

January 14, 2018
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Deuteronomy
Community Baptist Church
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PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP Deuteronomy 1:1-18

The title of this book, like the other four books that make up the Torah, or the Law, or Pentateuch, comes from the opening words of the book. For example, the first book of the Bible is called Genesis which means “beginning” which comes from the first word in the book which is “in beginning.”

However, in the case of the English title Deuteronomy, the name does not come from the opening words of the book. The Hebrew title for the book does come from the opening two words which are translated in English “*These the words.*” That is not what Deuteronomy means. The English title for the book comes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew. That title appeals to 17:18 which speaks of “*a copy of this law. . .*” Those ancient scholars considered this book to be simply a restatement of Exodus. Therefore, they called it *Deuteronomion*, which means “a copy of the instruction.”

I point this out in order to emphasize the fact that this book we will study is far more than a restatement of Exodus. Sure, there are several statements within the book that are restatements of passages from Exodus. Not the least of which is the restatement of the Law in chapter five. However, in so many ways Deuteronomy is a unique writing. It is a detailed account of the last words of instruction that Moses, God’s unique and chosen leader, gave to God’s people before they crossed the Jordan River to possess the Promised Land.

There is little doubt that Moses is the human author of this book given through inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Probably he compiled the book around the year 1400 B.C. or very close to that time. We come to this date based on the historian’s statement in 1 Kings 6:1

where we read that Solomon began to build the temple in his fourth year as king. We know that Solomon’s fourth year would have been 966 B.C. In that same verse, the historian pointed out that Solomon’s fourth year was 480 years after Israel’s exodus from Egypt. That puts the exodus at 1446 B.C. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses addressed these words to the second generation of Israelites in about 1406 B.C. Their parents, the first generation of the nation of Israel, had perished during the wilderness wanderings according to God’s promised judgment for their rebellion.

Therefore, this book takes on great meaning for us. Moses was talking to a generation that was, for the most part, born in the wilderness. They had not experienced the astonishing exodus and crossing the Red Sea. They were not around when God came down on Mount Sinai and delivered the law to His people. The words of Moses in this book are the restating of God’s law so that the people would have a clear understanding of who their God was. More than that, the words of this book offer a unique application of the Law that is not found in Exodus.

These are God’s words to His people which virtually establish a covenant between Yahweh and the second generation of His nation. The blessings and curses of chapters twenty-seven and twenty-eight form a clear example of covenant and response.

Therefore, these words of Moses will serve to remind us, the new people of God, that our God is faithful to His covenants and promises. They will prod us to know God better, serve Him more faithfully, and trust Him fully. By the time we reach the end of this study at the end of the year, we should be able to look back on significant spiritual growth in our walk with God.

Background (vv.1-5).

These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel. Where was it? *These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness (v.1a).* For the most part Moses could have relayed most of the content of this book in one setting, though he probably did not. The first three chapters of the book are simply a historical review of God’s dealing with the people’s parents. Beginning with chapter four, Moses made direct application to the second generation.

When he spoke to the entire nation of Israel, it was probably through the elders and family leaders that he conveyed the information. Speaking to a couple million people without a PA system would have been impossible.

It is important to locate the place of this gathering being just east of the Promised Land. More exactly the text describes it as being *in the Arabah opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazereth, and Dizahab (v.1b)*. Now we all know exactly where that was, right? I had a teacher who would sometimes put people to the test when he was visiting churches as a guest speaker. When people would ask him for his life's verse, he would respond that it was 1 Chronicles 26:18. He said that generally people would respond with something like, "Oh, that is a good verse," or something to that effect. The test proved that the people were certainly ignorant of the verse that says in the KJV, "*At Parbar westward, four at the causeway, [and] two at Parbar*" (1 Chronicles 26:18). Taken out of its context, which was the dividing of the land, the verse sounds meaningless.

So, too, the first two verses of our text sound odd if taken out of the context which simply explains the precise location of the nation of Israel when Moses spoke the "Book of Deuteronomy" to the people. The Arabah was a desert area east of the Jordan River between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. None of the other towns or regions mentioned are known except for the Wilderness of Paran which was connected with Kadesh Barnea where Israel was camped when they refused to go into the Promised Land early on before their wanderings.

The expanded description in verse two has greater significance. *It is eleven days' journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea (v.2)*. Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai throughout Deuteronomy. Horeb then is where God established His covenant with the nation. Having received God's law and covenant, and after an eleven day journey, the parents of these people had arrived at Kadesh-barnea. They set up camp there and ultimately refused to trust God and chose not to enter the Promised Land.

That picture should ever serve as a reminder to us that it is wise to follow the plainly revealed will of God. When we know God's will we must obey. Not to obey is rebellion that throws God off the throne of our hearts and puts us on the throne.

Now we are sort of familiar with the location of this special challenge from Moses to the second generation of God's nation. When did it take place? That question is answered in verses three and four. *In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the people of Israel according to all that the LORD had given him in commandment to them (v.3)*.

It was forty years after the exodus from Egypt. We know the exact day of the departure. They left at Passover, an event that would have fallen about the end of our March and first of our April. Now the people were gathered east of the Promised Land in their eleventh month, which would be equivalent to our January/February. The puts the date of Moses's speech only about two months before Israel crossed over the Jordan to face Jericho.

Sometime in that two month period, Moses died, the people crossed over Jordan, the spies went to Jericho, all the men were circumcised and healed and the nation kept the Passover on Nisan 14 (end of our March). When God's people get in gear to do God's will, things can happen rather quickly.

Moses's challenge also followed a couple of very significant victories. It was *after he had defeated Sihon the king of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon, and Og the king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth and in Edrei (v.4)*. Moses spoke the words of Deuteronomy after God had given the nation significant victories.

God had granted Moses and the Israelites victory over Sihon the king of the Amorites. Sihon and his people had been in the Arabah for over 800 years. They had displaced the Moabites whose founder was the son of Lot and his daughter. No doubt they were pretty well convinced that "this land was their land" and they aimed to keep it that way. Therefore, Sihon and his people refused to let Israel pass through on their way to the Promised Land. It was all part of God's plan and He destroyed Sihon and his little kingdom.

Actually God has far more important reasons for displacing people—like judgment against their ungodliness. The tribes of Gad and Reuben would settle here. We should not forget that no people group can rightfully lay claim to the land of Israel simply by virtue of being there first. The land belongs to the people to whom God gave it, because only He was there first, and He owns it all.

Also, we know that God had defeated Og the king of Bashan in behalf of Moses and the people. This was a significant victory because Og was an imposing fellow. Later in this speech Moses would remind the people of how imposing Og was. *“For only Og the king of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. Behold, his bed was a bed of iron. Is it not in Rabbah of the Ammonites? Nine cubits was its length, and four cubits its breadth, according to the common cubit”* (Deuteronomy 3:11). Og was a descendant of the giants (called Rephaim, Anakim, or Emim, Deut. 2:11). The guy’s bed was probably over 13’ long and 6’ wide. He had to have the original “King Sized” bed.

Quickly review what God had done. In preparation for taking possession of the Promised Land, God gave His people victory over two particular kinds of people. God defeated people who had been settled in the Arabah for over 800 years. Just like God was going to defeat all the Canaanite tribes that had been in the Promised Land for centuries. Also, God defeated the giant king who was like the giants who had scared off Israel’s forefathers 40 years earlier. The spies had said, *“Where are we going up? Our brothers have made our hearts melt, saying, ‘The people are greater and taller than we. The cities are great and fortified up to heaven. And besides, we have seen the sons of the Anakim there’”* (Deuteronomy 1:28).

How kind of God to prepare us for service by putting us through gradually increasing tests. He affirms and stretches our faith so that we are able to trust Him while we serve Him.

Explanation of God’s Plan (vv.5-18).

In that setting Moses said, *“The LORD said . . .”* (vv.5-8). As the prophet of God, Moses declared God’s plan (vv.5-8). *Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to explain this law, saying* (v.5). The explanation of the law in this case was actually the application of it. Moses did not get to the statement of the law itself until chapter five.

God’s spokesmen set the standard. From Moses onward the responsibility of prophets (both fore-tellers and forth-tellers) is to explain God’s Word. And so we see that many years later after God’s people had been adequately chastened through Babylonian captivity,

when they returned to Jerusalem, the leaders taught the law just like Moses had done. In that setting, Ezra revealed the character of the person who will explain God’s truths. *For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel”* (Ezra 7:10). Ezra’s work flowed out of his character. *And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. (Nehemiah 8:5) . . . They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading (Nehemiah 8:8).*

Like Ezra would do in years to come, Moses took up the task of explaining God’s will. In explaining God’s law for His people, Moses laid out the history. But not from the beginning of creation and not even from God’s promise to Abraham. Rather he started with God’s covenant with His people at Sinai.

In brief, here is the plan: *“Take what God gave you.”* Moses told the people that it was time to move out of the training phase into the possession phase. *The LORD our God said to us in Horeb, “You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Turn and take your journey, and go to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, in the hill country and in the lowland and in the Negeb and by the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates”* (vv.6-7).

The people had hung out at Horeb (Mt. Sinai) for about a year. Finally, after their rest, God commanded His people to make a bee-line for the Promised Land. God commanded these people’s parents to go directly to where they were now. Only, that was forty years previous. Why did their parents balk? They could have done God’s will through God’s power. God had told them, *“See, I have set the land before you. Go in and take possession of the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their offspring after them”* (v.8).

Fresh off from God’s display of astonishing power by earthquake, fire, smoke, and loud trumpet, God sent the people to take possession of the land. It was the land God had sworn to give to their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob hundreds of years earlier. One would think that with all the blessings that God had just dumped on these people, they would be raring to go out and obey God.

But even Moses was hesitant at that moment. It was as though he looked at the daunting task himself and concluded, “Ummmm, I can’t do that!” According to verses nine through fourteen, Moses confessed that he had admitted forty years earlier that he faced limitations in leading God’s people. God had created a mighty nation and, *At that time I said to you, “I am not able to bear you by myself” (v.9).*

On one hand, we know that the people Moses was supposed to lead didn’t follow well. God called them stubborn, rebellious and stiff-necked. Moses agreed (Ex. 34:9). In fact, Moses blamed the people for causing him to sin and bring God’s judgment on himself. Three times in this speech Moses referred to that blame. *Even with me the LORD was angry on your account and said, “You also shall not go in there” (Deuteronomy 1:37). But the LORD was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the LORD said to me, “Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again” (Deuteronomy 3:26). Furthermore, the LORD was angry with me because of you, and he swore that I should not cross the Jordan, and that I should not enter the good land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance (Deuteronomy 4:21).*

On the other hand, the nation was large and growing larger. *The LORD your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven. May the LORD, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are and bless you, as he has promised you! (vv.10-11).* Though they had caused him much trouble, Moses still desired for God to bless them. Moses was a leader who understood the sin nature in people and truly did exercise patience.

It was very clear that one man could not lead a whole nation of “real” people. *How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife? (v.12).* The leader realized he could not do it all himself. No doubt there were times when Moses thought, “If you want it done right, do it yourself.” But one man can know, help, and work with only so many people. That is especially true when that one man thinks about the *weight and burden of the people’s strife*. The word *strife* speaks of controversy, arguments, contention, and disputes. We all know from experience that people don’t always

agree. But it makes the leader’s job much easier if we can agree to disagree and not have party spirits that each demand their way.

So, here’s a plan to compensate for the leader’s limitations. *Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads (v.13).* This was the recommendation of Moses’ father-in-law Jethro. He observed Moses teetering on burnout as he tried to solve all questions, disputes, and disagreements himself. Jethro might have been just a farmer, but like a lot of farmers, he had plenty of practical wisdom.

The account is given in Exodus 18:17-22.

Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you (Exodus 18:17-22).

Moses followed the practical wisdom. And everyone agreed. *And you answered me, “The thing that you have spoken is good for us to do.” (v.14).* Godly wisdom ought to be recognized and appreciated. For that matter, just plain common sense ought to be recognized and acceptable, but too often it is not.

Moses recognized the wisdom of his father-in-law’s recommendation and chose leaders to help him (vv.15-18). *So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officers, throughout your tribes (v.15).* Notice that it was Moses himself who decided who was wise and experienced. Moses set the leaders over the people in

specific sized groups according to the leaders' abilities. And all modern Baptists respond, "What! No vote, no Q&A to vet the guys?"

Surely in most people's minds, this could not be a fair or wise way to choose leaders because Moses would no doubt play favorites. Actually, that conclusion is to misjudge Moses. He had proven to be faithful to honor God and do all for God's glory. Never did Moses indicate that he was trying to build a nation for himself. In fact, when God put Moses to the test on that issue, Moses steadfastly refused to accept the offer (Exodus 32:10). In spite of Moses' grudge against the people for keeping him out of the Promised Land, he still desired for the people to love, obey, and demonstrate God's glory. He wanted what was best for the people.

Moses chose the leaders and he charged leaders. Their job was to hear grievances. *And I charged your judges at that time, "Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him" (v.16).* As long as there is more than one person in a group, there will be disagreements. Who is qualified to decide between them?

To judge impartially was very important. So Moses required: *You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's (v.17a).* The judges were to hear every case from every kind of person. They were to remember to render God's judgment. It would seem fitting for Moses to appeal to the judges to remind themselves to judge God's judgments by maybe keeping a copy of the Ten Commandments in the courtroom.

The plan was for Moses to hear the difficult cases. *And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it (v.17b).* Not that Moses was so much wiser, though he probably was in many cases. Rather, Moses had the greater responsibility. God chose him directly, not through another leader or mediator. When the dust settled and it was all said and done, Moses would answer to God for the people.

The plan was clear. *And I commanded you at that time all the things that you should do (v.18).* Moses was faithful to give the leaders their job descriptions. Having received the instruction, the leaders were responsible to do their jobs.

Moses' history lesson to God's people as they looked over Jordan toward the Promised Land is a good lesson for us. It reminds us that God still has a special people. Today we, the special people, are the Church. God still has a plan for His people. God desires for His people to possess all the blessings of His covenants that He makes with His people. God ordains leaders to help the people on toward becoming more like Himself. Leaders are necessary because no one is perfect—or even close for that matter. Leaders need to take their responsibilities over God's people seriously. God's people need to take their responsibilities of following the leaders seriously.