

The Beauty of God's Law

DAVE BAST

Whenever a leader is about to retire, whether from the nation or a company or organization of some kind, he or she is usually expected to make a speech. In this farewell address, the leader might sum up some of the accomplishments of his or her administration, or make note of significant events that happened along the way, or cast a vision for the future. The leader might also offer guidance or counsel for the next generation, perhaps some words of encouragement, or even words of warning. What I have just described pretty much exactly sums up what Moses did for the people of Israel. His farewell address to them is recorded for us in the Bible. You may even have read it. It is called the book of Deuteronomy, and that is our topic for the next Groundwork series of programs, beginning now.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Welcome again to another Groundwork program. Welcome to you, Scott; and we are beginning a series of programs on one of the great books of the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Pentateuch, as it is called, are the first five books of the Bible, and this is the fifth of that set of five, beginning with Genesis. So, we are going to be doing six programs on Deuteronomy, which means we are going to be going through large swaths of it. It is a fairly long book.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, it is like 34 chapters or something.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we cannot pick up everything, but we will pick up a lot of the highlights; and we will just begin by noting what even the title of this book means. There were original Hebrew titles to Old Testament books, and usually the Hebrew title was just literally the first word in Hebrew; so Genesis – the Hebrew title for the book of Genesis is *bereshit*, which means in the beginning. Exodus – the Hebrew title is *shemot*, which are names because it begins with the names of the sons of Jacob, who ended up in Egypt. For Deuteronomy, the Hebrew title is: These are the words – and those are the first books – these are the words that Moses spoke to the people; but these books also have Greek titles, and Deuteronomy is a Greek title.

DAVE BAST

Right, and it could be translated several ways – a second law – not to imply that it is different from the first law, but more a copy of the law or a copy of *Torah*, which was another Hebrew word for this. There is a phrase from Chapter 17, in verse 18, that says: When the king takes the throne of his kingdom he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law. So that gave rise to the expression: It is a repetition of the law. It is a second law: *Deuteronomy* (deutero-nomos) in Greek.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I have sometimes said there is also a sense in which it is the law the second time around, because as we will see in the series, this is now flash forward forty years from the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. The people, of course, did not enter the Promised Land immediately. They had grumbled, complained, expressed fears; so this farewell speech, as you said in the beginning of the program, Dave, this is Moses' farewell speech, but in it he has a different audience than had lived forty years before, and so he is giving them a review session of everything that happened before this group of people was born, or when they were very, very little children. They do not actively remember Mount Sinai and God thundering the law. They do not actively remember crossing the Red Sea. So, Moses says: Look, you all are just about getting ready to go to the Promised Land, and before you do, it is review time, and so I am going to repeat all of God's laws – Law 2.0 – the law the second time around so that you have a living memory of it because this has to lead your lives from here on out.

DAVE BAST

I think of that aspect of it. There is a poignance to this book because the whole book is cast as the words of Moses speaking to the children of Israel. Now I am sure that that might have taken place over the course of several days or weeks, that he did not just stand up and talk for hours on end while they sat there, but the setting is on the brink of Canaan, just before they are about to enter the Promised Land; and of course, as we will point out eventually in one of these programs, Moses was not allowed to go into the Promised Land with the people, so he is there on the mountain – he has been given a glimpse of it on Mount Pisgah – he has looked across to the land, but he is forbidden... and he is deeply concerned, as every leader is, for what is going to happen to the people when they enter the land; and so that really sets the tone for his farewell address to them. He will go over some of the past; he will remind them of some things that have happened; but always it will be from the standpoint of what God has done for them, what He will do for them, and how they need to respond to that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. This is Moses' last shot to be able to speak the words of God's truth to them. You know, Dave, as we study this book, I think it is a good reminder to us... I think it was Samuel Johnson who famously said: We need more often to be reminded than instructed; and especially today with new technologies and new things happening all the time, there is this temptation, I think, also in the Church, to always wanting to be learning something new – something innovative – something cutting edge – and Deuteronomy – in scripture, even now for us as Christians as we look at this book, Deuteronomy is sort of a big time-out; kind of calling a pause on all that to say: Whoa, whoa, learning new things is good, but don't forget the core values of the old things; don't forget what God has spoken in the past; how He has instructed us; how He has given us His law, which is a blueprint for flourishing in the creation. So Deuteronomy is sort of saying to the Israelite people 4,000 – 3,000 years ago: Look, you need to be reminded more than instructed about new things; and it is sort of the same for us.

DAVE BAST

It is, and it is a significant book. I think maybe that is the last thing as we are sort of introducing the whole idea of this series on this book. Deuteronomy is quoted something like 80 times in the New Testament...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So, it really ranks among the most significant of Old Testament books. You think of Genesis, you think of the book of Psalms, Isaiah out of the prophets, and Deuteronomy really ranks among those as probably the big four for the Apostles and for Jesus Himself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; in fact, I think we have looked at this on a past Groundwork program, but in Matthew's version of Jesus' three wilderness temptations with Satan, Jesus defeats Satan all three times by quoting verses, and they are all from Deuteronomy...

DAVE BAST

All from Deuteronomy, yes, absolutely. We will look at that too. So, this is not just part of what someone once called "the clean pages of the Old Testament," you know; at least, it shouldn't be. This is a book we should be familiar with as Christians – that we should go to again and again. It is full of rich things and those are the things that we want to feast on today and in the next few programs, so stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we are opening the book of Deuteronomy, and we are starting right at Chapter 1, where Moses begins to speak to the people. There is a great poignancy to this scene. He has been told he cannot enter the Promised Land with the people. That is some of God's discipline in his life because Moses himself had disobeyed at one point in the wilderness. He was told to speak to the rock when the people were clambering for water... you might remember that story... at Mount Horeb. Instead he got mad, lost his temper and hit the rock with his staff and said: Here, let me show you. I'll... you know; and God said: No, no, Moses. So, you won't enter with the people, but you will send them off; and this is what it is, it is a great sendoff.

So, the book begins this way:

^{1:1}These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the wilderness east of the Jordan, opposite Suph (and a number of other names). ³In the fortieth year, in the first day of the eleventh month. So, forty years since the exodus – forty years of wilderness wandering.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So it has been forty years, and it goes on in verse 3 to say: Moses proclaimed to the Israelites all that the Lord had commanded him concerning them. And so that is the setup for the book. This is going to be, for those who are really familiar... Of course, now in our bibles we can go back and look up Exodus and Numbers and Leviticus, but those people did not have it written down, and so, the new generation needs to have their memories refreshed, and maybe not even their memories refreshed; they just need to be told what maybe their parents told them about what God had said and done for them in the past. It is a new generation, it is a new day. Moses' time is coming to an end. We know... those of us who are familiar with the Old Testament know that Joshua will be taking over soon, but before that happens, here we have what we called in the first segment, a giant review session; Moses' farewell address.

There is a sense in which actually Deuteronomy is a giant sermon. Sometimes it has been called a giant sermon by Moses, and the text of the passage that he is preaching on is basically everything in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers... everything that has come before.

DAVE BAST

Right. In Chapter 1, he gives a brief recap of some of the history, including one of the most significant events of the whole exodus period. So, we have said it is forty years; now, if you look at a map of the position of the land of Egypt and the position of the land of Israel, it does not take forty years to get from one to the other. You might ask what in the world were they doing for forty years on the Sinai Peninsula? I mean, you could crisscross the Sinai Peninsula on foot multiple times...

SCOTT HOEZEE

They kind of did, I think.

DAVE BAST

In the course of forty... right. Well, something happened very early on in the Exodus experience. So, we remember the story how God delivered them by the plagues on the Egyptians. Finally the Egyptians said: Go ahead, get out of here. Pharaoh gave up and let them go. He chased them and then was destroyed. And they marched out and they met God at a place called Horeb or Mount Sinai, where God gave them the Law. They camped there for a while – they sort of experienced that; and then they moved on, and Moses reminds them what happened in Deuteronomy 1:19:

Then as the Lord our God commanded us, we set out from Horeb and went toward the hill country of the Amorites, through all that vast and dreadful wilderness that you have seen, and so we reached Kadesh Barnea.

Well, Kadesh Barnea was right on the southern border of the land of Israel. So, they are there. They are on the verge only a few months after leaving Egypt... maybe a year, a year-and-a-half; and God said at that point: Now go up and take the land; and the people said: Now wait a minute. What are we getting into here? Let's send some scouts to go check it out. This story is told in Numbers 13 and 14, but Moses is reminding them here what happened. What happened was, the scouts came back and ten of them... they sent one from each tribe, twelve altogether... two of them said: Hey, we're good to go. God is with us...

SCOTT HOEZEE

God is with us, yes.

DAVE BAST

Yes, Joshua and Caleb...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Joshua and Caleb.

DAVE BAST

Ten of them said, the majority report came back: Whoa, wait a minute...

SCOTT HOEZEE

There are giants in that land. They are going to squash us like bugs. We can't possibly go there; and they kind of carried the day. All the people despaired and rebelled against Moses and complained to God, forgetting totally what had just happened to the Egyptians, right? The crossing of the Red Sea and the defeat of the Egyptian army is a recent memory. This happened really, really recently back at that time, and still they were scared and believed that God was not with them; and on account of that, God said: I am going to call a really big time-out here. It is going to be forty years... in fact, this generation, because you have doubted Me, because you have rebelled against Me, you are not going in at all. When you are all dead and gone, your kids and grandkids get to go in. So we are going to wait for you to die, basically; and that then was the forty years of wandering; but what is significant about the early part of Deuteronomy – and here we could look at Deuteronomy 2:7, too – is that despite the fact that that wandering was a punishment, despite the fact that it reflected the peoples' failure of nerve, but worse than that, failure of faith, despite that, Moses reminds this new generation in Deuteronomy 2:7:

The Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years, the Lord your God has been with you and you have not lacked anything. That is a reminder of God's goodness even in the teeth of human failure and sin.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, and that is a verse – Deuteronomy 2:7 – that will be expanded in a beautiful way when we get to Chapter 8 in a coming program. Just the theme that even when God is, in a sense, punishing... maybe a better word is disciplining, to use the New Testament term, but even in that experience, He is still with us, still

ultimately caring for us. It is a reminder of God's faithfulness, basically, to His people in what John Bunyan once called: The wilderness of this world. "As I wandered through the wilderness of this world," his great pilgrim Christian fell asleep and dreamt of his journey to the heavenly city.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, I think many of us know people who have gone through a metaphorical wilderness period in their life: Cancer, unemployment, the loss of a child, the demise of a marriage; terrible experiences that we would just as soon never have had to go through, and yet we have heard testimonies from people who have endured things we have not endured ourselves and would never want to; and yet, they will say: God was still with me. God was good. When someone who has been through that kind of experience says it, you know it is not just saccharine piety or that they are faking it or... no, the Israelites in the wilderness, they had the manna. God sometimes dropped quail down so they would have meat to eat. They would get water from a rock in dry places. There was the cloudy and the fiery pillar that assured them of His presence – His protection. So even during the wilderness periods, God is good; and one of the themes that is going to come out in this series, and we will hear a little bit in the next segment when we turn to Deuteronomy 4, is that we always need to make the wilderness connection when we are not in the wilderness, because sometimes we come through those times, and then times are better, and all of a sudden we pray a little less and we are a little less mindful of the signs of God's goodness than we were when we were so hungry for them in the wilderness. So, how do you keep that going when life is regular and normal? That is one of the great challenges Moses foresees because this new generation is going to leave the wilderness now; and so he has got to remind them: Look, God has been good to you in the wilderness and He is going to be good to you in the Promised Land, and it is the same goodness, so don't stop noticing it.

DAVE BAST

I also think, too, it is so interesting to just piece this together and imagine what life was like during those 38 years of... It was like sitting in a plane in a holding pattern, you know. They wandered a little bit, but they kept going in circles, and that can be a sort of wilderness experience for us as well, where we don't feel like we are advancing – we are not making it – we are not moving toward the goal. We are just in a holding pattern; and God says: I am with you then, I am with you there, and ultimately you will get there – you will get there. It may not be now; it may not be today. Like Moses says: I have been to the mountain; I have seen the Promised Land; I won't get there with you, but God will bring you there. That is the confidence that we have if we happen to be living ourselves in those wilderness kinds of experiences.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But before that happened – before the wilderness period happened, something very, very significant happened, and that was that God gave Israel His Law, and Moses is going to talk about that in Deuteronomy 4, and we will dig into that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are digging into the opening chapters of the book of Deuteronomy, and we are turning next to Deuteronomy Chapter 4. Moses speaks:

¹Now Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord the God of your ancestors is giving you. ²Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you. ³You saw with your own eyes what the Lord did at Baal Peor; the Lord your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor, ⁴but all of you who held fast to the Lord your God are still alive today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me so that you might follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom

and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this is a great nation and is a wise and understanding people. ⁷What other nation is so great as to have their gods near to them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to Him? ⁸And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?”

There are some interesting things going on in those verses, not the least of which is what we see there at the end, and this is something we can think about briefly in this closing segment. Israel at its best regarded the law of God as a gift; not a burden, not a big to-do list, not a grim set of things like well, we’ve got to do this now, too. No, when God told them how they could get along best in this creation by giving them the operating manual for creation, i.e., the Law, that was a gift.

DAVE BAST

You just reminded me of a wonderful little book by a writer named Thomas Cahill called *The Gifts of the Jews...*

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And in that book he makes the basic point that it was really Hebrew religion – the Jewish faith – the Old Testament, let’s say, which we believe was given to the people by God, that stressed the point that there is one God, and we will look at that in our next program, but that that God was also a moral God, a God who was good and holy and just and who asked for those same kind of qualities from His people, because all the gods of the ancient world, which were really no gods – were idols – they didn’t really give a hoot for people’s behavior as long as they got their sacrifices, as long as they got their worship, the people could pretty much do what they pleased. There was no connection between the worship of god and holy living or basic human goodness – human rights.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and God, because He cares for His people (to use a phrase you just used, Dave) God did give a hoot. He cared deeply that the people get along well in His world, and that is why He gave them the law; but there is always this temptation, and it is referred to in this passage, and Moses knows that once the people move into Canaan, into the Promised Land, there is going to be a lot of relics left over from the religion of the Canaanites. There is going to be... and this becomes a real refrain in the Old Testament, there is going to be what they call often “the high places,” which were the high places where there were temples to Baal and to Asherah, the false gods of the Canaanites. They were supposed to dismantle those high places, get rid of all of the relics of the Canaanite religion so they wouldn’t even be tempted to mix that in with their own religion or substitute it (worse yet); and there is a reference to this Baal Peor, this terrible incident that happened. It is a grim story; we won’t even go into it. A lot of Israelites died because at one point during the wilderness wanderings, they did, they saw some Baal relics lying around and thought: Well, let’s try this god for a little while, and the true God got quite upset about that. A lot of people were punished and a lot of people were killed.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is one of the non-G-rated Bible stories. It is Numbers 25 if you are really interested. We won’t go there ourselves in this program; but here is the basic choice that faced the people of Israel, and frankly faces people today as well: Is your worship – your religion – something that you do in order to get what you want from God or from the world or from the powers that be? That was basically the fertility religion of the Canaanites...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, from Asherah.

DAVE BAST

The worship of the Baals... they were fertility gods, and what you did was to give them devotion or sacrifice so that they would pay you back with what you want, versus the worship of the *true* God – the God who reveals Himself at Sinai and in Jesus supremely – who says: This is what I want *you* to do. You don't do anything for Me, really, but I will save you, I will care for you, I will see you through to the end; but meanwhile, I want you to reflect My character in your behavior.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here is the good news, right? That is also what will lead to flourishing, because God knew by following His law... You know, we have talked about this before... there are different kinds of laws. You can have a speed limit law, which can be a little variable, right? But there is also like the law of gravity, and it is a good idea to respect the law of gravity because you really don't want to step off the edge of that cliff. Gravity is relentless; you will suffer by not respecting it. God's law is like that. It keeps us from stepping off various moral cliffs. So He gives us the law as a warning, but also as an encouragement to live in a way that will lead to delight.

DAVE BAST

It is good for us, that is one reason to keep the law; but here is another reason that Moses gives us here in Deuteronomy 4. Now listen to this. Pay attention to this:

⁶Observe God's law carefully (Moses says), for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."

So you see, ultimately another reason for the law is for mission. God chose Israel for the sake of the nations...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Witness.

DAVE BAST

Right; and what He is telling them is: Look, if you keep the law, you are going to flourish as a people and your neighbors are going to look at you and say, "I want to be like that," and they will be attracted to you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I want to get in on that, yes.

DAVE BAST

Wouldn't that be wonderful if our churches were that kind of place?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And at our best, the Church is like that. The people look at the grace that we proclaim, the joy that we have, sometimes even in the teeth of suffering, and they say, "I would like to be a part of *that* kind of people;" and so, Deuteronomy reminds us again, as we said at the beginning, we need more often to be reminded than instructed; we need to review what is old instead of always learning what is new; and in this case, it is learning to live for the glory of God.

DAVE BAST

Well thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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