

Deuteronomy 1

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Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[0 : 00] Well, what does Christianity have to say to a community in mourning, a community in shock? You know better than I, since you live closer.

! The yellow ribbons that once were a sign of love and hope, and now a sign of love and mourning and grief. What does Christianity have to say to a community dealing with the kind of tragedies that have been unfolding particularly last week?

Well, of course, the answer to that depends on what people think Christianity is about. So I guess if we went out in the streets, many people would tell us Christianity is just a sort of ethical code, just a way to live.

And if all it is is rules to obey, then it has no help at all. Because rules will just beat us up. Rules lead to pride or despair. If Christianity is just a form of self-help, like popular religion is, you go to Waterstones, look at the religious shelf, it's all self-help books.

If that's all Christianity is, then does that really help anybody? No, because you just pull your socks up, do better. That's not helpful. If Christianity is just wishful thinking, a nice idea, there is a benevolent higher power out there who looks after us, then that's not a great help either.

[1 : 16] But as we open the pages of the scripture, as we open Deuteronomy, we see Christianity is not any of those things. It's not wishful thinking. It's something real.

Do you notice in these first verses, verse 3 for example, we read about a man speaking God's words to people on a certain day. In the 40th year, or the first day of the 11th month, Moses spoke to the people of Israel.

This is God speaking through Moses to a particular people in a particular place. He is rooted in space and time and geography. It tells us where? Across the Jordan, in the wilderness.

It's not wishful thinking, it's real. And also, it's not about rules or self-help. Rather, Christianity is about rescue and promise. We see that in these verses as well.

It's about rescue. God had rescued these Israelites. That's why we read it was the 40th year. It was the 40th year since he'd rescued them from slavery in Egypt. Rescued them from a terrible situation they could not get themselves out of.

[2 : 20] They held out to them this promise of a new life in a new land. Verse 8, see the land I set before you, that I promised your forefathers. Christianity is a story of rescue and promise.

It's God's story. And what we see in shadow, in outline, in prototype form in the Old Testament, this rescue from slavery and promise of a good land to come, is what we see in glorious, technicolor and three dimensions in the New Testament.

As we see the rescue that God promises, the rescue that God works, is not merely from slavery in Egypt, but slavery to sin, slavery to our inability to do the good we want to do.

The slavery we feel every day when we fail to live to our own standards, let alone God's standards. The slavery we feel as we try hard to break free of addictions and struggles and cannot.

It's all symptoms of our slavery to sin that every human being faces. And the rescue God gives is not only slavery from, but freedom for.

[3 : 23] The promise of a new land to come. Not just a piece of real estate in the Middle East, but a whole new world. A world free from the scars and the brokenness of sin. Free from mourning the death of loved ones.

Free from all the effects of sin. Free to be the people God created us to be. To enjoy life forever in his presence. That is the promise to come.

So that's the story of Christianity. That's what Christianity is about. It's not self-help. It's not rules. It's not wishful thinking. It's a story of rescue and promise. It's a story of rescue from sin, its effects, its brokenness, its penalty.

For the promise of new life in God's world. And the question we all face then is, well, can we really believe this? Is this promise real?

How do we experience this promise? See, it's so easy to see the challenges around us. See the difficulties of living a Christian life in this world. For the Israelites who Moses spoke to, it's easy to see the challenges ahead.

[4 : 28] Go up and take possession of this land. They were only used to life in the desert. How could they defeat these great powerful armies? Well, how do we receive anything that we've promised?

How do we get anything we've promised? About a year ago, a letter came from my wife, promising her an inheritance from her grandmother, who actually died a long time ago, but that's beside the point.

What did we have to do to get that inheritance that had been promised? Well, we had to trust that the letter was genuine, for a start, and then we had to respond in faith.

We had to respond to that promise. So we had to send off marriage certificates and passports and stuff to prove that the Mariel James this letter was addressed to was actually the Mariel Cashman to whom I married. And having done that, Julie, a small sum of money, was sent to our bank account. We had to respond in faith, trusting that was a genuine promise, that the lawyer would do what they said they would do. So for the people of Israel, what they needed to do was trust that God would do what he said he would do.

[5 : 30] For us today, how do we receive these great promises of God that Jesus holds out to us in the Gospel? We need to depend on God.

We need to believe him, trust him, live our lives showing that we trust him. And that's what Moses is exhorting the people to do here. He's looking back at the past, to remind them what happened in the past, to show them God's faithfulness in the past, so they can respond in faith in the present. He wants them to know that God is dependable, that God is faithful. I guess we're all used to seeing those adverts, aren't we, on railway stations and bus stops and on the tube, for financial products, for ISAs and all this kind of stuff.

And they always have this small print at the bottom, don't they? Past performance is no guarantee of future results. That's the lawyer's caveat to get out of anything. And that is absolutely true with every human endeavour.

Past performance is no guarantee of future results. But with God, Moses' big point here, is past performance is the guarantee of the secure future. The guarantee that he is dependable.

[6 : 40] And so Moses wants to remind them of the past. First of all, verses 19 to 18, or 9 to 18, he says, Remember the Lord's faithful provision. Remember the Lord's faithful provision. And secondly, verses 19 to 46, remember the Lord's faithful protection.

You can depend on it. But thirdly, implicitly, all this is also a warning. Remember the consequences of how you respond to God's promises. So let's look at those things briefly.

First of all, remember the Lord's faithful provision. Remember, Israel had been at this point earlier in their history. That's what Moses is reminding them of. Once before, their fathers, 40 years earlier, had stood on the verge of the promised land.

They just had to trust God, but they hadn't. And so Moses is reviewing the history. First of all, to show them God's faithful provision. Verse 9. At that time, when we first stood here, I said to you, I'm not able to bear you by myself.

The Lord your God has multiplied you. And behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven. And even with that problem, we see the first of God's provision providing them growth.

[7 : 45] God had promised Abraham, their ancestor, that he would make them into a great nation. And he'd done that. From 70 people who went down to Egypt, he brought a million out of Egypt. God had given them growth.

And that growth, and the people's grumbling, created a problem for Moses. How am I supposed to look after you? Well, here we see the second gift God gives. His provision of gifts of leaders, the structure.

Look at verse 15 particularly. I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them over you, as heads over commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, of tens, and officers throughout your tribes.

And I charged the judges at that time. See, God gave gifts of wisdom and experience to his people. He had gifts of structure, commanders of hundreds, of fifties, and tens, judges, officers, to lead the people.

He gave them these gifts for their flourishing, so the people could flourish even in the desert. As we look at the pages of the New Testament, we find that our Lord Jesus Christ gives gifts to his church, doesn't he?

[8 : 53] Ephesians chapter 4, he gives apostles and prophets, and some do pastors and teachers, to build up the people of God. He gives gifts to individuals, gifts of leadership, and teaching, and generosity, and service.

Gifts to serve one another, structure and skills, skills, so his people can flourish. Even in these wilderness years, as we look for the promised land to come, the Lord provides, provides growth, provides gifts, for the flourishing of his people.

And can I say, one of the great encouragements I've had in my first four days, or five days now, on the job here in England, is the way I see so many people, so many. To turn up at 20 past nine this morning, and see PAs set up, and the chairs set out, to see the Club 16 on a Thursday night, and leaders giving their time, teaching the kids, looking after them.

To know that you have a cafe on Friday nights. To see many people serving in many ways. So you've got to know your elders, and some of your deacons a little bit. To see the gifts God has given them.

I know that God is still faithfully providing for his people. No one is on their own here. We are part of a church family. And do you notice, it's not just he gives gifts and grace, but he gives his good word, to govern his people.

[10 : 11] Look at verse 16. I charge 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 you. 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. It's God's good word that governs you. God gives you his good word to lead you. So no one's going to miss out, whether they're important in the world's eyes or not, small or great, whatever their ethnic background is right or alien in your midst.

By God's good word, they're going to be governed. Of course, we meet today to hear God's word, to sing God's word, to receive God's word. God still guides his people through his word.

So how can we inherit these great promises? How will we get through life to receive the great promise beyond of life in God's perfect kingdom? Well, God has faithfully provided.

[11 : 16] He provides the church. Part of depending on God is to gather like this, week by week. Church is not a filling station where we get topped up and then go off. It's a family where we grow and are nurtured.

It's not a club, like a golf club to join. It's a community of which we're part. It's certainly not a building to go to. This is a school after all. But it's a body where we're all connected, joined together.

This is part of God's provision for you and for me that we will make it safely into his land, into his perfect kingdom one day. So remember God's faithful provision.

It's a reason we can depend upon him for the future. But also let's remember God's faithful protection for his people's flourishing. Look at verses 19 on this. Of course, it's not just enough to be part of a church.

We've got to respond individually to how God promised God gives us. And Israel had failed to respond in the past. 40 years earlier, they'd stood on the verge of the promised land.

[12 : 16] Verse 21, we read about that. The Lord had said, see, the land is before you. Go up and take possession of you. But they failed to trust. Look at verse 26. Yet you would not go up but rebelled against the command of the Lord your God.

And so we need to learn from this history how God's people failed in the past and why. So what went wrong? Well, the way Moses tells the story, it's really a matter of what they chose to focus on. There's a lot of language around using seeing and believing. So look at verse 19. What did they see? What did the Israelites see as they arrived at this point?

Verse 19, we set out from Horeb, from Mount Sinai where they'd been given the law and went through all that great and terrifying wilderness that you saw on the way to the hill country of the Amorites.

They'd seen the terrifying wilderness. They'd seen also, therefore, how God had cared for them in that wilderness. How the Lord had protected them. They saw the land ahead of them.

[13:19] Verse 21, see the Lord has set the land before you. Go up and take possession. They could look up and see the very hills that God had brought them to. And they saw that it was a good land.

Verse 25, these spies came back, they brought the fruit. They saw that what God had promised to give them was indeed good with all the mountains and grapes these guys brought back. And yet, what did they do having seen all that, having seen God's protection and provision?

What did they do? Verse 26, you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God and you murmured in your tents and said, because the Lord hated us, he brought us out of the land of Egypt to give us into the hand of the Amorites to destroy us.

What were they doing? They were gossiping, maligning God's character, discouraging one another, causing each other's hearts to melt because they were forgetting what they'd seen of God's goodness and instead were focusing on the challenges ahead of them.

Do you see that? Verse 28, where are we going up? Our brothers have made our hearts melt saying that people are greater and taller than we are. The cities are great and fortified up to heaven. Besides, we see the sons of the Anakim there, the Anakim were called giants of old.

[14:32] It's really like saying, you've got to go and play rugby against the All Blacks. These big genetically modified guys who look like they can flatten any of us. That's who the Anakim were.

They were the All Blacks of their day. See, what were they choosing to focus on? They'd seen in the past God's provision and protection. Now they're choosing to focus on the problems instead of God's power.

The size of the people, the defences of the people, the power of the people. Now, those of us who are Christians, what do we choose to focus on in life? It's easy, isn't it, to focus on how hard it is in our schools these days where everything's so secular and the culture is so bad and we can fear sending our children into school.

We can fear British culture, so apathetic to spiritual things, so hostile to Christian things specifically. we can fear what can seem like the increasing materialism and sexualisation in our culture.

Perhaps as a church we can fear the thoughts of trying to raise money to redevelop the building.

We can easily look on the problems, can't we? Instead of looking on God's provision and power that we've seen over the years.

[15:58] So we need to recall God's faithful protection of his people. And Moses does that. He provides three pictures to encourage the people, to call them to depend upon the Lord. Look at verse 29, see the first of them there.

Do not be in dread or afraid of them, the Anakim and these Ammonites. The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes.

He saw God as a warrior for you. He fought for you. He released you from the great superpower of the day. He flattened Egypt. They begged you to go in the end. He was a warrior who fought for you.

Brothers and sisters, we have seen the Lord Jesus Christ fight for us on the cross as he defeated Satan, triumphant over him on the cross.

God fights for us. He's fought for us in the Lord Jesus, defeating us, defeating Satan's powers.

What can possibly stand up against him? God is a warrior, but also he's a father.

[17:00] Verse 30, verse 31. In the wilderness where you've seen how the Lord your God carries you as a man carries his son. They couldn't have survived in the wilderness, did they?

Without the bread, without the manna from heaven, without the water from the rock, without God protecting them. He carried them as a father carries his children. I'm sure many of us have been carried by our fathers when we're children.

Many of us who are fathers know that carry our children today. We've all seen things like that, haven't we? We were on holiday in the Isle of Wight back in Orvis. And Mariel had got this great book of walks, of family walks.

They were great walks and they were very good. We went on walks most days. But one day there was a little bit of a problem. We had an ice cream stop so our children were fully fortified with magnum ice creams, jar gluten free so they loved them.

We carried on the path as instructed and found that it was closed. It had been dug up by a digger. There was a ditch we could not cross. So Mariel, great map reader that she is, looked at the map and said there was another path here that we can take that's marked on the map.

[18:06] So we went down, we found where this path was and the metals and the briars were pretty much up to my shoulders. They would have dwarfed the kids. The only way to get through on this second path was for me to carry them.

they would have been in fear and dread of those stinging metals and brambles and everything else. So I carried them. That is a very minor echo of how God carried his children through the wilderness and how he still carries his people today.

Us. People of ours. He is a warrior who fights. A father who carries. And a guide. Look at verse 32. In spite of this word he did not believe the Lord your God who went before you in the way to seek you out a place to pitch your tents in the fire by night in the cloud by day to show you the way you should go.

This is our God. Father, Son and Spirit. The Father who cares for his people. The Son who fought the decisive battle on the cross for his people. The Spirit who is guiding his people moment by moment with us through this wilderness pilgrimage to take us home.

We can depend upon him. He faithfully protects his people. It's true for us generally. I'm sure many of us have stories of how this is true for us personally.

[19:30] How God has carried you through difficult times. How he's led you. How he's taken care of you. In our family the very fact we're here today is a great reminder of God's protection and provision for us over three years of interesting health shall we say.

This is Christian experience isn't it? We have a God who provides and protects. John Newton in his great hymn Amazing Grace puts it like this. Tis grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.

This is how we know we can depend upon God his faithful protection and his faithful provision. See if Christianity is just self-help if it's just trying to be a nice person and keep the rules then it's no help at all to a broken grieving community.

But if it's about a faithful God who rescues and promises ultimate deliverance and he's shown his faithfulness then it is good news. Good news for us in this room good news for this community where we live.

But the challenge then is how do we respond to this God of faithfulness? How do we respond to this call? Well as Moses recounts the history he shows three ways in which various Israelites responded first time around.

[20:48] Look at verse 26 the first response was rebellion. You would not go up but rebelled against the command of the Lord your God. Of course many people just rebelled today just don't listen to God's command just shut their ears to it so we will not listen we do not care what God has to say.

What's the result of rebelling against the loving creator God? Verse 34 The Lord heard your words and was angered and he swore not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give your fathers.

What's the ultimate evil? Closing our ears to the living God rebelling against him no hope of heaven no paradise no forgiveness if we rebel against God and his terms.

So it's outright rebellion but it's also secondly relying on self. Look at verse 41 Then you answered me having heard this judgment we have sinned against the Lord we ourselves will go up and fight just as the Lord our God has commanded us.

Now it's really important we notice what's going on here. They are relying on themselves. Look back to verse 30 there's a key contrast. Verse 30 Moses said the Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you.

[22:12] As they depended upon God's word he would fight for them. Having rejected God's word they said we'll go fight for themselves. It'll be fine. They were relying on themselves. And that is so many of us do that don't we?

In this world today. I met a guy at one of our children's parties recently Alan he said I'm not religious myself we've got nothing against religion but I'm not religious myself.

I wonder how many times you've heard that line. Well what was that guy saying? He said there may be a God there and that's nice for you if there is but I don't need God I'm okay.

And he has a very nice person he's a great father he has lovely kids but actually he's relying on himself. People also rely on themselves they just go through the religious motions. In a sense that's what the Israelites were doing here. Oh he said go up God I will go up. So I have a friend who likes to come to church occasionally who goes to the the Buddhist temple when he's in Thailand where he goes often it's all I'm a nice person I'll do nice things I'm sure that's not he's relying on himself.

[23 : 18] So many people do. Do you see the key problem? Verse 42 the Lord said to me say to them do not go up or fight for I am not in your midst lest you be defeated before your enemies.

If we're relying on ourselves we don't care if the Lord is in our midst. If we're depending on God then there can be nothing more scary than thinking we don't have God with us.

I was so delighted to be at a prayer meeting on Wednesday night. Mary and I were both hugely encouraged to see signs of a church family who do depend on God. So many people coming to gather to pray a wonderful thing not relying on self.

Moses goes on and says that they were presumptuous in their self-reliance. It's presumed God would be for them. They acted presumptuously. So that's two responses. Outright rebellion firstly rely on self secondly and then thirdly there's resting on God's promises which is what Caleb did. Look at verse 36. Having said that none of these generations will get into the land the Lord has except Caleb the son of Jephunneh he shall see it and to him and his children I will give the land on which he is trodden because he has wholly followed the Lord.

[24 : 38] What does it look like to wholly follow the Lord? Does it mean being perfect in our obedience? No. It means doing what Caleb did. You can look it up later in Numbers chapter 14 verse 8.

This is what Caleb and Joshua said to the people as spies on that occasion. It says If the Lord delights in us he will bring us into this land and give it to us a land that flows with milk and honey only do not rebel against the Lord and do not fear the people of the land for they are bred for us. I love that. It's an ancient Hebrew way to say these people are toast because God is with us. I guess they didn't have toast but they are bred. Why? Because their protection is removed from them and the Lord is with us.

Do not fear them. See wholeheartedly following the Lord meant he rested on God's promises. So God has promised God will do it. No one can stand against him. We look to the Lord's faithful protection of his people.

So will we do that? Will we look to God's faithful protection? Will we rest on God's promises as Caleb did? Will we rest on his promises when we're in secondary school?

[25 : 54] The peer pressure must be enormous to join in with all the sexual activity all the gossip all the everything else that goes on. Will we say hang on I remember God's promise.

I remember that I trust in Jesus. I am loved by the living God. The Son of God has given his life for me. The Spirit of God lives in me. God the Father chose me before the dawn of time.

I can rest on those promises. Why do I need to seek approval from anyone else? Or as life is perplexing as we deal with aging parents or complex situations with finances and where are we going to get money to live on?

Are we going to rest on God's promises? Or are we going to panic? God is faithful. He's provided for his people.

He protects his people. Let's not rebel against him. Let's not rely on ourselves. Let's rest on God's promises. So I was preparing this week.

[26 : 59] A flyer dropped through the door. It's funny enough it's from a state agent. Normally they're trying to sell us houses in Chiswick. This one just said with a very pretty autumn photo. The best way to predict the future is...

How would you finish that sentence? The best way to predict the future is to create it. Let us help you take the next step. Now that is the story most people live isn't it?

That if they want to know their future they need to create it. The Bible has a different story. It's a story of rescue and promise. The best way to predict the future is to look back at God's past results. He's provided for his people. He's protected his people. So we can depend upon him. The best way is not to create the future but to rely on God for it.

Because God is faithful to his people let's depend upon him to receive what he has promised. Let's pray together.