

## DEUTERONOMY

### Take a Second Look

We now come to Deuteronomy, the fifth book in the Pentateuch. While its name means literally, the second law, or the second rendering of the Ten Commandments, it is really a revision of what has gone before and a preparation for what is to come.

To appreciate its significance in the Pentateuch it might be well to take a revision trip ourselves.

Following the tragic catastrophe of the early chapters with the Fall Genesis is characterised by (the excluded) God taking the initiative and calling Abraham and the Patriarchs to leave their native environment and, by faith, follow the divine path. It meant – as our conversion should – *detachment* from the natural, sinful, life and *attachment* to the dedicated life with allegiance and obedience to God as its hallmark. The Genesis stories, culminating in Joseph, clearly illustrate that.

However, between Genesis and the next book there is further tragedy in that the ‘chosen nation’ finds itself in bondage to a Pharaoh “who knew not Joseph” and cried out for deliverance according to the promise of God.

That is what happens in Exodus: release and rehabilitation. It starts with obtaining their release from the bondage of Egypt by the Passover and directions for the future in the Law and the Tabernacle on Mt Sinai.

While acknowledging the past deliverance, the emphasis is on the future with concern over what Moses calls their ‘*being distinctive*’ – the positives of living holy lives.

That distinctiveness is spelled out in the parallel books of Leviticus and Numbers. Leviticus focuses on relationship with, and expression towards, God: their holy worship and godliness. Dealing with various rituals and behaviour, it highlights the importance of being devoted to God.

Numbers, the parallel book, has more to do with movement and logistics in relation to their goal of ‘marching to the Promised Land’. It has to do with marshalling personnel, enlisting their involvement and preparing them for faithful partnership with their God. Obedience and commitment, choice and priority are paramount.

All that opens the way for Deuteronomy. Here, Moses stands on the edge of the wilderness – the scene of their 40-year indecisive meandering – giving them a final briefing as to what lay ahead and their responsibilities with regard to it.

The first part of the briefing is a look back at their experience of wandering through the wilderness from Sinai until this view over Jordan. Various stages of the journey are recalled

but, interestingly enough, though the Passover and out-of-Egypt items are fundamental, the focus is on post-Sinai and the need for progress and possession.

## REVIEWING THE PAST Chapters 1 – 12

### Chapters 1 – 3

Deuteronomy begins with Moses, at the end of the 40 years journey through the wilderness, explaining to the people where they were at, what they had been through and what it all meant. He 'explained' the law.

It was a critical moment for they were poised now ready to enter the Promised Land. His emphasis was on their readiness to possess the new territory and to occupy it as the chosen people of God. The past had been a preparation for this, so he reviews this and draws lessons from it.

Significantly, he starts, not with the miraculous escape from Egypt through the Passover nor the opening of the Red Sea nor even the care and experience of being "*borne on eagle's wings*" in the wilderness, but with Sinai and the journey from there with its fresh demands of obeying the Law and manufacturing the Tabernacle. There they were told to 'get a move on' (the 'ready, steady, go of Numbers) for which Moses shared the load with chosen leaders from each of the tribes, emphasising the corporate nature of God's way. (The priesthood of all believers and the many-member nature of the church).

They reached Kadesh Barnea from where it would take 11 days to reach the Promised Land. They hesitated, however, reluctant to venture into the new land which, though a good land was infested with giants and potential difficulties. Spies had been sent to scout out the land and report but, while that of Joshua and Caleb saw possibilities, the one from the majority was very negative. The outcome was refusal and subsequent rejection by God as potential inhabitants and 'citizens of heaven'.

That tragic episode was followed by long years of wandering and going round in circles until the time came when they were charged again not to stay around that mountain but to progress to the land that God had promised. That meant progressing through enemy territory which they eventually did, overcoming the opposing kings and destroying the inhabitants. This was to be God's territory, part of which was allocated to the two-and-a-half tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh as Moses had earlier promised, provided that these tribes stayed and fought with the others to the very end.

From here, viewing the Promised Land but forbidden from entering it because of earlier disobedience, Moses handed over to Joshua and Caleb to take over the leadership.

Two very important lessons emerge from this section.

Fascinating, though the past might be, the overwhelming concern is with the future, the people and the fulfilment of God's purpose for them. It is looking at the future and the prospect. That reminds us of Paul's declaration that he wanted to forget the past and press on toward the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. God's concern is with the future and with his People. It is '*Onward Christian soldiers*'.

Secondly, is there not a significance in the fact that the recounting begins (but does not ignore what has gone before) with Sinai and the transformational encounter with God on that mountain. Up until then they had been recipients of God's goodness in redemption and providence. But there, they were challenged with moving from being self-centred recipients to being responsible God-fearers and faithful servants. They had been rescued for a purpose and now they were to fulfil that divine vocation by observing the Law and establishing the Tabernacle. In Moses' words, they were to be distinctive: exercising loyalty to God and manifesting his new way of living, making progress toward the territory where they could practise this godliness in a unique way.

It is so easy to think of the Christian message as being almost totally concerned with my being saved from sin and its consequences, being looked after and blessed by God in every aspect of my (?self-centred) life until I reach the security of heaven. That is only half the story. Paul says that "*they that live should not henceforth live unto themselves but unto him who loved them and gave himself for them*". True Christian life is God-centred, presenting our bodies as a reasonable sacrifice, not conforming to this world but with renewed minds tasting that good and perfect will of God. We are "*chosen to be soldiers*".

So what lies ahead?

#### Chapter 4

Having recited all that had happened on the wilderness journey Moses now presents the existence of the law and the teaching to the children of Israel as they are poised to enter the land. The emphasis is still on the future, going in to occupy the land promised to Abraham and the Patriarchs and which was to feature significantly in the Scripture narrative.

Moses here is presenting the lessons learned from that previous experience, encoded and encapsulated in the 'law and teaching'. It is something to be passed on and implemented. So, the instruction is to listen, obey and to practise. Nothing is to be added to it nor is it to be modified in any way. The assumption is that it is being received and acted upon by those who had refused to rebel at Baal Peor but were committed to 'go on with God'. By keeping it and using it to live in the new territory they were not only being wise but bearing a testimony to the fact that their God was one who enjoyed a close and productive relation with his people.

That situation is best described as a picture of the people having come through the wilderness and being pointed to and prepared for entry into the Promised Land as God had promised to Abraham.

The journey had taken an unnecessary long time. Had they followed Joshua and Caleb's report at Kadesh Barnea they would have completed it in 12 days but, due to their refusal and intransigence, it took them 40 years during which one generation was disqualified and forbidden from entering. This message is to that second generation.

In Chapter 4 Moses is emphasising the great privilege they enjoy in having such a redemptive God, One who speaks to them but seeks their welfare and is more concerned with the future than the past. He is a God who has rescued them from the grip of an alien nation. He is their God. And, they are so privileged to be His people.

The picture painted is that of a legacy, a treasure trove, a divine Resource Pack and Starter Kit that will enable them to enter the Promised Land and live there fully equipped.

## Chapters 5 - 12

Chapters 5 – 12 now disclose the 'contents' of this Resource Pack. It is made up of two parts, the one (chapters 5 – 8) focusing on God and the other (9 - 12) on them. These two parts are important because the execution of God's purpose (as we have already seen at Kadesh Barnea and following) is a partnership where the purposes of God are achieved through the obedient cooperation of his people. It is not God alone, regardless. (Although, if man refuses God will find a way. cf. Romans 11 "*you, a wild olive tree, grafted in because of Israel's faithlessness*"). Although God could do it entirely on his own he chooses not to: he looks for a people "*willing in the day of his power*" and challenges them elsewhere with "*If my people... then I*" ....

So, we look at chapters 5 – 8 first. They lay the foundation of a Covenant that God makes with his people. Originally with Abraham (*I will make of thee a great nation*) and subsequently repeated it is reaffirmed here. The initiative and enterprise is his. The authority to negotiate the Covenant is his, but he seeks our response. That is followed by a full rehearsal of the Ten Commandments (without anything added). These set the parameters of life as God's people, establishing priorities relating to God and his honour and then prohibiting that which is destructive. Within those parameters there is such scope to live a holy life. It reminds us of Jesus' words "*I am come that they might have life ... abundantly*". Such a 'code of conduct' is so precious that it is to be cherished and safeguarded. It should be given priority in terms of total commitment, overshadowing all other claims. They were to worship God with all their heart and soul – a truth that Jesus himself reiterated when rebuking Satan at the Temptation. Indeed, "*Love so amazing, so divine demands (shall have) my soul, my life, my all*". So precious and vital is it that it needs to be taught and inculcated in generations that follow.

It supersedes everything else and therefore anything that is “*not of God*” is to be totally destroyed – teaching that is echoed in the NT with Paul’s exhortation to “*put to death*” the things of the flesh and to bury the old nature. For what is important is the fact that they are a chosen people, a treasure, an essential vehicle for reflecting and representing his nature and glory. That is echoed in the NT in Ephesians when Paul tells the Ephesians that their conversion following belief is “*for the praise of his glory*” for “*God wants to make known –by the church – his manifold wisdom*”. With those values foremost then there should be no question of generating and worshipping idols (*whate’er that idol be*). Nor are they to forget - echoed in Hebrews as “*How shall we escape if we **neglect** so great salvation?*”

So, in chapter 8 they are reminded to remember all that God has done for them and especially remind themselves that “*man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” – words echoed by the Lord Jesus at his temptation.

That is the wonderful, comprehensive and totally adequate ‘Resource Pack’ available to those anticipating entry into Canaan. It is not only based on “*His oath and covenant and blood*” but is also more than sufficient for all their needs, both for themselves in achievement and also in ensuring the fulfilment of his purpose, making sure that “*Thy kingdom come and Thy will be done on earth*”. It is also a reminder for us of Jesus’ promise as he commissioned his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples that “*Lo, I am with you unto the end of the age*”. He is both able and faithful. How dependable will the ‘partners’ be in this project. The next four chapters 9 – 12 may give us an insight.

## Chapters 9 – 12

In each of these four chapters the people are reminded of all the good things that they have experienced and also of the occasions when their behaviour has been disastrous. In that reflection two aspects emerge very strongly along with the people’s waywardness.

On the one hand there is, as one would expect, the nature of an “awesome” God, all powerful, redemptive, and gracious. His thoughts and actions are predominant. On the other hand there is the praying of Moses as appointed leader who, in some ways, is committed to the situation almost more than God. As he sees the people straying or even God withdrawing, he pleads for God’s continued operation of redeeming His special people and ensuring that they have victory. But that process needs collaboration.

Having listed the contents of these four chapters this whole half of the message can be summarised as the: Project, Package and Partnership.

God’s **project**, ever since the Fall (and envisaged before it) is to redeem for himself a special people – a kingdom of priests, a holy nation - that lives a distinctive life reflecting all that God is and what he wants to convey. In NT terms Paul describes it as “*God wants to make known his manifold wisdom by the church*”. In the OT it is embodied in Israel and her prowess: in the NT the focus is on the church and believers collectively. They are to ‘occupy’

the land, having cleared out all the current inhabitants and establish 'the kingdom of God'. That is the burden of the Lord's Prayer when it stipulates *"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth"*.

The **package** is what is described here in the lessons learned and insights gained from experience. These indicate the greatness of God and his purpose. They also emphasise his power and deliberation which they have already experienced and are promised more of as the Covenant is fulfilled. Different from man-made gods and idols this God is *"awesome"*. It is significant in that it is his Word, the instruction, exhortation, encouragement that distinguishes a *"God who speaks to his people"*, not in wrath and anger but in redemptive and constructive tones. That is significant also in the NT when it is the word of God that dwells in them and, as the Psalm says, *"is a light unto my path and a lamp unto my way"*. Jesus said, *"The words I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life"* to which Peter responded saying, *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life"*. Paul echoed that in encouraging the Colossians to *"let the word of Christ dwell in you richly"*. Earlier the Lord Jesus had quoted, *"man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God"*.

However, it is a **partnership**. There is no question as to God's potential, commitment and execution. But, for the 'stiff-necked' people it is a different story. They already show signs of weakness. Yet in the light of such a God they are exhorted to abandon their own false perception of themselves, recognise their weakness and vulnerability and commit themselves totally to *"walk worthy of the vocation wherewith thy were called"*. The destruction of unlawful inhabitants is echoed in the NT with the command to *"put to death"* the 'old man' and the things of the flesh. Properly equipped they are ready to enter the land. But, first there is a catalogue of distinctives spelled out in Chapters 13 – 26.

EXOECTATIONS:      Looking ahead      Chapters 13 – 26

The nation was not only promised a new home in the Promised Land but were also charged with the responsibility of displaying a different kind of life. These expectations are spelled out in this section.

### 13 – 18 – Major aspects

The first of these concerned major aspects. Initially, they were warned against being tempted to wander away by following idols and violating their commitment. That temptation might come from a pretentious false prophet, members of family or even city practices.

Having resisted that, they would need to focus on the benevolent Year of Jubilee bringing freedom and liberty; then establish the public worship of the Passover and the celebratory Feasts commemorating God's provision in the wilderness. Difficulties would arise but could

be settled in the courts. However they were promised a leader in “a prophet like Moses” who would ensure their welfare and success.

#### 19 – 26 minor aspects

That general picture is followed by a collection of other expectations spelled out in a catalogue of minor behaviours, many of them almost mundane. Commands are given about setting up Cities of Refuge, civic responsibilities, ensuring the purity of the territory, and even setting up a parapet on the roof to prevent anyone falling.

What these requirements spell out is that in the new country they were to manifest distinctive patterns of worship and that new life was to permeate all their being, down to the smallest details.

That has significance for us today. While we receive Christ by faith in conversion that new life is in embryonic form. It is all there; no one receives only a portion of Christ: but it needs to develop, expand and mature so that that life “*permeates my being through*”. Otherwise it is easy to live compartmentalised Christian lives with Christ securely accommodated but restricted in the territory He is allowed to influence and control. As “Christ is formed in you” so we come to the fulness of the stature of Christ” and that new life is seen in all the peripheral aspects of our conduct: all generated by obedience to the Word of God. In that way we are a people holy (wholesome, complete, and integrated) to the Lord, shining like stars in this present evil age where often religion is confined to some compartments but not others. Integrity is a hallmark of Christian testimony.

Yet, it doesn’t happen automatically or mechanically. Discipline and choice – and their consequences - are involved, as we shall see in the next section.

#### COMMITMENT      Final Instructions      Chapters 27 – 34

##### Chapters 27 - 30

Following the extensive coverage of expected behaviours outlined in 13 – 26 the eight remaining chapters deal with the entry activities of the people who have been redeemed and brought thus far.

They are told that “*this day you have become the people of the Lord*” signified by being those who obeyed all the commandments given to them and following the ways of the Lord. As such, on entry, they were told to erect an altar, worship at it and record the laws already delivered. They were also offered options of continuing obedience or refusal to obey.

In a way which echoed the 10 Commandments they were warned that curses would follow certain behaviours that disregarded God, set up idols, dishonoured parents or denigrated friends, family and neighbours. These, like the Decalogue before them, spelled out what they should NOT do: within those parameters they were to live life to the full.

The next chapter offers a similar set of options which would bring either blessings or a curse. The blessing promised were of a general nature showing the favour of God in prosperity and fruitfulness with conditions working benevolently for them. It was an indication of the Lord's enabling and protection.

While the curses belonged to the same realm of 'normal' life they are characterised by the absence of the Lord's favour and facilitation. Things would not work, success would not come. There would be debilitating factors and such lack of success would lead to despondency, eventually seeing them being scattered and dejected.

The choice was theirs. Obedience would result in blessing: disobedience ends up in being cursed.

In marked contrast God's covenant was still applicable and available. Reflecting on what had been their experience in the wilderness, either coming out of Egypt or triumphing against their enemies, gave them assurance to be confident in God's goodness. If they obeyed and trusted he would exalt them as His people and hold them up as examples to the world.

But, there were hidden dangers. While present commitment and dedication was essential it could be that some would, by insincerity, renege on such single-mindedness and use the cloak of God's promise as an excuse for apostasy – an apostasy which would be endemic and far reaching in subsequent generations.

Yet, God is redemptive. Repentance and submission would activate redemption and restoration; but only if they obeyed the commandments and "wholly followed the Lord" as Caleb and Joshua had done.

It boils down to a matter of choice – not achievement. The work is God's not ours. The choice is the response by faith (and accompanying practical implication) to the revealed word of God, beautifully summed up in Joshua's challenge in a later context: *"Choose you this day whom you will serve"* and the encouraging, life ensuring response, *"As for me, I will serve the Lord"*.

## Chapters 31 – 34      Final Briefing

On the assumption that the right choice has been made we now come to the final words and reminders, starting with the 'speeches' made in Chapter 31.

Moses begins by reminding the Israelites that, although they will not be advancing, they will. The way ahead will be arduous and the challenges great. But God will be with them; he will take them through; he will overcome the enemy. So, they should be very courageous and confident in his promises – his covenant promises.

Next he addresses Joshua who is designated to succeed him as leader and will be the one who will be instrumental in seeing these exploits "come to pass".



Moses then turns to the Law which should be recorded as being the proof of God's goodness and accomplishments in redeeming them and in setting the pattern of their life. Not only it is to be recorded as a lesson for those who follow but it is to be given a place of permanence by being placed in the Ark of the Covenant for enduring generations (and eventually given centrality in the new Temple).

Then, surprisingly comes a fresh development in that God speaks to Moses, as well as confirming Joshua's commissioning, warning him of the apostasy that will certainly follow their entry and initial triumph. This is to be recorded in a song and preserved and performed as a warning to those who will follow.

It is interesting to ask: why a song and what is the song. It is in a form that can be easily remembered and repeated but it also is a faithful reflective record of what has been happening. Beginning with an adulatory description of God as the Rock to whom greatness should be ascribed it then expresses surprise that such goodness is not being respected by the people who were the recipients. So, the story is expanded to explain that the initial experience was one of redeeming nurture as God rescued them from oblivion and nursed them bringing them into redemption and freedom. The resultant satisfaction, however, generated complacency and disdain as the (sinful) tendency took hold and deviant backsliding and idol worship took place, abandoning all the distinctives that should have characterised their behaviour.

Being a just God meant punishment and chastisement for such behaviour but redemptively applied until such time as restoration would be made possible. That was the kind of God they had for they were *"a people saved by the Lord"*.

God is not only redemptive but always positive, so Chapter 33 list the patriarchal 'blessings' Moses bestowed on each of the tribes. All are mentioned but not all given prominence. From the presentation we can glean that the 'members' of this people are many, each is different from the other and each has a significant contribution to make: Judah, Joseph (through Ephraim and Manasseh) and especially the insignificant, almost despised, Asher in whose blessing we find two wonderful and reassuring texts: *"As your days, so will your strength be"* and *"The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms"*

The final chapter records Moses' death viewing but not entering the land and Joshua's taking over. Some would say that this is like the Holy Spirit taking over the executive role of the work Jesus had come to accomplish. But, lest too much prominence should be given to the Holy Spirit role (as often happens in our day) there is a reminder that Moses was a prophet 'par excellence'. In the NT it says that the powerful, God-sent Holy Spirit, while making things happen is committed to verify Jesus' words: *"he shall glorify me"*.

So, the Book of Deuteronomy ends the review of this wonderful redemption story. Having reviewed the earlier experience of being delivered from bondage and set on their way it

highlights the lesson learned from that experience and records these expectations being made of distinctive behaviour – in both major institutions and in minor behaviours – when they enter the new land. Based on the covenant of God it is nevertheless ‘dependent’ on cooperation and partnership (the exercise of faith and practice of commitment) to come to fruition. Thus a choice between blessing and curse is set. Based on an assumption of positive response, assurance is given of enabling advance and exhortation to exercise courage and confidence with a firm reminder of the “sure foundation” and the need to “be compacted by that which every part of the body supplies.”

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