

# **DEUTERONOMY: WELLNESS GOD'S WAY**

## *PREFACE*

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This little booklet is a written version of the *Burning Heart* film series *Deuteronomy: Wellness God's Way*. It was consciously and deliberately written for film, and we still think that the content works best when watched – but some people prefer to read, and others like to be able quickly read back over what they've watched, so we've made it available in a written form for those who want it. If that includes you - we hope and pray that you find it helpful, and that it draws you closer to God.

We have also included the study guides for each film/chapter at the end of the relevant chapters below. The guides were designed to accompany the series and are particularly designed as discussion starters for small groups watching or using the material in their meetings. We wanted to include them here, so that all are materials in this series are available in written form in one place.

There is also an 'extra essay' on the date and authorship of Deuteronomy, for those wanting to explore that area further.

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# Chapter 1:

# INTRODUCTION

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## *Wellness – God's Way*

One of the words of the moment these days is “wellness.” Google throws up over a billion hits for it, and there’s a whole industry that has grown up around it. From spa days and beach holidays to wellness coaches or nutrition planning, wellness has become big business. We all want to know how to flourish in life and how to be well.

While there is nothing wrong with any of the things mentioned above (who doesn’t love a beach holiday?), when it comes to wellness on a deeper level we often don’t know where to look. Surprising as it may seem, Deuteronomy is a great place to start. It may not fit in with the world’s expectations, and there is plenty that we may struggle with, but this is a book that shows us God’s ways for how to live life and how to live out our faith.

There’s a phrase that crops up 10 times in Deuteronomy as an expression of God’s intentions and purposes in giving laws and instructions to the people of Israel. It is “that it may go well with you.”<sup>1</sup> You could say that Deuteronomy is “Wellness - God’s way,” which is the title of this book. It’s all about learning to live life according to God’s ways and God’s instructions.

## *Jesus loved Deuteronomy*

Deuteronomy seems to have been a bit of a favourite for Jesus too, he turned to it again and again, and in the gospels he quotes it more than any other Old Testament book.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 4v40, 5v16, 5v29, 6v3, 6v18, 8v16, 12v25, 12v28, 19v13, 22v7.

One of my favourite moments comes early on in his ministry when he's confronted by Satan in the wilderness. Three times the Devil tempts him to turn from God's ways, and three times he resists.

But how? With the whole arsenal of heaven at his disposal, what does Jesus do? The answer is, each time he replies by quoting from Deuteronomy.

I've always loved how Jesus used the Bible here and loved that that's something I can do as well. The first time I realised that the passages he quotes from were all from Deuteronomy though, that was a surprise for me!

Deuteronomy isn't a book that we naturally turn to. It has a reputation for being dull and boring – even irrelevant. Yet Jesus loved it!

### *Rediscovering a masterpiece*

The more I've read Deuteronomy, perhaps to my surprise, the more I've found I love it too. At times it is surprising and challenging, as we discover unfashionable themes like obedience and even judgement. At its heart though it's a book which explores how to live life with God, according to his ways and instructions. It shows us that doing that is the real key to wellness and flourishing.

I want to invite you to join me on a journey – an adventure – over seven episodes as we explore this unfamiliar but beautiful book, to discover Wellness..God's way. My prayer is that Deuteronomy will come alive for you, as it has done for me, and that you will meet with God and discover his character and ways and plans for us, that it may go well with you.

### *Sermons in the desert*

As the book of Deuteronomy opens, we find ourselves alongside the people of Israel in a moment of transition. They are on the plains of Moab, just outside the land that God promised generations earlier

to give them, and which has been their hope and dream ever since. They're finally about to enter into it and receive everything that God has promised.

Before they enter the promised land though, Moses gathers the people one last time. He has been their great prophet and leader, but he is now on the verge of his own death. Before he dies, he calls the people together and preaches one last sermon series - the book of Deuteronomy.<sup>2</sup>

### *Jesus and Deuteronomy*

As we read this book we are invited to join with the Israelites in that moment. That is because Jesus not only loved and used the Old Testament, he also taught us that all the scriptures look forward to and testify about him.<sup>3</sup> That means that whenever we read a book like Deuteronomy, it becomes our book too - because its primary purpose is to point to Jesus.

Sometimes that can be a direct prophecy about him, and we do find a couple of prophecies like that in Deuteronomy.<sup>4</sup> More often though it's about showing us God and telling some part of the story of his grace and salvation. As we read books like this, we discover who God is, and what he's like and we see how he then reaches out to our broken world. We see our own weakness and need for his grace, but then also what it means to receive that grace and live our lives in the light of it.

We read this book to explore our faith and our relationship with God. We can understand it more fully because we know how the story

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<sup>2</sup> Some Bible scholars take a different view about the origins of Deuteronomy. They believe the book was actually written much later, and that presenting it as a series of sermons by Moses is just a literary device used by the later author. I disagree very strongly and believe that the evidence does point to Moses having preached these sermons (as the book itself suggests). I have outlined why I believe this in much more detail in the Appendix: Who wrote Deuteronomy and when, on p.100.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. John 5v39 or Luke 24v32.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Deuteronomy 18v15, 32v43b

ends in Jesus. Yet we can then also understand Jesus better, and what it means to be his people, because of what we discover in these pages.

*Looking backwards, looking forwards..*

In Deuteronomy we find all of that, not in some abstract form, but lived and experienced in the lives of the people of Israel. Moses shares with them, and teaches them, all that he has learned in a lifetime with God. In Hebrew this book is just called – “these are the words...” That comes from the book’s opening phrase – “these are the words Moses spoke to All Israel in the wilderness East of the Jordan...”<sup>5</sup>

As Moses speaks, he looks backwards and forwards at the same time. Moses casts their minds backwards to everything that God has done for them, reminding them of who he is and what it means to be his people – a story of grace and salvation. At the same time, he also points them forwards – looking to the future and exploring what it will mean to live out their calling as God's people in this new season.

As we read this book we are invited into that place of transition with the people of Israel on the edge of the promised land. Firstly, we look backwards at all that God has done, called to remember his grace and salvation to us. For us the story will be different to them. It is not a tale of escape from slavery in Egypt or victory over strange sounding ancient kings. Our story is one of forgiveness at the cross of Jesus, of rescue from slavery to our sin and brokenness, and the ultimate promise of victory even over death. However, as we will see in the next session, the dynamics of the grace that Moses declared on the plains of Moab are still the same today. This is a tale of a God who loves us despite all our faults, a tale of grace and salvation.

Like the people of Israel we are called to look back and remember all that God has done for us. But then like the people of Israel we are also called to look forward and ask, ‘how then shall we live?’ What

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 1v1.

does it look like to be a Christian, to live out our faith in our world today?

Deuteronomy is a very practical book, full of teaching and instruction for how they were supposed to live once they enter this promised land. It's in this context that that repeated refrain "that it may go well with you" keeps coming up. The message is that if they follow God's ways then things will go well with them.

### *Reading Deuteronomy for Today*

Not all of the commands in Deuteronomy apply directly to us as Christians, and some can seem very far removed from us. What are we supposed to make of the law about not muzzling my ox as he treads out the grain, and things like that?<sup>6</sup> While again the details are different though, we'll discover as we look forward with Deuteronomy that many of the dynamics and themes of what Moses taught the people of Israel still hold true today.

When he was asked what God's most important commandment was, Jesus turned once more to Deuteronomy, and quoted chapter 6v4-5: "hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."<sup>7</sup> We'll explore that a bit more later in the series, but those words really capture and sum up the heartbeat of Deuteronomy's instructions for living life.

### *'Walking in God's ways'*

That central insight and teaching is that the most important thing in life is our relationship with God. That needs to be protected and prioritised above everything else. If it is, then that will transform every other area of life as well – because as we come to know and love God more and more, we will also want to reflect his character in us. That

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<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 25v4

<sup>7</sup> Mark 12v29-30 and Matthew 22v34-40

sentiment is summed up in another favourite phrase of Deuteronomy, to “walk in God’s ways” (sometimes translated “walk in obedience”).<sup>8</sup>

For us as Christians, and in our very different culture, the details of what it looks like to ‘walk in God’s ways’ will often be different. As we’ll see later in the series, as New Testament believers we are no longer bound by the law. Yet, while many of the details no longer apply directly to us, the vision should be the same. Even when individual laws and instructions aren’t directly applicable to us, we can still learn so much about God’s ways, and what it means to walk in them.

### *Oxen and Pastors*

I mentioned a command earlier from Deuteronomy 25v4 about not muzzling an ox while it’s treading out the grain. I don’t have much grain, and I don’t own any oxen – so that might seem the very definition of irrelevant to me. If I realise that God wasn’t just randomly firing rules at them for the sake of it though, then that can help me discover something much more relevant to me. I need to begin to ask ‘why?’ ‘Why is this command here?’ If I can begin to answer that question, then I can also begin to learn something about God – and about how to live life well.

I confess I slightly cheated here – because Paul quotes this verse twice in his letters.<sup>9</sup> He read it and spotted a bigger principle. If God cares even about oxen, and even an ox deserves to be rewarded for its work, then how much more do we. Paul then applied that principle specifically to supporting and honouring pastors and missionaries. Given my line of work, that suddenly makes the verse seem a whole lot more relevant for me!

Even if I can’t always spot how a particular law might apply to my life, the level of detail and concern that God shows in this book for the way we live is wonderful. It shows me that my relationship with God isn’t just about Sundays, or the obviously religious bits of life. Loving

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<sup>8</sup> e.g. Deuteronomy 5v33, 8v6, 10v12, 11v22, 19v9, 26v17, 28v9, 30v16

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 9v9 and 1 Timothy 5v18



God with all my heart and soul and strength is about everything. It includes how I treat my ox – or today's equivalents. God cares about the details of life. That means that it matters how I treat my colleagues at work, what I do on Monday morning, or what I get up to around the home. All of that is part of what it looks like to love God.

### *The words of God*

When we read through this book we also need to remember that it isn't just some good ideas that Moses had and wanted to share. As well as being the words of Moses, this book is also from God. As we've seen, the Hebrew title for this book ("these are the words") highlights how this is Moses speaking. The English title comes from Greek (**deuteronomion**, deuteronomion), and it focuses us in on how it is also from God. Deuteronomy means "a second law." What Moses is doing here is preaching and presenting God's law for a second time, and that's presented and explained to us right at the start as well.

In chapter 1 verse 1 we're told 'these are the words of Moses...' but just two verses later that's clarified. We read: "Moses proclaimed to the Israelites all that the LORD had commanded him concerning them. ..."10 In many ways that's a beautiful little description of how all scripture came about. Preachers, prophets, poets, and evangelists shared something – everything – that the LORD had commanded them. That means that their words were actually his words – and God speaks through them to us.

I love an illustration from Alpha that likens the Bible to St. Paul's Cathedral. I used to live – and work in a church – just a stone's throw away from St. Paul's. It's a glorious building, and I used to walk past almost every day.

All the guidebooks will tell you that St. Paul's was built by the great architect Sir Christopher Wren. Of course though, Wren didn't actually dig the foundations, lay the bricks, or paint the frescoes. An army of

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<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 1v3

artists, builders, and craftsmen did all that – but each one was working according to the master plan and vision of Sir Christopher Wren. They made all that he had commanded them to do. In the same way, here in Deuteronomy, Moses speaks all that God has commanded him. It is Deuteronomy – a second presentation of God's law.

### *Re-examining the meaning of 'law'*

I think we need to explore the word 'law' a bit more though. It's not a word we tend to warm to, and I think that can make us wary of those books of the Old Testament known as the 'law.'<sup>11</sup> That may be one reason why Deuteronomy isn't as popular as it could be.

Part of our wariness with the law can be because we misunderstand what this word law means. When we think of law we tend to think of courts and contracts. Most of us can't understand the latter and hope to avoid the former! We're glad that our law exists, but we hope never really to have to have much to do with it.

In Hebrew though, the idea of the law is much wider and richer than in English. In fact, other ways you could translate the Hebrew word (torah, תּוֹרָה) are 'instruction' or 'teaching.' This law is as much about teaching and learning, as it is about rules and regulations. Think back to what I said earlier – this book is a sermon series. This is the law that Moses preached to all Israel. It's full of story, teaching, and revelations of the character of God. There's even a song at one point. It is much more than simply commands.

However, for all the variety and richness of the Old Testament law, there are still lots of commands as well! Think back to the little explanation from chapter 1v3 that I highlighted earlier to explain how this book can be both Moses' words and God's: "Moses proclaimed to the Israelites all that the LORD had commanded him concerning them... ." God didn't just suggest that this was some wisdom for Moses

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<sup>11</sup> The other Old Testament books collectively known as 'the Law' are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers.

to share with the Israelites if he felt like it – he commanded it. And obedience is one of the main themes of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy is not presented as a choice – here's some spiritual ideas to think about, or a buffet of instructions that they can pick from. No, it is law, and the people are commanded to obey all of it. As Moses begins to sum up towards the end of the book he tells them: "take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law."<sup>12</sup>

Even though our situation as New Testament believers is different, and not all these laws apply to us, the call to obedience does still stand. In fact it was reinforced by Jesus himself. On the night he was betrayed, at the last supper with his disciples, he told them "if you love me keep my commands."<sup>13</sup>

### *A spiritual 'Copernican Revolution'*

This theme of obedience isn't one that plays particularly well in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture. The watchword of our age is to "be true to yourself" and we are encouraged to find our own path, our own way. We're told that that is the way to find happiness and fulfilment, that is the key to our wellness.

As Christians we can easily be caught up in this way of thinking. We can assume that God's plan is for us to find ourselves, and for him to help us on the way. A book like Deuteronomy cuts across that though, and asks us – tells us – to re-orientate our thinking. It calls us look to find not ourselves, and our path – but God and his path.

A friend of mine compares this to the so-called 'Copernican revolution.' Nicolaus Copernicus was the 16<sup>th</sup> Century astronomer who discovered that the world revolves around the Sun. Before him everyone assumed that the earth was the centre of the universe, with

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<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 32v46

<sup>13</sup> John 14v15

the sun and the stars revolving around us. After Copernicus' discoveries our whole understanding of the universe changed.

Most people today put ourselves at the centre of our lives, we assume that life revolves around me. Deuteronomy calls us to undergo a Copernican revolution. It calls us to put God at the centre of our lives, and for life to revolve around him. Deuteronomy shows us that that means not just orientating our lives around God, but also obeying him, and following in his ways.

### *Failure and Grace*

Yet even as God calls the people to obey in Deuteronomy, he knows they will not. The final great theme that sweeps through Deuteronomy is an awareness of their failure. God knows that they – that we – cannot fully obey, that we will fall short of his ways.

The initial result for them will be catastrophe and judgement. Deuteronomy looks unexpectedly forward hundreds of years to the 'Exile' – the moment when God judges Israel for her sins, and they are conquered and carried away from the land.<sup>14</sup>

Gloriously though, it doesn't stop there. Moses also looks beyond failure, to grace and a new and greater salvation. As he does, he points us forward to Jesus. As we'll see again and again over the course of this series, this is a book which is full of the gospel – indeed one Bible scholar has called it "the Gospel according to Moses."<sup>15</sup> It speaks of our need for forgiveness and rescue, and the loving grace of our God in reaching beyond our failings to bring about salvation.

What I love about Deuteronomy though is that it so often shows us God's grace in unfamiliar ways, and with unfamiliar themes. As it does so, it helps me to work out in practice what it means to live out my faith as a Christian. How do grace and obedience come together? How

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<sup>14</sup> See especially, Deuteronomy 4v25-31, 30v1-10, 31v14-32-43

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Block: *The Gospel According to Moses* (Oregon, 2019)

can love and law mix? And how can this ancient book show me wellness – God's way?

Join me for the rest of this journey rediscovering this surprising masterpiece that is Deuteronomy, and we'll find out together.

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## **Prayer**

At the end of each chapter, I would love to encourage you to respond in prayer, to wait on God, to lift your heart and mind to him, and allow him to minister to you by his Holy Spirit. I have included the prayer that I prayed at the end of the corresponding film in the film series version of this book.

"Lord, as we journey through Deuteronomy, meet us and inspire us through your Holy Spirit – bring your word to life in us each time, and show us yourself and your ways.

We pray, Come Holy Spirit. Amen."

# **Chapter 2:**

## **REMEMBERING GRACE**

*(Deuteronomy 1-4)*

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*Who cares about ancient history?*

Every morning when I wake up, I can see a local landmark called Chanctonbury Ring in the distance from my bedroom window. It's the site of an Iron Age hillfort and some Roman ruins, and it's the sort of place I love. History has always been one of my passions. When I see the sites of the past, or hear its stories, my heart races and my interest is easily caught. I imagine the people who will once have lived in such places, and their tales and lives.

You might be like me, and a history enthusiast – or you may not. Strange as it seems to me, there are plenty of people who find this all very tedious – and probably most people are somewhere in the middle. Whatever your views on history though, few of us read the stories of ancient history with any expectation that they will impact our lives today. Even I have to admit that apart from some interest and enjoyment, there's not a lot more there!

Sometimes when we read the stories of the Old Testament, they can feel just like that - obscure stories from ancient history that might be exciting for someone like me, but don't seem to have much relevance to today. The parts of Deuteronomy that we are going to be looking at in this chapter are full of those kinds of stories. The key question we need to be asking is 'how can these stories be relevant to me, today?'

*Why should I care about all this?*

We saw in the last chapter how Deuteronomy is a series of sermons preached by Moses to the people of Israel shortly before his death. Today we are looking at Moses' first sermon, which we find in chapters 1-4. The bulk of what we read here is story. Moses is retelling the stories of their recent history. Stories like how they defeated Sihon King of Heshbon at the battle of Jahaz, or Og King of Bashan at the battle of Edrei.

At first glance, unless you're a history nut like me, these chapters can seem pretty irrelevant. Who cares? What relevance do the tales of ancient battles and long dead kings have to me today?

The answer to that question is both nothing...and lots. For us the events themselves don't have a lot of immediate relevance. There's no need to do a character study on King Og, or assess the military strategies employed at the battle of Jahaz. Instead, the point of these stories is to show us something about God and his relationship with his people.

Through Jesus he is our God too, and that means that these stories do have relevance to me and you. This is the story of someone we love, the story of someone we care about. This is a story through which we can get to know him better, discovering his ways and character, and what it means to be his people. Suddenly that means that this is a story that I want to read – this is a story that is personal for me.

### *Starting with the story*

Moses starts his great farewell sermon series with a re-telling of Israel's story. He does so because that story is crucial to their relationship with God and the teachings and law that will follow in the rest of this book.

That may surprise you because we don't usually associate law and story. We expect law to be all about rules and regulations, and I think most of us assume that that's the focus of the OT law. There is plenty

of that kind of law in Deuteronomy – but crucially, that's not how it starts. It starts with story.

Why? Why does Deuteronomy start with stories? The answer is that the stories are all about grace. God's grace is the starting point and foundation of Deuteronomy, the OT law, and in fact the whole Christian faith.

So often when we think of law in the Bible, or in other religious contexts, we think of it as a way of getting to God. If I do this or that - keep the 10 commandments, love God, or whatever it may be - then God will accept me. The basis of our relationship with God then lies in our own righteousness, in our ability to keep the rules.

But that is not the message of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy starts with grace. It starts with the story of God's interaction with his people, and only then moves onto the rules. That's actually the dynamic we see everywhere in the Bible, and in our relationship with God. It's the dynamic of the gospel and the New Testament. It's also the dynamic of the rest of the Old Testament, and it's the dynamic of the rest of the Old Testament Law.

The first significant body of rules in scripture is the 10 commandments, and they don't come until Exodus 20. That means that before the first commandment hits the page (or in this case, the rock) we've already had 69 chapters of story, of grace. Law cannot be the way of getting to God - because they're already there with him from the start. Instead, everything is built upon grace.

### *Remembering Grace*

In Moses' first sermon, he tells them the story to remind them of this foundation of grace. He tells them their story to remind them of who God is and what he has done for them.

Remembering is really the big theme of these early chapters of Deuteronomy and I think that it's more important for us than we often



realise. We often have a tendency to skip over this, to forget about remembering.

It's like watching a hit series on Netflix or Prime or whatever streaming service you use. At the start of each episode there's often a recap – "previously on...whatever show." These days though, this is often a little button that pops up with the option to "skip recap." I think that when it comes to retelling the stories and foundations of our faith, we can tend to "skip recap." We think we know it already, and we're impatient to get to the next episode.

Yet God would have us remember. In fact, this is one of the most important lessons of Deuteronomy, something repeated again and again and again. In chapter 4 Moses emphasises it hard. In verse 9 he says: "be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live..." There's something pro-active about this. It's not enough just to know. We need to take care about remembering, because otherwise we will forget.

I don't that think Moses is saying that the people would actually forget what happened. Instead, he's warning them against forgetting to pay attention to it. He warns them that they need to be proactive in remembering. If they are not, then these things "will fade from their hearts." That's such an evocative and insightful phrase because even things we know can "fade from our hearts."

As Moses goes on to predict, and the rest of the OT bears witness, that is actually what happens in the history of Israel. The awe and wonder and love of a people who have been rescued and saved by God fades, and they become just like the world around them.

### *Remembering Jesus*

That danger is all too real and present for us too. As Christians today we can spend far too little time remembering the grace that has been shown to us. We can spend far too little time meditating and

weeping and rejoicing at the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and what it means for us.

Instead, we want to focus on the next steps, and our passion becomes something else – whether its social justice, miracles, morality, or whatever. While so many of those other things can be excellent and praiseworthy, they're not God. That means that we become focused on the things of God, and no longer on God himself. Like the church in Ephesus, we can forget our first love for Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

I think this is one of the big reasons why Jesus gave us Communion. Just hours before his death, he took the time to give us this meal, this sacrament, and he told us to “do this in remembrance of me.”<sup>17</sup> Each time we do, we have this tangible reminder that brings us back to Jesus. It brings us back again and again to his death and resurrection, and what it means for each of us – for me, for you. Like Moses, Jesus calls us to remember the grace we have received.

### *Remembering God's grace to me*

Remembering is not just important in the big things – the Exodus for them, and the cross and resurrection for us. As we read the opening chapters of Deuteronomy, most of the stories are actually much less well-known. I confess that if I hadn't spent the last few months with my nose down in Deuteronomy, I don't know if I would be able to tell you any of them!

Deuteronomy 1-3 focuses in on the recent stories, and I think that's because these are their stories. These chapters are not as dramatic as the stories of the Exodus – and so we don't tend to know them. At the time of the Exodus though, most of the people Moses preached to in Deuteronomy were only kids - or not even born yet. In contrast, the stories he tells in these chapters were the stories and experiences that they had lived and seen for themselves. This was their testimony. This

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<sup>16</sup> Revelation 2v4

<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 11v24-25

was not just the story of what God had done for everyone, for ever. This was what he had done specifically for them as well.

If we're Christians, each of us has a story like that too - my story, your story, of what God has done for me. All our stories start in the same place - with a God who loves us and gave himself for us. That is the objective truth on which everything else is built, like the Exodus for them. As we've just been exploring, it is so important to actively remember that and root it in our hearts.

Each of us also then has our own story and testimony though, the subjective - our experience of God's love and grace day after day in our own lives.

### *My stories*

I could tell you so many stories! One of my earliest memories was my Mum trying to explain to me what it meant for God to be my father - "he's like Daddy - only better," she said. For all my training as a preacher I've never managed to better that, never got past being that little boy grabbing hold of his heavenly Daddy through the highs and lows of life.

I could speak of knowing God's presence with me in that sense of joy and thankfulness on my wedding day. I could speak of his presence in my terror when my daughter was born unresponsive and not breathing, and all I could do was cry out to God for help - and then my relief and happiness when she was OK. I could speak of my knowledge of a God who met me in the midst of my desolation when my earthly Dad died in an accident when I was in my 20's, and how he held and comforted me. I could speak of my experience of the sweetness of a God who's forgiven me so many times I've lost count.

My life is just one long story of a God who loves me and has shown me grace after grace, no matter what. It is the story of my experience of a God who is like Daddy - only better. I could tell you so many stories.

I could tell you so many stories - and yet, I so rarely do. I so easily move on and forget to remember.

What about you? Maybe you need to take some time out to remember? Learn from Moses - be careful and watch yourself closely, so that you do not forget the wonders of the grace that God has shown to you and let them fade from your heart.

### *Remembering not reminiscing*

Notice though that this isn't just reminiscing, Moses telling his grandchildren anecdotes and tales of the past. This is remembering God. This is all about the wonders of the grace that God has shown them - and you.

These chapters are essentially a two-character play - the story of God and Israel. Their purpose is not to give us a history lesson, but to help them - and us - to know God better. At one point Moses tells them: "You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other."<sup>18</sup> All the rest of the characters that crop up are essentially just bit part players, forming the backdrop to show God's goodness to Israel.

Actually, even Israel's part is decidedly mixed. You'd think Moses might track through some of their highlights, and at first glance some parts of this might seem like that. On closer examination though, lots of Israel's lines in this play are lines that they fluffed. For instance, the story begins with their failure to enter the promised land when God first told them to. Israel may be central to this story - but even they're not the hero, because the hero is God.

The special name that God revealed to Moses and Israel (YHWH, or in English Bibles, 'the LORD'), comes up 81 times in just these four chapters.<sup>19</sup> It is the story of how God has loved them, and chosen them and fought for them, despite all their fears and failures. The point of

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<sup>18</sup> Deuteronomy 4v35

<sup>19</sup> Exodus 3 recounts how God revealed himself through this name to Moses at the 'Burning Bush.'

the story has been to show them who God is. It reminds them who God is and tells of his greatness and his glory and his grace.

### *Showing God to the world*

God's greatness and glory and grace is then shown through them to the rest of the world – to us. There's actually an explicitly missionary element to Deuteronomy. At various places Moses talks about how all this will show the world who God is. In our chapters today, for instance, Moses talks about how other nations will look at Israel and see how God is near them.<sup>20</sup>

We begin to realise that this isn't just the story of an ancient nation's faith. It is also part God's plans for the salvation of the whole world – for us too. Through this ancient nation God revealed his character and grace to us all. Everything here echoes and points forward and prepares us for the even greater manifestation of God's glory and grace in Jesus.

As a Christian though, it's difficult not to wonder; 'if this all points forward to the even greater revelation of God in Jesus, why not just skip to the end of the book? Why not just read the gospels? Why not just explore that greater revelation of God in Jesus?'

The answer is that this book not only prepares us for Jesus, it also helps us to understand Jesus and teaches us what it means to live in the light of his grace. We'll see that in various different ways as we work through this book and this series.

That's why the whole Old Testament is actually such an important part of the New Testament. Jesus always seems to be quoting it, and every one of the New Testament writers uses it extensively as they show and explain to us the mysteries and grace of God in Jesus.

There's so much we can learn from these chapters about what it means to live out our faith. We've already seen that in this key theme

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<sup>20</sup> Deuteronomy 4v5-8

of remembering God's grace, which is as true and relevant for us as it was for them.

### *Grace and obedience*

I want to close this chapter by tying this in with another key theme of Deuteronomy – obedience. How does the call to obedience that we find in this book fit in with what we also read about grace?

I think that so often we struggle to hold grace and obedience together. Where we emphasise holiness and obedience to God's ways, we can often subtly de-prioritise God's grace. When we dwell on grace, we can often lose sight of the call to obey God and walk in his ways. Yet Moses in Deuteronomy sees no tension between the two - in fact we find them again and again side by side.

For instance, the closing words of Moses' sermon here refocus us on God, and then immediately call us to obey:

"Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you"<sup>21</sup>

The heart of this is that Moses sees our obedience as flowing from God's grace – it is a response, almost even an inevitable consequence, of a healthy and remembering relationship with God.

The best illustration of this is actually a picture that the Bible itself uses again and again – the idea of fruit. Trees and plants that are well planted, and tended and watered, will naturally produce fruit. In the same way, if we are rooted in God and his grace and our love and thankfulness to him, then obedience and holiness will be the natural result.

That sequence is so important though – grace, and remembering grace come first and then out of that flows obedience. That's what we

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<sup>21</sup> Deuteronomy 4v39-40

see in this book of Deuteronomy – and that's why these opening chapters are so important. Here the focus is on grace, while as we move forward in the book more space will be devoted to laws and obedience. We need to remember all along though that all the laws flow out of the grace we see in these first chapters.

### *Grace after failure*

Even that is not actually the end of the matter, because these chapters also point us forward to grace after failure. Even as Moses calls the people to obedience, he also prophesies their disobedience, and its consequences. He predicts that they will be conquered and taken away into exile. Yet then he points to repentance, and promises that if they turn back to God they will find forgiveness and restoration: "if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul."<sup>22</sup>

I want to finish on that note. As we move forward in Deuteronomy, the focus is all about how to live life in the light of grace, we'll talk of obedience and holiness, and of faith. Yet, even the oldest Christians, the best among us, will still fail. What a joy it is to remember from the start, that grace is not a one-time offer! In Jesus we receive grace upon grace: grace at the cross, grace when we first believed; but then also grace after failure, grace renewed.

So we finish as we began – awestruck and thankful at the amazing grace of our God.

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## **Prayer**

Come Holy Spirit we pray, and meet with us through what we have seen in your word. Help us to Remember – remind our minds and

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<sup>22</sup> Deuteronomy 4v29

hearts of your amazing grace. Remind us of your cross and resurrection, and of your grace to us day after day – always. Come Holy Spirit. Amen.



# Chapter 3

## THE PERFECT 10

*(Deuteronomy 5)*

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### *Famous Commands*

The ten commandments are one of the most famous parts of the whole Bible. They are still hard-wired into our culture, even in our increasingly secular age. As I was researching for this series, I found all kinds of examples. From Hollywood to fashion photography magazines, references to the ten commandments are all around. My particular favourite was The Rock Stars' Guide to Life: the 10 Commandments in their own words with contributions from stars like Ed Sheeran and 50 Cent.

Even atheists who reject the ten commandments, still stand in their shadow. In Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*, there's a section on ethics cast as a search for a 'new ten commandments.'<sup>23</sup> All of which begs the question: why? What is so special about the ten commandments? Why are they so important?

I wonder, have you ever asked yourself that question? What answer would you give? Some people would say that they are timeless wisdom, others that they're some of the most important commandments in the Bible. Still others would say they matter because they were written on tablets of stone by God himself.

### *The ten commandments in Deuteronomy*

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp298-300

As we've seen in the previous chapters, Deuteronomy is a series of farewell sermons Moses preached shortly before his death. In his longest sermon, spanning chapters 5 to 26, Moses seems to focus in on the ten commandments. Some scholars think that the whole sermon is loosely based on their structure, and Moses begins in chapter 5 by retelling the story of the ten commandments.

In this chapter we are going to focus specifically on Moses' retelling of the giving of the ten commandments. We are not going to work through them one by one though. Instead, we are going to explore a little bit more why they're important, how they work as a whole, and what that teaches us about our relationship with God. Deuteronomy 5 is a wonderful passage to do that, because it doesn't just list the commandments, it also begins to explain them.

### *Words of God*

Why are the ten commandments so important? Earlier I listed various different answers that people give to that question – none of which I would disagree with. Yet none of them are the most important thing about them. There's something else even more amazing and significant about the ten commandments – something that for much of my life I missed.

The most extraordinary thing about the commandments is that they are the words that God spoke out loud to all Israel. Look at Deuteronomy 5 verse 4: "The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain...and he said... ." What follows is what we call the ten commandments – in Hebrew they're actually just called 'the ten words.' Ten words – or messages – that God himself spoke in a loud voice before everyone.

It is maybe worth taking a moment just to picture and imagine the scene. All Israel were assembled on the plains around Mount Horeb in their hundreds of thousands, as God came to meet them in an extraordinary revelation. The mountain was shrouded in cloud and smoke and darkness, the ground shook, the sky was lit with fire and

lightning, and the heavens resounded to the sound of a trumpet blast. And then God spoke. He spoke out of the fire and cloud and darkness in a loud and audible voice that must have thundered across the plain. What a moment!

God revealed himself in power and glory and splendour, to the entire nation at once. Can you imagine it? What makes the ten commandments so special? They're what God said to Israel in that moment. Wow!

### *It's all about relationship*

Even that isn't actually quite the full answer though. You can still ask: why? Why did God reveal himself in such glory, and speak out of the fire and darkness to Israel?

Again, Moses gives us the answer in our passage. It's just a line, so we can easily miss it, but it's there and it's so important. It comes in verse 2: "The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb"<sup>24</sup> This grand revelation of God, and the giving of the ten commandments, were all about creating a covenant between God and his people. This is about relationship - that's essentially what that word 'covenant' means. The covenant was about establishing and formalising the relationship between God and his people Israel.

The best illustration of what that all means for us is an image that God himself uses again and again later in the Bible to describe his relationship with his people - marriage. If you like this is the wedding ceremony of God and Israel.

Liz and I got married in the summer of 2019 at St. Peter's Brighton and then we had a reception nearby at a grand home called Glynde Place. It was one of the best days of my life! We spent a huge amount of energy and effort (and yes, money) to make it the best we could. While I'm obviously a little biased, I think we did a pretty good job.

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<sup>24</sup> Horeb is the name of the mountain, which is also known as Sinai.

Even I have to admit though that God's big day casts ours into the shade!

The illustration of a wedding helps me to understand how this whole scene works. First and foremost, it helps show me what really matters – which is the relationship.

When we were planning our wedding, I used to say that as long as Liz showed up and said the vows, I didn't really care about the rest. Somehow though, the gathering of our friends and family, and all the trappings of the ceremony, helped us to make that covenant to each other. They helped us to realise what we were doing, and to make it real.

I think that that's also true with all that's going on in this awesome scene. The dramatic extravaganza that God lays on all helps to form and reinforce this relationship between God and his people. Amazing as it all is though, that is just the packaging - ultimately, it's all about the relationship.

### *A relationship built on grace*

It's not just in the frame and setting of the ten commandments that we see the centrality of relationship. When we turn to the words God spoke, the ten commandments themselves, that relationship is still front and centre.

How do the ten commandments start? For all their fame, that is a question that most people (even most Christians) usually get wrong. They don't actually start with a command at all – they start with a declaration: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."<sup>25</sup>

God begins his words with a reminder of who he is and what he has done for them. It is a reminder that he is already their God, and of the grace he has already shown them. Whatever else they may be, the ten commandments are emphatically not a recipe for how to earn

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<sup>25</sup> Deuteronomy 5v6

favour and relationship with God - that part has already been done by God.

It can be helpful to go back to the illustration of marriage at this point. Liz and I didn't meet at the altar! We were committed to each other beforehand. We were already engaged, and I already loved her.

At this point the illustration isn't perfect. God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants was already unbreakable, and far stronger than any engagement. The idea of moving from engagement to marriage is still helpful though. It helps us to understand this new covenant that God enters into with Moses and the people of Israel. It is not a new relationship, but the intensification of an existing relationship. It takes the relationship to a new level.

Even as this covenant ceremony begins, God reminds Israel of this relationship they already have with him - like a bridegroom whispering "I love you" as the bride gets to the front. Not only that, but he also reminds them of the roots and foundation of that relationship. He reminds them that it is all built on his actions, on his grace. He is the one "who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."<sup>26</sup>

### *Rules or relationship?*

This emphasis on relationship doesn't stop there. If we look at the structure and flow of what God commands the people to do, again the start and emphasis is on their relationship with him.

When people talk about the timeless and universal merits of the ten commandments, they almost always seem to skip the first few! The commands start with instructions for how to protect and strengthen our relationship with God. There are four commands which focus us on how best to love and follow him.

These four commands actually seem to be emphasised more than the commands that follow. Together the first four commands are more than twice as long as the remaining six, as God explains and

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<sup>26</sup> Deuteronomy 5v6

expands on this central theme of relationship. God not only starts with his relationship with his people, he also emphasises and dwells on it. This is the core and the heartbeat of the ten commandments – they are about relationship.

Even when we then move to the final six commands, which are focused on our relationships with each other, our relationship with God is still in view. The only remaining one that has an explanation is the command to honour our parents. That explanation starts by reminding us that we should do this “as the LORD your God has commanded you...”.<sup>27</sup>

In this, the ten commandments reflect a basic assumption that we will see throughout the rest of Deuteronomy – and indeed all of scripture. That assumption is that our relationship with God should overflow into the rest of our lives. Because God loves each of us, to love God necessarily also means loving our neighbour.

The six commands about our relationships with each other therefore flow out of the relationship that we have with God. Our motivation for wanting to put them into practice is not primarily that they are timeless and universal truths (although they are!). Instead, we should be motivated to do them because they reflect the ways and character of the God we love, and he has commanded us to do them. It all comes back to relationship – the relationship between God and his people.

Even the tablets of stone that God then writes the commandments on, are actually about relationship – a permanent record and reminder of what God said, which are to be kept in the so-called “Ark of the Covenant.”<sup>28</sup> They are like the marriage certificate!

We come to this passage looking for rules – but what we find is first and foremost relationship.

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<sup>27</sup> Deuteronomy 5v16

<sup>28</sup> See Deuteronomy 10v2

### *Rules for relationship*

Yet for all their focus on relationship, these aren't called the ten suggestions. They're not ten top tips for happy and successful living, or God's attempt to break into the self-help market. They are known as the ten commandments for a reason!

Even if in Hebrew they can be translated as 'the ten words,' it is pretty clear that God expected the people of Israel to do what he said. Moses concludes this section on the ten commandments with the words: "so be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in obedience to all that the LORD your God has commanded you."<sup>29</sup> Now I don't know about you, but the thrust of that seemed pretty clear to me! God expects them to obey.

But what has obedience got to do with relationship? In our culture we tend to assume that rules and relationships just don't mix. That creates a problem for us, not just with the ten commandments, but with all the rules and commandments we find in the Bible. How can rules and relationship come together? How do we reconcile the emphasis the Bible places on grace and love, with everything that it says about law and obedience?

Some people just give up at this point. Others emphasise one part over the other, or try to suggest that God used to be about law (in the Old Testament), but then changed and is now about grace. For all their ingenuity though, the Bible itself doesn't allow any of those options.

As we saw in the last session, this 'law' is actually rooted in grace. The two elements come together. That is even clearer in this moment, with the giving of the ten commandments. We see rules and relationship together, at exactly the same time. For us today, I think

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<sup>29</sup> Deuteronomy 5v32-33

that that is perhaps the most powerful thing we can get from the ten commandments. They show us a dynamic of rules in the context of relationship with God. Indeed, the rules are there because of the relationship.

### *Can rules and relationship go together?*

The rules are the core part of this covenant ceremony, and they're there as the recipe for how to make that relationship succeed. At this point I want to go back to my illustration of marriage. Marriage also has commitments – things we need to do – at its heart.

When I married Liz, I made a series of promises and vows before all our family and friends, and before God. I promised to love her, cherish her, comfort her, honour her, protect her, and (forsaking all others) be faithful to her, as long we both shall live. Those are some pretty big commitments – life-long promises with no 'get out' clause.

Why did I make those promises? Well, one answer is that we wouldn't have been able to get married if I didn't! The fuller answer though is that I love her and I wanted to commit to that relationship for the rest of our lives.

Slavishly following those vows – the 'rules' if you like – won't create love or relationship where none exists. However, it will protect and strengthen the love and relationship that is already there. They show me the way forward, the way to invest in my marriage, and the way to make it work.

If I break those vows, I won't just be breaking a contract – I'll be killing my relationship with Liz. That's not actually primarily because of the obligation and vows I've taken. It's because a marriage in which one spouse cheats on the other, or checks out at the first hint of difficulty, or fails to love and cherish the other, is one that will quickly grow cold and die.

The same is true of these ten commandments – the marriage vows of God and Israel. They are a God-given recipe for Israel to make their



relationship with God work. They don't create the relationship, because God had already initiated it by his amazing grace, establishing it by his actions in this awesome moment – but they are the means to protect and strengthen and cherish the relationship.

### *Rules for Christians?*

For us as Christians, the details are different – but the dynamic is the same.

It is by grace we are saved – through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us and for our sins. As we saw at the end of our last film, even if we mess up again and again, that dynamic of grace is always there, and Jesus is always willing and eager to forgive us and restore us.

Yet, if we want to cherish and strengthen our relationship with God, then we do need to follow in God's ways. If we want to grow closer to Jesus, if we want to be more filled with the spirit, then in exactly the same way as we see in the ten commandments in Deuteronomy 5, obedience is at the heart of that.

Contrary to many of our preconceptions though, God's call to obedience was always and ever for our good. This is not an arbitrary set of hoops to jump through, but the perfect plan of our perfect God, for us to thrive. Look at Deuteronomy 5 verse 29. What did God say when the people responded positively in this moment of covenant? Hah! They're on the hook now forever? No backing out this time? No, he said: "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!"

At the start of this book, I referred to the current popularity of the idea of wellness. It turns out that the key to true wellness is something a whole lot less popular – obedience. Obedience to God is the key to true wellness. As we cherish and safeguard our relationship with him through obedience we will find that we will thrive.

It turns out that rules and relationship do go together after all – in fact when it comes to faith they're hand in hand.

### *A stronger relationship in Jesus*

For us, our relationship with God is actually even stronger and greater than this covenant we read about in the ten commandments - which is a pretty mind-blowing thought when you remember how awesome this moment at the mountain was. We have more, because unlike the people of Israel who draw away in fear after God speaks, God now lives within us by his Holy Spirit. He is always with us and our covenant with him is written not on tablets of stone, but on our hearts – as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians.<sup>30</sup>

Even so, that doesn't negate the lessons of these ten commandments. The call to obedience still stands and still remains at the heart of our relationship with God. Indeed, Jesus tied together love and obedience very explicitly, telling his disciples that "anyone who loves me will obey my teaching."<sup>31</sup>

As we'll explore further next time the greatest calling and command on us as Christians remains to prioritise our relationship with God, to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength.

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## **Prayer**

Father God, as we talk about relationship, fill me afresh with your Holy Spirit I pray. Renew my love for you, help me to obey you, and strengthen my relationship with you. Come Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>30</sup> 2 Corinthians 3v3

<sup>31</sup> John 14v23

# Chapter 4

## THE MEANING OF THE LAW

*(Deuteronomy 6-11)*

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### *What children pick up*

I've recently become a father for the first time. It's a rollercoaster ride, with lots of joys and a few challenges. One of the great early joys has been when our baby (Beatrice) started to recognise my voice. She turns and smiles when she hears me, which melts my heart.

Friends with older children tell me that this responsiveness of children to their parents is a scary joy too though. As they get older children not only respond to their parents, they also pick up on and copy what we do. One of my friends was a bit alarmed when his daughter started constantly checking her toy phone – apparently because that's what he does!

This dynamic of children picking things up from their parents is one that Moses was well aware of. In Deuteronomy 6, he imagines a scene where a child turns to their parents and asks: "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?"<sup>32</sup>

Sharing our faith with our children is one of the primary responsibilities of parents, and it was the same in Moses' day. It seems the law was supposed to be such a part of daily life that children would pick up on it and be asking their parents for an explanation of what it's all about.

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<sup>32</sup> Deuteronomy 6v20-24

What is the meaning of the law? It's an intriguing question - how would you answer it? Would you talk about rules and regulations? Would your answer be positive or negative? What do you think?

### *Deuteronomy 6-11*

That is the question we're going to explore in this chapter, as we unpack Deuteronomy 6 to 11. These chapters are the opening half of Moses' longest sermon in this book. The sermon began with the ten commandments (in chapter 5) and will finish by moving onto the details of the law in chapters 12-26.

We'll skip for now some of the harder parts of these chapters that address God's commands to the Israelites to drive the Canaanite nations out of the promised land. Most of us really struggle with those commands, and so I want to wrestle with them separately in the next chapter in this e-booklet. That will also allow us to focus here on exploring that question: 'what is the meaning of the law?'

### *What is the meaning of the law? Moses' answer*

The answer Moses tells parents to give their children in Deuteronomy 6 reinforces some of the surprises of Deuteronomy so far. It's not focused initially on rules but starts instead with the people's relationship with God. He speaks about who God is, what he's done for them, and how they are supposed to respond.

Crucially, it begins with story: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the LORD sent signs and wonders—great and terrible—on Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land he promised."<sup>33</sup>

This is a story of God's greatness, and of his love and grace. Only then do we move to what they are supposed to do in response, as the

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<sup>33</sup> Deuteronomy 6v21-23

answer continues: "The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God."<sup>34</sup> The crucial point is that obedience is a response to grace. It is not the way of obtaining or earning grace but the natural overflow of a thankful heart.

Even once the call to obey is introduced, it is further explained as actually being for their sake – not God's. The parents carry on that, they should obey "so that we might always prosper and be kept alive."<sup>35</sup>

The meaning of the law is that God loves them and wants to bless them, and so calls them into a relationship and obedience to him.

### *Understanding the Law as Christians*

Many of the details in our relationship with God are slightly different for us. They were under the old covenant of the law, and we are part of the new covenant in Jesus. Yet this little parent-child role play shows us that the law was always about more than just rules and regulations. It had a meaning. It had a purpose.

This meaning and purpose to the law is what makes everything we read here so relevant to us as Christians today. The law was always rooted in Israel's relationship with God. It was supposed to show them that that relationship started with God's grace. The call to obedience was then supposed to be their response, and the way of nurturing and protecting their relationship with God.

This dynamic of grace, obedience and relationship is exactly the same for us as Christians – and that means that we too can learn so much from what we read here.

### *The greatest commandment*

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<sup>34</sup> Deuteronomy 6v24

<sup>35</sup> Deuteronomy 6v24

I want to unpack all this a bit more by focusing on another verse for most of the rest of this chapter. It is one of the most famous verses in the whole Old Testament - Deuteronomy 6 v4-5: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

This verse is sometimes called the "Shema" which is the Hebrew word for 'Hear' (its first word). To this day many Jews recite it daily. When Jesus was asked what he thought the greatest commandment was he responded by quoting this verse - which all explains why it's so famous and well loved. It also shows us that this central call remains the same for us as it was for them.

This command is much more challenging and controversial than first meets the eye. It comes at the start of the section we're looking at in this film, and in many ways acts as a sort of 'theme sentence.' It introduces and summarises everything that will follow in the next 6 chapters.

### *Commanded to love*

Once again, this is rooted in relationship. The Shema begins with a reminder and call to 'hear' who God is, and then continues by calling us to love God in response. Yet this isn't simply an invitation to relationship, like God asking us out on a date - it's a command.

For all its familiarity this is an aspect of the greatest commandment that actually really jars with our modern ideas and preconceptions. For most of us in our culture today, love is primarily an emotion, a feeling. We think that love is something that we "fall" into - or out of. You can't control who you love. Or can you?

God commands us to love him - and actually as we'll see later, he then also commands us to love each other. Immediately our understanding of love is made to shift from something passive to something deliberate and active. Love is not something involuntary, but something we can choose and decide to do. The greatest commandment is this: to love the Lord your God.

When we talk about "love" our minds usually go straight to romance. I think that a better illustration here though might be the love that parents have for their children. As I've been discovering, love for children is both a delight-filled joy, and hard work. It's a love that requires quite a lot of effort - all the crying and the nappies and the sleepless nights!

I do all this because I love my daughter. It flows out of the relationship that is already there, just as in this verse God starts with who he is, and the fact that he is already in relationship with them. At that point though my love for Beatrice needs to go beyond just emotions and feelings. I have to choose to act on it. I choose to change that nappy, to drag myself out of bed, or whatever it may be. Love for a baby is very pro-active, and actually impacts on everything in my life - even my sleep is no longer my own!

Of course, the benefits of being a father far outweigh the costs. When Beatrice smiles and laughs and (in her own baby way) loves me back, my heart leaps and melts. With God that is even more true, and the benefits to us of loving God are far greater than the challenges.

Parenting is actually usually used the other way round as an illustration of our relationship with God - he is our Father. That is because God is the one who makes all the running, who loves us perfectly, even in the midst of far worse than nappies and sleepless nights.

Even so, I think this illustration of parenthood is still helpful here - because it is the one relationship where in our culture love is still synonymous with hard work and effort. It shows us what it means to choose to love someone pro-actively and deliberately - as God calls us to do in this verse.

### *Big words*

The pro-active and deliberate nature of our love for God is reinforced by the words that immediately follow the call to love God

– heart, soul and strength. Each word is full of meaning, and 'bigger' in Hebrew than in English.<sup>36</sup>

The first word is levav (לֵבָב), heart. As in English, Hebrew uses 'heart' metaphorically. As well as speaking of our emotions and feelings though, it also refers to our understanding – our minds and intellect and will. This covers every thought, every feeling, every hope and every dream. As David sang in the psalms: "let all my inmost being, praise his holy name."<sup>37</sup>

Do we use 'all our inmost being' and all the actions that flow out of it to love God? Because that is what this means. What do you spend your time thinking about? Dreaming about? What do you do when you wake up in the morning, or you're at a loose end during the day? Are you like my friend that I mentioned at the start (and often me too!), reaching for your phone and catching up on your social media, or do you turn your mind and heart to God? Do you love God with all your heart.

Then, we're told to love God with all our soul. In Hebrew, the word is nephesh (נֶפֶשׁ). It essentially means our whole being – all of who we are. For instance, in Genesis 2, when God breathes life into the first person, we are told they became a 'living nephesh' – usually translated 'living being.'

Another common translation of nephesh is actually simply as 'life.' It basically covers everything – all that we are. Our nephesh is everything that makes me 'me' and you 'you' – love God with all of it.

This makes me think of the English phrase "to devote your life to... ." We think of heroes and stars who we'd say devoted their lives to civil rights, or justice, or even football. To love God with all your nephesh means something similar. It means to devote your life to loving God.

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<sup>36</sup> Incidentally, this is probably why there is a long history of using more than three words to translate this saying into other languages – as we see in some of the gospels, where there are four.

<sup>37</sup> Psalm 103v1



When you put that together with what it means to love God with all your heart, there doesn't seem to be much room left for anything else. This is a call to love God with everything we've got.

Yet, there's a third bit. We are told to love God with all our strength or energy. This one is the hardest of all to translate. The word is me'od (מְאֹד), and it literally just means "very." "Love God with all your very" doesn't seem to make much sense though – hence the translation 'strength.' Strength carries that same sense of emphasis as 'very.'

You could maybe think of this like writing **“LOVE GOD WITH EVERYTHING YOU'VE GOT!”** This is not the place for feeble or half-hearted God-loving – this is full-throttle, high energy, loving God to the max. Which is big!

This is also extraordinarily challenging – do I do that? Can I do that? What would it look like if I did – if you did? What if everything about you was like this and you really did love God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength?

### *Putting God first*

It's not just the size and scope of this commandment that makes it so challenging. It's also the priority that loving God is given. I've already mentioned that this call to love God opens and summarises this section of the sermon and the book, a sort of 'theme sentence.' Pretty much everything Moses goes on to say in the next six chapters is then about making their relationship with God their first priority – and of course, Jesus then highlighted this as the most important command of them all.

This is the big one. If this is the greatest commandment, then this is bigger than 'don't steal' or 'don't lie' or 'don't murder.' It's bigger than 'love your neighbour.' This is the most important calling on your life – more important than your career, or your morals. This is more important than staying true to yourself. This outranks your responsibility to your family.

Is that really what Jesus was saying?

Well...yes.

For us today that is explosively counter-cultural. Instinctively we'd put all those other things I've just listed above loving God. To reverse that order, to put loving God first, would actually seem wrong to many people.

### *Loving God and loving our neighbour*

One reason we struggle with the priority that is given to loving God here is that we worry that prioritising God de-prioritises people. Ironically though, nothing could be further from the truth.

Have you ever wondered why when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he also told us what the second one was too?<sup>38</sup> He wasn't asked what the second commandment was – but he told us anyway.

I think the reason is that to love God and to love your neighbour are inextricably interwoven. Jesus didn't want people to forget that – he wanted to emphasise a fact that is stated again and again in the Bible, that to love God necessarily also means loving our neighbour. As we love God more, we will find that, far from loving our neighbour less, we love them more too.

### *Life-changing love*

This is one key example of a basic pattern and assumption that we find everywhere in Deuteronomy. It is that to love God also means following in his ways and keeping his commands. Another example comes as Moses begins to sum up this section in chapter 10, he asks: "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you?"<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Mark 22v39. The second commandment is to 'love your neighbour as yourself,' and is originally found in Leviticus 19v18.

<sup>39</sup> Deuteronomy 10v12

The answer Moses gives weaves together relationship and obedience as though they're same thing. They're told: "to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands."<sup>40</sup>

I think of it like the sun. The sun is not just the source of light and warmth on a summer's day. It is also the source of so much more. From plant life to the seasons, almost everything in the natural world can be traced back to the energy and power of the sun. For us as Christians, it should be like that with our relationship with God. Our love for God is the source and inspiration for how we go about everything in life.

Unexpectedly we begin to realise that love for God is actually one of the greatest forces for good in the world. The church today (as ever) has all kinds of flaws and problems, and yet it still shows us this in action. For instance, a recent report found that in the Church of England alone there were 33,000 social action projects running, from food banks to debt counselling.<sup>41</sup> What a huge positive impact on our nation that represents!

There are differences between the details of what this looked like for ancient Israel, and what it looks like for us. Many of the individual commands God gave Israel were specific to them or designed to prepare the way for Jesus. Therefore, as we'll explore more when we dive into the details in chapters 12-26, they don't all apply directly to us.

This dynamic of our faith and love for God overflowing into every part of life is the same for us today though. As Paul wrote to the Colossians: "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Deuteronomy 10v12-13

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/full-extent-church-england-work-support-local-communities> (accessed 5 Jul 2021).

<sup>42</sup> Colossians 3v17

### *Why should we love God?*

Even at this point though, you may still ask: why? Why is this all so important? Why is God so insistent about the importance of loving him, and following in his ways? This can come across as a bit needy – why does God need my love, my obedience, so much?

The answer is that God doesn't. Because he loves us, God does want us to love him back – but he doesn't need us to. But we do. We need to love God, for our own good.

This is a surprising theme that comes out again and again in Deuteronomy. As we saw at the start of this chapter, part of Moses explanation of the meaning of the law is that the call obedience is given "so we might always prosper."<sup>43</sup>

As I pointed out in the first chapter in this e-booklet, one of the refrains of Deuteronomy is "that it may go well with you."<sup>44</sup> God calls them – and us – to love him, and in loving him to obey him, for our own good.

### *The Promised Land*

For the ancient Israelites this was quite concrete and tangible because it was tied to God's gift of the promised land to them. As the land isn't part of our relationship with God in Jesus, we can often skim over the bits of the Old Testament that focus on it. Yet the land gives us the most beautiful picture and illustration of the blessings of following in God's ways.

As Christians we can often struggle to get our heads around what it means for God to bless us. The idea of God's blessings can seem very intangible, until we find an image like this, that we can more easily grasp.

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<sup>43</sup> Deuteronomy 6v24

<sup>44</sup> See above, p.#

Imagine the people of Israel, scarred and downtrodden by slavery in Egypt, and wearied by decades of wandering in the wilderness. Now imagine them as they then come into their inheritance – a land of beauty and abundance, described as a land “flowing with milk and honey.” This is finally a land of their own, a land of safety and rest under the protection of our mighty God.

In that picture, you can see a glimpse of God's heart and desire to bless you, and of the blessings of relationship with him.

Even in Deuteronomy though there's a hint of an even greater inheritance. Moses tells the people that the Levites – his tribe, the chosen tribe – don't have a physical inheritance in the land. He explains that this is because “the LORD is their inheritance.”<sup>45</sup>

### *Our inheritance*

The Levites were promised an even greater inheritance than the gift of the land – God himself was their portion. For us in Jesus, the Lord is now our inheritance too. We can have a relationship of love and intimacy with God that goes beyond what even Moses had, as by the Holy Spirit we experience what Paul called “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”<sup>46</sup>

We can know this supreme and most glorious joy in all creation, next to which everything else in life pales like rubbish in comparison. That is why we must love God – because not to do so is to forsake light and joy and beauty, for darkness and desolation.

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<sup>45</sup> Deuteronomy 10v9

<sup>46</sup> Philippians 3v8

## **Prayer**

Lord God, would you refresh my vision of you. Meet with me now and fill me afresh with your Holy Spirit, and help me to love you with all my heart, all my soul, and all my strength. Come Holy Spirit. Amen.

# Chapter 5

## WHAT ABOUT THE CANAANITES?

*(Deuteronomy 7 and elsewhere)*

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### *Troubling commands*

One of my favourite Bible stories as a child was the fall of Jericho. God told the Israelite army to march round and round the city walls of Jericho for a week. Then at the end of the seventh circuit on the seventh day the priests would blow on trumpets and the whole army would shout - and at that point the walls would come tumbling down. It's quite a dramatic story - and of course everything happened exactly as God said it would.<sup>47</sup>

As an adult though, I've found the story of the fall of Jericho more troubling. The reason is that it was part of the Israelite conquest of Canaan, and the instructions that God gave the Israelites about the conquest are one of the bits of the Bible I struggle with most.

The key commands come in Deuteronomy 7, and they're pretty stark and difficult to hear: "when the LORD your God has delivered [these nations] over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them and show them no mercy."<sup>48</sup>

What are we supposed to make of that? How can we square it with what we know of God's love? How can we even reconcile it with our own basic ideas of justice and goodness?

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<sup>47</sup> You can find the story in Joshua 7

<sup>48</sup> Deuteronomy 7v2

Those are the questions we are going to grapple with in this chapter, as we explore how we can still trust in God's goodness and in his love - even in the light of Deuteronomy 7. We need to struggle through how we can still hear his voice and meet with him - and even allow him to challenge us - as we read these difficult passages.

### *Loving foreigners*

As we start to grapple with God's commands to destroy the Canaanite nations, perhaps the first thing we need to realise is how jarring they are within the context of Deuteronomy.

In our interconnected world, things like immigration and work and the way we interact with foreigners and the rest of the world are all hot topics. We often assume that the ancient world was very different, and these issues weren't really on the agenda.

Surprisingly though, Deuteronomy actually has lots to say about all this. There is a particular emphasis on how the Israelites were supposed to treat foreigners living among them. There are more than a dozen laws on this subject, with the main focus summed up in Deuteronomy 10v18.<sup>49</sup> Moses tells them that God loves the foreigner residing among them, and that they too should love those them.

Elsewhere, as Moses re-tells Israel's story at the start of the book, he emphasises how God explicitly forbade them to harass or provoke the people of Esau or of Moab as they passed through the wilderness.<sup>50</sup>

For all his love and favour towards Israel, God is not against other nations. In fact, as we saw earlier in the series, his choice of Israel has a missionary purpose.<sup>51</sup> As God told Abraham - "all nations will be blessed through you" - a promise ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, as

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<sup>49</sup> Other examples include: Deuteronomy 1v16, Deuteronomy 5v12, Deuteronomy 10v18, Deuteronomy 14v29, Deuteronomy 15v3, Deuteronomy 24v14, Deuteronomy 24v17, Deuteronomy 24v19-21, Deuteronomy 26v12-13, Deuteronomy 27v19.

<sup>50</sup> See Deuteronomy 2v1-18.

<sup>51</sup> See above, p20.



through his death and resurrection he makes God's blessings known and available to all people.<sup>52</sup>

There seems to be something consciously and uniquely different about the nations mentioned in Deuteronomy 7. That impression is reinforced later in the book, in chapter 20, where a distinction is drawn between 'normal war' and these campaigns to drive out the Canaanite nations. There is something unexpected and unusual going on as God commands the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites.

We know God loves everyone who he has made – so why does he tell the Israelites to destroy the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites? Well, the text itself actually gives us two overlapping answers.

### *The wickedness of the Canaanites*

The first answer Deuteronomy gives us here is that God commands the Israelites to drive out the Canaanite nations because of their wickedness. This is a sovereign act of God's judgement on an evil and depraved culture.

This is a point that is made forcefully at the start of chapter 9, where Moses twice tells the Israelites: "it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you."<sup>53</sup>

God doesn't give us much detail of what these nations did that was so awful – in fact, the people were told not to inquire too much about it. The one example we do have is pretty shocking though – we're told: "they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods."<sup>54</sup>

These commands are often misrepresented as an arbitrary and unjust victimisation of otherwise innocent people, something to get them out of the way so that Israel can inhabit the land. But friends,

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<sup>52</sup> Genesis 12v3.

<sup>53</sup> Deuteronomy 9v4-5

<sup>54</sup> Deuteronomy 12v31

God wouldn't do that. God is a God of justice, slow to anger and rich in love. When he acts in judgement, he does so only when there is good reason to do so.

### *Judgement delayed*

In this case, we're actually told elsewhere that God deliberately delayed giving the Israelites the promised land and allowed them to struggle and suffer in Egypt as a result. In Genesis 15v16, we read that God told Abraham that the reason for this delay was that "the sin of the Ammorites has not yet reached its full measure." God would not drive out the other nations until their wickedness warranted it.

Generations later, as Moses finally points the people towards the promised land, that has now changed. The sin of the Ammorites had reached its full measure, and so God uses Israel to put an end to this wickedness, and to bring his righteous judgement on the nations of Canaan.

It's really important for us to realise that this isn't just some general licence to Israel to permit them to behave as they want against their enemies, or an arbitrary clear out of otherwise innocent people. This isn't even a framework by which Israel can judge other nations. It is a unique and sovereign act of God's judgement on a wicked and depraved people.

### *The unique calling of Israel*

The second overlapping reason that Deuteronomy gives us for why the nations in the land needed to be driven out was to protect Israel's relationship with God.

In chapter 7v4, Moses explains that the Canaanites must be destroyed because: "they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you."

Tragically, we know all too well how prescient that prediction was. As the Old Testament continues, we see the people of Israel

compromising their faith with the worship of the gods of the nations around them. The result was disaster – what we call 'the Exile', as God's people were conquered and driven from the land for 70 years. It is a tragic and depressing tale, but one that should have been no surprise to them. It is exactly what we see prophesied in Deuteronomy centuries beforehand.

Deuteronomy actually devotes far far more time to warning the people of Israel of the possibility of God's judgement on them than it gives over to talking about God's judgement on the Canaanites. Throughout the book there are scattered warnings, until at the end whole chapters are filled with prophecies of the Exile. No-one who has ever actually read the book of Deuteronomy could ever accuse it of bias against the Canaanite nations, because it uses exactly the same standards to judge Israel as it does them.

Why though?

### *Judgement brought forward*

In the history of God's dealings with the world, both the destruction of the Canaanite nations and the exile for Israel are unusual. They are an exception. There have been myriad other nations and societies that have done equally horrible and wicked things, but who God did not stop and judge.

The Bible is clear that that will one day change. There is a final judgement, at which all people will answer for their lives. In some senses, therefore, all that is happening in these two examples is that God's righteous judgement on Israel and the Canaanites is brought forward into time. But why?

The answer Deuteronomy gives comes in chapter 7v6: "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God." If Israel had been just another nation, then maybe God would have left the Canaanites, and then later the Israelites, simply to face judgement at the end of time with all the rest of us.

But Israel was not just another nation, they were a people 'holy to the LORD.' They were set apart to be in a relationship with God, so that through them he might ultimately save the world in Jesus. God could not let Israel simply descend into sin and idolatry, and their relationship with him dissipate into nothing. If he did, he would allow his purposes for the blessing and salvation of the world to be derailed.

God acts, because he will not allow his plans for the good and salvation of the world to be stopped. He intervenes within history, and brings his final judgement forward, in order to protect his relationship with Israel.

This is a message that isn't just found in chapter 7, but is repeated again and again throughout Deuteronomy. For instance, in chapter 29v18 Moses tells the people: "make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison."

In one sense you could say that an answer to the question 'why did God judge the Canaanite nations?', is 'because he loves you.' Without this moment of judgement, the whole history of Israel, and God's salvation plan for the world would have been derailed.

### *Working out the problem*

I think that we do have answers to why God judges and drives out the Canaanite nations - but most of us still don't like them. We still struggle with this.

This is where we both need to dig a little deeper and allow God to challenge us. I think that intellectually probably most of us can accept the logic of the two answers that I have given above to this question. Emotionally though most of us aren't quite there. In our hearts we are still troubled - we still don't 'get' why this is all necessary.

Because of that, I think that there's a temptation to try and explain away the judgement on the Canaanites, to try to make it more

palatable. If you explore some of the texts and ancient background to these commands, there is some justification for doing so. Many scholars think that it was actually just the cities and strongholds that fell under this command. Possibly, even then, it was only when the ruler and city in question had refused to surrender and submit to Israel. That all makes this much more limited than at first appears.

Even if that is all true though, the basic problem still remains. We see a whole people, even now in a smaller group, facing God's judgement.

I think our issue here is actually less about the Canaanites, and more about God's judgement more generally. We tend to be OK with the idea of God's judgement when it comes to particularly awful individuals – such as Hitler, Stalin, or Pol Pot. Indeed, many of us would demand it.

Instinctively though we assume that most people, ordinary people like us, are OK. Surely we don't deserve judgement? Do we?

That means that when we think of an entire nation facing God's judgement we struggle. However OK we may be with the idea of a particular wicked leader facing judgement, we struggle with the idea that the ordinary people might also be deserving of it.

I think that this is the root of our struggle with the driving out of the Canaanites. Were they all guilty? Do ordinary people really deserve judgement?

### *Can a whole nation be guilty?*

This whole issue of God's judgement is one that I have explored in much more detail in my film series *Struggling with Judgement*, and you may want to check it out.<sup>55</sup>

I do want to briefly explore the specific issue of whether a whole nation or group can be guilty here though. To help me do that, I want

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<sup>55</sup> It is available on [BurningHeart.org/swj](http://BurningHeart.org/swj)

us to think back to a tragedy from a few years back. In 2013 the world was rocked by news that a garment factory in Bangladesh had collapsed, killing more than 1,000 workers.<sup>56</sup>

As news of the tragedy came out, it became clear that the safety and welfare of the workers had been severely compromised over the years. The reason was that every effort had been made to cut costs. That was a process driven ultimately by the desires of western consumers – like me – for more clothes for less money.

At the time, most of us in the West were horrified by what we learned, and by the growing realisation that our comfort, our wealth, our fashion, had led (even indirectly) to such a tragedy. At the time we could at least comfort ourselves with the thought that we just didn't know what was going on.

Yet years have passed since then. How many of us have changed our shopping habits? How many of us have taken the time to research the issue? How many of us have done anything at all?

Now obviously not all clothing brands and fashion business are at fault - but lots are, and the issues still remain. One campaigning organisation, The labour behind the label sums up the situation today: "human rights abuses are systemic throughout the industry...It is an industry built on exploitation and...lack of transparency."<sup>57</sup>

My part in all that may be small – but it is real. I am part of a culture that is wrong – that in this area is wicked. However uncomfortable it may make me feel, the reality is that I am guilty.

That is just one example – we could also talk about climate change, or racial injustice, or many other issues. This is just one example. I have chosen it though because it is an example where my part feels quantifiable, and so it helps me to get my head around how a whole nation can be guilty of sin.

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<sup>56</sup> For more details, see

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013\\_Dhaka\\_garment\\_factory\\_collapse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_Dhaka_garment_factory_collapse)

<sup>57</sup> <https://labourbehindthelabel.org/who-we-are/> accessed 28/May/2021.

The Bible tells us that that was the case with the Canaanites - but on a grander scale. I may be guilty for the part my selfish thoughtlessness has played in the global fashion industry, but child sacrifice takes things to a whole new level.

This is still a message I find hard though, and I think for me that will always be the case with judgement. Yet however reluctantly I get there, I have come to realise both intellectually and emotionally that God's judgement on the Canaanites was just and fair. For all my struggles, I know God is still good.

### *Rediscovering grace*

Even as we struggle with this judgement though, Deuteronomy casts our minds forward not just to God's goodness, but also to his grace. While the wickedness of the Canaanites may have been particularly awful, the Bible tells us that actually all of us are guilty. As the Psalmist says: "All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one."<sup>58</sup>

We find ourselves in the strange situation that each of us is both victim and culprit - we suffer the consequences of a broken world, but in our own sinfulness we also contribute to its brokenness. As a result, we need God's grace. We need his grace to put things right, so there is no longer inequality and injustice, violence and exploitation. But also, we need God's grace to rescue us from the consequences of what we do - to forgive us.

As we'll explore in more detail in our final chapter, Deuteronomy gives us glimpses of the promise of that grace. It reminds us that God uses Israel, and then through Israel, Jesus, to bring that about. Uncomfortable as it may be to say so though, God's judgement on the Canaanites is part of that grace to all the rest of us. This moment of judgement safeguards God's relationship with Israel, and through it our hope of salvation.

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<sup>58</sup> Psalm 14v2-3.

### *An unexpected glimpse of grace*

Yet that brings me to my final point - which is the final issue that I think many of us have with the commands to destroy the Canaanites. There seems to be no hope of redemption. This grace doesn't seem to be offered to them. But I think that actually it is.

If you read these texts about driving out the Canaanites closely, the focus seems to be less about the destruction of individuals, and more about the destruction of a wicked nation and culture. That seems to me to hint at the possibility that if individuals or groups were to turn away from their culture and its wickedness and look instead to God, there might be a chance of grace.

As the rest of the OT rolls on there are scattered examples of exactly that happening.<sup>59</sup> I want to finish with my favourite – taking us back to Jericho, where we began this film, and the story of one woman's faith.

Our heroine is Rahab. Rahab was someone you might think was an unlikely candidate for Biblical stardom – she was a prostitute, and a Canaanite.<sup>60</sup> Despite all of that though, she's one of the great heroines of the book of Joshua.<sup>61</sup>

Rahab hid and helped Israelite spies sent to scout out her city of Jericho, and she did it because she believed that the Lord was, in her

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<sup>59</sup> We see lots of examples of messages of grace and redemption for other nations, but there are some specific examples relating to the Canaanite nations – see the story of Rahab below, the story of the Gibeonites (Joshua 9), and also the hint in Zechariah 9v7 that the whole nation of the Jebusites were actually ultimately incorporated into Israel.

<sup>60</sup> There have been some modern attempts to suggest that Rahab might not have been a prostitute, as the Hebrew word used to describe her in Joshua 2 is simply the normal Hebrew word for 'woman' (isha, אִשָּׁה). In some ways the point is not significant either way, as whatever her profession she is an example of a Canaanite who was rescued and saved by God's grace, as a result of her faith. However, in Joshua 6v25 she is also specifically described as a prostitute (zanah, זָנָה), so the traditional description does seem to be valid.

<sup>61</sup> Rahab's story is told in Joshua 2v1-21, and Joshua 6v22-25.



words, "God in heaven above and on the earth below."<sup>62</sup> Dangerous as it was for her, she chose to put her trust totally in God, turning her back on the walls and armies and beliefs of Jericho, and believing instead in the LORD.

When God brought the walls of Jericho crashing down, he saved Rahab and all her family. Not only did he rescue her from destruction, but he fully redeemed her life. She went on to marry Salmon, one of the leaders of the tribe of Judah. As a result, she became one of the ancestors first of King David, and ultimately of Jesus.<sup>63</sup> It's a story of hope and salvation, even in the midst of wickedness and judgement.

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## **Prayer**

Rather than suggesting a prayer for this chapter, I would like to encourage you to simply come to God with whatever struggles you still have with these passages, but also the ways he's challenged you. Pray Come Holy Spirit, and ask him to work in your heart.

Come Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>62</sup> Joshua 2v11.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew 1v5.

# Chapter 6

## GETTING DOWN TO DETAIL

*(Deuteronomy 12-26)*

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*How does the Old Testament Law relate to me?*

One of my heroes is the Anglo-Saxon King, Alfred the Great.<sup>64</sup> He's most often remembered for his heroic defence of his kingdom against the Vikings, which laid the foundations for the creation of the nation of England. What's really inspired me though, is that alongside all that he was also a man of great faith in Jesus, and something of a scholar.

One of his less well-known achievements is that he wrote one of the most important law codes in English history. That law code begins with the ten commandments and some translations of bits of Exodus, followed by some reflections on the New Testament and how the Old Testament law should be understood by Christians.<sup>65</sup>

Most of us are probably unlikely to be writing national laws any time soon, but that concern to work out how the laws of the Old Testament should relate to us as Christians today is one that we should all share. If we're honest, most of us don't find it easy.

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<sup>64</sup> To find out more about Alfred, see the biography of him by his friend and contemporary, Bishop Asser, available in translation at [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/63384/63384-h/63384-h.htm#sec\\_103](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/63384/63384-h/63384-h.htm#sec_103) or for a modern account and assessment see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred\\_the\\_Great](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_the_Great). I was always told that Alfred was the only European ruler between Marcus Aurelius (Roman Emperor 161-180 AD) and Alfonso the Wise of Castile (King of Castile, in Spain, 1252-1284 AD) who has left behind any surviving written works – an indicator of how extraordinary he really was.

<sup>65</sup> A complete text and modern English translation of the Law Code can be found at <https://www.heroicage.org/issues/18/gates.php> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> November 2021), the relevant sections are §6-64 in the Prologue.

Some aspects of the Old Testament law – or torah – are easier to understand than others. We've already looked at some ways in which this book of Deuteronomy is relevant and applicable to us as Christians in previous chapters. When it speaks of the character or grace of God, or of our need for forgiveness and salvation, we can see the connections quite easily.

In this chapter though we're going to turn to the bits of Deuteronomy that we often find harder to get our heads around - the details. We are going to be looking at chapters 12 to 26, which are full of detailed individual commands about all different aspects of life, and how the Israelites were supposed to live.

As we look at these chapters, we'll ask what they teach us about how to live as the people of God. Crucially we will be asking: what applies to me – and how – and what doesn't?

As we look at both the themes and the details of these chapters, we'll also be looking more widely as well. We'll be asking the wider questions: how as Christians should we read and understand Old Testament commandments? What is their relevance to me, now? How is God speaking to us through them?

*Why do we do this...but not that?*

One of my favourite treats is the classic full-English breakfast – bacon and eggs and sausages, black pudding, baked beans, tomatoes and the rest. I love it! If I was an Old Testament Israelite though, half of it would be off limits to me – no bacon, no sausages, no black pudding. Those are just some examples of things that Deuteronomy 14 tells the Israelites not to eat. Christians have always eaten foods – and done plenty of other things – that aren't allowed in the Old Testament law.

There are also lots of things that the law tells the Israelites to do that we don't – we don't circumcise our sons, worship only in Jerusalem, or cancel all debts every seven years (although I'm guessing some of us would be quite keen on that last one!).

Yet, when it comes to other parts of the law, we are as committed to them as any ancient Israelite. For instance, as we saw earlier in this series, we still count Deuteronomy 6v4-5 with its call to "love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength" as the greatest commandment.

All of which begs the question – why? Or more specifically, why do this...but not that?

### *Learning from the New Testament*

To answer that question, we have to look forward to the New Testament before we turn back to Deuteronomy. This tension between the things that we do and the things that we don't reflects two seemingly very different streams of what the New Testament teaches about the law.

Firstly, the New Testament strongly affirms the Old Testament law. As Paul explained to Timothy: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."<sup>66</sup> Clearly, Paul anticipated that we would read and love books like Deuteronomy. He encourages us that we should use them as a guide and resource for our 'training in righteousness,' because these words are 'God breathed' and through them God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit.

Elsewhere though, Paul (and the rest of the New Testament writers) is equally clear that we no longer have to follow the law. As Paul puts it very simply in Romans 6v14: "you are not under the law, but under grace."

That may all seem like a contradiction - but it's not. The New Testament is clear that for Christians the Old Testament law is useful, and God still speaks to us through it, but we are no longer bound by it.

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<sup>66</sup> 2 Timothy 3v16. While this refers to the whole Old Testament, and not just the law, it does obviously include the law – there are also lots of other New Testament examples in which the law is praised.

### *Leaving school*

Paul uses a helpful analogy in Galatians 3 and 4, in which he compares the law to a tutor or guardian. He explains that while we are children, we are subject to the authority of our tutors. Once we reach adulthood though, that all changes.

I never had a home tutor, but the illustration still works as I think back to my experience of school. There were lots of rules (and even punishments) that I was under that no longer apply to me. I can wear whatever clothes I like (no uniform policy), I don't need to worry about having to spend my Saturday mornings in detention, and I can even run in the corridors.

Paul tells us that a similar dynamic is at work as we move from the old covenant – and the law – to the new covenant, in Jesus. We are no longer under the authority of the old rules.

However, while I am no longer bound by the rules of my schooldays, they have helped me to understand and live life as a grown up. I still use what I learned, and I now see that many of the rules were there for our good. Even though my teachers can't punish me for things like fighting or bullying, I still try not to do them!

It is the same with the Old Testament law. It no longer has authority over us, but as Paul says elsewhere, it is 'holy, righteous and good.'<sup>67</sup> Most importantly of all, it still reveals God to us. It shows us his character and his ways, it unpacks what he loves and what he hates, and it shows us the importance of living life according to his ways. Not only so, it also demonstrates an example of what it looks like to do that – and that is priceless.

The question we tend to ask when reading the law is: "am I still bound by this command?" The principles above suggest that that is the wrong question. Instead, we should be asking: what does this teach me about God and what it means to be his people? If we ask

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<sup>67</sup> Romans 7v12

those questions, Deuteronomy 12-26 immediately begins to have relevance for us.

### *Learning from the themes of Deuteronomy*

If you read through the whole section, you will see all kinds of themes and priorities. Many scholars point out that the basic outline of these chapters seems to loosely follow the order of the ten commandments, and so once again we see the first priority of our relationship with God and our worship emphasised, as it has been throughout this book. Then – like the ten commandments themselves – the focus moves onto our relationships with each other, and all the various details of life.

The level of detail we find in these laws shows us that God is not a distant God. They show us that he cares about every aspect and detail of our lives, down to what we eat and what we wear. How gloriously different from so many other religions – God wants to be involved in our whole lives. That shows us that he is interested in Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday and 'secular' things as well church stuff.

Not only that, but these laws show us that God cares about all of us. Most ancient religions were focused on the rich and powerful and privileged. Deuteronomy does talk about them – for instance, half of Deuteronomy 17 is all about future kings of Israel. But Deuteronomy also talks a lot about supporting the poor, includes a law to protect the rights of foreign women captured in war, and gives specific instructions to rich employers to make sure their workers are not exploited.

How wonderful is that? If you've ever felt small or insignificant in this world – well those verses are for you. They are a reminder that God cares about you – God loves you.

I could go on, as there are plenty of themes here we can see and learn from.

### How does this apply to me?

It isn't just in the themes of these commands that we can find God – we can also find him in the details. It's the desire to know how we do that which is usually behind that consistent question: 'does this law apply to me?'

On one level the answer is always 'yes.' Paul tells us that all scripture is God-breathed – that means that every detail and every command tells us something of him, and he speaks to us through every verse.

On another level though the answer to the question 'does this law apply to me?' is always 'no.' We are not under law, and the punishments we read about later in the book (and that we'll look at in our final chapter), no longer apply to us.

That means that the question is perhaps better put: how does this law apply to me? What can I learn about God from it? In order to answer those questions, we need to ask another: why is this here? What is the purpose of this law?

Back in the time of the reformation some brilliant people spent a lot of time wrestling with this question. They came up with three helpful categories of Old Testament law: the civic; the ceremonial; and the moral.

#### *'Civic' laws*

The first type of law they identified is the civic – national laws and instructions for how society should run. We are no longer part of ancient Israel, and so these don't apply to us. That doesn't make them irrelevant though – in fact, quite the opposite! They show us something of God's heart, and his vision for this world he has created.

Let me give you an example. In Deuteronomy 24v19, we read: "When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow."

Now, I don't own any wheat fields. Even if I did though, I don't think that this law would apply directly to me.

The point of the law is to provide food and sustenance for the poor, the powerless, and the disadvantaged in society. In an ancient society like Israel, the best way to do that was to let them glean (as this is called) the leftovers and uncut bits of vineyards and fields. If you read the book of Ruth, you'll find this principle in action in chapter 2.

Today though, there are much better ways to look after the poor and disadvantaged than leaving bunches of wheat on the floor of a field and hoping someone spots them. The principle – the 'why?' behind the law – is still very relevant though. God doesn't change, so this teaches us that he cares – and will always care – about the disadvantaged in society. That means that we as his people, should act accordingly.

We actually have so many different examples through history of Christians doing exactly that. Think of William Wilberforce and the Clapham sect campaigning against the slave trade, or of the myriad Christians today volunteering and working in Food Banks, debt advice centres, or the like. Whether they realise it or not – all of them are acting on what we read here in Deuteronomy 24v19

That is all an example of how we can apply what the reformers called the "civic law", in our lives.

### *'Ceremonial' Laws*

The second type of law the reformers identified were the ceremonial laws. These are all the instructions and commands about Israel's worship, and particularly the temple and sacrificial system.

The main purpose of these laws was actually to point forwards to Jesus. The best place to look for an explanation of all this is in the New Testament book of Hebrews. Chapters 9 and 10 are all about how the Old Testament Temple, and all the sacrifices, point forward to Jesus.



The writer describes them as "a shadow of the good things that are coming" – by which he means what Jesus has done for us.<sup>68</sup>

Again, let me give you an example. This section of detailed laws opens in chapter 12 with a big chunk on worship, and it has two main points. The first is that the Israelites were told to get rid of all pagan worship and practices throughout the land. The second is that they were then commanded to worship God only in 'the place the Lord your God will choose'<sup>69</sup>

Now, there's lots we could look at here. I think that the main point though is to highlight and stress that there is only one way to God. That came first through this sacrificial system, and then through the one to which it points – Jesus.

That's increasingly controversial in our world and culture. We're often told that the different religions of the world are simply different paths up the same mountain, or encouraged to explore spirituality in our own way, without being bound by any one faith or dogma.

As we read this though, those ideas just fall apart. It's very clear that all the different religions around Israel didn't lead to God – in fact quite the opposite, they led the people away from God. The people of Israel are not to worship God as they please. Instead, the only way to God is the way that he has given us. As Jesus said to his disciples: "I am the way, the truth, and the life – no-one comes to the Father, except by me."<sup>70</sup>

That's the second type of law – the ceremonial. It relates to the whole system of Israelite sacrifices and worship, all of which were a shadow pointing forward to Jesus.

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<sup>68</sup> Hebrews 10v1.

<sup>69</sup> Deuteronomy 12v5. The place God did actually choose changed over time – it was initially the Tabernacle, which was pitched in Shiloh, and later the Temple in Jerusalem.

<sup>70</sup> John 14v6.

### *'Moral' laws*

The final type of law that the reformers identified was the moral. These are just simple moral commands, and they are as valid now as they were then. Even though we are not 'under' them, we are still called to do them.

We don't follow these commands because we are compelled to, but because they show us God's ways. I quoted Romans 6v14 earlier: "you are not under the law but under grace." Perhaps surprisingly to us, that wasn't an invitation to do what we like, but actually part of an exhortation to live life God's way – the preceding verses say this: "Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace."<sup>71</sup>

What does this look like in practice in Deuteronomy? Much of what we've looked at in previous chapters would actually fall into this category. They're full of general principles for the relationship between God and his people throughout the ages. An example would be the command to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength.<sup>72</sup>

Most of the detailed laws in chapters 12-26 probably fall into the other two categories, but there are some in our chapters which fall into this category pretty clearly.

For instance, Deuteronomy 25v13-15 is a command for shopkeepers and people buying and selling goods. It says: "Do not have two differing weights in your bag—one heavy, one light. Do not have two differing measures in your house—one large, one small. You must have accurate and honest weights and measures."

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<sup>71</sup> Romans 6v13-14.

<sup>72</sup> Deuteronomy 6v4-5.

Why? Well, using dodgy weights and measures is a way of cheating customers. It's a form of dishonesty or small-scale theft, and that goes against God's character.

Moses continues, "For the LORD your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly."<sup>73</sup> It's a moral command that is rooted in who God is – if he hated dishonesty then, then he still hates it, and we shouldn't do it.

That actually means that this principle is much more widely applicable than just calling for honesty amongst shopkeepers. The Bible doesn't say anything directly about modern issues like dishonest expenses claims or fiddling company accounts, but I think it's pretty clear from this verse that we shouldn't do them.

### *A helpful framework*

I find this division of the law into three different categories – the civic, the ceremonial, and the moral, really helpful. Asking which category any particular law falls into helps me to work out why it was written, and so what God might be saying to me through it.

This is just a framework to help us though – the threefold structure isn't found anywhere in the Bible, and at times it can be unclear which category to put a law into.

For instance, you could actually say that the last example I used is as much a Civic command as a moral one. The command to use accurate weights and measures establishes the importance of honest business practices, which are key in any society.

That's fine – because this categorisation should just be a framework to help us work out how we can learn from whichever law we're looking at. It's simply a guide to help us answer that key question: how does this law apply to me?

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<sup>73</sup> Deuteronomy 25v16.

### *Don't worry!*

It's also fine if we end up bamboozled by the whole thing and can't work out what the point of a particular law is. Use whatever help you can find – friends, pastors, books, etc. Most importantly of all, pray and ask the Holy Spirit for help. But don't worry if you don't understand everything.

There's a command in Deuteronomy 22v11 that I've never been able to work out: "do not wear clothes of wool and linen together." Many people much cleverer than me have spent a lot of time trying to work out what the point of that law is, and much of what they say is very persuasive. I have to confess, I'm still not sure any of us know the answer though!

### *Laws that bring us to God*

The point of all these laws overall though is to draw us closer to God, to show us his ways, and help us work out what it means in practice to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength.

As we finish, shall we pray that he'd help us?

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### **Prayer**

Lord God, thank you for these wonderful chapters – however difficult to understand we sometimes find them! Please open the eyes of all my heart, so that I may meet you as I read them, and learn how better to love you. Then help me to put what I learn into practice - help me to love you more in all I do. Come Holy Spirit. Amen.

# **Chapter 7**

## **GRACE THROUGH JUDGEMENT**

*(Deuteronomy 27-34)*

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### *Blessings and curses*

As Moses begins to draw his farewell sermon series to a close, he gives the people of Israel some instructions for a grand drama.<sup>74</sup> Once they have entered the promised land, half of the tribes of Israel are to gather on one mountain, called Mount Gerizim. The other half of the tribes are to gather on the hill opposite, called Mount Ebal. Once there, those on Mount Gerizim are to proclaim blessings over Israel, and those on Mount Ebal are to proclaim curses.

It must have been quite an occasion when they actually did it. The Levites declared blessings and curses and then all the people in their hundreds of thousands thundered back "Amen." I think God would give Hollywood a run for their money when it comes to spectacle and drama!

In this final chapter we're going to be looking at the last chunk of Deuteronomy – chapters 27-34. It's a bit of an eclectic collection – this drama, a bit of preaching, a song, some final blessings, and then an account of Moses' death.

The theme of blessings and curses is the thread that runs through all these chapters though. At one point Moses sums it up like this: "this day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I

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<sup>74</sup> The instructions are given in Deuteronomy 27, and in Joshua 8v30-35 we read about the ceremony actually happening.

have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life... ."75

In some ways this is quite an unsurprising ending – modern scholars have discovered that ancient treaties often ended with ceremonies of blessing and cursing. There's an element of this that would therefore have felt familiar to the Israelites. This was a treaty, or covenant, between God and Israel.

As we'll see though as we explore this in the rest of this chapter, this treaty comes with a twist. Unexpectedly, devastatingly, it comes with the expectation of failure. The emphasis is not on the blessings, but the curses. As Moses looks far into the distant future, he prophesies catastrophe and judgement. But then – even more surprisingly – through the clouds of disaster and darkness, he speaks a note of hope and restoration, of the saving grace of God.

### *Standing at the crossroads*

These final chapters of Deuteronomy begin with a choice. It is a choice between walking with God and following in his ways on one hand, and walking away from God and doing things differently on the other.

Essentially Moses places Israel at a crossroads. It's a crossroads where the final destinations for each route are clearly signposted and marked out. On the one hand they are told: "blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God."<sup>76</sup>

Moses then gives a series of beautiful and poetic blessings. There's a lovely little wordplay on 'fruit' at one point with promises of abundance in blessings on the fruit of the land itself (flowers and crops and plants), in the fruit of their animals (as their flocks and herds increase), and in the fruit of their own bodies (the promise of children). Blessings everywhere!

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<sup>75</sup> Deuteronomy 30v19-20.

<sup>76</sup> Deuteronomy 28v2

This is what wellness, God's way, would like for them.

The signpost in the other direction is equally clear though. Moses tells them: "if you do not obey the LORD your God...curses will come on you and overtake you."<sup>77</sup> What follows here is then actually far longer than the blessings just before. It is a series of curses inverting the earlier blessings, but then also expanding on them. At times the curses of Deuteronomy 28 are very difficult to read, as Moses promises the downfall and destruction of the nation in graphic and harrowing detail.

### *Singing a song of judgement*

The reason for this is that God always knew what path Israel would ultimately take. In chapters 29 to 32 that is spelt out, as Moses prophesies how Israel will walk away from God, and what that means.

As is often the case when something significant is happening in the Old Testament the prophecy actually comes twice. First there is a simple prose account and then there is a song.

I find the poetry of the song, which comes in chapter 32, really brings this all to life for me. It can feel quite jarring, because much of it is about judgement, and judgement isn't normally something we want to sing about! Even so, it's beautiful and evocative word pictures help me to grasp what is going on, and why.

The song begins with a declaration of the greatness and goodness of God:

*I will proclaim the name of the LORD.  
Oh, praise the greatness of our God!  
He is the Rock, his works are perfect,  
and all his ways are just.<sup>78</sup>*

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<sup>77</sup> Deuteronomy 28v15.

<sup>78</sup> Deuteronomy 32v3-4.

I love that image of God as the rock – solid, secure, unshakeable in his greatness, but also pure and good and perfect. I think it's so important that we start here – because so often when we go wrong, it's because we lose sight of who God is. We forget about his goodness and greatness and so we seek elsewhere and wander away from God.

But Moses doesn't stop here. As he continues, he begins to speak of God in more personal times – he speaks of love:

*God shielded Israel and cared for him;  
he guarded him as the apple of his eye,  
like an eagle that stirs up its nest  
and hovers over its young.<sup>79</sup>*

It's an image of such tender and loving strength, as God watches over and protects Israel.

And yet, Israel turns away. Moses continues:

*They abandoned the God who made them  
and rejected the Rock their Saviour.<sup>80</sup>*

In many ways this is the key moment in the song because it is here that the song turns to judgement.

### *Spreading poison*

Earlier in the prose bits, Moses describes turning away from God as "a bitter poison."<sup>81</sup> Most of my experience of poison comes from gardening. Liz and I love gardens and are really blessed to have one of our own - but we've had some issues with weeds, and had to resort to weedkillers. They can look very innocuous, but they're not. They're poison, and if you spray them in the wrong place, everything they touch will die.

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<sup>79</sup> Deuteronomy 32v10-12.

<sup>80</sup> Deuteronomy 32v15-17.

<sup>81</sup> Deuteronomy 29v18.



Most weed killers apparently work by getting the plant to absorb them, and then blocking off the life-giving nutrients the plant needs to survive. In Moses' song we see something very similar happening as the people turn away from God. Moses sings that they:

*"made God jealous with their foreign gods."<sup>82</sup>*

This isn't just about the people abandoning God for a competitor though. These other gods – or any other thing we may turn to for meaning or purpose other than God – are actually a mirage, a fake. Moses calls them out as:

*"false Gods, which are not God,"*

and later simply says they are *"worthless."*<sup>83</sup>

Worse, as the people turn to these idols, they turn away from God. Like dying plants swapping nourishment for poison, they are cut off from the source of all life and goodness and wellness – or in the language of Deuteronomy, all blessing.

That actually challenges and imperils the grace and blessings of God to all of them, and his plans through them to bless us all. And so, he acts. He acts to stop the spread of the poison. He acts in judgement.

### *Judgement foretold*

The song continues:

*"a fire will be kindled by my wrath,  
one that burns down to the realm of the dead below.  
It will devour the earth and its harvests  
and set afire the foundations of the mountains  
I will heap calamities on them."<sup>84</sup>*

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<sup>82</sup> Deuteronomy 32v16.

<sup>83</sup> Deuteronomy 32v17 and 21.

<sup>84</sup> Deuteronomy 32v22-23.

I find it very interesting though that this word of hot anger and judgement isn't spoken in the heat of the moment. There's nothing impetuous or ill-considered about God's anger. We actually find it spoken here in prophecy centuries before the judgement it speaks of will fall on Israel.

I think that that is key to understanding it. In many ways that is actually the key to understanding the whole Old Testament law. In the chapter before God tells Moses why he has given him this song to sing: "this song will testify against them, because it will not be forgotten by their descendants. I know what they are disposed to do, even before I bring them into the land I promised them."<sup>85</sup>

Moses' song is actually given to him for the sake of their descendants, and for all those who come after – us. It is designed to show us that all along God knew what would happen.

### *No plan B*

For me, this completely changes how I see the Old Testament law. Too often I think we see the history of God's dealings with his people as a sort of Plan A and Plan B.

In this thinking, Plan A is the law. God gives Israel the rules and instructions they need in order to be good, and to earn the ongoing blessings of God. But Israel fluffs it – they get it all wrong, as the rest of the Old Testament shows us. God then brings judgement on them and sends them into exile. At that point God initiates Plan B – which is grace, which is Jesus.

Here in Deuteronomy though, even as God through Moses was still giving Israel the law, we see that his plan was always grace through Jesus. God tells Moses: "I know what they are disposed to do [and what's going to happen], even before I bring them into the land."<sup>86</sup> So,

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<sup>85</sup> Deuteronomy 31v21.

<sup>86</sup> Deuteronomy 31v21.

it seems Plan A, was never actually the plan at all – God knew that they would turn away from him, and that judgement would follow.

Yet that was never going to be the end of the story. Plan A was always Jesus. Plan A was always grace and forgiveness and salvation – and there was never a plan B at all.

Just when you think as you read it that the song has finished, it continues unexpectedly:

*"The LORD will vindicate his people  
and relent concerning his servants  
when he sees their strength is gone."<sup>87</sup>*

It's a stunning and glorious reversal, as God acts now not in judgement but mercy. When all their pretence is gone, and the emptiness that they followed has been exposed, and no-one and nothing is left to look to, save only God himself, he carries on:

*"See now that I myself am he!  
There is no god besides me.  
I put to death and I bring to life,  
I have wounded and I will heal."<sup>88</sup>*

After all that has been said in the song, and its prophecies of Israel's failure and judgement, Moses's words in Deuteronomy then finish in the next chapter with a poem of blessing. For all the focus on judgement – it is grace and blessing that is ultimately the loudest and longest note as this book comes to a close. Israel will fail – but God's grace will not.

*Looking forward to Jesus*

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<sup>87</sup> Deuteronomy 32v36

<sup>88</sup> Deuteronomy 32v39

Deuteronomy just hints at how God will do this. For instance, the song finishes with an enigmatic promise that God will: "make atonement for his land and people."<sup>89</sup>

Elsewhere in these chapters Moses speaks of a saving transformation, how: "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."<sup>90</sup>

There's enough here that we can follow the story through to the end. Looking back, we can then see clearly what probably even Moses could only see hazily and in shadow. We can see a barren hill and new cut grave outside Jerusalem, where the Son of God himself would die and rise again for us and for our salvation. We can see an upper room of disciples praying, when with rushing wind and tongues of flame the Holy Spirit came and filled all those who were there.

This is our story – this is the gospel. This was always God's plan A, God's only plan.

### *What's the point of the law?*

But...why? Why if that was always God's plan, didn't God just send Jesus at this point? He could have done, and the whole sorry tale of Israel's sins and failures would have been skipped.

This is actually something that Paul spent a lot of time wrestling with - what was the point of the law? If salvation comes through faith in Jesus, then why was the law necessary?

Like a many-sided diamond there are multiple angles and facets to the answer, some of which we've touched on in earlier chapters. A key one that Paul focuses in on echoes the lessons of these final chapters of Deuteronomy.

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<sup>89</sup> Deuteronomy 32v43.

<sup>90</sup> Deuteronomy 30v6.

It is that the law is here to show us that we're not as good as we think we are. We cannot obey God. We cannot be good. Paul explains in Romans 3v20: "through the law we become conscious of our sin."

Think of this like a powerful spotlight on a blemished sheet. In the shadows of the half-light we can miss the flaws, but when the spotlight comes on, suddenly they are revealed for everyone to see.

*Showing us our need for grace*

Through all the ages our instinctive faith has always been that we can be good. We assume that the path to God, or the road to enlightenment, or a better world, is achievable by us. We believe that everything can be achieved by us being good, working hard, following the rules.

All the other religions of the world, from the pagans of old, to modern day faiths like Islam or Hinduism, have really always taught that. Even the more individualistic spiritualities or philosophies of today actually preach the same message. They tell us to 'be true to yourself.' They tell us the key thing is to ask; 'what does your heart tell you?' They tell us to look within yourself and, that when we do, we will find everything we need.

Except we won't. That is the great lesson of the law.

The law begins with God rescuing and saving Israel and bringing them into a covenant relationship with him. Then after this perfect start, God gave them this law – this perfect blueprint for life, and he told them to follow it.

If ever there was a way to be good, a route to holiness, that we could achieve through our own efforts, then this was it. Yet, they couldn't do it.

We think we can do it and that we can be good. Sometimes we even think that we are good - until God gives us the yardstick of the law. Then, under the harsh spotlight of the law and its standards, we're exposed. We are finally forced to recognise our sin.

We see this in various different places in the law. For instance, the whole sacrificial system is really a response to sin. It is a gift from God to Israel to allow them to repent and receive his forgiveness.

### *Deuteronomy points to Jesus*

In these final chapters of Deuteronomy, we begin to see that God's plan was always bigger than the Law. The Law always pointed beyond itself to a real solution to all our sin. God knew that the people would not be able to follow his commands and keep his covenant with them.

He tells Moses in chapter 31v16: "these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them."

The blessings and curses, the prophecies of judgement, and the whole ending of this book of Deuteronomy, are here to show us that. These chapters turn us away from believing in ourselves or trusting in the other gods and beliefs of this world. They lay before us the consequences and disasters of a life (and world) without God.

Yet for all the darkness of these closing chapters, their ultimate intent is to point us towards the grace that will then dawn beyond them. They give us a glimpse of grace renewed – of atonement beyond judgement, and of transformation of the heart. These chapters are ultimately here to stir up in us a recognition of our need for God, that we may turn to him and be saved.

### *The End*

That is seen very clearly in the final chapter. It's a surprising chapter, written by a later narrator, probably long after the events it describes. It brings the book, and the whole Old Testament Law, to an end.

You might think that it would close on a high note, but instead it finishes with Moses' death. We are tantalisingly close to the Promised Land – in sight of it even, but short. Not only that, but the reason we

are short of the Promised Land is because of Moses's own failures. As God explains in Deuteronomy 32, Moses would not enter the land because he too had 'broken faith' with God.<sup>91</sup> Even Moses, the great hero of the Old Testament, had dramatically and catastrophically fallen short at least once.

The narrator then turns to the future. At first his words seem positive, but the final words are more ambiguous. The narrator comments

"Since then, no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face"<sup>92</sup>

While the narrator does then remind us of Moses' greatness, it's a surprisingly downbeat ending, written against the backdrop of both Moses' and Israel's failures. It seemingly dismisses the hope and victories to come in the Promised Land.

That changes though when you realise that the words about a prophet like Moses echo a promise made earlier in the book, in chapter 18. In it we are told that one day, "the LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you."<sup>93</sup>

When we realise that that is being echoed in chapter 34, we realise that Deuteronomy (and the whole Old Testament Law) actually finishes by pointing us to Jesus. He is the promised prophet like Moses that this points us towards.

And that's the note that I want to end this booklet on too – because that is ultimately the main point and purpose of Deuteronomy. It is here to point us to Jesus, to show us our need for him, and hint at the promise of the grace and salvation that we receive in him.

It shows us that it is through him that we can experience life as God always intended it, that we can experience wellness...God's way

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<sup>91</sup> Deuteronomy 32v52

<sup>92</sup> Deuteronomy 34v10

<sup>93</sup> Deuteronomy 18v18

What's the point of Deuteronomy? What's Deuteronomy all about?  
In a word – Jesus.

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## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, as we reflect on Israel's sins and failings, we are also so conscious of our own. We repent of them [you may want to think of specific sins you need to repent from here] and ask that you could forgive us for all that we do wrong.

And yet Lord, we rejoice in amazement at your grace and forgiveness. As we finish this series, we ask you to show us afresh the beauty of the cross, and the beauty of your grace and forgiveness.

Fill us afresh with your Holy Spirit – circumcise our hearts and draw us closer to you. Come Holy Spirit. Amen.



# TWO FINAL QUESTIONS...

We hope and pray that this series has been a blessing to you, and that it has drawn you closer to God and deepened your relationship with him. If it has, we want to ask you and your group two final questions:

- would you consider giving towards the costs of future series?
- can you please pray for us?

## GIVE...

[BurningHeart.org/give](https://BurningHeart.org/give)

All our materials are available free of charge, so that money is not a barrier to anyone engaging with God through them – but that also means that we are reliant on donations for our funding.

If you would like to give towards our ministry, we would be grateful for any amount – whether 5 pence or £5million! The Bible is very clear that what matters in our giving is how generous we are with what we have, and not how much we give in absolute terms (see Mark 12v41-44). We will not know how generous you are actually being – but God will!

We would also encourage you to prioritise your own church when planning your giving. Please don't stop your giving to them to give to us!

# **PRAY...**

We believe in prayer! As James tells us, "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." (James 5v16). Please can you pray for us and for our ministry? Pray that God would use our resources to speak to people and meet with them. Pray that God would inspire us as we look to make more resources. And pray that God would provide all that we need to resource what he has called us to do.

# Appendix A

## **WELLNESS GOD'S WAY**

### **Group Study Guide**

#### WELCOME...

Welcome to our Deuteronomy: Wellness God's Way series. Our vision and prayer for you and your group as you watch these films is that they would make Deuteronomy come alive for you, opening up the text and helping you meet with God and be transformed.

We'd love to pray for you specifically as you work through these sessions, and it would also really help us to know who's running the series – so if you can, please do let us know by registering your group at [burningheart.org/register](http://burningheart.org/register).

#### SESSION OUTLINES...

The notes for each session give a suggested outline and timings for a one-hour session – but feel free to adapt that to your circumstances and preferences.

The outline and questions are designed to be discussion starters, rather than too proscriptive – don't worry if you only get through one or two in the time available, or even if your conversation takes you in different directions completely. What matters is that you are all engaging with God, and to a lesser extent this wonderful book of Deuteronomy.

## A LITTLE EXTRA HELP...

Did you know that you can download each film in advance of your session, so you can avoid technical glitches? Go to the 'extras' section on [burningheart.org/deuteronomy](http://burningheart.org/deuteronomy) for instructions.

If anyone in the group misses a week, why not send them the link so they can catch up? There are also podcast and e-book versions of each session available in the "extras" section of the website.

Don't forget that we'd also love to pray for you – just let us know who you are by registering on the link above.

## DIGGING DEEPER...

If any of your group want to dig a little deeper we've got lots of resources to help – we've put together a daily devotional guide, as well as "extra essays" on the authorship of Deuteronomy or some difficult questions. Just go to the "extras" section on the website.

# Session 1: Introduction

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## WELCOME...

In this first session we'll begin to explore Deuteronomy – and how it's much more exciting and life-giving than we often realise.

Start the session by opening in prayer and/or worship.

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## WATCH... (20 mins)

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## DISCUSS... (25 mins)

- What are you hoping for from this series?
  - What is your attitude towards Deuteronomy? How has that changed after watching the film?
  - Read Deuteronomy 4v40.
    - What are the main points of this verse?
    - How do you respond to what it says?
  - David talked about the need for a 'Copernican Revolution', to re-orientate our lives to put God at the centre of everything? How do you feel about that? How are you doing at it?
-

## PRAY... (15 mins)

- Spend some time praying that God would meet you and speak to you through this series
  - Ask each member of the group what has challenged them most in this session – and then pray about what is shared
  - Pray for each other as you would normally at the end of a session
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# **Session 2:**

# **Remembering Grace**

*Deuteronomy 1-4*

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## WELCOME...

In this second session we'll explore Moses' first sermon, in chapters 1-4, looking at how they re-tell Israel's stories and what that shows us about God and us.

Start the session by opening in prayer and/or worship.

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## WATCH... (20 mins)

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## DISCUSS... (25 mins)

- What are your expectations when you read the stories of the Old Testament? Has that changed at all in light of what was said in the film?
- Read Deuteronomy 4v9. How do you think we can best "be careful, and watch ourselves closely so that we do not forget the things our eyes have seen or let them fade from our heart as long as we live"?

- David spoke about remembering our own experiences of God's grace in our lives. What is your story and experience of God? Use the remaining time for discussion to share your stories with each other.
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## PRAY... (15 mins)

- Spend some time giving thanks to God for his grace. Pray both about the general and universal grace we have all received in Jesus, and the specific testimonies you have just heard from each other.
  - Ask God to meet with each of you now, and renew your awareness of his grace and presence in your lives. Spend some time simply waiting on God in silence and allowing him to meet with each of you.
  - Ask one member of the group (maybe not the most obvious person!) to pray for God to help you all to remember his grace, and keep it fresh in your hearts
  - Pray for each other as you would normally at the end of a session.
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# **Session 3: The Perfect 10**

## *Deuteronomy 5*

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### WELCOME...

How well do we really know the ten commandments? In this session we'll explore them afresh, asking whether they're as much about relationship as rules.

Start the session by opening in prayer and/or worship.

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### WATCH... (20 mins)

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### DISCUSS... (25 mins)

- Read Deuteronomy 5v1-22. What strikes or surprises you from this familiar passage as you read it?
- How do you feel about the idea that rules and obedience are a part of our relationship with God?
- Read Deuteronomy 5v28-29. Do you agree that God's call to obedience is for our own good? How does that change the way you react to this chapter?
- What does obedience to God look like for us, today? Is there anything that needs to change in your lives?

## PRAY... (15 mins)

- Ask God to meet with each of you now and deepen his relationship with you. Ask him to show you more fully what it means for you to follow him. Spend some time simply waiting on God in silence and allowing him to meet with each of you.
  - Pray together as a group about the things you shared in the final part of the discussion about what obedience looks like for you today.
  - Pray for each other as you would normally at the end of a session.
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# **Session 4:**

# **The Meaning of the Law**

*Deuteronomy 6-11*

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## WELCOME...

This session looks at the opening half of Moses' longest sermon in the book and explores how it shows us the purpose of the Law, and the priority of loving God.

Start the session by opening in prayer and/or worship.

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## WATCH... (20 mins)

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## DISCUSS... (25 mins)

- Read Deuteronomy 6v20-24. How would you answer this question? Has today's session changed that at all?
- Look at the rest of that passage – how would you update this drama for your own children (or friends), if they asked you what the meaning of your faith was?
- Read Deuteronomy 6v4-5. How do you feel about being commanded to love God? As your first priority?

- What does this actually look like in practice?
- 

## PRAY... (15 mins)

- Ask God to meet with each of you now and help you to love him more deeply. Spend some time simply waiting on God in silence and allowing him to meet with each of you.
- Pray together as a group about the things you shared in the final part of the discussion about what loving God looks like in practice. Pray particularly for any areas you identified as difficult or challenging.
- Pray for each other as you would normally at the end of a session.

# **Session 5:**

# **What about the Canaanites?**

## *Deuteronomy 7*

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### WELCOME...

This session looks at one of the most challenging bits of the whole Bible – God's commands to the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites. How could God have done that?

Start the session by opening in prayer and/or worship.

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### WATCH... (20 mins)

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### DISCUSS... (25 mins)

- How do you feel about God's command to destroy the Canaanite nations?
- Has this film changed your feelings at all? What did you think of the two key explanations that David gave? (that they were guilty of extraordinary wickedness, and that Israel's calling as God's people needed to be safeguarded)
- How do you feel about the idea of God's judgement in general?

- In the film David spoke of the connection between God's grace in restoring and saving the world and his judgement. How do you feel about that idea?
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## PRAY... (15 mins)

- This is a particularly difficult theme, and so it is important that we take time both to acknowledge that and to pray. Take some time at the end of the session to ask each person how they are feeling about all this. Then pray about it – pray about the issues that have been shared, and ask God to meet you all by his Holy Spirit and minister to your hearts and souls.
  - Don't worry if you run out of time to do anything else – but if you do have more time, pray for any specific situations and systemic areas of sin that have come up in the session (such as the sinfulness in the global fashion industry that David mentioned).
  - Pray for each other as you would normally at the end of a session.
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# **Session 6:**

## **Getting down to detail**

*Deuteronomy 12-26*

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### WELCOME...

In this session we'll look at the details of Deuteronomy, with individual laws from chapters 12-26. We'll explore how we as Christians should understand and apply them to our lives.

Start the session by opening in prayer and/or worship.

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### WATCH... (20 mins)

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### DISCUSS... (25 mins)

- Has today's film helped you to understand the Old Testament Law any better? Do you feel more confident about reading it?
- Read Deuteronomy 15v1-11.
  - Why are these laws here? What is their purpose?
  - What do they show us about God, and what it means to be his people?

- In light of that, how do these laws apply to you?
  - Has working through this passage made you any more confident about reading passages in the Old Testament Law?
  - If you have time, read Deuteronomy 19v1-14, asking the same questions.
  - If you still have time, read Deuteronomy 24v6-7, asking the same questions.
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## PRAY... (15 mins)

- Pray together as a group, asking God to meet with each of you when you read the Old Testament law and reveal himself and his ways to you.
  - Take some time in silence to meditate and reflect on the things you have looked at in this session. Ask that God would meet and speak to you in the silence.
  - Pray into the specific things you discussed about your lives as you studied the passages in Deuteronomy in the discussion time.
  - Pray for each other as you would normally at the end of a session.
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# **Session 7:**

# **Grace through Judgement**

*Deuteronomy 27-34*

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## WELCOME...

In this final session we'll explore how Deuteronomy closes with a focus on both judgement and blessing, and how that point us to Jesus and our need for God's grace.

Start the session by opening in prayer and/or worship.

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## WATCH... (20 mins)

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## DISCUSS... (25 mins)

- Read Deuteronomy 31v19-22.
  - What is the point that these verses are making?
  - Does this change your understanding of the blessings and curses prophesied in this part of Deuteronomy?
  - How does it impact your understanding of the Old Testament Law more generally?

- In the film, David talked about Deuteronomy pointing forwards to Jesus? What do you think about that?
  - As this is the final session in the series, take some time to share with one another what (if anything!) you have learned over the course of the whole series.
    - In what ways has it changed your understanding of Deuteronomy?
    - In what ways has it drawn you closer to God and deepened your relationship with him?.
- 

## PRAY... (15 mins)

- Pray together as a group about the things you shared in the final part of the discussion about what you have learnt through this series.
- Pray into the ways in which this series has drawn you closer to God and deepened your relationship with him:
  - Take some time to pray as a group to thank him for those things
  - Take some time to ask that he would root those things deeply in your hearts, praying 'Come Holy Spirit' and waiting on God.
- Pray for each other as you would normally at the end of a session.

## Appendix B

# **Who wrote Deuteronomy, and when?**

### *Introduction*

Throughout the film series and this booklet I have followed the witness of the book of Deuteronomy itself about its origins, understanding the text as the written record of a series of sermons (with some other material) preached by Moses shortly before his death. However, many modern scholars take a different view on the origins of Deuteronomy. I think that it is important to acknowledge that difference and take some time to explain why I hold the view that I do. I believe that there are strong reasons for believing that Deuteronomy is largely Mosaic, as it claims.

### *Why don't the films mention any of this?*

I spent some time weighing up whether I should include some discussions of this in the film series, but in the end decided not to do so. The main reason for that is that I think that this discussion is subtly off topic. The vision for my films is to seek to listen to the Bible, and to God speaking through it, whereas this is a debate about the Bible itself. The two are obviously connected, and I do hope that viewers of the films will go away having learnt lots about Deuteronomy. However, that is only ever a means to an end – we study Deuteronomy so that we can hear God speaking through it. When planning the film series, I concluded that to devote significant time to essentially academic

discussions of dating and authorship would actually distract from that primary purpose.<sup>94</sup>

My intended audience in the films is not academic Bible scholars, but ordinary Christians seeking to know more of God. Obviously, there is some overlap between the two categories, but the concerns of each are different. While determining the origins and dates of Biblical books is one of the primary focuses of modern academic biblical studies, it is only ever of preliminary concern for the ordinary Christian. It is one part of a host of different beliefs that underpin what we believe about the Bible, and how we read it. Those beliefs also include our belief in the existence of God, our faith in Jesus, what we believe about the Holy Spirit, our understanding of scripture as a whole, and various other elements. It is important for us to be able to be confident that what we believe is built on a solid foundation, but we don't all have to prove every element of that foundation each time we come to the Bible.

My experience as a pastor suggests that different people respond quite differently to these questions. My wife and I are examples of the two ends of the spectrum. I am always wanting to prove everything, whether that means studying the arguments for the existence of God or for the Mosaic origin of Deuteronomy. By contrast, Liz finds that all rather tedious – she's put her faith in God and just trusts him on the details. The difference is more one of temperament than intellect or faith. She's every bit as clever as I am, and my faith in God is pretty strong – we just respond differently in this area.

Those who share Liz's temperament will probably have been relieved that the film series didn't focus in on questions of Deuteronomy's date and authorship – and they probably aren't going to read this essay. Others who are more in the middle of this

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<sup>94</sup> I will confess that my own experience in planning and writing the series has contributed to that conclusion. When studying Deuteronomy for its own sake I found that the text came alive, and God was really speaking to me through it. Once I turned to these academic questions though I found the process much drier and harder work and was much less conscious of God's voice.

continuum, will probably care that there are cogent reasons for holding to a traditional view on the Mosaic origin of Deuteronomy, but be much less interested in actually exploring that view for themselves. They may well be reading this – but probably won't need to read much further. The final group though are those like me – people who want the whole argument. The beauty of an internet-based resource is that I am able to examine these issues for those who want to explore further, but without forcing them on those who don't.

There are also practical reasons for exploring questions around the origin of Deuteronomy in a supplementary essay, and not in the films themselves. I do not think that film is a format that naturally lends itself to this form of detailed discussion, and this form of detailed discussion is also very difficult to make visually compelling on film. I concluded it would work much better to provide these thoughts in a written form than on film.

While I have spent considerable time and energy reading Deuteronomy and studying what has been written about it, I am aware that I am a preacher and not an Old Testament scholar. There are others far cleverer and better informed than I am who have also written on this subject, both in general and more specifically regarding the origins of Deuteronomy. I would commend the following:

- Amy Orr-Ewing *Why Trust The Bible?* (IVP, 2005)
- K.A.Kitchen *On The Reliability Of The Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003)
- Christopher Wright *Deuteronomy* (Hendrickson, 1996), p6-8
- J.G.McConville *Deuteronomy* (IVP, 2002), p21-40
- Ajith Fernando *Deuteronomy* (Crossway, 2012), p25-32
- Daniel I. Block *The Gospel According to Moses* (Eugene Oregon, 2012), p21-60

Amy Orr-Ewing's general book and Christopher Wright's commentary are relatively slim volumes that should be easily accessible to all. The other four books are weightier and longer, and probably more aimed at academics and preachers. The page numbers given after the books specifically on Deuteronomy concern

the discussions of authorship and dating – but I'd recommend the rest of the books too.

### *The two different views*

The book's claims about itself are relatively straightforward, as hopefully comes through in the film series. It claims to be predominantly the words of Moses, with more than 96% of the text presented as spoken by him. His words are mainly sermons, although towards the end there is also a song (32v1-43), a series of blessings (33v2-29), and some other instruction (e.g. 27). The remaining 4% of Deuteronomy is presented as the words of an editor. The texts suggests that Moses himself wrote down some of what he preached (e.g. 28v58, 27v3).<sup>95</sup> As the last chapter of the book records Moses' death though, it is clear the final form of the book was drawn together by a later editor. There is no clear indication of who this editor was, or when they wrote. I think that Deuteronomy 34v10 suggests that significant time has passed since Moses' death – but I could easily be wrong.

This understanding of Deuteronomy's origins was universally accepted by both Jewish and Christian commentators until the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Over the past 200 years though it has been supplanted in most academic circles by a view that Deuteronomy was written much later, and probably in stages. The starting point for this new thesis was the observation of similarities between parts of Deuteronomy and the reforms of King Josiah of Judah (640-609 BC) by W.M.L de Wette in 1805, an observation that became one of the foundations of an analysis of the origins of the whole Pentateuch (Genesis – Deuteronomy) by Julius Wellhausen in 1885. Wellhausen's thesis, known as the 'Documentary Hypothesis,' became the dominant view on the origins of the Pentateuch for over a century, and remains highly

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<sup>95</sup> For more on the subject of whether Moses was responsible for writing down his sermons, see Daniel Block 'Recovering the Voice of Moses: the Genesis of Deuteronomy' in *The Gospel According to Moses* (Oregon, 2012)

influential today.<sup>96</sup> In this view, the core of the book of Deuteronomy (usually seen as chapters 12-26) is identified as being the 'book of the law' whose discovery is recounted in 2 Kings 22, and it is usually seen as having been written around this time. There are then various different hypotheses as to exactly when it was written, and by whom, and how the rest of the book of Deuteronomy then came to be written and compiled.<sup>97</sup> While there are significant differences between the details of how different commentators would re-construct the pre-history and date of Deuteronomy, the majority of critical scholars today would follow this reconstruction of Deuteronomy's origins to some degree.

### *Critiquing the critics*

The 'Documentary Hypothesis' and subsequent sceptical reconstructions of the composition of the Pentateuch are examples of the 'historical-critical' method of biblical scholarship. It is a method that sets aside the traditional understandings of the different Biblical texts and seeks instead to examine them from a more 'neutral' viewpoint using literary and historical techniques. On the basis of this research many Biblical books have been re-dated, deconstructed into various original sources, and traditional views of their authorship rejected. This process is often reported with very high levels of

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<sup>96</sup> Most academic books on any of the first five books of the Bible will give some form of overview of the 'Documentary Hypothesis' - but for those without access to academic commentaries there is also a Wikipedia page on it at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary\\_hypothesis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_hypothesis). As is often the case with Wikipedia articles, it largely ignores more conservative scholarship, but it does give a helpful overview of this hypothesis for those who are interested. For an analysis that is less accepting of the Documentary Hypothesis, I have found the following helpful: Daniel Block 'Recovering the Voice of Moses: the Genesis of Deuteronomy' in *The Gospel According to Moses*, p21-51, and Gordon McConville *Deuteronomy* (IVP 2002), p21-33.

<sup>97</sup> Again, most academic commentaries on Deuteronomy will sketch out the broad outlines of the various views, but for those without access to academic libraries there is a Wikipedia page at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deuteronomist> (albeit again largely ignoring more conservative scholarship).

confidence and precision. One of my main reasons for rejecting many of the conclusions drawn on this basis is that I am profoundly sceptical of how much weight these techniques can bear.<sup>98</sup>

I have been very influenced by a masterful essay written by C.S.Lewis in 1959, *Fern-Seed and Elephants*.<sup>99</sup> Lewis critiques some of the problems with this methodology as applied to New Testament studies.<sup>100</sup> It is an intriguing essay in part because the genesis of much historical-critical scholarship lay in the use of techniques of literary criticism, which Lewis was so familiar with from his own work as a Professor of English Literature. Lewis explores various ways in which he distrusts not the conclusions, but the methodology of 'modern' biblical scholars. Towards the end of the essay he makes a telling observation: "everywhere, except in theology, there has been a vigorous growth of scepticism about scepticism itself."<sup>101</sup>

My own academic journey is far shallower and less brilliant than that Lewis', but I have found myself with similar doubts about the methodology of the historical-critical method. In my case the doubts came from my experiences as an undergraduate, when I studied history. As its name suggests, one of the foundations of the historical-critical method was the application of historical methods to biblical studies. When Wellhausen (and others) wrote in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, he was using the most up to date historical methodology. Central to that methodology was the 'objective' application of 'scientific' methods, to "tell how it really was."<sup>102</sup> In the 135 years since Wellhausen wrote though, historical scholarship has grown much more sceptical and

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<sup>98</sup> The Documentary Hypothesis itself is an excellent example of this precision and confidence, and the growing divergences from it even amongst critical scholars is perhaps an illustration of how shaky the foundations of that confidence may be.

<sup>99</sup> Available as part of the collection of essays *Fern Seed and Elephants* (Fontana 1975) p104-125.

<sup>100</sup> The same criticisms are as valid (if not more so) when applied to Old Testament studies.

<sup>101</sup> C.S.Lewis *Fern-seed and Elephants*, p119

<sup>102</sup> The quote is a famous line from the great German Historian, Leopold von Ranke – I remembered it, but without access to a historical library have had to source it from [wikiquotes: https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Leopold\\_von\\_Ranke](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Leopold_von_Ranke)



diffident. The possibility of objectivity in academic research is now largely dismissed, as is the quest for 'scientific' methods for assessing history. Historians no longer make the grand claims of their predecessors to be able to confidently state 'how it really was', and most current historical scholarship is much more sceptical of its own possibilities.<sup>103</sup>

I am relieved to see that there is now a growing current of scepticism about many of the previously accepted conclusions of biblical scholarship, including the 'Documentary Hypothesis'. It is a scepticism that I heartily share. History is one of my passions, and I do believe that historical study can shed significant light on the study of the Bible – as can literary analyses. In the films, for instance, I mention how scholars have identified parallels between the structure of Deuteronomy and that of many ancient treaties. Such insights can help us to better understand the Biblical text against the backdrop of the world in which they are set. However, I believe that much biblical scholarship over the past 200 years has placed more weight on historical (and literary) techniques than they are capable of bearing. As will become clear below, I do not think that historical or literary study of Deuteronomy (and indeed many other biblical books) is able to tell us very much at all about its origins and dates with any degree of certainty.

### *Analysing critical understandings of the origins of Deuteronomy*

At the heart of traditional critical understandings of Deuteronomy since De Wette has been the identification of a form of Deuteronomy (usually seen as chapters 12-26) with the "book of the law" recovered by King Josiah, as described in 2 Kings 22-23 and 2 Chronicles 34. This was then set alongside a critical reconstruction of the development of Israelite religion, in which religious practices evolved over time into what we now read in the final form of the Old Testament. In this

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<sup>103</sup> A classic work that covers these trends is Professor Sir Richard Evans' *In Defence of History* (available in various editions)

understanding, the heart of Deuteronomy is not just seen as an inspiration for the royal reform programme and centralisation of religion under Josiah, it is seen as a product of it. It was produced by someone close to the royal reform programme, to bolster the movement. This core was then supplemented over time with the rest of what is now Deuteronomy, with the final form having been written around the time of the Exile (which explains how 'Moses' could have so accurately predicted the Exile itself).

This reconstruction is ingenious and compelling – the problem is that there is so little historical evidence to support it. The most compelling feature of the thesis is the identification of 'the book of the law' found during Josiah's reforms with Deuteronomy (in some form). However, all that can show is that that part of Deuteronomy could not have been written after Josiah's reforms. Both Biblical accounts seem to assume that it was in fact written some time before – and on the basis of these accounts there is no reason at all to conclude that the book could not have been written centuries beforehand.

Linking the writing of Deuteronomy with Josiah's reforms clearly therefore has to rest on other evidence, and it is here that the reconstruction of Israelite history and religion becomes so key. I say 'reconstruction' because Wellhausen and those who have come after him have a radically different understanding of the history of Israel, and particularly Israelite religion, to that presented in the Bible. Surprisingly though this is not primarily based on external sources but on a re-reading and reinterpretation of the Biblical texts. The reason for this is that there is virtually no external written evidence for the early history (religious or otherwise) of Israel.

The earliest mention of Israel in an extra-Biblical text is a one-line inscription on a stone stele erected by the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah in 1209BC. The reference is so brief that it cannot really tell us anything except that an entity called 'Israel' existed at the time.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Almost all books on the early history of Israel will have something to say about the Merneptah Stele, and again there is also a Wikipedia page [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah\\_Stele#%22Israel%22](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah_Stele#%22Israel%22).

There are then no more references to Israel in any extra-Biblical sources for the following 450 years,<sup>105</sup> until some brief mentions in Assyrian sources from the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BC (the time of the divided monarchy). Even then the external written evidence is very thin. We only have a couple of brief inscriptions (one sentence or two) written in Israel itself prior to the exile, along with a handful of brief accounts and inscriptions from Israel's neighbours and enemies, and these texts are concerned with contemporary events.<sup>106</sup> It is difficult to draw any conclusions with any confidence about the early history of Israel from extra-biblical texts – there is essentially silence.

There may not be much extra-biblical written evidence about Israel in this period, but we can draw some insights from comparisons with other written texts from similar periods. Such evidence can be very helpful in illuminating the background against which Deuteronomy was written, but I am very sceptical of how much weight they can bear when it comes to dating the book.

An example would be the comparisons that have been drawn in recent years between Deuteronomy and Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) vassal treaties. I mention this in the films, and I do think that it gives us an interesting insight into a literary form that may well have been an inspiration for how Deuteronomy was structured. I am unconvinced though by attempts to date the book on the basis of comparison with such treaties. There is considerable debate amongst scholars as to whether Deuteronomy is closer in form to Assyrian treaties (from the mid first Millennium BC) or Hittite treaties (from the mid second millennium), with many then using their conclusions to support an

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<sup>105</sup> It should be noted that this silence is not just confined to the nation of Israel – there is nothing about anything at all in this geographic area during this period.

<sup>106</sup> The only two pre-exilic Israelite inscriptions I am aware of are the inscription at the entrance to the Siloam water tunnel

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siloam\\_inscription](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siloam_inscription)), and an incomplete tomb

inscription from the 7<sup>th</sup> Century

([https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_1871-1107-1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1871-1107-1)), but there could be more.

early or late date for the book itself.<sup>107</sup> The problem though is that Deuteronomy can only ever be understood to be loosely based (at best) on such treaties – the form was clearly widely used, and in this case has been adapted for use in a religious context, by a different culture, and in a different language. The analogy seems to be me to be far too inexact to be much use in dating Deuteronomy. It strikes me as being like trying to use medieval and early-modern French royal edicts to date Shakespeare's plays – impossible!

The final extra-biblical strand of historical evidence is archaeology. Again, I believe that archaeology can be very helpful in illuminating the Biblical texts. Indeed, when I was a vicar in central London, I used to do informal tours of 'the Bible in the British Museum' for groups of congregation members. The evidence of archaeology though is by nature broad and imprecise, and its usefulness in dating a literary text like Deuteronomy can only ever be limited.

All this brings us back to the evidence of the Biblical texts themselves, which are by far the best sources of historical evidence available for the dating of Deuteronomy. A surface level reading of the Bible clearly indicates support for the traditional view of Deuteronomy – as witnessed by the unanimous testimony of 2,500 years of Biblical scholarship, prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Alternative modern views of the religious history of Israel, and with it an alternative dating of Deuteronomy, require something else. It relies on modern scholars' ability to reconstruct what lies behind the Biblical texts as we now have them – confidently identifying the source material the final authors used, where they came from, and separating them out from the explanatory notes of later editors, before then correctly piecing all the evidence back together.

Unfortunately, the problems with this process are myriad. Firstly, much of it is cumulative, with each stage built upon the conclusions of the first. So, for instance, most critical scholars now assume that Deuteronomy was written in stages, with an original core (usually

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<sup>107</sup> This overview of the terrain is largely based on Gordon McConville *Deuteronomy* (IVP 2002) pp23-24, although my conclusions are my own.

identified as chapters 12-26) supplemented by subsequent editors. The first conclusion here is that the book was written in stages. That is then the starting point for identifying the original core text, which in turn is the starting point for identifying and analysing the next layer in the composition, and so on. Most critical reconstructions of Deuteronomy would postulate at least 3 or 4 redactional layers, and so we have a chain of at least four different links. Even if we assume that each step on its own has a very high probability of being correct (say 75%), then the probability that the final conclusion is correct is far far less (if each step has a 75% probability, then four consecutive steps being correct has a probability of just 32%).<sup>108</sup>

In reality though, there are many more steps than this in the process of discerning Deuteronomy's proposed original context. It requires a particular understanding of the development of Israelite religious traditions, and the ability to match the different parts of Deuteronomy to different stages and places in that development. That in turn requires an ability to correctly identify the origin and dates of other books found in the Bible, many of which are re-dated by critical scholarship using these same methods.<sup>109</sup> All these questions are then also influenced by each individual scholar's philosophical and methodological assumptions. For instance, how should claims to divine inspiration and prophetic predictions be handled? Wellhausen's analysis of the development of Israelite religion was based in part on the assumption that religious practices grow more complex over time – a viewpoint that seems to a priori rule out the

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<sup>108</sup> I have adapted this point from C.S.Lewis *Fern-seed and Elephants*, p120.

<sup>109</sup> For instance, most critical scholars think that the rest of the Pentateuch is much later than it appears, consisting of various redactional layers culminating in a post-Exilic final document. They would also redate the second half of Isaiah (and some parts of the first half) to the exile or later and see all the history books as being written much later than the events they describe (albeit based on earlier sources). Indeed, in critical re-datings of the Old Testament the earliest acknowledged book is Amos, written in the late 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC – making it very difficult to use historical tools to shed light with any confidence on the earliest history of Israel.

divine origin of the Old Testament Law that it claims for itself, as well as being highly questionable on simply observational grounds.<sup>110</sup>

For this process to hold firm, each step needs to be built on extremely strong foundations. In recent years though those foundations seem to have been cracking, even amongst critical scholars. Few scholars now hold to the 'Documentary Hypothesis' as Wellhausen proposed it, and recent scholarship has cast doubt on the closeness of the links between Josiah's reforms and Deuteronomy. There are now a variety of proposed contexts and origins for the core of the book, from circles of rural Levites to Northern priests, or courtly wise men.<sup>111</sup> It feels to me like the whole edifice is a pack of cards, and that the bottom row is tottering and close to falling. There are too many variables, too many unknowns, too much conjecture and guesswork, and too many linked hypotheses.

I find myself thinking back to comments made by C.S.Lewis about similar reconstructions of the developments in early Christian theology:

...This seems to involve knowing about a number of long dead people...things of which I believe few of us could have given an accurate account if we had lived among them; all the forward and backward surge of discussion, preaching, and individual religious experience. I could not speak with similar confidence about the circle I have chiefly lived in myself. I could not describe the history even of my own thought as confidently as these men describe the history of the early Church's mind. And I am perfectly certain no one else could.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> For instance, a quick glance at the history of the charismatic movement in the Church of England should be enough to prove that sometimes religious practices can grow less complex over time.

<sup>111</sup> There are numerous studies of the field for those who wish to dig deeper, but I would recommend the short summary in Daniel Block 'Recovering the Voice of Moses: the Genesis of Deuteronomy' in *The Gospel According to Moses*, p25, and slightly fuller one in Gordon McConville *Deuteronomy* pp21-33.

<sup>112</sup> C.S.Lewis *Fern-seed and Elephants*, p13.

Lewis was a writing about a different field of Theology, but the issues are the same – and the difficulties inherent in reconstructing the evolution of Old Testament religion are arguably even more formidable.

At this point, many readers may be expecting me to propose an alternative analysis of the available evidence to prove the traditional view of a largely Mosaic origin for Deuteronomy - but I cannot do so. In recent decades there have been some brilliant defences of the traditional view and for the possibility of dating Deuteronomy in the pre-monarchic era of Israel's history – and I am profoundly grateful to the scholars who have undertaken this important work.<sup>113</sup> I believe that their theses are well-researched and well-argued, and that they show that it is perfectly reasonable to come to a 'traditional' conclusion on the basis of historical-critical study. However, I do not believe that they can prove the matter any more decisively than those on the other side of the argument (and I do not think that they would claim to do so). It is not that I do not think that this view is true – it is that the limitations of the available evidence mean that I do not think historical-critical study is even remotely capable of proving the matter one way or another.

My reasons for holding to a traditional view of the Mosaic origin of Deuteronomy are therefore not primarily historical (or literary) but theological. It is to these that I now turn.

### *Theological questions*

I believe that the most important question to ask in any analysis of the origin and dates of any Biblical book is "what do I believe the Bible

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<sup>113</sup> Gordon McConville's Deuteronomy is a particular tour de force, exploring this in some detail in the introduction as well as relevant parts of the commentary. He simply argues for a pre-monarchic dating for Deuteronomy, rather than seeking to prove Mosaic authorship – although of course a pre-monarchic date does leave open the possibility of Mosaic authorship. In his introduction he also refers to most of the other significant work in this field to that point.

is?" It is a question which is rarely explicitly asked, but which changes everything.

This is perhaps best illustrated by looking at the origins of modern critical scholarship. For nearly 2,000 years almost everyone reading the Bible had accepted the 'traditional' understandings of who wrote which books and when. Then in a comparatively short period of time, that all changed. The trailblazers of this new scholarship weren't cleverer than the great minds that had gone before them (or less so), they didn't have access to lots of new historical sources, and they didn't study the Bible more intensively than their predecessors. What changed was their starting point – their answer to that question: "what do I believe the Bible is?" They no longer accepted it as the inspired word of God, and instead began to investigate it from a human perspective. The result was a completely different way of reading the Bible – and perhaps unsurprisingly, a completely different set of conclusions about it.

I believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, and that while it was written by a myriad of human authors, its primary author is God. I therefore expect each book to reflect something of its human author, but even more so to carry the voice of God.<sup>114</sup> As a result, I read and understand it in a completely different way to someone who does not

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<sup>114</sup> I explore this further in the first film in the series, using the illustration of St. Paul's Cathedral:

"In chapter 1 verse 1 we're told 'these are the words of Moses...', but just two verses later that's clarified, and we read: "Moses spoke to the people of Israel all that the LORD had given him..." In many ways that's a beautiful little description of how all scripture came about – that preachers and prophets and poets and evangelists shared something – everything – that the LORD had given them. Their words were actually his words – and God speaks through them to us. I love an illustration from Alpha that likens the Bible to this building, St. Paul's Cathedral. I used to live – and work in a church – just a stone's throw away from St. Paul's, and it's a glorious building. All the guide books and articles will tell you that it was built by the genius architect Sir Christopher Wren except that of course, he didn't actually lay the bricks, or paint the frescoes, or whatever an army of artists and builders and craftsmen did all that – but each one was working according to the master plan and vision of Sir Christopher Wren they made all that he had given them to do and in the same way here Moses speaks all that God has given him."



believe what I do. I read expecting to hear the voice of God speaking to me through its pages, and to meet with God as I do. I understand it is a single unified whole, in which the disparate human voices come together in harmony to sing a single tune. When I struggle to understand one part of it, I will often turn to another part of it to help me work out what it says (including using the New Testament to understand the old). And when I read that "these are the words Moses spoke...", I believe it.

I will be honest – my reasons for believing all this are not because I was able to prove it scientifically or historically. As the Bible is deeply rooted in history, if someone were able to disprove it that would challenge my faith deeply – but I am confident that no-one has done so (or will), and indeed have found that the more I investigate the more convinced I become.<sup>115</sup> While my studies have strengthened my faith, even so they are just one strand in a thick cord of evidence. I believe all this for all sorts of other reasons too. I believe this because I believe

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<sup>115</sup> One piece of evidence that I have not mentioned in the main argument outlined above is that many of the "assured results of modern scholarship" (as they used to be known) have proved to be anything but. The Documentary Hypothesis itself is one example – for a century most leading biblical scholars accepted it as proven and it took considerable courage and intellectual confidence to demur. How many other established conclusions of critical scholarship will one day turn out to be wrong? It can still take courage to disagree with an academic consensus, but a glance back at past mistakes can make it easier!

It is worth highlighting that this is not just true of the various scholarly hypotheses, but even of our understanding of the historical 'facts' of the Ancient Near East. An example I often use on my tours of the British Museum is the identity of King Belshazzar, the anti-hero of Daniel 5. At one point the identification of Belshazzar as 'king' in the dying days of Babylon seemed to contradict the very strong evidence of history – scholars have long known that the last king of Babylon was actually called Nabonidus, and not Belshazzar. The available historical facts all changed though in 1854 with the chance discovery of an inscribed clay cylinder buried in the foundations of a Babylonian building in southern Iraq. The cylinder was buried by Nabonidus, and mentions his son and co-regent – Belshazzar. Not only did this suddenly vindicate the Biblical account, but it also explained some odd features of it – such as why Belshazzar made Daniel the "third highest ruler in the kingdom" (Daniel 5v29), rather than the second highest. He himself was only number two, so third was the best position he could offer! (see Edwards and Anderson *Through the British Museum with the Bible* (Leominster, 2008) p68 for details.

in God. I believe this because I believe in Jesus, and he believed it. I believe this because I have experienced it to be true – I have met with God as I have read his word. I believe this because of the evidence of all the other aspects of my faith. I believe this for a myriad of different reasons. Ultimately though, for me this is not just a question of what the Bible is. That question is just one small part in a far bigger whole – what I believe about God, life, the universe, and everything.

That is a view that is clearly at variance with both the presuppositions and the conclusions of historical critical analysis. The historical-critical method starts by setting aside all claims to divine inspiration and authority, and instead reads each Biblical text from a human perspective.<sup>116</sup> It does not look for a unified whole or expect to hear many voices singing together in a single tune. It does not try to interpret one text in the light of another (unless there is a clear literary relationship), and so on. That does not mean that this method is necessarily wrong. There are many perfectly logical and rational reasons for using this method, possibly even for concluding that it is the best way to study scripture. But they are the presuppositions of historical-critical study and not its conclusions. Like my beliefs about the Bible, historical-critical views of scripture bear all the hallmarks and assumptions of a particular worldview.

That does not mean that I cannot learn lots from historical-critical scholars (or even vice-versa). Many of their insights and discoveries around the text I have often found very helpful.<sup>117</sup> It does not even prevent me from engaging with historical critical scholarship on its own terms – as many wonderful conservative scholars do.<sup>118</sup> What it does mean though is that on a fundamental level we will read the text

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<sup>116</sup> This is not to say that there aren't many believers who use the historical-critical method to varying degrees – it is simply an observation of the fact that the method itself does not allow for the supernatural.

<sup>117</sup> I am a particular fan, for instance, of Brevards Childs, whose work I find very insightful and helpful in reading scripture.

<sup>118</sup> The list would endless, so I won't try! Gordon McConville, who I have already quoted a lot above, would be a good example.

in very different ways – and as a result of doing so, we will come to all sorts of different conclusions.

I believe that this question is particularly pertinent when discussing historical 'problems' with the biblical text, such as scepticism about what they claim for themselves about authorship (and therefore date).<sup>119</sup> As outlined above, the issue is that there is often so little historical evidence with which to work. That means that our starting points will determine our conclusions to a far greater degree than is commonly acknowledged. The critical scholar looks at a 'traditional' position (such as the Mosaic origin of Deuteronomy), and asks: "can this be proved?" The answer is a clear 'no', and on that basis the position is set aside, and alternative explanations are explored. By contrast the believer who holds to a traditional view of biblical inspiration will ask the question: "can this be disproved?" Again, the answer is a clear 'no' – and on that basis they will continue to believe the traditional view. Both positions are equally reasonable – but they are radically different.

These divergences become even greater once we realise that the Bible constantly forces us into philosophical judgements that cannot be settled on the basis of critical study. It is full of miracles and prophecies.<sup>120</sup> If we believe in the God of the Bible then these are both plausible and likely. If not, we have to reject them as impossible.

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<sup>119</sup> It's worth noting here that when we are talking about authorship and dating of biblical books we need to be clear and honest about what they do and do not claim for themselves. Many biblical books have traditional attributions of authorship that are not actually given by the text (such as the gospels, or much of the rest of the Pentateuch), and in such cases the question is much less important.

<sup>120</sup> We could add historical accuracy to this list, but it is not strictly relevant to Deuteronomy (with the possible exception of chapter 34), as it claims to be contemporaneous with the events that it describes. For Biblical history it is a significant issue though. For instance, how could the writer of Genesis know accurately about events centuries before they wrote? We might assume that they used sources, but how confident could we be that they used accurate sources and correctly judged them? Speaking from a human perspective the answer must be 'not very.' If God was at work through his Holy Spirit though, then things are very different – God could easily guide the human author to the right sources, or even reveal things directly to them.

However much we may try to keep an open mind, those two positions must result in different conclusions about the passages and books in question.

For instance, in Deuteronomy 5 we read an account of God declaring the ten commandments to the whole people of Israel out of the fire and cloud and darkness, and then writing them on tablets of stone.<sup>121</sup> I have never had any trouble believing this account – I believe in God, and so have no more reason to doubt this part of the account than any other. If I did not believe in God though, this is simply impossible – I would have to conclude that this story was either mythological or pure fiction.

Not only are these two positions on Deuteronomy 5 opposite, but they have the potential to profoundly influence my views on the dating of the whole book. If I believe that these events did not happen, even if I believed that Moses existed, and that he led the people out of Egypt (which many scholars do not), I would conclude that this account was written down much much later. The reason is that it would have taken time for such an elaborate and dramatic myth to develop – and even if it had developed and been written down quickly, enough people would have known it was rubbish to prevent it gaining wide credence. Simply on the basis of this one chapter we can see that it is very difficult to believe in the Mosaic authorship of this part of Deuteronomy if you do not believe in God.

This dynamic is even more obviously present when we move onto the prophetic parts of the Bible. The Old Testament is full of prophetic predictions of events centuries in the future, sometimes with a level of specificity that is just not possible without actual knowledge. If God exists then there is no problem with any of them – but if he does not exist then they too are impossible. The only plausible explanation is

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<sup>121</sup> See also chapter 4v36 for further details of what Deuteronomy says happened in this moment – not only did God speak to the people of Israel in a loud voice, but they also “heard his words”. This is a supernatural event that cannot be fully explained through natural causes.

that they were recorded after the events they describe.<sup>122</sup> An example from Deuteronomy would be the 'Song of Moses' in chapter 32 (and its explanation in chapter 31v15-22). It is a very explicit prediction of both the exile and return from exile – events that were centuries in the future. It is possible in this instance to believe that Moses might possibly have guessed at this on his own, and then made this prediction, but it seems unlikely. It is easy to imagine why Moses would warn of curses for disobedience, but less likely that on his own he would predict that that is what would happen, and even less likely that he would then predict God's restoration and salvation of the nation. By far the most plausible explanations for this passage are either that God did instruct Moses as the text records, or that the 'prophecy' was actually made during or after the exile. It is no surprise to discover then that those explanations are exactly what the traditional and critical views on the book espouse.

In reality these divergences are often compounded, as no question about the Bible is ever capable of being examined completely in isolation. For instance, in my survey of the critical understanding of Deuteronomy, I mentioned the influence that Wellhausen's views on the evolution of Israelite religion had on his conclusions about Deuteronomy. Those views were the product of his studies not just of this book, but the whole Old Testament and the evidence that every part of it brought to bear on the question. The conclusions that we

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<sup>122</sup> I have been told in the past that this is not the case, and that actually the scriptures do not include prophecies of the distant future – an assertion I uncritically absorbed for a while, until it was flagged up to me that actually there are lots of examples of such prophecies. The reason why the assertion is made is because they are all either in history books that were written down after both the prophecy and its fulfilment (see e.g. 1 Kings 13v1-2 and 2 Kings 23v15-19), or in books which critical scholarship has re-dated to after the events prophesied were fulfilled (e.g. Daniel 11). I think that it is important to recognise that actually this is a common feature of biblical prophecy though, and so have made a quick list of some examples: Genesis 15v12-16; Genesis 49v10; Deuteronomy 31v16-22 and 32; Joshua 6v26; 1 Kings 13v1-2; 2 Kings 20v16-18; Isaiah 6v11-13, Isaiah 13v17-19; Isaiah 41v21-29, Isaiah 44v24-28; Jeremiah 29v10-14; Ezekiel 27-28; Daniel 8; Daniel 11; Nahum 2v6, Habakkuk 2v3, Habakkuk 3.

draw in one area and about one part of the Old Testament will necessarily impact how we look at other areas – how can they not?<sup>123</sup>

Ironically this is something that conservatives who take a traditional view on these questions are sometimes criticised for. We are often asked to approach each individual historical question with an 'open mind' – and yet, to do so would actually be illogical. First of all, it denies this impossibility of disentangling our conclusions about various bits of the Bible from one another.<sup>124</sup> More fundamentally though, it asks us to ignore what we believe is the most important fact about any piece of scripture – that it is God's word. If what I am reading comes from God, then that is a very very good reason for accepting what it says. It might theoretically be possible to prove that it is wrong, but the evidentiary standard required to do so would need to be extraordinarily high.

Let me use an illustration. When my father died The Telegraph ran a short obituary of him.<sup>125</sup> As a family, we immediately spotted that the obituary included a small mistake. As a young man he had served as an officer in the army, but The Telegraph put him in the wrong regiment.<sup>126</sup> The Telegraph is a well-respected and usually well-researched newspaper. Therefore, the most logical conclusion for most people reading the article would be to trust that it had got this right. However, I know that the obituary was wrong. My knowledge is based on numerous conversations over the years with my father, and

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<sup>123</sup> As an aside, I think that it is worth flagging up that this means that those of us who believe in the divine inspiration of scripture need to be wary when learning from critical scholarship and engaging with it. We may not realise that a seemingly neutral point or conclusion may actually be resting on an explicitly anti-supernatural assumption. This is also obviously true vice-versa too – but in my experience critical scholars are much quicker to spot the impact of our beliefs on our conclusions.

<sup>124</sup> Which of course means that there is often an unintentional double standard at work here – we are asked to leave our 'bias' at the door, but those coming from a sceptical perspective are not, even though their conclusions will be equally influenced by their a priori assumptions.

<sup>125</sup> The obituary ran in The Telegraph in March 2009.

<sup>126</sup> He was an officer in The Rifle Brigade, but the obituary put him in The Honourable Artillery Company.

it would be completely illogical for me to set them all aside and instead trust The Telegraph obituary. It might theoretically be possible to prove that what my father had told me was wrong, but the evidentiary standard required to do so would need to be extraordinarily high. Not only would there need to be compelling positive evidence, but that evidence would now also need to be sufficient to overcome the contrary evidence both of his testimony and general truthfulness.

I believe that the same is true of the Bible. For Christians who have encountered God speaking through the Bible, those encounters are themselves powerful evidence that the Bible truly is God's word – as are the many other aspects of our experience of God and what we know about him. Much of that evidence may not be objective and independently verifiable, and so it falls outside the scope of current understandings of biblical scholarship – much like my knowledge of my father, and of our many conversations over the years, is not something that is independently verifiable. However, that does not make it any less true, or my experience of it any less valid. These are things that I cannot prove to you, but it would be illogical for me to ignore them when answering this question.

This all brings us back to where we started this section, and the question 'what do I believe the Bible is?' Does the Bible come from God or not? That is a question that takes us far beyond the scope or possibilities of biblical scholarship. The evidence that we bring to bear on it will not only include objective facts and arguments, but also subjective experiences and evidence from our own lives.

I have strong and powerful reasons for believing that the Bible is God's word, and that therefore what it says about the origins of Deuteronomy is true. Those reasons do include my own assessment of the available historical and scholarly evidence, but they make up only a small part of it. My conclusions are also based on lots of other evidence, and what I know about God and about his word. Taken together, I believe that they provide overwhelming evidence that when Deuteronomy 1v1+3 says that "these are the words of Moses...that the LORD commanded him," it is correct.

# TWO FINAL QUESTIONS...

We hope and pray that this series has been a blessing to you, and that it has drawn you closer to God and deepened your relationship with him. If it has, we want to ask you and your group two final questions:

- would you consider giving towards the costs of future series?
- can you please pray for us?

## GIVE...

[BurningHeart.org/give](https://BurningHeart.org/give)

All our materials are available free of charge, so that money is not a barrier to anyone engaging with God through them – but that also means that we are reliant on donations for our funding.

If you would like to give towards our ministry, we would be grateful for any amount – whether 5 pence or £5million! The Bible is very clear that what matters in our giving is how generous we are with what we have, and not how much we give in absolute terms (see Mark 12v41-44). We will not know how generous you are actually being – but God will!

We would also encourage you to prioritise your own church when planning your giving. Please don't stop your giving to them to give to us!



# **PRAY...**

We believe in prayer! As James tells us, "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." (James 5v16). Please can you pray for us and for our ministry? Pray that God would use our resources to speak to people and meet with them. Pray that God would inspire us as we look to make more resources. And pray that God would provide all that we need to resource what he has called us to do.