

DEUTERONOMY (Page 170)

Turn to page 170 and you will come to the fifth book in the Bible which is called Deuteronomy. The first five books in the Bible are called "The Pentateuch" – which comes from two Greek words meaning "five scrolls". They are like one book divided into five sections – it is the story of God's people from the call of Abraham to the death of Moses. Deuteronomy is the last book of The Pentateuch – if I was to ask you what do you know about it what would your response be?

Off by heart – familiar – not much – nothing at all.

(Be honest – which one)

Who has heard a series on this book before?

This is new territory for us as a preaching team – we need first your prayers and then your concentration and participation.

Today is a general introduction and we will start at the very beginning – a very good place to start – so let us read Deuteronomy 1: 1 – 8 (get someone to read it)

To give us understand what is happening in this passage - here a quick story!

It is from the deep south of America.

An old man was walking along with his mule and hunting dog when a pick up truck came flying around a corner and knocked all three into a ditch. The man sued the driver, whose lawyer tried in court to argue that the man had no case. In fact - said the lawyer, at the time of the incident the man had said to the driver:

"I have never felt better in my whole life".

In the cross examination the lawyer said:

"Did my client come up to you after the alleged incident and did he ask you if you were all right?"

"Yes" answered the man.

"And did you reply, "I have never felt better in my whole life?"

"Well" said the Old man "Me and my mule and my dog were walking along and this man came around the corner too fast, and he knocked us into the ditch. He jumped out of his cab with his shotgun. He went to my dog, and it was bleeding - so he shot it. He went to my mule and its foreleg was broken - so he shot it.

Finally he asked me

"Are you all right?"

So - I then I replied "I have never felt better in my whole life"

The point of telling that is this – to understand anything you have to know its context. And it is absolutely vital to read anything in the scriptures in its context. As someone once said "a text out of its "context" is a "con".

So to understand what Deuteronomy is about we need to put it in its context.

To do this we need to go back to the first book in the Bible – and the first in the Pentateuch – which is Genesis and chapter 12 (don't look it up)

It is a very significant chapter because it is there that God makes a covenant with Abraham.

There were two big promises to that covenant.

The first big promise was that Abraham would have many descendents – despite the fact that he was an old man and his wife was barren.

The second big promise was that these descendents would have their own land to dwell in – despite the fact that Abraham was a nomad who actually owned no land whatsoever.

We read on to discover that Abraham did have descendents – there is Isaac – then Jacob – then Joseph – who became a ruler in Egypt and there settled with his all his siblings and their families. There the Hebrews grew in size but were eventually enslaved by the Egyptians. We read that God heard the cry of the slaves and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He raised up Moses to go to the Pharaoh with the message "Let my people go" – there then followed the plagues and the Passover and then the Exodus out of Egypt. The first stop for the people of God on the way to the Promised Land is Mount Sinai where the people receive the Ten Commandments and God made a covenant with Moses.

Is that clear?

At the beginning of Deuteronomy the people of God are not yet in the Promised Land but are still in the wilderness.

The first promise to Abraham had been fulfilled – let me read you Chapter 1 verse 10 – the words of Moses to the Israelites in the wilderness:

"The Lord your God has increased your numbers so that today you are as many as the stars in the sky".

Moses wasn't having a particularly poetic moment, but rather he is actually quoting what God had said to Abraham when He made the covenant with him.

For God had said:

"Look at the stars in the sky – that will be the number of your descendents".

So it was so – at the beginning of Deuteronomy Moses is effectively reminding them:

" See - this promise has been fulfilled"

But what of the other promise that was given to Abraham which was the land for these descendents to dwell in?

At this point this had not been fulfilled.

The children of God were still on the wrong side of the River Jordan – the east side – but they should have already entered.

Look at verse 2 of chapter 1 – it is a very poignant verse:

"It takes 11 days to go from Horeb (Mount Sinai) to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road"

11 days – that was the time it should have taken to get to the Promised Land?

In terms of time, where are we now? Look at verse 3:

"In the fortieth year".

This is now 40 years later! A journey that should have taken 11 days took 40 years. Someone has worked out that is the equivalent of every hour in the wilderness being equal to 50 days!

SO WHY?

WHY AFTER 40 YEARS WERE THEY STILL IN THE WILDERNESS?

The answer is not because God cannot keep his promises.

Moses underlines and explains why they are still in the wilderness after 40 years in the rest of Chapter 1. Here is a quick summary of what he said.

They had come to the edge of the River Jordan 40 years previously.

Moses had sent in 12 spies to see if it was a good land as God had promised. They went in for 40 days. When they came back they declared that it indeed was a good land – a land flowing with milk and honey. But then 10 of the spies reported back that the Ammorites who lived there were like giants – the Israelites felt like grasshoppers alongside them. Also the cities were fortified – their walls reached up to the heavens.

10 of the spies said: "There is no way we can go in"

But 2 of them – Caleb and Joshua – declared:

"Yes – we can enter the land"

What was the reaction of the Israelites to these reports – who would they believe and how would they react?

Moses tells us:

DEUTERONOMY 1 verses 26 – 31(read it)

Think of how God had taken care of them at this point. He had delivered them from slavery – He had brought them to the edge of the Promised Land – He had promised to be with them as they entered the Promised Land – He would not abandon them now.

But look at what they say:

"The Lord hates us" (verse 27).

Isn't that a perverse and bizarre reaction?

It is one of unbelief and rebelliousness – despite all that God had done for them.

And because of that – a whole generation never entered the Promised Land. For 40 years they stayed and wandered in the wilderness – one year for every day the spies went into the land.

(PAUSE)

It is desperately sad and sobering part of scripture. There is much to reflect upon on their wilderness wanderings – but not our focus now.

For now – at the beginning of Deuteronomy – the 40 years of wandering is up and the God says "break camp – leave this place – it is time to move on and go into the land I promised you"

The book that actually records what actually happened when they entered the Promised Land is the next book – the book of Joshua.

In Deuteronomy they are on the border of the Promised Land – the first unbelieving generation had died and now a new generation was ready to go in. They are East of the River Jordan – it is not a huge river and they could see the promised land very clearly – the good land – the land that God had pledged to give them.

This is the setting for the whole of the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy as a book looks back on lessons learned – and looks forward to how the people of God should live in the land they are just about to enter.

Most of the book is speeches – or sermons - from Moses which he gives before he dies. They are his final words to the people of Israel for he himself never entered the Promised Land.

Just as the physical view is panoramic – looking back over the wilderness and forward to the Promised Land – so when Moses speaks he also looks back and forward in the historical sense. He is looking back to what the Lord has already done in Israel's salvation story - and then forward to how the Israelites should live in their relationship with the Lord and with each other while in the Land. In the first four chapters of the book we have the first sermon he gives which is a summary of what has happened in the wilderness up to this point and why they ended up spending 40 years in the wilderness.

Then we have the second sermon which is from chapter 4 verse 44 through to chapter 28 – and some of you think that the sermons here are too long.

Turn to Deuteronomy 4 verse 44 (page 175).

The title is "Introduction to the Law"

"This is the Law Moses set before the Israelites. These are the stipulations, decrees and laws Moses gave them when they came out of Egypt" (verse 44, 45)

Our focus of this series is on this second sermon – the commands given at Mount Sinai and the law that followed. We will thus focus what our vertical relationship with God should look like – and how that is then worked out expressed in our horizontal relationship with each other and those around us.

What is the relevance of the commands and the Old Testament law to us now as New Testament believers in Jesus Christ?

How do we read the Old Testament commands and laws we find in Deuteronomy as Bible believing Christians?

These are the searching questions we will be considering and trying to understand and apply over the coming weeks.

I said at the beginning of this talk that we need to put Deuteronomy in its context to understand it. But not only the historical context – which hopefully I have done – but in the context as the Bible as a whole – which is important for any book we look at.

So, to do that, let me ask you another question.

Are we saved by grace – or is it by keeping God's law?

Is it one or the other – or is it both?

How would you answer that (two minutes in 3, 4's)

(Quick feedback)

If I was to say to you:

"We are looking at Deuteronomy over the coming weeks because we need to understand and keep this law to gain our salvation" – how would you respond?

I hope you would come back to me and say:

"But surely we are saved by grace – not by works – so it can't be about keeping the law"

Maybe you would – very appropriately – point me to Ephesians 2 verses 8, 9 in the New Testament:

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God. It is not by works, so that no one can boast"

That is a wonderful, foundational truth that we need to be constantly reminding ourselves of, rejoicing in and praising God for.

And I want to assert that we find this principle – this great truth – in the Old as well as the New Testament.

How can I say that?

Let us – again – go back to Abraham and Genesis 12.

Abraham lived in Ur of Chaldeans and God told him to pack his bags and move out. He didn't give any explicit instructions but rather said "I will show you where to go when you get there".

He was promised descendants, land and that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him.

THE BASIS OF THIS COVENANT WAS DIVINE GRACE.

By that I mean there was nothing about Abraham that warranted those amazing promises. It was grace – it was something that God – because He is God – chose to do. He chose to unconditionally bless Abraham and his descendants.

Is that clear? Because it is absolutely vital that we understand that.

Abraham saw just one descendent - but the line continued until they became the Hebrews in Egypt and were eventually delivered and led out by Moses. They went to Mount Sinai and there received the Ten

Commandments.

Here is a question I wouldn't expect you to get.

How many years are there between the covenant with Abraham and the giving of the Ten Commandments?

It was 430 years.

What is significant is not the actual number of years - but the order of events. For it is fundamental to our understanding of the relationship between law and grace.

God made a covenant of grace with Abraham and his descendents.

Further on He subsequently gave the Ten Commandments and other numerous laws that the children of Israel were to observe.

That is simple enough – but significant.

The point is they were going to observe these commands and laws in the context of a life of faith based on grace. In making and establishing the covenant God graciously drew them into a relationship with Himself - and the proper response was to live in loving obedience.

How were they to express this loving obedience and show tangibly that they belonged to this creator, covenant keeping God?

God responded by saying "I will give you ten ways" and we call them The Ten Commandments"

Do they have any significance today?

Surely the answer is "yes" (Yes?)

So what do we say when people say:

"We don't have to worry about the 10 commandments because we are not under the law but under grace"

In fact – to back this fully – let me quote you from the New Testament – book of Galatians – written by Paul the apostle:

"...a person is not justified by observing the law but by faith in Jesus Christ...we are justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law because by observing the Law no one will be justified".

That seems very clear.

But then later on in the letter Paul writes this:

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use this freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another humbly in Love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command "love your neighbour as you Love yourself"

So – it is clear that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ.

But the New Testament writers also say that the Law is holy, righteous and good - and that in Loving God and Loving our neighbour we fulfil the law.

So – if it is all about grace – then does that mean we can forget about the commandments and the Law and we can thus ignore books in the Old Testament like Deuteronomy?

Two reasons why I believe that is the wrong way to think.

Firstly, it is really important to underline that – and this is from the perspective of the whole of scripture - that our salvation is not earned by keeping all the commandments and the laws. No – it is by grace, through faith, not by works, so no one can boast.

However, the law of God – which we will look at in this series in Deuteronomy – is a reflection of God's character and of His will – and as professing Christians we should be reflecting to some degree His character and have a passion to follow His will – yes?

So, in one sense, the Law has no significance as a means of earning salvation – but it has a profound significance as a means of demonstrating in our obedience and behaviour that we have received salvation by grace through faith.

Secondly, there is a verse in the New Testament that we should always be aware when we come to books like Deuteronomy in the Old Testament and it is Romans 15 verse 4:

"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance taught in the scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope"

That obviously includes the book of Deuteronomy that we will be looking at over the coming weeks.

Yes, it was given to the people of Israel at a specific time and we are not a nation like Israel was when it was about to go into the Promised Land.

But we are descendents of Abraham by faith and this book does speak to us now as God's people through our faith in Christ Jesus.

Moses aim throughout the book of Deuteronomy was to encourage the people of Israel to faithful obedience as they entered the land.

Likewise, as we look at this book together - the aim and purpose is that in the world we are living in we would receive the strength to endure, we would be encouraged to be faithful and obedient to what we are called to and that the promises and presence of God would be the foundation of our hope.

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

1. Discuss in the group what knowledge people generally have of Deuteronomy and their perception of it?
What is the general reaction to studying the book?
2. At the beginning of Deuteronomy we are reminded that a journey that should have taken 11 days took 40 years! Moses explains why in the rest of Chapter 1 – it was due to the Israelites unbelief and rebellion when they heard the reports of the 10 spies.
Read Chapter 1:26 – 28
The Israelites grumbled and said “The Lord Hates us”
How did they get to that point after all that had happened and what are the warnings for us now?
3. The promise from God to Abraham in the Covenant in Genesis chapter 12 was of descendants and a land. By the end of Deuteronomy the both promises are about to be fulfilled. But this is now 500 years later.
What can we learn from that?
4. In this series we will be focusing upon the commandments and the law that Moses expounds in Deuteronomy.
If – as the New Testament makes clear – we are saved by grace and not by keeping the law (Ephesians 2: 8, 9 – Galatians 2: 15 , 16) why do you think (if you do!) that it is still profitable and important for us to look at the law in the Old Testament?
(and in light of Romans 15 verse 4)
5. Read Galatians 5 verses 13 – 15.
How does this help us to see the value of looking at the Law in the Old Testament?
6. How are we to look at the Law in Deuteronomy through New Testament eyes?
What does this mean and involve?