

Deuteronomy-by Nathan White

Chapter 1

Deuteronomy opens with Moses addressing the people of God as they prepare to enter the land God has given them. They have traveled for forty years in the wilderness and have lost an entire generation. The book functions as a second giving of the law – a covenant renewal between God and a new generation of His people. The chapter recalls for Israel the events that led to their wandering in the wilderness. Why would Moses remind them of their painful past on an occasion that most would consider joyous? Because the sins they committed that led them to those their failure were committed due to disbelief in God's promises. Moses is about to remind them throughout this book of God's law and the promises He has made to His people. They needed to understand the dangers of covenant faithlessness. To move forward relying on themselves as opposed to the promises of God would land them where it landed their parents.

Chapter 2

Moses picks up his narrative of Israel's history near the end of their time in the wilderness. He begins to remind them of how the Lord faithfully brought them through both the wilderness and the lands of the Edomites (The Edomites were the descendants of Esau. Moses does not explicitly call them the Edomites in this text.), the Moabites, and the Ammonites. All of these nations are related to the Israelites and God makes clear that Israel is not to fight them. God has given those nations their land. Moses also points out that both Moab and Ammon dispossessed "people great and many, and tall as the Anakim." The Anakim were the people that frightened Israel when they refused to enter their land a generation before. Moses is trying to drive home the point that the Earth is the Lord's and the land is His to give and take. No army can stop Him from keeping his promise. If God is showing such kindness to Edom, Moab, and Ammon, He will surely be faithful to His people.

Chapter 3

After the defeat of the kings of Heshbon and Bashan, their lands are given to Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh. We might assume that the journey for these tribes is done. They have survived the wilderness. They have conquered the inhabitants of the land God is giving them. They have made homes for their families. But their part in the conquest is not yet finished. While the women and children are allowed to remain in their new country, the men of these two and a half tribes are commanded to continue fighting with the rest of God's people. Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh could not selfishly settle in and leave God's people to handle everything West of the Jordan on their own. Obviously, there was a military benefit to these tribes continuing to fight, but their presence also served as a reminder that God had already started bringing His promises to fruition. God's people were – and are – living, breathing reminders to each other of God's faithfulness.

Chapter 4

This chapter begins the transition to the legal portion of Deuteronomy. Moses will remind the people not only of their history, but also of the law. He'll explicitly detail the requirements of covenant faithfulness. The victory they will enjoy over their enemies will be because of this covenant that the Lord has made with them, not because of military might. Their obedience, however, will not only be a benefit to them. In verses 6-8, Moses points out that their obedience will serve as a light to the nations. Through them, the world would marvel at the goodness and faithfulness of God. However, should they rebel and commit idolatry, God will judge them. God will remove them from the land and scatter them. But even this will be done with His covenant in mind. The result will be repentance (Vs. 29). Even God's

discipline is a mercy for His people. Unfaithfulness will reap serious consequences, but the Lord will not forget His covenant.

Chapter 5

Deuteronomy 5 opens with a restatement of the Ten Commandments. Moses reminds them of the law they received. He also reminds them of how they received it. Moses reminds them that the Lord brought them out of slavery and spoke to them from fire and clouds at the mountain. He recalls for them their fear at hearing God's voice and their pleading with God to allow Moses to be a mediator. Moses even makes a point to say, "Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all here alive today." The only strange thing about all of that is that it wasn't that generation who was there. It was the previous generation who stood at the mountain. This is very intentional, though. Moses hasn't simply gotten his dates mixed up. God's covenant with their fathers was so binding that it's as if they were the generation who received it. The Lord's covenant promises did not just belong to the first generation, but also to their children.

Chapter 6

After outlining the Ten Commandments, Moses reminds the people of the greatest commandment: to love God with all that they have. Moses does not simply remind them of this commandment, though. He gives them a practical framework for how it should play out in their daily lives. He explains that to love God is to love His law. Obedience to God is the fruit of love for Him. In every way he can, Moses implores them to keep God's law before their eyes and the eyes of their children continually. They are not simply commanded to know it. They are to faithfully pass it down. Moses also commands them to teach their history. When their children ask why God's law is important, they should answer with stories of His faithfulness. They should make it clear that obedience to God's law is a response of faith to who God is and what He has promised His people. They need to remember what He has done, not only what He has commanded them to do.

Chapter 7

God very clearly commands Israel to completely destroy the nations in the land He is giving them. He reminds them again and again not to take prisoners, not to intermarry, not to worship their idols, and to "devote them to complete destruction." To us, it might seem as if God is belaboring the point. To repeat it so many times in just one paragraph seems excessive, but it serves to show God's seriousness. The sins of these nations are abhorrent to God and if Israel adopts them, He'll judge them for it. This demand for obedience is predicated on one thing: God chose them. He brought them out of Egypt. He preserved them in the desert instead of destroying them for their faithlessness. He crushed their enemies and promises to continue to do so as they enter the land. He has called them His people. Their success is due to His initiative and His faithfulness. If they fail to honor Him, He can (and will!) remove them from the land just as easily.

Chapter 8

Chapter eight of Deuteronomy is a very clear continuation of chapter seven. God commands His people to remember Him as they enter the land. He produces an extensive list of all that He did to protect them and spiritually shape them. He also reminds them again of the good things that wait for them in the land. He is lovingly giving to His people a land in which they "lack nothing," where they will "eat and be full." This exact blessing, however, could eventually become dangerous for them. They run the risk of forgetting God in their prosperity. Instead of seeing these blessings as gifts from God that cause them to rejoice in His unmerited kindness, they might (and eventually will) begin to love the gift more than the

giver and will become desperate to do – or worship – any unrighteous thing to keep it. To forget God in prosperity will inevitably lead them to idolatry.

Chapter 9

In chapter nine, the Lord points to another danger that the Israelites will face: self-righteousness. While God is judging the nations in the land for their wickedness, He isn't giving it to Israel because they are righteous. He's giving Israel the land because He is faithful to the promises He made. This gift He gives them is due to His grace and faithfulness, not their righteousness. He made them His people and keeps His covenants because He is good, not because they are good. In fact, they are stubborn and sinful and have already earned His judgment. God could have destroyed them, but instead He accepted the pleas of Moses on their behalf and spared them. Like Israel, God's kindness toward us is not because of our goodness, but because of His faithfulness. Like Israel, we earn His wrath, but He is pleased to accept the intercession of Christ, the true and better Moses, on our behalf.

Chapter 10

The Lord does not simply want Israel to follow a few laws, make some sacrifices, and go about their lives without giving any real thought to what it means to be His people. God wants His people to actually love Him. Circumcision that is only of the flesh just won't do. God wants them to circumcise their hearts. They should be marked as His people not only outwardly, but also inwardly. God wants faith and faith is always accompanied by a genuine desire to obey. Many treat the Old Testament as if it was the time when God's people were saved by works of the law, but this has never been the case. Salvation has always come by faith and saving faith is always inextricably connected to receiving a changed heart. The Pharisees and Judaizers of the New Testament who placed their hope in how well they kept the law did not heed the warning of this passage. May we never forget that God desires faith, not just rote, indifferent obedience.

Chapter 11

Chapter eleven closes this section of the book. Since chapter five, Moses has been laying out general stipulations of the Covenant. Starting in chapter twelve, Moses begins to deal with more specific requirements. Readers might expect Moses to summarize a list of rules before moving on to the next section, but this chapter is not just a general call to obedience. It is a reminder of what God has done for them. Many readers might gloss over all the reminders of God's past grace and promises of God's future grace that fill this chapter. In fact, it's that abounding grace that God considers the foundation of their obedience. God's kindness was meant to lead them to repentance. "For your eyes have seen all the great work of the Lord that He did. You shall therefore keep the whole commandment that I command you today..." (vs.7-8). For the Israelites, and for us, to be shown such immeasurable grace should lead to obedience.

Chapter 12

Beginning in chapter twelve, Moses transitions from general stipulations of the covenant to more specific stipulations of the covenant. This section begins with rules for how God wants to be worshipped. He reiterates that they are to destroy the high places of the cities they conquer, but that isn't just so they avoid worship of other gods. In fact, verse four says, "You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way." The issue wasn't just that God alone should be worshipped, but also that He should be worshipped in the way that He prescribed. They were not to worship God in whatever way seemed best or most convenient to them. God would give them one place where they could bring their sacrifices. He would establish only one place where they could meet with Him. For the Israelites, that

would eventually be the temple in Jerusalem. But this points forward to a true and better temple in Christ, the ultimate meeting place between God and man.

Chapter 13

God takes seriously the perversion of His Word and worship by false prophets and idolaters. He takes it so seriously that the punishment He tells the Israelites to apply in such cases is death. That He has revealed Himself to us at all is unbelievably gracious and He is faithful to do all that He has said He would, so when people twist or neglect what He has said and done, it is effectively a direct assault on His character. Still, to many of us, death seems like a harsh punishment. The reason God prescribes death as the remedy for Israelites who rebel in these ways is not simply retributive. It is also intended to protect the rest of the people. To expel false prophets and idolaters in the most serious way reveals the seriousness of those sins and protects the people from their influence. While the Church is not commanded to put idolaters to death, we are to take God's Word and worship seriously. There is tremendous danger in a cavalier attitude toward God's revelation of Himself to us.

Chapter 14

Tithing was not a new practice and there are other passages that deal with more specific aspects of tithing laws, but here God lays out some of the basics of the practice. Most of us are indifferent at best about tithing. We do it. We don't mind it. It's just something we're supposed to do and we have no particularly strong feelings about it. But there is a strong emphasis throughout Deuteronomy about celebrating the blessings of God that shows up in this section. God treats the tithe as a celebration. It's a party. God has given His people incredible blessings and they are using their tithe as a way to celebrate it. He even tells them that if they can't bring their tithe all the way from home, they can sell it and buy "oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink." He then tells them to "eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice." Tithing wasn't to be done begrudgingly, but with celebration for the Lord's kindness and provision.

Chapter 15

Every seven years, Israelite creditors were to forgive their debtors. God expected His people to deal fairly and generously and to consider the poor. He even makes a point to tell them that they can't refuse to lend money because "the seventh year, the year of release is near." God considers such hard-heartedness an "unworthy thought." God's people are to give freely and "not be grudging" when they give because God has blessed them. God's kindness and generosity to them is meant to compel them to kindness and generosity to others. The same law even applies to Israelites who have sold themselves as bondservants to pay off a debt. Every seventh year, God commands that they be released. In fact, God even tells creditors that they "shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress." God expects His people to concern themselves with the wellbeing of the poor among them and to extend the same kindness that He has.

Chapter 16

Again, we have a chapter full of celebration. Chapter sixteen outlines the details concerning the observance of Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths. Each of these events is intended to call to mind the faithfulness of God to His people. This celebratory remembrance is a major part of the Jewish calendar. If celebration before the Lord was important to God's people then, shouldn't we be even more joyful now? Matthew Henry, in his commentary on Deuteronomy, says, "If those who were under the law must rejoice before God, much more we that are under the grace of the gospel." Paul even says to believers in Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice." We have

been bought out of slavery to sin, reconciled to God, and sealed as His own. Do we have a duty to honor God? Absolutely. But it is not only a duty! God's infinite grace toward us should make it a delight.

Chapter 17

Deuteronomy 17, like Numbers 35, requires at least two or three witnesses and diligent inquiry to bring a charge against a person. This, of course, is meant to help protect the innocent from false accusations. Of course, we know that evidence does not always point to an obvious conclusion. In the middle section of this chapter, the Lord gives the people of Israel a solution for that. If a case is too difficult for their local courts, they are to take it to the priests who will deliver a verdict. The ruling of these priests from the central sanctuary was to be final. Their judgment was to be so strictly followed that if a man "act[ed] presumptuously by not obeying the priest," it would warrant the death penalty. The case was taken to the place where the people met with God – it highlighted that God Himself is ultimately the perfect judge – and there, the priests effectively made a ruling on God's behalf. To reject their decision was to claim the authority to scrutinize God's judgments.

Chapter 18

The Lord very clearly commands Israel to avoid the wicked practices of the nations they are dispossessing. He leaves no room for interpretation. "There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead" is about as clear-cut as someone can get. Each of these practices was a way that the pagan nations tried to seek divine assistance. These were their destructive, evil ways of interacting with their gods. In contrast to pagan pursuits of divine revelation, God promises to give His people prophets who would proclaim the Word of the Lord. This is such a serious role that to be a false prophet warranted death. Ultimately, this office finds its completion in Christ. Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us, "God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son."

Chapter 19

At the end of this chapter, the laws concerning legal witness are outlined once again. We might be tempted to skim over this, but to do so would be to miss an important inclusion that was missing in chapter seventeen. Here we read that if people come together to bear false witness against a person, they are to suffer the consequences of the crime they claim to have witnessed. To "bear false witness" is a serious thing in the eyes of the Lord. Much more than just lying, it is anything that unjustly assaults the character of our neighbor, and in so doing, harming the well-being of one who bears the Image of God. We should avoid not only outright lying, but also misrepresentation of a person's character, actions, or words. In fact, the Heidelberg Catechism goes so far as to say that we should "defend and promote...the honor and good character" of our neighbors. We are not only to avoid participating in slander, but we are to actively oppose it.

Chapter 20

When going into battle, the officers are to dismiss three groups of men: men who have planted a vineyard but have not yet enjoyed its fruit, men who are betrothed, and men who are fearful. The first two groups are exempt because they have yet to enjoy good blessings that God has given them. The purpose of war was to defend these gifts. War was not an end in itself, but a means to protect what was important. What's more, Israel did not depend on every available man to win. They depended on God's faithfulness. Fearful men were exempt in part because their faithlessness disqualified them to see God's glory played out in battle. More practically, their exemption was also granted because they might cause others to fear, which could result in unnecessary panic and chaos in battle. Their fear might cost more

lives than their sword would save. These laws, and each that follow, are centered on God limiting the destruction, death, and loss of war to only what is necessary.

Chapter 21

The past couple of chapters have dealt with the laws surrounding the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder.” There have been clear stipulations regarding the legal processes when the culprit is known, but what about if the murder is unsolved? The opening of chapter twenty-one answers that very question. Should a body be found in the open country and there are no witnesses to the murder, there must still be atonement. Even when there is no conviction, God’s righteous wrath toward sin still burns and if Israel wants to avoid that wrath, they still have to make a sacrifice. It might seem unfair to us that Israel could be on the hook for a sin about which they know nothing, but that is how serious sin is. It is an inexcusable affront to God’s holiness. Ignorance does not function as an excuse. Praise God that in Christ, we have a final, perfect sacrifice who satisfies God’s wrath for all of our sins – known and unknown, remembered and forgotten.

Chapter 22

Chapter twenty-two of Deuteronomy contains a variety of laws, but the largest section of the chapter is dedicated to laws about sexual morality. Just like the sexual habits of Israel’s idolatrous neighbors were often intimately connected to the worship of their gods, Israel’s sexual ethics were meant to reflect the holy God they served. Similarly, early Christians had a significantly different sexual ethic than the pagan culture in which they lived. God’s people have always maintained that how we conduct our bodies says something about our souls. This is as relevant today as it ever has been. Living in the fallout of the sexual revolution can make it easy to echo in our hearts the prayer of a young and immature Augustine: “Lord, give me chastity, but not yet.” Of course, Augustine would repent of this selfish thought. May we never give into the sexually hedonistic spirit of the age, but instead recognize that what we think about sexual ethics reflects what we think about God.

Chapter 23-25

The next three chapters of Deuteronomy continue to address laws that did not fall into any of the previously established categories. This can make these chapters difficult to follow. Each section seems entirely disjointed from the next. However, you might also notice that certain themes seem to show up repeatedly, giving us an idea about what God desires for and from His people. For instance, like in chapter twenty-two, sexual purity laws are prevalent. Another consistent theme in these chapters is economic and financial righteousness and generosity. We find laws about interest, loan collection, timely pay for workers, fair prices in the marketplace, and even what a lender can demand as a pledge. At the heart of these laws is this simple truth: God has been generous to His people so they should be generous too. If generosity was expected from Israel, how much more should our generosity reflect the goodness of God now that we have seen the immeasurable riches of God’s love in Christ?

Chapter 26

This is the last chapter of Deuteronomy that deals with specific laws and it is entirely about tithes. All of Deuteronomy is centered on responding to God’s graciousness, which makes this a fitting conclusion to the law-giving portion of the book. The very heart of this chapter is entirely about Israel remembering what God has done for them (vs. 3-11). In fact, the chapter spells out a liturgy for the people of Israel to follow when they give their tithes and it begins with, “And you shall make response before the Lord.” Giving, like all obedience, is a response to what God has already done. It is dialogical. God loves His people and His people respond. This liturgy might have seemed repetitive to some Israelites, but it was important for them – and important for us – to remember that the obedience they offered to God paled

in comparison to the grace He showed them. Until we see our obedience as a response to grace, we will always be tempted to think God owes us something for it.

Chapter 27-28

The first thing the people are to do when they enter the land God promised them is set up an altar and write the law on it. The placement of this altar is actually of particular significance to the Hebrew people because it is set on Mt. Ebal, a mountain on the north side of Shechem – the very same place where God promised Abram that his offspring would inherit the land. In more ways than one, this altar calls Israel to remember God’s faithfulness. Moses then elaborates on the covenant blessings and covenant curses as they prepare to formally renew their covenant with God. The altar, the remembrance of their history, and the clear articulation of covenant blessings and curses were all intended as deterrents for sin. Of course, we know, it didn’t work. We, like Israel, know what is good and have countless reasons to remember it but still fail. But this is the good news of the Gospel: Jesus Christ did keep the covenant and willingly suffered the curse in our place.

Chapter 29-30

Chapters twenty-nine and thirty are split into two separate chapters, but they are actually both part of one speech. Moses knows that he won’t get to enter the land with his people, so he passionately pleads with them to keep the covenant. He reminds them of what God has done for them (which is a consistent theme throughout Deuteronomy) and he begs them to search their hearts for idolatry, not because he is unsure of their propensity for idolatry, but because he knows that they will be tempted toward idolatry. He reminds them, in no uncertain terms, that their choice is not simply between obedience and disobedience, but ultimately between life and death. It’s easy to read this speech and see only law, but if we read carefully, we see a great deal of grace. God promises that when the curse falls on them for disobedience, He will use it to draw them to repentance and bring them back out of exile (30:1-10). Even under Moses, God’s grace outweighed His people’s sin.

Chapter 31

It’s easy to get lost in all of the legal sections of Deuteronomy and forget its place in the narrative of the Hebrew people, but reading this chapter is a deeply moving reminder that Deuteronomy is not simply a recounting of the law. It is a pivotal moment in the history of Israel. For four-fifths of the Pentateuch, Moses has been the leader of the Hebrew people and now, as they are finally inheriting the land promised to them, he is entrusting them to someone else. Surely, this was an emotional moment for Moses, Joshua, and the rest of the Hebrew people. There are practical lessons here about how we might not always see the result of our labor, discipleship, and even our mortality. All of those, however, are undergirded by the biggest takeaway. God’s work is dependent on Him, not on us. It’s easy to put our hope in our own plans or even those who lead us, but ultimately, God’s redemptive purposes are fulfilled in the work of only one man: Jesus Christ.

Chapter 32

The majority of chapter thirty-two is comprised of Moses’s song for and about Israel. This song, in conjunction with the law, would be used to bear witness against Israel when they fell into idolatry. This might seem like a strange use for a song to us. Why would Moses write a song that included Israel committing idolatry and the curses that follow it? Because, whether we realize it or not, songs are formative as much as they are expressive. We often recognize the fact that our theology informs our songs, but rarely do we consider that our songs help inform our theology. What we sing, we remember. When the Israelites committed idolatry, this song, as much as the law, would serve as a call to repentance. Theology and doxology are interdependent. This is exactly why what we sing in corporate

worship is so important. It is not simply a matter of expressing our emotion, although that is certainly part of it. It is a matter of getting our theology right.

Chapter 33-34

In the final chapters of Deuteronomy, we see Moses lovingly address each tribe. He blesses them as a patriarch would, calling to mind Jacob blessing his sons (Gen. 49). He reminds them one last time that though he has led them to the land and Joshua will lead them into it, God is their king (v. 5). Finally, Moses climbs onto Mount Nebo and before he dies, he gets to look at the land the Hebrew people have waited so long to possess. It is tempting to read this and only focus on God not allowing him to enter Canaan. But we should be careful not to miss the overwhelming grace present in this moment. Moses knows his people are under Joshua's care and that the Lord will keep his word. What's more, he gets to lay his eyes on the fulfillment of the promise, even if he didn't get to participate in it. Finally, and most importantly, Moses saw Canaan before passing to the true and better land of promise. Deuteronomy ends as Moses sees the shadow before walking into the substance.

Reflecting on Deuteronomy –

Before moving on to our next book of the Bible, take some time today to reflect on what we've read in Deuteronomy. Perhaps re-visit a favorite chapter or an especially meaningful passage. Or read the beginning chapter(s) again, now that you've read the whole. Or go back to a part of the book that struck you as curious and see if it makes more sense now. Or speed-read the whole thing again, seeking to reinforce its main themes. Or... perhaps you need a catch-up day to finish Deuteronomy before we move forward?

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Matthew 24.35