

Deuteronomy ~ Sermon/Commentary

George Burns once said, “The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible.” That sounds great except when you consider that the Hebrew title for Deuteronomy is Devarim, which means or “words” or “rhetoric.” Devarim describes the book well, which is essentially a series of long speeches or sermons delivered by Moses to the Jews as they prepared to cross the Jordan into the promised land. Trivia: the book not only has some of the longest speeches or sermons in the Bible but also the longest sentences. In a novel, a long sentence might have 20 or 25 words. In this book, we have several sentences with more than 150 words.

Today, we know this fifth book as Deuteronomy. That name came from Greek and it actually means “second law” or “repetition of the law.” Why that name? Well, we need to look at a little Jewish history.

The Jews refer to the first books of the Bible as the books OF Moses, not books BY Moses. Although Moses may have written a few scrolls himself, the vast majority of the five books were passed along orally from father to son, from one generation to the next. It was not until the Jews were settled into promised land, Israel, and perhaps not even until the days of the temple around 1000 BC that Moses’ words were actually set down on scrolls. This was quite an undertaking by a number of scribes—we don’t know how many—which Jewish scholars call a “composite work.” So by the time Solomon built the first temple, roughly 950 BC, the first four books of Moses had been set down in written form and became known as the tetrateuch—four books.

After Solomon, what then happened in the promised land? Well, Solomon’s son Rehoboam came into power and declared, “My father made your yoke heavy, I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips, I will scourge you with scorpions.” Nice guy, eh? As a result, the northern ten tribes broke away under King Jeroboam and continued to call themselves Israel while the southern two tribes formed Judah ruled by Rehoboam. For the next 230 years, both Israel and Judah had a succession of good kings and bad kings, but eventually God got fed up with the idol worship and backsliding in Israel, withdrew his support and in 722 BC allowed it to be conquered by the Assyrians and its people exiled.

Meanwhile, in Judah a good king, Josiah, comes into power and during the repair of the temple, a priest named Hilkiah discovers a long lost book of the law. (described in 2 Kings 22 and 23, 2 Chronicles 34 and 35) This book served a basis for sweeping reforms made by King Josiah. But it also served as the center of what came to be known as Deuteronomy or, as I mentioned earlier, “repetition of the law.”

At this point, roughly 620 BC, Israel has been conquered and its people are in exile. To the south, Judah is being threatened by the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians and needs someone to rally around. Who better than Moses? So some scribes—at least four—take this newly discovered body of the law and wrap around it some inspired speeches and sermons of Moses made to the Jews as they prepared to cross the Jordan. The exodus and wilderness wanderings are described briefly in Chapters 1 and 2 but great emphasis is put on the defeat of several Amorite kings.

Throughout the book several small changes are incorporated to make Moses look heroic and perfect. In Exodus, the idea for Moses to appoint capable men to judge matters over the thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens came from his father-in-law, Jethro. In Deuteronomy, Moses is credited with coming up with the idea himself. In Numbers it says that God would not allow Moses to enter the promised land because of his sin. Now it becomes the sins of the people. There are two or three other accounts that are a bit slanted to put a positive spin on Moses and everything he did.

The central part of the book from Chapter 4 through 26 is the law itself and a restatement of the covenant. Chapters 27 to 30 describe the blessings from following the law and curses and penalties for not following it. Chapter 32 is the so-called “Song of Moses,” which is in such a totally different and archaic style that it seems possible that this may have actually been written on old scrolls by Moses himself. Chapter 33 is Moses blessings for each of the 12 tribes, while the last chapter, 34, describes the death of Moses.

Big Question: the book describes events that took place around 1400 BC, more than 3,400 years ago. It was set down on scrolls around 600 BC, still 2,600 years ago. Does it have any relevance for us today? Didn't the law and animal sacrifices and all that stuff about impure foods and mildew and cities of refuge and burnt offerings all go away with the coming of Jesus? Well, some did and some didn't. But in Jesus' own words we read, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” (Matthew 5:17-18).

Interestingly, Deuteronomy itself deals with this same issue. Even though Moses is speaking to people who would have been under the age of 20 at the time of leaving Egypt, he emphasizes that the covenant, in other words keeping the law and being blessed by God, is for *all* generations. In 5:3, he says, “*Not* with our fathers did the LORD seal this covenant, but with us—we that are here today; all of us alive.”

So the answer to the Big Questions is: Yes, Deuteronomy has relevance for all of us here today. Indeed, the Oxford Study Bible concludes that “it is clear that the Book of Deuteronomy is meant to speak to all future generations.”

My next question is: so it’s relevant. What message does it have for me? For you? For all of us?

Previously, we identified four themes running through the five books of Moses. By the way, now that Deuteronomy has been added, the books are called the Pentateuch, i.e., five books. The Jews call them the Torah. The themes are:

1. Election or chosen people.
2. Covenant
3. The Law
4. Exodus

There is a fifth theme that I would like to add and that is the absolute and awesome supremacy of the Lord God and *only* the Lord God.

It is this fifth theme, the supremacy of the Lord God, plus the Covenant and the Law that are the main focus of Deuteronomy. Let’s look at some scripture. I’m using the translation by Robert Alter. There are two modern Jewish translations, the Anchor Bible that came out in the late 90s and the Alter translation of the five books of Moses that came out in 2004.

This first passage, Deuteronomy 4:11-20 comes after the narration about the exodus and is part of the introduction of the law. It’s about the great Mt. Sinai experience. In this passage we find a summary of all five themes: the supremacy of the Lord, the covenant, the law, the chosen people, and the exodus. (It also has one of the longest sentences in the Bible, 141 words in verses 15 to 19, which the NIV breaks into 3 sentences.)

“And the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire. The sound of the words did you hear but no image did you see except the sound. And He told you His covenant that He charged you to do, the Ten Words, and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. And me did the LORD charge at that time to teach you statutes and laws for you to do in the land into which you are crossing over to take hold of it. And you shall be very watchful of yourselves, for you saw no image on the day the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire, lest you act ruinously and make you a sculpted image of any likeness, the form of male or of female, the form of any beast that is on the earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the heavens, the form of anything that crawls on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters under the earth, lest you raise your eyes to the heavens and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the array of the heavens, and you be led astray and bow down to them and worship them, for the LORD your God allotted them to all the peoples under the heavens. But you did the LORD take and He brought you out

from the iron's forge, from Egypt, to become for Him a people in estate as this day.” (4:11-20).

This passage is essentially the defining memory of the Jewish people, which is an overwhelming revelation of God but with the absence of any visual image. As Robert Alter says, “it is not the image of God but His incandescent presence that the Jews experience through their history, and the powerful rhetoric of Deuteronomy is the means that evokes this presence.”

So...Given this absolute and awesome supremacy of the Lord, what does he expect of us? These next few verses state it very clearly.

“Hear, Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all of your being and with all of your might. (6:4-5) The LORD your God you shall fear and Him shall you serve, and by His name shall you swear. You shall not go after other gods, from the gods of the people who are all around you. For the LORD God is a jealous god in your midst. (6:13-15) You shall surely keep the command of the LORD your God, and His treaty terms and His statutes with which He charged you. And you shall do what is right and good in the eyes of the LORD, so that it may go well with you.” (6:17-18a)

The first verses in this passage (6:4-9) are a foundational Biblical text within Judaism known as the Shema. This section of scripture follows the ten commandments and is the beginning of Moses' exposition of the Covenant between God and Israel. It is recited twice each day in Jewish worship and is basically the heart of the Jewish faith. But in these verses is a strong message for Christians as well, namely that the Lord is absolutely unique, there is no other.

Let's flip forward two chapters to Chapter 8 and beyond.

“And you shall keep the commands of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. (8:6) And it will be, if you indeed forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and worship them and bow to them, I bear witness against you today that you shall surely perish. (8:19)

“And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, and to worship the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your being, to keep the LORD's commands and His statutes that I charge you today for your own good? (10:12-13)

“And you shall love the LORD your God and keep His watch and His statutes and His laws and His commands for all time. (11:1)

“After the LORD your God shall you go and Him shall you fear and His commands shall you keep and His voice shall you heed and Him shall you worship and to Him shall you cleave. (13:5)

“The LORD you have proclaimed today to be your God, and to go in His ways and to keep His statutes and His commands and His laws and to heed His voice.” (26:17)

Are you getting the idea of what the Lord expects of you? This is spelled out in three other places as well. Do you think repeating it ten times is enough? I think verses 10:12-13 summarize it the best. There are five things the Lord asks of us: Fear him, love him, worship him, walk in his ways, and keep his laws and commands. Simple, right?

A word about “fearing” the Lord. This doesn’t mean the fear you might feel if someone is pointing a gun at you or the fear that your child might drown in a big wave at the shore. To fear God mean to be awed by his great power—the power of creation, the power of the flood, the power of the 10 plagues, or the power to defeat the vast armies opposing the Jews. “Fear” also implies respect.

As far as loving God, we get a good meaning of that from the Hebrew text which says that loving God is *not* a matter of feeling or emotion but of *doing*. We’re told to love God with all our heart, with all our being, with all our might. In Hebrew thought, *heart* means the place of thinking, *being* means your life and vitality, and *might* means something like your resources. Actually, the traditional rabbinic interpretation for might is money. So loving God is not some amorphous concept or jumping in his lap like a kid might do and saying, “daddy, I love you.” It’s actually thinking, doing something, and using your resources to do it.

What does God want us to do to show our love?

Certainly obeying the Ten Commandments, and as we read earlier, serving God, obeying God, and following His laws and statutes and commands as laid out in the Covenant in Chapters 6 through 23. If you read these chapters, you’ll find that the Covenant is very broad and covers many things. The Sabbath day of course. Worship. Celebrating the Passover and other religious festivals. Tithing. But much more. Clean and unclean food. Taking care of people. Women are not to be taken advantage of. There are to be no false accusations. Punishment for wrong doing must not be excessive. All people’s dignity is to be respected. Everyone is to be paid fairly. Everyone is to share in the crops. The marriage relationship is to be kept inviolate. Taking care of poor and disabled people. Everyone is to have a fair trial. No one, not even the king, is above the law. There are even verses about the welfare of animals and the environment.

So basically the Covenant sets out a standard for living in a Godly way and by so doing, showing that we love God. The other half of the Covenant is that if we do so, we will be blessed. But if we don’t, we will be punished—actually it says we will be cursed. Interestingly, the blessings are spelled out in the first 14 verses of Chapter 28, while the curses take the remaining 53 verses of the chapter.

There are two other important lessons to take with you from Deuteronomy that we don't have time to discuss at length. But if you look at the last two sections of scripture that are toward the end of Deuteronomy, verses 29:17-21, you'll see that the Lord wants us to worship him and him alone. The bad news is that he also says that there is no forgiveness for knowingly worshiping a false god or idol. This is repeated in the New Testament in five separate places where it is called blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and is the only sin that God will not forgive.

The last scripture we'll look at is Chapter 30:11-14 where the Lord effectively tells us that there are no mythological secrets or hidden wisdom of the gods. You don't have to climb to the sky or cross the sea to know what he wants you to do. Moses says that if you have listened to the sermons and heeded the covenant, it is now in your heart (and remember, heart in Hebrew means the place of thinking). Today we have a further advantage in that the word is not only passed along orally in stories and sermons, but also in the written word of the Bible.

So, given that final thought of Deuteronomy, let me ask you: you've heard the sermon, you have the words; is it now in your heart? What does God want of us? Acknowledge that the Lord is the only God. Have no idols. God wants us to love him, to worship him, to fear him, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands. And remember, that loving God is much more than an emotional love; it means thinking, doing, and loving others. That's Deuteronomy in a nutshell.

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January 2011