

DEUTERONOMY – PART THREE

A Covenant Appeal – Promise of Forgiveness

Chapters 29-32

Introducing Moses' third sermon, the Collegeville Commentary states:

“The major concern of this address is Israel’s immediate future. Moses makes provisions for Joshua to assume the leadership of the tribes after his death. Equally important are the provisions made for storing the book of the law and for its periodic reading. The law is to be the guide in Israel’s future existence in the land. Individual human leaders come and go, but the law endures as the most effective way to safeguard Israel’s commitment to the Lord” (p. 225).

CHAPTER 29

“Keep the terms of this covenant, therefore, and fulfill them, that you may succeed in whatever you do” (v. 8).

Verses 1-8. Moses' third sermon or address begins with a recital of God's past saving deeds on behalf of Israel, remembering, in particular, three events: (1) Israel's deliverance from Egypt; (2) God's care for the Israelites during their wilderness journey; and (3) the defeat of Sihon and Og. Verse 4 points to the necessity of faith to help us *recognize* God's saving presence in our lives.

Verses 8-14 reiterate Israel's covenant with the Lord. *“Keep the terms of this covenant, therefore, and fulfill them that you may succeed in all you do”* (v.8). In verses 9-10, the deuteronomist writer includes the whole community *and* future generations as partners in the covenant made with God.

Verses 15-20 are a reiteration of the first commandment: God alone must be the object of Israel's worship. Egypt is denounced as a model of false worship that Israel must reject. As we read these verses, we need to keep in mind that they were written centuries after Israel entered the Promised Land and became involved in all kinds of poisonous false worship.

Verses 21-27 reveal the disastrous consequences for Israel for disobedience to the Sinai covenant. Disaster befell Israel because *“they forsook the covenant which the Lord...had made with them”* (v. 24).

Verse 28 states: *“Both what is still hidden and what has already been revealed concern us and our descendents forever, that we may carry all the words of this law.”* The Israelites had *partial insight* into the workings of God.

Pause: We all live with the unknown and with a future that may have good and not so good surprises. What helps you to cope with this aspect of life?

CHAPTER 30: Israel's choice: the two ways

“Here, then, I have today set before you life and prosperity, death and doom. If you obey the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I enjoin on you today, loving him, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees, you will live and grow numerous, and the Lord, your God, will bless you in the land you are entering to occupy. If, however, you turn away your hearts and will not listen, but are led astray and adore and serve others gods, I tell you now that you will certainly perish . . .” (vv. 15-18).

Chapter 28 describes all the bad things that could happen to Israel if she was unfaithful to her covenant with the Lord. Verses 1-10 of this chapter give a litany of the wonderful blessings to be bestowed on Israel if she returned to the Lord and kept his commandments. This sounds like an offer that's hard to refuse, though it raises the question: *What if* Israel did not take God up on his offer and persisted in their stubborn ways that the catastrophes they were forewarned about in chapter 28 actually happened – what then? Would that have been the end of the story?

The answer is no, it is not. These verses were addressed to the *exiles* who actually saw the worst happen to Israel. The deuteronomist is seeking to give hope to a people who felt all was lost: *“If you and your children return to the Lord, your God, and heed his voice, with all your heart and all your soul..., the Lord your God will change your lot...he will gather you from among the nations wherein he has scattered you”* (vv 2-3). The past cannot be undone, but the present can be changed. The exiles

are told that the Promised Land can be re-entered, prosperity regained (vv 5, 9), and even their strongest enemies defeated (v.7).

Verses 11-14 respond to an unstated objection that God's law is too difficult to understand and obey. The deuteronomist author says that God's law is not too mysterious or remote—no, it is something very near to them, already in their mouths and in their hearts; they have only to carry it out. God's law is within the reach of all and doable if we would just cooperate with God's grace. (See Paul's comments on these verses in Rom 10:5-10.)

Verses 15-20 – Israel's choice. It has been said that every good sermon ought to pose a challenge and set a choice before the listeners. Moses does not fail in this regard. Commenting on these central verses, the Collegeville Commentary states: *"We can say that the whole book of Deuteronomy has been leading up to this dramatic choice that Moses sets before the people. These verses contain all the key themes of this book; commandments, blessing and curse, the appeal for obedience. After all has been said, the entire thrust of the book comes down to a choice that the people need to make. Israel's future is dependent upon that choice. God's graciousness is not the issue"* (p.226).

Important caveat. It is important to note that the theology or outlook of Deuteronomy (and other books of the Old Testament) is limited in that it did not have the fullness of revelation granted through Jesus. We know that in the real world, bad things can and do happen to good people and that suffering does not always result from disobedience. *"From Jesus, we learn that while peace is promised—a peace the world does not understand—it is also a peace that we can, indeed must, find even in the midst of trial, suffering, and possibly persecution. One of the important truths of the Christian tradition is that pain and suffering are an inevitable part of the journey to union with God"* (*The Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition*, p.89).

Pause: "Every time you choose to obey God and his Word, you are choosing blessing. When you put God first in your life, especially when it is difficult, you are choosing blessing." What say you?

CHAPTER 31: Joshua, Moses' Successor

Deuteronomy is a book of words, embodying Moses' instructions to the people before they entered the Promised Land. *"When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel..."* (v.1). In this chapter, we return to the narrative framework of the Pentateuch, with the description of a leadership change.

Before Moses commissions Joshua into his leadership, he offers words of encouragement to both the people and to Joshua. *"It is the Lord your God who will cross before you..."* (v.3). *"Be brave and steadfast; have no fear of them, for it is the Lord your God, who marches with you..."* (v 6).

Verses 9-13, 24-29 speak of Moses' plan for the future preservation of his people which involves two steps: the appointment of a competent leader and the preservation and maintenance of the law code enshrined in the book. The priests are to guard the code and the elders are to read it to the people lest they forget what it contains.

Verses 16-22 are seen by scholars as an introduction to the Song of Moses, which we will find in chapter 32. *"Write out this song.... Teach it to the Israelites and have them recite it..."*(v.19). The song which was written after Israel had been in the Promised Land for centuries is a sad reflection on Israel's disloyalty to God.

CHAPTER 32: The Song of Moses

"Give ear, O heavens while I speak' let the earth harken to the words of my mouth!" (v. 1).

- The song begins with a summoning of witnesses. The heavens and earth are called to testify that a covenant existed between God and Israel.

- A contrast is made between God's fidelity (vv 4, 6-14) and Israel's unfaithfulness; God's generosity and uprightness and Israel's ingratitude and idolatrous tendencies (vv 15-29).

- The pagan nations who are unable to see God's hand at work in Israel's defeat will find themselves facing their own doom (vv 30-43).

"The song [of Moses] encapsulates Israel's tragic history while affirming that the nation's defeat is not God's last work to Israel" (Leslie Hoppe).

In Chapter 30:15-19, Israel is strongly exhorted by God to choose life by obeying God's law. The Song of Moses bespeaks death more than life. Chapter 32 ends with God taking Moses to Mount Nebo from where he can see the Promised Land.

CHAPTER 33:1-29: Moses blessing to the Tribes of Israel

"The Lord is your saving shield, and his sword is your glory. Your enemies fawn upon you, as you stride upon your heights" (v. 29).

The Song of Moses in Chapter 32 is followed by the *Blessing of Moses* from his deathbed upon the tribes of Israel. Scholars believe that this blessing originated during a period of economic prosperity and political security—enemies were not absent, but they posed no serious threat. The blessing begins and ends by praising and celebrating God's providential care for Israel *"How fortunate are you, O Israel! Where else is a nation victorious in the Lord? The Lord is your saving shield and his sword is your glory"* (v. 29).

CHAPTER 34: Death and Burial of Moses

The Book of Deuteronomy and the whole Pentateuch, the era of Israel's foundation as a nation, come to an end with the death of Moses.

Moses led the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt and guided them through their forty years in the wilderness which was filled with many difficulties, to put it mildly. Moses gave the people the law of the Lord which was intended to guide the nation for future generations. He interceded for them when they rebelled against God and failed to keep his law. No wonder this book ends with a glowing obituary for the founder of Israel's nation.

"Since then, no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He had no equal in all the signs and wonders the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh and all his servants and against all his land, and for the might and the terrifying power that Moses exhibited in the sight of all Israel" (vv 10-12).

Pause: Having watched Moses in action for the past four books of the Bible, what do you find most attractive about this leader? What can leaders today learn from Moses?

RESOURCES

- Collegeville Bible Commentary on Deuteronomy
- Interpretation Series, Vol. 5, Patrick Miller
- The Daily Study Bible Series, David Payne
- The Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition