The Conquest War for the East Side of Jordan

Deuteronomy 2:1-3:29

Key Verse:

Deuteronomy means ‘the second law’ or ‘the copy of the law’. God gave this second law to the second generation of the Israelites through Moses just before they entered the promised land. Through Deuteronomy we learn who God really is and how we have to live as the people of God. It is a great blessing for us to know how God dealt with the Israelites in each generation and for each incident.

First, God’s divine and long discipline for the rebellious people (2:1) Look at verse 1. “***Then we turned back and set out toward the wilderness along the route to the Red Sea, as the Lord had directed me. For a long time we made our way around the hill country of Seir***.” In the aspect of length of time this one verse takes longer than the whole book of Deuteronomy. It had been more than 38 years for the Israelites to wander in the wilderness. It would take only eleven days for them to travel from Kadesh Barnea to the region of the Red Sea, but the Israelites took 38 years. Why? This was because of their rebellion against God. By his mighty power and love God delivered them from out of Egypt and brought them to the promised land. The Israelites should have thanked God and trusted in him in all their ways. But they kept on complaining against God and Moses. When they confronted a little sufferings and enemies, they complained to God. They asked Moses to go back to Egypt, the place where they had lived as slaves for 430 years.

Their unbelief and rebellion provoked God to anger. God could have destroyed all these ungrateful and rebellious people. But he did not do so. In his great patience God disciplined them to repent and to be changed into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. So, God took them into the wilderness directing to the Red Sea, where they had crossed. It took 38 years until all those who had complained died, and their children took over God’s mission for the promised land.

This story gives us a very significant lesson. We must have fear of God, and be thankful and obey his word. Our God is gracious. Psalm 145:8 says, “*The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love*.” He is also righteous. God let the rebellious Israelites go back to Egypt, not because he wanted to destroy them, but because he wanted to discipline them. Hebrews 12:6 says that God disciplines the one he loves. God disciplined the Israelites because he loved them. So we must not complain when God disciplines us. God provided the Israelites a short and easy way for traveling to the promised land. But the Israelites chose the long and hard way because of their unbelief and rebellion. God does not work forcefully in human history in order to fulfill his purpose. God gave freewill and conscience, above all his law, to his people as a guideline. But they are responsible for their choice whether it is good or bad. The Israelites chose a long and hard way, and they paid its price. It took more than 38 years for their children to enter the promised land after such long and painful experiences. We are often tempted to go back to our own Egypt, our old sinful lifestyle. God bought us from Satan by the precious blood of Jesus and brought us into the promised land, the kingdom of God. Still, we don’t appreciate this divine love of God and want to go back to our own Egypt. Through Deuteronomy study God gave us a choice between obedience and disobedience, between blessing and curse, between life and death. Our God is gracious and righteous. Galatians 6:7,8 says, “*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life*.”

Second, God keeps his promise (2:2-23) Look at verses 2-6. “***Then the Lord said to me, “You have made your way around this hill country long enough; now turn north. Give the people these orders: ‘You are about to pass through the territory of your relatives the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. They will be afraid of you, but be very careful. Do not provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land, not even enough to put your foot on. I have given Esau the hill country of Seir as his own. You are to pay them in silver for the food you eat and the water you drink.***” After such a long period of his divine discipline for his people, God commanded Moses to move north to the promised land. In order to approach the promised land they had to pass through the territory of Esau, and the region of the Moabites and the Ammonites. Who was Esau? Esau was Isaac’s first son and the brother of Jacob. He was known as a godless man (Heb 12:16), but God gave Esau the land for the sake of Isaac. God commanded the Israelites not to provoke them to war because God would not give their land to the Israelites. The Israelites should pay them for food and water.

In verses 9-23 God ordered the Israelites the same command for the Moabites and the Ammonites. Who are the Moabites and the Ammonites? Moabites and Ammonites are the descendants of Lot, Abraham’s nephew. Even though Lot made mistakes, God gave the lands to his descendants for the sake of Abraham. Even though the Moabites and Ammonites were not the covenant people, God loved them and gave them the land. God ordered the Israelites not to wage a war against them because they were relatives to them.

Here we learn the faithfulness and mindfulness of God. God kept his promise with the godless man like Esau. God showed his mercy to the descendant of the faulted Lot. Our God is righteous. He is just and treats people fairly. Through this event God also taught the Israelites that the conquest of the promised land should be done by God, not by their own ambition or desire. God is the one who had planned Exodus, provided the promised land, and defeated his enemies. The Israelites should deny themselves, curb their own desire and plan, and submit to God’s will and obey his direction. The conquest war belongs to the Lord.

Third, the conquest war for the east side of Jordan (2:24-3:11) God treated people who lived in the east side of Jordan differently from the descendants of Esau and Lot. After passing through the territory of the descendants of Esau and Lot, the Israelites finally reached the desert of Kedemoth, the east side of the Dead Sea. The Israelites sent a letter to Sihon, king of the Amorites in Heshbon that they wanted to use a main road for their journey and for crossing the Jordan River. The Israelites promised them not to turn aside to the right or the left. They would go straight without raising any conflict with the people in Heshbon. They also would buy food and drink from them while they were passing through their territory as they did in the territory of Esau and Lot. But Sihon King of the Amorites came out with his army to fight against the Israelites. (32) God gave him into the hands of the Israelites. The Israelites destroyed Sihon and all his towns, and completely destroyed them-men, women and children. (34)

The Israelites did the same for Og King of Bashan. Bashan is located at the north east side of Israel near Mt. Hermon. The Israelites marched to confront against them. The Lord said to Moses, “***Do not be afraid of him, for I have delivered him into your hands, along with his whole army and his land. Do to him what you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon***.” (3:2) So the Lord gave the land of Bashan to Moses and the Israelites. At that time, they took more than sixty cities. All these cities were fortified with high walls and with gates and bars, but the Israelites completely destroyed them until no survivors remained. They did the same as they did to Sihon king of Heshbon. Here we wonder why God ordered the Israelites to completely destroy these people including women and children. Some may doubt the love of God. Did the good and loving God allow the killing of innocent children? Our God is definitely the loving God and merciful God. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever. (Ps 136:1) Our God is also righteous God who blesses those who do good and curses those who do evil. God saves and judges. God did not save women and children when he judged this world by water in Noah’s time. God’s judgement was universal. At the same time, God saved the world through Noah’s family. The Israelite’s conquest war is the picture of God’s divine judgment and salvation. God taught the Israelites and his descendants that those who stand on God’s side will live and those who stand against God’s side will perish. This is the same message of gospel. The gospel is the good news of salvation for those who believe in Jesus Christ. It is the bad news of judgement to those who reject the truth and follow evil.

God warned the Israelites not to worship the foreign gods and follow the gentiles culture after they entered the promised land. God commanded them not to marry with the daughters of the Canaanites or not to give their children to them because they would be snares to their children. Their children who do not know good or bad will follow the gentile gods or culture without any discernment. The Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16a, “*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Balial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols*?...” God wanted the Israelites to take out the root of wickedness. God wanted his people to live a holy and honorable life as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Fourth, the spirit of unity (12-20) chapter 3:12-20 is written in Numbers 32. After conquering the east side of Jordan, the Reubenites and Gadites came to Moses and asked for the east side of Jordan, the territory of Heshbon and Bashan, as their inheritance. The territory of the east side of Jordan looked good for them to settle down and feed their animals. They also didn’t have to cross the Jordan river. Their idea and suggestion was selfish to the eyes of Moses. Moses allowed them to do so on condition that all their able-bodied men, armed for battle among Reubenties and Gadites must join the conquest war for the other side of Jordan along with other brothers. Moses asked them to fight as frontline soldiers with their other brothers. Moses did so in order to keep the unity of the whole Israelites community. Suppose two tribes among the twelve exited out from the whole assembly of Israel and stayed on the east side of the Jordan while other brothers were fighting the conquest war for the west side of Jordan. Their selfishness breaks the unity of the whole community and discourages the morale of the soldiers. Selfishness is the worse enemy than adversary. We must not be selfish, but cooperative. We must work together with one in heart and mind. Then victory is ours. Moses divided the lands to the Reubenites and Gadites as they had requested. He also gave the territory of Bashan to the half tribe of Manasseh. (3:13)

Fifth, your grace is sufficient for you (3:21-29) Moses eagerly wanted to enter to the promised land. But God did not allow him to do so. Look at verses 21-22. After conquering the east side of Jordan, Moses called Joshua and encouraged him to be strong enough to lead his people into the other side of Jordan. Moses said to Joshua, “***Do not be afraid of them; the Lord your God himself will fight for you.”*** At that time Moses pleaded with the Lord for himself to enter into the promised land. He praised the Lord and his mighty work in order to gain God’s heart. But the Lord said to Moses, “***This is enough. Do not speak to me anymore about this matter***.” (26) God closed Moses’ mouth by a word. Then God commanded Moses to go up to the top of Pisgah, the Mount Nebo (34:1), and look west and north and south and east. God told Moses that Joshua and his people would cross the Jordan river and take possession of the promised land and that Moses would spend the rest of his life in the mount.

Someone may ask, “Why did God not allow Moses to enter into the promised land?” Of course, this was because of his sin before the Lord while he was in the desert. He struck a rock with his staff two times in his anger before his people (Nu 20:12) At that time God said to Moses, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.” Our God shows his grace to those who do not deserve. He also works according to his will and plan. God’s grace upon Moses was sufficient for him when he saw the promised land with his own eyes, though it was from a far distance. God blessed Moses’ life as a deliverer and leader of the Israelites for the last 120 years. Now God wanted to transit the leadership from Moses to Joshua so that through Joshua God wanted to fulfill his will. Moses’ mission is over and his grace is sufficient for him. Moses humbly accepted God’s sovereignty and his direction. Moses blessed Joshua and his people so that they could enter the promised land with the presence of the Lord.

In today’s passage we learned that the conquest war for the promised land belongs to the Lord. Our life is the pilgrimage to our promised land, the kingdom of heaven. The Lord God will be with us and will fight for us. What we must do is to trust in him, believe in him and follow his direction. Our God is gracious and compassionate. His love endures forever. Our God is also righteous. He will judge those who reject the truth and do evil. May God be with us and fight for us until we enter our promised land. May God make each of us a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Amen.