

Deuteronomy

The Context (1:1-4:40)

The Law (4:41-26:19)

1. Preamble (4:44-5:1)
2. Ten Commandments (5:1-6:25)
3. Conquest of Canaan (7:1-26)
4. Obey the Law (8:1-20)
5. Warning Against Self-Righteousness (9:1-29)
6. Rewards and Punishments (10:1-11:32)
7. Ceremonial Laws Explained (12:1-16:17)
8. Civil Laws Explained (16:18-20:20)
9. Social Laws Explained (21:1-26:19)

How God Will Bless Israel (27:1-34:12)

1. Entering the Promised Land (27:1-28:68)
2. Establishing the Covenant (29:1-30:20)
3. Transferring Leadership (31:1-34:12)

Starting the Conversation

When we begin to talk about Deuteronomy, we need to understand the context more fully. There are questions that we need to answer which include: 1) who wrote the book, 2) why was it written, and 3) what is its significance for the church today? We'll take each of these questions in order.

First, who wrote the book of Deuteronomy? Scripture itself, as well as tradition, claim Moses as the author of the book. In fact, Moses being the author of the book was basically without debate until the nineteenth century.¹ As such, we continue to embrace Mosaic authorship.²

Second, why was Deuteronomy written? As the last book in the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy "expounds the implications of the historic agreement at Mount Sinai between God and Israel."³ The covenant between God and Israel finds its most theological expression in this book. After all, Moses had four decades to "reflect on the exodus from Egypt and Yahweh's establishment of a covenant relationship with Israel." He therefore penned this "theological manifesto" which calls Israel to give unfettered loyalty and love to God in response to God's gracious action on their behalf.⁴

Third, what is the significance of Deuteronomy for the church today? The significance of the book of Deuteronomy begins with the overarching theme, which is to live each day with unfettered loyalty and love for God in response to the amazing grace He has bestowed upon us. We are the recipients of His grace through faith Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8-9), and Deuteronomy calls us to respond to this grace with undivided loyalty and love (Deut 10:12).

Reading and applying the message of Deuteronomy as the church today follows this process:

- 1) **Original Context:** We read the book in the context of its original writing; namely, to the children of Israel a millennia before the birth of Christ;
- 2) **Eternal Truth:** We recognize the eternal truth of Deuteronomy, including the explicit declarations (“The Lord is God; there is no other besides Him.” Deut 4:35) as well as the underlying principles of specific commands that remain applicable for the Christian today; and

Through the course of this study, we will follow this two-step process for each passage that we examine. Just as God was preparing Israel to move on mission into the Land of Promise, the message of Deuteronomy for the church today is to equip and inspire us to live for God’s purposes in our world.⁵ I pray that God will consume our hearts with a deeper affection for Him and passion for His purpose as we reflect upon His wondrous grace.

The Context: Remembering God’s Grace, 1:1-4:43

The Exodus Generation (1:1-2:1)

1. Preamble (1:1-5)
2. Mount Horeb (1:6-18)
3. Horeb to Kadesh Barnea (1:19-46)
4. The Desert (2:1)

A New Generation (2:2-3:29)

1. Transjordan Believers (2:2-23)
2. Amorite Kings (2:24-3:11)
3. Thoughts of Moses (3:12-29)

The Future (4:1-40)

1. The Grace of the Torah (4:1-8)
2. The Grace of the Covenant (4:9-31)
3. The Grace of Salvation (4:32-40)

The Exodus Generation (1:1-2:1)

Original Context

“These are the words...” The introduction of the book of Deuteronomy carries the official title of the book in the Hebrew Bible: *‘el-lēh hāddebārīm*. This opening line gives the book a prophetic and pastoral flavor, along with the task that Moses was to speak everything that the Lord had commanded him. Just as obedience to God is a major theme in the book, Moses is actually living the message that he proclaimed.⁶

Moses began to explain the Law to the people.⁷ As He explains the instructions of God to the people, He is demonstrating the journey of God’s people under the leadership of God, “shaped by God’s command and the response of Israel and others to it.”⁸ This was not merely a rehearsing of God’s commands with explanation from Moses, but it was a pastoral exhortation to the people to remain fixed on obedience to God as they journey into the promises of God’s glorious purpose.

Beginning in 1:6, Moses rehearses the work of God’s grace among His people of the Exodus.⁹ In Horeb at Mount Sinai, God had revealed Himself with glorious power in giving His Law to His people. Yet, Moses reminds the hearers that God called His people to leave the mountain and move on to the Promised Land.¹⁰ The people moved from Horeb to country of the Amorites. God’s statement, “I have set before you (1:8),” is the language of covenant and contract.¹¹ With God making the statement, Moses is reminding them of the permanence of the promise on His side. What He promises, He will fulfill. The Land belongs to them, and so they must enter that land.

Moses moves from the grace of God’s provision of the Land to the organization of God’s people as they prepare to enter the Land (1:9-18). The Lord God has been faithful to multiply His people as a fulfillment of His promise to Abraham (Gen 15:6). Yet this expansion of the people of Israel created challenges for the faithful leadership to fulfill God’s purposes for Moses (Ex 18:13-37; Num 11:11-17). Following the advice of Jethro, Moses delegated the leadership.¹² These leaders should be wise, understanding, and experienced (1:13). Further, they were to judge rightly according to God’s will, reject any partiality, refuse to be intimidated, and get help from Moses when the challenge or problem was too much for him to judge alone.

In 1:19-25, Moses repeats the journey from Mount Sinai to Kadesh Barnea. Although God had promised the Land and set it before them as the purpose of

His promise, Israel must act to take possession of it. The fear before them heightened by the uncertainty of their own ability is met with a "Do not fear or be discouraged."¹³ With these words, Moses highlights the certainty of their undertaking because it is "authorized and overseen by YHWH."¹⁴ Victory is certain as long as the children of Israel obey the Lord God.

Yet, the children of Israel responded with uncertainty and doubt. Rather than trust God, they sent spies into the land (1:22-25).

Under normal circumstances such a reconnaissance mission might have made good sense (Josh. 2:1; 7:2; Judg. 18:2), but coming immediately after God's command, the proposal itself seemed to betray a lack of faith (cf. 9:23). The outcome of the mission reinforced this conclusion.¹⁵

At Kadesh Barnea, the children of Israel decided against obedience to God (1:26-33). Even though God's promises were true about the Land, the people decided that the obstacles were too much to risk.¹⁶ Rather than obedience, the people rebelled against God's command, murmured in their tents, and cast aspersions on God's motives (1:26-27). Moses reminded the people of God's loving provision and leadership in their lives (1:29-31). He reminds them that God was the warrior who fights for His people to fulfill His purpose for them. Just as He fought for them to bring them out of Egyptian bondage, He would be faithful to win the victory for them in the Land of Promise. He reminds them that God was the faithful, loving parent who carried them through the wilderness. As warrior and parent, the children of Israel could trust God to bring them victory.¹⁷ Yet, the children of Israel did not trust God (1:32-33).

The result of disobedience was God's displeasure and judgment (1:34-40). God declared that they would not enter the Land of Promise.

This particular generation had finally excluded itself from the enjoyment of the covenanted blessing of the promise to Abraham. The covenant as such was not revoked, but this generation would not see its fulfillment. Their eyes were sealed with unbelief. With such eyes they would never see the promised land.¹⁸

The people tried to take back their initial rebellion and planned to go to war in the hill country against the Amorites (1:41). God told them "no," but again they did not listen or obey God. They were defeated and exiled to the wilderness for life (1:42-2:1).

Eternal Truth

1. God is faithful (1:6-18).¹⁹

2. Move on from the Mountain (1:6).²⁰

“For God’s pilgrim people, moments come when God says ‘long enough.’ There is a boundary to cross, a new phase to enter.”²¹

3. Justice for all (1:16-17).

“The actual content of this ‘justice’ is to be equitable to ‘small and great,’ with no advantage to the powerful. Furthermore, this justice is to be equitable for covenant members and outsiders (‘resident aliens’), that is, for all parties to any social dispute.”²²

4. Obedience to God’s leadership secures victory (1:19-21).

God is faithful to fight for His people and care for them in a nurturing supportive way.²³

5. Disobedience to God’s leadership secures failure (1:22-40).

Our fear perverts our understanding of who God is. “The people’s rebellion completely perverted their understanding of the nature of their God.”²⁴ Rather than seeing God’s great love for them, their fear caused them to twist His love into hatred. Rather than seeing the purpose of God as giving them life, their fear caused them to twist His purpose into extermination. The failure to trust God in obedience to Him results in a failure to taste God’s promise.²⁵

A New Generation (2:2-3:29)

Original Context

After forty years in the wilderness, God told Moses to lead the children of Israel northward toward the Promised Land (2:3). The punishment of the Exodus Generation was completed, and now God and His people move forward with a new initiative. Despite the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea, God provided for His children during their forty years in the wilderness, and now they are ready to enter the Promised Land, a new generation facing the opportunity that the previous generation squandered (2:7).²⁶

As God had blessed His people during their wilderness years, He would care for them as they made their way through the land of Edom among the descendants of Esau through the wilderness of Moab. They were not to contend or make war with the inhabitants of Moab, for that was not the land that God had promised His people.²⁷

So, the people obeyed God's instructions and according to His command crossed over the brook Zered (2:13). Crossing Zered was a turning point (2:14-16), in which the obedience of the children of Israel caused Moses to remember the judgment of God upon the rebellious generation so that all the men of war of that generation perished.²⁸

Through the rest of the journey through the land of the Ammonites beyond the Valley of Arnon, God gave clear instructions. The children of Israel did not contend with any peoples until God gave the go ahead to do battle with Sihon (2:24). This was the beginning of the conquest of the Promised Land [Chrstensen 1991: 43]. God gave this new generation six commands: Arise! Set out! Cross the Valley Arnon! Begin! Take Possession! Engage him in battle! Attached to these commands were 1) the promise of victory that God has already secured for them and 2) that "from this day on, he would send shockwaves throughout the earth, causing people to tremble in fright when they heard of Israel's triumphs."²⁹ And God gave the new generation victory over Sihon and Og (2:26-3:11).

With the victory over the Transjordan territory, Moses allotted the land to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh according to God's promise (3:12-17). Moses recalls his words to these tribes, that their men of war would fight with the other tribes in the conquest of the Promised Land until it is complete (3:18-20). He then turns to Joshua and encourages him as he prepares to take the reins of leadership. Just as God had done with Sihon and Og, God would do for Joshua in the conquest of the Land (3:21-22). There was no need of fear because the Lord God fights for them!

On the brink of entering the Promised Land, Moses once again pleaded with God to let him enter (3:23-29). Moses lived in intimate relation with God, so that he could approach Him with a personal request to enter the land (3:24-25). His appeal is to see one more season to see and participate in God's mighty acts.³⁰ God's response is an adamant refusal, yet God allows Moses to see the land but not enter. Moses' role is to encourage Joshua as the leader of the new generation.³¹

Eternal Truth

1. Hope in God's blessing even under the weight of discipline (2:7).

2. Judgment on faithlessness (2:13-15).
3. God fights for you (3:22).
4. We can pray to the Lord God who loves us (3:24-25).

When we come to God in prayer, we acknowledge our subordination before God (Sovereign Lord, your servant).³² We acknowledge and rehearse His mighty acts and greatness. We come to Him with the petition from our hearts. And we humbly accept His answer and obey Him.

The Future (4:1-40)

Original Context

From this point, Moses has his sights set on the future, helping the new generation as they prepare for faithful and loyal love for God in the Land.³³ In this chapter, Moses demonstrates the grace of God in His relationship with the children of Israel, and he takes great pains throughout the rest of Deuteronomy to help them on their spiritual journey of faithfulness. Thus, this chapter “sets the sermoniac (rather than the legal) tone for the rest of the book and declares Moses’ central concern in the book: to call his people to covenant love demonstrated in actions that please their redeemer” [Block 2012: 115].

Moses declared that God gave statutes and judgments that the people were to follow so that they might live a fulfilled and satisfied life in the Land (4:1-2).³⁴ They were not to add to or subtract from these instructions, for they alone are the normative way to live.³⁵ Obedience is a matter of life and death, which was revealed in the worship of Baal at Peor (Num 25:1-9). Those who worshiped Baal were destroyed and those who “held fast” were among the number of Moses’ hearers. God’s will, unveiled in His statutes and judgments, provide wisdom and understanding for the life that they were to live (4:4-6). The statutes are the tasks that God has given for them to do.³⁶ Judgments are the decisions God has made about life and the world.³⁷

Moses sought to inspire the people of God to obey. So he turned to all that God had done in history and nature (4:7-8). None of Israel’s greatness is, was, or ever will be due to her own qualities, but only because of God Himself. Moses told the children of Israel to remember how God had proven Himself time and time and

time again to them. He was planting hope in their hearts that would bear the fruit of courage.³⁸

Moses told them to guard their souls with diligence (4:9). It's a word picture that expresses a passionate pursuit without passivity.³⁹ They are to guard themselves against forgetting what God has done (4:9, 15, 23) and against disobedience to the will of God (4:16, 19, 23). Moses tells the people to keep from forgetting the way that God has worked in their midst (4:9-14).⁴⁰ As they pass on the glory of God's gracious work to their children and grandchildren, there will be an unbroken passion to obey God and to live accordingly in the Promised Land (4:14).

Again, Moses calls God's people to guard themselves (4:15). The point of this diligent watch over their lives is so that they might not fall prey to idolatry in any form (4:15-24). God had rescued them from Egypt and establishing the covenant with them. Ultimately, Moses declares that God will tolerate no rivals of any form or sort. As a people formed and established by God's grace, they are His special possession and live under the privilege of His loving care (4:20). God is a consuming fire, which highlights His glory and His fury over covenant infidelity (4:24).⁴¹

Moses looks to the future of the people possessing the Land (4:25-31). If future generations rebel against God through breaking the covenant with God, then God will scatter them from the Land (4:25-28). Yet, after they have been scattered, if they seek God with all their hearts, then God will make Himself available to them for He is a merciful God (4:29-31).

Moses concludes his sermon with a declaration of the greatness of God and a call to commitment to Him (4:32-40). As incomparable as God is, His love for His people is boundless. "The triumph of grace is a testimony to the incomparability of the Lord of Israel."⁴² All that God has done from the beginning of time reveals His desire to rescue and cause to live. If God's people follow Him in loyal love, then they will live!

Eternal Truth

1. Obedience to God is the key for thriving in God's Kingdom.

God's will is the roadmap for our life.⁴³ If we obey God, then we will have life. If we disobey Him, then we will experience devastation.

2. We live on mission (4:6).

“The missional goal of God’s people is not fulfilled with precise theological formulas, but through the life-giving and transforming power of the divine Word.”⁴⁴

2. God is near to those who call upon Him (4:7).

3. God is merciful (4:31).

¹R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969; reprint 1991), 640.

²For a representative view of those who do not embrace Mosaic authorship, see Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 18-24. He summarizes this perspective: “Because Deuteronomy as a book reached its final form through a long editorial process designed to keep the book pertinent and responsive to different historical crises, it is not easy to date the book or to identify its origin.”

³Duane Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1991), xl.

⁴Daniel I. Block, “Deuteronomy,” in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament*, eds. Kevin Vanhoozer, Craig Bartholomew and Daniel Treier (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 67.

⁵Christopher J. H. Wright [*Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 8] notes that “Deuteronomy bends every rhetorical, literary, emotional, and moral skill to the task of equipping and motivating God’s people to live for the purposes of God in each generation.”

⁶Peter Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 91. Craigie writes: “Moses is thus a man under orders; the demand for obedience is a prominent theme throughout Deuteronomy, and in declaring that demand, Moses was himself living his message.”

⁷The verb in 1:5, באר [*bā’ar*; BDB 91], means “to explain, instruct.” Moses began to explain the Torah [תורה; *tōrah*] to the people.

⁸Patrick Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 21.

⁹For an in depth analysis of this section, see N. Lohfink, “Darstellungskunst und Theologie in Dtn. 1:6-3:29,” *Biblica* 41 (1960): 105-34.

¹⁰Breuggemann [2001: 27] rightly notes that 1:7 highlights the “boundaries of the land” which rehearses “the promise to Abraham in Gen 15:18-21.

¹¹See Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 39.

¹²The description of the need for delegation by Moses (1:12) highlights the “problem” [טרה; *tārchā*], “burden” [מַסָּא; *māssā*], and “strife” [רִיב; *rīb*] of the people. The problem was not necessarily the numerous numbers of people, and even if it were Moses saw the increase of people a blessing and something to be celebrated (1:11). The problem was the burden and conflict

among the people. As Block [*Deuteronomy*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 64] suggests, “the problem lay with the character and conduct of the people; to Moses they were a pain and a burden, and their bickering was intolerable.”

¹³The verb for “discouraged” in 1:21, תַּחַת [tēchāt], means “to be shattered, broken to pieces” and thus it points to being “emotionally distraught” [Block 2012: 78 n. 1].

¹⁴Breuggemann [2001: 29]

¹⁵Block 2012: 70.

¹⁶Miller [1990: 31] writes: “Fearfulness is the wrong response. God has given the land *plus* words of assurance *plus* a report of the goodness of the land – these do not add up to a negative and fearful reaction. But the people are fearful, immediately and dramatically contrasting the power and promise of God with the weakness and lack of trust of the people.”

¹⁷See Block 2012: 72.

¹⁸Wright 1996: 31

¹⁹Craigie [1976: 94] writes: “The prologue recalls not only the covenant’s history, but also the ability of the Lord of the covenant to fulfil his promise. What God has done in the past, he could continue to do in the future. There is thus a presentation of a faithful God, whose demand was for a faithful people.”

²⁰Christensen [1991: 13] highlights the truth that “it is not enough to enjoy the presence of God in the wilderness.” God calls us onward from the powerful presence of His glorious revelation and move on to the purposes to which He is calling us.

²¹Wright [1996: 24]

²²Breuggemann 2001: 28

²³Miller [1990: 32] writes: “The combination of the saving fighting activity of God with the caring, supporting relationship conveyed by the parental image is a fundamental paradigm of Scripture for portraying God *vis-à-vis* the human community, both individual and corporate. It is intended to declare that in the deepest of troubles and in the face of the largest threats you do not have to be afraid, for God is there with you to watch over you and will be at work to deliver you from the trouble and the threat.”

²⁴Craigie 1976: 102.

²⁵As Breuggemann [2001: 32] notes in reference to the lack of trust the children of Israel had in God (1:33; the verb is אָמַן [‘āmān]) that “the condition of the new land is complete trust in YHWH; thus, no trust equals no land.”

²⁶Specifically in 2:7, the new initiative carried forward by God’s blessings comes to the forefront. Craigie [1976: 109] rightly notes that the “failures at Kadesh are now in the past.”

²⁷The interesting names in 2:10-12 have given rise to much speculation. The Emim were predecessors to the Moabites prior to the descendants of Lot. The Anakim were giants in the land (1:28), and the Emim were tall like the Anakim. Moses contends that the Emim and the Anakim were considered or counted with the Rephaim, which may have been “the aboriginal inhabitants of the Bashan (present day Golan Heights). For more on the Rephaim in particular, see C. L’Heureux, “The Ugaritic and Biblical Rephaim,” *Harvard Theological Review* 67 (1974): 265-74. The Horites were also known as Hurrians and were the aboriginal inhabitants of Edom but were dispossessed by the children of Esau [Christensen 1991: 41-42].

²⁸Miller 1990: 39.

²⁹Block [2012: 90] further highlights that “Rahab’s testimony in Joshua 2:9-11 and the narrator’s comment in Numbers 22:3 indicate that this actually happened among the Canaanites and Moabites.”

³⁰Block [2012: 104] writes: “Israel’s overwhelming triumph over the enemy must have excited this 120-year-old man, and we should understand his intense desire to see his dream of entering the Promised Land fulfilled.”

³¹Breuggemann [2001: 45] writes that Joshua “will need all the encouragement with which Moses can endow him. The narrator goes to great pains to mark the Jordan as the boundary of old and new; not even Moses may violate that demarcation.”

³²The picture of “servant” in prayers functions as an expression of humility and subjugation while retaining hope that the “servant” will receive favor from the master. See H. Ringgren, עֶבֶד, in *TDOT*, 10: 392.

³³Block [2012: 114] rightly suggests that “although Moses continues his backward look in chapter 4, he actually has his sights set on the future, preparing the Israelites for life in the land.”

³⁴In verses 1 and 2, Moses declares that the entrance and occupation of the promised land is “dependent upon full obedience to the commandments Moses is about to utter” [Breuggemann 2001: 51].

³⁵Block 2012: 117.

³⁶BDB, s. v., “חֶק,” 349.

³⁷Robert Culver, s. v., “מִשְׁפֵּט,” in *TWOT*, 948-49. It describes the “sentence or decision issuing from a magistrate’s court.”

³⁸Christensen [1991: 81] suggests that “one of the great lessons we can learn from the experience of ancient Israel in the religious life is that memory serves to lead to the continuing experience of the presence and activity of God.”

³⁹BDB, s. v., “בָּאֵד,” 547.

⁴⁰The verb, שכח [*šākāch*], means more than a failure to remember, but it highlights what happens when God’s people fail to take into account their relationship with God and the covenant of love that He has established with them.

⁴¹Craigie [1976: 138] proposes that the imagery of 4:24 highlights, not merely the sternness of God in requiring fidelity by His people, it also establishes the fierceness of His love for His covenant people.

⁴²Miller 1990: 63

⁴³Brueggemann [2001: 52] suggests that “Moses is here doing ‘public theology,’ aware that Israel’s radical and intentional choice of obedience takes place in broad daylight before the eyes of all the watching nations. What is proposed is the ordering of a ‘contrast society,’ quite unlike the other nations, a contrast that is lived out in ways that are inimical to the watching nations. It is though Moses intends that Israel should be ‘bragged upon’ by the other nations who will be dazzled by what they see lived out in Israel’s existence.”

⁴⁴Block 2012: 123.