

Why Study Deuteronomy?

Last words matter. In movies, TV shows, plays, and novels, we are regularly treated to the deathbed scene in which a dying character imparts final words to his loved ones. Likewise, we pour over the last words of a final speech or manuscript from the hands of an important leader. I think of the significance attached to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final Memphis speech. King echoed the experience of Moses from Deuteronomy, "I've been to the mountaintop ... I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." He was fatally shot the very next day. Last words matter.

The Book of Deuteronomy represents to us the last words of Moses. The main text of the book is a series of three speeches which Moses delivered to the Israelites on the Plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River and across from the great city of Jericho. The period of wilderness wandering had come to an end, and the people were finally ready to cross into the Promised Land of Canaan. To this Mosaic material has been added some narrative material and possibly the work of some additional editing, but it is still within reason to call the text the work of Moses. The title given to the book in our English Bibles means "Second Law." And this helps us to understand the nature of the work. In this book, we hear Moses reiterating, reminding, and developing the laws of God that had been given at Sinai. He is preparing the people to enter the land under the leadership of Joshua, for Moses knows that he himself will not enter the land. At the end of the book, the epilogue gives us the death and burial of Moses. We will talk about that passage in due time.

Why study the book of Deuteronomy? Beyond the general idea that last words matter and the simple reason that the book is a part of Holy Scripture, I suggest four reasons why you should study this book. Lord willing, these four reasons will provide a kind of framework for us as we study select passages from these pages. I do not here guarantee that every sermon will reflect the four categories in equal weight, but you should nonetheless acquaint yourself with these four words as we move forward.

Inheritance. Deuteronomy tells us about how the Israelites were to claim their inheritance in the land. Likewise, the book helps us to know how we are to lay hold of our inheritance in and through Jesus Christ. It has been common in our tradition – particularly in our hymnody – to associate Canaan with heaven. This is perfectly right. It is said of Abraham in Hebrews 11:10, “For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” And of Abraham and Sarah it is written in Hebrews 11:13-16,

These all died in faith, although they had not received the things that were promised. But they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth. Now those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they were thinking about where they came from, they would have had an opportunity to return. But they now desire a better place – a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

From such passages, John Bunyan drew his image of Christian journeying towards the Celestial City in *Pilgrim's Progress*. But we need to add an important correction at this point. The full biblical focus of heaven is not just some spiritual, other-world. The full picture is a renewed heaven and a renewed earth in which God's resurrected people live with God and one another. If it is the call of the Christian to shape our experience according to our vision of heaven, then we must shape our lives by this vision of fruitfulness and blessing right here right now on earth. Your inheritance is not simply that you get to go to heaven when you die. Your inheritance is that you receive blessing and give blessing in the land that the Lord has given you to occupy. We should not so spiritualize the language of Deuteronomy that we forget that we are talking about real people living in a real world. Likewise, Jesus has called us to embody his teaching in the place where we have been called to live. This is our inheritance.

Idolatry. Deuteronomy shows God's people the danger of idolatry. One of the key passages of the books is found in chapter six. It is the heart of the

religious creed of the Israelites: “Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (6:4-5). But note how this belief in the oneness of God is to filter down into all of life. In verses six through nine of the chapter, God’s words are to be the constant topic of Israelite reflection and conversation. They are to be talked about at home and on the road. They are to be in the hearts of the people and written on the city gates. In verses ten through nineteen, the people are counseled to fear God, keep his commandments, reject all other deities, and drive out the enemies before them. Vv. 14-15: “Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you, for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God. Otherwise, the LORD your God will become angry with you and obliterate you from the face of the earth.” Vv. 18-19: “Do what is right and good in the LORD’s sight, so that you may prosper and so that you may enter and possess the good land the LORD your God swore to give your fathers, by driving out all your enemies before you, as the LORD has said.” In verses twenty through twenty-five, God’s people are told to pass the truth of God’s work and God’s commandments on to the coming generations.

If all we had was vv. 4-5, we might think that the point is to have the right doctrine, as if the Israelites were simply being told to believe that there was one God and love him. But the rest of the chapter makes it clear that this belief in and love of God is to spill out into a whole way of life. God’s truth and the practice of God’s truth is to dominate conversation. Children must be brought up in the faith. Comprehensive commands for living must be followed, and the idolatrous peoples must be driven out to prevent any type of syncretism with the surrounding religions. What becomes clear throughout Deuteronomy is that whole cultures can be idolatrous. We are not called to simply replace a false set of beliefs with a true set of beliefs. We also must fight against the ways in which idolatry has infected every area of life. In our context, we must appreciate that there is an antithesis that runs through business, education, art, sports, religion, and everything else. The Christian calling is to battle idolatry in all these areas and in some poor way to bring forward an authentically Christian culture. We may disagree with what this looks like in practice, but we must hold to the goal of whole-of-life discipleship.

Interpretation. Deuteronomy gives us a lens to interpret the subsequent history of Israel. Why did Israel go into exile? The book gives clear rationale in chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine, explaining that persistent idolatry and violation of their covenant with God would result in curses coming upon them, including the warning that “the LORD will scatter you among all peoples from one end of the earth to the other, and there you will worship other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known” (28:64). Deuteronomy even provides a promise of return from exile and the looming hope of a renewed covenant with God on the other side:

When all these things happen to you – the blessings and curses I have set before you – and you come to your senses while you are in all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and all your soul by doing everything I am commanding you today, then he will restore your fortunes, have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you...The LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, and you will love him with all your heart and all your soul so that you will live (30:1-3, 6).

Here we find a prophetic reference to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the beginning of the hope that would come to climax with the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the true Israelite who would wholeheartedly live to God and spread the blessings of God to all the peoples of the earth.

Inspiration. Deuteronomy gives us many verses which are immediately applicable in our life of discipleship to Jesus. The book is the third most quoted OT book in the New Testament. Paul turned to the words of Moses when explaining the way of salvation in Romans 10. Jesus quoted the book three times in order to overcome the devil during his wilderness temptation. Likewise, you will find immense spiritual inspiration by meditating and memorizing the words of this book.

Inheritance. Idolatry. Interpretation. Inspiration. With the Lord’s help, we will use these four categories in the sermons to come.