

The Spiritual Challenges of a Comfortable Life

DAVE BAST

I remember a pastor who served a church that was located in a very wealthy community. He used to say that he had been called to minister, not to the down-and-outers, but to the up-and-outers, to people who were financially wealthy but spiritually poor. I am guessing that most of us are pretty well off, at least compared with the rest of the world. Just living in North America qualifies us as that. We may not quite be up-and-outers, but neither are we down and out; but while it is nice to be relatively prosperous, a comfortable life has its own kind of spiritual challenges, and we will learn what they are today on Groundwork. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, we are now pretty near the middle of our series on the book of Deuteronomy, although we are only progressing as far as Chapter 8. There is so much good stuff in these opening chapters, so in our last program we considered the Shema, the great passage in Deuteronomy 6 that expresses the oneness of God and the need to, not only follow God's Law ourselves, but to teach our children what that Law is. Then in Chapter 7 there is a wonderful passage about how God has chosen Israel. We call that the "doctrine of election," how God singles out people, but in Chapter 7 He makes the point that it was not because they were so special – it was not because of anything about them. They weren't great; they were the most insignificant of people; but we read that God says: The Lord chose you because He loves you; and so if you ask: Why me? If you have ever asked that question, there is no answer other than to say because God loves.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because God loves; and that then leads us to Deuteronomy 8. That will be the focus of this program, this third program on Deuteronomy; but really, what we are going to find in this chapter, Dave, is a refrain. It is like the chorus of the book of Deuteronomy. Moses loops back to this every few minutes, as it were. This is like a sermon he delivered on the plains of Moab. He will keep coming back to this again and again. So let's just listen to the opening words of Deuteronomy 8, as Moses says to the people on God's behalf:

¹Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. ²Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these 40 years to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart; whether or not you would keep His commands. ³He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. ⁴Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these 40 years. ⁵Know then in your heart that just as a man disciplines his son so the Lord your God disciplines you.

So, there is a lot of theology in those five verses...

DAVE BAST

Yes, beautiful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Basically saying God has taken care of you, and by the way, the manna... yes, it was bread. It was something you really ate, but it was also a theological token; it was a metaphor, and that is how Jesus will talk about it in John 6 in the New Testament. The manna was a daily reminder of God's love, and that your life was not your own, it was God's gift to you. So, it was literal bread? Yes; it was breakfast and lunch and dinner, but it was also a reminder: You live on the word of God – you live by God's good grace every single day.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and as you said, Jesus calls Himself the bread from heaven – the manna – the bread of life, as He will say in John 6; so there is a strong connection with the New Testament and this passage in Deuteronomy 8; also, the idea, Moses is looking back and just reminding them: All those years of wilderness wandering God not only cared for them... We call that the “doctrine of providence;” so we look on our lives... You can really only see it when you look back; you cannot see it looking ahead. Looking ahead, we call it faith; looking back we call it gratitude for providence – all the things that God has done; and maybe he even exaggerates a little bit. He says: Your clothes never wore out; your feet didn't swell, even though you were marching in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula all this time; but the point – and it is a point we all, I think, get and would all echo, those of us who are people of faith – God did provide. God did supply our needs. We wondered sometimes. Maybe we didn't get all that we wanted – all that we hoped for – but it was enough, whatever He gave us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the great doctrinal statements or confessions of the Reformed tradition, Dave, is the Heidelberg Catechism. It has a very famous question and answer: What do you understand by the “providence of God?” What does *providence* mean? Here is the answer that is in the Heidelberg Catechism: Providence is the almighty and ever-present power of God, by which He upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and draught, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty – all things, in fact, come to us, not by chance, but from His fatherly hand. So that is a very tender way of putting what Moses basically said to the people: Look, you were in God's hands. He's got the whole world in His hands, right? That song was not written back in Israel's day, but that is the idea. You were in God's hands; that is why you had food to eat every day. That is why your clothes did not wear out. God was with you every step of the way. It was a terrible place to be and it was a discipline that you had to stay there for 40 years; but God was with you then, and that is a good thing; and you have to remember that when times are better, which is the challenge we are going to be seeing in this eighth chapter.

DAVE BAST

Yes; maybe there is something else that jumped out at you when you heard that passage from Deuteronomy 8: Man does not live by bread alone. Those are words Jesus quoted when Satan tempted Him in the wilderness. So in a sense, Jesus recapitulated in His life the whole history of Israel, including the 40 years in the wilderness, we are told in the Gospels. For Jesus it was 40 days – some lengthy period of time.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Matthew's Gospel, of course, was the one written for Jewish readers, and this would ring all the bells with them...

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is why all of Jesus' refutations to Satan in His 40 days were from Deuteronomy, including this passage. Jesus is the new Israel. That is the theology of Matthew's Gospel; Jesus is the new Israel, and so, as the original Israel went through the wilderness so God could test what was in their hearts, so Jesus, the Son of God in the flesh, did the exact same thing.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and the message that comes through as Moses delivers it to the people is: You know, this is what it was all about. I don't know how introspective you are, Scott, or if you ever wonder: What does my life amount to? Questions that maybe from time to time strike most of us: What did it all come to? Did I matter? What was the significance? And Moses is suggesting to the people a message which I think could be taken on by any of us, that the meaning of our lives, of the 40 years, or however long we spend in the wilderness of the world, the meaning of our lives will only be found, not in what we are making ourselves, but in what God is making of us in the lessons that He has to teach us; lessons of faith, trust; lessons of obedience. You know, the point is to learn that we don't live by bread alone; that mere material things are not enough; that we will only live when we live by the word of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is one thing to remember that when you are in the wilderness, it is probably a little easier to remember that when you are in the wilderness; but what about what is next? What about Promised Land living? Moses talks about that next, and we will, too.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are in Deuteronomy Chapter 8; the third program of a six-part series on Groundwork on the book of Deuteronomy, the Bible's fifth book – end of the Pentateuch; and this is Moses' farewell address, and he has just reminded the Israelites in the first five verses of Deuteronomy 8 that God was with them in the wilderness, and the signs of that were fairly tangible. There was a cloudy pillar and a fiery pillar. There was manna that magically, by God's...

DAVE BAST

Especially the manna, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes... appeared every day. Every once in a while there is water from a rock and quail dropping out of the sky. So the signs of God's providence in the wilderness were a little extraordinary. Now the trick, if you will, that Moses wants to impress upon the people is, you are going to have to find more creative ways to see the providence of God in the ordinary things in the really good land you are coming to.

DAVE BAST

And it is the proverbial land of milk and honey, and Moses turns to the description of that in the next verses: ⁶Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in obedience to Him and revering Him. (I think we are going to get tired of that message eventually, but it is all about obedience.) ⁷For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land. A land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; ⁸a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil, and honey. ⁹A land where bread will not be scarce (no more need for manna), and you will lack nothing. A land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. What a beautiful description, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it's a Chamber of Commerce brochure here for Canaan; and it is wonderful, and it is exactly what the people have been pining for; it is exactly what they have been hoping for since the minute they stepped out of Egypt 40 years ago; and it is all God's gift; it is all a wonderful thing; and Moses looks at it all and sees all the goodness and also sees a lot of red flags. Oh, boy; when it gets this good – when you can bake bread and

don't need manna to fall out of the sky – when you have a well that delivers nice buckets of clean, fresh water and you don't need God to...

DAVE BAST

You don't need a rock, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

miraculously split a rock open, how are you going to remember God then? The wilderness has a way of focusing our minds; and of course, even today the wilderness for us can be a metaphorical time of loss, deprivation, cancer treatments, sadness in our lives; those are wilderness periods, too; but for most of us, thanks be to God, we live a little bit more Promised Land-like most of the time. Not everybody, and there are plenty of suffering Christians around the world who do live in the wilderness every day; but for many of us in North America, most of life is a little more Promised Land-like than hot, scorching furnace of a desert.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I just think of the contrast. What a contrast it must have presented them after 40 years in the Sinai Peninsula, which is still today a pretty harsh environment. I mean, it is kind of like a moonscape, and they saw the greenery of Canaan; and even so, Canaan is a pretty arid place. It is in the Middle East, you know, compared to where many of us live in North America. You talk about riches that God has given and God has provided: Natural resources, mineral resources, water – water especially features in these verses from Chapter 8 because water was so precious. You know, Moses talks about: Hey, water is going to be gushing; you know, there are rivers and springs.

So, yes, a wonderful place, and I think it invites us to think about our faith in the good times. So often, you know, we address the Gospel to people who are feeling their need or are, as you say, in those desolate times of life – in those desolate places; but you know, for most of us most of the time life is pretty good. Look at where we live. You know, we are fairly well off. We have no need, really, to worry where our next meal is going to come from or our next drink of water. So, what are the peculiar dangers? What is the peculiar need or exhortation for us when we get to the Promised Land? When we are in comfortable circumstances? Certainly the first thing Moses says is remember the Commandments; remember what God has said; and especially... We saw this in the last program – that primary command to love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself. One of things I think about that is going on around us today is the problem of what to do with people who have need, and maybe even people who are trying to come to our good lands where we live. You know, what is our responsibility toward them?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, it is very interesting, and this comes up in Deuteronomy because it is a repetition of what was already in Leviticus and Numbers. In Leviticus in particular, where God's Laws are given in great, great detail; but what is interesting is that we saw on the last program that in Deuteronomy 5 where the Ten Commandments are repeated, the only difference between Deuteronomy 5 and Exodus 20 – the two versions of the Ten Commandments – was why we keep the Sabbath. In Exodus 20 it is because God created in six days and rested on the seventh. In Deuteronomy 5, it is: Remember you were slaves in Egypt and you never got a day off, so take a day off now to remember that God saved you from that; but that idea: Remember that you were slaves in Egypt... Remember that you were slaves in Egypt... That comes up again and again and again in Leviticus, and again and again... When does it come up? Well, take care of the orphans, take care of the widows, and take care of refugees. Take care of the stranger who is within your gates because that was you in Egypt; and look what they did to you; they treated you terribly. Don't you dare do that to an Egyptian who comes to you now. Don't you dare do that to a Phoenician or a Babylonian or whoever it may be... or a Moabite woman named Ruth. Don't mistreat the stranger in your gates. Remember you were slaves in Egypt. That is a core piece of Israel's identity not to forget that. Remember that you were in the wilderness where God had to take care of your every need; now when someone comes, you take care of their needs. It is just part of the package.

DAVE BAST

I think one of the real dangers, and that is what we are going to talk about in the time that we have left: What are the dangers of prosperity? What are the dangers of living in the Promised Land, of having it pretty comfortable? Certainly the first one is selfishness. It is what someone has called the drawbridge mentality, you know. Oh, we got in. Let's pull up the drawbridge behind us because there is not enough to share. We don't want to let *them* in. And Moses again just goes back to basics: Remember God's Commandments. Remember God's Commandments. That is the first thing you need to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We will talk about this in the last segment coming up... We could call it: You make the wilderness connection; and for the Israelites: You make the Egypt connection. Remember you were dispossessed and didn't have a land once. Remember how badly you were treated when you were the alien – the stranger within the gates – so don't do that.

Selfishness, as you just said, Dave, is danger #1 of living in a good place; danger #2 is ingratitude, and we will consider that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, and we are right in the middle now of Deuteronomy Chapter 8, and we are going to pick up the reading at verse 10. So Moses goes on speaking to the people after they have come into the Promised Land:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. ¹¹Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe His commands, His laws, and His decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹²Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³and when your herds and flocks grow large, and your silver and gold increase, and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁵He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. ¹⁶He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. ¹⁷Now you may say to yourself: My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me; ¹⁸but remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms His covenant which He swore to your ancestors as it is today.

When I studied Deuteronomy in seminary, Dave, the professor said: You want to know what Deuteronomy is about? Just remember this saying: Remember and do not forget.

DAVE BAST

Yes, remember and don't forget. It is just a beautiful picture, isn't it, of the gratuitous goodness of God. We quoted providence in the beginning of this program; how God sends us all these things from His fatherly hand – the good and the bad – and mostly the good. Most of the time for most of us it is mostly good; and Moses reminds them: Look, you are going to go into this land and you are going to get all kinds of stuff that you don't deserve, that you did not do anything to create or produce; you are going to inhabit cities that you did not build; you are going to live in houses that someone else made; you are going to eat crops that someone else planted. Eventually you will take over and do those things for yourself, too, but it is all a gift from God, and don't forget it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It reminds me also of the saying that sometimes you hear applied to very wealthy people. It is a baseball analogy. Sometimes people will say: That guy was born on 3rd base, but he grew up thinking he'd hit a triple.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a good one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, you didn't need a triple to end up on third, you were born there. It is a gift. You stepped into the givenness of things, and so be grateful... be grateful; and don't chalk it up to: Well, I deserve it; and don't chalk it up to saying: I did it; I built it. Even if it is true, that you went out and dug a new well... So, you go to the Promised Land, Moses is saying, even if you go dig a well and it works terrific for years and it gives you fresh water, don't look at it and say: This is what I did. Look at it and say: This is what God helped me to do.

So, it is very interesting how easy it is for us to say: Well, I worked hard. I earned it. You see advertisements for banks. It is my money; I earned it. So I can do with it what I want; and what God wants to say to believers is: You did work for it. You earned it; and it is Mine because I gave you the gifts and the talents by which you did it and I have sustained your life and I am your health and your strength, so let's cut Me in on the credit here; and that is the main point here.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is funny because sometimes people resent being reminded that, really, they did not do it all themselves. There are certain people... maybe they start a company or they build a business, and yes, they work hard and they put in the hours and put in extra hours, and then they are tempted to sit back and say: Yes, the government did not do that for me, I did that; and Moses reminds us: No, really, step back even further. The very fact that you had the ability – the wherewithal – the mental power or whatever it was – the insight into getting an advantage and coming up with that idea; that came to you from God. I think one of the great cautionary stories of the Bible, of the Old Testament, is the story of Nebuchadnezzar. You remember that in the book of Daniel, how Nebuchadnezzar is warned to remember God, but he is walking around on the walls of his city and he says: Look at this great city that I built; and immediately God kind of strikes... drives him crazy for a period of time to remind him of that basic truth: All that we have comes from God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, for Moses in this great farewell address, this last sermon, Moses' last will and testament, which is the book of Deuteronomy... use whatever image you want; for Moses, he wants to inspire and instill into the people, this new generation who will take possession of Canaan, two things: Gratitude and generosity; and they go together, right? Gratitude and generosity; don't ever forget to say thank you to God above all for your well water and your freshly baked bread and your investment portfolio and your 401k. Remember to give thanks to God above all, but also remember that that means you are supposed to be generous. It is not for you to just to keep only for yourself.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, here it is in verse 10: When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. So, how do you *not* forget? I mean, how do you remember to remember and not forget, as your professor told you? One chief way is to keep on saying thank you; thank you, thank you, thank you. Cultivate the habit of gratitude for all that you have, and ascribe it all to God. Don't claim your credit, be humble about it, ascribe it to Him.

You know, the curious thing is, Scott, and probably you have noticed this, too: Very often, poor people are more grateful than rich ones are.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and often more generous. I mean, there is the great scene in John Steinbeck's classic novel of *The Grapes of Wrath*, at one point where Ma Joad – she is the head of the Joad family – these Okies who are desperately poor... at one point in that great story of *The Grapes of Wrath* she says: If you need something, don't ever go ask a rich person for it. Go to the poor; they are much more likely to give to you than the rich are because they are more grateful, they are more generous, they are closer to the ground; but we are all

called to that; gratitude to God because He is the ultimate giver of all good gifts. Generosity toward others because that is what God has done for us, so we kind of adopt the family style. Our Father in heaven has been gracious to us... gratuitously gracious... over-the-top generous by sharing life with us through Jesus Christ our Lord; so why wouldn't we do the same thing? It is God's family style, and we are in the family now by grace, so we are supposed to be generous, too.

DAVE BAST

You know, in I Corinthians 4 Paul writes to the Church: ⁷What do you have that you have not been given? I think that is a great question to test ourselves with. I mean, is there something you can point to that someone else did not give to you? Maybe your parents gave you good genes. Maybe they gave you a start in life. Maybe they gave you an inheritance of some kind. Maybe the community into which you were born – the country you are a citizen of – it is all a gift; and ultimately we trace it all back to the Giver; so while we rejoice and celebrate His good gifts in the Promised Land, let's not forget the Giver.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always want to know how we can help you dig deeper into the scriptures. So visit our website, groundworkonline.com, and tell us topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

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