

"Arise, Begin Your Journey"

This Friday it will be 2010. New years are always a chance to make a fresh start of things: New Year's resolutions and things like that. Well, in deciding what passage I wanted to preach on for the New Year, I decided to continue on in our series in Deuteronomy. That's because I thought this passage was a fitting one for the New Year. I mean, look at what we've got. We essentially have Israel here getting a fresh start themselves. Just last chapter, Moses had reminded Israel of how stubborn and stiff-necked they had been. The worst example was the golden calf incident. That resulted in God being so angry with them, that he had threatened to destroy them, and to destroy Aaron who had led them in that idolatry. Last chapter ended with Moses interceding on behalf of Israel and Aaron. The chapter ended a bit abruptly with Moses' prayer. But that's because the story really continues here in chapter 10. Here we see the outcome of Moses' intercession for them. Essentially God forgives them. He gives them a fresh start. Here God renews the covenant with them and sends them off headed for the Promised Land. Moses is of course recounting all of this to the new generation. This was all past history for them at this point, about 40 years before. But Moses is retelling this to the next generation to remind them of God's grace to them as a nation. That at the height of their spiritual rebellion, God gave them a fresh start, so to speak.

And so today we're going to look at this fresh start for Israel. Then we're going to think about what this will mean for Israel in their future as they head into the Promised Land. Finally we'll think about how this relates to us under the new covenant.

So let's begin today by looking at this fresh start for Israel. Notice all the reminders in this passage that Israel needed a fresh start. Here you have God remaking the Ten Commandments with Moses. And when you read through these verses, something becomes clear very quickly. This wasn't the first time they did this. The whole process of remaking the Ten Commandments is a reminder of Israel's sin. And this passage repeatedly brings this out. It does this with repetition. The same adjective is used five times in this passage. It's the word for "first." It appears once in each of the four first verses, and then again in verse 10. Each time it's used in a way that effectively reminds Israel of their sin and how God was now giving them a fresh start. This word for first might seem like a common word, but it only appears seven more times in the entire rest of the book of Deuteronomy. And so it's being used here in a highly concentrated way. The repetition is intentional to draw out a point.

And so let's just quickly scan these uses of this word "first." Verse 1. God tells Moses to make two stone tables "like the first." Verse 2. God mentions to Moses about the "first tablets," describing them as the ones that Moses broke. Verse 3 then records Moses going up to the mountain with the new tablets that were just like the "first" ones. Verse 4 then records God writing the Ten Commandments on these tablets just like he did the first time around. And then in verse 10 Moses mentions that he stayed on Mount Sinai forty days and nights, just like he did the first time.

Do you see the repetition? Do you see the point that's being made here? This is not the first time all of this happened. It's the second time. And it's the second time, because Moses broke the tablets from the first time. And Moses broke those tablets of the covenant symbolically. It was a symbol of what Israel had

done. Israel had broken the covenant with the golden calf. And so do you see the purpose of the repetition? It reminds Israel of their sin, but also tells them that God was giving them a fresh start. God would give them another chance to be in covenant relationship with them. God would do all this over again. He'd have Moses remake the tablets, come back up the mountain, and God would write out the Ten Commandments again. God would renew the covenant with the people.

Of course this fresh start and renewed covenant assumes something very important. Something we shouldn't miss. It's actually told to us in verse 10 as well. Moses reports in verse 10 that God had heard him at that time. This is talking about Moses intercession for them in the last chapter. After they sinned with the golden calf, God had threatened to destroy them along with Aaron the High Priest. But Moses interceded for them. Moses asked that God forgive them. Here in this passage we see that God answered that prayer. Verse 10 says that God heard Moses and chose not to destroy them.

And we see Moses' intercession answered about Aaron as well. Don't miss verse 6. Verse 6 might sound like an unimportant side note. It might sound like just some FYI given to us. But in light of the context from chapter 9, this is a very important. It tells us that God heard Moses prayer about Aaron as well. In chapter 9 verse 20, God threatened to destroy Aaron along with Israel. And so Moses also interceded for him. And according to verse 6 of our passage, God obviously heard Moses' request about Aaron. Verse 6 says that Aaron died in Moserah. That means he didn't die at Mount Horeb where the golden calf incident happened. It meant that God spared Aaron's life at that time, in answer to Moses' request. And look what else verse 6 tells us. It says that Eleazar, Aaron's son, succeeded Aaron as high priest after he died. That tells us that Aaron received a fresh start too. Even though Aaron had sinned so horribly as high priest with the golden calf, God didn't strip him from his office. Aaron continued as high priest. You know, today in the church, when a pastor or elder commits some egregious sin, that's often it. Even if they repent, and are restored as a member in the church in good standing, often they never return to the leadership position that they held before. But God not only heard Moses' prayer to not destroy Aaron, but God also continued to have Aaron serve as high priest. Even after such a major failing in his leadership. That's God's grace at work here.

And so what's going on here with Israel in general, and Aaron specifically, tells us that God was renewing his covenant with the people. He's giving them a fresh start. They had horribly broken the covenant before. But God's grace abounded. He had forgiven them in light of Moses' pleading with God. And now he was renewing them in the covenant. They'd now have new stone tablets with the Ten Commandments rewritten on them. These would be placed in the Ark of the Covenant. God's again entrusting his commandments to the people, that they might live according to his words. And then in verse 11 we see this fresh start in yet another way. Moses recounts how God had then sent the people off on the journey to take the Promised Land. In other words, not only had God spared the people from destruction, but he was still going to give them the Promised Land. They still had an inheritance from God. And so God sent off the people back then, renewed in the covenant, marching toward the Promised Land.

And so now as they headed off to the Promised Land back then, they didn't go by themselves. They went as God's covenant people. And they would go with a visible reminder of the covenant with them the whole time. You see, God had Moses place the tablets with the Ten Commandments into an Ark and bring it along with them, wherever they went. It's right here in this passage that we're told about that. It's put rather briefly, but it's here. Notice that verses 6-7 seem to interrupt our story to tell us about some of Israel's travels. But then in verse 8 we see

part of why were told about these travels. It's a segue to tell us that the Ark of the Covenant with the Ten Commandment would travel along with the people. That would happen through the Levites. That's what verse 8 tells us. That the Levites were appointed in part to bear the Ark. They'd be the ones who'd carry it around wherever Israel went. And so when we get to the end of this passage in verse 11, we need to keep this in mind. When Moses remembers back to Israel breaking camp and heading out for the Promised Land, they aren't going alone. They have the Ark of the Covenant with them. The Levites are carrying it. And inside that Ark are the Ten Commandments. The summary of the terms of the covenant. Wherever they went, the Law of God would go with them. The very covenant that they were being renewed in at that time, that covenant was now to be their way of life. It was to always be with them.

It was actually common practice back then in the ancient Near East that when two nations entered into a covenant together, there would be two copies of the covenant made. Each copy would usually be stored in the local temple for each nation. And the purpose of this was clear. Each copy served as a witness. It was a witness to the terms of the covenant. Each party in the covenant would have its copy of the covenant. It could be used against that party if they didn't keep their part of the covenant. And by placing the copy in the local temples, this was the pagan way of placing it right in front of their gods. They placed the covenant documents right before their idols and it was there way of saying that their own gods would hold them accountable if they broke the covenant.

And so God does something similar with Israel here. At this point, Israel didn't have a temple. They had a tabernacle that moved along with them. And so God had a box, the Ark of the Covenant, created that could travel along with them. And inside this portable Ark is where the terms of the covenant were. And nowadays scholarship tends to think that the two tablets were not just part one and two of the Ten Commandments. But that each tablet was an identical copy of all ten of the commands. In other words, God was one party in the covenant. Israel was one party in the covenant. There was a copy of the covenant for each. But God didn't live in some distant land. He was present there along with Israel. And so both copies of the covenant, both of the stone tablets were kept in this Ark that traveled along with Israel.

And so realize the significance of all this. The purpose of having the Ark of the Covenant with the Ten Commandments engraved on stone was as a witness against the people. They went with Israel to remind them of their obligations to God. These two stone tablets symbolized the covenant. Their existence symbolized that they owed obedience to God. Think about when Moses destroyed the first set. That symbolized how Israel had broken covenant with God. That symbolized how they were under divine judgment. How they have fallen out of covenant with God. But now that the covenant had been renewed and new stone tablets had been created, they were again under obligation. Now these tablets symbolized that. They would be witnesses against the people if they once again broke the covenant.

I think Moses states this very simply in verse 5. Remember he's talking about past history to the people here. He's describing the sins of their fathers forty years before. He's talking to the next generation here. But as Moses describes this past history, he says in verse 5, "Then I turned and came down from the mountain, and put the tablets in the ark which I had made; and there they are, just as the LORD commanded me." "There they are." Moses could point to the next generation standing there 40 years later, and basically say, "There they are. The Ten Commandments are still here with us. The Ark has followed us along. They stand there, right there, now as a witness to each of us. We are God's covenant people. And we are called to live like it."

And so this is what this passage says to Israel. It reminds them of the fresh start God gave them. But it also reminds them of their obligations. Would they continue in faithfulness to the covenant? Or would they break it like their fathers? Well, sadly we know that they did end up breaking it. Yes, God would bring this new generation into the Land. But quickly Israel would turn into its typical back-sliding ways. The history of Israel is up and down throughout. The people at different times and places returning to idols and false gods. Breaking the covenant. The Ten Commandments would stand as a witness against them.

What this all shows, is that the people needed a better covenant. They needed an unbreakable covenant. It was great that God gave them a fresh start here in this passage. But it was a fresh start where they'd end up in the same fate. They'd break their New Year's resolutions, so to speak. God sent prophet after prophet to warn them. He told them through the prophets that they were breaking the terms of the covenant. But they would not listen. And so God destroyed the nation of Israel. Be brought them into captivity. The temple was destroyed. The Ark of the Covenant with the Ten Commandments might have been destroyed as well, or at least lost; we don't really know for sure. But the point is that though the people were renewed in that covenant; though they were given a second chance, they'd ultimately break the covenant again. They just weren't able as a nation to keep the Law of God. And they rebelled and went after false gods instead.

What the people needed was a new covenant. One that was unbreakable. Well, after Israel was brought into captivity, that is what God promised them. God promised in Jeremiah 31:31 that he would one day make a new covenant. And he said that this new covenant would be unbreakable. Saints of God, that new covenant came with Jesus. Jesus on the night before he was betrayed took bread and wine and said that they symbolized a new covenant being made. That new covenant would be founded on the death of Jesus Christ. In the new covenant, instead of having stone tablets broken as a sign against you, you have the body of Christ broken for you. You see, God knows we could never stay in a covenant that had to do with our obedience. He knew that this side of heaven, we will keep breaking covenant by our own actions. And so God solved this problem in two ways. He solved the problem with our sin and rebellion in two ways.

First, he solved it from a guilt perspective. God knows all the sins we have and will commit. On the cross, Christ paid for all the sins of his people: past, present, and future. That forgiveness is applied to us the day we become believers. The day we trust our life to Christ, we find complete forgiveness. It's sort of like a fresh start for us on that day, though much more profound than what Israel had in this passage. For on that first day of conversion we are given new life. The old has gone. We become new creations. We have a fresh start in a new life living for Christ. And any ways in which we'd be guilty of breaking covenant in terms of our law keeping, Christ has already forgiven us for it. Moses' intercession was effective for Israel in this one specific sin. That gave them an opportunity at a fresh start. But Christ' intercession for us in the new covenant is continually effective at taking away our guilt, that we never can have this new covenant broken. And so we don't just enter into a covenant that we could then later lose. We're not just given a fresh start that hopefully we can then live good enough the rest of our lives, just barely to hold on to that new life. No, Christ's sacrifice keeps us in covenant relationship with God, even when we continue to stumble and fall in sin.

But this doesn't mean that God would have us to be content with sin. But that's also part of the good news of this new covenant. Christ doesn't just deal with our guilt. He doesn't just forgive us. But the second way he deals with our sin

problem is that he begins to get rid of it completely in our life. He gets the broom out in our life and begins to sweep it clean. When the Bible talks about Christ giving us a new heart, that's what it's talking about. It's what we call sanctification. We grow more and more to hate the remaining sin in our life. And this process is completed when we die and go to be with the Lord. It's not that any of us become perfect in this life. But we do find ourselves having successes over certain sins in our life. And whatever remains of our sanctification when we die, Christ will perfect us at that point.

The old covenant law showed us our need for our sin problem to be dealt with. Prophecy upon prophecy in the Old Testament declared God's solution to this problem. The solution would be through the coming Messiah. Well, that Messiah has come. Jesus came and inaugurated a new better covenant through his death and resurrection. And entrance into this covenant is simple. Faith. The Bible calls us to see our need for this new covenant in Christ and to believe. To trust our lives to Jesus. To turn from our old life of sin and rebellion and find grace and hope in Jesus. To set Jesus as the Lord and Savior of your life. To endeavor to live your life for him and according to his Word. And if you have truly done that, then no matter what struggles you have in living that out, he will uphold you and keep you. This is the good news of the new covenant in Jesus Christ. This is what you and I have become a part of by faith in Jesus. This passage shows the need for this new covenant, and we rejoice that we've seen the arrival of this new covenant.

This passage also foreshadows another blessing of the new covenant. That's in terms of the inheritance. In the old covenant, the inheritance for God's people was the Promised Land. Verses 9 and 11 remind us again of that. But look a little closer at verse 9. It mentions that the Levites don't get that inheritance. Their inheritance was something different. Their inheritance was the LORD! That's amazing. The Levites didn't get an earthly inheritance because they got a heavenly one. God himself was somehow their inheritance. But that too points us to the fact that in the old covenant, there was an inheritance better than the Promised Land. And so it's no surprise why Jesus could tell us to focus our efforts on gaining heavenly treasure. Why Jesus could tell the rich young ruler to sell his possessions, possessions that included land, surely land in the Promised Land. Because a greater inheritance had come in the new covenant. A heavenly inheritance. Where God himself would dwell with his people in the New Heavens and the New Earth. This too is part of how much better the new covenant blessings are for God's people. That's why when Jesus came to earth it was proclaimed as good news, as "Glory to God in the highest!"

And so saints of God, as we see Israel being given a fresh start in the old covenant today, I hope you've been reminded of how much more we have in the new covenant. And so as a way of a final application, I'd like to think about verse 11 a little more here in closing. Verse 11, "Then the LORD said to me, 'Arise, begin your journey before the people, that they may go in and possess the land which I swore to their fathers to give them.'" Literally the words, "Begin your journey," are "Go and break camp." They were to leave their camp and head out to the good Promised Land. They had an exciting journey ahead for them.

This is a very forward looking statement for Israel, in light of everything that was mentioned in the previous verses. Here they are called to go forth with the Levites bearing the Ark of the Covenant. They'd go and move forward into all the good things God had in store for them. These are expectant words. They are exciting words. And as they went, God went with them. And God even went with them via the Ark as a witness to them.

Well for us, I hope these words can serve as a sort of charge for us as well. As this new year starts, we're being called to continue on in the journey God has for us. That journey is a heavenward journey. We read Philippians 3 earlier in the service. Paul said, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." That was actually the NIV translation. I really like how it uses the word heavenward. That's where we are headed. We are headed heavenward. That's the inheritance we are marching toward on our journey.

And yet most of us probably have a lot of journey still ahead of us. If you are here this morning, you're not in heaven yet. But let's keep on going in this journey God has us on, even as we start out this new year. It's one where the destination is heaven. Let's keep a heavenly perspective in all that we do this year. What I mean is let's have our final destination give us the right perspective on the things we'll face along the way this year.

When I go backpacking on a several day trip, after a few days of eating freeze dried food and my muscles really start to get sore, I usually start thinking of that first good meal I'm going to have when we get back to civilization. That reward helps keep me going for the rest of the trip. Well, how much greater is the reward that we have at the end of our journey?

And this is not a journey that we go on alone. God goes with us. Christ goes with us. And Christ goes with us as a witness too. But not as a witness to condemn us when we struggle with sin. No. He goes with us as a witness to encourage us in our struggles with sin. He doesn't condemn. No he lovingly encourages with words such as, "It is finished." "My grace is sufficient for you." Jesus is the "faithful witness" who encourages and sustains throughout this heavenward journey that we are on.

And so, brothers and sisters, continue on this year the journey God has for you. What things will God have in store for you this year? What things is he calling you to do this year to serve him? How is he calling you to live for him this year? The road might not always be easy. It may involve some suffering for Christ even. But it is one with the greatest reward. And Christ will go with you the whole way. He will see that you complete the journey. And so be encouraged as we head into 2010. Christ will carry you through as his child. And certainly he will continue to be with us as a church as we continue on this year with the ministry he has entrusted to us here in Novato. Amen.

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