

**Core Seminar**

**Old Testament**

**Class 8: Deuteronomy**

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**Introduction**

Today, as we conclude our overview of the Five Books of Moses, we’ll encounter one of the greatest transitions in the Bible, as the people of Israel prepare to enter the Promised Land. While they wait on the plains of Moab for that long-expected day, Moses delivers three final exhortations to the people on God’s behalf. These sermons are what make up most of our book today: Deuteronomy. The name comes from the Greek for “second law,” because much of the book is a second giving of the law that we’ve seen already in the Pentateuch. But this book is far more than a repetition of the law. It’s the Bible’s summary of God’s covenant with Israel. So you’ll see in the rest of the Old Testament overview, the authors continue to come back to one book more than any other in the Pentateuch. They come back to Deuteronomy. It’s the key to understanding Joshua. And Judges. We’ll use it to structure our study of 1 and 2 Samuel. And 1 and 2 Kings. You get the picture. This book is central to the rest of Scripture.

Now, one way that it’s central is that it helps us understand the role of the law and of grace in our salvation. So let’s start there. Some people have said that in the Old Testament, people are saved by works and in the New, by grace. But we know that’s not true. Romans 3 makes it clear that salvation has only and ever been by grace. So, based on your knowledge of the Old Testament, where are some of the places where it talks about our need for God’s grace?

**Context**

Let’s talk a bit about the context of the book, and then we’ll dive into our study. We left off last week at the end of Numbers, with Israel on the plains of Moab, just across the Jordan River from the Promised Land. It’s around 1400BC. The first generation that came out of Egypt has died. The second generation is ready to enter and occupy Canaan. And as Numbers leaves off, we begin Deuteronomy. And we see in the opening verses that this is going to be a book of Moses’ sermons.

But why? If they’re so close to this land they’ve been dreaming of for 40 years, why stop here on the border… to listen to sermons? Why? Because there’s much more at stake than just a place to live. Israel is a nation founded on the promises of God that’s been sustained by the power of God. They’ve been redeemed from slavery, constituted as a nation, brought into covenant with Yahweh, given good laws and a tabernacle where God’s glory dwelt. And so possession of the land of Canaan is the last of the puzzle pieces to come together for God to make good on all of his promises to Abraham. Now, they could easily get confused and think that all they need is a place to live. So to work against that, God uses Deuteronomy to renew his covenant with them—the complete and finished puzzle of his relationship with them. Deuteronomy is the book that future generations will turn to again and again. To understand who they are and what it means for them to be in covenant with Yahweh.

**Structure**

So, some important context. With that in place, let’s take a look at how this covenant shapes the structure of this book.

You’ll remember that we’ve defined a “covenant” as a bond in blood, sovereignly administered.[[1]](#footnote-1) A binding agreement between two parties with terms and conditions. In the ancient Near East, it was common for rulers to use a covenant to guarantee their alliances. Typically, the terms of the covenant were laid down in a document and ratified in a solemn ceremony, with oaths, witnesses and a symbolic seal or sign.

Well, if you’ve been with us in the OT class so far, you know that this covenant model is one of the major ways that God chose to deal with his people. We’ve seen how God covenanted with Abraham to make his descendents a great nation, with Yahweh reigning and ruling over them in Canaan. Then, in Exodus, we saw the obligations Abraham’s descendants were bound to in a new covenant: the Ten Commandments and laws in Exodus 20-24. This covenant, called the Mosaic Covenant, was a gracious step forward in God’s redemptive plan -- it made the people into a nation, revealed God’s holy character through his law, and established the sacrificial system that prepared the way for Christ’s atonement on the cross.[[2]](#footnote-2) But it also formally placed an obligation on the nation of Israel: to be holy as God is holy, with the curse of death if they fell short.

It’s this Mosaic Covenant that’s being expounded and ratified here in Deuteronomy. In fact, turn to the back page of your handout and you’ll see that the whole book of Deuteronomy follows the format of a covenant document commonly used in the ancient Near-East. We begin with a historical prologue in chapters 1-4, where Moses in his first speech recounts God’s past faithfulness to the people. Then, the heart of the book is Moses’ second speech. That’s where he details the covenant stipulations that bind the people. First, general commands in chapters 5-11 about their exclusive relationship to God. Then, specific commands in chapters 12-26 about how to operate as God’s people in the land. In Moses’ third speech, he explains the blessings and curses that will result if the people are faithful or unfaithful to the covenant. The conclusion of the book gives a window into Israel’s future as the covenant people of God. For the rest of our class today, we’ll walk through this covenant document section by section.

[Questions]

**Historical Prologue - Chs. 1-4**

First, the covenant’s Historical Prologue**.** Chapters 1 through 4 are a review of the Israel’s relationship with Yahweh to date. The theme? Yahweh has shown himself to be both just and merciful. The history here is the same as we saw last week in the book of Numbers. The people’s lack of trust in God’s power (Dt. 1:32), God’s refusing to let the first generation enter the land (Dt. 1:35), the people’s wanderings in the desert (Dt. 2:14), and God’s gracious provision (Dt. 2:7) and military victory (Dt. 2:24-3:11). The summary of all this is 4:35: “To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him.” Moses continues in verse 40: “Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that theLord your God is giving you for all time.” A perfectly faithful God requires perfect faithfulness to himself.

That’s the history: God has been gracious. And that’s the charge: therefore, follow God alone. What will it look like for the people to obey that charge once they’re in the land? God tells them, by giving them his covenant stipulations in Moses’ next speech.

**General Stipulations: Love and Faithfulness – Chs. 5-11**

And these begin with some general laws in chapter 5. If you turn there, you’ll see a reiteration of the Ten Commandments. But God makes it clear that his relationship with Israel is *not* about merely following rules and regulations. At the heart of these commandments is a story of *love*. Look at 6:4-6:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.”

This is the famous “*Shema*,” which is the Hebrew word for “hear.” The most important thing for the Israelites to hear is that Yahweh is one God. He is the only God, and the proper response to the one true God is total, all-consuming love. What does this love look like? Obeying God’s commands. Because his commandments are to be “upon your hearts,” which the ancient Hebrews understood to be the mind, will, emotions, thought life - everything that makes up the “inside” character of a person.

But if total, exclusive love is at the core of how Israel was to engage with its covenant God, this was simply because God had loved them first. Listen to these amazing words, just a chapter later, in Deut. 7:7-8:

“It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

Here we have a majestic window into the mystery of God’s electing love. He chose this people simply because he loved them. Not because of anything about them; he just loved them. Their relationship with God is based entirely in God’s grace.

We can apply this to our lives too. Though we are in a different chapter of redemptive history, love should still be at the center of how we engage with God. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he quoted Deuteronomy 6:4. " You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. (Luke 10:27)." But, like Israel, we must recognize that we can only love God because he first chose and loved us. We love God by first tasting his gracious, electing love for us.

And as we look over this section of general covenant stipulations, we see that a crucial part of loving God is obeying the first commandment: having no other gods but him. That’s why Moses instructs the people to completely destroy foreign idols in chapter 7 (7:5-6), to never forget God’s faithfulness in chapter 8 (8:10-14), and to remember that idolatry is deadly in chapter 9 (9:27-29).

With this guiding principle of loving faithfulness in place, Moses proceeds to explain the specific stipulations of the covenant for the nation’s life in the Promised Land. That’s chapters 12-26.

**Specific Stipulations: Justice and Holiness -- Chs. 12-26**

Moses starts in 12:1 by saying, “These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth.” The point of these 15 chapters is that as God’s people in God’s land, they were to worship God alone, reflect God’s holiness, and represent God’s justice. But… in spite of that straightforward purpose, this section of Deuteronomy may be the toughest to work through as we meditate on this book in our personal devotions. Why? Well, the general principle in 12:1 is followed by command after command that don’t really seem to apply to us. Like, how to destroy idols (Chs. 12-13), clean and unclean food (Ch. 14), tithes, animal property, and national feasts (Chs. 14:22-16:17). How are we to make sense of *all* these laws?

For one, it’s helpful to see that there’s a basic structure in place. If you look at the back of your handout, you’ll see a guide to this underlying format: broadly speaking, the laws follow the order of the Ten Commandments.

Now, knowing that structure may be useful, but it doesn’t tell us everything we need to know about how to apply these laws today. To understand that, we need to take a step back and review the chapter of *redemptive history* that Deuteronomy is in.

As we’ve discussed already, this period in the Bible sees God fulfilling his promises to Abraham by establishing Israel as his special people. In order to set the stage for Christ, the promised seed of Eve, God is graciously setting Israel apart. They are the holy nation from whom the Messiah would descend. And the fact that Israel is God’s *covenant* nation means that they are obligated to obey his law. When you read these laws, remember the context: they were given to Israel at a specific point in history.

Now, today, Christ has come. *We’re* in a different stage of redemption history. That doesn’t mean that this law is irrelevant, though. As we discussed a couple of weeks ago, the law still reveals God’s flawless character, it still exposes our need for a Savior, and it stills instruct Christians about how to live.[[3]](#footnote-3) Jesus said in Matthew 5:17 that he didn’t come to abolish the law. Instead, he came to fulfill it. Now, in one sense he fulfilled it by obeying it perfectly. So Deut. 27:26 says, “Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.” Because Jesus was the only one who “did” them, he is the only one not under a curse. So he was able to die in our place, bearing *our* curse, so that we might be set free from the curse of the law. (Cf. Rom. 6:14).

But that’s not all that Jesus meant when he said he “fulfilled” the law. In John 5:39 Jesus claims that the Old Testament “bear[s] witness about *me*.” It’s his portrait, so to speak. And that’s exactly what we see as we read through how the New Testament authors use the Old Testament. They see the Old Testament as pointing to Christ.

OK. Good background on the law. But we still don’t know how to apply it, do we? Let’s make this practical. In order to understand how to apply a section of the Old Testament law, we need to understand exactly how it points to Christ. How it is fulfilled in Christ. To do this, a helpful starting point is to divide the law into three different categories.

* The *moral* laws are largely permanent and apply directly to us, because they aren’t limited to the national, ethnic context of Israel. A prime example would be the Greatest Commandment (“love the Lord your God”…).
* On the other hand, the *civil* laws applied to the political nation of Israel’s governance and justice,
* and the *ceremonial* laws dealt with Israel’s temple sacrifices, religious offerings, and national feasts. These were pointing to Christ in the sense that a shadow points to the real thing. So once Christ came, their purpose was complete. And so they are no longer binding on Christians.

So, given that the law is fulfilled in Christ and that it divides broadly into those 3 categories, let me suggest three ways we can practically apply the law today:

* First, we should follow the New Testament’s instruction regarding these laws. For example, laws about clean and unclean food like we see in Deut. 14? In the NT, Mark 7 and Acts 10 teach that Christians do not need to follow those rules - they were part of the ceremonial law. But, in contrast, moral laws that are repeated or even amplified in the NT, like “do not murder,” *are* valid for Christians today.
* Second, we should understand what these laws teach us about God’s character. Deut. 22:11 forbids the Israelites from mixing wool and linen in the same article of clothing, to remind them about God’s holiness and the nation’s distinctness from the world. We don’t have to obey this law, but it tells us something important about God.
* Third, we should appreciate Jesus’ perfection because he upheld all these laws. All of them.

I hope you can see that even though some interpretive work is required, these laws are very instructive for our lives as Christians. We should be like the Psalmist who declared, “I gain understanding from your precepts (laws); therefore I hate every wrong path” (Ps. 119:104). But most importantly, these laws should point us to our need for a Savior! As Luther said, “the principal purpose of the Law in theology is to make men not better but worse; that is, it shows them their sin, so that by the recognition of their sin they may be humbled, frightened, and worn down, and so may long for grace and for the Blessed Offspring.”

[Questions]

**Moses’ Third Speech: Covenant Renewal -- Chs. 27-30**

As we move ahead to Moses’ final sermon, let’s again put ourselves in the shoes of the Israelites. You can see the Promised Land waiting in the distance. You’ve just heard God’s standards, and they are utterly high.

Now, in chapters 27-30, we learn just how high the stakes are. If Israel devotes their hearts to Yahweh, the covenant promises great blessings. Deut. 28:10-11: “And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you. And the Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your livestock and in the fruit of your ground, within the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give you.” In fact, there are 14 inspiring verses in chapter 28 outlining the blessings for covenant faithfulness.

But, if Israel will not stay faithful to Yahweh, the covenant includes terrible curses… *70* devastating verses of them, in chapters 27-28. The greatest curse of all? Exile from the Promised Land. Listen to 28:36-37: “The Lord will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone. And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you away.”

If we’re the people of Israel listening to Moses, our hearts should be quaking right now! The curses are horrific! And the blessings only come... if we’re perfect??

It seems that failure is inevitable. Deuteronomy leaves us with no false impressions that the people will be able to maintain the demands of this covenant. In fact, in chapters 29-30, Moses directly tells the people that they will fall short. The reason, in 29:4, is that “But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.” The people can only keep the covenant if they are given new hearts—and only God can do that.

And it’s precisely at this point that Deuteronomy turns to hope. God’s law and its curses do stand against the people. But God himself, as this book comes to a close, makes some astounding promises of grace.

First, he promises restoration for all who repent of breaking his covenant. 30:2-3: “[When you] return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.” For disobedient Israel, the curses don’t need to be the end of the story - if they only would repent and trust in God’s promises. What a message of hope for all of us who feel condemned by the weight of our sin!

Second, God himself promises to give a new heart to his people. Back in 10:16, the Lord commanded the people to “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.” What he was after wasn’t mere externalities, seen in circumcision of the flesh. But inward transformation: circumcision of the heart. So what refreshing news that in 30:6, Moses declares that even after the people go into exile for their disobedience, “*And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live*.” What God commanded, and yet the people were unable to do on their own, God does. He will transform their hearts.

So is the book of Deuteronomy a covenant of works or a covenant of grace? I guess it’s both, isn’t it? The Mosaic covenant is there to be sure. And yet behind it is the covenant of grace God made with Abraham, that depended in no way on obedience. *God* will restore them. *God* will circumcise their hearts. So which is it, works or grace? The next few books in the Old Testament—and the entire rest of the Old Testament for that matter—will wrestle with that. And we will finally see in Jesus Christ that it is both: a covenant of works that he kept perfectly on our behalf so that we might receive *by grace* the blessings of the covenant of works.

So, it’s not that the law was God’s plan A and the gospel was plan B. This law is part of God’s perfect plan to set apart his people and to expose their need. It paves the way for the divine intervention that would enable true obedience and a new intimacy with God through the redemption that would come in Christ.[[4]](#footnote-4)

For us, as we read this Third Speech of Moses, we should pay attention to God’s concern for the heart. Even as Christians, our hearts can be tempted to turn away to the “other gods” (29:18) of our age. How do we respond to this temptation? We learn here that to have a pure heart we must *depend on God.* God’s Spirit is the one who changes us so radically that we do desire to “choose life,” which is the final plea that Moses makes in Deut. 30:19. So, depend on him through prayer. Confess your need. And choose life.

**Conclusion: Israel’s Future -- Chs. 31-34**

As we turn to the conclusion of Deuteronomy, remember that this is a book of transitions. The people have affirmed God’s covenant as they prepare to transition into the Promised Land. And now we see a great transition of leadership: in chapter 31 Moses transfers his authority to Joshua and prepares to die. But in another sense, this close to the book of Deuteronomy actually functions as a great transition to the rest of the Old Testament. The Torah, the books of Moses, have come to an end. So now we wait to see, in the next books of history and prophecy, exactly how these blessings and curses—and promises of grace—will play out. But before that happens, God offers a preview of their future so that the people will be without excuse when they fail to trust him.

He does that through the song of Moses in chapter 32. In fact, as you study the Old Testament, Deut. 32 is a great chapter to keep turning back to: in many ways, it’s the sneak preview for the hundreds of years that are to come. In it, Moses looks ahead to future Israel and says, “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.” (32:18). But Israel’s unfaithfulness will not be the last word. After the exile, God will “avenge the blood of his servants” and make atonement for his land and people. (32:43).

A promise of atonement! The tone here, as Moses blesses the tribes in chapter 33 and even as he breathes his last in chapter 34, is one of hopeful expectation and trust in God’s grace. God will make all wrongs right. God will atone for his people. This covenant will not be the last. A new covenant is coming. And that is the hope that propels the rest of the Old Testament forward.

And as we close, there’s one more thing in the final verses of Deuteronomy that should strengthen *our* hope in this covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. First, turn back quickly to Deut 18:18. In this verse, God promises that in the future, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.” A prophet who speaks only God’s words! A prophet even greater than Moses! And, praise God, we know that prophet! He is Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh (Jn. 1:14), who spoke all that the Father gave him to say (Jn. 8:28) and confirmed his message through miracles (Jn. 14:11). Just as the great prophet Moses was the mediator of the covenant in Deuteronomy, the greater prophet Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant by his blood. He bore our curse. And we receive the eternal blessing that only he deserved.

[Questions]

Let’s pray.

1. This definition comes from O. Palmer Robertson, The Christ of the Covenants, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Robertson, The Christ of the Covenants, p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This roughly translates to Calvin’s three “uses” of the law: First, it restrains evil in society (the “civil” use); second, it exposes our need for a Savior (the “pedagogical” use, which is what Paul was referring to in Galatians 3:24); and third, it teaches Christians how to live (the “didactic” use). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Paraphrased from J. G. Millar, “Deuteronomy,” in New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, p. 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)