

Remember

Introduction to Teaching Deuteronomy

Dave Williams (2019)

Part 1
Introduction to the Book

Deuteronomy God's People in God's Place

Why study Deuteronomy?

A church should aim to teach and submit to the whole of Scripture. This means that a balance of Old and New Testament, history, prophecy, letters, wisdom and law should be taught as part of a Sunday teaching series.

Deuteronomy is a particularly significant book. It is frequently quoted in the New Testament. Other books are seen as significantly shaped and influenced by it including Proverbs, Jeremiah, Matthew and Romans

Jesus said that he came to fulfil not to abolish the Law. It's important that we know what that Law is and how Christ fulfils it.

Deuteronomy particularly challenges us with the question: "What does it mean to not only survive our circumstances but to live holy lives in the face of circumstances."

Some background

Authorship

Traditionally ascribed to Moses. Jesus refers to what Moses says and this is seen as supporting the tradition.

Modern critical scholarship favours a later date and different authorship. This includes questions about whether the book was "discovered" during Josiah's reforms or in fact written at that time.¹ Some have suggested that the book may have been formulated and edited over a lengthy period of time with the final form only coming about in exile. It is therefore intended to function as a book for the people about to re-enter the land during Ezra and Nehemiah's time.²

This often assumes that the Pentateuch rather than having a single author was made up from a number of sources which were later edited or redacted together. This includes the JEPD theory. This theory identifies 4 main sources for the first 5 books. This assumes that the initial sources telling the story of God's people referred to God primarily as Elohim (E). Later authors provided accounts using the YHWH/Jehovah (J). Still later sources (P) told the story specifically from a pro Levite/ Priestly point of view. The Deuteronomist (D) writes last with a focus on encouraging a centralised political and religious leadership based in Jerusalem.

Such an approach reads the OT as a collection of potentially contradictory texts, from authors with differing religious and political agendas hastily pasted together. It has increasingly come to be seen as simplistic and at odds with what we see in the OT of a clearly unified and cohesive, unfolding story and in recent years has fallen out of favour.

However, it is worth noting that the existence of multiple sources should not be seen in itself as an obstacle to divine inspiration and even to the possibility of Moses acting as the primary editor. It is also possible that the final form of the OT books may have only come into place at a later date such as immediately prior to, during or post Exile. Whilst I personally view Moses as the likely

¹ See JG McConville, *Deuteronomy* (AOTC. Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 2002), 22-27

² Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Abingdon), 20.

editor/author for reasons set out below, I acknowledge that the possibility that other authors were involved in the writing and development of the book is not problematic for divine inspiration and infallibility. Whilst Jesus refers to “Moses” this does not require him to be the author of everything.

- Reference to Moses may be seen to acknowledge that the books are primarily concerned with him and contain significant content from his book.
- There are other examples of books which are under a specific author but have been shaped by overt editorial work. For example, Jeremiah relies on the editorial work of Baruch.
- Jesus includes material from minor prophets with and under the heading of major prophets.
- There is overt evidence even within Deuteronomy itself of an additional author/editor as numerous accounts refer to Moses in the third person and the final chapters describe his death.

I believe that the simplest and most likely explanation is that at least the majority of the material was put together during Moses life time and immediately afterwards so that whilst other writers and authors may have had an input and it is possible that the final form was developed later, he had primary human influence over its content. Moses is the primary author in that it is his voice that is heard throughout.³

There are two reasons for this. First the internal evidence of the book. It is shaped in the style of a treaty or covenant reflective of the Treaties and covenants of that time -as seen for example in Hittite covenants.⁴

Secondly, the external evidence suggests that the Kings such as David, Solomon etc and the people are dependent upon the existence of the Law in a significant and full form in order to live in God’s land. The prophets clearly rely on God’s law in pronouncing judgement on God’s people. Furthermore, the content of the book was immediately relevant to those Israelites about to go in and possess the land. It is no surprise that a rejection of Moses as historical author has been accompanied by an attempt to question and reject the recorded history of God’s people and the real existence of Moses, the judges and Kings and of the Exodus event as recorded.

Name: Deuteronomy from Greek Deuto and Nomos - “Second Law.” This is from Ch 17-18 in the Septuagint. This could lead to a misunderstanding because although it contains additional material, it is not a new or second law but a retelling of the Law.⁵

The Hebrew title for the book is literally “These are the words” taken from the first sentence in the book.

Setting:

The book recounts Moses speech to the people of Israel as they were about to enter the promised land. It is set beyond the Jordan. James Robson has suggested that this “Beyond Jordan” setting becomes theologically important. It enables the people returning from exile to read it as those about

³ Note Robson identifies a number of examples for seeing other people involved. This includes that Moses is referred to in the third person – it is a reported speech. See James Robson, “The Literary Composition of Deuteronomy” Pages 19-59 in *Interpreting Deuteronomy* (Ed David G Firth & Philip S Johnston), 22. Additionally, 34:10 suggests a passing of time between the life of Moses and the commentary made on his life. See Robson “The Literary Composition of Deuteronomy”, 25.

⁴ McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 34.

⁵ See McConville, 17.

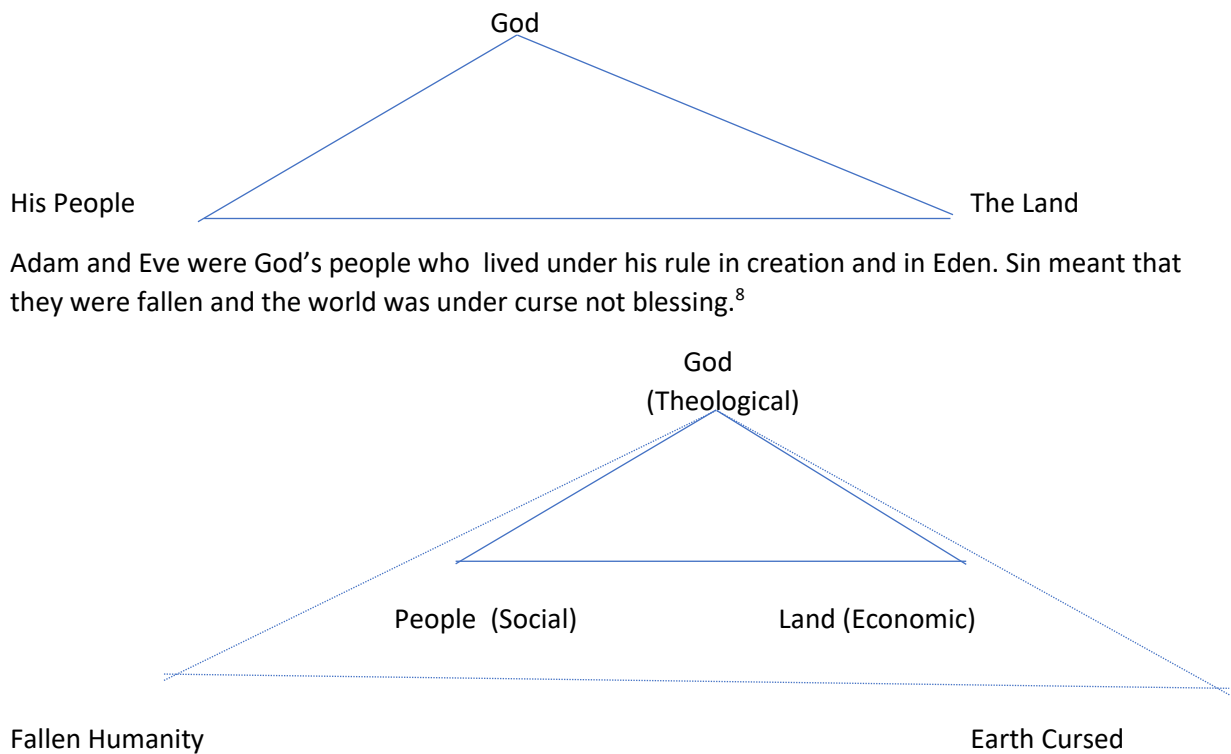
to re-enter the land (a new Exodus). It may also give Christian readers the perspective of “looking in” on the New Covenant.⁶

Style:

As part of Torah it includes historical narrative with extensive reported speech. The main body of the book is law code with a number of case law fee.. I think it is helpful to see a close relationship between Torah and wisdom literature. We are given scenarios and encouraged to think about how we apply God’s word wisely to each situation.

A Biblical Theology perspective

Chris Wright suggests that the OT can be viewed through a paradigm which enables us to think about what it means for God’s people to live in God’s place/land under God’s blessing.⁷



Adam and Eve were God’s people who lived under his rule in creation and in Eden. Sin meant that they were fallen and the world was under curse not blessing.⁸

Genesis 12 in effect sets the reset button. God calls Abram as the father of his people, he promises him a land to live in under his blessing. At the end of Genesis we find however that God’s people are absent from the land of blessing and at the start of Exodus are under the tyrannical rule of Pharaoh. The story of Exodus- Numbers is about God calling his people out of Egypt to live under his rule, in his land.

⁶ James Robson, *Honey from the Rock*, Deuteronomy for the People of God (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 17-18.

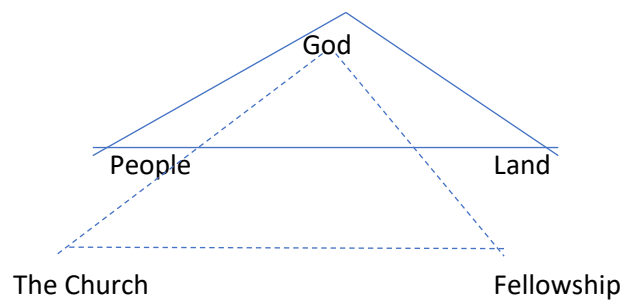
⁷ Adapted from Wright, Christopher JH, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God (IVP, Nottingham: 2004)*, 19.

⁸ Adapted from Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 183.

For the people of Israel, this paradigm meant that God's people Israel lived in the promised land under the rule of God's Law. Deuteronomy places us on the verge of this being fulfilled.

We can apply the paradigm to Christ. He is both the God who blesses through the Gospel and the perfect human who is obedient to God's Law. Christ is also portrayed in the New Testament as the "place" of God's Blessing. He is the temple out of whom streams of living water flow and who if destroyed will be raised up in three days. It is in him that we receive life and all the blessings that come from God.

Finally, we apply it to the church who are God's people under the blessing of his new covenant. God's place for us is the fellowship we have with one another "In Christ" and in him we go into the whole world. We look forward to the day when it will be the New Creation.⁹



Structure

The book can be divided into the following sections.

- Setting the historical scene (ch1-4)*
- Introducing the Covenant (ch5-11)*
- Explaining the Covenant -Detailed stipulations and cases (ch 12-26)*
- Celebrating the Covenant –The Ceremony, blessings and curses (ch27-30)*
- Looking forward –The Song of Moses and Moses' death (ch31-33)*

Deuteronomy Part 1 – Setting the historical scene and introducing the Covenant

Our first preaching series on Deuteronomy will cover chapters 1 -11 with a break (ch 6) at Easter. This will enable us to set the scene and learn about how God's Covenant with his people functions.

The book starts East of the Jordan at the end of the 40 years wandering. Moses brings out this point starkly by reminding the assembled people that it should only have been an 11 day journey and by telling them twice that God said "You've been circling too long." Once in chapter 1 with regard to their stay at Horeb and a second time with regards to the 40 years in the desert.

Along the way the defeat powerful rulers, Sihon and Og demonstrating God's ability to provide for them and protect them (This is summarised in chapter 1 and expanded on in chapters 2-3). This makes their cowardice in failing to go up and possess the land all the more pitiful.

⁹ Adapted from Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 184.

Moses reminds them of how he had set rulers over 1000s, 100s and 50s. In context this does not look so much like the leadership structure advice it is often taken for and more like a way of emphasising the difficulties of ruling over a stubborn and rebellious people. This leads into the spying report and the refusal to go in and possess the land which leads to the 40 years wandering.

They pass through the territories of Moab and Edom but are not to fight with the descendants of Lot and Esau. This both serves to emphasise the focus on the inheritance they have been given whilst providing an early pointer in Scripture to God's providential care and purpose for all nations, not just Israel.

Chapters 1-4 provide the background for a retelling of the Law. The context for the giving of God's Law, summarised in the Ten Commandments is the Exodus out of Egypt and the command to go in to possess the land has given them. The Law tells God's people how to live in God's land in God's presence.

In Chapter 5-6 we see the Law summarised first through the "Ten Words" or commandments. Note that these are set in the context of God's redemptive act, bringing them out of the Land of Egypt. God speaks to them face to face but through Moses as mediator. This happens because the people are afraid to hear him directly. There is a sense in which that fear is healthy and correct – God says they speak correctly and he hopes they will continue in their reverent fear. At the same time, fear that requires a mediator is the mark of the problem. God's people cannot dwell in his presence and need a mediator. The mediator at this stage is Moses and the Law.

Chapter 6 gives us the "Shema", Israel are to hear and know that God is the one, true, living God. Again the context is God's redemptive act, bringing them out of slavery. Righteousness is found in obedience to one command -this summarises the Law and is the command Jesus identifies as the greatest commandment. God's people are to love him with their whole hearts, minds and souls. Deuteronomy therefore can be seen as the story of the God who is love and who loves and redeems his people, inviting them to dwell in his presence and calling them to know him and love him back.

Loving God is characterised by holiness. God's people are to be loyal to him and to have no rivals for his affection. This is seen in the instructions given by Moses about how to deal with the people in the land. They are not to form alliances with them marked by giving and receiving in marriage. Instead, they are to devote them to destruction.

Holiness is marked out by remembrance. God's people are warned in chapter 8 about forgetfulness. Remembrance and forgetfulness are not so much about an intellectual remembering of facts as they are about whether or not we allow those truths to affect how we live. The danger with forgetfulness was that the people would become proud, thinking they had achieved things for themselves and so cease to trust and obey the Lord.

Forgetfulness is about self-righteousness (ch9). Moses reminds the people that it was not their own righteousness that led to God choosing, delivering and blessing them. In fact the opposite. They were rebellious and stubborn. They deserved death. Moses had to intercede for them. Their salvation was completely an act of Grace.

The point about the rebellion of the people and the need for intercession sets us up for the retelling or second law. Moses had smashed the first stone tablets because of the people's idolatry, worshipping the golden calf. Now God invites him to come to him and receive the Law again. It is this Law which he is about to bring to the people. In response they are called to circumcise their hearts. It is heart change that is needed. Hard hearted, stubborn people are called to love the God

who has loved them. Of course we will learn later in Scripture that the Law could not produce those new hearts.

So in chapter 11, the people are called to obey God, to go in and possess the land and to live in his presence under his law. Once again, the call comes in the context of God's redemptive acts. The call is to choose between blessing and curse, life and death. This has of course been the choice for people since the very beginning when Adam and Eve chose the tree of curse and death over the tree of life. To choose curse and death for Adam and Eve meant exile from Eden. For the people of Israel the choice was between life in the land or curse/death in exile.

Summarising the big themes

1. It has always been about grace. The Lord is the one who forgives and saves stubborn and rebellious people, not because we deserve it but for his own glory.
2. God is love and he calls us to love him
3. Holiness matters. God calls us to a faithful covenant relationship with him and there's no place for rivals.

Exegeting the Congregation

It is important to think about the congregation and how they are likely to engage with and respond to God's Word.

Things to consider:

1. People tend to be more familiar with and comfortable with the New Testament than the Old Testament. When we come to the Old Testament we tend to be more comfortable with narrative than with law code. Genesis, Samuel and Kings tend to be more familiar territory than Numbers and Deuteronomy. There may also be a nervousness about approaching a large book where a significant part of it is made up of a law code reflecting a distant culture. The risk is that people will switch off from this. So it is important to:
 - a. Approach the book with confidence. This is God's Word and is relevant to us today. This is a book all about how God loves and rescues his people. It's about a call to know and love him
 - b. Begin to talk now about how and why the book is relevant. Signpost practical application which is going to come up.
 - c. Take time to grapple with some of the more challenging issues ourselves. How do we understand and engage with some of the passages that people are likely to find hard?
2. A book written for people on the edge of home who have been wandering for 40 years has much to say to a congregation that includes people who have been displaced and dispersed. Where do we find our true home? What does it mean to be part of a family – part of God's people.
3. The book also touches heavily on matters of justice. How do we treat the poor, the weak, the vulnerable?

Part 2
Overview Deuteronomy 1-11

Teaching Deuteronomy 1-11

Deuteronomy 1 “When God Speaks” (10/03/2010)

Theme(s) – God’s Word call’s for response

- The book opens with “These are the words” – Moses’ speaks but is bring God’s Word
- A call to leave behind the place where they have been settled and move on
- A call to enter the land
- The challenge of a stubborn people. They’ve multiplied but are difficult to rule. They have seen God act when he defeated enemies along the way but are afraid to enter the land because of enemies.

Application

- How do we respond when God speaks to us. NB this is not about second guessing what he might want but rather his clear revelation in Scripture meaning a call to trust in Christ, to serve and speak for him, to live holy lives.
- Christ is God the Word. How do we respond to him?

Deuteronomy 2-3 “God Delivers his people (17/03/2019)

Theme(s) We can trust God to guide and deliver

- God plans the route for Israel through Moab (descendants of Lot, Abraham’s nephew) and Edom (descendants of Esau, Jacob’s brother).
- Israel are not to get into battle with Moab and Edom. They are to keep focus on the land God has given them not on land given to others – points forward, be single minded, receive what God has given you don’t get distracted. It reminds us as well of God’s wider purposes beyond Israel, his concern for all people.
- The accounts of Og and Sihon’s defeats are fleshed out. God delivers from mighty enemies.
- Moses himself will not enter the land because of when he can struck the rock for water in frustration and not trusted/listened to God.

Application

- Do we trust God with our whole lives? Trusting for salvation. Trusting him to look after us all the way through. Single mindedly looking forward with hope.

Deuteronomy 4 “The One God worth obeying” (24/03/2019)

Theme(s) God alone is to be worshipped. Don’t be forgetful heed past warnings

- Baal Peor was the incident in Numbers 25 where Balaam tempted the people of Israel into idolatry
- The preparation for the telling of the Law is a reminder not to forget judgement, a warning against idolatry
- God’s uniqueness is demonstrated because no god has spoken to a people or chosen and rescued a people like he has

Application

- The challenge of idols in our lives should be countered when we remember how God has spoken to us, loved us and saved us in Christ.

Deuteronomy 5 “The Ten Commandments” (31/03/2018)

Theme(s): You shall have no other Gods before me

- If “Love the Lord your God” sums up the Law then the Ten Words/Commandments are an expression of this in terms of there being no place for idolatry
- Idolatry is seen in the creation of alternative Gods.
- It’s seen in the pursuit of material gain whether through refusing to rest and take a day out to show our honour for God, in coveting and in theft.
- Idolatry is seen when we fail to honour and obey parents who are given responsibility for teaching us about God. Note the point about long life in the land reflecting the biblical theology of God’s people under God’s rule in God’s land. The people were to teach their children and their children’s children. Forgetfulness and rebellion against God’s Word through rebellion against parent/teachers will lead to exile.
- Idolatry is seen when we bear false witness against and seek to kill those who bear the image of God.
- Idolatry is often portrayed as spiritual adultery in the OT but adultery itself is also a form of idolatry by seeking sexual satisfaction as priority over faithfulness
- Note that as with Genesis 2/3 and 9 the creator and redeemer God provides for his people but also sets out boundaries in order for them to enjoy life in his land/creation.
- Note the fear of the people means they need a mediator and cannot hear God directly. This is both recognised as a good thing in terms of reverent fear but also raised as a negative issue. In Christ we can boldly draw near.

Application

- Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount takes us to the heart, lust, hatred etc are the root and therefore equivalent to adultery and murder.
- Romans 8 shows that the Law is not able to deal with the problem of the heart. We cannot obey God we need new hearts.
- The commandments encourage us to consider both how we love God and love our neighbours

Deuteronomy 6 “The heart of the matter” (07/04/2019)

Theme(s) The God who is love calls us to love him with all that we are

- V1 refers to “The commandment” singular. The Law is both presented as multiple commands/statutes and a single commandment
- The Shema is the Hebrew call to pray “Hear oh Israel the Lord is one...” In Paul’s letters when he talks about one God and Father And one Lord Jesus Christ he is in effect drawing Jesus into the Shema showing his deity as the 2nd person of the Trinity. The prayer is an announcement that God should have no rivals.
- The response to the truth that there is one God is “whole hearted love”. That’s the sense of “heart, mind and soul” rather than three locations of love.
- This one command, the greatest commandment comes again in the context of reminders that it is God’s Grace, they will possess a land which they have not worked for. They are

warned and reminded not to test God but instead to trust him. The Law is to be taught - passed on to the next Generation.

Application

- Christ is the one who loves God perfectly and obeys perfectly even to death. This is what justification is all about. His perfect righteousness is imputed to us. In other words it is "Just as if I obeyed God's law perfectly, just as if I loved God with my whole heart"
- That God calls us to love us in response helps us to see the type of God he is. Love is the right response to a God who is love
- As we grow in sanctification, how are we growing in our love for him
- What are we passing on to the next generation? What values. Do they see in us and hear from us that loving God is the most important thing?

Deuteronomy 7 What does it mean to be holy? (28/-4/2019)

Theme(s) God's people are set aside and devoted to him alone – there is no place for rivals to God, or for rivals to the blessing

- The people are going into a land with nations greater and stronger than them but God will defeat them.
- God's people are not to make alliances with the people in the land. Intermarriage will mark those alliances/treaties
- Instead the nations are to be devoted to destruction.
- This is not about ethnic purity. The issue was always that compromise treaties marked by marriage would lead to compromised religion and buying into the idolatry of the land
- This is first of all a call to be Holy -set apart as God's people and not to have any rivals for our worship and affection.
- But it also reminds us that God will not have rivals for his affection either. Israel are his treasured possession and the land he has given them is for their exclusive blessing. I

Application

- Our faithfulness to God should be whole hearted and without rivals or distractions. It is exclusive.
- Just as Israel was God's "son" and so his affection and blessing was exclusively set on them, so Christ is the only begotten Son and so the Father's love and affection is set exclusively on him
- We are in Christ, adopted into the family and so we become God's exclusive possession. In Christ we enjoy the blessings. God's love for his people is exclusive -outside of Christ there is no salvation.
- By evangelistic implication -you cannot simply attend church to enjoy Gospel blessings. You need to belong to Christ.

Deuteronomy 8 Don't forget (05/05/2019)

Theme(s)

- The purpose of obedience is so that they will remember what God has done for them
- God humbled them and taught them dependence in the desert by feeding them manna
- God provided through his word. We live by his word and not simply by bread food alone

- The risk is that when they get into the land they will become comfortable and nonplacement with material prosperity and forgetting God's grace become proud.
- Forgetfulness will lead to destruction

Application

- Forgetfulness is one of the greatest risks. We become proud, we cling to positions forgetting that God took the weak and foolish things to use for his glory.
- This means whilst intellectually we know the Gospel we should beware the danger that we forget in emotion and practice. We live as though we are not dependent upon Grace.
- This is a good opportunity to talk about the means of grace -communion and baptism and the vitalness of weekly gathering for worship, teaching and communion – so we remember the Lord' death.

Deuteronomy 9 Grace is no Excuse for pride (19/05/2019)

Theme (s) God did not chose a people because of their goodness/greatness but to fulfil his own purpose

- It wasn't because the people of Israel were good that they got to enter the land but in order to punish the sinful inhabitants
- Their own sin was in evidence at Sinai with the golden calves
- It was through grace and the pleading of Moses that the people were spared
- Moses pleading focuses on God's own name, reputation and glory that it will not be dishonoured.

Application

- Grace should humble us. It's not my intellect, purity or love-ability but God's grace that saves
- History revolves around God, his purposes and glory, not around us/me and our/my needs
- Beware attempting to draw spiritual conclusions from circumstances. Because a situation works out does not mean God's please/okay with it. He may choose to use our mess and stupidity and bear with us patiently for his glory.

Deuteronomy 10 Second Chance?(26/05/2019)

Theme (s) A reminder, God's requirement of his people is to love him back

- Structurally we are at the end of the introduction and chapter 12 will take us into the detailed laws and regulations told to Moses at Sinai
- This is a second telling of the Law to Moses following the destruction of the first stone tablets and Moses' intercession for the people.
- God calls his people to obedience – they are to love him and serve him
- This is in response to God's outpoured gracious undeserved love to them not because he needed them but because he chose to love them
- God's exclusive love to his people does not exclude a love and concern for the vulnerable, weak and foreigner/stranger and God's people should include them within their care.

Application

- A refresher from chapter 6 -God loves us and calls us to love him back
- God is patient with us but that is not an excuse for sinning.

- Practically, we should be a people who welcome the outcast, vulnerable, stranger so they experience love in our midst

Deuteronomy 11 The Blessing of obedience

Theme(s) The choice is between blessing or curse, obedience or disobedience, life or death. The way of life and blessing is the way of obedience

- Final chapter before the detail section
- The people have seen the Lord's work, his deliverance and also his discipline -this is the basis for a call to obedience
- Obedience is linked to the people going in, possessing and enjoying the land
- Note the contrast with Egypt, demonstrated by the methods of irrigation and farming. The emphasis is on God's poured out blessing, that they are recipients of his provision. Context for obedience again.
- They are to keep the whole commandment
- The big imperative is to go in and possess. This echoes the creation mandate to fill and subdue the earth

Application

- The mirror for obedience and possession for us is surely the Great Commission
- The benefits of obedience – lead into application about sanctification
- The people discovered and so do we that perfect obedience as required is impossible. So our application cannot be legalistic but must rather be through Christ. His obedience is perfect. It is his obedience/righteousness that is imputed to us.¹⁰

¹⁰ There is a little debate about whether this is his passive obedience only (i.e. His death) or whether it is actually his active obedience imputed to us (his obedient life). My view is that the latter is better because in fact you cannot separate the two. If Jesus did not die then his obedience was incomplete and failed. If he had not lived a righteous life then he would not have offered a perfect sacrifice so the passive obedience would also fail. The upshot of this is that Justification is not only "just as if I never sinned" but also "just as if I kept God's Law perfectly" / "just as if I loved God with my whole heart and my neighbour as myself." (H/T Mike Ovey).

Part 3
Some Sample Sermons (Deut 1-11)

Deuteronomy 1 When God speaks

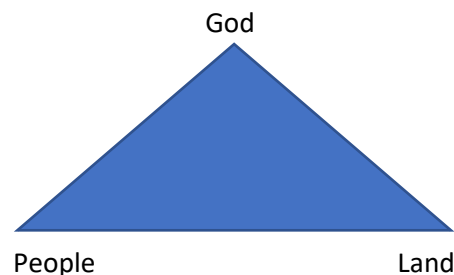
1. Setting the Scene (v1-8)

We finished 2 Corinthians by asking the question “How do we respond to God’s Word when it challenges us.” We are going to start Deuteronomy asking similar questions.

- A. God calls us – in fact invites us- to enjoy all of the blessings that go with belonging to Jesus. This is not about a prosperity gospel but rather about enjoying forgiveness, assurance, peace with God, safety and security, hope, fellowship with one another, lasting joy, purpose, identity etc. Remember that we talked about some of these as gifts to unwrap in our Christmas series.
- B. God calls us to be fruitful – to grow in holiness, to serve him with our gifts and to be witnesses for him both individually and as churches.

Deuteronomy starts with God’s people about to enter the Promised Land. He calls them to go in, to possess it and enjoy it. Moses is about to repeat the Law given at Sinai because the Law was given to help them know how to live as God’s people, enjoying God’s blessing in God’s Land. They had spent a lot of time at Sinai and God had said “You’ve spent enough time here -now it’s time to go and put things into action.” So off they set (v6-8)

The book of Deuteronomy is all about what it means to live as God’s people in God’s place (land) under God’s rule, protection and provision.



Now, here they are outside the land and God is speaking to them again through Moses, repeating the call to go in and reminding them about the Law. How will they respond now? After all, there have been set backs already.

A wrong turning?

Did you notice the problem, right there in verse 2 and 3?

Just under 9 years ago, Sarah and I set out for an interview here at Bearwood. We left in good time in the morning expecting to arrive within a couple of hours and have plenty of time to spare maybe for a walk around the area or to find somewhere to get coffee. All was going well until we turned off the motorway at Spaghetti Junction and took the Aston Expressway into Birmingham. Somewhere on the ring-road among the tunnels and roundabouts we took a wrong turning. We found ourselves lost on the Soho Road stuck in queues of traffic wondering whether or not we would even make it to Bearwood. We’ve all been there. A quick journey takes much longer because we get lost or simply stuck in traffic.

Something went wrong on route for the Israelites. They were meant to have taken 11 days to get from Sinai (sometimes referred to as Horeb) to Canaan but it had taken 40 years. What went wrong? Well we’ll find out shortly -but first of all a fascinating and important interruption.

2. Are we ready for the challenges and even pain of blessing and fruitfulness? (v9-18)

As they left Sinai, Moses had organised the people under a leadership structure each tribe was to appoint wise leaders or judges over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. He had instructed them to be godly, not to show favouritism but to judge wisely. Difficult cases were still to be brought to him but there was a kind of filter or triage system.

Why did he do this? Well we know he had some outside advice from his father in law Jethro and we can see here that the reason was that the work was becoming too heavy a burden for him. Notice the cause was that God had blessed them and multiplied the people, just as he promised.

Blessing and fruitfulness brought work with it. Moses was tempted to think that the responsibility lay completely on his shoulders. He was trying to do everything. That's a sure and certain way to turn a blessing into a burden. If you or I try to do everything in the church then we will end up burnt out, discouraged and miserable. Just because you are able to do many things in the church doesn't mean you should do all of them!

Practically it means that when we enjoy fruitfulness in Gospel ministry, when the church is growing, when there are new opportunities when people are becoming Christians then it should be a cause of joy but sometimes it becomes a burden -especially if we don't share the work with each other. This means that some of us need to be ready to hand over responsibilities and others need to take them on. It does mean that in a growing church we won't all know everyone in the same way and have the same access to individual leaders. That's why we have plural elders, its why we have congregational leadership teams and people who lead ministries. It's why it is never healthy for a church to have the pastor doing everything. It's why we want to encourage you to use your gifts – can you play music, can you help organise chairs, could you lead a Sunday Club group, can you be on the door to welcome people? There are so many opportunities to serve and to share in the work? Are you able to visit someone this week? Are you playing your part in telling others about Jesus. Are you involved in a home group?

However, whilst this is partly about a response to a good thing (the blessing of fruitfulness and multiplication) I think that its place here in the chapter suggests something a little more negative as well. It should be that the growth in God's people would be a joy to Moses but it had become a burden. We saw a bit of that in 2 Corinthians as well didn't we, a church that should have encouraged Paul became a bit of a thorn in the flesh to him. Why? It wasn't just numbers but their tendency to disobedience against God's Word, suspicion of his grace and to stubbornness and grumbling. They saw all of God's promises negatively. It is sometimes said that it took God one night to take the people out of Egypt but 40 years to take Egypt out of the people. In Egypt they had harsh task masters and no freedom. I think they learnt to see God in the same way. At times they even said they would rather be back in Egypt.

This leads to the main point

3. Don't risk a delay or barrier to enjoying God's goodness v19 -46

Deja-vu?

They've been here before, on the edge of the land. Moses had called them to go into the land. But they'd delayed. First of all they'd asked for scouts, spies to go and check things out. Now that wasn't a bad idea. Moses thought so -and in fact Numbers 13 shows it was part of God's plan but where God meant it to encourage them we see here that their plans were fuelled by doubt and the desire to delay.

The spies come back and report on the goodness of the land – they bring evidence. This contrasts with their experience of the wilderness journey, described as “terrifying” (v19). God had protected them through that dangerous journey against the elements and against hostile enemies such as fearsome kings like Sihon and Og. Yet the spies and the people focus instead on the dangers, strong cities, powerful enemies, even giants

!2 spies were sent to spy out Canaan 10 were bad 2 were good

Some saw the giants big and tall

Some saw the grapes in clusters fall

Some saw that God was in it all

10 were bad, 2 were good.

Sadly the people went with the majority. They refused to go up. God described them as an evil generation and said that none of them would go into the land. Their children and only 2 of their adult number, Joshua and Caleb (the two faithful spies) would go into the land (v36-39). So they were condemned to 40 years wandering in the wilderness whilst a whole generation died off.

Notice that they were fickle, they thought they could do a deal with God and change their minds but God won't allow that kind of fickleness.

So what about us? Remember that I said

- A. Christians are called to enjoy God and glorify him – that means enjoying the blessings of salvation -not material blessings
 - Peace
 - Assurance
 - Joy
 - Greater love
 - Greater holiness
- B. As a Church we are called to be fruitful in service and witness
- C. Do we refuse to step out and possess?
 - A fear of witnessing?
 - A drawing back from fellowship?
 - A disregard for God's Word?
 - A refusal to use the gifts God has given us

This might be caused by fear, shame, guilt, stubbornness, forgetfulness.

4. The Answer is found in Christ Alone

Matthew's gospel quotes Hosea saying that "Out of Egypt I have called my Son" Hose was referring to the Israelites. Matthew says that Jesus is the true and better Son. Jesus was the one who obeyed his father's call. Facing "danger and giants" Jesus was obedient even to death.

I can't read about Israel's disobedience here without being reminded of Jesus' obedience. This is important because all of the blessings I described above are found in Christ.

Maybe today you identify with disbelieving and disobedient Israel. Find forgiveness today in Jesus.

Today we are called in Christ, first of all to enjoy the goodness of his grace -all the things I mentioned above but also to serve him fruitfully. Will you do that?

Deuteronomy 2-3 Wilderness Wanderings

Introduction

We are continuing to think about how we respond to God's call to enjoy him and his blessings. This leads us to the following questions which we will start to find answers to this week.

- What might distract us away from whole hearted trust in Christ?
- Is it possible for a believer to lose the blessing of assurance and security in Christ?
- Is it possible to be part of the church and yet not get to heaven?

1. Don't be distracted from what God has called us into (Ch 2 V1-25)

After the people refuse to go into the land, we see the start of the 40 years wandering outside of the land. They will journey through lands which have not been given to them. They are to enjoy the hospitality of those peoples and to buy food and drink.

They must not seek a fight with the inhabitants of those lands because these are lands not given to them (v4, v 8). They are to be careful because the inhabitants will be afraid of them. They must handle the situation they face wisely.

Those lands had already been given to their inhabitants and in fact God had already defeated and removed previous inhabitants. The theme seems to be that just as with Israel, there had been giants -or strong, powerful, fearsome people in those lands but they had been defeated to enable Israel's cousins to possess lands given them.¹¹ God humbles the proud but gives strength to the weary.

- V1- 8: Edom are the descendants of Esau
- V9 -13: Moab are the descendants of Lot
- V14-25: The Ammonites are also descendants of Lot

Note, in v 14, we are 38 years in to the wanderings. The previous generation has died out and this is the turning point as they start to head back towards the promised land.

Now, there are lots of fascinating side lessons we could pick up here. We can be distracted from priorities other than the Gospel like the latest party political rumblings. We can see other churches as "in competition with us and fight with them for converts" we can also become busy-bodies in the lives of others, worrying about them instead of what God has called us to do as Peter does in John 21.

However, I believe the main thing here for us is this. The Israelites were not to get distracted by other lands and people because God had a land for them to go to. They could be tempted to use their military muscle to win battles in Edom and Moab and settle there. They would have fallen short of what God has promised.

The devil wanted to distract Jesus in the wilderness from his mission and from the joy God had set before him. He offered him immediate power and success. Jesus knew that this fell short.

The devil wants you and me to fall short of what God has promised us, the treasures hid in Christ. So he distracts us.

¹¹ Note the picture here is that Canaanite type peoples had been defeated by Semitic relatives of Israel. This also marks fulfilment of God's blessing of Shem and cursing of Ham in Genesis 9:26.

He offers legalism and self help -sort your life out with religious rules, learn to fit in and look okay. This falls short of the complete heart change that Jesus offers.

He offers material prosperity now. This falls short of the eternal blessings we have promised. The Prosperity Gospel is about a bit of money and freedom from physical pain for a few individuals who match the criteria now. The true Gospel promises that by God's grace all of his people can enjoy resurrection bodies and a place in God's new creation for ever.

2. Don't be afraid of the trials, testing and opposition you will face as a believer trust in the victorious God who fights for us. (Ch 2:26- 3:11)

They pass through two lands -where they hope to pass through peacefully but are opposed.

- 2:26-37 Sihon king of Heshbon
- 3:1-11 Og King of Bashan

In both cases, they face fearsome enemies But God defeats them.

We do face spiritual warfare. The enemy, Satan wants to disrupt and discourage God's people. He wants to tempt us into sin and when we fail to discourage us further and get us to give up.

Recently at home group we saw something incredible -looking at Ephesians 1 and 2. We saw that God is sovereign and this means that Jesus' victory is secure. I have seen Bradford City throw away a healthy lead far too often. Even when we went to see them at the play-off final and they were quickly 3-0 up in the first half, we pessimistic fans were still nervous. So we had got three goals in 10 minutes. There was nothing to stop Northampton getting 4 in the second half. It was only in the last 5 minutes that I began to relax.

But you know, the Bible is clear, Jesus has won -and so the devil isn't going to snatch a 4-3 victory. He isn't coming back in the second half.

Jesus promised that he will not lose hold of those the father has given him. If you belong to Jesus you are safe and secure. Enjoy that gift from God.

3. Trust in the God who will do even more than we can ask or imagine (Ch 3:12 – 20)

The result of Israel defeating Og and Sihon is that they possess an even greater territory. The primary focus of God's promises is for the land west of the Jordan river. However, some of the tribes now settle to the east.

I think we get to see something of God's abundant, overflowing provision here. Do you see that there is an overflow of his goodness. Last time, I talked about the call to enjoy God's love and goodness to us. The sense throughout scripture is that his love overflows beyond our widest dreams and imaginations.

It means we can always trust God to provide for us. His love overflows not just into this life but into eternity. It means that his "grace is enough, more than I need." This should give us the confidence to trust him.

I've mentioned before that what can hold us back from stepping out to share the gospel is the fear that there is not enough love and grace. It is often put in these terms "If the church focuses on evangelism then won't it be at the expense of pastoral care?" If new people come in will we still look after the older people? If we get involved in church planting and mission will it overstretch us at the

expense of our own priorities here. But in my experience when we trust God's bountiful provision and step out in faith, he never leaves us short.

4. Don't miss out on Christ (3:21-29)

The sad thing about Moses is that like his generation, he never makes it into the land. This was the consequence of his own lack of faith and disobedience. Twice the people had complained and God had provided water from a rock. Once, Moses was told to strike it, the second time he was told to speak to it but strikes it again (Numbers 20). God sees in Moses a lack of trust. Of course, here Moses can blame the people's stubbornness and to some extent it's true but God is clear that Moses is responsible for his own actions.

Now, I want to be clear at this stage that this for Moses was about going into the land. He suffered great disappointment. We are not to second guess the nature of his personal faith in God's promise and place in heaven. However, we can and indeed must learn a lesson here.

Moses was a great leader, a key figure, used by God even. Yet that did not guarantee his entry into the land. He saw something of it. What a privilege to look over and see into the land but he fell short.

We have seen that in the OT, the place of God's rule, protection and provision, his blessing was to be in the land of Canaan. This points forward as a picture. For us, it is not about a physical land. We find our place, our provision and protection, forgiveness from sin, peace and hope in Christ. He is our land. He is our rock and our redeemer.

If you have not put your trust in Jesus then it does not matter how pious, religious, active you are. You can come to church every week, you can sing loudly, listen intently, make notes copiously. You can play in the music group, help with the children, even get onto church leadership teams and even get a feel or taste for what it must look like to know God's presence and love but the reality is that you are still outside.

It is only when you put your trust in Jesus, ask him to forgive your sin and take up residence in your life that you can know forgiveness, peace, joy, hope.

Conclusion

Don't fall short. Don't be distracted away from the main thing. For believers and those seeking alike, our priority needs to be the same this morning to seek Christ first and cling to him alone.

I am going to pray two prayers -one for those of us who are already Christians -one for those who are not yet. Pray the one that applies to you along with me.

"Lord God,

We confess that we are so often and so easily distracted by the cares, worries and priorities of this world. We seek material comfort. We trust in the false security of religion. Help us to fix our eyes upon Jesus and to find in him all that we need."

Amen

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"Lord God,

I know that I am a sinner. I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words and actions. I have not loved you as I should with my whole heart. I have not loved my neighbours as myself. I turn to you this morning. Please forgive me for my sin. Thank you that Jesus has died and risen in my place. Lord Jesus I invite you through your Holy Spirit to take charge of my life that I may be safe and secure in you alone.”

Amen

Road to Freedom (The Ten Commandments) Deuteronomy 5

Introduction

A couple of weeks ago when I was leading the 1115 service, I started with a welcome and invitation. The welcome was an invitation to all who are weary, heavy laden, fragile, discouraged, rejected, excluded, depressed, despairing to come to find, love, acceptance and rest. Maybe those words describe you this morning. If so I want to repeat them again. Yet those words may well at first hearing seem to jar with the Scripture reading today which seems to be all about rules and regulations, things to do, commands to keep, bad things to avoid.

So far, the big theme for us as a church this year has been that God calls us to be holy, distinct, faithful, obedient to him.

Maybe that has come as a shock to some of us. Here's a church that talks about God's Grace about freedom from legalism about relationship, acceptance, welcome, inclusion. Is talk about holiness and obedience out of step with that? Have we suddenly caught you with the small print.

What has all of this stuff about commands and holiness got to do with the promise of love, acceptance, grace, forgiveness and rest?

I want to suggest today that they have everything to do with each other and this can be seen in three invitations, calls or commands.

1. Draw Near to the Speaking God

A covenant has now been made with God's people through a mediator.

Note:

- Moses says "It wasn't with your ancestors" which is interesting because it was the ancestors who were there. But if the purpose of that covenant was for life in the land then that makes sense. They were the initial hearers but it was actually with/for those who would receive the promise.
- The mediator – here it has a negative tone. Fear causes the people to draw back. Moses stands in between to hear and to pass on.

What is a covenant?

- We can compare the OT covenants with the treaties made by kings and rulers at that time.. A king would offer to rule a people with justice and provide for them. In return they submit to his rule. The covenant would then finish with the promise of blessings to the people if they submitted and curses if they rebelled.
- Craigie suggests we should think of this less like a list of rules and more like the marriage covenant vows. We promise to "Love, honour and cherish/obey." We commit "for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse. In sickness and in health, until death us do part."

We are called to draw near to God and put our trust in him. The New Covenant means that this is possible because Jesus died in our place.

Jesus is our mediator. There were negative reasons why Moses had to act as the go between. Fear is on one level a bad thing. What stops us from drawing near to God, from fully trusting him? It might include:

- Fear that God will reject me, I will never be good enough to earn his love. The Bible reassures us that his love is unconditional
- Shame because of what I have done and what others have done to me. Christ takes away our shame. We are new creations.
- Experience – of harsh legalistic authority. God’s invitation in Christ is to weary broken people. He offers healing and rest.

2. Embrace freedom in the God’s Rule (V6-22)

The big theme which runs through the chapter and on which the ten commands hang is that God is the one true God, he is their God and he has rescued them from slavery and brought them to the land.

- First I think this shows that obedience is always in response to grace. We are saved by grace for good works but not by our good works
- Secondly I think that it gives us a clear insight into what it means to leave slavery behind.

Idolatry, toil dishonour and shame, murder, theft, adultery, coverting, lying are enslaving things. The people had been enslaved to Pharaoh’s idols in a land where they faced death, in a land where there was no rest, in a land where their over-lords would take everything from them to use for themselves, children, possessions, women, they could only long and crave (or covert) for good things.

So this Law starts with getting a right understanding of who God is. It is summed up by the command to Love God with our whole hearts.

This means that we are not to worship other gods or make idols.

“No other god but me.” (v7). Some of you may remember this as “No other god before me.” However, this is not about hierarchy/order but about putting gods or idols in his presence. – before his face. These are gods/idols brought into the presence of God’s worship, alongside him. Archaeologists have found shrines devoted to Yahweh and his Ashtaroth. It seems that the people of Israel sadly made this mistake, often. God will not share his glory. Idolatry is not always about replacing God completely with other gods. Rather it can be when we limit God and so look to others to meet needs we think God is unable to meet.

When I put my trust in my job, in relationships, in political solutions whether Brexit or remain, then I risk placing these as gods alongside the Lord.

The people were not to make images to worship (v8). Idolatry is not just about adding other gods. Rather, we make God in our image when we limit him, put him in a box, make him fit our imaginations and expectations. When I say “my God would ...” or “my God wouldn’t ...” I make an idol.

Taking God’s name in vain (v11) literally means to take and lift up his name to emptiness. This may mean using his name to worship a false god, or using it to manipulate. So think less about swearing. Rather can we seek to employ God (his name reflects his character) in our own agendas?

“Unlike other god’s available, this is not a god who lends God’s name to any earthly ‘cause.’ V11)”¹²

¹² Bruegemann, *Deuteronomy*, 68.

We do this by:

- Superstition -not to be used in magic/voodoo curses. This also means we are safe, people cannot use magic against us.
- Trusting in the Prosperity Gospel
- Confusing our own wishes and desires with guidance. We tell people that God has told us to do something when we mean it is something we really would like to do. We use "but I've prayed about it" as a defence mechanism to stop others from challenging us. When was the last time God disagreed with you?

The Law rightly understood is literally about freedom from slavery. It's about choosing life. We are set free from idolatry to serve the true God. This is where we choose life and find freedom

So when we get to v12, the sabbath rest is for all, including strangers and household servants. God promise rest after toil whether that's a hard week's work or the toil of slavery. Practically this encourages us to set limits and boundaries in working life. Why take a day out from normal activities to spend with God's people? The answer is because we depend upon God. We need him. We are not infinitely capable and the world is not dependent upon us. But it also acts as a reminder of God's greater rest. The New Testament talks about the Christian's salvation and especially our future eternity with God as rest. Sin enslaves us, it works us hard, exhausts us and pays lousy wages. God offers rest ... and it is free.

This sense of freedom from slavery is linked to the command to honour parents (v16). This command comes with a promise, obedience leads to long life in the land. I don't think it just means that your own life won't be cut short and you'll live into old age, though coming up later on we'll see that this is a risk for wayward sons. Even more than that the promise is for God's people that they will remain in the land given them. Note here the generational links with v 9. God's jealousy means future generations are blessed for obedience but judgement comes on third and 4th generation. This helps us to understand. The point about generations is not generational curses. It is unjust to punish a later generation for their parents sins. Rather, the consequences of sin or obedience are felt. 4th Generation is seen as the outer limits of a lifespan. Your great-grandchildren may be around in your lifetime and therefore affected by decisions made now. They will see what/who you worship ...and you will see the consequences.

So, children are called to honour and obey their parents because parents are meant both by word and example to teach their children to love for God. What do you model with your children? Dare I challenge a culture here where we pack so much into our children's lives, clubs, activities, computers, tuition and we weigh them down with pressure to succeed academically, in sport and materially. WE run ourselves ragged taking them from activity to activity. We find that the organisers are unforgiving if they miss and so the only thing that will give when we need some time off or another treat is church. We find we have no time left to show our children how to rest in God's presence. We find no time left to enjoy God together.

Here's another example. The baby-boomer generation post war worshipped technology and individualism. We are seeing the consequences in Generation Z. If they are addicted to their i-phones, messed up about gender and sexual identity, unable to engage with those they disagree with, feeling overbearing pressure about their identity to the point of self-harm and suicidal tendencies then who is responsible? Don't those of us who unleashed this upon them have to stand up and say sorry? It was us.

A third example. Some of you are worried about Brexit, we see the negative consequences if hard borders go up, if the economy suffers. Some of you are maybe looking forward to it, maybe afraid that big government will step in to stop it. You see it as an opportunity to seek freedom from the EU bureaucracy. Those views are both legitimate. However if we demonise those we disagree with and become smug about our own position. If we retreat into panic about what will happen next then we do not teach our children to trust God. We teach them that there are idols in this world to fear.

But also remember that God's love and grace are greater. The consequences of his judgement are seen to 4 generations but his steadfast love and faithfulness to thousands. Wow!

3. Worship God, honour, fear and love him (V 23-33)

In the first part of the chapter, we saw that there is a negative type of fearing God. That fear stops us from drawing near to him.

The other side of their fear is seen here however. There is a healthy respect. God says they are right to fear him and expresses the desire that they will continue to fear him.

At the end of the chapter we saw God's people awestruck by his power and glory. There is a right way of fearing God.

God is holy, he is infinite, majestic, wonderful, all knowing, all powerful. He is creator, he is eternal, he is judge and king. It is impossible for sinners to stand in his presence.

Now here's the good news. We have a mediator. However, this mediator is greater than Moses because in Jesus God himself has drawn near to us and made it possible for us to come close to him.

Is there reverence and awe in our worship? Are we truly astounded at how great and good God is? Does this move us to gratitude at his grace. Do we truly worship.

In the end true worship is all about enjoying God for who he is without conditions. The other day I was talking with my neighbour. He keeps pigeons. The breed are known as tumblers or rollers because they will suddenly plummet and roll. They are kind of the Red Arrows acrobatic team of the bird world. He told me that experts had spent years trying to work out why they did this. We talked about how it could be a form of self-defence against birds of prey, playing dead. Then he said "Everyone who keeps them knows why they do it." I asked "Why is that?" His simple answer. "They enjoy." Our worship is not about negotiating God's love and care through keeping these rules conditionally. Rather it is the obedience which comes out of trusting and enjoying him.

Once again we are reminded that Israel had a mediator in Moses. We have a better mediator. Jesus is the one who acts as our go between. However in Jesus, God himself has drawn close to us.,

Conclusion

Who is the God who calls us to live under his rule? The answer is that it is the loving heavenly father who has acted to save us and give us true freedom in Christ.

Holiness is an act of remembrance and trust. We know that we are set apart by him and for him. We know that we belong to him and can rely on him completely. We can cling to him, trust him, obey him, submit to his rule and reign because we know and remember that he has always been faithful to us.

Deuteronomy 6: The Heart of the Matter

Introduction

One day, a man came to Jesus and asked him “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He could have asked:

“How can I know and please God? How can I experience God’s loving presence in my life?”

For many of us, that is the big question isn’t it. We are here this morning because we want to know God. We are so grateful to him for all he has done for us. We want to know him, to be close to him to experience his power, protection and presence in our lives.

Well Deuteronomy is all about what it means for God’s people to live in his presence (represented by the Land), knowing his protection and provision. So, this looks like a good place to start as we seek to answer that question (after all it seems to have been Jesus’ go to chapter of the Bible too!)

1. The God who is love calls us to love him back with all that we are (v 1-12)

V1-3 – The chapter starts with the words “These are the commands...” Actually it is literally “This is the command” (singular). The idea is that the whole law is a unity and will be summed up in the commandment we are about to look at here.

Jesus would one day be asked “What is the greatest commandment and take his hearers to Deuteronomy 6 telling them that the commandment found here sums up the law. One rabbi suggested that all of the other commandments are just commentary on the greatest commandment.

The Law is given for a people about to enter the land God has given them. Remember that it is all about how God’s people can live in his presence (in his land) under his rule and care.

If they fear God, worshipping him, trusting him, revering him then they will enjoy long life. The “You” here is plural and once again it is about what it will mean for God’s people together to enjoy the land given to them for many generations.

V4-9 - The heart of the command . There is one God and we are to love him.

“Hear Oh Israel” is the Jewish call to prayer. It is called “The Shemah” from the Hebrew imperative to hear. Once again we are given a declaration about who God is. He is the one true God without rivals and so we are to

- Obey him?
- Worship Him?
- Fear Him

Actually ... no, more important than that is that we are to love him.

It is to be whole hearted. “All your heart, mind and soul” is simply a way of saying “All of you, with all you have and are.” It’s not about three different ways of loving God.

This is something to teach to children and to take practical steps so it is visually and permanently in sight. The Jews kept this literally and engraved the commandments on doorposts. They also made small boxes called phylacteries to contain miniature copies of the commandments. These would be worn in prayer. The modern day equivalent might include

- Using texts and WhatsApp to send Bible verses to encourage each other

- Listening to worship songs

However the point here is not so much a literal requirement to “wear” and engrave the commandments. Rather, the sense is that they live permanently in the presence of God’s Word. Carving it on their doorposts creates the sense that they “inhabit” God’s Word. Wearing it above their foreheads suggests that it should always be on their mind.

V10 -12-God warns the people against lazy forgetfulness. There is a real danger that when they come into the land and enjoy it, then they will become complacent. They will forget that God gave it to them without them having to fight or work for it. They will become content and lazy. They are to remember that they received this land by God’s grace. He is the one who rescued them. They are completely dependent on them. We see here that obedience is contrasted with forgetfulness so that disobeying and forgetting are intrinsically linked. This makes sense of obedience and love are intrinsically linked. Love is about remembering and so honouring and cherishing. True worship is true love.

The commandment is founding on relationship. A loving, saving God calls us to love him. This is important. A King can order us to submit to him. A police man or judge can insist that we keep the rules. But that is not how God deals with us. This commandment points us back to his character. We are pointed to the loving father who sent his son, the loving son who died in our place and the loving Spirit who is our compassionate comforter. God calls us to love him because he is love.

2. The God who is love calls us to faithfulness (v14-19)

Love for God means exclusive loyalty to him. They are to fear him and serve him alone (v12). This leads to a series of commands which echoes the first three of the Ten Commandments

- Only take oaths in God’s Name (v12)
- Don’t worship the gods of the surrounding nations (v14)
- Don’t put God to the Test (v16)

V12: They are only to swear oaths in the Lord’s name. This complements the command not to take God’s name in vain. Again this is another way of saying “Remember that your whole life is dependent on God.”

Sometimes we say prayers in “Jesus’ name” and this can become a lazy or even superstitious phrase. If we tag it on the end of our prayers then God will have to answer and if we don’t he will not. That’s not the point here. Rather we are to seek what honours God in our decisions and commitments.

A woman comes to find Jesus. She has lived a life of sin. She stands at his feet weeping, she dries his feet with her hair, she pours expensive ointment over him, anointing him. This is an extravagant act of love. She seeks him out and wants to be close to him because she knows and remembers his forgiveness, his unconditional grace and his overwhelming love.

Once again this is the challenge to us as believers. This is the theme in Romans 6-8. God’s grace, his free gift of eternal life does not set us loose to do whatever we please. In fact sinfulness is an act of short-sighted forgetfulness. Every day when I am tempted to fall I am also reminded that God has loved me and saved me.

V14 -19 Forgetfulness leads to idolatry. We lose sight of God’s grace and provision and turn to other Gods. They are warned again that God is a jealous God -and his anger might burn against them leading to their destruction.

The NLT translation is a little unhelpful here when it says that his anger will “flare up.” It is not that his anger will flare up as though he is on a short fuse suddenly flaring up but there is the sense of a righteous anger reflecting God’s settled will against sin and idolatry and this is compared to a consuming fire.

It is helpful to think about what it means for God to be jealous and why to understand the warning here. We tend to use the word “jealous” negatively because human jealousy almost always is negative and linked to covertness, possessiveness and bitterness. However the word is much more closely linked to zeal and there is a sense of passionate protectiveness.

In the past, people would talk about pastors being jealous for the pulpit. Now negatively this could mean that they protected their own position and wanted to do all the preaching. However, rightly and positively it reflected a concern that God’s people should be protected from false or inadequate teaching. Are we as elders “jealous for the pulpit” in Bearwood? Yes we are. We want to make sure that what is taught from the front and in Home Groups is faithful to God’s Word.

Husbands and wives can be rightly jealous for each other expecting an exclusive loyalty when it comes to intimacy. Dads are likely to be jealous for the children. There is a unique relationship reflecting their responsibility to protect their sons and daughters from danger.

That’s what it means to say God is jealous. First of all for his own name or honour and character because this reflects our highest good and our greatest need to know him. Secondly for us and our care and protection as his people.

This is important because for the people to slide back into idolatry would be deeply dangerous. Remember that they have been set free from slavery to other gods. Idols are harmful and destructive and for the people of Israel are linked to life under despotic tyranny in Egypt. So their destruction as a people will mean exile from the land and they will find themselves under the cruel rule of false gods.

Linked to this call to forsake idols is a command not to test God. On the way to the land they had constantly tested him, grumbling and complaining. This included the rebellion at Massah when they did not trust God to provide water. That’s where God provided water from the rock. This re-enforces the point that God is not short tempered. It is not that he suddenly lashes out or is easily provoked. Rather, the sense is that he is patient and faithful. He puts up with our grumbling and stubbornness. He is slow to anger. Yet this is no reason to continuing provoking him and pushing the boundaries. We should not take his patience, kindness and gentleness for granted.

It is to this verse which Jesus turns when tempted in the wilderness. The devil wants him to jump from a high pinnacle of the temple to provoke the father in sending his angels. Of course Jesus can depend upon the Father’s protection but it is exactly because he trusts the Father, loves him and knows that he is already eternally loved that he does not need to force the father to act in love towards him. It is also fascinating to see that the temptations link the issue of testing God very closely with

- a. Not forgetting God’s provision and care (the temptation to turn stones into bread).
- b. Not worshipping other gods.

Forgetfulness, testing and idolatry are closely linked because Sin is at heart an act of idolatry. Sin’s root cause is the failure to love God with all that I am and all that I have. Sin is idolatry because it reflects a divided and distracted heart (where our heart represents our will and our affections). Why

am I tempted to sin? It is because I am tempted to believe that there is a better alternative to God's way.

Sin offers the quick fix and the quick way out of trouble. Sin tells me that I am not dependent upon God.

- When we don't stop to rest. When we are caught up in a workaholic grind that keeps us from home until late evening and eats into our Sunday worship, we are saying that the world around us,- our family, our colleagues, our clients, myself depend more on me than God. We make idols of work
- When we boss people around, when I lose my temper with their failings, when I enjoy being popular, prominent, respected, when I can't take criticism, I am trusting my status, standing and popularity more than the status and standing I have in Christ I make an idol out of my identity.
- When you pursue a relationship with a non-Christian, find yourself drawn to pornography or are tempted to start the affair, you are learning to trust others for love and intimacy. You are believing the lie that you cannot depend on God's faithfulness and that momentary pleasure is all that is achievable. We make idols of sex and relationships.

All three examples are idols which appeal to us so compellingly but all three of them are deeply destructive. Not only that, but as well as there being the sense that we may be complicit, we can also see how idolatry is oppressive and enslaving. Employers, big or small can make us feel that we have no choice, that we owe our lives to the job. Idols are often the things we fear so that:

- Fear forces us to work long hours. This can be fear of failure, fear of retribution, fear of losing my job, fear of being let down if someone else takes on the responsibility and either doesn't show up at all or does a poor job.
- Fear of losing control, losing significance, losing face.
- Fear of being alone, fear of being unlovely and unloveable.

3. The God who is love calls us to pass on the memory of his saving goodness (v20-25)

Hopefully you will have picked up on this theme over the past few Sundays. The good news of salvation is something to pass on!

V20-25 When your children ask you "Why do we keep these commands, your answer is that it is because God rescued us. Commands are there to help us remember God's loving faithfulness and his saving acts.

Once again, we are reminded that this is all about how we worship the saving God.

The commandments are connected to righteousness. It is those who obey the commandment to love God with their whole heart who are righteous and justified.

This leaves us with a problem at the end. On Sunday evenings we have been discovering from Romans that if being right with God depends on our ability to keep God's law then we simply cannot do it. In fact what the Law does is to arouse our desire to sin. It draws our attention to temptation and then it condemns us as it highlights the true awfulness of our sin.

That's why it is so important to see that this is about the good news of a God who loves us. It's not just that God asks us to try and obey him in response to his mercy. His grace and mercy is seen in how Jesus deals with the problem of our disobedience.

The New Testament shows us that Jesus lived a perfectly obedient life by loving his Father completely and loving us -even his enemies as himself. Jesus is the one who has kept the greatest commandment when we could not.

Jesus' death on the cross means that he took the penalty of our sin on himself but it also means that we are justified. Romans 6 says that we have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection. He dies our death so that we can receive his life. We receive the status of being righteous through him. It is as though everything in his bank account has been credited to us. It is as though we get to stand dressed in his royal clothes. God sees us clothed in Jesus so that it is just as if I kept God's law perfectly. It is just as though I loved him with my whole heart.

This is the good news we can pass on, not just to our own physical children but to our friends, family and neighbours.

Conclusion

Is your trust completely in the loving God who has saved you through Jesus?

Are you growing in your love for him?

Are you telling others about him?

What does it mean to be Holy? (Deuteronomy 7)

Introduction

When I was working for BAE SYSTEMS as a young graduate there were people we were meant to look up to, they were successful, they had rapidly climbed the ladder into senior management. They were successful at work and with that came all the trappings of a large pay cheque, big house, expensive car etc.

I remember getting pep talks from some of them about my career. I was encouraged to move about -not get settled in one part of the business, take on the right projects, know how to present a positive spin on everything etc. If I wanted to be like them, then I could if I conformed to their ways.

1. Choose your desires carefully

The tenth Commandment says

“You must not covet your neighbour’s wife. You must not covet your neighbour’s house or land, male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbour.” (Deuteronomy 5:21)

We covet things when we see what others have or are and desire it so much that we will go to any lengths to get it.

Deuteronomy 7 is in effect rooted in this. The Law of Moses was all about what it meant to live in God’s land under his rule as his people. As we saw in chapter 6, we are called to love God with all that we are and all that we have. When we don’t do this, we commit idolatry, we put possessions, people and priorities ahead of God. Coveting is an example of this.

God’s people were entering the promised land and there was a danger that they would look around them at the people who were already in the land and covet. They would desire what they had.

- They would look and see that the nations were greater and stronger than them (v1)
- They would see the gold and silver and covet it (v25)

The temptation was that they would desire what the people had and so be tempted to form alliances and sign treaties marked by the giving and taking of daughters as wives. Marriages - especially between leaders were often used to guarantee peace between rival nations.

However, the temptation was wrong because:

- i. The nations appeared powerful but God was going to defeat them and hand them over. God had already won the victory. God did not choose the people because they were strong but because he chose to love them even though they were weak.(v7)
- ii. The gold and silver they were tempted to desire was just the thin veneer that covered the idols (v25). Take it off and the idols were nothing. Yet the people were at risk of being led astray and trusting the false gods (v3-4). If they did this then they would lose all the wonderful blessings that God was giving to them in the land (v26).

What is it that you desire? As I suggested at the start, the temptation is that when we see what others appear to have, then we are likely to go to them, submit to their advice and conform to their ways to get it.

We are bombarded with messages about how to succeed in life, what to do, say and wear. The internet, TV, magazines, social media and what everyone else is saying and doing create images about what it means to be popular, successful etc.

You will know what the image is. Maybe it's the need to own your own house or reach a particular rung on the career ladder by a given date. We used to be told that if you didn't get into senior management by your 30s then you never would "make it." Imagine that -your career and by implication, your life over by the time you are 40.

But we are also bombarded with messages telling us to identify as victims and to use our victimhood to get payback.

By pursuing the wrong priorities, we can lose sight of the greater thing to love God as a response to knowing that we are loved by him.

2. Give no place in your life to the things that act as rivals and distractions to God's affection

Deuteronomy 7 is perhaps one of the most difficult and controversial Bible passages to get to grips with, particularly because of:

- i. V2 Which says: "When the LORD your God hands these nations over to you and you conquer them, you must completely destroy^[a] them. Make no treaties with them and show them no mercy." Is God encouraging genocide?
- ii. V3 which says: "You must not intermarry." Is this about racial purity? Are cross cultural marriages forbidden. Sometimes sadly the Bible has been used this way to justify apartheid, segregation and even slavery.

It is important to say at this stage that the use of Deuteronomy to encourage racial purity -especially white supremacy is a disgraceful abuse of Scripture. Where the church has stood complicit with racism either through active involvement or cowardly silence, this is something to repent of. We will see what is going on shortly.

But first of all a word about the "genocide" charge. We don't have a lot of space in a short sermon to deal with this but here are some key things to say.

- a. We will struggle with this if we struggle with what the Bible says about sin and death. The Bible is clear that all humanity is under the condemnation of death because of sin.
- b. If we struggle with this then we also will struggle with what the Bible says about the future - that hell/eternal separation from God after death is the just consequence of sin.

I say "struggle" because I recognise that passages like this are hard for us to get our heads and hearts around, they are not just difficult to understand intellectually but hard to accept emotionally. Yet, this is where we really are challenged -what do we do when the Bible disagrees with us and our culture? Do we dismiss it or are we ready to wrestle with it and for God to challenge us?

What Deuteronomy 7 does, is it takes something that is true for the whole of creation and gives us a very vivid and specific example. Remember the paradigm we have used

God



People

Land

This describes God's purpose in making a people to himself and giving them the whole earth to enjoy. The paradigm in Deuteronomy focuses specifically on the land of Canaan and the people of Israel. To be outside of God's people is also to be outside of the place of his blessing -this means death.

This shows in a specific circumstance that rebellion against God is serious, death is the horrendous consequence of that rebellion. Now, for the Canaanites, there were some horrendous things that they did, wrapped up in their religion and that's why they faced an immediate destruction. However, the Bible is clear that all have sinned so that all deserve death. It is only in Christ that we receive eternal life.

But, furthermore, Moses helps us to see what the specific problem with the Canaanites is by telling us what it will mean to destroy them as a people. It is not just that there will be battles and the enemy are to be killed. Rather:

“This is what you must do. You must break down their pagan altars and shatter their sacred pillars. Cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols.”(v5)

The problem is that the Canaanites will lead God's people into idolatry. It is the idols and the false religion that are the focal point of destruction. That's why inter-marriage is forbidden. This is not a racial matter but a faith matter. Moses himself was married to a Cushite, and the people of Israel left Egypt as a multi-cultural crowd. Canaanites like Rahab and Moabites like Ruth find their way into David's family tree and therefore into Jesus' family tree. The issue was about marriage leading to divided loyalties between the true and living God and other gods. By the way, this is part of the Biblical argument for not dating non-Christians because when you marry, you want to be with someone who shares the same faith in Christ so that he comes first in everything you do.

This also helps us to think about how we apply this to our lives. Romans 8:13 says:

“...if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature,^l you will live”

Romans 8 could almost be a sermon on Deuteronomy 7. There we are told that God has won the victory by defeating sin's power to condemn. We are more than conquerors in Christ. But we also have a job to do. There are not Canaanites for us to deal with but sinful desires are to be put to death. What does this mean?

It means that though I may face temptation.

- a. I choose not to entertain it. Rather than enjoying the thrill that even the temptation gives, I choose to fight it and replace those thoughts with Scripture.
- b. It means that I don't provide opportunities for sin to stack. I need to be aware of where my weak points are. There needs to be a ruthlessness about my decision not to give sin any opportunity.

If I decide to go on a diet to lose weight and eat more healthily but keep my cupboard stocked with biscuits, and chocolates, a load of frozen chips in the freezer and the local takeaway on speed dial, I think you would conclude that I am not serious about the diet. I would need to be ruthless about clearing my life of those things.

What is it that gets into your mind and under your skin? What do you need to cut out? Where are the weak points. How are you tempted? Let's leave no room for sin to get a foothold.

3. Be motivated by God's love for you in Christ

What motivates God's people in this ruthlessness? Remember that it can't be legalism. That will never work.

Look at verse 6.

"⁶For you are a holy people, who belong to the LORD your God. Of all the people on earth, the LORD your God has chosen you to be his own special treasure."

The people of Israel were motivated by God's unconditional, overflowing, overwhelming love for them. Holiness did not just mean that they were to be exclusive and faithfully loyal to God. It was not just that they were to have no rival Gods. Holiness meant that they were special. God would tolerate no rivals for their affection, just as a faithful husband will not even tolerate or give space to the flirtations of rivals for his affection but wholly commit to his wife.

It is because God is 100% committed to his Son and in the Son (Jesus Christ) we discover that God is 100% committed to us that he calls us to root out any rivals for his affection in our lives.

Conclusion

What are the rivals for God's affection in your life? What is it that gets in the way of your love for him? Where are the warning signs of danger?

What do you need to do in order to put to death sinful desire in your life?

Don't Forget (Deuteronomy 8)

Introduction

It's 97 years after the nuclear apocalypse that wiped out most of civilisation. 13 space stations have been brought to together to form an ark to look after survivors. However the ark is running out of resources and so 100 juvenile convicts are returned to earth to see if they can survive. There Finn and Clarke, two of the main protagonists in The 100 form a relationship. It all sounds wonderfully romantic except that hurtling to earth on another craft a little while later is Raven, a young lady sent to help the group and Finn's forgotten girlfriend.

It's the classic romantic love triangle tension that movie makers are fond of.

Last week, Steve said that "a holy people can give no room to rivals and distractions for God's affection.

Here we see that one of the biggest dangers and obstacles to that is comfort and forgetfulness.

So:

1. Learn to trust the Good Father who discipline us because he loves us (v 1-5)

The people were to be careful – or diligent in keeping God's Law. So that they could enter and enjoy the land God had given them.

This meant remembering how God had led them. God's protection and provision had included testing – notably through lack of food and water by natural means so that they turned to God for supernatural provision including water from the rock and manna from heaven.

Testing taught them to cling onto God more and more. They learnt that they didn't just need basic physical provision to live. Rather, we live on God's Word. In other words, it is the speaking, revealing God who gives us our very existence. Jesus uses this very verse in his response to Satan's temptation to turn stones into bread. He wasn't just saying "You need the Bible as well as food." Jesus was saying something about how we learn to trust and to cling onto God more through trials. He did not want his fast to be magically ended, even though he was physically hungry. In so doing, he was reminding us that even in intense physical hunger (and other forms of suffering) we learn to depend upon the Father more and more.

Testing was not about punishment ... rather it was about a father disciplining his children for their good (v5) Hebrews 12:5 picks up this theme. We think of the word "discipline" as a harsh word and that's maybe because some of us have seen abusive people hide behind the word in order to inflict pain. It is vital that we recognise that abusers exist and we want to be clear that there is no place in church life for physical, emotional, sexual or spiritual cruelty under the guise of discipline.

Yet we know that discipline can and should be a good thing. For example

An athlete, musician or actor will discipline themselves to get up early and practice daily until they are able to perform to their best.

If I am serious about wanting to lose weight, then I know I will have to be disciplined by getting rid of all the sweets, chocolates, ice-cream and general sugary goodness from the house.

As in the example used, parents discipline their children by teaching them right from wrong and showing them that doing wrong has consequence.

So, the point that both Moses and the writer to the Hebrews makes is that there is a type of discipline which is all about a father who loves his child and cares for him or her enough not to just allow them to bumble along in life without any direction or purpose.

We can see that God is motivated by love because whilst they are stretched and challenged in their faith by the immediate absence of water and bread by natural means, God provides supernatural. We can see it is love because they are not overwhelmed, even in the time of trial they are provided for. Their shoes and clothes do not wear out (v4).

This is important because our natural reaction to negative circumstances is to want them to end. That is understandable. We can also see trials primarily in terms of spiritual opposition. Indeed, some preachers will tell you to denounce/deny the trial and command it to leave. However, very often God is using our trials in order to teach us to cling onto him more and more.

2. Keep praising the Good Father who provides richly for us (v6-10)

Wow! You can't read verses 6-10 without your mouth starting to water can you? The image here is is luxurious, abundant provision. The people were to trust God and they were to show that trust by obeying him. Why? It was because He was about to bring them into the land he promised and in that land they would find abundant provision.

The correct response to this was to praise God and thank him.

“The chief end of man is to glorify him and enjoy him forever”¹³

....

“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.”

God is providing for you and me.

- a. On a practical level, I read this week of a mum who no matter what her daughter and her have gone through that day stops with her child each evening and together they list out the things they can be grateful and thankful for from that day.
- b. Also on a practical level, there is a sense through the OT Law in Deuteronomy and through Jesus' and Paul's teaching in the New Testament that we should function as a family so that needs should be met within the body of God's people. It's why we have a hardship fund and food parcels, its why we encourage home groups for emotional support, it's why we are looking at what we can learn from Safe Families for Children so that we can learn how to help each other through hard times.
- c. God has provided us with grace. Let me take you back to our Christmas series. We saw then that in the gift of Jesus come a whole host of wonderful gifts wrapped up, eternal life, forgiveness, peace with God, joy and certain hope.

¹³ The Westminster Confession, Shorter Catechism

- d. We look forward to “Future Grace.” Just as the people of Israel stood on the border looking into a wonderful land flowing with unimaginable goodness, so we look forward as we stand on the border of God’s country. The Easter message reminds us that death does not have the last word, the grave does not have the victory. We will go to be with the Lord. He will raise the dead and bring us into a new creation. All the trials, testings and troubles of this life will pale into insignificance compared to the wonder of eternity. That’s what we have got to keep remembering, we have so much to look forward to. We have hope that should keep us going.

Are you and I enjoying God? How easily are we robbed of that joy?

3. Don’t stop remembering the lavish grace of the Good Father (v11-20)

Notice here that I am saying something stronger than “Don’t forget.” We are to be active in remembering. This is important because when the people got into the land, they risked becoming too comfortable. Comfort would lead to complacency and forgetfulness. They would forget their dependence upon God. Forgetfulness would lead to idolatry.

It would lead to:

1. A trust in their own abilities (v17). ‘I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy.’
2. A trust in other gods – this links to last week and the risk of alliances with the people and the gods of the land (v19) The consequence would be that they too would perish like the previous nations. This would mean exile from the land (v20)

Rather, there is the long list of things that have happened and it is God that did it. God led them (v14) and God fed them (v16).

I can’t help but have an imaginary sound track of some of the songs we’ve been singing recently running through my head as I read those words whether it’s “O Lord my Rock and my redeemer” or Lauren Daigle’s song “I remember.” When we sing it, we say

“I have seen giants fall, I have seen mountains move
I have seen waters part because of You”

Those words pick up on the imagery of the Exodus and what the Israelites experienced but remind us as well that God in Christ delivered us from slavery to sin and the punishment of death and Hell.

We go on to sing:

“I can't stop thinking about
I can't stop thinking about
I can't stop thinking about
Your goodness, goodness”

I know that bit gets a bit repetitive after the 150 millionth time (or however many times it is. But do you get it? Does it sink in. We keep actively remembering, delighting in and rejoicing in God's faithful, lavish goodness to us.

1. We need to do this even and especially when things seem comfortable. You see whilst comfort seems to often be the enemy of trust, if I don't learn to remember and trust now and if I become complacent in times of comfort, I will be ill equipped when the trials come and instead of clinging more to Christ we can become distressed and disorientated as the false anchor I have clung to slips from my grasp.

Therefore, this means that we too are to be careful to follow/obey/trust God as verse 1 demands. First of all this means obeying Greatest commandment -we are simply called to love God with our whole hearts. We do this because and exactly because we know that we can't and haven't of ourselves. Rather, I know that I have not kept the command, I have not loved God with my whole heart. However, Jesus -as seen in his temptations but most fully in his death and resurrection has done. In him, God treats me "just as if I have always kept his law perfectly, just as if I have loved him with my whole heart"

Secondly we are to take practical steps to actively remember God's grace.

- The obvious one is communion as commanded by Jesus
- Regularly gathering together as God's people
- Taking time to read and/or memorise Scripture
- Counting our blessings each day
- Encouraging one another
- Telling people the Gospel

Conclusion

So a very practical and immediate example for us as a church family. Supposing we get the news this week that we are not able to go ahead with the land purchase, if the finances simply aren't there? I know some have invested so much time and energy into this. What if it means we have to wait longer, or work harder for this? Worse, what if it means we have to give up on the land altogether and what if that comes with difficult new neighbours who make life hard for us as a local church? On one level that would hit a lot of us hard. However what if it devastates us? What if it rocks our faith? What if it distracts us from ministry and divides us? How will we stand in the trial and testing?

On the other hand? Supposing it all goes forward straight forwardly? What if the money is readily available? What if the sale goes through without a hitch and further investment comes in to enable us to develop the land? Will we become complacent? Will we start to think "it is because we put our hands in our pockets, because we negotiated well, because others and maybe even God saw us as worthy of investing in? Do you see the risk?

I know of a church that were facing possible eviction if they could not raise the same amount of funds to buy their existing building. We know of churches closed in China, bombed in Sri Lanka, set on fire in Nigeria. And we see those affected continue to trust God.

That's one obvious example. But that may not be the point of testing for us. We may be quite laid back on that one. You will know what the thing that challenges and tests you is. You will know where

you are stretched. You will know when and where you are tempted to doubt. You will also know where you are tempted to be complacent

- Why not take time to jot down those things now and pray about them.
- Let's remember that God has always been faithful to us.

A second chance? (Deuteronomy 10)

Introduction

What does it mean to be a Christian? - We've seen that a Christian is someone who chooses to love God above and before everything else.

How do we do that?

Is it actually possible?

Some headlines

- It means we enjoy and God's grace
- It means that we are devoted to him alone – he comes first in our lives
- It means we serve him by following his example -loving those he loves

1. We enjoy his grace

A. More than a second chance (v1-11)

Recap Sinai

- Moses received the law but meanwhile the Israelites were worshipping idols -they gave up on him and God.
- Stone Tablets destroyed (covenant symbols) - a bit like the wedding ring being thrown down "it's over"
- But Moses continues to plead with God (v10 -11) and God confirms he will not destroy the people

A second chance?

No ... more than

- a. God has already acted. He does not need Moses to plead. He has already told him to make new stone tablets
- b. The Ark of the Covenant to hold the tablets and to be carried by the priests with the people – a reminder of God's presence and grace
- c. Our tendency if let down -even if we give a second chance – is to be harsher, more restrictive but "They were the same words" (v4). God continues to treat the people "the same" -this is genuine, whole hearted, complete forgiveness.
- d. God's continuing favour to the Levites despite Aaron's failure (v6-9).

Side note

-Some of us may feel that we have very little -no status, security, material wealth etc.

- Some of us may feel that we have been asked to say no to a lot and give up a lot: promotion prospects, a better standard of living, relationships etc.

The Lord himself is our special possession (v9) – we have a greater inheritance

B. God's very Nature

- He is the sovereign creator God who made, owns and rules all creation (v14). Moses literally talks about “the heavens” (or skies) and “the heavens of heavens” – or whatever is beyond the sky.
- Yet the ruler of creation chooses them and loves them. The ruler of creation chooses us and loves us (v 14-15)
- He is the one true God and Lord – all other powers and authorities must bow before him. He has all power and authority (v17)
- But he is just and compassionate caring for the vulnerable and the outsider (v17b -18)

If you feel unlovable, small, worthless, exhausted, isolated, an outsider. If you have faced abuse, rejection, desertion, then know this.

God loves you. God chooses you and in Christ Jesus welcomes you into his family. God will not turn his back on you. God will not desert you.

If you do not feel those things then know that

- Objectively the Bible says that sin makes us slaves to evil. Sin makes us God’s enemies. Sin makes us outsiders
- But God has chosen to love you and me and to offer us forgiveness.

2. We are devoted to him alone

Our response is rooted in grace. What does God ask of us? He says “I love you, so love me back.” This is important because whilst it is true that a Christian is someone who chooses to love God above all else, we know that we can’t. We know that we fail.

So we want to say even more that a Christian is someone who God chooses to love, in Christ, with undivided devotion. He loves us first:

So that we can (v12-13)

- Fear him
- Walk in his ways
- Love him
- Serve him with our whole hearts
- Keep his commandments

Note

- a. The repetition of Deuteronomy 6 language “all your heart and soul”
- b. Fear him (v20). What does this mean? Well -if the things we fear are the things that become our idols then simply know that God is more powerful, greater and stronger than anything we might fear in this world. It’s the type of fear that says “I don’t want you for an enemy” and so we stick close by his side.

It means circumcised hearts. God cuts away at our stubbornness. The Bible picks up on this in Jeremiah and Romans -the emphasis is on a new heart. I love him because he changes me so that I can love him.

3. We serve him by loving others

This is a big New Testament theme -how do people know we love God? Answer by seeing that we love each other.

The focus here is on God's love for the orphan, widow and outsider. How do you treat those who are vulnerable, despised, rejected.

Answer – we are to love them

- a. Because God loves the vulnerable and the outsider. The Gospel takes it deeper – he became one with them.
- b. Because we too once were outsiders.
 - The Israelites, physically in Egypt.
 - Us spiritually (1) when we were outside of Christ
 - Us spiritually (2) now -because we do not belong to this world or share its values

Practically

- Asylum seekers and immigrants, homeless, marginalised, addicts, abuse victims ... what about the unborn child too? Is this a place of safety and sanctuary?
- Our concern for the unbeliever -sharing the Gospel so that they may be welcomed into God's family

Conclusion

Next steps

1. Do you need to know what it means to find shelter, safety, healing, forgiveness, welcome. Come talk with us, pray with us - talk to ...
2. Is God challenging you ... what can you do practically?
3. Is God challenging you .., how can I be sharing my faith?

Choose Life: Choose Love (Deuteronomy 11)

Introduction

“Choose life.
Choose a job.
Choose a career.
Choose a family”

If you are about my age you'll immediately recognise the opening lines from the classic film “Trainspotting.” We are then given a whole list of things to choose -big televisions, washing machines, lazy Sunday afternoons, junk food and at the end, the bleak despair that whatever you choose, whatever you work for will be wasted away by the next generation (especially if like the characters in the film, they are all drug addled!).

“Choose rotting away at the end of it all,”

“Will you choose life?” Is in fact, the big question of the Bible. Right back in Genesis 2-3 we see that offer held out. God makes man and woman in his image, places them in a garden where they can enjoy his protection and provision. In the middle of the garden are two trees. One is called the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam and Eve are told “Don't choose that one because that means to choose death.” But the other tree is the Tree of Life. Those trees represented a daily choice. Would Adam and Eve choose life or death?

Choosing life meant choosing to trust God completely, to cling to him, to love him. Choosing death meant choosing to turn their backs on God and go their own way.

It's the question for you and me. Do we choose life -and do we even know what it means to live?

1. Choosing Life means choosing to love and obey God

Here are the people of Israel on the boundary of the land. Going into that land meant Life. It meant living as God's people under his rule, protection, provision and blessing in the place he had provided for them.

Choosing life meant choosing to obey God -to live for him alone. Choosing life meant choosing to trust him and obey him.

See how the chapter is punctuated by this call (v1, v 8, v 15)

- You must love the LORD your God and always obey his requirements, decrees, regulations, and commands (v1)
- ⁸“Therefore, be careful to obey every command I am giving you today (v8)
- If you carefully obey the commands I am giving you today, and if you love the LORD your God and serve him with all your heart and soul (v13)

There's a variation at verse 16 with the warning to take care not to be deceived, which is another way of saying be careful to keep faithful, but that reinforces the point “be careful to keep God's commands.” Then at verse 18 we are told to Keep the command by remembering, inhabiting and teaching them.

Verse 22 returns to the instruction to keep the commands.

Finally in verse 26-32 we see that it is all about choosing blessing/life. This will be vividly demonstrated in a powerful covenant ceremony as the people will go to two mountains and there declare the blessings and curses that go with the covenant. Just as Blessing and Curse, Life and Death were represented by two trees in Genesis, so here they are represented by two mountains.

What is it that God asks of his people? Well the Law is summed up in that one commandment. God loves them with an undivided, undistracted heart. They are to love him back in the same way. Later in the year, we will come back to the detail of the commandments in the later chapters of Deuteronomy. We will keep coming back to this point. The detailed commandments are not hidden terms and conditions designed to trip people up. God is not the harsh police man wanting to catch them out and punish them. Rather, those rules are all about what it means to love God and love your neighbour.

What does God ask of you and me? Simply the same. He has loved us. Will we love him back? And will we show that love by loving each other?

Choosing life means choosing love. This is important because when I say that, it will create a reaction in each of us.

- For some of us the word “love” will conjure up romance. All nice, sentimental but unlikely to last, not the sort of thing that will keep you going through life.
- Indeed some of us will associate “love” with hurt. We have been let down by those we have loved the most. We have even experienced pain and abuse under the guise of love. We fear love.
- Some of us will associate it with failure – perhaps all of us? We know deep down that we aren’t too good at loving. We let down those we love.

So, it is not enough to say “Love God.” What does that mean and is it even possible? The rest of the chapter helps us to see what God means by love and why he calls the people to love him.

2. Choose Life ... choose love and obedience – the how and the why

a. Knowing that God chose you (v2-7)

Moses tells the people that the covenant is specifically with them. The feel we get here is that the focus is on a very specific generation.

In chapter 5:2 they are told:

“The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Mount Sinai.^[a] ³The LORD did not make this covenant with our ancestors, but with all of us who are alive today.”

Here, they are told that the command is specifically for them as opposed to their children. This is because their obedience is rooted in what they have seen and experienced:

- God’s discipline
- His signs in Egypt
- The destruction of Pharaoh’s army
- Their experience in the wilderness
- The judgement of Dathan and Abiram and those who rebelled against Moses (Numbers 11).

Now, there is an element of rhetorical force at work here. This is not the generation who started out in Egypt however the whole Exodus narrative holds together as a single story arc so that they are the immediate beneficiaries.

Their fathers did not benefit from the giving of the Law because they rebelled and did not enter the land.

For their children, these events will be much more second hand and reported. They will not have directly experienced God's goodness in this particular way -although it is important to see that they will continue to experience God's grace and goodness in the land. Why

Why is this important? Well it gives us a sense of the "nowness" of God's love, goodness and grace.

- God has chosen you. God has shown love and mercy to you. It is for you that Christ died. It is you who he is speaking to now.
- This means it is you that knows God's love. Now in one sense we can talk about the ways in which he has shown love in providing for you in life's circumstances. However, far more importantly, you know that you are a sinner, you know that you fail to love him, you know the many ways you have let him and others down. So you know that when Jesus died on the Cross it was for you.
- Therefore, it is you that God calls to turn from your sin, put your trust in him and love him.

This means

- I cannot inherit faith and salvation from my parents and grandparents.
- Our children will not simply inherit faith and salvation because we are Christians.

Therefore

- You need to respond for yourself.
- Our children must be given every opportunity to hear and respond for themselves.

b. Learning to enjoy his goodness (v 8-11; 14-15; 23-24)

God's people are told to obey him by loving him so that they may go in and possess this good land. Obedience and faithfulness is linked consistently to long life in the land.

It is very important not to confuse this with legalism. The idea is not that there are things they have to do in order to get God to do things for them. Remember that the land has already been promised to them and God has already acted to rescue them.

Indeed look again at verses 8-11. The whole point is that this is a land unlike anything they have experienced, a good land which God cares for. Whilst there will be work in the land, it is not the kind of labour and struggle they experienced in Egypt where dry barren land had to be irrigated.

They are going to be able to enjoy God's goodness. That's what the Law is really about, it's about learning to enjoy God's love and care. It's about knowing how to. And you can't enjoy God's goodness without enjoying God himself. You can't love what God gives without loving God himself. You can't receive the gift and not the giver.

We often use the example of the prince who marries the poor beggar woman to show how Christ loves us, draws us to himself takes on the debt of our sin and gives us the riches of his grace. Well imagine the wedding where the groom says "All I have is yours" and the bride says "Brilliant ... I'll be off now!"

That's the point. We are not to treat God like that. If we have never experienced true love and goodness, we are likely to treat it as snatch and grab -get what you can before the giver changes their mind. God's love is not like that. God loves us faithfully and without distraction or rival. So he calls us into a relationship with him.

c. Knowing the Difference between life and death (v17; v25-32)

You can't enjoy all the goodness of God's provision whilst rejecting him. Back to our marriage analogy. If the wife claims to love her husband and enjoys all the good things he provides for her but goes out and sees other men, we have a word for that "adultery."

God says that you can't enjoy his goodness whilst choosing to worship other gods (v17). As we have seen over the past few weeks, idolatry is when we put our affection elsewhere, idolatry is when we look to others to provide. We say that we trust them more than we trust God. We fear them more than we fear God. We love them more than we love God.

Over the past few weeks, we've run some examples in the weekly bulletin of how we can fear – or put our trust in other things – work, personal power and popularity, relationships instead of God. We've provided examples of practical ways in which we can step away from those idols and put God first in our life.

Conclusion

So the choice is stark and simple. Will you choose life. You see, if you don't choose life then the only other thing on offer is death.

Death means:

- That in this life I am spiritually dead – I was made to know and love God and I find myself alienated from him. I lack peace and purpose
- That one day I will physically die
- That after death, I face Hell -eternal separation from God's loving presence provision and protection.

Life means

- That right now I can know God's forgiveness, presence, protection and peace
- That although one day I will physically die, I do not need to fear death because it will not have the final word.
- That after death I can look forward to eternity with Christ.

So, today we come back to the Gospel. This is both a challenge and good news.

- a. If you have not yet chosen life -will you do so today
- b. If you have chosen life -then is the evidence there? Do you find your assurance, peace, safety and security in Christ alone?