



## **The Center of the Story**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

How someone tells the story of their life says a lot about their functional view of God. Say you're catching up with an old friend on all that's happened in their life as of late. And the story they tell is a list of all the things they've been doing at work, with their family, or in the community. They claim to be a Christian, but you can't help but sense the good works they're doing are the functional center of their story.

Say you're talking with a family member after Thanksgiving dinner. And it seems like no matter which way the conversation goes, they find a way to insert example after example of all the terrible, hurtful, or crazy things other people have done to them. It's a police line-up of personal enemies and a lengthy one at that. As you're driving home, you can't help but sense the bad things other people are doing are the functional center of their story.

Or say you're caring for a church member who asks for prayer. You invite them to share what's going on and they proceed to give you a list of all the sins they've committed, all the consequences of various mistakes and failures, and say, "Would you ask God to help me stop making a mess of my life so I can be useful in his kingdom?" You take a few minutes to pray. Yet afterward you can't shake the sense that something was off. It almost felt like their own sin had become the functional center of their story.

The first few chapters of Deuteronomy review a roughly forty-year chapter of Israel's story, from shortly after they departed Egypt to immediately before entering the land God promised them. The focus shifts at the end of chapter 3, however, from what the whole nation has been doing to what Moses himself has been doing. He speaks of the good works he did for Israel. He speaks of the enemies she had already faced and would soon face. He even speaks of the consequences of his own sin.

All of that is real. But none of those things are the functional center of the story as Moses describes it. God is. He always has been. He always will be. Moses perceives as much and wants Israel to remember as much as she prepares to enter the Promised Land.



We need the same exhortation, my friends! Our good works are not the center. Our enemies are not the center. Our sins are not the center. God is the center of our story. That's true in a cosmic sense for every man or woman who has ever lived. But it's especially true in a redemptive sense for his blood-bought people. Consider some of the ways Moses sees God at the center of the story.

### **1) GOD USES HIS PEOPLE TO GIVE REST TO HIS PEOPLE (verses 12-20)**

After Israel defeated two Amorite kings east of the Jordan river, Sihon and Og, some of the Israelites asked Moses to give the conquered lands to them as their inheritance instead of possessing land with the majority of the tribes on the west side of the Jordan. Evidently, the territories of Heshbon and Bashan were ideally suited for raising livestock and Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh had plenty of them! Numbers 32 provides the details.

After clarifying their intentions were not to create division or shirk their responsibility to help their brothers, Moses obliges and apportions the Transjordan territory to the two and a half tribes. As God's appointed leader, Moses was responsible for distributing the land. The pattern in verses 12-17 is consistent. Verse 12, "I gave to the Reubenites and the Gadites..." Verse 13, "I gave to the half-tribe of Manasseh..." Verse 15, "To Machir I gave Gilead..." Verse 16, "To the Reubenites and the Gadites I gave the territory..."

I gave. I gave. I gave. I gave. Dividing the land required real leadership work on Moses' part no less than conquering the land in the first place. The aside in verse 14 instructive. The region of Argob didn't fall into Jair the Manassite's lap. He "Took all the region of Argob." Hard military labor was required. And it would continue to be required when the nation crossed the Jordan and began to fight against the Canaanites. Moses doesn't minimize or want Israel to think his labor (or theirs) is insignificant.

But notice how he summarizes the whole experience in verse 18. "The LORD your God has given you this land to possess." It wasn't ultimately a work they accomplished. It was the Lord's. He gave it to them, keeping the covenant promise he made to Abraham centuries earlier. In verses 18-20, Moses twice refers to the land as something he gives and twice as something the Lord gives. Why? Because he recognized the Lord was simply using him to get it done.

Christian, when you are doing the work of evangelism, discipleship, mercy, administration, parenting, or whatever other good work the Lord has called you to do,



know this. The surest way to not be crushed under an oppressive sense of responsibility is to remember your work is ultimately the Lord's enterprise.

Has he seen fit to use you? Praise the Lord. But do not think for a moment success rises or falls on the tide of your diligence, your perfection, your strategic leadership, or your exceptional labor. You are a tool in the Master's hand. Success is guaranteed by one thing and one thing only. God keeps his promises. He completes the work he began.

Rest in that, weary saint! That doesn't remove the necessity of hard labor. Rather, it infuses our hard labor with a joyful contentment and quiet confidence that would otherwise elude our grasp.

What sort of purpose did God accomplish by giving Israel land to possess? Look at verse 20. "...until the Lord gives rest to your brothers, as to you..." Rest describes far more than the absence of wilderness wandering or military combat. Rest in the land is the joy, peace, and satisfaction of living as God's people in God's place.

It points back to the Garden of Eden, the perfect place God created for his people. It points forward to the new heavens, the new earth, the day Christ returns to dwell with his people and makes all things new. It points to the present age where God by his Spirit comes to dwell within every man or woman who repents of their sins and believes in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. It points to the local assembly of the church where we experience God's manifest presence in a powerful way through the ministry of the Word and the sacraments.

God delights to give his people rest by bringing them into his place. He does it through the gospel, through the work Jesus accomplished on the cross. Rest from proving your worth and value. Rest from doing enough good deeds to earn God's approval. Rest from the agony of searching for someone or something that can satisfy the deepest longings in your soul. Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

And there's a parallel between the way God gave Israel rest in the land back then and the way God gives his people in Jesus today. Look at what Moses commanded Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh to do in verse 18. "All your men of valor shall cross over armed before your brothers, the people of Israel. Only your wives, your little ones, and your livestock...shall remain in the cities that I have given you, until the LORD gives rest to your brothers, as to you, and they also occupy the land that the LORD your God gives



them beyond the Jordan. Then each of you may return to his possession which I have given you.”

Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh had tasted and seen something of God’s rest and now it was their responsibility to help the rest of God’s people to experience the same. Brothers and sisters, that’s a beautiful illustration of the work God has called us to do in one another’s lives as fellow church members. Listen to what the author of Hebrews says in the context of describing the salvation rest the Lord offers us through Christ.

Hebrews 3:12-13, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

In the midst of my temptations and suffering, you say to me, “Matthew, remember Jesus. Trust him. Obey him.” In the midst of your temptations and suffering, I say to you, “Friend, remember Jesus. Trust him. Obey him.” God uses his people to give rest to his people as we urge, admonish, and exhort one another to hold fast to Christ.

I doubt many of you would disagree with that principle in theory. But the claim of Deuteronomy 3 goes further. Are you willing to help other people find rest in Jesus even when it costs you something? Think about it. What did the “Men of valor” from the three tribes have to leave behind? And not just for a few days or weeks? Their families and possessions.

Wait. Doesn’t God want husbands to love their wives? Doesn’t God want fathers to care for their children? If you’re a Christian, isn’t your family supposed to be the highest priority in your life? It almost sounds like Moses is instructing families to sacrifice their own comfort for the sake of helping God’s people to experience his rest!

That’s exactly what Moses is doing. He’s commanding Israel to reject the self-centeredness that says, “I’ve got what I need out of the church, so I’m tapping out.” We do the same thing if we use “family time” or “family needs” to justify or excuse our failure to sacrificially serve, love, or show hospitality to our brothers and sisters in Christ. There is a “Christian” species of “Family first” that is nothing more than selfishness in disguise.

Then and now God calls us to lay down our lives as individuals and families for the collective good of his people. We don’t find life by holding onto our life as families. We



find life by laying down our lives as families for the good of others. I'm not talking about discipling everyone other than your own children, moms and dads. I'm talking about leading your kids through the example of your life that caring for the welfare of the church and the people of God, is of the highest priority.

Don't love the church instead of loving your family. And don't love your family instead of loving the church. Love your family by leading your family in sacrificially serving the church – even when it's hard, even when it's inconvenient, even when it reduces the amount of alone time you have in the quiet of your home.

Remember Jesus' words in Luke 9:59–62, "To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' And Jesus said to him, 'Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Yet another said, 'I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'"

It required a significant amount of trust in Yahweh for Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh to leave their families and goods with no military protection whatsoever. Apart from the faithfulness of God, it made no sense. Then again, does living for the sake of Him who died for us ever make sense in the court of human wisdom?

When the missionaries we support in East Asia tell me their kids are suffering for Jesus' sake in ways they never did here in the states does that mean they shouldn't have gone in the first place? Since when did what is easiest for our families become the defining mark of biblical obedience?

May it not be so among us, brothers and sisters! God uses his people to give rest to his people. It will require significant sacrifice, laying down good things for the sake of something far better – the joy of participating in the work God is doing all around you that Christ Jesus may be glorified! And lest we fall prey to pride or self-pity ruminating over all we have given up for the sake of his kingdom, remember this. God uses our good works. But they are not the center of the story. He is.

## **2) THE GOD WHO DELIVERED US IN THE PAST WILL DELIVER US AGAIN (verses 21-22)**

What else did Moses do "At that time" besides apportioning land across the Jordan? He gave a specific command to his successor. Deuteronomy represents Moses' last words to the nation. A leadership transition is imminent. So what does he tell Joshua?



Verse 21, “Your eyes have seen all that the LORD your God has done to these two kings. So will the LORD do to all the kingdoms into which you are crossing.” The first “Your” is singular, but the second “Your” and the final “You” are both plural. Moses is addressing Joshua and simultaneously speaking to the entire nation, preparing them to follow him.

The message is exactly what Israel needed to hear after the defeat of Sihon and Og and before the conquest of Canaan. What God has done in the past is a sure indicator of what he will do in the future. Sometimes people talk about faith in God as a blind leap in the dark. “I guess I’ll give faith a shot and see what happens.” That’s not biblical faith.

Biblical faith is informed reliance, trust grounded in reliable evidence. Why do we trust God will grant his people final victory over every physical and spiritual enemy? Because we have a sure record of his faithfulness in the past, example after example of God delivering his people from their enemies in Scripture, culminating in the cross of Christ, where our King defeated the enemies of sin, Satan, and death!

May the Spirit guard us, brother and sisters, from being a people who perpetually cry, “Oh Lord, what have you done for me lately?” In light of his faithfulness, what do we say? How do we respond to enemies without and within? Verse 22, “You shall not fear them, for it is the LORD your God who fights for you.”

What are you tempted to fear, friend? What are you worried will overwhelm you or prevent you from experiencing the fulfillment of God’s promises in your life? Humiliation? Poverty? Sickness? Betrayal? What enemies are you concerned might keep you out of the land, so to speak, far from the joy of relationship with God?

Is this world filled with physical and spiritual enemies too powerful for us to stop? Absolutely. We don’t know how helpless we really are. So why should Joshua not be afraid? Why should Israel not be afraid? Why should we not be afraid as the people of God? Because the Lord our God fights for us. He personally contends against whatever enemies oppose his good and perfect plans for your life, Christian.

When an unjust boss seems hellbent on destroying your career, remember, it is the LORD your God who fights for you. When a critical or lazy spouse makes leading or following seem impossible, remember, it is the LORD your God who fights for you. When the allure of sexual sin feels too desirable to resist, remember, it is the LORD your God who fights for you.



He is not passively watching as events go down, content to know it will all work out in the end. He is actively, continually, faithfully, and graciously, contending with those who contend with us. “So will the Lord do” is a divine declaration of war against more than Canaan. It’s a promise of victory over every evil power in the universe.

What does a team of 7-year-olds feel when the bases are loaded and one of the dads steps up to the plate? Why do they begin cheering and jumping up and down? Because they know what my presence on their team represents in that moment. It means a homerun is coming. It means a win is guaranteed. Such is the confidence we have in King Jesus, brothers and sisters. The enemies of our body and soul are real. But they are not the center of the story. God is.

### **3) SIN MAY CHANGE THE WAY WE EXPERIENCE GOD’S POWER, BUT IT DOES NOT PREVENT US FROM PARTICIPATING IN HIS WORK (verses 23-29)**

The last vignette in chapter 3 is perhaps the most vulnerable experience Moses recounts in the entire passage. “At that time,” as Israel waited on the border of the Promised Land, Moses asked the Lord to retract one of the most painful consequences of his own sin.

Numbers 20 provides the background details. Israel is wandering the wilderness and runs out of water. So they come grumbling to Moses and give him an earful. Verses 4-5, “Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place?”

Moses asks the Lord what he should do. God tells him in verse 8 to assemble the entire congregation and “Tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them...” Moses gathers the people, but he doesn’t obey God’s Word. Numbers 20:10-11, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?’ And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.”

What did he do wrong? He struck the rock in anger – twice – instead of speaking to it with faith in God’s promise. And he did it in front of the entire nation. The Lord holds him accountable accordingly in verse 12. “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.”



The consequences of sin are painful, friends. And the temptation to blame shift lies close at hand. In both Deuteronomy 1:37 and Deuteronomy 3:26, Moses puts all the responsibility on the Israelites who induced him to sin. “The LORD was angry with me because of you...” Is that true? In part, yes. The entire episode arguably wouldn’t have happened if Israel had not provoked Moses to anger.

But does that mean Moses isn’t really at fault? Not at all. He still chose to sin. And the Lord pointedly refuses to take away the consequences of his sin in verse 26. “Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again.”

A commendable desire motivates his requests. He longs to see the Lord display his mighty arm on Israel’s behalf in the land beyond the Jordan. He knows the defeat of Sihon and Og was just the opening stanza in the symphony of God’s salvation. He even gets his theology spot on, confessing the Lord’s utter uniqueness and exclusivity. “For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours?” So why does God say no? Because Moses’ request was out of line with God’s revealed will. The situation is similar to a Christian who knowingly dates or marries a non-Christian hoping God will use your influence to bring them to Christ. Part of what you desire is good, but your actions are still a direct violation of the Word of God.

Moses should have humbly submitted to God’s authority and accepted the consequence of his sin. Instead, he tests God’s patience, questions his wisdom, and keeps shifting the blame to other people. The irrevocable consequences of sin are real, friends. When we choose to go our way instead of God’s way, we miss out on real opportunities to see God’s power and glory displayed in us and around us.

When marriage gets hard and you bail, you lose an opportunity to see God redeem broken relationships. When life gets stressful and you turn to food or alcohol to numb the pain, you lose an opportunity to see God satisfy your soul through the gift of his Word. When the Lord gives you a chance to share the gospel and you stay silent, you lose an opportunity to see God show himself strong in your weakness.

The consequence of his sin changed the way Moses experienced God’s power. Yet it didn’t prevent Moses from experiencing the Lord’s mercy. He mercifully granted Moses a glimpse of his provision from afar. Verse 27, “Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and look at it with your eyes...” He didn’t owe as much to Moses any more than he owes us a single blessing. All we have is a gift of grace, an expression of God’s unmerited favor.





And the Lord's mercy didn't stop with what he allowed Moses to see from the top of Pisgah. He also gave him the privilege of continuing to participate in his work, even if it wasn't in the way Moses would have preferred. His role would be different because of his sin, but the Lord still had good work for Moses to do. V. 28, "But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he shall go over at the head of this people, and he shall put them in possession of the land that you shall see."

What does pride say when the consequences of our sin seem to alter the opportunities available to us? The trust we used to enjoy? The ministry we used to have? The work we dreamed of accomplishing? "Alright, Lord. If you won't give me the leadership role or ministry platform I want, I'm out. I'm done with serving the church, caring for your people, and prioritizing my spiritual life." We can be just like a kid on the playground who says, "Either you play the game I want, or I quit."

In contrast, what does the humble man or woman say? "Lord, I will gladly embrace whatever role you see fit to assign me, even if it means supporting someone else in fulfilling the very ministry I longed to do myself." Instructing Moses to wholeheartedly support Joshua was a divine invitation to walk in humility before God and man.

Friend, getting to serve our gracious God in any capacity is an unspeakable privilege. If the consequences of sin in your life have impacted the way you're able to serve others, do not count yourself out from participating in the Lord's work. Your role may be different. But God's good purposes for your life will continue to prevail if you are willing to humbly exchange your dreams for his ways. The consequences of sin are real. But they are not the center of the story. God is.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite all his exceptional character qualities, Moses remained a broken man who needed a Savior. He was an imperfect mediator just like Joshua and every other human ruler in the entire Old Testament. There's only one man, one ruler, one King who can lead us into the good land, into heaven itself. His name is Jesus.

He doesn't bring God's people part of the way and fall short. He brings us all the way home. He finishes the work he began for he is perfect in all his ways. Unlike Moses, he could bear the guilt of our sin because he had no sin of his own. The blame Moses tried to shift from himself to God's people Jesus humbly accepted on behalf of God's people. Why? So you could enter the salvation rest the Lord longs for you to enjoy.



In Deuteronomy 3, neither the good works Moses accomplished, the enemies Israel faced, or the sin Moses committed is the center of the story. The Lord is. So be careful how you tell your story, Christian.

God uses his people to give rest to his people. That means your good works matter, but they are not the center of the story. The God who delivered us in the past will deliver us again. That means our enemies are real, but they are not the center of the story. The consequences of sin may change the way we experience God's power, but they do not sideline us from participating in God's work. They are not the center of our story.

Jesus is and always will be. Therein lies our confidence for today and all the hope we need for tomorrow. Let's pray and ask for God's help to keep our eyes on him.