

Living the Dream

Serving with all our Strength in 2023

February 12, 2023

Overarching Theme: 2023 – Living the Dream

Instructions:

When using this material as teacher, feel free to pick and choose the point you want to emphasize in the lesson. The format of the curriculum is designed to have an abundance of information in which to refer as desired.

Core Point: 2023 can be a year of living the dream of faithful discipleship as we take a step forward in following Jesus Christ.

Reflect on this Scripture: Deut 30:15-20 NRSV

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Commentary: The book of Deuteronomy has been passed down to us as the very last message of Moses, one final opportunity for this great spiritual leader to impart a word of exhortation and encouragement to the people he has faithfully led for a generation. This sermon (for that is exactly what it is) is preached to people on the brink, of the literal Jordan River originally and of figurative Jordan Rivers throughout history. The historic setting pictured in the text is the end of Israel's 40 years in the wilderness and the beginning of their conquest of the Promised Land. As they pitch camp on the plains of Moab on the eastern bank of the Jordan, Moses summarizes the covenant arrangement between Yahweh and

Israel. Before they cross over Jordan, he reminds them of the terms of the covenant God has made with them. Our text is the dramatic climax of Moses' long sermon, raising the central question: *will they serve the Lord with all their strength or will they bow down and serve other gods?*

What were some of the 'gods' that Israel might be tempted to 'bow down and serve' in years to come? The pantheon of the Ancient Near East included fertility gods and goddesses who in theory could influence the weather, agriculture and human fertility/prosperity. Through cultic actions (animal/human sacrifice, temple prostitution, etc.), worshippers attempted to appease divine anger or manipulate the god/goddess to act on the worshipper's behalf (provide fertility/prosperity). There was little or no ethical component to this religious system. By stark contrast, Yaweh (the LORD) called the children of Israel out of the profound injustice of Egypt to a common life of righteousness and justice. This community was called to live into God's dream of being a 'light to the nations' (Isaiah 49:6).

This sermon in Deuteronomy urges Israel (and us) to choose the "blessed to be a blessing" God-dream of being 'all in' in faithful service to God. Rather than giving lip service to the LORD while seeking the 'gods' of personal prosperity, we are called to "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). As Deuteronomy 30:19-20 summarizes, *"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."*

Adapted from the Center for Excellence in preaching

<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2020-02-10/deuteronomy-3015-20-2/>

Questions to Ponder for Accountability in the Group:

1. Do you remember a particular speech or pep talk that influenced you to action?
2. As the Book of Deuteronomy draws to a close just prior to the death of Moses, summarize what you think he is seeking to communicate to the children of Israel in his last sermon prior to their entry into the promise land.
3. The LORD promised exclusive faithfulness to Israel and expected exclusive faithfulness in return. Why was it so important that Israel be "all in?" What harm could the occasional worship of the fertility 'gods' of the Ancient near East do?

4. In contrast with the moral emptiness of other ancient religious expressions, the LORD called Israel to be an example of justice and righteousness for the surrounding peoples. Why was being a *light to the nations* so important?
5. In an age of greater skepticism and disengagement by non-religious people, what are some ways that we can serve with all our strength and let our "*light so shine before others*" (Matthew 5:16)?

Activity for the Life of a Disciple:

1. Remember to find encouragement for the day by reading the daily devotional from FUMCC.
2. Ponder and pray on this scripture this week: Deuteronomy 30:19b-20
Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.