

Know Your Spiritual Enemies: The Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Deuteronomy 2:1-6 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

¹ "Then we turned, and took our journey into the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea, as Jehovah spoke to me; and we went around Mount Seir for many days. ² And Jehovah said to me, saying, ³ 'It is much for you to go around this mountain; turn yourselves northward. ⁴ And command the people, saying, "You are to cross over into the border of your brothers the sons of Esau, who dwell in Seir; and they shall fear you, and you shall watch yourself very carefully. ⁵ Do not meddle with them, for I will not give you any of their land, not so much as a step of a sole of a foot; for I have given Mount Seir to Esau for a possession. ⁶ You shall purchase food from them for silver, and you shall eat; and also water you shall procure from them for silver, and you shall drink." ' "

Deuteronomy 23:3-8 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

³ "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not come into the assembly of Jehovah; even to their tenth generation they shall not come into the assembly of Jehovah, even to eternity; ⁴ because they did not come before you with bread and with water in the way, when you came out of Egypt; and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you. ⁵ But Jehovah your God was not willing to listen to Balaam; and Jehovah your God turned the curse to a blessing for you, for Jehovah your God loved you. ⁶ You shall not seek their peace nor their goodness all your days to eternity.

⁷ "You shall not treat an Edomite as an abomination; for he is your brother; you shall not treat an Egyptian as an abomination; because you were a sojourner in his land. ⁸ The children of the third generation born to them may come into the assembly of Jehovah."

Revelation 2:12-17 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

¹² "And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write: 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: ¹³ I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold My name, and have not denied My faith, even in those days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you where Satan dwells. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you, that you have there those who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit harlotry. ¹⁵ Thus you have, even you, those who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans, which I hate. ¹⁶ Repent; otherwise I will come to you quickly, and will fight among them with the sword of My mouth.

¹⁷ "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written, which no one knows except him who receives it." '

Secrets of Heaven 3322:5-7

“Edom” stands for people who possess simple goodness, which is the kind of goodness that exists in people who make up the Lord’s external or more superficial church. So do “Moab” and “the children of Ammon”.... The difference is that “Edom” means goodness on the earthly plane with doctrinal truth linked to it, while “Moab” is earthly goodness of a kind that also exists with people in whom they are not linked.

From this it is now evident why Deuteronomy 23:7 says, “You shall not treat an Edomite as an abomination, for he is your brother....” It is also evident why Jehovah told Moses that they were not to join battle with the children of Esau, and that the children of Jacob would not be given any of their land, down to the print of the sole of a foot.

In an opposite sense, though, “Esau” and “Edom” represent people who turn away from goodness because they utterly despise truth and resist the introduction of any religious truth – usually as a result of self-love.

Introduction

- Today, we're going to talk about a couple of the nations that the Israelites dealt with on their way to the promised land.
 - Part of what we'll see in these stories is illustration of the teaching that loving our neighbors does not mean treating everyone in the same way.
 - We are supposed to try to love people according to the good in them (*True Christianity* 417-419) which means that the loving and right thing to do is to treat different people differently and we'll see that play out in the stories about the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites.
- We're picking up the story when they had come out of slavery in Egypt, had spent some time in the wilderness and now they're starting to head towards the land of Canaan.
- As we read in the lessons, the Lord was clear with the Israelites about how they should treat these particular nations.
 - Other nations, like the Amalekites that we talked about a few weeks ago, they were supposed to fight against and destroy every single one of them.
 - But the Lord gave them different instructions for the nations we're going to talk about today.
 - Today we're going to focus on the Edomites, the Moabites, and the Ammonites.
- The people from these nations have something that makes them different from the other nations that the Israelites dealt with: all of those people were cousins of the Israelites – they were different branches off of the same family tree.
 - The children of Israel traced their family back to Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob who was also called Israel.
 - The Edomites were the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau.
 - The Moabites and the Ammonites were the descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot.
- Just because these nations were family did not mean that they were always good.
 - In fact sometimes they were quite terrible.
 - But the children of Israel were not supposed to just destroy them.
 - It was more complicated than that.
 - So today we're going to try to understand what they mean in our lives and something about how to have good boundaries.

The Edomites

- Let's talk first about the Edomites.
- The Israelites were coming up towards the land of Canaan from the South and the first of these nations that they encountered along the way was the Edomites.
- The Edomites were generally better than the Moabites and Ammonites.
 - The Edomites' ancestor, Esau, had his problems and his conflict with his brother Jacob but he also had his good sides and his descendants were the same way.
 - The Moabites and Ammonites, on the other hand, from the beginning were the product of incest (Genesis 19:30-38).

- There are a few instances where the Moabites and Ammonites represent something good in the Word but the majority of the time they represent something pretty messed up and terrible.
- Because the Edomites were pretty good sometimes, the Lord's instructions were clear that they should not be messed with.
 - The Israelites were supposed to treat them as their brothers.
 - The Lord's instructions to the Israelites about how to treat the Edomites sounds a lot like a parent giving instructions to siblings to get them to stop messing with each other.
 - They were supposed to go to the border of their land but they were not supposed to set foot on their land without permission.
 - The Lord said explicitly, "...you shall watch yourself very carefully. Do not meddle with them, for I will not give you any of their land" (Deuteronomy 2:4,5).
 - It was OK for them get food and water from the Edomites but it needed to be a mutually beneficial transaction – they needed to pay for everything they got, not just take it.
- The lesson that we read from the teachings of the New Church explained why the children of Israel were given these instructions.
 - When the Edomites were representing something positive they meant "people who possess simple goodness" and even "goodness on the earthly plane with doctrinal truth linked to it" (*Secrets of Heaven* 3322:5-7).
 - If people are living good lives, then we should not mess with them.
 - The tone of the instructions given to the children of Israel makes it sound like the Lord knew that they would really want to mess with the Edomites.
 - "Watch yourself very carefully."
 - Don't let yourself just kinda sorta end up meddling with them a little bit.
 - No. Stop it.
 - No, you can't have any of their land – not even a little bit!
- Think about what people in your life it's hard to not meddle with.
 - Is it family members?
 - Somehow when a stranger does something that we don't like, it can be no big deal.
 - But if our family member does that, we feel it differently.
 - We have a different sense of connection to family members; a different sense of ownership; a different sense of them being a part of us so, if they do something we don't like, we feel like it affects us in a different way.
- But, if the family member or person that we feel some sense of close relationship with is doing something good, then we need to watch ourselves carefully, go only to their border, and not meddle with them or take their things.
- You might think back on when you were growing up and one of your siblings doing something that got on your nerves.
 - You could tell them that you wanted them to stop but, if they weren't actually doing something wrong, you needed to stay on the boundary and maybe go do something else.
 - You don't have permission to go in there and make them change.

- Another category of people that it can be hard not to meddle with is people who are part of our religious community.
 - If someone from a different religion does something that we disagree with, that's one thing.
 - But if a New Church person does something we disagree with, that feels different.
 - I wonder if these various nations that have family connections to the Israelites might be like people in our broader religious community.
 - It could be various other people that live in our same area and are part of our same church organization and community.
 - Or it could be people who are part of our broader denomination, the General Church of the New Jerusalem.
 - Or it could be people who are part of other denominations based on the teachings of the New Church.
- We need to be awfully careful with applying these stories in this way.
 - Are we making ourselves the good guys in the story and everyone else the bad guys?
 - Are we the Israelites and people around us are the Moabites and Ammonites etc.?
 - The safest way to view all of these things is to realize that they all exist in each of us – we all have Moabites and Edomites within ourselves and we all have Israelites within ourselves.
- That being said, if we are trying to be followers of the Lord, we are going to be interacting with other people who are trying to follow the Lord and we need to acknowledge that sometimes those people will be a good influence on our spiritual lives and sometimes they will not.
 - Sometimes we will need to work hard to maintain appropriate boundaries between us and other religious people – even other religious people who are part of our family or part of our church organization.
 - In some cases we might be the Israelites that need to not mess with the Edomites.
 - And in other cases we might be the Moabites and we need to leave the Israelites alone.

The Edomites Response

- In the story, the Israelites ask the Edomites if they can travel through their land.
 - ¹⁷ "Please let us pass through your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, nor will we drink water from wells; we will go along the King's Highway; we will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory." (Numbers 20:17)
- But the Edomites refuse.
- The Israelites ask again, saying that if any of their people or livestock drink some water, they'll pay for it but the Edomites refuse again.
 - ²⁰ Then [Edom] said, "You shall not pass through." So Edom came out against them with many men and with a strong hand. ²¹ Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory; so Israel turned away from him. (Numbers 20:20,21)
- Were the Edomites being stubborn and selfish and unaccommodating? Yeah.
 - The passage from our lesson said that the Edomites can represent "people who turn away from goodness because they utterly despise truth and resist the introduction of any religious truth – usually as a result of self-love."

- But that still didn't give the Israelites the right to cross their borders so they had to go around Edom instead (Numbers 21:4).
- It's the same for us sometimes.
 - Sometimes people don't do what we want.
 - Sometimes people are unreasonable and don't help us out even though we're trying to make it all fair and approach it in the right way.
 - And that still doesn't give us the right to do what we want anyway.
 - We have to find another way around.

The Moabites & the Ammonites

- After the Israelites made their way around the land of the Edomites they find themselves on the boundary of the land of Moab and then on the boundary of the land of Ammon.
- We didn't read it but, in the same chapter where the Lord told the people to not mess with the Edomites, he also tells them not to harass or fight with the Moabites or the Ammonites because he's not going to give the Israelites any of their land either – it belongs to the descendants of Lot (Deuteronomy 2:8,9,19).
- As we said earlier, the Moabites and Ammonites are a much bigger problem than the Edomites.
 - The second lesson from Deuteronomy said that an Edomite or an Egyptian could join the assembly of the Israelites in the third generation but an Ammonite or a Moabite couldn't join even after ten generations.
 - That's so many generations!
 - It's symbolic of how they can represent something so adulterated and messed up that there are no remnants of goodness or truth anymore (*Secrets of Heaven* 2468:15).
 - For the same reasons the Israelites were also told, "You shall not seek their peace nor their goodness all your days to eternity" (Deuteronomy 23:6) and we'll see why they were told this as we go through what happened.
- The Israelites go around the Moabites' land; they don't go through it but the Balak, the king of Moab, still feels threatened by having the Israelites in the area so he doesn't leave them alone.
 - He calls for the Balaam, a soothsayer, to come and curse the Israelites.
 - You might remember that Balaam tells Balak from the beginning that he won't be able to curse anything or anyone that Jehovah hasn't cursed.
 - Balak convinces him to still come and try to curse them.
 - So Balaam eventually comes because he really wants the money and wants to curse them but instead he blesses Israel four times, including this prophecy:
 - ¹⁷ A Star shall come out of Jacob;
A Scepter shall rise out of Israel,
And batter the brow of Moab,
And destroy all the sons of tumult.
 - ¹⁸ And Edom shall be a possession.... (Numbers 24:17,18)
- This is a remarkable illustration of the protection that the Lord can offer us.
 - Other people can wish us ill but, if we are following the Lord, He can protect us from the worst.

- But, unfortunately, Balaam was evil and clever.
 - The teachings of the New Church tell us that he represents people who have an enlightened understanding and who teach truths, but who also love to destroy people who are of the church in crafty ways (*Apocalypse Explained* 140).
 - We get an explanation of this meaning from where Balaam is mentioned in the book of Revelation, in the letter to church in Pergamos.
 - "But I have a few things against you, that you have there those who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit harlotry." (Revelation 2:14)
- Balaam figured out a crafty way to hurt the Israelites.
- He tells Balak to entice the Israelite men to marry women from other nations so that they will start worshipping other gods than the Lord.
 - Numbers 25:1-3
 - ¹ Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. ² They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³ So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of Jehovah was aroused against Israel.
- As a result of this, twenty-four thousand of Israelites die in a plague (Numbers 25:9).
 - This might seem like a very harsh punishment but we need to remember who these other gods were that the Moabites and Ammonites were getting the Israelites to bow down to: Chemosh, Molech, and Milchom, gods that they would worship by sacrificing children to them (1 Kings 11:7, 33; 2 Kings 23:13; 2 Kings 3:27; *Secrets of Heaven* 2468:16).
- What's the lesson for us today in all of this?
 - Again we can see it being about having appropriate boundaries.
 - We're not meant to mess with the Moabites and Ammonites.
 - There are limited times where they're doing fine.
 - Don't mess with them.
- And then at other times when we might be tempted to have not enough of a boundary with them.
 - They seem friendly, attractive, interested in us.
 - However, these represent people who can put on a good show of doing good external actions – even religious actions – but at their heart they are manipulative, self-serving, and cruel.
 - Don't intermarry with cruelty.
 - Don't spend time with people who have the trappings of religion but who despise other people in comparison with themselves.
- It's simpler to view other people as either mortal enemies or close friends and family.
 - It seems like we're being asked to do something different with these nations.
 - Not treat them as enemies but also not treat them as friends.
 - Keep them at arms' length.
 - Maintain some distance.
 - Maybe trust less quickly.

- Ask the Lord to bring His sharp two-edged sword to cut through the external appearances and help us to see what's really going on.
- Just because people's behavior might look good externally does not mean that we should immediately wed ourselves to them.
- It's not our job to get rid of these particular nations; our job is to steer clear of them and keep on heading towards the Promised Land.

Conclusion

- The Israelites do eventually enter the promised land and it seems significant that their entry point is not through Edom, Moab, or Ammon.
- Their entry point is across the Jordan river.
 - The Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites can all represent good external things – good actions, worshipful behavior, and people who do good and worshipful things.
 - Those are good things but they are not our point of entry into the church or into heaven.
 - We don't get into the church properly via other people – family, friends, or otherwise.
 - We also don't get in through doing enough good-looking actions or enough worshipful things.
- The real thing that gets us into the church is repentance – taking responsibility for fighting against evil within ourselves, doing all that we can to stop doing what's wrong, and asking the Lord to help us begin a new life (*True Christianity* 510).
- If we're working on our own stuff and trying our best to follow the Lord, He will help us figure out how to have the right kind of relationships with all the different people in our lives – from our family members, to our fellow church members, to anyone we might interact with.
 - If we work on loving the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our mind, and all of our strength, He will help us learn how to love our neighbors as ourselves.
- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.