every book in scripture, is rich with the good news of the gospel of grace. Outside of Psalms and Isaiah this is the most quoted book by the New Testament authors and the book Jesus himself quoted the most. If you don't identify yet as a Christian, this book answers some questions that are central to many of today's philosophical questions like: morality, social justice, and how we move from being self-conscious to self-confident.

So having a good grasp on Deuteronomy sets us up with a good grasp on the gospel and of life itself. And even though he's not explicitly mentioned in here, you can't see either without seeing Jesus in this text.

Deuteronomy is the last book of what is called the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch is the first five books of the Bible, all of which were written by Moses. It is the climax of Moses recitation of the origins and history of God's people. While they are five separate books they tell one cohesive story, a story which sets the course for everything which follows including the New Testament.

In Genesis we read about God creating the world, the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve. And as quickly as perfection was established, rebellion ensued. Adam and Eve sinned and were removed from the wonderful life giving garden and presence of God.

And for a while things don't get much better. We see lots of sin, we see global judgement, and we see more rebellion. Then in Genesis chapters 11 and 12 we meet a man named Abram, a man who set out on a deliberate journey, but got side-tracked, lost interest, and became content in his desert wanderings. But God saw Abram, and he chose him for himself. He went to Abram, the wanderer and said this: **Genesis 12:1-3**.

Even though God had no requirement to, God chose Abraham to be the man through which he would recreate his people which was lost after Eden. What's really interesting about Abraham is that before God spoke to him and told him that he would bring him into the Promise Land of Canaan, the Bible says that's where Abraham wanted to go, but by the time he settled in Haran, he was content with it.

What a great reminder that most of us have at our core a desire for God himself, we want the peace and place that he brings, but without Jesus' help we will always settle for less, and that's a dangerous and unsatisfying place to be in. And this really is the heart of the gospel. None of us have any idea where we are going, but God in his grace finds us in our confusion and calls us to follow Jesus.

The rest of Genesis tracks the expansion of God's promise to Abraham and ends with the people of God living in Egypt where they have grown so vast that the Egyptians enslave them to keep them in line. Enter the book of Exodus and Moses. He is the man whom God chose to not only lead God's people out of slavery, but to give them God's law so that he might rule them, and to bring them into God's place so that he might dwell with them.

I think this is one piece of Christianity that is often missed, but is so central to Deuteronomy. God not only calls us out of judgement and slavery, but he calls us to something so much better. We are delivered from sin so that we might live for God. He's not only saving us from something, but he's bringing us somewhere.

After the people leave Egypt, the end of Exodus and the books of Leviticus and Numbers describe a scene at Mount Sinai, also called Mount Horeb. It is where God gives his law to Moses and Moses begins to teach the people the law. This too is important to remember when it comes to our salvation. God doesn't give us the law and then say: do this and be saved. He saves us and then he gets after how we act. The Old Testament was always a book of grace.

The book of Numbers is very important for the book Deuteronomy because chapters one through three of Deuteronomy basically summarize the whole book of Numbers. In Numbers the people of God, finally have the law of God and set out towards the land of God. And while they get there, some stuff happens in the middle of it. And this is where Deuteronomy picks up: the people of God are finally at the doorstep of the Promise Land and now Moses speaks to them.

Look with me at **Deuteronomy 1:1-5**.

Knowing better the context of Deuteronomy, now we can begin to better understand what Moses is doing here. First, we see that **Deuteronomy is a sermon**. Now this might seem like an odd observation, but it's extremely important when it comes to helping us understand Deuteronomy.

You'll notice in verse 1 it says: these are the words Moses spoke, verse 4 says Moses spoke all that the Lord had given him in commandment, and in verse 5 it says Moses undertook to explain this law.

Moses' goal was to apply the whole teachings of God to the lives of this people because he knew that they needed it. The book of Deuteronomy really has very little narrative parts in it. For the most part it is a long sermon given by Moses to teach God's people God's word and to inspire them to obey God.

Deuteronomy was not meant to record laws, it was meant to change people. That is why we preach God's word at Sovereign Hope. We preach not because we simply want to know God's word. Paul says that if all we do is know God's word we will be puffed up. Instead we seek to know God's word because we want to know God. And when we know God we can't help but be changed by him. The preaching of God's word is intended to expose us to God himself.

This is what Paul reminds Timothy of in the New Testament: **2 Timothy 4:1-4**. The goal of Moses' teaching, the goal of Paul's teaching, and the goal of our teaching is not just that you would know things, but that the things you know in scripture would change you. And the "thing" of biblical preaching is God and his plan to redeem his people. We are behold to God's word because we desire to behold and be transformed by God himself.

Moses knew that despite all the law giving that had already gone on, these people needed to hear it once more. Hear it from their leader. Hear it from the one who cared for them like no one else cared for them. And yet, this sermon was a very odd sermon.

I have a collection of sermons in my office that are in a book called, "Sermons that Shaped America." There is a sermon in there from John Cotton [1600's] encouraging the Pilgrims to not neglect God's glory as they move to the Colonies. There's another one by Jonathan Edwards setting the tone for the Great Awakenings [1700s], sermons fighting for equal treatment of African Americans, and even sermon given by Tim Keller in Manhattan the Sunday after 9/11.

Sermons are so powerful that they have the ability to shape history. This sermon is the mother of all those sermons. This sermon sets the tone for the Psalms. It is what the Psalmist has in mind when he says in Psalm 119:97, "Oh how I love your law!" It is the book which King Josiah found [2 Chron. 34:14] and used to reform Israel. It was also the book that Ezra taught [Neh. 8:1] to restore worship after the exile. When Jesus is tempted by the Devil, it is portions of Deuteronomy that Jesus uses to resist the Devil. It is the sermon which frames much of Paul's theology in the book of Romans.

This book is a powerful book. But powerful in an odd way. Here is the summary of Moses' sermon: You failed, you're going to fail and I'm going to die.

But hidden deep inside these moments of failure and sorrow, there are glimpses of God's incredible grace. Despite everything that goes wrong, God is gracious all the more.

And this story of failure and faithfulness is really what Moses wants us to see in this whole book, and it's what God wants you to see in your life. This book is a sermon which should warm our souls to the warmth of God's infinite grace in Jesus Christ.

This book is a sermon, but this book also is **A sermon about our need.**

There is a song by the band Weezer titled, "Undone," which says, "If you want to destroy my sweater, hold this thread as I walk away."

Basically the whole scope of chapter one of Deuteronomy is Moses gently holding a string as the excited Israel finds itself to be quickly undone.

We get a glimpse of that even in the opening we just read. Look back: **Deuteronomy 1:1-3.**

Now these are typically the parts of the book that we skip over but here we see something really important. How long of a walk did Moses say it was from Mount Horeb to Kadesh-barnea? Eleven days. But how long has it been since Israel left Egypt? Forty years.

Either Moses is a completely terrible guide or something went terribly wrong. Between Sinai and the Promised Land, something big happened. The sweater was unraveled.

This whole chapter begins to slowly pull that thread and expose what it was that went wrong. We see this unfold in two parts. First we see a scene back at Mount Horeb and then we see a scene at a place called Kadesh-barnea.

I'm going to read the scene at Horeb for us here: **Deuteronomy 1:6-18.**

So here we have two things that Moses wants us to see. First he wants us to see God's immeasurable promise of good is finally at hand. God's people have God's law, and now it's time to go to God's place.

He is going to do it, the land God swore to Abraham is finally going to be land of reality. But then we begin to see a problem. It's not big. But it is a problem. Moses needs help. Why? Because the people are so many. God has been so faithful the population has grown so much that Moses needs help in leading them.

Not only were they too many, but these people were still far from being perfect people. In verse 12 Moses says that it's because of their strife and bickering. At this point, at Sinai, we are only a few months out of Egypt and Moses already is tired of the people asking "Are we there yet," and "Stop touching me!"

So Moses and the people make a plan. They will appoint their best and brightest and Moses will teach them to judge things according to God's law. Moses proposed this idea to the people, the people said, "This sounds great, this is what we need, let's do it."

So what's the problem? Here we have God's promises about to be realized. Here we have God's leader who while limited, is still willing and able to lead according to God's law. And here we have God's people who are democratically submitting to the authority of God's law.

But let's read as the Israelites move from Horeb to Kadesh-Barnea which was the doorway to the Promise Land. **Deuteronomy 1:20-25**. Don't we hear Moses preaching really hitting its stride here? As third party readers, we have this emotion at this point that they are finally going to do it.

God's promises are at hand, God's prophet is encouraging them, the representative spies have found only good things about this land. Moses gives this rousing commands: Go up, take hold of the Land, do not fear! What could go wrong?

Apparently everything: **Deuteronomy 1:26-46**.

They get to the doorway of God's promise and the people rebelled. Why? Because there were some tall people and big walls in the land.

This is the danger of trying to follow God at a Farmer's Market. The spies brought back the amazing produce of the land, but they also brought back stories of how difficult the conquest of the land might be. And if all we do is gauge the cost of following God through the fruit that we get from it, we will see the fruit as good, but ultimately we will see the fruit as too costly. Community inside the church is good, but community costs less outside the church.

A Farmer's Market Christianity will always cause us to drift towards similar fruit which is less costly. But the reward of living in the Promise Land wasn't the fruit itself, it was living with God himself. This was where God wanted to dwell with his people. God is the fruit which captivates and compels us forward. God opened the eyes of two of these spies, Joshua and Caleb, to see the beauty of God over and above the beauty of the fruit. And unless God opens our eyes, we ourselves will never be willing to move forward in costly obedience.

Israel had so many safeguards at this point didn't they? They had just collectively agreed to be ruled by God's law, the people were of one mind. They had just heard the promises of God declared to them, they were of one promise. And they just had their lead plead with them to not fear or dismay, they were of one strength. But everything came crashing down. They rebelled and Moses describes their rebellion in verse 32 as unbelief and in verse 45 as disobedience.

We hear Moses pleading with them: Remember Egypt! Remember how God toppled the mightiest empire in the world? Remember how he carried you through this wilderness like a Father carried his son? Remember how he has constantly gone before us in a pillar of fire? Remember that God?

And the people didn't. And now we get a little more context as to why Moses is giving this sermon: Most of the people who rebelled at Kadesh-Barnea have died. That was God's punishment in verses 24-40.

In Numbers 14 we read of this punishment and God says just as the spies explored for 40 days, you will continue to wander in this wilderness for 40 years. Why? Because God wanted that entire faithless generation to die out.

Everyone who Moses is talking to today were either born after the Exodus, or were teenagers during it. This is a new people. A new people who Moses is hoping will be like Caleb who encouraged the people to pursue God's promise.

How bad was this rebellion? Even Moses, their fearless leader, the one whom God spoke to as a friend (Ex. 33:11), he couldn't get in. Joshua, the other faithful spy would be the leader who replaced Moses.

Then there is this tragic scene at the end where the people all of a sudden become frantic: "We'll go, look God, we're going!"

These people are so disillusioned at this point that they actually think that continually resisting God and his prophet will make up for their past sins. They say, "We will fight as the Lord our God commanded us," Then God commands them to not do it, and sure enough, they go up into the land, but they go without God and suffer great loss. Even for us we see that there is a difference between saying you want to obey God and actually obeying God.

You see good preaching doesn't just inform our minds, but it affects our hearts. Do you think that this generation listening to Moses is maybe affected at this point?

Because why would Moses do this? Why would he open by reminding them of all their failures? Right after this Moses is going to turn and look at the faithfulness of God, but here he wants the people to see their faithlessness. Why? He wants them to see that something needs to be done about this sin. If they want to get into this land, something needs to be dealt with.

Most of these people didn't see the Ten Plagues, they didn't see the Red Sea, and they didn't see Horeb on fire with the glory of God. And if the generation that did see these things still wrestled with doubt and disobedience, how much more might this generation? Do you get a sense of hopelessness, maybe even in your own life?

And it is here where we see our last point: **A sermon about our need and how God is going to change us.**

This same rebellion the Israelites had is the same rebellion we participate in. We are cut from the same cloth. Hebrews 12:14 says that without holiness, without a commitment to obedience, you will not see God.

You see for the believer there is something far greater to live for than the Promised Land and something far more terrifying than death in the wilderness. There is heaven to be gained and hell to be found.

And when we look at our lives don't we too see the same stories of rebellion. Moments and concessions which seem so small and inconsequential which before we know it blow up into larger more telling issues?

We need our sin to be dealt with. And if Moses himself couldn't help these people deal with their sin, if Moses himself was disqualified due to his own sin, what hope do we have for real and meaningful change?

Well, we have all the hope in the world. That's the message that Moses is preaching to those who stood before him some thirty five hundred years ago and it's the message he wants to preach for you today.

Look at what the author of Hebrews says: **Hebrews 3:1-6**. Moses himself was a place holder for the greater Moses. In fact Moses himself says in Deuteronomy 18 that there will come another prophet after him, a better one. A prophet who doesn't just speak to our hearts, but changes them.

This book is a book about the gospel. Where Moses is pleading for the people to be conformed to God, he prophesies in chapter 30 that God himself will one day circumcise your hearts. Something which Paul picks up on in **Colossians 2:8-11**.

Paul is preaching Christ to you in Mosaic language.

Dear church we have a problem of rebellion and God has promised to be faithful even to rebels if those rebels are faithful unto Christ.

You see the story of the battle at the end of this passage is such a fitting illustration of the problem which underlines the whole book. We can't do it without God. We can't do it apart from obedience to God.

In your life you can try to white knuckle your way into change. But notice the contrast between these two verses: **Deuteronomy 1:29-31** and **Deuteronomy 1:41**. Why do it on your own when God has promised to do it for you if you would just listen to him? Not apart from our obedience, but through it.

This passage so clearly shows that through judgement God is recreating a new people and a new leader so that the people might inherit the promise. And in Jesus Christ, our leader has passed through judgment for our rebellion so that we might be wholly true to him in everything.

This is the change we need.