

Deuteronomy: the Second Law

(Is it law or is it grace?)

12 March 2015

Reading: Deuteronomy 1

Introduction

In these brief few weeks, I will only be doing 'An Introduction to Deuteronomy'. I will not be looking at the laws of Deuteronomy which start from chapter five. Our coverage will only be the first four chapters which is the first section of the book, the first address of Moses to the Israelites. Calvin preached 200 sermons from Deuteronomy over some fifteen months. He must have given three to four sermons per week.

Before we start to look at the book of Deuteronomy, we need to put the book in perspective. We need to look at the structure of the Old Testament. Deuteronomy is the last book in the five books of Moses that we called the Pentateuch, the books of law, the Torah. Then we have the historical books from Joshua right through to Nehemiah. The five poetical books followed, i.e. from Job to Song of Songs. The Old Testament then finished with the prophetic books, the five Major Prophets and twelve Minor Prophets. That is our classification. However, the Jews do not classify them that way. They have the law, the prophets and the writings.

The difference between our classification and that of the Jews is that the Jews do not have a category called history. The reason is that they hold together word and act. What God has spoken, that is considered accomplished. The importance is on the word whereas we have turned it the other way round. We focus on the action and ignored the word. We find it hard to trust what people say nowadays. They use circumstances to justify themselves when they go back on their word.

Deuteronomy

The word 'Deuteronomy' means second law (*deuteros* = second, and *nomos* = law). Deuteronomy, despite its title, is all about grace. 'The end of the matter is grace'. The book of Deuteronomy records for us 'the triumph of grace'. These are the titles of two recent books on Deuteronomy.¹

I feel that the title, Deuteronomy or Second Law, is not appropriate to the book. It comes from chapter 17 regulating the coronation when the king should be given a copy of the law as his guide in life.

¹⁸ When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. ¹⁹ It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, ²⁰ neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel. (Deut. 17:18-20)

That copy of the law was thought to be the fifth book of Moses and thus the title 'Second Law' (Deuteronomy) was given to the book. This book is a compilation of sermons by Moses before the entry into the land that God had promised them. It was the preparation for nationhood. Thus the book begins with these words.

¹ J. Gordon McConville, *Grace in the End*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1993).
Paul A. Barker, *The Triumph of Grace in Deuteronomy*, (Paternoster: Great Britain, 2006)

¹ These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan—in the wilderness, on the plain opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Di-zahab. (Deut. 1:1)

Towards the end of the book, again we note that Moses was again saying to the people.

¹ These are the words of the covenant that the LORD commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in the land of Moab, in addition to the covenant that he had made with them at Horeb. (Deut. 29:1)

Saints of old had equated the covenant with law or contract. They thought that if the book contains the words of the covenant, then it is law. Hence, the book of Deuteronomy has been interpreted as a book of law, but the setting is not a legal code. It is not meant to be a book of law in the way we understand law nowadays. It was the farewell discourse by Moses who was aware that he would not enter the Promised Land. Joshua and Caleb were to lead the people into the Promised Land. They were the only two that left Egypt and lived to enter the Promised Land. Here, on the threshold of nationhood, Moses who brought them out of Egypt wanted to see that they did not waste another opportunity given by God. He instructed them on what he had learnt so intimately from God. This book is not a legal code, but consists of heart warming words from one who felt so deeply for the people. Deuteronomy expresses the heart of the covenant that God has made with His people. We will explore more of that as we move into the contents of the book.

The Setting of Deuteronomy

Israel had left Egypt and because of their lack of faith, they were sent wandering in the desert for forty years. At the beginning of the book, they were on the threshold of entering the Promised Land the second time. Here, Moses was putting in the so called final touches before they made their definitive journey and into the Promised Land and into nationhood. We need to ask a question. Is their entry into the Promised Land the result of their obedience or the result of God's faithful covenant with His people? Of course it is because of God's faithfulness to His people. It was in spite of their disobedience and stubbornness of heart. These final touches were reminders by Moses of their failures and the covenantal faithfulness of their God, Yahweh. The tensions between Israel's faithlessness and God's faithfulness were played out in the book and these tensions are also reflected in our lives. That is why we need to have a good look at this book.

Why study Deuteronomy?

The book of Deuteronomy is pivotal in the Old Testament. The whole of Israel's history is written and interpreted with the teaching of this book in view. As a result, theologians have used the term, Deuteronomic history, in referring to the books from Joshua to Kings. Also, some of the prophets like Jeremiah were writing with the themes of this book in mind. As we look into the book, we will also need to engage the history of Israel and the prophets because they are all linked together into the one great plan of God for His people. Without a grounding in Deuteronomy, the interpretation of the history of Israel and especially the reform of Josiah, is unsatisfactory and distort the truth of God.

Deuteronomy is also the most quoted book in the New Testament. Jesus quoted predominantly from this book. Paul also quoted extensively from Deuteronomy, especially in Romans 9-11.

Deuteronomy is an important book in the Old Testament and yet its meaning and interpretation are not often understood. It is often looked upon as a book of law and interpreted as such. That is not so. That is to misunderstand the book. It is often taught that the Old Testament is all about law and the New Testament about grace. Again that is not so. In the studies that I will be giving from the book Deuteronomy, I will show that the book of Deuteronomy is all about the grace of God.

To quote Paul Barker, an Anglican minister in Melbourne,

... that the pessimism attached to Israel is fundamental to Deuteronomy and that generally optimism is grounded not in Israel but in Yahweh's faithfulness to his promises.²

Our reading of the law in Deuteronomy may lead us to think that the keeping of the law will bring about the blessings of God. At the outset we need to abolish this trend of thought. That is simply not true because Israel had been unable to do so and their history is a record of their inability to keep the law. Yes, there are blessings and curses in the book of Deuteronomy, but we cannot interpret them in a simplistic way. We will say more about this at a later stage of the series. Israel at times may seem to have some ability in keeping the law, but this is to misread the book. It is difficult to understand why with all that was recorded for us in history, we now stand and think that in this age, we can succeed in keeping the law. It is simply our conceited way of thinking of ourselves. Paul Barker wrote again.

Israel's ability is established through Yahweh's grace and faithfulness to the Patriarchal promises. ... Exhortation to keep the law need not presuppose Israel's ability to do so. Rather, in the context of the climatic exhortation of 30:15-20, we argue that the law and exhortation function to expose Israel's need for grace, presupposing, in fact, its inability to keep it.³

The alternative posed by the book of Deuteronomy for Israel and also for us is this. It is not between trusting and doing. It is between to trust in the grace of God or not to trust in the grace of God. Put it in another way, the alternative is between trusting in the grace of God and trusting in ourselves

... either Israel, exercising its own strength and effort, with failure the inevitable result, or Yahweh and his enduring grace and faithfulness. The key is not whether Israel will obey, because it cannot, but whether Israel will trust in itself or Yahweh and his grace. ... Israel's hope is to be grounded in Yahweh's grace and not in its own obedience.⁴

Joshua, at the end of his leadership spoke to the Israelites like Moses, and exhorted them to serve (worship) the Lord, i.e. to trust in their God.

¹⁵Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:15)

So it is against this background that we come to read the opening words of Moses in the book.

¹ These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan—in the wilderness, on the plain opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazereth, and Di-zahab. ² (By the way of Mount Seir it takes eleven days to reach Kadesh-barnea from Horeb.) (Deut. 1:1-2)

This is the setting of Deuteronomy. The people of Israel were at the watershed of their history. They were promised the land that they were given to possess and having failed once to enter, they must be keen not to fail again. Moses was addressing them before this very important move. As the leader who had seen the consequence of their mistrust, he must be passionate in trying to ensure that it did not happen again. It is this passion that must undergird our reading of the book. Again we must not make our assumption of the basis of this passion. The basis of this passion is not to be found in human endeavour, but in the implicit trust in the grace of God.

² Paul Barker, *The Triumph of Grace in Deuteronomy*, (Paternoster: Great Britain, 2006), 4.

³ Ibid. 4.

⁴ Ibid. 6.

This opening set the place and time of the narrative. It was on the verge of the entry into the Promised Land, the second time. Moses did not begin with a challenge to trust, but recounted what God had done. The former would be an appeal to human endeavour, the latter an appeal to the grace of God.

Before going on, Moses acknowledged the burden of leadership. God's answer to this was to be resolved within the community of Israel. (Deut. 1:12-18)

Kadesh-barnea **(Failure to Trust vs Faithfulness of God)**

Having settled this side issue of the burden of leadership, Moses returned to the real issue in Israel. It was the failure to trust. He reminded them of what happened at Kadesh-barnea. Now this generation of Israelites were not there. It was their parents who failed to trust, but the same failure would infect the present generation. They needed the reminder as they were all tarnished with the same disposition.

Christianity is a historical faith. It is not based on a philosophical concept and neither is it based on something metaphysical. Our God is not a concept or a physical force in the universe. Our God is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yet many Christians are not aware of what God has done in history from the calling of Abraham, and indeed since creation. The incident at Kadesh-barnea was an event in the history of Israel that resulted in the prohibition of the Israelites from entering the Promised Land for one generation. Many would not have heard of the name of the place. (*Show map of the Sinai desert.*)

What happened at Kadesh-barnea was the watershed in the history of Israel. What happened there caused the Israelites to wander in the desert for forty years. What happened there resulted in all who left Egypt to forfeit the opportunity to enter the Promised Land except for two, Joshua and Caleb. In this first chapter, Moses was reflecting on what happened forty years before this. The Israelites were at Kadesh-barnea and poised to enter the Promised Land. They were hesitant because the people there were bigger and they did not feel they could conquer the land and this was despite the promise God gave that they will be victorious. They chose to defer the entry.

The Israelites had left Egypt and under the leadership of Moses came to the Red Sea pursued by the Egyptian army. They panicked and we know the story of what happened. God opened up the Red Sea and the Israelites crossed over. This was well depicted in Cecil DeMille's production of the *Ten Commandments* (1956). The Egyptian army was then destroyed when the Red Sea closed in. The Israelites then camped in the Sinai desert. They came to Mt Sinai and here Moses was given the Ten Commandments. While he was up in the mountain talking to God, the Israelites under Aaron made a golden calf and worship the idol. This abhorrent act of worship angered Moses, but it did not prevent them from continuing the journey towards the Promised Land. Moses pleaded for their forgiveness. Everything was still on scheduled. When they got closer to the Promised Land, they came to Kadesh-barnea. This was to be the last stop or encampment before moving onward to the land that God had promised them. They were to move in and occupy the land as God had promised. They were commanded to go and do so, but there was some hesitation.

However, there was a sense of apprehension with such a great event which was about to take place. They got cold feet and opted not to go in. This angered the Lord and they were consigned to wander in the desert for forty years.

Circumstantial Decision

Instead of going straight ahead as God had promised and commanded, their brains got in the way. They thought they had a better idea than what God had promised. The problem was precisely this. They doubted the promise and the command of God. They did not trust God at His word. They trusted the opinion of those who went up to make an assessment of the situation. They thought that the democratic majority rule would be more certain instead of theocracy, i.e. rule by God. That was the human intellect. They trusted the human assessment. They relied on the circumstantial finding and what was humanly possible. It was the popular circumstantial decision and that went against the will and command of God. If you think that was three and half thousand years ago, be assured that that is still happening today in our churches.

'The Lord will fight for you'

The battle is the Lord's. We are the men and women who marched under His banner.

³⁰ The LORD your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes,

God did not just promise them the Promised Land. He also gave an undertaking to fight the battle for them just as what He did for them in delivering them from slavery in Egypt. God took them out of Egypt. God parted the Red Sea and guided them by day and by night. God even forgave them of the golden calf saga. They seemed to have forgotten all that. In our lives today, God's work is done by the Triune Godhead, Father, Son and Spirit. We are the auxiliaries in this great movement of God towards His people and creation.

Failure to trust

The issue here is not merely obedience, for how can they obey unless they trust in the God who delivered them.

²⁹ I said to you, "Have no dread or fear of them. ³⁰ The LORD your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, ³¹ and in the wilderness, where you saw how the LORD your God carried you, just as one carries a child, all the way that you traveled until you reached this place. ³² But in spite of this, you have no trust in the LORD your God, ³³ who goes before you on the way to seek out a place for you to camp, in fire by night, and in the cloud by day, to show you the route you should take."

Despite the fact that God had delivered them from Egypt and led them across the Red Sea and furthermore forgave them for what they did at the foot of Mt Sinai in erecting the golden calf, they did not trust the Lord at this momentous time in their history. Therefore the indictment came from Moses – 'but in spite of this, you have no trust in the LORD your God' (v, 32). It is a failure to trust. This sad history of Israel, God's chosen people is recorded here for us.

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread

There is a further twist to this story. The Israelites then decided to take matters into their own hands – man's attempt to obey God, but is this really obedience. (Deut. 1:41-45)

Having been judged by God and banished to wander in the desert for forty years, they decided that they can now make good for what they failed to do earlier. They then put on battle gear and went out on their own to do battle. Of course they were badly defeated. This is what I have been saying all along. It is not the 'doing' but the 'being' that is important. Anyone can do what is written, but is it done with the right motivation and in the will of the Lord? The prophets raised this point repeatedly. The Israelites continued with doing what was prescribed

in the worship by bringing the offering to God, but God was not pleased. So the Israelites were punished and prevented from entering the Promised Land for one generation.

The lesson (Summary)

Deuteronomy records the instructions for the Israelites just as they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. The most important question that needs to be raised repeatedly is this. Did the Israelites enter the Promised Land because of their obedience? Answer is no. They entered the Promised Land because of the promise of God and in spite of their disobedience. This promise of God is what we call the covenant. God did for them as a result of the covenant God made and not the result of their obedience or disobedience.

We need to emphasise this point again and again. There is the blessing of God as a result of creation and the covenant of God. Then there is our obedience which results in further blessing from God. Of course the disobedience brings on curses. We will look at these at a later date. So all is from Him, through Him and to Him. I will bring this up again and again as we look at Deuteronomy because this keep us in perspective. Our obedience does not alter anything in the covenant of God. We don't get extra brownie points for that.

The book of Deuteronomy did not open with praise for the Israelites nor did it catalogue their successes and achievement. If it did, then it gives support for the way we commonly thinks, i.e. obedience leads to rewards. It did not. On the contrary it begins with the most dismal failure of the Israelites as they left Egypt. It was the incident at Kadesh-barnea. This opening in the book highlights one point and that is, obedience to the commands of God is not in the make-up of the Israelites and neither is it in us. It furthermore highlights the grace of God in dealing with His people. This fact is underlined in this first chapter. That is why Moses began his sermons to the Israelites at this important time with this piece of history.

There were two dismal failures of the Israelites referred to in Deuteronomy. Both events were the disobedience of the Israelites. The first was worship of the golden calf when Moses was on the mountain with God. The second failure was the refusal to enter the land at Kadesh-barnea. However, the event at Kadesh-barnea is referred to first. Surely, the erection and worship of the golden calf must be a greater heinous incident than what happened at Kadesh-barnea. Why is this? What is the significance? It is not what we do that is at the heart of the problem. It is the failure to trust. This is the essential problem – not failure to do (obey), but failure to trust. The doing has to be in the will of the Lord. It is not just the action. It is no point going at the inappropriate time when the Lord is not there.

What happened at Kadesh-barnea highlights this point. It is not the doing that is at the centre piece of God's covenant. It is trusting God for His promises. What is brought out here is that Israel did not have the capacity to obey. The obedience comes not from the will of man, but from trust in God because it is through the grace of God and His empowerment that we have the ability to obey.

Yes, there will be blessing and curses. The Israelites paid the price for their failure to trust. A generation missed out from seeing the Land. However, God did not waver in His promise to take the Israelites into the Promised Land. God raised up Joshua to take over from Moses and the nation of Israel was eventually established.