

DEUTERONOMY: THE LAW THAT DELIVERS

by Ray C. Stedman

Deuteronomy is the last of the five books by Moses. It is a pastime of scholars today and a supposed mark of intelligence to raise the question of whether or not Moses actually wrote these books. There are those who maintain that Moses really wasn't the writer, but that the Pentateuch was made up by some unknown editor who went through ancient books and abstracted various parts, putting them together in a collection.

They say we now have nothing more than a collection of writings by unknown authors whose names have been totally lost to us, and that Moses' name was simply added as the author. This is what is called the documentary theory of scriptures; anyone who studies comparative religions in high school or college will probably be exposed to it.

Fortunately, it is a theory that has already been very well answered and exposed as false. Amazingly, though, it is still being taught in many places as though it were true. I remember that Dr. Ironside told me years ago of listening to an outstanding liberal speaker at the University of California at Berkeley who said something like this to the listening young men:

Young gentlemen, I am regarded, at least in some circles, as an authority on the documentary hypothesis of the Old Testament books of the Pentateuch and many questions are asked me regarding the so-called books of Moses. Much is being said today about the assured results of higher criticism and the critics tell us that it is now certain that Moses did not write the books ascribed to his name. But I want to say that after having examined all the evidence very, very carefully, and having worked in this field for many years, my conclusion is that if the five books of Moses were not written by him, they must have been written by somebody else named Moses.

The ordinary and usual concept that these are the books of Moses is a very authentic one. The book of Deuteronomy is the last great word from the mighty man of God, just before his death. It begins with a word about Moses and that he delivered these words to Israel beyond the Jordan, in Arabah wilderness, and it closes with the account of the death of Moses. It says that God ordered Moses to go up into Mount Nebo which overlooked the promised land. But because of his disobedience to God in striking the rock with a rod instead of speaking to bring forth water for the people in the wilderness, he was not permitted to enter the land himself. But he went up into the mountain and saw the land. And although there was not a single sign of deterioration in his physical body, he died, and God buried him there; no man knows where Moses is buried.

But before he left, he preached this tremendous message that we have recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. This great sermon was delivered at the end of forty years of wandering in the wilderness. This was a new generation of people who were camped just across the Jordan River, not far from the City of Jericho. The message looks ahead to the life that will be theirs when they have entered into the land. They are through with the wilderness and ready to enter the land of Canaan.

Now let me remind you that these five books of Moses are what might be called God's visual aids to demonstrate what is happening to us in our own spiritual life. As God leads the people of Israel out of Egypt through the wilderness into the land of Canaan, they reproduce in all their journey the exact same problems, same obstacles, same enemies, and the same victories that we will be encountering all through the journey of our spiritual life.

The bondage depicted by Israel as slaves of Egypt is the same as the bondage to the world we experienced before we were Christians. And the land of Canaan, flowing with milk and honey, pictures a life filled with continual victory, which can be ours in Christ. All this is God's way of picturing for us what is happening in our individual lives.

If you read your Old Testament with this key in hand, it becomes a simply luminous book. Every story in it

has a direct relationship to you and there are marvelous lessons to be learned. In my own experience, I could not understand the mighty truths declared in the New Testament until I saw them visually demonstrated in the Old Testament. As these stories come to life for us and we see how they apply to our own experience, then the New Testament truths which are so familiar to our ears become living, vibrant, vital experiences.

Moses' great sermon in Deuteronomy falls into three divisions. (Every good preacher has three points to his message.) The first four chapters review God's love and care of Israel in the wilderness. Most of these people waiting to enter the land had gone through only part of the wilderness journey. They were only children when, forty years earlier, Israel had stood at Kadesh-barnea and refused to enter into the land. Many of them are now just young men and women -- twenty or thirty years of age. They need to be reminded of what God has done during the wilderness journey.

So Moses' first task is to recite to them the wonderful care and love of God watching over them, as he led them with a pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day, and guided them through the trackless, howling desert. He tells how God brought water from the rock to slake their thirst in a vast and waterless area. And how he delivered them from their enemies again and again; how he fed them with manna that did not fail. Imagine it! For forty years God fed more than two million people every day with manna that fell from heaven. What marvelous evidence of his loving concern for this people.

The second division is a great resume of the law. The Ten Commandments appear in the Bible for the second time here, beginning with chapter five, verse 27. Here are the laws on divorce, on faithlessness and the penalty that was extracted if any were caught in some suspicious situation. Here are the penalties for idolatry, and for sorcery and the warnings of God against falling into the terrible, terrible deeds practiced by the tribes that then inhabited the land.

It is essential to understand that the land into which these people were coming was inhabited by people who were utterly given over to lewd and obscene practices. The book of Deuteronomy is a mighty revelation that God expected his people to live in the midst of a sex-saturated society, among people who were completely committed to the most vile practices. I think this is encouraging to us who are being asked to live in just such a society today. And yet God expected his people to keep themselves completely from these things and to be a holy people in the midst of sex-mad nations. Then, at the end of this section, there is a recapitulation of the sanitary laws, which are also found largely in the book of Leviticus.

The third division of the book, chapters 27 through 34, is a mighty revelation of the future, both in terms of blessings and of curses upon Israel. The twenty-eighth chapter is one of the most amazing prophecies ever recorded. This prophetic passage is fully as complete and remarkable in its detail as any other prophecy in scripture. It is a prediction of the entire history of the Jewish people. even, after they ceased to be a nation and were scattered over the face of the earth. Here you can find the entire record of all that Israel has gone through in these long, long centuries.

First, there is the prediction of the Babylonian dispersion; when Israel would fail to heed the prophets and turn to other gods, God would send them out into captivity. This happened, as you know, under Nebuchadnezzar.

Then there is the prediction of their return to the land and how, after centuries, they would fall again into the terrible sin of rejecting the Messiah. A strange nation would come in from the west, the Romans, who would be hard and cruel people. They would burn the cities, destroy the inhabitants and disperse them again, to the ends of the earth.

Israel would wander for many, many centuries as a people without a land, but God would at last gather them again and there would be an ultimate restoration. All of this is precisely predicted in the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy. There are predicted blessings for the obedience of the people -- wonderful blessings. And there are curses that would come upon them if they disobeyed the word of God.

The key to this book is in its name: Deuteronomy means "the second law." The first giving of the law was in the twentieth chapter of the book of Exodus, where you have the Ten Commandments. Why was it necessary for the Holy Spirit to give the law twice? Why do you find the Ten Commandments once in Exodus and again

in Deuteronomy? And all the sanitary regulations and the dietary regulations are reproduced in Deuteronomy. Why?

>From the book of Romans in the New Testament we learn that the law of God has two functions. In Paul's great argument in Romans, the law is also brought in twice. It is introduced first in chapter one and then again in chapter seven. And in the third chapter there is a specific statement of what the law was designed to do.

Most of us think God gave the law to the human race to keep us from doing wrong and to make us do right. If you ask the man on the street what was the purpose of the Ten Commandments, he would probably say, "It is to keep us from doing wrong." But this is not the reason the law was given. God never dreamed for a moment that the law would keep anybody from doing wrong. The reason the law was given is set forth in Romans: "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law..." Why? "... so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God." (Rom. 3: 19)

That is the reason the law was given in the first place. It was given to man to reveal the sinfulness of his acts. Because there is this amazing faculty about the human heart: we never think that what we are doing is wrong. It is always what the other fellow does that is wrong, isn't it? It's remarkable the different expressions we have for this. We have a whole category of words that use apply to things we do and quite a different set for what everybody else does. Others have prejudices -- we have convictions. Others are stingy -- we are very thrifty. Others try to keep up with the Joneses -- we are simply trying to get ahead. And so it goes all the way down the line. Now what does the law do? Well, the law comes in and applies the same terms to everyone. The law says, "You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not covet. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and have no other gods." And the law is absolutely impartial in its application. When we are confronted with the law of God, we can no longer deceive ourselves. We have to admit that what we are doing is wrong. God said that the law was given so that every mouth might be stopped. There is nobody who dares to stand up to God and say, "Well, others may be wrong, but right here you've got someone that leads a good, clean, moral life." The law says "No! All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3:23)

Therefore, the cross of Christ becomes the answer to what man did. What Jesus did on the cross is the answer to what we have done. He bore our sins in his own body on the tree. That is set forth so beautifully in the books of Exodus and Leviticus in the sacrifices of the lamb, the goat, the oxen, the calf and the other animals. They are pictures of the blood Jesus Christ shed for the transgressions and sins we have done. There is no way for a sinful man to deal with a holy God except by some payment, some ransom, or some justification being rendered to him for man's sins. It is the law that makes us aware that we need to make this payment.

But the law comes in again in Romans seven. Once our sins are settled, isn't that enough? Once we discover through the law that we have done what is wrong in God's sight and are guilty before him, isn't that enough? No!! There is another purpose of the Law. Paul says,

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. (Rom. 7:7)

It is not sins here, but sin. Not what I have done, but what I am. If it had not been for the law, I would not have known that I am under the grip and influence of an alien, satanic philosophy which is in itself sin.

I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. (Rom. 7:7-8)

Paul continues:

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? [Was it the law that did this?] By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. (Rom. 7:13)

He says, not only do I realize that I have done things which merit the just wrath of God, but that I am a sinner indeed and have received Jesus Christ as having paid the price on the cross, thus settling the debt for my sins.

But it is also through the law that I understand that I not only do things that are wrong, but what I am is wrong in God's sight. The answer to this, we discover from the book of Romans, is in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. He died to pay for our sins. But further Paul writes:

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. (Rom. 5:10)

I learn that it is the presence of a living Savior within my heart, who dwells within me and who makes available to me everything that he is that is the answer to what I am. I need what he did because of what I have done. But I need what he is because of what I am. This is what the book of Deuteronomy illustrates for us.

If you read carefully through Deuteronomy you will find two themes running throughout this entire discourse that are not found in Leviticus or Exodus. The first great theme is of man's utter weakness and inability, even though he is cleansed to do anything in himself to please God. There is nothing he can do in himself. His sincere, dedicated efforts to please avail nothing.

"The mind that is set on the flesh" cannot please God, as Paul puts it. (Rom. 8:7) Right along with this is a wonderful parallel theme -- the theme of God's abiding presence. God himself is the answer to the demands of the law in us. He himself takes up residence with us in order that he might meet the demands in himself. What he demands of us, he himself supplies.

Let's look at a few passages so that you may see this yourself. First in Deuteronomy six you have the theme of man's weakness. Moses says:

When your son asks you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?" (Deut. 6:20)

In other words, why do you do these things? Why do you go through all these ceremonies? Why do you kill these lambs and goats and sheep? Why do you go up to the tabernacle? What is the purpose of all this? When your son asks you that, what do you say?

Then you shall say to your son, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt." {Deut 6:21a RSV}

That is where we begin. That is what we are. We are no better than slaves.

"We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes; and he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land." (Deut. 21-23 RSV)

He brought us out so that he might bring us into the land. These are all symbols by which God is teaching us what it takes to get us out of Egypt and into the land. That was the explanation they were to make to their sons.

Further on Moses explains:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession... {Deut 7:6a RSV}

A people for his own possession where he himself will dwell.

...out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose

you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord Jesus loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. {Deut. 7:6b-8 RSV}

It wasn't anything in you; you have nothing. It was God who did it -- not man.

And in chapter nine, there is this elaboration:

Do not say in your heart, after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land'...Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you...Know therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people. {Deut. 9:4, 9:6RSV}

Near the end of the book, in Chapter 29, Moses said:

"You know how we dwelt in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed; and you have seen their detestable things, their idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, which were among them. Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away this day from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations..." {Deut 29:16-18a RSV}

After forty years of training in the wilderness he says, "Watch out. You never get to the place where you can stand on your own. Never.

"...lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.' This would lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. The Lord would not pardon him, but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy would smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book would settle upon him, and the Lord would blot out his name from under heaven." {Deut. 29:18b-20 RSV}

You see man never gets to stand in his own strength. God never makes us so strong that we no longer need him. Never. We are continually dependent upon him. This is the great lesson taught in Deuteronomy, just as it is also taught in Romans five through eight.

Accompanying this theme is that of God's abiding presence as the strength of the believer. Back in chapter seven:

"If you say in your heart, 'These nations are greater than I; how can I dispossess them?' You shall not be afraid of them, but you shall remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt," {Deut. 7:17-18 RSV}

When you are up against problems in life -- giants, difficulties, and various trials you say to yourself, "I don't have any strength in myself. I can't do this." What should you remember? That God does it. God is in you. God is there to meet that problem. God is there for living. He is there for the problem of your life.

"...remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt, the great trials which your eyes saw, the signs, the wonders, the mighty hand, and the outstretched arm, by which the Lord your God brought you out; so will Lord your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid. Moreover the Lord your God will send hornets among them, until those who are left and hide themselves from you are destroyed. You shall not be in dread of them; for the Lord your God is in the midst of you, a great and terrible God." {Deut. 7:18b-21 RSV}

What a statement! Then in chapter eight:

"And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord." (Deut. 8:3)

Does that sound familiar to you? Those are the very words Jesus used in the wilderness when he explained to the devil why he did not would not and even could not -- in that ultimate sense of obedience -- turn the stones to bread. He said "You don't understand how I live. I don't live by doing remarkable signs to make everyone look up in amazement. Man doesn't live like that. Man lives not 'by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.' But God is in me. That is what makes me strong." (Matt. 4:1-4)

Again the theme of God's presence:

"You are the sons of the Lord your God; [therefore] you shall not cut yourselves or make any baldness on your foreheads for the dead. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his own possession..." {Deut 14:1-2a RSV}

There he lives. There he dwells.

"...out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth." {Deut. 14: 2b RSV}

Even in the midst of the sanitary regulations for Israel, where he is giving orders to the people, governing the uttermost limits of their life he says:

"You shall have a place outside the camp and you shall go out to it; and you shall have a stick with your weapons; and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it, and turn back and cover up your excrement." (Deut. 23:12, 13)

Why?

"Because the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp, to save you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, that he may not see anything indecent among you, and turn away from you." (Deut. 23:14)

The presence of the living God is the secret of a satisfying life.

Chapter 30 contains one of the most remarkable passages in the Bible. Here is a marvelous explanation of the "dynamic" that keeps the law. What is it that makes it possible for a man to obey the law? In the first part of this chapter, Moses recounts the law again. He tells the people of the blessings that will come and warns of cursings if they disobey. Then he says (Deut. 30:14):

"For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you..." {Deut 30:11a RSV}

Every man who falls short says, "It is no use. The law is too hard for me. I can't do that." Moses says it is not too hard for you.

"...neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'" {Deut 30:11b-13 RSV}

That is, who can bring this near to us so that it will come into our very lives? Now listen to what he says:

"But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do

it." {Deut 30:14 RSV}

What does that mean but the indwelling life of God himself! And these very words are picked up by the apostle Paul when he writes about the two occasions when the law was given -- the first law in Exodus and the second law in Deuteronomy:

Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it. (Rom. 10: 5)

But Israel found it utterly impossible to live by the law on that basis. Now Paul says, again quoting from Moses -- this time in Deuteronomy:

But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?" (that is, to bring Christ down)... But what does it say? The word is near you on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom. 10:6a, 10:8-9)

There it is. The two great things are the death of the Lord Jesus and the raising again from the dead, making his life available to others. This is what Paul calls "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:2) fulfilling by another principle the righteousness which the law demands.

You know that old illustration of the plane -- the law of gravity continually holds us down to our seat, but the law of aerodynamics overcomes the law of gravity. It doesn't cancel it out. It simply overcomes it. You simply step into a plane and sit down. You don't have to cling to your seat; you don't have to hang on to the sides of the plane in order to stay aloft once you are in the air. You just rest on the fact that there is a law at work that is keeping you from fulfilling the law of gravity. If you were ever to get to the place where you thought you had it learned and you said to the stewardess, "Will you open the door please? I think I will go on by myself," you would be very literally "jumping to a conclusion!"

But in this quiet, continual, confident resting on the fact that God is the ample provision of all that he requires from us, there is the ability to fulfill the righteousness which the law demands. And that is what the book of Deuteronomy teaches. The Israelites are taught the principle, at least in shadow, of how to live in the land. The only book that could possibly follow this is the book of Joshua in which the people are led into the land.

Prayer:

Our Father, what marvelous truths you have unfolded to us in this great word. How feebly we apprehend it, but teach us, Lord; teach us by your Holy Spirit. Teach us, young and old alike. Teach us to be dissatisfied with life in the wilderness. Lord, make us to be fed up with this continual barrenness, this empty, frustrating experience of trying to do something on our own, and struggling and failing all the time.

Make us desperately ready to listen, and to heed this delivering word, Lord: how we can be set free from this wretched man and made to walk in fullness of your Spirit so that the righteousness which the law demands might be fulfilled in us. Not by us, but by the Lord Jesus working through us in his blessed, risen life. We pray in his name, Amen.

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