

AMBER WAVES OF GRAIN

Deuteronomy 8

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Prayer: We thank you, O God, for the blessings of liberty, for the simple but beautiful privilege of reading a newspaper this morning which has not been censored, for the privilege of deciding to invest this morning in worship, free from control or encouragement, for the freedom to believe in your or not to believe in you. Author of liberty, startle us with your love which frees us from everything that would oppress or demean or hold us back, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It was a momentous day! A new land was about to be settled, a new nation about to be established. Previously the people had been NO people, construction slaves on the Nile River, nomad wanderers in the Sinai Desert. People with no voice and no clout, people pushed about by the overwhelming power of others. But now all of this was to change. These people were about to occupy a territory which they had been promised, and to establish a nation which would be among the great ones of the earth. All present waited in anxious anticipation.

It was clear that the land they were about to receive was a gift, a gift of the ancient God who had come to them in their oppression. This God had led them out of their bondage with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. This God had led them with signs and wonders through the desert wilderness. This God had brought them to the place where they were now encamped, in the Plains of Moab, just east of the Jordan River, from which, for the first time, they gazed upon the rich and fertile land which was to become theirs.

As they looked, they were overwhelmed. Not at all the parched desert wasteland which had been their home for the past 40 years, this was a land of grandeur: a land of brooks and water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of spacious skies and amber waves of grain, of purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain, a land whose stones were iron and whose hills were copper, a land where God had spread God's grace liberally from sea to shining sea. This was to become their land, a gift from God, their inheritance through many generations.

On the eve of their entry, their leader, Moses, gathered them together to make a speech concerning what they were about to do. We can see the whole assembly seated on a mountainside with Moses, standing on a high place, setting forth his words. It was a key moment in the life of the people, a major turning point between past and future. Moses addressed this turning point, and spoke directly to what was to be.

First, he raised a primary question: Why has God chosen you? Why did God not choose the Moabites or the Ammonites or the Philistines? Why you? Was it because you were more deserving than they, more virtuous, of a higher moral fiber? To answer this question, Moses reviewed the story of Israel's life so far: You were an unknown people in the land of Egypt,

nothing among the nations. After God heard your cries and delivered you at the Red Sea, you became a stubborn and stiff-necked people, murmuring because you were thirsty, complaining because you were hungry, and making for yourselves golden calves because you did not believe that God could care for you. You fought and bickered and broke the commandments. You turned aside and worshipped other gods. Did God choose you because you were deserving? God chose you because God chose you—for no other reason. An act of pure grace. It was God's doing and not yours that you are here today.

Moses then turned to consider the life they would live in the land they were about to occupy. After you settle in the land, he said, after you drink its water and eat from its amber waves of grain, after you build for yourselves goodly houses and alabaster cities, after you come to enjoy the best fruits of this rich place, then, at that moment, you will face the greatest question of your existence, the fundamental issue of your entire life: **What effect will this prosperity have on you?**

What kind of people will this gift of God make you? Will your head be puffed up? Will you say in your heart, "Behold, my power and the might of my hands have gotten me this wealth?" Will you come to think that it is your own initiative and worth that have brought you where you are? Or will you remember how the Lord your God brought you out of the land of oppression, and led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground, and brought you this place?

What effect will this prosperity have on you? Will it make you blind shield your eyes against those who have not been given this same abundance, harden your heart against them? Will you lie down on beds of ivory, and stretch yourselves on plush couches, eat the best lambs from the flock and filet mignon from the midst of the stall, sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and enjoy the best in classical performance, will you drink wine in bowls and bathe yourselves in the finest oils, and take no notice of the destitute who are all around you?

Or will you reach forth your hand in mercy to the meek and lowly, to the downtrodden and the oppressed, to provide for them as your God provided for you?

What effect will this prosperity have on you? Will it make you a vineyard of sour grapes? When the Lord comes to measure you for justice and test you for righteousness, will he find instead bloodshed and a cry of anguish? Will oppression roll down like waters and exploitation like an ever-flowing stream? Will you grind the heads of the powerless into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted? Will court decisions be sold in the marketplace and favorable treatment auctioned to the highest bidder?

Or will justice be your guide and righteousness be your light? Will you decide with equity between the strong and the powerless? Will your words convey truth and your pronouncements reality? Will the vineyard produce sweet grapes which its builder intended?

What effect will this prosperity have on you? Will you measure your worth by economic accomplishment, your status by the size of your estate? Will you come to believe that because you are prosperous, you are superior?

Or will you count yourself fortunate that you were born in an historical moment when the toil of your hands produced grain and barley rather than thorns and thistles, when the talents of your minds led to success rather than to frustration?

In other words, the key question as you move into this land is: will the prosperity that God is giving you make you haughty or make you thankful? Will it cause you to crawl off into your own perfected world of enriched splendor, surrounded by an ever-increasing abundance of lavish things, sealed off from the hard realities of the rest of humanity, or will it cause you to live a fundamentally grateful life, using your gifts so that others also shall receive blessing? Will it make you self-centered or self-giving? This is the speech that Moses spoke to Israel on the eve of their entry into the promised land.

It is significant that 600 years later, in the reign of King Josiah, after Israel had had a long and varied history, some prophets found a copy of this speech in the Jerusalem archives and declared it to the nation a second time as God's work spoken through Moses. The prophets perceived that even a country that is six centuries old still stands on the threshold of what it shall become, and still faces this fundamental issue of its life.

Today we celebrate the 234th anniversary of the United States of America. We shall sing of spacious skies and amber waves of grain. We shall pray for God's continued blessing from the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans white with foam. We shall give thanks for this land of freedom and prosperity which are gifts from God.

And as we do so, the fundamental question that God poses to us remains the same. The question has not changed in 3,200 years: What kind of people, what kind of nation, will the prosperity of this land make you?

Will we say in our hearts, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth?" And will our basic approach to life be protectiveness and greed?

Or will we say, "These amber waves of grain are God's gift to me to be used as a blessing for many?"

This is the issue as we, the United States of America, on this momentous day, encamp in the Plains of Moab, on the threshold of what we shall become.

And there is no better starting place to answer that question than at the table, where we are reminded to whom our allegiance ultimately belongs, and who is the giver of all good gifts.

Thanks be to God.

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Deuteronomy 8 NRSV

1 This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. **2** Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. **3** He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. **4** The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. **5** Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. **6** Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. **7** For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, **8** a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, **9** a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. **10** You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you. **11** Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. **12** When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, **13** and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, **14** then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, **15** who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, **16** and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. **17** Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” **18** But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. **19** If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. **20** Like the nations that the Lord is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God.