

**“DON’T FORGET”**  
***Deuteronomy 8:1-20***

Here we are, once again, celebrating God’s abundant provision for us – thanking him for all that he has given us so faithfully during another year, remembering that all our food and sustenance come from him, and giving a bit of a nod in the direction of those who are less well off than we are. We’ve brought along stuff from our well-stocked cupboards, from the groaning shelves of our supermarkets – even, perhaps, from the fertile soil of our gardens and allotments.

But I’m sure most of us can remember times when we weren’t quite so well supplied. Some of you can remember the rationing of the war and post-war years. Many of you can recall when you were students trying to cope on a small grant. Some can think back to when you were just starting out on your own – single or married – and you had to think carefully how you were going to use your limited income. There was a time when you could only spend what you’d got, when credit was not an option. They seemed difficult times, but those of us who were followers of Jesus prayed hard and relied on God to see us through – then thanked him for his miraculous provision.

The words we’ve just read from *Deuteronomy 8* are part of Moses’ long address to the people of Israel as they approached the end of their wanderings in the desert, en route from their lives as slaves in Egypt to the new land that God had promised them. And in this section he is reminding them of the ways in which God has helped them during their forty years on the move – a nomad nation with no settled home and no real opportunity to produce their own food and clothing. He recalls the way in which God fed them miraculously with manna (and quails) as we considered a couple of weeks ago (v3). He points out that their clothes didn’t wear out (v4), so presumably many of them were still wearing things they’d had for forty years (like some of my dad’s suits). And they were kept healthy – even their feet didn’t swell up, despite walking across rocky territory for four decades. What a great provision!

And that is re-iterated a few sentences later. In vv14b-16, Moses stresses that it was God who did all this. **He** brought them out of Egypt and gave them freedom. **He** led them through the desert to their new destiny and gave them a purpose to their lives. **He** protected them from the dangers that lurked in the desert (snakes and scorpions, amongst other things) and gave them security. **He** miraculously provided them with food and drink and gave them sustenance. There’s no doubt that it was God who had done all this and the people had constantly thanked God for it during their time in the desert.

Now they stand on the brink of a new life. Now they are to grasp their destiny and settle this new land. Now they will be able to enjoy all that God has promised them. Moses gives them a glimpse of what they’ve got to look forward to in vv7-9.. It will be a land where they “*will lack nothing*”. There will be farmland fertile with fruit and grain. There will be plentiful supplies of water, good land for crops and earth full of minerals. It’s almost a paradise. They can start a new life and marvel at all that God has given them. Instead of wandering they can settle down. Instead of tents, they will live in houses. Instead of just getting by they will have plentiful flocks and herds. Instead of poverty they will know wealth.

And there’s the danger, says Moses. They may well forget where it all comes from. In J A Thompson’s commentary on this book, he entitles the section about these verses “The Dangers of Prosperity”. He warns them of the temptation to start saying, “*Look what I’ve done. See what I’ve produced. This has all been achieved through my effort, my skill, my planning.*” Remember that this is still all God’s work. He may be giving you more than you had in the desert. He may be allowing you a greater share of the earth’s resources. He may be providing more than you’ve been used to. But it’s still all from God. He provides the raw materials. He gives you your skills and your vision. He provides the natural infrastructure for your development. He is the one who actually “*gives you the ability to produce wealth.*” It’s part of his promise to you.

His final words in this section point out that, if they forget about God and his provision, they'll start following other gods. It will be very easy for them, in the kind of situation in which they will find themselves – surrounded by other, alien cultures – to get sucked into the practices of their neighbours. Remember, these were fairly primitive peoples still, and their explanation of regular harvests and all the other aspects of a rural and agrarian way of life was not scientific, but based on a system of deities who oversaw all the different things that happened during their year. So take the One True God out of the picture and you still have to find some kind of force behind it all – Ba'al or Asherah or Moloch are fairly attractive options. If it works for the Jebusites, it will work for us.

So occasions such as today are useful for us in the same way that Moses' speech was useful for the early Israelite nation. This harvest Sunday reminds us that all that we have comes from God – the God who created this world and the God who sustains it and faithfully goes on providing. We are, I hope, grateful for all that God has given us. In our songs and prayers and offerings today we have expressed our gratitude for all that, and made our annual recognition that we rely on God.

But the same dangers confront us as confronted the people of Israel on the borders of Canaan. And that is especially true in a place like Lichfield. Here we are in the prosperous West, probably the most privileged people on this earth, with all we could possibly want within easy reach. Even within this country we are in a privileged position – a pleasant, historic, provincial city with so many advantages (Don't believe a word of the moaning letters in the *Mercury*): quiet, peaceful, relatively crime-free, temperate, well-educated, good health facilities, friendly neighbours (for the most part). Look around this congregation. Most people are settled down in fine houses. When we eat we are satisfied (when we're not, it's only a short walk to the supermarket). We might not have herds and flocks, but our silver and gold are increasing in our bank accounts and ISA's pension funds, and all we have is multiplied.

And the temptation is there to say, "*Look at me. Haven't I done well for myself?*" We revel in our education as if we taught ourselves to read and write. We look at our careers and congratulate ourselves on the way we've risen up the corporate ladder. We sit back and enjoy whatever wealth we've got as if we'd personally minted every coin we possess. Somehow God, upon whom it all depends is left out of the equation.

And the gap that is left gets filled with other gods. Of course, we're far too sophisticated to believe in the old fertility gods and goddesses. Our faith is not in such primitive deities – after all, we can now explain it all with science and so on. So science becomes one of our gods, a god we can tame and mould as we use it to modify crops genetically, as we use it to prolong and shorten life, as we use it to "improve" our crops and our environment. We worship at the altar of economic theory – be it capitalism or socialism – believing that faithfully following one model or other will inevitably bring the right rewards. (A particularly unpleasant guest on *Beyond Belief* last week was convinced that naked capitalism was the cure for all the world's ills.) We even set *ourselves* up as gods, believing that it's all about self-sufficiency. Materialism, consumerism, environmentalism, militarism – these are all the gods which replace the One True God when we lose sight of our reliance on him and forget to thank him for what we've got.

And when we forget that it's all from God and assume that we've created it all ourselves, then we start to believe that we can do what we want with it. It becomes our property and ours alone, so there is no responsibility to share it for the good of others. Then we end up with a world full of inequalities (which most economic models have built into them anyway). While we strive for better and better conditions and benefits for ourselves, the rest of the world fades into the background and those who have nothing are forgotten, along with the God who created them and loves them. There are long passages in this book of *Deuteronomy* in which Moses lays out the policies which are designed to ensure that all share in God's provision and no-one takes too much for themselves at the expense of others. Forget God and you forget your fellow human beings. Forget your fellow human beings and you are clearly forgetting God and his word. Harvest is a good time to remember God and his provision – but make sure it's by no means the only time you remember him.

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This is part of Moses' long address to the people of Israel as they approached the end of their wanderings in the desert, en route from their lives as slaves in Egypt to the new land that God had promised them. And in this section he is reminding them of the ways in which God has helped them during their forty years on the move. He recalls the way in which God fed them miraculously with manna (v3). He points out that their clothes didn't wear out (v4) and they were kept healthy – even their feet didn't swell up, despite walking across rocky territory for four decades.

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But the danger is that they may well forget where it all comes from. Moses warns them of the temptation to start saying, *"Look what I've done. See what I've produced. This has all been achieved through my effort, my skill, my planning."* Remember that this is still all God's work. If they forget about God and his provision, they'll start following other gods.

So Harvest is useful for us in the same way that Moses' speech was useful for the early Israelite nation. It reminds us that all that we have comes from God – the God who created this world and the God who sustains it and faithfully goes on providing. But the same dangers confront us as confronted the people of Israel on the borders of Canaan. Most of us are settled down in fine houses. When we eat we are satisfied (when we're not, it's only a short walk to the supermarket). We might not have herds and flocks, but our silver and gold are increasing in our bank accounts and ISA's pension funds, and all we have is multiplied. And the temptation is there to say, *"Look at me. Haven't I done well for myself?"*

Science, materialism, consumerism, environmentalism, militarism – these are all the gods which can replace the One True God when we lose sight of our reliance on him and forget to thank him for what we've got. And when we forget that it's all from God and assume that we've created it all ourselves, then we start to believe that we can do what we want with it. While we strive for better and better conditions and benefits for ourselves, the rest of the world fades into the background and those who have nothing are forgotten, along with the God who created them and loves them.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Can you think of times when you have been struggling to make ends meet? How did you cope? Did you acknowledge God's involvement?
2. Why do you think we are more aware of God at times of crisis than when things are going well? What can we do about it?
3. Do we look more at those who have more than us and envy them, or at those who have less and think about how we can help them? (Be honest!) Why?
4. Is it really practical to work for the elimination of poverty? (After all, what does Jesus say in *Matthew 26:11*?)
5. When we do forget God, what other things take his place? How can you see that happening in your own life?
6. What practical steps can we take to ensure that we don't forget God and his provision for us?