



Deuteronomy

Transcript

Introduction

00:00-01:05

The book of Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Bible and the final book of the Torah. After the exodus from Egypt, Israel was at Mount Sinai for one year, entering into a covenant with their God. And then they had the disastrous road trip through the wilderness, and the exodus generation disqualified themselves from entering into the land promised to Abraham. And so Deuteronomy begins with Moses standing in front of this new generation explaining the Torah, and it's from here that the design and purpose of the book unfolds.

Deuteronomy is a series of speeches from Moses where he's calling the next generation of Israel to be faithful to the covenant with their God. At the center of the book is a collection of laws, which are the terms of the covenant between God and Israel. Some of the laws are new, but many are repeated from the laws given earlier at Mount Sinai.

And that's actually where this book gets its name, from a Greek word, *deuteronomion*, which means "a second law." Now, surrounding these laws are two outer sections of Moses' speech. Each of these are broken up into two parts themselves. Let's just dive in, and we'll see how this whole thing works.

Chapters 1-11

01:06-03:11

So Moses first of all summarizes the story so far, and he highlights how rebellious the previous generation was in contrast with God's constant grace and provision in the wilderness. And God did bring his justice on them, yes, but he did not abandon his covenant promises.

After this comes a series of very passionate sermons where Moses calls on this new generation to be more faithful than their parents were to the covenant. He reminds

them of the Ten Commandments, and then the centerpiece of the section is the famous line called the Shema. Moses says, “Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, and you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your might.” This became a very important daily prayer in Judaism, and it brings all of the themes of the book together.

So the word “listen,” or *shema* in Hebrew, it means much more than just to hear. Its meaning includes responding to what you hear, or in English we would say “obey.” And the word “love” in Hebrew also means much more than just an emotion or feeling. It’s about a decision of wholehearted devotion to God that involves your will and your emotions, your mind and your heart.

Now for Israel, their obedience and devotion to God served a much larger purpose. Obedience to the laws is going to make Israel a unique people among the nations, just like God said at Mount Sinai—they’ll become a kingdom of priests. And Moses now says how. Israel has the chance, by following the laws, to show the whole world the wisdom and the justice of God.

The other key idea in the Shema is that Israel was called to obey and be devoted to the Lord alone, or literally in Hebrew it says, “the Lord is one.” Now in context, the point is that the Lord is the one God Israel is to worship and obey. Israel’s about to go into the land of Canaan, where people worship idol gods that represent all different aspects of creation: the sun, the weather, sex, and war. And in Moses’ view, worshipping these gods degrades humans and destroys communities. But worshipping the God of Israel, who’s the creator and the redeemer, that will lead to life and blessing.

Chapters 12-26

03:12-05:22

And so we come to the large collection of laws at the center of the book, and they’re roughly arranged by topic. So the opening section is about Israel’s worship of their God. They were to have one central temple where one God would be worshiped, and also God was to be worshiped in Israel’s care for its poor. So for example, all Israelites were to set aside one tenth of their annual income to be given to the temple, but another tenth was to be set aside every three years and given to the poor. And these are the kinds of laws that put Israel on the cutting edge of justice in comparison to their ancient neighbors, and it was all bound up with their worship of God.

The next section outlines the character qualities of Israel’s leaders. So the elders, the priests, the kings, these were all placed under the authority of the covenant laws, which God said that he would enforce by sending prophets to keep the leaders accountable. So in contrast to Israel’s neighbors, where kings were thought

of as divine and a law unto themselves, Israel's leaders were subordinate to the law and the prophets.

Following this is a large section of laws about Israel's civil life, so rules about marriage, and family, and business, and also about social justice, about their legal system and how it was to protect widows and orphans and immigrants. And then these are concluded by more laws about worship.

Now, here's some tips for reading all of these laws. Remember, first of all, these are the terms of the Sinai covenant given specifically to ancient Israel living in a culture that's very different from yours. And so, two, it's not going to be helpful to compare these laws with modern laws from a very different culture. Rather, these were given to set Israel apart, and so we need to compare these laws with those of Israel's neighbors, like in Assyria or Babylon. And when you do that, all of a sudden laws that seemed harsh or bizarre become much more clear. You see that God is pushing Israel to a higher level of justice than was ever known before. And so finally, try to discern what core principles of wisdom or justice underlie any particular law, and you'll discover some really profound things.

So here's an extra credit assignment: Go see how Paul the Apostle does this very thing in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 9. And he quotes a law from Deuteronomy, chapter 25, verse 4. It's really interesting.

Chapters 27-34

05:23-07:15

So back to Moses. After he goes through all of the laws, he issues a final challenge that Israel should listen to and love their God. He first issues a warning and the ultimatum. If Israel listens to and obeys their God, everything's going to go great—lots of divine blessing. But if they don't listen and rebel, famine, plague, devastation, and ultimately exile from the land.

And then Moses forces a decision. He says, "Today I set before you all life or death, blessing or curse, goodness or evil, so choose life by loving the Lord your God and listening to him." But then Moses says this, he says, "I know that after I die you're going to rebel and turn away from God and end up in exile." Which is kind of a downer, but then again, he's been with these people for decades, and it becomes clear that his hopes are not very high. But all is not lost, Moses says. One day, when Israel is sitting in exile, at any point, Moses says, they can turn back to their God who will, in his words, "circumcise your hearts, so that you may love him with all your heart and soul and live."

Now this is a vivid metaphor that's saying something is fundamentally wrong with Israel's heart. It's stubborn and hard. And it's the same thing wrong with the heart of all of humanity. This is going all the way back to the rebellion in the garden. Humans seized autonomy from God; they wanted to define good and evil for themselves, and they ruined God's good world as a result. But one day, Moses says, God is going to do something to transform the hearts of his people so that they can truly listen to and love God from the heart and be led back to true life. And this is the promise that gets picked up by the later biblical prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel—the hope for a new heart.

So Moses ends his speech with a poem of warning and then a blessing. And then he walks up onto a mountain, and he dies.

Conclusion

07:16-07:46

And so the Torah draws to a close. All of the major plot tensions of the biblical story are in place, but left totally unresolved. So when is the descendant of the woman going to come and defeat evil? Or how is God going to rescue the whole world and bless all nations through this family? And how can God's holiness be reconciled with people who are continually rebellious? And how is God going to transform the hearts of his people? You just have to keep reading to find out. But for now, that's what the book of Deuteronomy is all about.