

Deuteronomy 5: Introduction to the Ten Words

Reading: Deuteronomy 4:44-5:21

Resume

It has been a year since we started on Deuteronomy. It is a long book and I will try to cover as much as I can in these two series of five each. As it has been a year since we started on this book, we need to take a quick recap of the first four chapters which are important as a backdrop to the book and the central portion which is the Ten Commandments. These first four chapters are not merely stories of where the Israelites had come from and where they were about to go. These chapters form the foundation of the rest of the book and they must be given the appropriate emphasis as we are doing now.

The book opens with the incident at Kadesh-barnea and this anchors the book. It is a story of faithlessness of Israel contrasted with the faithfulness of God. This underlies the covenant relationship and the function of the law to be given. The theme of the book is essentially second chance (grace) rather than second law. Without doubt, the core of the book is the law, but this has to be put in the context of grace.

Chapter 2 and the early part of chapter 3 deal with the relations of Israel. The faithfulness of God to His creation is given added impetus with the blessing to the Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites, the relatives of Abraham. Edom, Moab and Ammon were blessed despite their poor beginnings. The Canaanites were harshly dealt with after they were given a chance. The freedom of the sovereign God is emphasised and the blessings reside with God the giver and not on the merit of the recipient. Herein lies the difficulty if we were to treat Deuteronomy merely as a book of law.

Chapter 3 deals with the community of Israel and Moses prohibition from entering the Promised Land. The narrative here is important for the way Israel is to be constituted. It is on the basis of God's covenant and their relationship with each other and their God. That is the true constitution of community with Christ as the head of the body. The later part of the book spells out the way in which the relationship within this community is to be observed and acknowledged. We will come to consider these aspects later in the series.

In repeatedly recounting his prohibition from entering the Promised Land, Moses drew out the most important platform for the Word of God and indeed the Ten Words. We must not see this repeated recounting of what Moses was denied as bemoaning of his treatment by God. In this book, Moses repeating that experience four times and three times in these first four chapters. It is as if before he finished his addresses to Israel, he felt the need to repeat it one more time. Here is the reason for having been denied entry into the Promised Land and it needs to be told again and again.

The story is given to us in Num. 20:2-13. Moses was angry with the people and rightly so I would think. He said, 'Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' It was a rebellious and stubborn group of people that he had to lead. They complained and whined against him most of the time. It was very trying for Moses. Having said that, in his anger, he raised his rod and struck the stone twice. What God told him to do was to 'command the rock before their eyes to yield its water'. Moses was angry and used his rod to strike the rock. We may think that there was nothing wrong in doing that. The people did provoke Moses to anger as the Psalmist said (Ps. 106:32-33).

What Moses was doing was to lay out this important platform to the Ten Words from his treatment by God and he understood it well. What Israel needed to see and to understand is the power of the Word and not the deeds of humanity. It is the lesson from this prohibition

that Moses repeatedly exhorted Israel to hear the word of God. 'Hear O Israel' – these words preface Moses' exhortation to Israel.

The covenant of God is often brought up in Deuteronomy. We sing 'We cannot live without the word'. The covenant is the word of God because it is what God has promised. The spoken word of God is already history. That is why the Jews speak of their scripture as the law, prophets and writings. There is no historical section because history is written when the word is spoken. In short, that is covenant. We see history as written according to the deeds of humanity. That is part of history, but the fulfilment of the history of creation is written by the word of God as so is the history of the people of God.

What is the relationship between recounting the lack of faith at Kadesh-barnea and the exhortation to hear the Word? This relationship of faith and hearing was taken up by Paul in Romans.

¹⁴ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵ And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" ¹⁶ But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" ¹⁷ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:14-17)

In dealing with the problem of faith, Paul grounds it on the hearing. So here in chapter 4, Moses in his farewell address emphasised this by telling the Israelites to hear, and not only to hear, but to hear attentively the word of God. The rest of the book deals with this relationship as Paul so eloquently spelt it out here in Romans.

Moses second address

So with this resume we now look at the second address of Moses to the people of Israel. In this section, Moses set out the Ten Commandments. They are also referred to as the Ten Words or in theological language, the Decalogue.

The book of Deuteronomy has a long preamble. The first four chapters set the framework of the book – failure and grace. Before getting on to the Ten Words, Moses had another preface as if to summarise the first four chapters. We will see that again and again in Deuteronomy, Moses referred to the exodus from Egypt because the law is set in the context of God's grace and deliverance. So whenever the law is given, there will always be reference to what God has done in His covenant grace to His people.

We can see that the Decalogue occupies a large part of Moses' speech. He was not simply telling the Israelites what the commandments were, but he was keen in putting the commandments in the context of the covenant of God. What is happening to us today is that we take the commandments and put that in our legal framework. That distorts the whole message.

I am sure we are all aware of the importance of putting the law in the context of the covenant relationship. It is to establish in our minds and hearts the covenant of God to Israel and to us through Jesus Christ. A defect in our evangelical understanding has been to treat Jesus Christ as a means to an end, the end being our salvation. In a sense that is so, but there is something more than just being saved, and that is the covenant relationship. We are saved to be re-united with the Father and that is to be restored into the covenantal relationship. And it is only within the covenantal relationship that the commandments make sense.

William Temple, an Archbishop of Canterbury, is reported to have said, 'If you have a false idea of God, the more religious you are, the worse it is for you. It were better for you to be an atheist.'¹

We are going to look at the Ten Commandments. The scriptures called it the Ten Words. It starts in chapter 5, but that is the arbitrary division of the book. Moses prefaced these Ten Words at the end of chapter 4. The short segment in 4:44-49 forms the conclusion to the introductory message that Moses was giving to the Israelites and the introduction to the body of legislation that he was going to give.

⁴⁴This is the law that Moses set before the Israelites. ⁴⁵These are the decrees and the statutes and ordinances that Moses spoke to the Israelites when they had come out of Egypt, ⁴⁶beyond the Jordan in the valley opposite Beth-peor, in the land of King Sihon of the Amorites, who reigned at Heshbon, whom Moses and the Israelites defeated when they came out of Egypt. ⁴⁷They occupied his land and the land of King Og of Bashan, the two kings of the Amorites on the eastern side of the Jordan: ⁴⁸from Aroer, which is on the edge of the Wadi Arnon, as far as Mount Sirion (that is, Hermon), ⁴⁹together with all the Arabah on the east side of the Jordan as far as the Sea of the Arabah, under the slopes of Pisgah. (Deut. 4:44-49)

'This is the law that Moses set before the Israelites'. These words began this section on the Ten Words. We need to note that the word 'law' is not the same as the way we use it today in a legal sense. The term 'law' (Heb. *tora*) refers to instructions in a broad sense. Other words used in relation to the law are, decrees, statutes and ordinances. Note that in verse 44-45, the law is referred to in relation to the covenant of God in delivering them out of Egypt. In other words, the covenant of God operates within boundaries. This is the way in which creation lives. If we drink poison we will die. Yes, there is a law (instruction) that we should not drink those chemicals. It is just the way the body functions. So the law not to drink those chemicals is grace.

From the prelude in the first four chapters, Moses now made a brief summary before launching out to the core of what he had to say, i.e. the Ten Commandments. He reminded them of what God had done for them thus far in bringing them out of Egypt and over-coming the inhabitants in the eastern side of the Jordan. They were then poised to take the whole of the land promised to them.

And just before he spelt out the Ten Words, he reminded them again of the covenant God made with the Israelites. These two brief excurses are vitally important as a prelude to the Ten Words. Moses was taking pains to remind them of what God had done for them and that has its basis in the covenant. The Ten Commandments have often been given a legal (contractual) rather than a covenantal interpretation and that distorts our understanding of this very important writing.

¹ Moses convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. ²The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. ³Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. ⁴The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire. ⁵(At that time I was standing between the LORD and you to declare to you the words of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) (Deut. 5:1-5)

Note that Moses did not go straight to the commandment. Instead he summarised what he said in the first four chapters in a short paragraph. He was keen to recount again what God for them in Egypt and how God enabled them to take the land from the Canaanites. Why was this preamble necessary?

¹William Temple (1881-1944).

Many years ago when Australia was going to vote on becoming a republic, there need to be a change in the Constitution. This change also requires a statement in the preamble. That was because Australia did not suddenly exist. There were the original people who had lived on this land for centuries before Europeans came to settle here. This fact has to be acknowledged. The Constitution will not make sense without this acknowledgement.

Similarly, as the Israelites were on the verge of nationhood, the way in which the nation of Israel came into being needed to be acknowledged. This acknowledgement came in the form of the covenant of God, i.e. it was God's grace that brought this people together to become what they were at that time. That is why it is so wrong to read Deuteronomy without this preamble. That would be to read it simply as a piece of legislation without knowing the grace of God and without knowing what went before. Knowledge of the Old Testament is so lacking today and that is why so much of Christian thinking is mere legalism and the interaction within the church graceless. That is such a strange thing to say as most people associate the Old Testament with law. The Old Testament shows to us how the grace of God was played out in the history of Israel. Christians who read these Ten Words without the preamble are no better off than those outside the church. What is this preamble? It is this.

These are statutes and ordinances as a result of God's covenant and grace to the people of Israel. The covenant and grace of God preceded the laws of God. The laws were not given to bring them into the covenant if they would obey. Whether Israel obeyed or did not obey these laws, the covenant of God remains unaltered. God desires a people for Himself and He will succeed in doing that whether we comply or not. We need to repeat this point again and again because our sinful minds want some way to justify ourselves in our sins. Our justification comes as a result of our believing and not our doing. Abraham believed God and he was counted to be righteous.

Is marriage a legal entity or is it a covenant? It is both. Is there a law within marriage? Yes and no. Can one steal from one's spouse or can one kill one's spouse? Is adultery allowed within marriage? Marriage is indeed a covenant relationship. Yet within a covenant there are boundaries. Signing a document does not really make them husband and wife if there is not the covenant love between them. Why do you want to sign a legal document unless there is a love relationship?

Sometimes I really don't understand why we have to labour this point. My girls obey me because they are my children. We are family first and obedience follow that. Their disobedience does not annul the fact of family. On the contrary, for someone outside the family, if they obey what I said, that does not make them family. It just seems so silly to say that, yet when it comes to matters of God, it seems so hard for people to understand. A reason for that is that we have come to God contractually and not relationally, i.e. covenantally.

The covenant of God is to His creation and therefore spans all generations. Whether the commandments are expressed in a positive or negative way, they are not meant to be restrictive, but liberating. The worship of our creator God brings us into the fullness of God's blessing. The love of fellow beings brings us to the fullness of humanity and what it means to be human. That is our freedom in conforming to the image of God expressed in the commandments.