

# Spiritual Calisthenics

Deuteronomy 8-15

## Introduction

Our next door neighbor informed us of an honor that was bestowed upon their daughter – an honor they chose to receive. Their eight year old daughter was one of seven girls chosen, out of eight hundred, I believe, for the Junior Olympics. They decided, basically upon their daughter’s own decision, to accept the honor.

One of the amazing things about this privilege is all of the responsibility that goes with it. In fact, the mother was telling us that this little girl now gets up on her own, knowing she only has so many hours in the day. She is going to be exercising and practicing three hours a day, five or six days a week. This is now going to be the focus of her time. She will come home from practice, knowing she has an hour or two to do her homework before she has to go to bed and then get back up the next morning. The mother was telling us that she is imposing this schedule upon herself.

If you see this young girl, you see a bundle of energy and determination. If you ask her, “Hey, why are you doing all this?”

She will give you one reason, and that is, “I want to be an Olympian. That’s where I’m headed.”

Maybe she will get that far. She has a goal and the discipline is merely a means to reach the goal.

I found that very applicable to our study today because the Israelites, as we have been studying, are perched on the edge of the promised land. They have, in a sense, been through forty years of discipline; forty years of struggle; forty years of rigor that God has put them through in the different curriculums He has designed for them. He designed these curriculums because He wants them to become conquerors in the promised land.

Before the Israelites enter the promised land, however, Moses preaches messages that apply, better perhaps than anything I have seen in the Old Testament, to the New Testament believer. He says several things that I want to bring to your attention today.

The main point that I want to discuss today, revolves around the word “remember,” or “zakar”. I touched on this in the previous discussion, but decided that we needed to devote an entire study to it. So, please turn to Deuteronomy, chapter 8, where we will see this word “remember” several times.

Among the Israelites, the position of historian was an honored position. In fact, Isaiah, in chapter 36, tells of Asaph, who was the honored historian. This could be literally translated, “the rememberer; the recorder”. The Israelites never wanted to forget what they had gone through to reach where they were now.

I believe one of the difficulties in our own lives is that we so often fail to remember what we have gone through and that which has brought us to where we are now in the kingdom of God.

## Remember . . .

Moses will tell the Israelites to remember several things. We will discuss these today.

### The Designer of your wilderness

1. First, Moses tells the Israelites, “Remember the Designer of your wilderness activity.”

### Why remember?

Moses proceeded to give the Israelites several reasons to remember. Let me give them to you.

### To learn humility

- One reason to remember is that it was in the wilderness that the Israelites, as a nation, learned humility.

Look at verse 2 of Deuteronomy, chapter 8. There is a relationship between testing and humility that is brought out in this verse.

*You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart,*

***whether you would keep His commandments or not.***

Someone once said that humility is the diploma that you earn upon graduating from the school of affliction. The Israelites were graduating, in a sense, from a school that had lasted forty years.

If we ever think that we have it bad, we should think back to the Israelites. They had *forty* years of the school of affliction, as God tested them and as God humbled them.

### **To learn to trust only in God**

- A second reason to remember is that it was in the wilderness that the Israelites learned to trust only in God.

Look at verse 3. Note that the first phrase points out that God allowed them to be hungry.

***He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.***

In other words, in the wilderness, God removed all the props because He wanted the Israelites to learn that, if they would ever make it in the promised land, they had to trust in Him alone.

### **To learn God's methods are unique**

- Another reason to remember, thirdly, is that it was in the wilderness that the Israelites learned that God's methods are unique.

I love verse 4.

***Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell [nor did you need a new pair of shoes] these forty years.***

Can you imagine a dress that did not wear out for forty years? I imagine the women hated it and the men loved it. There were probably three million women praying every night, "Oh, God, please, I'll never get a new one unless you show some wear on this dress."

Their clothes never wore out – they wore the same clothing for forty years. By this, God was revealing an important point to the Israelites. They, in their own logic, would have expected God to perhaps, give them some wool or some flax or some material to

make new clothing. However, God, in His method, did not allow their gowns or their shoes to ever wear out. He is telling them, "My ways are different; My methods are unique. I'm different from you."

God's ways are above our ways. In fact, they are past knowing.

### **To learn that God's discipline is reflected in His love**

- A fourth reason to remember is that the Israelites learned in the wilderness that God's discipline was reflected in His love.

Look at verse 5.

***Thus you are to know in your heart that the Lord your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son.***

In other words, this forty year period had a purpose; a design. It was not based on some hateful God up there with a club, but on a loving God who treated them like a father would treat his son. This is referring to a father who would discipline his son so that his son would grow up to be wise, disciplined, and controlled.

God wanted the Israelites to know that His discipline had a plan. Even though it was difficult; even though it was a struggle, it had a purpose.

You may have heard the proverbial story of the little boy who was watching the emperor butterfly emerge from the tiny hole in its cocoon. He watched the butterfly struggle and shake inside the cocoon, as perhaps you may have had an opportunity to see. Then, that little boy, feeling compassion for the butterfly, took his small pocket knife and made the hole in the cocoon a little larger. The butterfly emerged. However, to the boy's surprise, and perhaps to ours as well, the butterfly was unable to fly.

God has designed for that struggle of the butterfly to get out of the cocoon to force fluid and blood into its wings. Unless it goes through the struggle, the butterfly will never be able to fly.

This week, in fact, through reading, I discovered a similar fact about the larval bee. As the bee reaches a mature state, which begins in the six-sided cubicle or incubator, and is ready to emerge as an adult, it begins to struggle. That bee has a wax top on the little six-sided incubator, and it struggles and moves and thrashes about. However, as I discovered this week, it is in that thrashing that the membrane is worn off of

its wings, so that when it emerges, it is capable of flying.

Now, if it were up to us, we would get rid of the struggle. I think we are the only created being that feels there is no purpose in struggle. Yet, we, like the rest of God's creation, find struggling to be beneficial.

God wants the Israelites to know that the forty years have been motivated by love.

### To learn to appreciate God's goodness

- A final reason to remember is that the Israelites learned in the wilderness to appreciate God's goodness.

Look at verses 6 and 7.

*Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills;*

Skip to verse 10.

*When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.*

There is something in our natures; something about us that if we always had the flowing milk and honey; if our path was always straight, we would cease to appreciate the good things, in our estimation, that God gives us.

Moses, in a sense, is telling the Israelites that the forty year period had a lot of reasons. One of the reasons is that when they get into the promised land, God wants them to have everything that they are going to have, but Moses wants them to be able to show their appreciation to God.

We understand this. It is like going through a dark tunnel – when we finally get out, we appreciate the light. In the same way, the Israelite would appreciate God's goodness when they entered the promised land.

So, the Israelites are to remember the Designer of their wilderness activity.

### The Source of your material assets

2. Secondly, Moses tells the Israelites, "Remember the source of your material assets."

Look at verses 11 through 13 of Deuteronomy, chapter 8.

*Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies,*

Notice that this is not just addition with their material wealth, this is multiplication. Now, take special note of verse 14.

*then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

Skip to verse 16.

*In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end.*

### Why remember?

Moses is going to give the Israelites two reasons that they need to remember the source of their material assets. Let us look at the text to find them.

### Wealth can create pride

- The first reason to remember is because wealth can create pride.

Look at verse 17 – if you forget that God is the source,

*Otherwise, you may say in your heart, "My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth."*

Note that this verse says,

*. . . you . . . say in your heart . . .*

This is not verbal. No Israelite would have the audacity to say this. But he is going to say in his heart, "All of these good things are because of my

stick-to-itiveness and because I'm really sharp. Why wouldn't I do this? Why don't I accomplish more?"

The Israelite so easily forgot that the very power given to them to make what they made was power given by God. We forget too.

It says – look at it again,

*. . . My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.*

Continue to verse 18.

*But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.*

So, first, wealth can create pride.

### **Wealth can distort perspective**

- A second reason to remember is because wealth can distort perspective.

In other words, we get to the point at which we look at all that we have and take the credit for it. We begin to think that somehow, it was our strength; our tenacity; the fact that we are bright that we have what we have.

Isn't it true, ladies and gentlemen, that when we live in plenty; when we have much, we forget God? It is when things go dry; when things get bad that all of the sudden, we say, "Oh, Lord, where have You been?"

We forget Him when we walk into the promised land. He says, however, "I don't want you to distort your perspective. I want you to understand that wealth comes from power that has come from God."

I recently read something interesting that said:

*Materialism has nothing to do with an amount, it has everything to do with an attitude.*

Deuteronomy, chapter 8, in the first part of the chapter, teaches us about poverty, and in the last part of the chapter, about plenty. Poverty and plenty can produce the same result – disobedience to God. They can produce the same thing, but prosperity seems to lean us toward; force us toward a position where we tend to forget that God has given us everything that we have.

We live in a day and age in which, I believe, the church of Jesus Christ has forgotten the source of all

that it has. We live in a country that I think, has forgotten the source of all that it has.

The source is God. Any benefit that we have is because God chose it, not because of our own power. This will come up even more succinctly later in the chapter.

Let me use an illustration of materialism, like I have never seen, from nature. The butterfly that is properly known as the "maculinea arion," hatches from a little egg placed on a plant. It eats from the plant and then, as a caterpillar, climbs down to the ground. In order to survive the coming winter, it must meet a certain kind of ant. It does. When the caterpillar meets the ant, the ant strokes it with its antennae. The caterpillar responds by exuding, from its tenth segment, a sweet liquid which the ant relishes. In fact, the ant likes it so much that it gets together with other ants in a small troop and they carry the caterpillar to their nest. The ants create a place in their anthill for the caterpillar and there, they drink from that sweet liquid. While the ants are drinking, the caterpillar is feasting on the larval ants; the infant ants. This continues throughout the winter – the ants drink from the fluid and the caterpillar feasts on their young. Finally, the caterpillar emerges as a butterfly and flies away – only to start the process all over again.

Do you know what a materialist is? A materialist is like that ant who cherishes some luxury to such a degree that it feasts on that luxury to the detriment of itself, and especially to the detriment of its young.

Moses is warning the people as they are leaving a desert and going into an oasis where they will have more than they ever dreamed, "Don't forget who gave it to you. Don't forget God."

### **The basis for your spiritual achievement**

3. Thirdly, Moses tells the Israelites, "Remember the basis for your spiritual achievements."

I think I love this more than anything else. It was a joy this week, to discover this.

Turn to chapter 9 of Deuteronomy and look at verses 1 through 3. Notice that in the promised land, the Israelites are facing nations mightier than they; nations inhabited by the giant sons of Anakim.

*Hear, O Israel! You are crossing over the Jordan today to go in to dispossess nations*

*greater and mightier than you, great cities fortified to heaven, a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know and of whom you have heard it said, “Who can stand before the sons of Anak?” Know therefore today that it is the Lord your God who is crossing over before you as a consuming fire. He will destroy them and He will subdue them before you, so that you may drive them out and destroy them quickly, just as the Lord has spoken to you.*

### **Why remember?**

In the next verses, the Israelites are given two warnings as to why they should remember the basis for their spiritual achievements.

### **Spiritual achievements are always dependent upon God’s power, not man’s**

- The first warning to remember is because spiritual achievements are always dependent upon God’s power, not man’s.

Now, take note of verse 4.

*Do not say in your heart when the Lord your God has driven them out before you, “Because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,” but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is dispossessing them before you.*

Underline the phrase “God has driven them out before you”. Then, note what they are *not* to say in their hearts. In other words, they are not to come to the point of saying, “Wow, look at these enemy nations – they’re running. They’re mightier than we are and we’re taking care of them in the wilderness fights. We are destroying these nations because of our righteousness.”

Isn’t that so much like us? When we achieve something for the Lord or we step out for Jesus Christ or we become known for having a testimony at the job, others notice. Then, someone says some admiring thing to us about our walk with God or we are given a position of leadership at the church and although we do not say it in front of people, we say in our hearts, “This is because of my righteousness.”

Let me take that a step further. All of us believe that we are saved by faith through grace alone – we

have nothing to do with it. We had this package, called salvation, dropped in our lap by a sovereign, graceful God, and we received it. All of us, as believers, would agree with that. However, what happens after salvation? Sanctification or growing up in Christ. That is up to us, right? No. God has designed a curriculum for us in which we have nothing to do other than surrender to how fast or how slow we grow.

Now, I am telling you this because I want you to understand and enjoy the freedom of your life in Jesus Christ. He has designed the pace. Stop going to Him and saying, “God, I want it to be faster,” or “God, it’s too slow,” or “God, slow me down.” It is up to Him. In fact, the writer tells us that He gives us both the will and the power for the accomplishing of His will.

### **Spiritual achievements are never deserved by God’s people**

- The second warning to remember is because, not only are spiritual achievements dependent upon God’s power, but spiritual achievements are never deserved by God’s people.

Now you may think it a harsh statement to say that spiritual achievements are never deserved by God’s people. I would challenge you on that, however. If you do not like that statement, it is because you are taking credit for spiritual achievements. The truth of the matter is, we do not deserve them.

Notice what the Israelites were told, and what we are told, in verses 6 and 7.

*Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people. Remember, do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord.*

Skip to verse 24. Moses is really hammering away at them.

*You have been rebellious against the Lord from the day I knew you.*

Do you remember the Israelite attitude of,

*. . . Because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land . . .*

Moses says, “Hey, have you forgotten? You need to remember . . .”

He goes on, in this chapter, to list their biggest blunders. “Do you remember the golden calf? Do you remember complaining about the manna? Do you remember complaining against God that you didn’t have any meat? Did you forget Kadesh-barnea, where twelve spies were sent out and ten came back and led the majority rule, which was, ‘We can’t do it.’? Did you forget that?”

So Moses jars their memory. He says, “In case you’ve forgotten,”

***You have been rebellious . . . from the day I knew you.***

“You can’t take the credit. In fact, you don’t even deserve it.”

Ladies and gentlemen, this is not intended to be a discouraging sermon, but I think it will free up our thoughts. The greatest Christian, if we could call him the greatest Christian, that ever lived was the apostle Paul. This spiritual giant, Paul, in incredible transparency, writing to the church in Romans, chapter 7, says, “The good things that I know I ought to do, I don’t do, and the things that I know I shouldn’t do, I do.”

Now Paul is not writing something for us to hide behind and say, “Well, we sin, but Paul is a bigger sinner.”

Paul is trying to say that what God does in us and through us, is a result of God’s grace and design. It is not meant for us to become proud and say, “We deserve it – we’re righteous. What a benefit we are to God’s kingdom. Where would God be without us?”

Did you ever turn on the television and see someone – some preacher, I will pick on the preachers – preaching, and hear him say, “If you don’t send your money in, we’re going ‘down the tubes.’”?

That preacher gives you the idea of, “Where would God be without me and my preaching?”

We have reversed this. It is no longer we who depend on God, it is God depending on us.

So, let us go back to some correct theology. What God does in us, and through us, and for us is undeserved. So quit trying to earn it. Relax and enjoy what God is doing in your life. Make sure you are surrendering, but get off the pietistic roller coaster that causes you to think, “I must do something so God can do something.”

God is going to do with you what He wills because He loves you and because His grace is going to be manifested in you, so that you can say, like Paul,

***. . . for when I am weak, then I am strong.  
(II Corinthians 12:10)***

Do not take the credit and do not think you deserve it.

### **The motivation for sympathetic assistance**

4. Fourthly, Moses tells the Israelites, “Remember the motivation for sympathetic assistance.”

Turn to chapter 15 of Deuteronomy, where the word “remember” shows up again. We will not read the chapter, I will summarize it instead.

### **Why remember?**

Moses is talking about the sabbatical year. Every seven years, the Israelites forgave the debts of other Israelites. This was a wonderful thing because God had designed the theocracy that the Jew not be indebted to the Jew.

When Jews had hard times, they would borrow from another Jew. Sometimes they were not able to pay that debt off and they would be sold into slavery to that Jew. It was a compassionate thing, not the kind of slavery that we tend to think of. Then, at the end of seven years, God had designed something wonderful – it was called the “year of release” or the “sabbatical year.” On that seventh year, all debts were cancelled among the nation.

This canceling of debts in the sabbatical year was going to accomplish a couple of things.

### **Assistance provided care for the needy**

- First, it was going to provide care for the needy.

There would always be poor among them. There would always be people who were needy.

The sabbatical year was also going to produce something else, and this is even more beautiful.

### **Assistance produced compassion in the people**

- Secondly, it was going to produce compassion in the people.

Moses, in fact, goes on to give the Israelites a warning, in verses 7 through 11 of chapter 15, concerning the coming of the sabbatical year. Let me help you understand the warning.

Imagine that you and I are Jews. I get in trouble and I come to you to borrow money. I say, "I need to borrow a thousand dollars. I'm having trouble because one of my oxen died."

You know, however, that the year of release is only six months away. You say, "Wait a second," and you calculate paying back a thousand dollars in six months and think, "He won't be able to do it."

So, you close up your heart and will not lend the money to me.

God says, "No. You loan it. I want something developed in the promised land."

God wants the same thing developed today. It is an ingredient that is sadly missing. It is the ingredient of compassion.

If you read this chapter, in fact, you will see a phrase that will strike you. It says to have an open heart and an open hand.

I like verse 12.

***If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free.***

Now note verses 13 and 14.

***When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the Lord your God has blessed you.***

You have got to be kidding! You are going to allow this guy to leave and you are also going to say, "Oh, by the way, let me start you off fresh. You owe me a thousand dollars – forget it, I'll give you a thousand."

I sure am glad I am not living in this day. Oh, wait a second, verse 15 gives us the motivation.

***You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you . . .***

Our hearts should not have this closed idea; our hand should not begin to sort of grab around what we have.

Let us make this application spiritually. We have treasures in Christ. If we come to the point where we fail to share that with people; if we see beggars or those without Jesus Christ – dying people, and we have a closed hand and a closed heart, guess what we have forgotten? We have forgotten that we were once a slave; we have forgotten that God redeemed us.

It is interesting that Jesus Christ, in Matthew, chapter 9, sees a mob coming toward Him. The disciples are over to the side with their little calculators, saying, "Let's see, how many can we seat? Where are we going to put them? Let's put a group over here. Let's divide it up. Can we feed this many people? Who has some money?"

The disciples are figuring out all of the logistics and right in the middle of that, we are told,

***Seeing the people, He [Jesus] felt compassion for them . . .***

The text tells us that He saw,

***. . . sheep without a shepherd.***

How do you view people today? Do you and I even see that they are sheep without a shepherd? Have we forgotten that they are in bondage to sin; that they are dying people? I think most of us go through life without even recognizing who is around us.

D. L. Moody, a great preacher from a century ago, was standing at a window looking at a busy downtown street. Next to him was the pastor of a church where he was speaking. D. L. Moody said to the pastor, "Look out the window. What do you see?"

The man looked out the window and said, "I see one of the biggest buildings in the downtown area. We have all kinds of great things happening in this town. I see great progress."

The pastor noticed Moody was a little quiet, so he asked, "Well, Dr. Moody, what do you see?"

Moody never even looked at the man, he just constantly looked out the window at the street, and finally, weeping, said, "I see dying people."

Do you realize that the individual who works next to you may be a dying individual? Do you realize that the person who lives next door to you may be dying? They may have a reservation in hell, and they may be there next week. Do we really recognize the fact that the world; that our own town is filled with sheep without a shepherd? They are dying! If we have a closed heart and a closed hand and we do not acknowledge and give them the greatest news they

have ever heard, we have forgotten that we were once a slave in sin and God has redeemed us.

## **Application**

Moses says, “Nation, remember.” If you will take this mental activity; this spiritual exercise; this walk down memory lane, it will produce in you:

- a godly acceptance of your lean years; your time of poverty; your trials;
- a godly perspective toward your good years; your time of wealth; your career;
- a godly demeanor toward your ministry;
- a godly attitude toward the needy; those who may need material help; those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Do we have open hands and open hearts? Moses says, “Remember. Remember.”