

# DEUTERONOMY – PART 1

## A Call to Choose Life through Obedience to God’s Word

### Chapters 1-11

[In addition to the pause questions offered here, you can ask: What spoke to you most in a particular chapter?]

*“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Therefore you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.” (6:4-5)*

Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of the Pentateuch. The name is derived from two Greek words: *deuteros* + *nomos* meaning “second law” or “repetition of the law” (see Dt 17:18). A large portion of this book is a reiteration of the law delivered on Sinai and recorded in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. In Jewish tradition, Deuteronomy is sometimes called *seper debarim*, “the book of words,” which is a very appropriate title in that it essentially consists of a monologue, i.e., Moses’ declaration of all the Lord’s commands. There is no action in this book until its final chapter which describes the burial of Moses.

**Historical setting.** The book has three historical settings.

- The first historical setting has the Israelites on the banks of the River Jordan in the territory of Moab. They are poised to take the land of Canaan which God has promised to them. Before they cross over, their leader Moses gives them one last sermon during which he reviews the events of the Exodus from Egypt and of the forty years in the desert. He restates the laws, including the Ten Commandments (Dt 5:1-21) by which Israel is to be governed. He lists the blessings that will come upon the Israelites if they obey God, and warns them of the curses that will afflict them if they disobey. After Joshua is commissioned by God as Moses’ successor, Moses blesses the tribes, climbs Mount Nebo to view the Promised Land, dies and is buried.

- Pinpointing the second and third historical settings is not easy and is disputed amongst scholars. Moses lived in the thirteenth century B.C. but the Book of Deuteronomy was not written until several centuries later. Many scholars believe that Deuteronomy, or part of it, is the book that was discovered in the Jerusalem temple during the reign of King Josiah in the late seventh century (see 2 Kings

22:8). In this historical setting, the sermon of Moses would have been used to bring about much needed religious reform.

- As the Book of Deuteronomy was still in formation, the historical circumstances of Israel changed dramatically. In 587 B.C. the southern kingdom, Judah, falls to the Babylonians and the people are taken into exile. This period is seen by the prophets as a new wilderness. Moses’ sermon has a new audience, a battered band of exiles. The sermon is used to explain why God allows terrible things to happen to them—they have been unfaithful to the Sinai covenant. But all is not lost. If the exiles listen to Moses’ great sermon and heed it, God will restore the land to Israel and bless them in the years ahead. We might say that in the first and second historical settings, the authors of this book wanted to make ancient tradition speak again in a time of great crises to help the Israelites to understand present events and move forward with hope into the future. Deuteronomy admonishes its audience that obedience to God’s law is the only way to secure the future. Obey and live—or disobey and die (30:15-20).

Using the figure of Moses to speak to different audiences at different historical periods is a literary device, just like characters in a play that are used to speaking to various audiences.

**Division of chapters.** Scholars divide the Book of Deuteronomy into three parts, often referred to as the three sermons, addresses or sets of instructions, followed by Moses’ last will and testament.

**First sermon (Chapters 1:1-4:13).** Moses surveys God’s past dealings with Israel. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 recount how God helps Israel defeat her enemies. Chapter 4 is an exhortation to fidelity to the law.

**Second sermon (Chapters 4:4-28:69).** Moses’ second sermon is the heart of Deuteronomy. He proclaims the Great Commandment to love God with one’s whole being and he repeats the Ten Commandments. Then he recalls those laws governing the worship, public and private life of Israel. This sermon concludes with a series of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

**Third sermon (Chapters 29-32).** Moses delivers a covenant appeal and promise of divine forgiveness, called the Song of Moses.

**Moses' last will and testament (Chapters 33-34).** Joshua is appointed Moses' successor; Moses gives his deathbed blessing to the tribes of Israel; Moses dies and is buried.

Even though this book, like the two previous books, has many chapters dedicated to the laws governing Israel's worship and daily life, it also contains, as we shall see, many wonderful sections that give much food for thought. *"The book of Deuteronomy offers a theological evaluation of God's dealings with Israel over a period of about seven hundred years"* (Kenneth Baker, S.J.). Deuteronomy is referred to several times in the New Testament. Two of the best known are when Jesus quotes three times from the book to refute Satan in the desert, and when Jesus responds to the scribes' question about the greatest commandment and quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-6 (see Mk 12:28-34).

The *theme* of this book is *exhortation*. In his three sermons, the preacher/teacher Moses exhorts his people to be faithful to their covenant with God and to avoid all that would hurt their relationship with him.

**Pause:** This book recounts Moses' most famous speech. Do you have a favorite speech or address given by someone still alive or deceased?

## COMMENTARY

### CHAPTER 1: Israel's failure to trust God

*In rendering judgment, do not consider who the person is; give ear to the lowly and to the great alike, fearing no man, for judgment is God's* (v. 17).

*The Lord said to Moses: "Warn them" Do not go up and fight, ...for I will not be in their midst"* (v. 47).

The first three chapters review Israel's journey from Horeb (the author's name for Sinai) to the border of the Promised Land. It is a story that relates God's presence with Israel, their call to place their trust in him and how they are failing.

Chapter 1 frames the contents of the book in a real historical situation and time. The *place* where Moses gives his address is on the Plains of Moab; the *time* is forty years after Israel leaves Egypt. God acts in and through human history in particular times, places and people.

**Verse 6** tells us that the words spoken by Moses come from God. Moses is the voice, but God is the source and author of the words.

**Verses 7-8** order the people to leave Horeb and "resume the journey," and to go and occupy the land God promised to their founding fathers—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The land is *promised, given* as gift, and eventually taken.

**Verses 9-18** interrupt the account of Israel's departure from Horeb and switch the focus to Moses' search for helpers in his role as leader of the people. Wise, outstanding and experienced men are chosen from each tribe to administer justice. Moses' charge to the selected judges is worth noting: *"...In rendering judgment, do not consider who a person is, give ear to the lowly and to the great alike, fearing no one, for judgment is God's"* (vv 16-18). In their courts, all are to be treated with equality irrespective of their social or economic background. This includes the alien or outsider.

**Verses 19-40** recount Israel's failure to place their trust in God at Kadesh-barnea. After scouting Canaan, the spies return and report: *"The land which the Lord, our God, gives us is good"* (v.25). Then Moses chides the people for letting their fear take over in spite of his assurance that *"the Lord, your God, who goes before you, will himself fight for you just as he took your part in Egypt, as well as in the desert, where... he carried you, as a man carries a child... Despite this, you would not trust the Lord your God, who journeys with you..."* (vv 30-34). Though the people know God as both warrior (v.30) and caring father (v.31), they still are unable to trust him.

**Verses 34-35** note the consequences of distrust in God. None of the fearful generation, except Joshua and Caleb, shall be allowed to enter the Promised Land, not even Moses. As leader, Moses is held responsible for the people's behavior (v.37). Only those who place their trust in God shall receive the gift of the land.

**Verses 41-48** give an account of the Israelites' failed attempt to take the Promised Land because they went without God.

**Pause:** Have you had dealings with our justice system? If so, what was that experience like for you? To what extent do you believe that many people in jail are there because of a poor representation?

## CHAPTERS 2-3: Peace and war on the journey

*“The Lord your God, has blessed you in all your undertakings: he has been concerned about your journey through this vast desert. It is now forty years that he has been with you and you have never been in want” (v. 7).*

The events described in these two chapters are also narrated in Numbers 20-21 and 33:37-49 with a different slant. For example, Deuteronomy depicts Edom as fearful of the Israelites, whereas Numbers characterizes them as hostile and threatening. Note that in these two chapters and elsewhere, the deuteronomist author wants to show that God is clearly in charge of events. The first three tribes—Edom, Moab and Ammon—offer no resistance to Israel. They pass through their land peacefully. But in the case of the tribes of Sihor and Og, who refuse passage to the Israelites, all are totally destroyed: men, women and children.

While it is nearly impossible to soften such horrid treatment of the enemy, we should keep in mind two things: (a) what at its beginning seems to have been an act of *human* initiative, is turned into a *divine* command; and (b) its purpose is to make sure that the Israelites do not fall for the strange gods and the pagan ways of the Canaanites.

Chapter 3 ends with a second account of God’s decision not to let Moses lead the people into the Promised Land. Here, the reason for God’s decision is *not* Moses’ sin or lack of faith but the people’s lack of trust. *“God was angry with me on your account...”* (3:26). In Deuteronomy, Moses is a suffering servant who pays for the sins of his people. *“Moses does not share their fearful perspective, but he shares their existence and so must suffer with them”* (Patrick Miller).

## CHAPTER 4: A call to obedience

The Collegeville Commentary on Deuteronomy states: *“The material found here was incorporated into Deuteronomy during the Babylonian exile (587-539 B.C.) when circumstances forced Israel to reconsider the meaning of its relationship with God and to examine the status of that relationship.”*

The Book of Deuteronomy, as a whole, and this chapter in particular, speak of the fundamental loyalty that is essential to Israel’s unique relationship with God. Here, the exile is explained as one result of a serious lapse in that loyalty, as manifested by

Israel’s disregard of the prohibition of images (vv 25-27) and the folly of serving other gods (v. 28). It is clear that obedience is the key to maintaining Israel’s relationship with God, which is made tangible by its possession of the Promised Land. The connection between obedience and possession of the land is repeated herein five times (vv 1, 5-8, 14, 21-22, 40). When Israel disregarded God’s commandments, disaster followed. Israel’s relationship with God is based on obedience, which brings her closer to God than is thought humanly possible (v.6).

*Verses 1-8* are pleas for fidelity to God and his commandments.

In *Verses 9-14*, the people are taken back in spirit to Horeb (Sinai) so that they do not forget that great event in their history. They must remember to teach their children and grandchildren about these pivotal events in Israel’s relationship with God.

*Verses 15-31* lecture on the second commandment which forbids all worship of false gods.

In *Verses 32-40*, the Israelites are invited through a series of questions to reflect on God’s goodness to them. They are allowed to experience God’s mighty deeds so that they *“might know the Lord is God and there is no other”* (v.35). Why did God act on Israel’s behalf in such a mighty way? Because he loved them (v.37). Such love should motivate the people to be loyal and faithful to God. In his role as teacher, Moses is by no means a neutral communicator of a message; rather, he is always seeking to elicit from the people a response of obedience.

**Pause:** What in us makes us vulnerable to think that certain false gods will make us happy, e.g., material things, status in our community? What can help us to resist the seductive attraction of such false gods?

## Second Sermon: God and his Covenant--The Law Proclaimed (4:44-28:69)

Moses’ second address can be divided into two parts:

- **Chapters 5-11** present the stipulations of the covenant, the Decalogue, the Shema, and an extended commentary on some specific dimensions of the law.
- **Chapters 12-28** are promulgations of the laws and the consequent blessings or curses for those who obey or disobey them.

Moses gives his second sermon near Beth-peor, the site of one of Israel's infamous acts of apostasy (Num 25), where the Israelites show themselves ready to compromise the absolute fidelity that God expects from them.

The Israelites are in Transjordan, ready to take the land promised by God to their ancestors. The initial acquisition of the land is the result of God's fidelity to that promise, but *remaining* in the land will depend on how faithful Israel will be to God's commandments.

## CHAPTER 5: The Decalogue

*"Hear, O Israel, the statutes and decrees which I proclaim in your hearing this day, that you may learn them and take care to observe them."* (v.1)

**Verse 2** is interesting and important in what it says: *"The Lord, our God, made a covenant with us at Horeb; not with our fathers...but with us who are alive here today."* The time lapse between what happened forty years ago at Sinai and the present moment is dissolved. It is as if God is with the Israelites today, speaking to them and instructing them on how they are to relate to him. This is what Catholics proclaim about the Eucharist. An event that occurred 2,000 years ago becomes a *now event*.

**Verses 6-21 (The Ten Commandments).** The first version of the Ten Commandments is found in Exodus 20 (see commentary in Article 9). The Ten Words, as Jewish tradition calls them, outlines for Israel what her *response* should be to the God who brought her out of Egypt and who is about to lead her into the land of promise. The first three commandments demand uncompromising fidelity to the God who has fulfilled every promise made to Israel. They commit Israel to the exclusive service of God.

The first commandment (vv 6-10) which is stated in the positive in 6:4-5, calls for Israel's total allegiance to God. But once the people cross over to the land God is about to give them, they will be tempted to compromise the total allegiance owed to God.

The second commandment prohibits turning to magical powers for help. The God of Israel is beyond manipulation.

The third commandment is a call to rest from work and to set aside time to worship God.

Commandments 4-10 deal with the right order of relationships within the family and community. They

focus on respect for parents, human life, marriage, other people's property and honesty in human relationships.

While most of the commandments are expressed in the negative, they imply a positive behavior, e.g., "You shall *not* steal" implies respect for people's property.

**Verses 22-33** tell the people that the commandments come from God but are interpreted through Moses.

**Pause:** In contrast to fifty years ago, which of the Ten Commandments are ignored or frequently broken today?

## CHAPTER 6: The Great Commandment—to love God wholeheartedly

*"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates"* (vv. 4-9).

Now we come to the heart and center of Deuteronomy, the chapter around which everything revolves.

**Verses 4-5** are to the Old Testament what Jesus' Great Commandment is to the New Testament (Matt 22:40).

In Jewish tradition, verses 4-5 are called the *Shema*, a Hebrew word for *hear/listen*. The *Shema* prayer (recited morning and evening by the devout Jew) calls the Israelites to hear and respond to the core commandment of the whole law God imparted to Israel. The *Shema* declares that the only worthwhile response to a God who has given Israel everything is a total and wholehearted giving of one's total being, heart, soul and might.

**Verses 7-9** stress the importance of drilling the *Shema* into children and doing whatever it takes to keep God's law front and center in their lives (see also Prov 6:20-22).

**Verses 10-19** warn the people to never forget who acted on their behalf in Egypt and gave them a land

filled with abundance. They are also forbidden to worship the gods of the Canaanites.

**Verses 20-25** reiterate the importance of telling their story to their children. This exhortation is mentioned several times in Deuteronomy whose emphasis is the next generation. Deuteronomy is a book about *learning* and *teaching*. What is learned by the adults is to be taught to the next generation to mold them into obedient children of God.

**Pause:** What do you believe are some effective ways to teach the next generation the ways of God?

## CHAPTER 7: Protecting Israel's holiness at all costs

*"It was because the Lord loved you and because of his fidelity to the oath he had sworn to your father, that he brought you out with his strong arm from the place of slavery . . ." (v. 8).*

In its introduction to this chapter, the Collegeville commentary states:

*"The Bible's pendulum swings back and forth with regard to the non-Israelite nations. At times the nations, too, will share in the blessings promised to Israel (Gen 12:1-3; Is 42:1-4). They will be converted to the Lord (Is 45:14-25); Jonah). At other times the nations are presented as Israel's implacable enemies, whose downfall is cause for rejoicing (Amos 1-3).*

*"This text is one of the harshest condemnations in the whole Bible, requiring Israel to annihilate the indigenous populations of Canaan in the process of settling in the land promised to the ancestors of Israel (v.2). Such a command is clearly abhorrent to the moral sensitivities of contemporary readers, but we should remember that this command was never carried out, nor was it ever intended to be. What, then, would have been the point of forbidding covenants and marriage with non-Israelite nations (vv 2-3)? This chapter represents a theological judgment on the nations, not a historical account of Israel's treatment of them" (p.204).*

The theological judgment mentioned above has to do with Israel's holiness and the pagan practices of the nations which posed a big threat to Israel's loyalty to God.

**Verses 6-11** remind the Israelites once again that God has chosen them from among all the nations to be his special people, not because they are better or bigger

than other nations, but simply because he loves them and because of his promise to their founding fathers. So love is unquestionably at the heart of Israel's relationship with God. Israel must remember that God's choosing them is not so much a privilege as a responsibility—the responsibility to remain faithful to their covenant with him. Nations should recognize Israel as God's choice because of Israel's love and obedience of God's laws.

**Verses 12-15** make known the many blessings that will come to the Israelites for their faithfulness to their covenant with God.

**Verses 17-26** reassure the Israelites that if they remain faithful to God, he will enable them to defeat enemies who are even much larger and stronger than them. *"God will dislodge these nations before you little by little"* (v.22). We will see the fulfillment of these verses in the book of Joshua.

**Pause:** God orders Israel to destroy pagan people and their shrines so they will not embrace pagan ways. In our pre-Vatican II Church, Catholics were encouraged to stay to themselves, to marry their own and send their kids to Catholic school. How do you feel about this matter?

## CHAPTER 8: Will Israel remember her gift-giver?

In verses 17-18, God warns the Israelites not to become proud and says: *"It is my own power and the strength of my own hand that obtained for me this wealth. Remember then, it is the Lord, your God, who gives you the power to acquire wealth. . ."*

In her efforts to remain faithful to God, Israel faces both *internal* and *external* threats (from her new neighbors). In this chapter, *"Moses now turns to these dangers from within and speaks of them by contrasting 'remembering and forgetting,' the desert and the arable land, human self-sufficiency and dependence upon God. These three contrasts are interwoven throughout this chapter, whose purpose is to keep Israel ever mindful of God"* (Collegeville Commentary p. 205).

In the desert, where it is a time of testing, Israel learns to *depend* daily on God for sustenance. When they enter the Promised Land filled with blessings, they are tempted to forget the One who is the source of all their blessings. They try to convince themselves that it is the power and strength of their own arm that brought them all this wealth (v.17), and they wish they were self-sufficient. Because of the constant

presence of the temptation—the source of their blessings, Moses, in this chapter and elsewhere, constantly reminds the Israelites that they must *remember*, not just now but in every generation, the God who blesses them. Such remembering will keep them obedient to God and his law.

**Pause:** How easy is it for us to forget God in the good times and to take credit for our own achievements versus giving God all the glory?

#### CHAPTER 9-10:11 – Unmerited success

*“After the Lord, your God, has thrust them out of your way, do not say to yourselves, ‘It is because of my merits that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land’, for it is really because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you . . . and in order to keep the promise which God made an oath to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”* (vv.4-6).

This chapter reiterates the point made earlier that Israel’s inheriting the Promised Land is not on any merit of their own (v.4) but is due to the wickedness of its inhabitants whom God removed to make way for Israel, and because it was promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (v.6). To make sure that the Israelites do not regard themselves better than anyone else, Moses recalls to them the consequences of the Golden Calf incident (vv 7-21) and four other acts of rebellion against God (vv 22-24). He also reminds them that it is *God’s power* only that will enable them to take possession of the land (vv 3-4).

The first five verses of Chapter 10 tell us how Israel’s broken relationship with God is restored when Moses makes two new tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments are written. Then he spends forty days and nights in prayer interceding for God’s mercy on the people.

**Verses 10:12-22** give a powerful summary of what lies at the heart of Israel’s relationship with God. It begins by asking: “And now, Israel, what does the Lord, your God, ask of you...?” The answer is full and total obedience. Since God has a very special love for his people, they must reciprocate the same deep and pure love for God. They must circumcise (or purify) their hearts of anything *not* of God. They must refrain from all stubborn behavior, realizing that their God is much more powerful than any other gods.

**Verses 18-22** present compassionate statements about God’s nature. He is a God of justice who cares about the most vulnerable and abused members of society: the orphan, the widow and the stranger. The Israelites’ remembrance of their years of slavery in Egypt should motivate them to have compassion on the defenseless. There are no strangers in God’s eyes and there must be no strangers in the eyes of God’s chosen people.

**Pause:** The scriptures clearly call us as a nation, church and individually, to be concerned about the less fortunate members of society. If this is a passion of yours, what has helped you to grow a compassionate heart? Do we, as a nation and parish, do enough for the poor?

#### CHAPTER 11: A final exhortation

*“Be careful lest your heart become so lured away that you serve other gods and worship them”* (v. 16).

*“Take these words of mine into your heart and soul. Bind them on your wrist . . . teach them to your children”* (vv. 18-19).

This Chapter is a final exhortation on obedience before we move into a long section on various laws (chs 12-26). In this chapter, “*commands alternate with stories from Israel’s collective memory to encourage obedience*” (Leslie Hoppe).

Moses calls upon the people to love God and to be faithful to his commands. He gives them a “history lesson” on how God acted on Israel’s behalf in overcoming the mighty powers of the Pharaoh, and how he punished Aaron and Miriam from rebelling against Moses. Point to remember: Keep God’s commandments and you will enjoy a long life in the land (vv 8-9).

**Verses 10-17** speak about the gift of rain. Today, we view climatic conditions as purely the product of natural forces. In ancient times, the Israelites saw the rain as a sign of God’s providential care for them.

**Verses 18-25** echo earlier exhortations to the people to keep God’s law front and center in their lives and to teach them to their children.

**Verses 26-32** tell of Moses’ desire for the Israelites to decide their future. They can choose the way of obedience and be blessed—or the way of disobedience and be cursed.