



Deuteronomy - Chapter Nine

II Deuteronomy 4:44-11:32 - Moses' Second Speech: General Covenant Stipulations (continues)

Summary of Chapter Nine

The people are again encouraged that, although the opposing nations are strong and live in fortified towns, it is God who will go before them and victory is assured. They are also reminded that it is not because of their righteousness but the other nations' wickedness that the nations are being driven out.

The Israelites are also reminded of the times they opposed God. Even while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the laws they rebelled against God and built an idol in the form of a golden calf. Moses recounts how he had to intercede for them with God to avoid the entire nation being destroyed for their sins.

II.h Deuteronomy 9:1-10:11 - Recounting the golden calf incident

Continuing the theme of Israel's heart problem, this section speaks of Israel's stubbornness in sin and gives extended evidence of that stubbornness.

II.h.i Deuteronomy 9:1-29 - The Consequences of Rebelling against God

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Hear, O Israel! You are about to cross the Jordan today, to go in and dispossess nations larger and mightier than you, great cities, fortified to the heavens, ² a strong and tall people, the offspring of the Anakim, whom you know. You have heard it said of them, 'Who can stand up to the Anakim?'

Deuteronomy 9:1-2

Hear, O Israel often introduces new and important sections; refer to Deuteronomy 4:1, 5:1, 6:4, and 20:3. Israel was bound to the covenant that they had agreed to in Exodus 24:1-8, yet the covenant was made with the previous generation which perished in the wilderness. The present generation had to understand and embrace the covenant if they were to enjoy the blessings of the covenant.

Go in and dispossess nations larger and mightier than you. God was leading Israel into something too big for them. It was a challenge they could only meet if they trusted in God.

Great cities, fortified to the heavens. The cities they would battle against were mighty and the people they would battle against were great and tall. Yet God had called them to enter into this seemingly impossible battle. There was no way Israel could do this in the flesh, or by their own strength. God commanded them to do something that was just beyond their ability to do by themselves. Obviously, God did not inspire Israel with a false sense of confidence or hype. He wanted them to realistically know what the battle ahead would be like. In the same way, Jesus never calls people with hype or false promises that would lead to false confidence. He plainly says: *<<If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me>>* (Matthew 16:24). Jesus lets his disciples know right from the beginning that following him would require giving God everything.

The offspring of the Anakim. The Anakim were reputed to be giants: *<<The Emim – a large and numerous people, as tall as the Anakim – had formerly inhabited it. Like the Anakim, they are usually reckoned as Rephaim, though the Moabites call them Emim>>* (Deuteronomy 2:10-11). Israel's fear of them is addressed by Moses in Chapters 2-3.

³ Know then today that the Lord your God is the one who crosses over before you as a devouring fire; he will defeat them and subdue them before you, so that you may dispossess and destroy them quickly, as the Lord has promised you.

Deuteronomy 9:3

Know then today. Just as much as Israel had to understand the impossibility of the battle on their own, they also must understand the certainty of victory in the Lord.

The Lord your God is the one who crosses over before you as a devouring fire. It was a battle too big for Israel, but not too big for the Lord. Israel could know both facts: That in themselves, the job was impossible: *<<apart from me you can do nothing>>* (John 15:5b), but in God the battle could not be lost: *<<I can do all things through him who strengthens me>>* (Philippians 4:13).

A devouring fire. In Deuteronomy 4:24 this expression was used of potential judgement against Israel. Here, the nations will be the object of the Lord's consuming fire, the wrath of God.

He will defeat them and subdue them before you. God was also calling Israel to a partnership in winning the battles. He will defeat them does not contradict the statements that the Israelites shall quickly drive them out and destroy them quickly. Was God going to do it, or was Israel going to do it? Both really, God was calling Israel to workers together with him: <<*As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain*>> (2 Corinthians 6:1).

Destroy them quickly. God did not want the Israelites to show mercy to the Canaanites. He wanted Israel to be a unique army of judgement against the Canaanites and their culture, which was so depraved that it deserved this kind of judgement. However, the church is to show grace and mercy to all of God's creation unless he specifically says otherwise.

Quickly contrasts with Deuteronomy 7:22. Compared with their long settlement in the land, the Canaanites will disappear quickly, but by the timescale of the conquest it will be a slow process: <<*The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance*>> (2 Peter 3:9).

⁴ When the Lord your God thrusts them out before you, do not say to yourself, 'It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to occupy this land'; it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is dispossessing them before you. ⁵ It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of those nations that the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfil the promise that the Lord made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Deuteronomy 9:4-5

Do not say to yourself alludes to Israel's pride and the heart as its source. In the ancient world, victory in battle was regarded as a reward for one's righteousness in the eyes of the gods. Israel is warned away from such thinking. While victory in the Promised Land is God's punishment of the nations' wickedness, that does not imply Israel's righteousness. Israel's possession of the land is due solely to God's faithfulness to the Abrahamic promises. Refer to the comment made on Deuteronomy 7:17-18.

This is a preview of salvation by grace through faith in which Christians cannot think that it is their righteousness that has obtained it. Instead, it is the righteousness they have received in Jesus Christ. When they receive any gift from God, they are tempted to take it and use it to glorify themselves. Israel must not do this in regard to the gift of the Promised Land, and they must not do it in regard to any gift the Lord would give them.

Sayings or proverbs of the ancient world reflect man's desire to earn his own righteousness and justification before God. "I will not have heaven for nothing" said one, and another said "Give me heaven, for Thou owe it to me." The same idea is expressed in an old Roman Catholic teaching that dying men should pray, "Lord, join my righteousness with Christ's righteousness" as if the two together could accomplish something. Instead, Christians should look to the righteousness of Jesus alone.

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

Deuteronomy 9:6

Yet again, the point is made in vv.4-5 that Israel's righteousness is not the cause of its being given the land. Israel is in fact stubborn, literally, 'stiff-necked'; refer also to v.13 and v.27. The idea is that Israel, like a rebellious domestic animal, would stiffen its neck against the yoke God would put upon it. They would not submit to God's direction in their life. The account of the golden calf is retold at length in vv.7-21 to demonstrate Israel's stubbornness and desire to live according to their own set of rules. This is an attitude of heart that continued into the NT era as Stephen stated before the Sanhedrin: <<*You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do*>> (Acts 7:51). The church needs to be careful not to allow it to continue today!

⁷ Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness; you have been rebellious against the Lord from the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place.

Deuteronomy 9:7

As with Deuteronomy 7:17-18 and 8:17-20, the way to avoid saying wrong things in the heart is to remember. Remembering their history of moral failure in the wilderness is humbling, countering Israel's potential pride. God's purpose in reminding Israel of their rebellions against him was not to discourage them or to make them feel defeated. The purpose was so that they would recognise their own weakness and trust in him.

You provoked the Lord your God to wrath. Various Hebrew words translated wrath, anger, and angry are used in Chapter 9. Verses 7-8 and vv.20-22 bracket the account of the golden calf.

You have been rebellious against the Lord. The same idea is communicated in the NT: <<*So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall*>> (1 Corinthians 10:12). When Christians remember their sinful nature, they walk in the poverty of spirit Jesus said was essential to a life of blessing: <<*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*>> (Matthew 5:3).

From the day. Israel's provocation of God began even before the people crossed the Red Sea: <<*They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?'*>> (Exodus 14:11).

⁸ Even at Horeb you provoked the Lord to wrath, and the Lord was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you.

Deuteronomy 9:8

Even at Horeb, where they heard God's voice directly, Israel misbehaved. The retelling of the golden calf incident follows (Exodus Chapters 32-34).

⁹ When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant that the Lord made with you, I remained on the mountain for forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water. ¹⁰ And the Lord gave me the two stone tablets written with the finger of God; on them were all the words that the Lord had spoken to you at the mountain out of the fire on the day of the assembly.

Deuteronomy 9:9-10

When I went up. Moses was instructed to go up Mount Sinai alone to meet with God and receive instruction; refer to Exodus 24:12-18.

The finger of God. Although God gave Moses instructions in the law and revealed the design of the Tabernacle to him, he actually inscribed the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone by his own hand: <<*When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God*>> (Exodus 31:18).

All the words that the Lord had spoken to you. This is a direct reference to the Ten Commandments; refer to Deuteronomy 5:22.

¹¹ At the end of forty days and forty nights the Lord gave me the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant.

Deuteronomy 9:11

Forty days and forty nights is a recurrent theme in Scripture. It was the time span for the waters to cover the earth in Noah's flood: <<*For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground*>> (Genesis 7:4). It is the time it took to embalm Jacob's body: <<*Joseph commanded the physicians in his service to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel; they spent forty days in doing this, for that is the time required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him for seventy days*>> (Genesis 50:2-4). The spies were in the Promised Land for nearly six weeks: <<*At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land*>> (Numbers 13:25). The Philistines intimidated the Israelites for forty days until David came forward to defeat Goliath: <<*For forty days the Philistine came forward and took his stand, morning and evening*>> (1 Samuel 17:16). It was the amount of time that Elijah went without food as he journeyed to Mount Horeb: <<*He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God*>> (1 Kings 19:7-9). It was the amount of time God gave Nineveh to repent: <<*Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'*>> (Jonah 3:4). It was the length of Jesus' temptation: <<*He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him*>> (Mark 1:13). And it was the amount of time Jesus spent on earth after his resurrection: <<*After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God*>> (Acts 1:3).

¹² Then the Lord said to me, 'Get up, go down quickly from here, for your people whom you have brought from Egypt have acted corruptly. They have been quick to turn from the way that I commanded them; they have cast an image for themselves.'

Deuteronomy 9:12

For your people whom you have brought. God disowns Israel and passes them over to Moses, e.g. <<*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*>> (Deuteronomy 5:6).

Go down quickly. This heightens the contrast of Israel's sin with having so recently been reminded of the Ten Commandments.

¹³ Furthermore, the Lord said to me, ‘I have seen that this people is indeed 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 more numerous than they.’

Deuteronomy 9:13-14

This people is almost a contemptuous description of the people, continuing God’s disassociation from Israel from v.12. Moses’ intercession for the makers of the golden calf is not described until v.25, although it is alluded to in v.19 in order to keep the theme of Israel’s stubbornness uninterrupted through to v.24. God had made his displeasure quite plain: <<*The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10 Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation’*>> (Exodus 32:9-10).

I will make of you a nation mightier and more numerous than they. God told Moses of his desire to wipe out Israel in judgement, and to start over again with a new nation, descended from Moses himself. Refer to the quote above.

¹⁵ So I turned and went down from the mountain, while the mountain was ablaze; the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. ¹⁶ Then I saw that you had indeed sinned against the Lord your God, by casting for yourselves an image of a calf; you had been quick to turn from the way that the Lord had commanded you. ¹⁷ So I took hold of the two tablets and flung them from my two hands, smashing them before your eyes.

Deuteronomy 9:15-17

While the mountain was ablaze. The burning fires on Mount Sinai were physical representations of the glory of God and his holy presence. The mountain began to burn when Israel first came to Mount Sinai: <<*Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently*>> (Exodus 19:18). Those fires had burned continuously for forty days, and they burned at the very time Israel made a golden calf and began to worship it.

Smashing them before your eyes. Breaking the tablets indicates the deliberate ending of the covenant relationship: an impulsive gesture of fury and despair, following God’s words in vv.12-14. A treaty of Esarhaddon, an Assyrian king (681-669 BC), forbids his vassal to destroy the treaty text, as this would be tantamount to rebellion. Here, it was the actions of the people and not Moses that nearly led to the covenant being broken.

¹⁸ Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before, for forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin you had committed, provoking the Lord by doing what was evil in his sight. ¹⁹ For I was afraid that the anger that the Lord bore against you was so fierce that he would destroy you. But the Lord listened to me that time also. ²⁰ The Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him, but I interceded also on behalf of Aaron at that same time.

Deuteronomy 9:18-20

This is the second period of forty days and forty nights.

I neither ate bread nor drank water. This is about the longest period of time a person could go without food without causing lasting damage to the body's organs. More significantly, it is beyond the endurance of most people to go so long without water. Therefore, it should be concluded that, not only did Moses fast to the extreme as he lay prostrate before the Lord, but the Lord also sustained him supernaturally to ensure no physical harm came on him.

For I was afraid. The Hebrew word here is a rare word, translated in the Septuagint by the strong word *ekphobos*, which means 'exceedingly frightened' or 'stricken with terror.' When he saw the sin of Israel and knew the holiness of God, Moses was very afraid for the sake of the people of Israel.

The Lord listened to me. This alludes to Moses' intercession (vv.25-29). Aaron was Moses' brother, the high priest of Israel. Aaron's sin was considered so bad, that he surely would have been destroyed by the Lord, except for Moses' intercessory prayer for him. This shows both the prevailing power of Moses' prayer and the great love in the heart of Moses. Exodus Chapters 32-34 does not mention any intercession for Aaron.

²¹ Then I took the sinful thing you had made, the calf, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it thoroughly, until it was reduced to dust; and I threw the dust of it into the stream that runs down the mountain.

Deuteronomy 9:21

The sinful thing. Deuteronomy emphasises Israel's act of sin. No mention is made here of forcing Israel to drink the water with the ground-up golden calf: <<**He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it**>> (Exodus 32:20).

Moses burnt the idol, ground it up, and sprinkled it in the people's drinking water for three reasons:

- To show this idol or god was nothing and could be destroyed easily.
- To completely obliterate this idol.
- To make the people pay an immediate consequence of their sin.

²² At Taberah also, and at Massah, and at Kibroth-hattaavah, you provoked the Lord to wrath. ²³ And when the Lord sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, 'Go up and occupy the land that I have given you', you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God, neither trusting him nor obeying him. ²⁴ You have been rebellious against the Lord as long as he has known you.

Deuteronomy 9:22-24

Horeb was not the only location where the Lord was provoked to anger. As v.7 suggests, this is far from a complete list.

The name Taberah means 'burning,' and in Numbers Chapter 11, when the people of Israel first left Mount Sinai to head towards Kadesh-barnea and the Promised Land, they immediately complained and God sent fires of judgement against them at a place they called Taberah because of the burning fires of God's judgement.

Exodus 17:7 describes the naming of a place called Massah, which means 'tempted,' because there Israel provoked the Lord by doubting his loving care and concern for them in the wilderness.

Kibroth-hattaavah. The name means 'graves of craving' and was the place where Israel longed for meat instead of manna, and God gave them meat. However, it became plagued in the mouths of those with greedy and discontent hearts, as described in Numbers Chapter 11.

Moses briefly remembered the rebellion at Kadesh-barnea, where Israel doubted God's love for them and refused to enter the Promised Land by faith, rebelling against the Lord; refer to Numbers Chapters 13-14.

You rebelled against the command of the Lord your God, neither trusting him nor obeying him. Israel's disobedience to God began with their unbelief. They did not believe God loved them or was mighty enough to bring them into the Promised Land.

As long as he has known you brackets the account beginning with v.7. Being rebellious is the same as being stubborn.

²⁵ Throughout the forty days and forty nights that I lay prostrate before the Lord when the Lord intended to destroy you, ²⁶ I prayed to the Lord and said, ‘Lord God, do not destroy the people who are your very own possession, whom you redeemed in your greatness, whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

Deuteronomy 9:25-26

Throughout the forty days and forty nights. Given its placement in Exodus 32:11-14, it is unclear if this is the same period of time described in v.18 or the earlier period recorded in vv.9-11 as the following prayer implies.

I prayed to the Lord. This great prayer of intercession from Moses is described more fully in Exodus Chapter 32. Moses asked for mercy upon Israel because of God’s past faithfulness to them, the people whom You redeemed.

Lord God is a standard form for beginning a prayer: <<*O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your might; what god in heaven or on earth can perform deeds and mighty acts like yours!*>> (Deuteronomy 3:24).

The people who are your very own possession, whom you have brought out. Moses counters the Lord’s apparent disowning of Israel recorded in vv.12-14.

²⁷ Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; pay no attention to the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin, ²⁸ otherwise the land from which you have brought us might say, “Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them, and because he hated them, he has brought them out to let them die in the wilderness.” ²⁹ For they are the people of your very own possession, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm.’

Deuteronomy 9:27-29

Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The primary basis of intercession for mercy is the Abrahamic covenant. No excuse for Israel’s sin is given, for there is none. A second basis of intercession is God’s reputation among the nations, not the least being Egypt. Two wrong statements might be made if Israel is destroyed. The first is that God is impotent to save; the second is that he hated Israel. Both are untrue: <<*Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”?* Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people>> (Exodus 32:12),

and: <<*you grumbled in your tents and said, 'It is because the Lord hates us that he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to hand us over to the Amorites to destroy us'*>> (Deuteronomy 1:27).

Otherwise the land from which you have brought us might say, "Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them". Moses asked for mercy upon Israel because of concern for the glory of God's own name and his reputation among the other nations.

Your very own possession, your great power, your outstretched arm. Moses asked for mercy upon Israel because they were God's people, not because they deserved forgiveness and grace.

Christians can seek the mercy and power of God through prayer by praying with the same heart and by pleading the same reasons before the Lord. Prayer on solid reasons like these is far more effective than merely casting wishes up towards heaven:

- Because of God's past faithfulness to all his people.
- Because of his past faithfulness to their ancestors.
- Because of his own glory and reputation among the nations.
- Because Christians are his people, the spiritual descendants of Abraham <<*For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us)*>> (Romans 4:16).

Keeping these things in mind is also a way to refine prayers. When Christians pray only for the things consistent with God's glory, they have their hearts set on the right things.