

Sermon – 20/11/2005 pm

A Rebellious People

Study Text: Deuteronomy 9:7–24

Do you believe in germs, micro-organisms that can make you sick if you breathe them in or ingest them? What a stupid question you say – of course we know and believe that there are germs that can make us sick! Well there are many people in this world who have never been to school and do not know about germs. They do not believe that drinking crystal clear water could possibly make them sick.

Even the water that came from our taps in India was dangerous to drink. In the mountains it was so clear and cool – but it was full of germs. Many people got sick after drinking this water and some children died. We had to boil the water before drinking it to kill the germs. But it was terribly difficult to convince illiterate people that there were germs in this water because they could not see anything. One health worker would put a potato in the pot and tell them to cook the potato and drink water. This they did while she was around. But they still did not believe in germs they could not see.

Where is your God the heathen say. *Our God is in heaven and does what pleases him* the Psalmist replies (Psalm 115:2). Do people say this to you – ‘where is this God you talk about?’ Show us God and we will believe in him. Until then we will worship things we can see or things we have made. Little do such people know that such blindness will lead to their destruction and the destruction of their children, just as surely as drinking water full of germs that we cannot see, will lead to sickness and even death.

Moses told the people of God that they would go in and possess the land of Canaan. They would drive out the inhabitants by the power of God. But he also warned them against boasting that they were righteous and deserving of this blessing from the Lord. Far from being righteous, they were stiff-necked and stubborn people, always rebelling against the Lord, always provoking the Lord to wrath. Moses had the facts of history to back up his claim.

Horrors at Horeb

From the day you left Egypt until you came to this place you have been rebellious against the Lord (9:7). *You have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you* (9:24). Right there at Horeb where the Lord spoke to them from the thundering clouds upon the fiery mountain they first provoked the Lord to wrath.

Moses had gone up on the mountain to meet with the Lord. He was gone for forty days – just under six weeks. But they began to ask ‘where has this fellow gone?’ We cannot see him so he must have disappeared. ‘Out of sight’ soon became ‘out of mind’. It can happen so easily and so quickly. A few weeks without hearing the word of the Lord and see what can happen!

These people had been delivered out of slavery in Egypt. They had been saved from death at the hands of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. These people had heard the voice from the mountain, the voice

of the Lord making a covenant with them. He spoke to them as his own chosen people. I will be your God and you shall be my people.

Yet while Moses was on the mountain they turned aside from the commands the Lord had just given them. They made a graven image in blatant disobedience to the terms of the second commandment – ‘you shall not make for yourself a carved image’. If they ever thought they were righteous or upright and deserving of the Lord’s blessing then they must think again. They had rebelled and provoked the Lord to wrath. They were deserving of God’s curse, not his blessing.

It was only by the intercession of Moses, by Moses prayer appealing to the grace and glory of the Lord their God, that God’s hand was stayed. *The Lord relented from the harm which he said he would do to his people* (Exodus 32:14). Aaron, Moses’ older brother, fellow Levite and his spokesman, had gone along with the rebellion and was also under the covenant curse (9:20). We were not told of this in the Exodus account. But here as Moses remembers how he interceded for the people he also tells how he prayed for Aaron to be spared.

Moses had not disappeared. He was on the mountain in the presence of the Lord. He neither ate bread nor drank water – *man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God* (8:3). This is what Moses said about the forty years in the wilderness. It was what he knew by experience from forty days on the mountain. Moses depended upon the Lord completely, just as Jesus did many years later when he was being tempted in the wilderness.

On the mountain the Lord was giving him the commands on two tablets of stone. There were two duplicate tablets written on both sides by the finger of God. The words of God, the terms of the covenant God was making with his people, were being set down for all to read and obey. But even as the Lord was making the covenant the people were breaking it.

At the command of the Lord, Moses hurried down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant. When he saw the moulded calf he accused the people of sinning against the Lord and of turning aside from the way which the Lord had commanded them (9:16). He threw the two tablets out of his hands and they broke before their eyes (9:17). Did he do this out of grief and sadness? Was he not angry at them for their rebellion? The Lord was – *and do I not hate them O Lord who hate you* said the Psalmist (Psalm 139). Some do not like to think of Moses throwing the tablets out of anger, but it was righteous anger, not uncontrolled rage.

Breaking the tablets was not of course an act of vandalism. This was symbolic of the breaking of the covenant. By their action the people had broken the covenant God had made with them. He could justly have destroyed them. But Moses interceded for them and they were saved. Moses went back up to get the covenant renewed.

Let us not underestimate the importance of intercession. We have one who intercedes for us – *Jesus ever lives to make intercession for us* under the new covenant (Hebrews 7:25, Romans 8:34). Where would we be without his intercession? Remember also that you are called to intercede for others in your prayers.

The covenant documents lay shattered by the golden calf they had made. But Moses took drastic action to remove their sin. He took the golden calf, burned it and ground it to powder. He scattered this powder on the water that flowed in the stream. Never again would they have this gold to make a graven image.

Jesus told us to take drastic action against sin. *If your right eye causes you to sin pluck it out and cast it from you he said... And if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off and cast it from you* (Matthew 5:29, 30). Temptation must be removed. Moses made sure they could not make another golden calf. To be sure they would have tried.

Beyond Horeb

Their rebellion did not halt at Horeb. What Moses did had not changed their hearts. Sinful hearts will always be inclined to rebellion. A change of heart, a new heart was the only way rebellion would cease. Moses reminded the people of their ongoing rebellion as for forty years they journeyed through the wilderness.

There was the time at Taberah when they complained about the food and wanted to return to Egypt for leeks and garlic (Numbers 11:1–3). Another time at Massah they ran out of water and instead of calling upon the Lord to provide water they threatened to kill Moses (Exodus 17). At Kibroth Hattavah they again complained about the food – they were sick of the manna and wanted meat. The Lord in his wrath sent a plague upon the camp and some died (Numbers 11:31–34).

At Kadesh Barnea they rebelled again and refused to go up and possess the land. For this they were made to wander in the desert for forty years until their rebellious fathers had perished.

So it was that not just once, but again and again they rebelled against the Lord directly, or indirectly through his servant Moses. They provoked the Lord to wrath and the ringleaders of the rebellion were destroyed. This was not a glorious history of obedience to the Lord their God. In fact there was nothing in their past to indicate any righteousness on their part – absolutely nothing. Any claim to self-righteousness would have been tantamount to hypocrisy. It would have been a lie and shown to be such by their own history.

What about your own personal history, and the history of our forefathers. A glorious history is it? We like to think so, but do we need to think again? When the people of God were living comfortably in the good land they might think they had a glorious past and that they deserved the blessing of the Lord. But would it have been true?

Remember, said Moses, your rebellion and how you sinned against the Lord. *If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we say we have no sin we make him (God) to be a liar, and his word is not in us* (I John 1:8, 10). If you have repented of your sin and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ your sins of course are forgiven (I John 1:9) – but do not let this truth go to your head lest you boast – keep it in your heart.

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