

Part 13: Moving Forward God's Way

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What are the keys to a progressive society?

Far more than a shorthand for a political party, everyone wants progress. We want our culture, our nation, our cities, our homes, and our hobbies to slowly and intentionally progress to the next level. Progress means that you are approaching where it is you really want to be.

But how do we make progress like this? What does it look like? Your answer to that question can be quite dangerous if. It was for the sake of progress that the scientific revolution in the 16th century led to breakthroughs in medicine and technology. But it was also for the sake of progress that genocide and ethnic cleansing flared in the 20th century. It was the allure of progress, of "being like God," that led Adam and Eve to complicate our way forward back in the Garden of Eden.

The tale of human history proves that we all have a desire to make progress into the world we've always wanted, but we've yet to figure out how to not make a mess of things on the way.

Today, Moses' sermon in the book of Deuteronomy begins to help God's people who are facing this reality in their own life. Here are God's people, Israel, who have been brought out of slavery in Egypt by the power of God himself, and now they stand on the threshold of the Promised Land. Ahead of them lies untapped possibilities for progress, but Moses knows that they need help.

If Israel is to occupy the land and develop it into the society they want, they need to move forward as God would have them. If you as a Christian want to live out your Christian life in a way that pleases God, brings you joy and loves others, you must have a similar view of what it takes to move forward.

It is as C.S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*: **But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man.**

For the Christian, and for any realist, to move forward we must realize that progress is always spatial. It looks back at what has happened, forward into future the consequences and hopes, and then makes decisions in the present.

When it comes to moving forward this is what Moses wants us to see today in Deuteronomy. Our text today is Deuteronomy 27-29 and in it we see that in order to move forward we must submit ourselves to God's word. To do this Moses wants us to consider three things: **Consider what God has done, Consider what God is going to do, and Consider how you will respond.**

If you have a Bible let's read together **Deuteronomy 27:1-8.**

I'm a huge fan of college football and I love the game day traditions that some teams have. One of my favorites is the tradition that the Clemson Football team has. Their locker room is located on top of a hill

on one side of the stadium and every game day they run down the hill onto the field, but at the top of the hill is a rock called Howard's Rock.

And before they run down the hill all the players touch the rock, which was named after one of Clemson's legendary coaches. Even as they are playing, the rock serves as a constant reminder to the legacy and tradition of Clemson football.

What Moses is prescribing to God's people in chapter 27 is similar. Moses is talking to God's people who are one side of the Jordan River, and he says, "When you cross over into the other side, into the Promised Land, you will go to Mount Ebal and you will set up this altar."

This altar was a supernatural reminder that God wanted Israel to always be mindful of. This is our first point. God's people must always **Consider what God has Done**.

If you've been with us in the book of Deuteronomy we often talk about the trifold of the Promised Land. Why was the Promised Land so important to God's people? If you look back to the Garden of Eden, you see God's ideal plan for humanity. God's plan was always to have God's people, in God's place, under God's direct rule or presence.

That's what Adam and Eve had, but then lost, in Eden, and that's what by the power of the gospel we will have one day in the New Heaven's and the New Earth. But here the Promised Land was a literal outcropping of this ultimately spiritual reality.

And Moses' point is that, when you get into the Promised Land you've made it. You are God's people redeemed out of slavery, you are in God's place the land he promised to give you, and you are in God's presence the land where he promised to set his name.

But you must consider what got you there. Don't forget it.

As the people begin to establish their own lives in the land, God wanted this altar to remind them of God's grace in bringing this trifold into place. Don't forget that just as you gathered uncut stones, God gathered you as a nation. You weren't the squarest stone or the sharpest tool, but God gathered you as his people. And it was in this gathering where, just as this altar would continue to do, God covenanted himself to you. God and man came together by grace.

And then lastly, Moses calls for them to cover the altar in plaster and to chisel into the stone of the altar the words of the law as legibly as they could. Why? Because it was Israel's ability to keep the law which would prolong their life and their success in the Promise Land.

This altar stood as a reminder for what they shouldn't forget: It was God's grace to bring them into the land, and it was God's law that was going to protect them as they lived life in the land.

Now for New Testament Christians, we see that all of this land and life was meant to point us to Jesus. Which means our symbol is not a pile of stones on Mount Ebal, but it's a cross on Calvary's Hill. To consider what God has done means you must consider the cross.

At GCF this past week I was talking with a student who was Catholic and I asked him what stood out to him about the sermon. He had attended a Christian baptism the night before and in reflecting on those

two experiences he said, "You guys sure talk about being saved by Jesus a lot! In the Catholic church it is assumed, but not really discussed."

This is because for a Christian, to forget the truth that God saved us by his grace in Jesus Christ, is to lose any hope for progress. You'd be a sailor without the North Star.

To forget God's grace in saving us is to forget everything about how to live. The cross reminds us of the involuntary reflex of grace which keeps Christians moving. Which is part of the reason why Christians go to church, read their Bible, attend Community Groups and pray together. It's not to earn grace, but to remind ourselves of it.

We have a number of statues in Missoula, most of which are supposed to remind me of something, but their meaning is lost on me. Yet, my life goes on pretty much as it had before. But for Israel this symbol of their past was not only history, but also a reminder of the realities which lay ahead.

To forget God's grace would be to live dangerously. This is where Moses begins the longest single portion of his sermon as he helps Israel to **Consider what God is going to do**.

Look at this next ceremony Moses prescribes for the people: **Deuteronomy 27:9-26**.

So here Moses numbers off the twelve tribes of Israel, and then they get into the land half of them are to go up to Mount Ebal (where the altar was) and half were to go up to Mount Gerizim. These were two mountains separated by a small valley and this again was a physical reminder of the spiritual reality behind God's covenant.

Those on Gerizim were to recite to those on Ebal the blessings for keeping the law, and those on Ebal were to recite to those on Gerizim the curses for disobeying the law. And then afterwards they priests (Levites) would lead the collective group of people in this corporate call and response of reading the following 12 curses, and the people would respond in saying "Amen."

Now far more than simply being a reminder these actions, done by the people themselves, were a sort of covenant cutting ceremony. Twelve affirmations of God's curse from God's twelve tribes. These kind of ceremonies may be unique for us in the modern world, but beginning in chapter 26 and going through the end of chapter 28 Moses and Israel are reaffirming their covenant loyalty to God.

When it came to moving forward Moses wanted them to consider the blessings for those who kept the law, and curses for those who didn't keep the law.

And this reality is expounded all the more in chapter 28. If you have your Bibles with you, you will see that chapter 28 is divided up into two unequal halves. The first half (1-14) outlines God's immense blessing to those who continue to obey this God, **Deuteronomy 28:1**. The second half (15-68) outlines God's just punishment for those who disobey the law, **Deuteronomy 28:15**.

Now this chapter is one of the longest uninterrupted parts of Moses' sermon. We aren't going to read all of it today, but there are a couple key take-a-ways Moses wants God's people to be aware of.

The first is that *God is faithful to bless, but God is also faithful to curse*. Now let's remember who God is talking to here. He is talking to Israel. His people. His people whom he has already saved out of slavery.

God isn't saying if you obey my law then I'll save you, he's saying I saved you now obey my law. Even in the Old Testament the gospel of grace always preceded God's law.

But, this same God of grace is faithful to punish those who reject his grace. In fact it is the rejection of God's grace which is at the heart of any and all disobedience. Look at **Deuteronomy 28:20**.

The truth is Moses spends 14 verses on God's wonderful blessing for those who obey, and 54 verses on those who disobey. And these verses are weighty. Consider the passage here where Moses talks about what life will be like when foreign nations attack Israel for their unbelief: **Deuteronomy 28:52-57**.

I remember when I took drivers-ed, a sheriff came over and made all of us put on these goggles which simulated impaired driving. I remember putting them on and as my vision became more and more distorted and disorganized I began to feel sick and nauseous. I remember taking them off and having a hard time even adjusting to seeing what was normal.

But just as that officer put those glasses on me for the explicit purpose of making me feel the danger of drunk driving, Moses is truthfully representing the grotesque dangers of sin so that we might actually feel the weight of punishment.

When you see God's immense blessings for faithfulness and God's just punishment of unfaithfulness you realize that these things really matter to God. Now for Israel, God's physical nation there was the promise of immediate physical punishment. In the New Testament the emphasis shifts from God's physical people to God's spiritual people. And this means that for believers and non-believers, all the physical weight which God speaks of here is nothing compared to the spiritual weight of judgment which awaits.

Look at how the New Testament speaks of this to you believers: **Hebrews 10:36-39**. This passage isn't saying that you can lose your salvation through disobedience, but it's saying that those who are saved will continue to obey and not turn away.

If you aren't a believer in here today, God is faithful to judge you for your wrong just as it is to judge me for my wrong. But the difference is that just like me, you can come to Jesus and see God's faithfulness to bless you. If you've never considered that, I pray you would today.

You see there is a fundamental problem this text shows in our hearts. Here we have half of a chapter of God wonderfully promising good, great, wonderful things to those who obey, and the other half promises terrible consequences for those who disobey. Yet we cringe don't we.

Doesn't this show the rebellion in our hearts which grace needs to solve? Imagine if you were at a restaurant and the waiter said: "Today I have this wonderful plate of the most delicious food which will satisfy your palate, fill you to perfection and give you all the energy with no crash later. Or you can have this plate of food which will inevitably, cause you to get sick and die." Who would choose the second plate? And who would fault the waiter for telling us such things?

But it is here in these promises of blessing and curse that we see the wonderful truth of our God: *God is gracious and not vindictive*.

I'm not a big board game fan. But there is one game I love and it's called the game of Mao. Now here is the kicker of Mao. The Mao master gets to create the rules of Mao, and everyone else has to figure them out. So one person knows the rules, and gets to create the rules, but he doesn't tell the other people the rules. Which is why I love it. Because in my vindictive spirit I get to mercilessly crush people for rules they are completely unaware.

Brothers and sisters, rejoice that our God is not a Mao master. Why does he spend such length and such weight in these pages of Deuteronomy? Because in his grace he is warning us. He wants us to experience the change that his Holy Spirit can bring into our hearts. He wants to free us from bondage by calling us to himself.

Paul says in Romans 2 that Jew and Gentile alike have both tripped the wire of judgement. God's law is written into creation and to ignore God for a moment is to face the judgement of sin. But God warns us of this so that we might turn to Jesus and live. Jesus has made a way back: repent. We can in this moment step out of the curse of the law by the grace of Jesus. Look at **Galatians 4:4-5**.

Jesus is where God's faithfulness to bless and faithfulness to curse is reconciled. If you want to find peace with God, the peace which you were created to live in, then it starts by submitting the whole of your reality to Jesus. That's the first step forward.

The reality of life is life and death due to our sin, but Jesus helps us get on the right half of Deuteronomy 28 on the cross.

And after stressing this dichotomy of blessing and curse, Moses moves into what I think is one of his most pastoral portions of his sermon. In light of looking back at grace and looking forward at blessing and curses, he now calls God's people: **Consider how you will respond**.

Many of us may fall into the false idea that to be saved means you have already responded and that there is no more need to respond further. But look at what Moses says **Deuteronomy 29:1-15**. What's Moses' big point here? After an extended time on God's ability to bless and his ability to curse he reminds them of God's faithfulness. We've made it through the wilderness, you've received the land from kings who fell before you. You stand here a sign of God's faithfulness to bless. And he wants more blessing for you. He wants you to continue in his grace.

Why do we always talk about the Jesus who saved us? Because if he helped us with something that big, don't you think he can help us with everything else in life?

Now I've used the word "blessing" a lot because Moses is using the word blessing a lot. But let's be careful to define the word blessing. What is the blessing of progress? Is it money? Justice? Houses? Health?

Moses defines this blessing in the middle of **Deuteronomy 28:8-10**. What is the blessing of God? That you would be made a people holy to himself. God's blessing is God himself; being able to call God our father is the greatest blessing you could ever have.

Paul picks up on this idea in **Romans 8:28**. What does Paul mean when he says it works out for our good? Well look at **Romans 8:29**. The good for us in all circumstances is being conformed more and more to be like Jesus. Our greatest joy, our greatest blessing is enjoying our God and becoming more

and more Christ-like in life. That's our purpose from creation. This is what we were made for. This is the progress our society longs for.

We just wrestle with misplaced ideas. And this is why Moses says what he says next: **Deuteronomy 29:16-20**.

What is the greatest danger to God's people? What stands opposed to the divine call for progress? A root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit. And what does that root look like? It looks like someone who stands on ground given by the costly act of grace, someone who has just heard the realities of blessing and curse and who "blesses himself in his heart and says, 'I will be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.'"

What a clear picture of sin. Because how frequently do we, who are saved by grace, who have seen first-hand the ability of God and God alone to bring us blessing, think that we can bless ourselves by pursuing sin.

And don't we say, in the safety of grace, "I'll be fine." I wonder how many times that prayer has been prayed by men and women in the passion of sexual immorality and pornography. How many times has that thought come upon someone who knows the next drink is the one that puts them over the edge into drunkenness.

How many times do we neglect God's word and prayer for the pursuits of hobbies and adventure thinking to ourselves: "I don't need to do it God's way, I am quite capable of blessing myself"

Don't we daily make the mistake of thinking that sin is progressive and it is God who holds us back? But look at the undoing power of sin: **Deuteronomy 28:1-6, 15-19**. It completely undoes the blessing of God. Sin doesn't get us closer to blessing, it destroys it. Moses says at the end of chapter 28 that the curses culminate with them being sold back to Egypt as slaves.

Sin promises the riches of the blessing of God but it always serves as the slave trader to Egypt. It doesn't progress, it regresses.

Matt Chandler shared a perfect illustration once about a video he watched online. The video showed a man who had "adopted" a pet lion in Africa. It showed the man and the lion playing in the wild, but then one day the world was shocked when the lion attacked and killed the man. Chandler pointed out that this shouldn't be shocking, the lion was made to kill the man.

This is the mistake we make when we think that sin can be our friend and be tamed for our pleasure. Sin is in its DNA designed to destroy us.

This is why the Israelites must not forget the altar on Ebal and how we must not forget the cross of Calvary. Do we really believe that inside of our salvation we really have all the reasons we need to trust Jesus for everything?

Do we see the goodness of what he has done and realize that the best way forward is to return to him if we have gone astray?

I don't think we will ever understand, this side of death how much God hates sin or how dangerous sin is to us. But I also don't think we will understand this side of death how loving Jesus is and how gracious God was in saving us.

If we could understand the depths of those things we wouldn't need faith because it would be plain as day. But look at how Moses closes this passage: **Deuteronomy 29:29.**

We haven't been given everything we can know, but we have been given enough to know the way forward. But we know faith and repentance matter to God, do they matter to you?

C.S. Lewis finishes his quote we opened with in saying this: **There is nothing progressive about being pig-headed and refusing to admit a mistake. And I think if you look at the present state of the world it's pretty plain that humanity has been making some big mistake. We're on the wrong road. And if that is so we must go back. Going back is the quickest way on.**

If we want to move forward into God's blessing, we must submit everything to Jesus who submitted himself to all things for us. So let's go forward together, by going to the cross every day.