

“From Blessing to Burden”
Deuteronomy 1:9-18
September 12, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We continue this morning with our fall series in the book of Deuteronomy. Moses is gathered with the second generation of Israel after the exodus from Egypt. They are on the edge of the promised land. And Moses is preaching a series of sermons to them. This first one is a look back on what God has done for them so far.

Last week, we heard Moses speak about the mountain-experience of God’s presence and how it led to the mission God gave to his people in the world.

This week we hear about the blessing God had already poured out on his people, and how it led to an increased burden that they needed to bear.

Last week our scope was broad: we considered the cosmic story of what God is doing in the world and our place in it as the Church. This week, we zoom in, and look at the inner workings of the Church itself, and how God works within the Church to make it a body that can do the work he has called it to do in the world.

With that said, we turn now to our text: Deuteronomy 1:9-18.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Moses says: ^{1:9} “At that time I said to you, ‘I am not able to bear you by myself. ¹⁰ Yahweh your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven. ¹¹ May Yahweh, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are and bless you, as he has promised you! ¹² How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife? ¹³ Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads.’ ¹⁴ And you answered me, ‘The thing that you have spoken is good for us to do.’ ¹⁵ So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officers, throughout your tribes. ¹⁶ And I charged your judges at that time, ‘Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him. ¹⁷ You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.’ ¹⁸ And I commanded you at that time all the things that you should do.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord,
we ask you to work now through this, your word to your servants,
the very word in which you have helped us to place our hope.
For our comfort in the afflictions we face in this world
is that your promises in your word give us life.
Though the world may deride us,
we do not turn from this your revelation to us.
Teach us from it now, we ask, in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:49-51]

Introduction

Our text this morning can feel like an odd aside. In the previous passage Moses recounted God's call to Israel to leave Mt. Sinai. In the next passage God calls them to enter the land. These are big, well-known parts of God's story with Israel, and both we, and the original audience, would expect Moses to go right from one to the other. But instead we have this pause to talk about administrative structures and organizational health.

This can seem odd and unimportant. An unnecessary rabbit trail. But I would argue that it's not.

I would argue that it's not, first, because we should trust Moses's wisdom and the Holy Spirit's guidance in going to this topic next.

But second, I would argue that personal experience tells us that these sort of organizational issues – and the roles people play – really are a matter of spiritual importance, and key to spiritual health. We've all been a part of an organization where it feels like the structure (or the lack of structure) is hindering the mission of the organization. We've all seen cases where people misunderstanding their role in a group or project has caused all sorts of dysfunction in the organization or the lives of those involved. And we've all seen the pattern, when some prominent Christian leader's ministry implodes, that after the first round of stories about their personal misconduct, there usually comes a second round of stories about how the organization and the people around them fostered a culture that enabled or even encouraged their behavior.

Knowing the roles people are called to fill, and how they are to fill them, and how they are to relate to one another – knowing what organizational health looks like – is key to spiritual health.

And Moses seems to know this. Because even though this story has been recorded earlier, in Exodus 18, Moses wants to tell it again. He wants to remind the second generation of it, and highlight certain aspects of it.

Now, this story doesn't get into the organizational weeds. In fact, it leaves some details out that we might find interesting. But instead, it gives us the big picture with some key concepts.

The passage begins with a problem. It begins, in verse nine, with a burden. "I am not able to bear you" Moses says. There is a burden to be borne, and Moses needs to figure out what to do with

it.

So let's ask four questions.

First, why is there a burden?

Second, who is called to bear that burden?

Third, what is the chief aim in bearing that burden?

And fourth, how is that burden to be born?

So: Why, who, what, and how?

Why Is There a Burden?

First: Why? Why is there a burden to be borne?

And the text actually gives two answers – two factors that when together lead to this burden.

The first factor is that God has blessed them. The first reason for this burden is that God has blessed them.

Take a look at verses nine through eleven again. Moses says: ⁹“At that time I said to you, ‘I am not able to bear you by myself. ¹⁰Yahweh your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven. ¹¹May Yahweh, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are and bless you, as he has promised you!”

Moses, there alludes to the promise God made to Abraham, that has in part, been fulfilled. And that makes sense because Moses had explicitly mentioned that promise just a verse earlier.

Remember, God's – Yahweh's – relationship with Israel is rooted in the promise – the covenant – he made with Abraham centuries earlier. And as we discussed last Sunday, he promised Abraham five things: To make his descendants into a great nation, to be with him and bless him, to defend him against his enemies, to give him a promised land, and to bless all families and nations of the earth through his descendants.

And that first promise – the promise to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation – is repeated by God several times. In Genesis 22[:17] God puts it like this – he says: “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.”

And so, when Moses says, here in verse ten, that Israel is “as numerous as the stars of heaven,” he is saying that God has blessed them as he promised to, and made them into a great nation.

But that blessing has led to a burden. *Because* God has blessed Israel so greatly, Moses says “I

am not able to bear you by myself.”

God’s blessing of his people often leads to a greater burden for them. And that is worth stopping and reflecting on. Because that truth can make us resistant to blessing.

This is a dynamic at work in almost every area of life. Blessing and success brings about the death of the old thing, as it brings about something new.

I was reading recently about the tech startup company Scaled Robotics. The organization, like most tech start-ups, began with a core group of workers – in their case, just seven – laboring hard together, depending closely on one another. The goal is always to grow the company. They work tirelessly toward that goal – that blessing. And yet, with that blessing, should they achieve it, comes a new kind of burden.

The leader of the startup explained in the piece how it really feels true that the company is like a family. He shared how after a night socializing with the small group of employees, one of them came up to him and said that he liked coming to work every day, but he was afraid that if they succeeded and the company grew, that might no longer be the case. The young CEO then comments: “I don’t want things to change. This is one of the best moments of my life. With the money coming in, maybe it will be positive and maybe it won’t. I hope it will be positive, and I have the power to try to make it that way, but I totally understand his point of view that you want to preserve those happy things that you have.” [Cox, 128-129]

And the church can struggle with the same thing. I spoke to a pastor recently whose church had introduced a new discipleship program, and they were seeing real growth – the Lord was blessing their ministry and using it to draw more people into the church and closer to the Lord. But some in the congregation wanted to get rid of the program. Their complaint was that there were too many new people ... and they didn’t like how that made the church feel different.

Now ... they’re not wrong about the effects of the ministry’s success. Blessing often brings a new burden. It can bring the death of how things were. And that can be sad. That can be something to mourn.

But at the same time, we serve a God who brings new life out of death. That dynamic is written into creation (as the Apostle Paul noted), it is written into human life, and it is especially true of spiritual life, rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ.

And so blessings and burdens can be all tied up together. That is what we see here.

But, even so, we are still to seek the blessings of God. Which is why Moses can look at the multitude, acknowledge that they are already too much for him to bear, and still say: “May Yahweh, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are and bless you, as he has promised you!”

So the burden is the result of the blessing. That’s one cause.

But the other cause is the limitations on the blessing. God has grown them. God has blessed

them. But God has not yet perfected them.

And that is highlighted in verse twelve. Moses says: “How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife?”

Moses uses three words there: weight, burden, and strife. As one commentator puts it: “The words are graphic and remind us of the many occasions in the wilderness narrative when the people murmured, complained, disputed, and argued – taxing even Moses’ outstanding leadership ability.” [Wright, 26]

The remaining sinfulness of God’s people is another reason for the burden.

And this is important. The Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper comments that what you think about the church will largely be determined by what you think about sin. If you think people’s flaws are mostly manageable, then the church for you will be viewed more as a nice club for spiritually like-minded people. Nice to have, maybe, but not essential.

But if you view sin as a deep problem in human life, a burden that every individual and every family and every community will continue to struggle with and need to bear in this life – then you will view the church as essential. Because the church is designed to address that burden.

Anyone who doesn’t believe in the need for organized religion, also probably doesn’t believe in the depth and pervasiveness of sin and evil in the world. And anyone who knows the reality of the burden of sin in this life, should see the need for the Church. [Kuyper, 20]

And so, we see two causes that combine to create the burden that Moses is dealing with: First, that God has blessed them. Second, that God has not yet perfected them.

The blessing has led to a burden. Which brings us to our second question ...

Who Is Called to Bear That Burden?

Who is called to bear that burden?

And the answer of our text is: a variety of people, in a variety of ways.