

## **Deuteronomy: the messages for a people called to a different way**

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Surrounded by oppressive pagan nations, the Hebrews were freed from slavery into a different paradigm for relationships with God and with each other. After 40 years as nomads, the Hebrews were becoming a new nation. But in order to move into the future God had prepared for them, they needed to remember what He has taught them so far.

To understand what God was saying in a book such as Deuteronomy we need to realize what was at stake. The world was not a neutral environment. The slaves had been delivered out of a nightmare culture of oppression and fear. A generation later, their children were about to enter a Canaanite environment even more brutal and chaotic. If the Hebrews were going to live a better way of life, they would need to depend on God, and they would need to be realistic about the danger of the cultures aligned against them. Deuteronomy is all about following the true God and not turning to the destructive ways of their surrounding nations.

At first glance we mistakenly view the Hebrews as aggressors. We forget that they had been so afraid of these enormous Canaanites with their walled cities that they would have preferred to return to slavery in Egypt. God made it clear that they could NOT overthrow the Canaanites. The Hebrews would need God to fight for them. If they even began to forget God, disaster would soon follow. Multiple instructions on caring for the foreigners in their midst make it clear that the conflict was not between Hebrews and non-Hebrews, but between the brutally corrupt Canaanites and God, who lovingly fights for the oppressed.

Each paragraph below is a summary of what each chapter is saying. Each summary has a heading. At the end, the list of chapter headings gives an overview of the message of Deuteronomy.

**Chapter 1:** It starts with a trust relationship with God.

The Lord, like a father, is more concerned about our relationship with him than with the object of our fear. We magnify fear of harm--because we do not "fear" the Lord. To "fear the Lord" means to magnify the Lord: that is, to exercise the reality that he is infinitely greater than the objects of our fears. It means we believe He will bring ultimate good, and evil will not get the final word. Magnifying the Lord grows in us a realistic trust of the one who overcomes our enemies. In that sense, we can "fear" the Lord rather than fearing harm. So this is about a trust relationship with the good God.

**Chapters 2-3:** We aren't strong enough to do this; God has to do it.

As seen in Numbers, the Lord does not support those who attack people under his protection. He does not give Israel indiscriminate power to attack nations to whom he has given homes. But he himself gives some lands to his people. Clearly, Israel can't take whatever they choose. They can have only what the Lord gives them, and they are dependent on him to give it. They are not strong enough to gain it otherwise. This history cannot be understood if we see the Hebrews as bullies taking whatever they want. They are not able to do that. They take only

what God gives them. This whole story makes sense only if Yah is the central initiator and fulfiller.

Chapter 4: God's warnings are wise; they aren't arbitrary demands.

It is clear that God is not interested in mere adherence to a code. He is after relational devotion. Idolatry is not an arbitrary taboo; it is unfaithfulness and disloyalty to the only one worthy of trust and devotion. Misplaced love and trust is self-destructive. God doesn't have to punish us; we hurt ourselves by valuing that which has negative value, and devaluing that which has supreme value. God doesn't make manipulative threats. He calls us to follow for ultimate good.

Chapters 5-6: We need God in view always.

Our chronic tendency is to ignore God to our own detriment. The Decalogue is about the personal value of the living God in contrast with the abuses rampant in pagan cultures. The Sh'ma (6:4-6) is about remembering who God is, who we are, and what God does for his own. He knows one of our most glaring weaknesses is forgetfulness, and he gives us truths to remember and ways to remember them.

Chapter 7: God does not defend those who are abhorrent.

Crucial to the story is that Israel is not strong enough to overcome these seven nations. Only the Lord could do it. And he isn't doing it because Israel is better, but because he loves them and is making a people for himself. He isn't endorsing a genocide out of arrogance; he is calling for non-compromise with a culture that is radically destructive. It's a necessity for survival.

Chapter 8: All good gifts are from the Creator.

A humble realism includes knowing where good comes from, enjoying what he has graciously provided, remembering the grace that gives enjoyment, and remembering that our strength comes from the Creator.

Chapter 9: God is not an optional accessory.

Again, God makes it clear that the Hebrews aren't strong enough to defeat these people. He will do it for them. And when he does, it is not a reward for righteousness; it is a removal of rebels. (Implied: don't become like the Canaanites.) The Hebrews' history is one of rebellion--and the consequential disaster.

Chapter 10: The God of grace is the ultimate value.

God is the inheritance of the Levites (and that is symbolic perhaps, that the ultimate inheritance of all those who serve him is God himself, the ultimate good). Love God and hold onto his words for your own good. He loves the unloved and the alien. That is what you were when he first loved you, and that is why he calls you to love the foreigner.

Chapter 11: Freedom is with God; idolatry is bondage.

God is being as clear as possible that his people have a choice--either to stay focused on his worth and his words, or to slide into the same disastrous idolatry of the Canaanites--which will be a chronic seduction and rival for their passion. God gives good; but rejecting it for idolatry brings its own consequences. This is not about "free will"; it is about a contrast: follow the Lord who gives freedom, or give yourselves into bondage and addiction.

Chapter 12: God guides in the path of life.

You have freedom to eat and enjoy, but don't emulate pagans. Worship where God chooses, giving what he tells you to give.

Chapter 13: Idolatry is the path of death.

It is a life-or-death issue if you turn to false gods. Better to destroy all that is associated with your idols than to fall for them.

Chapter 14: Being set apart is not only for your benefit, but for the world.

Dietary instructions are based on two values: avoiding what is unclean, and being set apart from the nations as belonging to Yah. It is both a health matter and a relational matter. Tithes are to be a benefit for the Levite, the foreigner, the widow and orphan. The distinctives of God's community are for the benefit of the nations.

Chapter 15: Generosity is freedom.

Cancel debts. Give generously. Free servants. Accept their devotion. Set aside the first and best for the Lord. This is all about a trusting heart in contrast with a fearful selfishness.

Chapter 16: This is about cultivating a non-abusive culture.

Passover foreshadows the ultimate sacrifice at a place where God chose to dwell among his people. Pentecost is a celebration not only for your family, but for Levites, foreigners, and those without means who live among you. Camping is likewise for all the above. These festivals are not exclusive, but remarkably inclusive. Participate as you are blessed to. Exercise justice without oppressive partiality. (Reflected in 1 Corinthians 11?) There is no place here for the oppressive religion of abuse to gain power.

Chapter 17: To abuse authority for selfish control is illegitimate leadership.

Deadly practices: idolatry, contempt for legal authority, contempt for ministry service. These undermine the spiritual community. A king gets authority from God's Words and God's will. Legitimate rulers of God's people do not abuse their authority as pagans do; he's not there to lead astray, gain a harem, or get rich. God's people aren't rebels, and God's leaders aren't despots.

Chapter 18: Those set apart to serve are not above others.

Levites are set apart to serve and to live on offerings rather than inherited land. They are servants, not despots. Human sacrifice and spiritism are horrors to oppose, not to adopt. Instead, listen to the Lord, who will raise up a prophet who speaks the truth.

Chapter 19: Justice means protecting the innocent.

Protect the innocent--by providing refuge, by verifying intent, by testimony of plural witnesses, by holding false accusers accountable.

Chapter 20: Don't spread fear, but trust that God will do what He says.

Don't fear the enemy. Don't bring your fear into the camp. Better to go home than to spread fear. Only among the brutal nations are you to destroy everything except the trees that give food. This is not about wanton slaughter; it is about God replacing corruption with an unexpected and gracious community.

Chapter 21: God is not flippant; he cares.

Offer a sacrifice for the guilt of an unsolved killing--so you do not share in the guilt. God does not overlook the guilt of murder. If you take a woman as the spoils of war, have her cleansed

and give her a month to mourn, then either marry her or release her. God does not overlook the dishonor of victims of war. Fathers, do not favor a younger son over an older son, or over a son of a different mother. God, not man, chooses the rights of the firstborn. Do not keep a stubborn, rebellious son among you. God will not overlook stubborn rebellion. The body of someone executed must not remain on a pole. God does not want a curse to remain on the land. God cares about sacrifice for guilt, honoring women as brides, the rights of firstborn sons, ending stubborn rebellion, and removing a curse on the land. As a whole, this foreshadows the **gospel** story.

Chapter 22: Do what makes for healthy future relations.

Think ahead--doing for others what you might someday need done for you. Don't leave clothing or marriage to unravel. Violating marriage is deadly. Don't tolerate gender-dishonesty, unfaithfulness, rape, adultery. None of these can end well.

Chapter 23: Legalism doesn't replace wisdom.

Remain ethically distinct from neighbors--some always, to remember your story; some for two generations, to remember your story. As you wouldn't keep dung in your camp, don't bring defilement into the sacred assembly. Don't abuse runaway slaves, or tolerate prostitution, or charge interest to your own people, or make promises you can't keep, or abuse a neighbor's kindness. This community is set apart by grace and truth, not one without the other.

Chapter 24: Honor; do not oppress.

Encourage happy marriages. Don't take away a person's livelihood. Stop abuse. Deal wisely with diseases. Don't take a debtor's blanket. Don't withhold wages from the poor. Don't put foreigners, orphans or widows at a disadvantage. Don't hoard your wealth. Remember what it is like to be in need.

Chapter 25: God cares for the underdog and opposes the arrogant and selfish.

Declare justice according to innocence and guilt. Don't withhold food from the one that is working. Don't leave a dead brother and widow without an heir and a name. Don't damage a man's ability to procreate. God hates dishonest trade. Destroy the memory of those who attack the weak.

Chapter 26: Remembering God and caring for others are part of covenant identity.

Once in the Promised Land, take your firstfruits, remember the story of your people, your slavery, and God's deliverance, and give a firstfruits offering to the Levites, foreigners, orphans and widows (the same people listed in chapter 14). God's people have a covenant with God to follow his instructions and to expect him to bless them. That is why they are free to give graciously to those who don't have the same means.

Chapter 27: Remember your directions; ignoring God brings consequences.

Once in the land, engrave all God's words and build an altar to the Lord. As God's people, listen and follow His directions. The nation is to divide, six tribes on Mt Gerizim (south of Shechem, Jacob's well) to proclaim God's blessing on his people; six tribes on Mt Ebal (north of Shechem) to proclaim the curses on those who make idols, demean their parents, steal land, mislead the blind, withhold justice from a foreigner, widow or orphan, commit incest or bestiality, murder, or ignore God's words. (Jacob's well is where Jesus spoke of worshipping in Spirit and Truth and he reversed the curse for the Samaritan woman.)

Chapter 28: Righteousness brings righteousness; failure brings failure.

Full obedience to the Lord will bring prosperity in every way. Failure to fully obey will bring the failure in every area of life. (This is the context for grace--unexpected righteousness in a realm of failure.)

Chapter 29: We know enough to reject evil; but we don't.

The Lord gave great trials and wonders, but He did not give you understanding. You have seen the sickening evil. Don't let it poison you, or you will see disaster. And when people ask why, the answer will be "because they abandoned a relationship with God to follow the plague of lies." The unknown belongs to God, but the revealed truth is our vocation.

Chapter 30: Love the Lord and you will live.

If you return to faithfulness, God will gather you from all the nations. He will soften your hearts to love him fully. He will restore your protection and prosperity. This is at hand, not out of your reach. God is your life: love, listen to, cling to him.

Chapter 31: God knows that people will rebel before they do.

Be strong and courageous; the Lord will never leave you. Assemble men, women, children, foreigners, to hear God's words. The Lord told Moses, "You will soon rest with your ancestors. Your people will inhabit the land and prostitute themselves with foreign gods. And I will hide my face from them. I know this before they even enter the land. Teach them this song, which will remind them how far they have fallen."

Chapter 32: The story so far is unfinished and disappointing. God is better.

The song: These words are like rain bringing life to thirsty plants. God is fully good and dependable. His children are corrupt, dishonoring their Life-Giver. God gave them special attention. He found them in the wilderness, embraced and nursed them, like an eagle teaching its young to fly. He served them every good food. They rejected him and gave themselves pictures that aren't real. God let them try it without him. They would end up envious of hollow people. They will know war, starvation, plague, snakebite, grief, terror. He considered letting them all die out, but then the enemy would claim victory as if he had done it. There is no other power to give and take life. God is it, inescapable. He will execute justice, atone for land and people. Celebrate that, if you want to live and not die.

Moses died on Mt Nebo, seeing but not entering the land, because he had not kept the focus on God's goodness. (Not even Moses was saved by fulfilling God's instructions.)

Chapter 33: Yahweh is who makes this people special.

Moses spoke blessing: Yahweh rose upon his people like the dawn. He loves them, and they sit at his feet to learn. He is king of his people.

Moses prayed for the tribes, envisioning them saved, provisioned, and set apart among the nations not by the land or the race but by Yahweh.

Chapter 34: Moses is not the ultimate leader of God's people.

The death of Moses before he reached the Land of Promise keeps us from worshiping Moses. Even though his strength was not gone, his time in this old world was over. No prophet was like Moses. His leadership was unique to his time, place and role. He is not the model for any other person's calling. God chose him and used him powerfully, but he was broken as we are and saved not by his own power but through faith in the true and ultimate Savior. At the time, Moses was replaced by a man filled with the Spirit of wisdom. But ultimately Moses' story is fulfilled by a different Joshua: Y'shua, Jesus.

The messages of Deuteronomy:

- 1 It starts with a trust relationship with God.
- 2-3 We aren't strong enough to do this; God has to do it.
- 4 God's warnings are wise; they aren't arbitrary demands.
- 5-6 We need God in view always.
- 7 God does not defend those who are abhorrent.
- 8 All good gifts are from the Creator.
- 9 God is not an optional accessory.
- 10 The God of grace is the ultimate value.
- 11 Freedom is with God; idolatry is bondage.
- 12 God guides in the path of life.
- 13 Idolatry is the path of death.
- 14 Being set apart is not only for your benefit, but for the world.
- 15 Generosity is freedom.
- 16 This is about cultivating a non-abusive culture.
- 17 To abuse authority for selfish control is illegitimate leadership.
- 18 Those set apart to serve are not above others.
- 19 Justice means protecting the innocent.
- 20 Don't spread fear, but trust that God will do what He says.
- 21 God is not flippant; he cares.
- 22 Do what makes for healthy future relations.
- 23 Legalism doesn't replace wisdom.
- 24 Honor; do not oppress.
- 25 God cares for the underdog and opposes the arrogant and selfish.
- 26 Remembering God and caring for others are part of covenant identity.
- 27 Remember your directions; ignoring God brings consequences.
- 28 Righteousness brings righteousness; failure brings failure.
- 29 We know enough to reject evil; but we don't.
- 30 Love the Lord and you will live.
- 31 God knows that people will rebel before they do.
- 32 The story so far is unfinished and disappointing. God is better.
- 33 Yahweh is who makes this people special.
- 34 Moses is not the ultimate leader of God's people.