

Deuteronomy

1. Observing the laws – legal or covenantal?

Reading: Deuteronomy 4:1-14

Resume

These first few chapters of Deuteronomy set the stage for the book and indeed for the whole of scriptures. What happens when coming to Deuteronomy is that we jump straight to chapter 5 with the Ten Commandments and then skip over to the middle of the book to engage the legislations. These legislations cover only half the book. The other half consists of narratives and exhortations and they provide the matrix on which the legislations stand. Without them we can treat the legislation anyway we like. The underlying framework of Deuteronomy is the covenant and not law (legal).

Chapter 1 deals with an introduction and the faithlessness of Israel at Kadesh-barnea. That caused a generation of Israelites to perish in the desert. However, we need to note that despite that, God's covenant remains. Another generation of Israelites was blessed with the occupation of the Promised Land. That is the faithfulness of God contrasted with the faithlessness of Israel.

Chapter 2 and the early part of chapter 3 deal with the relations of Israel. Edom, Moab and Ammon were blessed despite their poor beginnings. The Canaanites were harshly dealt with after they were given a chance. The freedom of the sovereign God is emphasised and the blessings reside with God the giver and not on merit.

Chapter 3 deals with the community of Israel and Moses prohibition from entering the Promised Land. The narrative here is important for the way Israel is to be constituted. It is on the basis of God's covenant and their relationship with each other and their God. That is the true constitution of community with Christ as the head of the body. In repeatedly recounting his prohibition from entering the Promised Land, Moses drew out the most important platform for the Word of God and indeed the Ten Words. What Israel needed to see and to understand is the power of the Word and not the deeds of humanity. It is the lesson from this prohibition that Moses repeatedly exhorted Israel to hear the word of God. 'Hear O Israel' – these words preface Moses exhortation to Israel.

The book opens with recounting the lack of faith at Kadesh-barnea, the freedom of the blessing of God in His covenant and continues with the exhortation to hear the Word. This relationship faith and hearing was taken up by Paul in Romans.

¹⁴ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵ And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

¹⁶ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" ¹⁷ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:14-17)

In dealing with the problem of faith, Paul grounds it on the hearing. So here in chapter 4, Moses in his farewell address emphasised this by telling the Israelites to hear, and not only to hear, but to hear attentively the word of God.

¹ So now, Israel, give heed (*listen*) to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. (Deut. 4:1)

Why is it so important to hear these laws and ordinances? Deuteronomy itself asked that question and we need to cross briefly to chapter 6 for an answer.

²⁰When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?" ²¹then you shall say to your children, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²²The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. ²³He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. ²⁴Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. ²⁵If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right." (Deut. 6:20-25)

The immediate answer to the question is not the need to obey or to do. The immediate answer to the question is to hear what God has done. This is because we need to hear what God has done again and again. We may know it, but that is merely a brain function and not a heart response. So often people rush out to do things without really knowing what and why they are doing that. Grace precedes obedience and confers the ability to do so. Obedience does not precede grace as if it can procure grace.

We have also seen that the book of Deuteronomy opens with an indictment on Israel because of their failure to trust. The event at Kadesh-barnea was highlighted above all the other acts of disobedience by the Israelites. This is because the failure to trust lies at the very root of human sin. The sin of Adam and Eve was a failure to trust. 'Did God really say that?' Once that question is raised it is *finito*, i.e. finished. The communion has been breached because one has put oneself above the Creator. One has put oneself above grace, ignoring it and this result in the reliance of the self. This ignores the Creator and the giver of grace and the enabling that comes with it.

However in scripture, the law was given to highlight our need of grace. There is a difference when we read the same law in a legal sense and in the covenantal sense. There are laws in Singapore and China to legalise the care of aging parents. This is of course the fifth commandment. Is it meant to be legal, or covenantal? We know the answer. Of course it is covenantal and now we begin to understand something of the covenant as it is given to us in Scripture.

Why is there a problem with the fifth commandment or any of the commandments? It is because of sin. The world's answer to the problem is to legislate or make a law to prohibit. But does that alter the heart. Social engineering cannot bring back the purity of the heart. It cannot cure the human predicament of sin. Only the cross can do that. Only the love of God can conquer the human heart and cause it to love. Breaking the commandment does not alter the covenant. Not caring for your aging parents does not erase the parent-child relationship, but it does put a distance in that relationship

Abraham nearly wrecked the covenant twice by claiming Sarah as his sister. God intervened in both instances to preserve the covenant He made. Sarah laughed at the promise of God for her to bear a son. Jacob cheated. His eleven sons were conspirators to murder Joseph. God intervened because Joseph has a part to play in preserving the covenant of God. Israel broke faith at Kadesh-barnea. All these did not annul the covenant because the covenant is of God. He initiated the covenant, maintains the covenant and guarantees its fulfilment.

This, being the history of Israel, a history of faithlessness and disobedience, the need for the laws for instruction and guidance become even more necessary, indeed vital for our walk with God.

We will come back and see more of this when we get to chapter 5 where the Ten Words, Commandments, were repeated to Israel.

In the second verse of the hymn, 'Thou who givest of thy gladness', the question is asked,

2. Need I that a law should bind me
 Captive unto Thee?
 Captive in my heart, rejoicing
 Never to be free.
 Ever with me, glorious, awful,
 Tender, passing sweet,
 One upon whose heart I rest me,
 Worship at His Feet.

'Need I that a law should bind me captive unto Thee?' How shall we answer this? Do we need that law or don't we? If we say 'yes', then we are back to legalism. Can we then say, we don't? If so, is our self-assertiveness sufficient to bind us to God. The author of the hymn did not answer the question directly except to say that he had been made captive. It is a rhetorical question that follows from verse one.

We need to cross to the later part of Deuteronomy to find the answer.

¹⁶ Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. (Deut. 10:16)

The command is for Israel to be pure to her creator. In figurative language, Israel was to circumcise her heart. Yet Israel was not able to do that. The creator will do that for her.

⁶ Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. (Deut. 10:6)

Deuteronomy anticipates failure. The commandments are the expressions of the nature of God. They highlight our need of grace. Grace precedes obedience and confers the ability to do so.

2. Warning against Complacency

Reading: Deuteronomy 4:15-31

Here we have the closing part of the preamble or introduction to the laws. This passage is as relevant for us today as it was in the days of Moses. Complacency is the trapping of humanity of all ages. This is the context for which this warning was given. The Israelites were poised to enter the Promised Land. They had passed by the kingdoms of Edom, Moab and Ammon. They had overrun and driven out the Amorites. Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh had settled into their land, with the exception of the fighting men. In due course, under Joshua, they would cross the Jordan and take over the land on the west bank of the Jordan River. Then all the twelve tribes would have settled into the land that God promised. They would have built their houses, farmed their land and become rather prosperous.

This picture is not quite different from the story of migrants coming into this country. They came here, worked hard and earned some money. They saved them up and then buy houses and invest the rest. Life then becomes pretty settled and comfortable. They have children and then when they retire, they have their 'children's children' as the passage noted. This was the situation that Moses was addressing. Nothing has changed over three and a half thousand years.

The point is this. Is God still the centre of our lives after He had seen us through the days of establishing our family, home and career. We needed God during those times, don't we? We prayed for places in universities. We prayed for job openings. We prayed for partners in life. Now that we have got all that, we have nothing else to pray for! We don't really need God now. That was the point of Moses warning to the people of Israel.

The whole of our lives, from the cradle to the grave, needs to be lived in the presence of God. God is not just a utility for us to get on in life. He has to be the goal and centre of our lives. We don't ask the eighty year old person to climb ladders and fix leaking roofs, but there must be something else that he can contribute to the community of God's people. It may not be in doing things. It could well be the word of wisdom or encouragement which is very important.

Remember the story of Judah asking his brother Simeon to help him to drive out the Canaanites. Remember how Moses told them that they were not to settle down until the whole land was fully conquered. They were to help each other in doing that. God lives in the community of His people. The god of leisure and pleasure is not the god of the community. It is the god of the self. That is not the god that we are to worship. Of course we need some time for ourselves, but that is not to say that that is the determinant of our time or of our lives.

Judgment for failure

There was judgment for Israel in departing from the God who brought them out of Egypt.

²⁷ The LORD will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the LORD will lead you. ²⁸ There you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. (Deut. 4:27-28)

The worship of idols and gods such as leisure and pleasure is indeed the judgment of our complacency. It may appear that they are having a good time or a better time than what the people of God are having. It is not. The life of leisure and pleasure is the judgment of God because in living that way, truth and reality are no longer present. Truth and reality are to be found in the presence of God. Complacency and the values of the world are not of God. What is outside of God is the judgment of God.

An Anticipation of future failure

In this closing of the preamble, Moses put in this provision for failure in life.

²⁵ ... if you act corruptly by making an idol in the form of anything, thus doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, and provoking him to anger,...

²⁷ The LORD will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the LORD will lead you. ...

²⁹ From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. ... ³¹ Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them. (Deut. 4:25, 27, 29-31)

The poet, Alexander Pope said this three hundred years ago. Many people can quote this.

'To err is human; to forgive, Divine'. (Alexander Pope, 1711).

Moses made the point two thousand years before that. We live in an unreal world thinking that we will never fail God or fail in any way. Gothe, (1749-1832), a German writer and statesman said this also about three hundred years ago.

The most fruitful lesson is the conquest of one's error. Whoever refuses to admit error may be a great scholar, but he is not a great learner. Whoever is ashamed of error will struggle against recognising it and admitting it, which means that he struggles against his greatest inward gain. (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflection.*)

It is not failure that is the problem. The problem is the refusal to recognise the failure and as a result we continue to live in our failure. So in order to continue to live, we make up all kinds of reasons to justify ourselves in that situation. That is the problem of sin. That is the problem our world is in.

What we are seeing here is that before even giving the laws to the Israelites, there was already an anticipation of failure to obey in the future. Moses was not as naive as we are. We make laws and we expect people not to fail and if they fail, bang, we slap on the penalty. Yes, there was also a penalty in what Moses was saying, but that was a judgment with a view to restoration. This is the important difference between laws which have the contract as its basis and laws which have its basis in the covenant and grace of God.

Moses in setting out the laws of God anticipated failures. We have seen the judgment for failure to obey and here we see the possibility of restoration. Programmed into the covenant is judgment and the purpose of the judgment is restoration. This is the wonder of the forgiveness of God. Yes, there is judgment but it is to lead us to forgiveness. That is why we keep saying that forgiveness is part and parcel of the covenant, but it needs to come through judgment. This is the blessing of the covenant. The covenant anticipates failures in the future and has within it, measures for restoration. The key to this restoration is the gift of repentance which brings us to realize the forgiveness of God.

This is what I mean when I refer to the way we see the laws of Deuteronomy. Those outside of the covenant will see only the judgment of disobedience, and they fear it and hate it. Those inside the covenant will not only see the judgment for disobedience, but also the provision for restoration. Forgiveness is programmed into the covenant and therefore repentance is the gift of God to us. Repentance is not so much for God as it is for us. Repentance is God's gift to us and has within it the power to free ourselves from the slavery of sin. It is because we are able to see the forgiveness of God, we do not need to live in our failures, but to acknowledge it. That is our freedom. That is the gift of God. That is the wonder of the covenant and it is not a matter of understanding it, but a matter of experiencing it in order to know the truth of it.

Most people see God as powerful and therefore demanding. That is the secular logic. Yes, our God is all powerful, but He is also merciful. That is the new logic of Christianity. Only the redeemed of God know it because they have firstly experienced it.

3. The Covenant Relationship

Reading: Deuteronomy 4:32-40

This preamble was absolutely necessary and he gave them a similar discourse at the end of the book. The reason for doing this was that he wanted to make very sure that the commandments were understood in the context of the covenant. We tend not to do that today. We go straight to the commandments and interpret them in our contractual framework. This has done violence to the book and distorted our very understanding of scripture and our appreciation of the grace of God. The laws that Moses put before us are so misunderstood because we do not have a sense of the covenant in our world today. Our thinking is dominated by what works and what brings

results. We are in a technological age and we have all the apps we need in our mobile phones to help us get on in life.

Today's passage is the last statement that Moses was making before he launched into the laws that he was going to give to the people of Israel. This concluding statement began from 4:25. He began with a warning to Israel regarding complacency, but it was not merely doom and gloom. While there was an anticipation of failure to obey in the future, there was also the provision for restoration because God is merciful. Our failure does not alter the covenant of God in any way. The covenant stands though there is judgment for failure and that judgment works towards restoration through repentance.

The Conclusions before we begin

This is the conclusion to the preamble in these first four chapters of Deuteronomy. This passage is the concluding statement of Moses before he set out the laws of the covenant. The last words are often the most important of all that have been said. There are three statements that I want to make to summarise this section.

The commandments are given not as a means for us to enter into God's covenant. The commandments are given because we are in God' covenant.

Keeping the commandments of God does not bring us into the covenant. It is because of the covenant that God made with us that we keep the commandments.

Laws which degrade human dignity should not have a place in our statute books. They are laws not for the protection of our community. They are frameworks for the protection of crimes.

Warning – No sense of the Covenant

Our problem with many of the injunctions in the bible or as a matter of fact, all that is written in the bible, is that we have lost the sense of the covenant. We have looked at most things in a detached, empirical way and worse still, in a utilitarian manner, i.e. we asked what it is worth to me. I can tell you that it is worth everything in eternity. Of course we cannot see all that now because we are so short sighted that we can't see anything beyond the present moment.

Family and adoption and laws.

When Moses set out the laws, stipulations or whichever way we want to call them, he always prefaced them or closed them with a statement on the covenantal relationship. In other words, he never failed to set out the laws in the context of the covenant. And so after having warned them against complacency, he put in this addendum.

³² For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? ³³ Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? ³⁴ Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? ³⁵ To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him. ³⁶ From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire. ³⁷ And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, ³⁸ driving out before you nations greater and

mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession, as it is still today. ³⁹ So acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. ⁴⁰ Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time. (Deut. 4:32-40)

Moses did it time and time again. He prefaced the command to keep the commandments of God with a statement on what God has done for His people. He did not simply tell the Israelites to keep the commandments. He told them why they had to do it. The reason was not what the result of keeping the commandments might be, though sometimes he added that, but what preceded the command. It is what God has done for them. We start off with the commandment and look for the result. That is because we start with the big 'I'. We don't have any precedent to the commandments. But when we put the God of the covenant as the precedent, then everything changes. It is what God has done for us that compels us from within to keep His commandments. That is His grace and as we have said last week, God's covenant has within it the power of restoration that frees us from our waywardness and complacency to worship Him as the one and only living God.

This is not just the almighty God. He is the relational God. He loves and He redeems. He is not only the God in heaven, but also the God on earth (4:39).

These preliminary four chapters of Deuteronomy firmly set the stage for the understanding of the laws or ordinances that Moses was about to give to the Israelites. The Ten Commandments do not have much meaning outside of the covenant. The laws do not bring us into the covenant. It is because of the covenant that there are laws to help us to express it. So in these four chapters, the matter of the covenant is firmly set out. These are statements about what God has promised or what God has done for the people of Israel. There is nothing about what Israel had done for God. These first four chapters are all about what God has done for Israel and this is so important for the understanding of the commandments.

And so with these words, Moses came to the end of his preliminary address and what follows are the commandments and we will look at them sometime next year. Don't pride ourselves for having kept the commandments of God because we are all debtors to God's mercy.