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## Chapter IX

# Entering the Promised Land

### UNDERSTANDING

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*(to use with your group)*

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UNDERSTANDING

## WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

After a year's stay at Mount Sinai following the golden calf idolatry, the Israelites finally depart and head to the Promised Land (Nm 10:11). They are on the verge of receiving this great blessing God has promised the people ever since the time of Abraham. Indeed, God is prepared to give them the Land right now—but, as we will soon discover, when Israel faces its next test in the desert, their hearts are still not ready to receive this great gift.

Let's turn to Numbers 13-14 to see what prevents the Israelites from entering the Promised Land at this time.

### Test No. 3: Afraid to Enter the Land

Now, a third testing of Israel takes place as the people come to the edge of the Promised Land. The Lord tells Moses to select one man from each of the twelve tribes to scout out the land of Canaan. They return bearing a mixed report. On one hand, the land is good, flowing with milk and honey. On the other hand, they report that the people in the land are remarkably strong and live in fortified cities. Ten of the spies view the strength of these inhabitants as an insurmountable obstacle: "We are not able to go up against the people for they are stronger than we" (Nm 13:31). Hearing this evil report, the congregation of Israel cries out against Moses and Aaron,

saying, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why does the Lord bring us into this land, to fall by the sword?” (Nm 14:2-3).

Outraged at the people’s lack of trust in God to protect them, two of the twelve spies, Joshua and Caleb, stand up and tear their clothes, pleading with the people not to rebel against the Lord: “Do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them” (Nm 14:9).

But this only enrages the people all the more. They are so terrified about facing the powerful Canaanite armies that they were ready to stone Joshua and Caleb for their insistence that they follow God into this dangerous (though divinely promised) land. At just this moment, the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people of Israel, rescuing Joshua and Caleb from the rebellious mob.

In a severe example of His justice, God grants the people what they desire. They say they don’t want to enter the land; therefore, God won’t give it to them. Only Joshua and Caleb—the two faithful spies who defended Yahweh and trusted in His plan—will be permitted to receive God’s promise (Nm 14:30). The rest of this unfaithful generation of Israelites will be disinherited from the land and will have to wander in the desert for forty years until they die: “Your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness; and of all your number, numbered from twenty years old and upward, who have murmured against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell” (Nm 14:29-30). Why forty years in the desert? God explains, “According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years” (Nm 14:34).

## Like Fathers, Like Sons

Israel's travel plans have taken an unexpected detour. An entire generation of the people is condemned to wander forty years in the desert and never enter the Promised Land. But at the end of this period, there is hope. The older generation has passed and their children have now come of age. This new group of Israelites approach the edge of the Promised Land that their parents rejected and are given the opportunity to start anew with the Lord.

Hopes for renewed faithfulness are quickly dashed when the Israelites develop an association with the pagan women in the land which will lead to their downfall. Numbers 25 tells us that the Israelites “began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab” and began worshipping one of their gods, Baal of Peor (Nm 25:2-3). This idolatry represents another dramatic break in Israel's relationship with God—one that will be felt down through the generations.

God's response to this new generation's idolatry will be to issue a new disciplinary law that comes to be known as Deuteronomy, which literally means “second law.” It is a “book of the boundary” that is first understood geographically (it is at the border of the promised land) but also *morally* since the people of Israel stand at a critical turning point in their relationship with God (see sidebar).

### SIDEBAR - THE SECOND LAW: A BOOK ON THE BOUNDARY

Biblical scholar Christopher Wright describes Deuteronomy as “a book on the boundary.” This certainly can be understood *geographically*, since Deuteronomy was given at a place called Beth Peor (Dt 3:29), which was only a day's journey to the Promised Land. But this

description also makes sense *morally*, since the people of Israel stand at a critical turning point in their relationship with God. They are about to enter the Promised Land, whose inhabitants have built an alluring pagan, immoral culture. Though initially hostile to Israel, these Canaanite societies have many enticing elements that could lead God's people astray, as was made evident by the seductive power of the Moabite women to lead the people quickly into worshipping Baal of Peor. If such apostasy occurred when the Israelites dwelt on the outskirts of these pagan cultures, what will happen when they enter the heart of this new land?

Deuteronomy is a law that prepares the people for life in this pagan, polytheistic society. This law is, first of all, uncompromisingly monotheistic. Take, for example, the monotheistic "creed" which the Israelites are to recite throughout their daily lives. Every morning and evening, and whenever they go out in the streets or sit in their homes, they are to have on their lips these solemn words professing their total allegiance to the one Lord:

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Dt 6:4-9)

Subverting the pagan religions in the land, Deuteronomy does not simply emphasize the existence of one God but unabashedly proclaims that the one true God is Yahweh—not any of the pagan deities, but the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt, entered into a special covenant relationship them, and brought them to the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy also calls for unconditional loyalty to Yahweh in the way the people live. Faithfulness to God is more than just an intellectual

conviction (that there is only one God, Yahweh); it is also a matter of the heart. The people are called to live lives that are markedly different from the pagans in the land. In Deuteronomy, perhaps more than anywhere else in the Bible, Moses emphasizes the vital necessity of steadfastly following God's commandments. Since he knows the people will face pressures to conform to the enticing pagan lifestyles around them—immoral ways of living that promise a false and fleeting happiness—Moses stresses that obedience to God's law is the only pathway to the abundant life and the true, lasting happiness that God wants to give the people: "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God...by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments....then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it" (Dt 30:16). But if the people's hearts turn away from God and turn toward the pagan ways of life, they will experience the emptiness of life outside the blessing—what the Bible calls the curse.

### **The Two Ways**

In Deuteronomy 28, Moses presents to Israel what is known as "the two ways." He challenges the people to choose between two paths: the way of life and the way of death. On one hand, if the people keep God's law, they will be blessed in the Promised Land (Dt 28:1-14). Israel will be "set high above all the nations of the earth" (Dt 28:1) and the Promised Land will be for them like a return to paradise, a new Eden. They are told that they will be blessed and fruitful with children, as Adam and Eve were told in Eden (Dt 28:4, Gn 1:26-28). The ground shall be blessed again, as well as all the work of their hands in the field (Dt 28:4, 12)—blessings that are the reversals of the curses on the ground and on man's labors after the fall (Gn 3:17-19).

But, on the other hand, if the people fail to keep the law, they will place themselves outside these wonderful blessings that God wants to give them. Instead, they will put themselves under curses, the culmination of which will be Israel's being driven from the land in exile (Dt 28:15-68). Just as Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden when they sinned, so will the Israelites be driven from the Promised Land if they break the covenant with God.

This is the choice Moses offers the people: the way of covenant faithfulness to God that leads to blessedness, and the way of infidelity that leads to death. He pleads with the people to make the right choice: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days" (Dt 30:19-20).

This challenge of the two ways applies to us, too, for we are faced with a similar choice: Every day we make decisions that lead us down the path either to the abundant life and true happiness that comes from walking in God's ways, or to the insecurity, emptiness, frustration, and disappointment that comes from not making God our priority. Right now, if you had to evaluate your own life, on which path would you say you are traveling?

### **Not If, But When...**

Back to Israel: Which path will God's people take? Moses makes Israel's future clear: "And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among the nations where the Lord your God has driven you..." (Dt 30:1). These are ominous words. Notice how Moses does not say "if

all these things come upon you”, but “*when*.” In other words, Moses knows Israel is going to be unfaithful to the covenant. He foretells that Israel will experience some of the blessings in the land, but, in the end, the people will break the covenant and the curses will fall upon them. They will lose the land and be scattered among the nations in exile.

These curses will bring God’s people face to face with their own brokenness, humbly standing before the Lord and crying out for mercy. One theological reflection we could draw out of the Book of Deuteronomy is how the law helps the people recognize their weakness and beg for God’s help and mercy. The Ten Commandments were given at Mount Sinai, but the Israelites’ forty years in the desert have made it evident that they do not yet have the heart to keep God’s commands. As the next several books of the Bible will reveal, their future life in the Promised Land will make their weakness all the more evident. God’s people might possess the law—so they *know* what is good—but they do not seem to have the ability to keep it.

This points to one important purpose of the law: It reveals both the good that we should do and our utter inability to live it out. The Lord’s commandments, therefore, make it abundantly clear how much we need God’s grace to fulfill the law, and it humbles us so that we are more inclined to call out to the Lord for help. As St. Augustine explained in *The Spirit and the Letter*, “The law was given so that grace might be sought; grace was given so that the law might be fulfilled.”

### **Circumcision of Heart**

This healing power of grace is foreshadowed in the same passage of Deuteronomy that offers a bleak forecast about Israel’s future in exile. In this condition of exiled suffering, the Israelites will turn their



hearts to God and God will rescue them, bringing them back to the land:

“And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you this day, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes, and have compassion upon you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples.”  
(Dt 30:1-3)

Furthermore, Moses foretells how God will accomplish an even *greater* act of salvation for the Israelites than rescuing them from their enemies. God will perform a profound work in their own hearts, empowering them to finally fulfill the law.

“And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.... And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord, and keep all his commandments.” (Dt. 30:6, 8)

In these verses, we encounter one of the most important prophecies in the Bible so far about the kind of salvation that God wants to work in our lives. God doesn't want merely obedient servants who follow His commandments. Ultimately, He wants sons and daughters who love Him. He doesn't just want external obedience—simply doing what is right; like a lover, he wants our hearts. The people of Israel have demonstrated that their hearts are weak, selfish, fearful, and incapable of remaining faithful to the Lord. This is not a problem

specific to Israel; not one of us, by our own power, is capable of loving God the way we ought. But Moses announces that God will heal their wounded hearts and give His people the ability to do what they could not do on their own. This transformation of their hearts will cause them to walk in God's ways, so much so that Moses can finally say to them, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart."

This is the ultimate goal for God's dealings with Israel throughout the Exodus story. God wants to free His people not only from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to sin. He wants to take them through "an internal exodus" in which their hearts are healed and they are transformed by His love. All this, of course, foreshadows the work that Jesus Christ will accomplish through His death, resurrection, and sending "the Spirit into our hearts," so that, "led by the Spirit," we can finally live as sons and daughters of God, faithfully loving and serving Him as our heavenly Father (Rom 8:13-15, Gal 4:6).

# NOTES

DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Numbers 13:25-33; 14:5-10; Deuteronomy 6:4-10;  
28:1-11, 15-20; 30:1-8*

*Please read aloud:* So close...and yet so far! After a year's stay at Mount Sinai following the golden calf idolatry, the Israelites finally depart and head to the Promised Land (Nm 10:11). They are on the verge of receiving this great blessing God has promised the people ever since the time of Abraham. Indeed, God is prepared to give them the Land right now—but, as we will soon discover, when Israel faces its next test in the desert, their hearts are still not ready to receive this great gift.

Let's turn to Numbers 13-14 to see what prevents the Israelites from entering the Promised Land at this time. Before we read the passage, a little bit of background. Moses is sending 12 spies to scope out the land. Were there other people there? Was the land good? Were the cities walled? Was the land fertile (Nm 13:17-20)? Let's read about their report:

## **Read Numbers 13:25-33.**

1. What is the report of the twelve spies about the land? What do they find there?

*Answer: They return bearing a mixed report. On one hand, the land is good, flowing with milk and honey. On the other hand, they report that the people in the land are remarkably strong and live in fortified cities. Ten of the spies view the strength of these inhabitants as an insurmountable obstacle: "We are not able to go up against the people for they are stronger than we" (Nm 13:31).*

**Please read aloud:** Hearing this report, the congregation of Israel cries out against Moses and Aaron, saying, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why does the Lord bring us into this land, to fall by the sword?" (Nm 14:2-3). But two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, have a different perspective.

### **Read Numbers 14:5-10.**

2. What do Joshua and Caleb propose for the people of Israel? Why do they suggest this? Why do they think differently than the others?

*Answer: Outraged at the people's lack of trust in God to protect them Joshua and Caleb stand up and tear their clothes, pleading with the people to enter the land and not to rebel against the Lord: "Do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them" (Nm 14:9). Joshua and Caleb trust in the Lord's promise, even though the situation appears difficult.*

3. How do the people respond to Joshua and Caleb?

*Answer: This only enrages the people all the more. They are so terrified about facing the powerful Canaanite armies that they were ready to stone Joshua and Caleb for their insistence that they follow God into this dangerous (though divinely promised) land.*

*Please read aloud:* At just this moment, the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people of Israel, rescuing Joshua and Caleb from the rebellious mob. In a severe example of His justice, God grants the people what they desire. They say they don't want to enter the land; therefore, God won't give it to them. Only Joshua and Caleb—the two faithful spies who defended Yahweh and trusted in His plan—will be permitted to receive God's promise (Nm 14:30).

4. Like the Israelites, have you ever struggled to trust in God's promises? Like Caleb and Joshua have you ever boldly believed? What does this story teach us about trusting God, even when things are difficult or other people are unfaithful?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Please read aloud:* At the end of forty years, the older generation has passed and their children have now come of age. This new group of Israelites approach the edge of the Promised Land that their parents rejected and are given the opportunity to start anew with the Lord. Hopes for renewed faithfulness, however, are quickly dashed. Numbers 25 tells us that the Israelites “began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab” and began worshipping one of their gods, Baal of Peor, on the outskirts of the promised land (Nm 25:2-3).

5. If such apostasy occurred when the Israelites dwelt on the outskirts of these pagan cultures, what is likely to happen when they enter the heart of this new land? Knowing that the people are likely to be unfaithful, if you were God, what do you think you might do to try and help the people be faithful?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Please read aloud:* God's response to this new generation's idolatry is to issue a new disciplinary law that comes to be known as Deuteronomy, which literally means “second law.” Deuteronomy is a

law that prepares the people for life in this pagan, polytheistic society. Let's look at a few key passages:

### **Read Deuteronomy 6:4-10.**

6. What is God asking of his people? Why is this so important for the Israelites?

*Answer: This law is, first of all, uncompromisingly monotheistic. Subverting the pagan religions in the land, Deuteronomy does not simply emphasize the existence of one God but unabashedly proclaims that the one true God is Yahweh—not any of the pagan deities.*

7. Deuteronomy calls for unconditional loyalty to Yahweh in the way the people live. Yet, even though the book is called “Deuteronomy” or “second law,” how does this passage (Deut 6:4-10) show us that God is asking for more than just “following the rules?”

*Answer: Faithfulness to God is more than just an intellectual conviction (that there is only one God, Yahweh); it is also a matter of the heart.*

*Please read aloud:* In Deuteronomy, the people are called to live lives that are markedly different from the pagans in the land. Perhaps more than anywhere else in the Bible, Moses emphasizes the vital necessity of steadfastly following God's commandments. Since he knows the people will face pressures to conform to the enticing pagan lifestyles around them—immoral ways of living that promise a false and fleeting happiness—Moses stresses that obedience to God's law is the only pathway to the abundant life and the true, lasting happiness that God wants to give the people. But if the people's hearts turn away from God and turn toward the pagan ways of life, they will experience the emptiness of life outside the blessing—what the Bible calls the curse.

This is what has become known as “the two ways.” Let’s read an example of each:

**Read Deuteronomy 28:1-11.**

**Read Deuteronomy 28:15-20.**

8. How would you describe these two ways? What happens if the people are faithful? What will happen if they are unfaithful?

*Answer: On one hand, if the people keep God’s law, they will be blessed in the Promised Land (Dt 28:1-14). On the other hand, if the people fail to keep the law, they will place themselves outside these wonderful blessings that God wants to give them. Instead, they will put themselves under curses (Dt 28:15-68).*

*Please read aloud:* This is the choice Moses offers the people: the way of covenant faithfulness to God that leads to blessedness, and the way of infidelity that leads to death. He pleads with the people to make the right choice: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days” (Dt 30:19-20).

9. How does God offer us a similar choice between these two ways? How are we invited to choose “life” and “blessing” as the Israelites were?

*Allow the group to discuss. Every day we make decisions that lead us down the path either to the abundant life and true happiness that comes from walking in God’s ways, or to the insecurity, emptiness, frustration, and disappointment that comes from not making God our priority.*



10. Right now, if you had to evaluate your own life, on which path would you say you are traveling? In what ways are you on one path and what ways are you on the other?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Please read aloud:* Back to Israel: Let's see which path it will take.

### **Read Deuteronomy 30:1.**

11. What does this passage tell us about Israel's future?

*Answer: Moses makes Israel's future clear. Notice how Moses does not say "if all these things come upon you", but "when." In other words, Moses knows Israel is going to be unfaithful to the covenant. He foretells that Israel will experience some of the blessings in the land, but, in the end, the people will break the covenant and the curses will fall upon them. They will lose the land and be scattered among the nations in exile.*

*Please read aloud:* The curses will bring God's people face to face with their own brokenness, humbly standing before the Lord and crying out for mercy. One theological reflection we could draw out of the Book of Deuteronomy is how the law helps the people recognize their weakness and beg for God's help and mercy. The Ten Commandments were given at Mount Sinai, but the Israelites' forty years in the desert have made it evident that they do not yet have the heart to keep God's commands. As the next several books of the Bible will reveal, their future life in the Promised Land will make their weakness all the more evident. God's people might possess the law—so they *know* what is good—but they do not seem to have the ability to keep it.

12. Have you experienced this reality in your own life? How so?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Please read aloud:* This struggle points to one important purpose of the law: It reveals both the good that we should do and our utter inability to live it out. The Lord's commandments, therefore, make it abundantly clear how much we need God's grace to fulfill the law, and it humbles us so that we are more inclined to call out to the Lord for help. As St. Augustine explained in *The Spirit and the Letter*, "The law was given so that grace might be sought; grace was given so that the law might be fulfilled."

This healing power of grace is foreshadowed in the same passage of Deuteronomy that offers a bleak forecast about Israel's future in exile. In this condition of exiled suffering, the Israelites will turn their hearts to God and God will rescue them, bringing them back to the land:

### **Read Deuteronomy 30:2-8.**

13. What does God promise he will do in this passage? What does this tell us about God and what he wants from us?

*Answer: Moses foretells how God will accomplish an even greater act of salvation for the Israelites than rescuing them from their enemies. God will perform a profound work in their own hearts, empowering them to finally fulfill the law. God doesn't want merely obedient servants who follow His commandments. Ultimately, He wants sons and daughters who love Him. He doesn't just want external obedience—simply doing what is right; like a lover, he wants our hearts.*

*Please read aloud:* This is the ultimate goal for God's dealings with Israel throughout the Exodus story. God wants to free His people not only from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to sin. He wants to take them through "an internal exodus" in which their hearts are healed

and they are transformed by His love. All this, of course, foreshadows the work that Jesus Christ will accomplish through His death, resurrection, and sending “the Spirit into our hearts,” so that, “led by the Spirit,” we can finally live as sons and daughters of God, faithfully loving and serving Him as our heavenly Father (Rom 8:13-15, Gal 4:6).

14. After discussing God’s dealings with Israel, what have you learned about what God wants to do with your own heart? How is God calling you to “love him with all your heart?”

*Allow the group to discuss.*