

Remembering Past Sins

Deuteronomy 9

Imagine with me that someone came to you and said, “I want to write a book about your life. It won’t be published and distributed. It will be for your eyes only. It will summarize your life in a way that helps you think about what God has done for you.” You think about it and say, “Yeah, I think that could actually be valuable.” And so you meet and talk about your childhood, your education, your key relationships, your career, your accomplishments, etc. But toward the end of your conversation, this person says, “One more thing. . . We also need a chapter about your sins. If you want an accurate picture of what God has done (or wants to do) in your life, you need to remember your past sins.”

What would you say to that? How could that possibly be good or healthy to remember past sins? How could that do anything other than promote shame and self-condemnation? Plus, that could be a pretty long chapter for some of us.

Today I’m going to argue from Scripture that it’s important and necessary to remember our past sins. I’m not suggesting we need to spend time every day dwelling on the specifics of past sins. But we’ll see in Deuteronomy 9 that Moses tells the people on the border of the Promised Land, “Remember, and do not forget” your sins in the wilderness. Moses wanted them to remember their past sins in **a God-centered way**, in a way that put the spotlight on God’s grace and His willingness to bless them with the Land in spite of their rebellion in the wilderness.

It’s interesting that the children of Israel are told ten times in the book of Deuteronomy to “remember” how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt (see 5:15, 7:18, 15:5, 16:12, etc.). They are only told **once** to remember their past sins, their stubbornness and rebellion in the wilderness. If Deuteronomy is a meal, remembering God’s deliverance is definitely the entree (the main dish) and remembering their past sins was a side dish. But it’s a side dish that makes the entree more satisfying.

We’ll first look at Israel’s example and then we’ll consider the implications for us today.

Israel’s Example: *“Remember, and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath. . .” (Deuteronomy 9)*

Listen to Deuteronomy 9:1-4.

1 “Hear, O Israel! You are crossing over the Jordan today to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, great cities fortified to heaven, 2 a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know and of whom you have heard it said, ‘Who can stand before the sons of Anak?’ 3 “Know therefore today that it is the Lord your God who is crossing over before you as a consuming fire. He will destroy them and He will subdue them before you, so that you may drive them out and destroy them quickly, just as the Lord has spoken to you. 4 “Do not say in your heart when the Lord your God has driven them out before you, ‘Because of my

righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is dispossessing them before you.

Moses stresses two things here. **First**, he makes clear that the conquest of the Land was God's judgment upon its inhabitants. A couple weeks ago we saw in Genesis 15:16 how God told Abraham that his descendants would have to wait 400 years because "the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." In His patience God would wait until the Amorites were sufficiently wicked so that nobody could accuse God of being unjust in giving the land to the children of Israel. **Second**, Moses wanted the people to know that the Land was **not** a reward for being so righteous.

5 "It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Do you see how Moses is anticipating that they would become proud once they got into the Land? He knew that they would be tempted to think that God gave them the Land because of their righteousness. But twice he tells them that "it is **not** because of your righteousness" that God is giving you this land. In case they didn't quite get the point, Moses tells them a third time:

6 "Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people.

Just because the Amorites were wicked **didn't** mean that the Israelites were righteous. To the contrary, they were "a stubborn people." Notice in verse 7 how Moses tells them never to forget their sin in the wilderness.

7 "Remember, do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord.

Instead of entering the Land with a sense of entitlement, thinking, "God chose us because we are so much more righteous than the Amorites," Moses wanted them to remember and not forget that they were a stubborn, rebellious people. Moses' strategy in this chapter is to convince the Israelites that they, God's chosen people, deserved God's wrath every bit as much as the nations they would displace.

In the rest of the chapter Moses rehearses some of the more spectacular examples of their stubbornness and rebellion in the wilderness. Even though Moses is describing sins of a previous generation, these sins were part of their corporate history and necessary to remember. They would be tempted to repeat the sins of their parents and grandparents. In verses 8-21 Moses recounts the sin of the people at Mt. Sinai (Horeb). Moses was on the mountain for 40 days, fasting and praying. There God delivered to him two tablets containing the "words of the covenant" (the ten commandments). At the

end of 40 days God told Moses to go down quickly because the people had abandoned Him to worship an idol they had made. In verses 13-14 we read:

13 “The Lord spoke further to me, saying, ‘I have seen this people, and indeed, it is a stubborn people. 14 ‘Let Me alone, that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they.’

That last phrase brings to mind the covenant God had made with Abraham; in Genesis 12 God had promised Abraham, “I will make you a great nation.” At Mt. Sinai God was basically telling Moses, “I am going to abandon the covenant with Abraham and start over with you!”

When Moses gets down from the mountain and sees how quickly they had turned away from God and made a golden calf, he smashes the tablets on the ground symbolizing that they had broken the covenant as described in the ten commandments. Moses goes on to describe how he entered into another season of prayer and fasting, pleading with God to withhold His judgment.

In verses 22 through 24 Moses reminds them of their sins at four specific places. In verse 23 he mentions how they refused to “go up and possess the land” when they arrived at Kadesh-barnea. We saw in chapter 1 that instead of believing that God was a good Father and that God would fight their battles, they said, “God hates us and wants to destroy us.” Look at Moses’ evaluation of their faith in verse 24:

24 “You have been rebellious against the Lord from the day I knew you.

Their stubbornness and unbelief had been a consistent pattern as long as Moses could remember. After putting up with such rebellion, we wouldn’t really blame Moses if he had concluded, “You know, God, maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea if you started over with me. These people have been too sinful for too long.” But he didn’t! Instead he entered into yet another period of prayer and fasting, pleading with God not to wipe out the people. If you read the rest of chapter 9 and the first 11 verses of chapter 10, you’ll see that Moses basically says, “If I hadn’t prayed for you, God would wiped you out. But God heard my prayers and honored His covenant with Abraham.”

Why did Moses tell the people to remember and not forget their past sinfulness? Not so that they would wallow in self-condemnation. Rather, so that they would remember that the Land was a gift, an expression of God’s grace, not a reward for their righteousness.

In our time remaining I want us to think about **The fruit of remembering past sins.**

First, remembering past sins helps us avoid pride. **Second**, remembering past sins shines a spotlight on God’s grace.

Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations - a shining example of what it looked like to be in covenant with the one true living God. Remembering past sins would have

eliminated any sense of superiority over the surrounding nations. They were supposed to communicate (in word and deed), “We are a shining example of how God is willing to forgive a stubborn and rebellious nation if only it turns back to Him.” People like Rahab and Nebuchadnezzar found out that the God of Israel is gracious and willing to forgive everybody who wants it.

Of course, in the New Testament we find this very same message. Jesus Himself said, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day should have known better (because they had the book of Deuteronomy), but they believed that the Christ (the Messiah) would come only for righteous people (which is code for people who are self-righteous, not people who are actually right with God). But Jesus didn’t have anything to offer people who already view themselves as righteous. But sinners - people who freely admitted that they have offended a holy God - Jesus offered them everything (forgiveness, life, and abundance).

Somebody who was crystal clear all of this was the Apostle Paul. By almost anyone’s standards, Paul would have been a five-star recruit for the body of Christ. He was well-educated and zealous; he was advancing beyond his contemporaries when it came to his career as a Pharisee. And yet when Paul remembered his conversation, those things he “counted as loss” (Phil. 3). What he loved to brag about was the grace of God he experienced in spite of past sins. In 1 Timothy 1 notice how Paul remembered his past sins. In this way he was able to avoid pride on the one hand and to shine a light on God’s grace on the other.

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief;

Paul remembered that he was “formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor.” He remembered these sins for the same reason Israel was to remember her sins: they put the spotlight on God’s grace.

14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. 15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

Paul viewed himself as living proof that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Paul never got over the fact that God’s grace reached even him.

16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

This is how Paul shared Christ with others. He said, “Look at me; I am the premier example of how patient Jesus Christ really is. I am the foremost of sinners, and yet I

found mercy.” That’s how he viewed his conversion. Many people start out humble and end up proud, but not Paul. Twenty years later, after he had been beaten and imprisoned and stoned and slandered, he still viewed his life and his accomplishments as evidence of God’s grace. In 1 Corinthians 15 we read this:

9 For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

Because he remembered (and did not forget) his past sin, he avoided pride and kept shining the spotlight on God’s grace. Even though he poured out his life for the gospel, he attributed everything he was and everything he did to the grace of God.

No matter where you are in relation to God, this has real-life implications for you. If you have never put your faith in Jesus Christ, the idea of God wiping out your sins and giving you life and abundance may sound “too good to be true.” About 20 years ago Brenda and I had a neighbor who became a good friend. Dr. Tiemeier was in his 80s. On the surface he was rather cynical about “religion.” But when I wandered over to talk with him on Sundays he would ask me what I would be talking about the next day. He was always interested in the Bible. When he finally opened up about his life, I found out that he had a hard time believing that God would really be interested in someone like him who hadn’t been to church in 60+ years.

But the children of Israel (who were stubborn and rebellious) and the Apostle Paul and every believer here today confirms that nobody is too sinful and nobody is beyond the reach of God’s grace. God proved that he wants a relationship with you by sending His one and only Son to die for your sins. You simply have to turn to Him in faith.

If you are already a believer, it is possible to agree with everything I’ve said and still give off the vibe, “I may not be perfect, but I’m probably in the top 10% of Christians. . . God is really pretty lucky to have me on His team. . . I’m so smart and gifted and influential. . .” We give that impression when we try to impress others with our spiritual knowledge, when we belittle others, when we could care less about others, etc. We can’t fulfill our mission if we’re like that! Nobody looks at that person and says, “I want to be self-righteous too! I want that air of superiority too!”

If you are that person, what do you do? You may remember the account in Luke 7 of the woman who violated all sorts of social standards by anointing Jesus’ feet with perfume and with tears, wiping His feet with her hair (her hair!). The Pharisee who owned the house where all this took place was scandalized, of course. Jesus’ comment to him was basically, “You could care less about Me - no kiss, no water, no perfume.” But “this woman . . . her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

If you are more like the Pharisee than the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her hair, I would suggest that you find a time to get alone with God, fall on your face and repent.

Apologize to God for not remembering your sins (past and present) and for not acknowledging God's grace. Ask God to show you just how much you've been forgiven. Ask God to show you just how much you should love in response.

I'll close this morning by reading an account of someone who really, truly understands what we've been talking about today. Three years ago we preached a sermon series on shame. I asked several people to share their experience with the rest of us, specifically how they dealt with the shame of past sins. Here is the story of a young woman who remembers (and does not forget) her past sins. But instead of self-condemnation, her past sins remind her of the grace of God.

"Shame has been an experience I've dealt with my whole life. I come from a non-Christian home, an emotionally abusive father, and have had multiple relationships based solely on sex. . . I've been diagnosed with depression, I've contemplated taking my own life, and I've physically harmed myself in order to release the pain I felt deep inside. But there has always been a force much greater than me that has been watching and waiting patiently for me. That force? That's God. That's my God!

The God who found me crying over the mess I had made out of my life; where I turned to men for comfort and found myself seeking their love through sex. God found me on the brink of questioning my own existence and whether I was worth the air that I breathed. God saw all of this shame I carried with me and he did the most amazing thing: he forgave me. He dug his way into my heart and claimed what was rightfully his. That shame that I carried with me for twenty years was washed away in one single moment when I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. A full twenty years passed before I was able to fully experience God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness! But God loves me just the same.

There have been numerous times, including this one, where I break down and cry because I feel his love surging through my veins. I want others who are struggling to take heart and know that God doesn't care where you have been but where you are right now. He so desperately wants you to talk to him and to accept his love into your heart. It may seem overwhelming to accept that much power and love but the God I've come to call my father, wants just a small window to give you the love you fully deserve and seek. Shame may seem like a mighty mountain but God turns that mountain into dust if you just give him the chance."