

AM Deuteronomy 1:1-8 & 4:1-14 The Promise and the Covenant

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Preacher: Rev Robert Dale

[0 : 00] Let's turn now to the Word of God, and we're going to read from Deuteronomy, chapter 1. Going to read the first eight verses, and then afterwards from Deuteronomy chapter 4. These are words that were spoken by Moses in the plains of Moab, just before they entered the promised land.

So visualize that picture which I showed the children earlier. These are words that were spoken there in preparation for entering the promised land. Deuteronomy 1.

These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness, in the Arabah opposite Suf, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth and Dizahab.

It is eleven days' journey from Horeb, by the way of Mount Seir, to Kadesh, Barnea. In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the people of Israel, according to all that the Lord had given him in commandment to them.

[1 : 35] After he had defeated Sihon, the king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon, and Og, the king of Bashan, who lived in Ashteroth and in Edrei.

Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to explain this law, saying, The Lord our God said to us in Horeb, You have stayed long enough at this mountain.

Turn and take your journey, and go to the hill country of the Amorites, and to all their neighbours in the Arabah. In the hill country, and in the lowland, and in the Negev, and by the sea coast, the land of the Canaanites and Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates.

See, I have set the land before you. Go in and take possession of the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their offspring after them.

In the next three chapters, he goes on to speak about their journey to the promised land, and then we take up his speech again in chapter 4, verse 1.

[3 : 04] And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.

You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.

Your eyes have seen what the Lord did at Baal Peor. For the Lord your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor.

But you who held fast to the Lord your God are all alive today. See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering, to take possession of it.

Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

[4 : 30] For what great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?

And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I have set before you today?

Only take care and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.

Make them known to your children and your children's children, how, on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, Gather the people to me, that I may let

them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.

And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud and gloom.

[5 : 43] Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form. There was only a voice.

And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform. That is, the Ten Commandments. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone.

And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess.

We'll come back to that passage a little later. But let's now, well let me ask you to turn now to Deuteronomy, chapter 4. And the last two verses that we read, 13 and 14.

And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform. That is, the Ten Commandments. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone.

[6 : 57] And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you the statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess.

Over the coming months, I want to look at the book of Deuteronomy. Not the whole book.

Preaching as I do here once a month, that would take me the rest of my lifetime. But just some of the highlights. Now you may ask, why Deuteronomy?

Isn't that rather an obscure book? A bit of a specialist subject for Bible scholars only. Well I think our Lord Jesus Christ might disagree with you about that.

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy more than any other book. I have heard it described as Jesus' favourite book in the Bible.

[8 : 12] The apostles also quoted it. Altogether it's quoted some 45 times in the New Testament. And that surely makes it worth studying, doesn't it?

We will notice some of those quotes as we go along. And you may be surprised at just how many good things there are in this book.

The background, as we've seen from our reading in chapter 1, is the arrival of the Israelites on the borders of the Promised Land.

After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. The hopes of the last 400 to 500 years are about to be fulfilled.

God had made a covenant with Abraham, in which he had promised him and his descendants the land of Canaan. For a few generations they'd actually lived there in tents.

[9 : 28] And then famine had forced them down into Egypt, where tragically they became slaves. But God had set them free, with a mighty hand, with signs and wonders, and had led them by the hand of Moses, to the very borders of the land.

On the way he had given them the Ten Commandments, and made a covenant with them to keep those commandments.

Moses now reminds them both of the journey and of the commandments. Hence the name of the book.

Deuteronomy means the second giving of the law. It was a summary of the past, and a challenge for the future. For the nation of Israel, this was a very important book.

It is foundational to their very nature as a nation. But it's not just about Israel.

[10 : 41] It's about God. And what he expects from his people in every age. And as such, I hope it will be a help to us in the Christian life.

We begin today by looking at the covenant which God made with Israel, which is the central theme of the whole book. A covenant is an agreement in which binding promises are made.

It's a fairly common idea, even today. wealthy grandparents, for example, might make a deed of covenant in which they agree to give money to their grandchildren.

When you buy a house, there may be restrictive covenants attached to it. A requirement, perhaps, that you maintain a public footpath that goes through your land.

The word covenant has a particular resonance in this part of Scotland. In 1638, in Edinburgh, thousands signed the national covenant in which they agreed and promised to maintain the reformed faith and to resist any changes to their way of worship.

[12:13] Many of them suffered for their faith in the years that followed. They became known as the covenanters. There were many covenants in the ancient world in which a king would promise to protect his people and they would promise in return to obey him.

And there were a number of covenants in the Bible also. Three of those covenants are of special interest to us today.

This covenant here was God's covenant with Israel made at Mount Sinai, called here by its alternative name of Mount Horeb, in which Israel agreed, made a binding promise to keep God's law.

And God promised that they would be blessed if they did. You can read about that covenant in Exodus 19 and verse 5.

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

[13:38] And Israel replied, all that the Lord has spoken we will do. But before that there had been another covenant, God's covenant with Abraham, confirmed later with Isaac and Jacob, in which God promised that he would multiply Abraham's descendants and that he would give them a land to dwell in.

And afterwards, there was another covenant still, the new covenant. We read of that in Jeremiah 31, in which God promised to write his laws upon his people's hearts, to be their God and to forgive their sin.

That covenant was fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ and extended to all who believe in him throughout the world.

We ourselves, as Christians, live under that new covenant. The covenant here, in Deuteronomy 4, is called the Old Covenant in contrast with the New Covenant.

Indeed, the two parts of the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament, take their name from the two covenants, testament being another word for covenant. I want to consider today, briefly, what God had already promised to Israel, what he now required, and what God has promised and required of us as Christians.

[15:36] So first, what God had already promised to Israel you have it here in verse 14 in one word, the land.

He had already promised them the land in his covenant with Abraham over 400 years before Moses, before the Ten Commandments were given.

The land is mentioned five times in these passages that we've read. It was mentioned twice in chapter 1 and verse 8. See, I have set the land before you.

Go in and take possession of the land that the Lord swore to your fathers. Then in chapter 4, verse 1, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you and do them that you may go in and take possession of the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Verse 5, he speaks of the land that you are entering to take possession of it. And here in verse 14, the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess.

[17:01] the land is mentioned 180 times in the book of Deuteronomy. It was very important to the Israelites then.

It is very important to Israel today. The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is very largely about the land which both of them claim for themselves.

One of the main newspapers in Israel today is called Haaretz which means the land. The original promise of the land was in Genesis 12 when God had said to Abraham go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

God led him to Canaan and he settled there living in tents with Isaac and Jacob. Later in Genesis 15 and verse 18 we have a definition of the land.

the Lord made a covenant with Abraham saying to your offspring I give this land from the river Egypt to the great river the river Euphrates the land of the Canaanites and the Canaanites and the Canaanites the Hittites the Perizzites the Rephaim the Amorites and the Canaanites the Gergashites and the Jebusites a much larger area incidentally than Israel has today.

[18:44] God described this land to Moses in Exodus 3 and verse 8 as a good and broad land a land flowing with milk and honey.

Now the point I want you to notice is simply this that God gave them the land. It was a free gift. They didn't have to earn it. True, they had to conquer it, which they did with the help of God, but it was given to them by God.

They didn't have to keep the law beforehand in order to be given the land. Like some modern shopper accumulates points on a loyalty card in order to claim their free gift in inverted commas. The land was theirs. It was a free gift. They didn't have to do anything to earn it. However, to enjoy it, they had to obey God's law.

[20 : 00] Which brings us to our second point, what God now required of Israel. In verse 13, Moses speaks of the covenant which he commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments, which he wrote, he says, on two tablets of stone.

Verse 14, he speaks of the statutes and rules, which were, of course, based on the commandments. Now, it's not my intention to preach on the ten commandments during this series on Deuteronomy, because I know that Alan Thompson is planning to do precisely that.

But it may be helpful to us just to remind ourselves of what they are. Moses himself reminded Israel of the ten commandments in chapter 5.

And reading there from verse 6, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything to worship it. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

[21 : 22] Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Honor your father and your mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness. And you shall not covet anything that is your neighbour's. That is the law.

Now going back into chapter 4, there are five points that I want you to notice about that law. Firstly, it is God's law, given by God himself.

Moses reminds them in verses 10 to 12 how they had stood before the Lord at Mount Horeb amid fire and darkness and cloud and gloom, all designed to impress upon them the holiness of God and God himself had spoken to them.

These laws were not devised by Moses according to his own opinions of how people should live. They were not devised by a committee of elders.

[22 : 43] They were not democratically decided by a vote of the people. They were given by God and therefore they have divine authority.

Secondly, notice, they are unchangeable. Verse 2, Moses warns them, you shall not add to the word that I command you nor take from it.

In verse 13 he reminds them that God himself wrote them on two tablets of stone. They were literally set in stone. I wonder if the Lord had this in mind when he said that not one jot or tittle of the law would pass away till all was fulfilled.

Certainly John may have had it in mind when he said in Revelation 22 that nothing should be added or taken away from his book. True, the Lord himself added what is sometimes called the 11th commandment, a new commandment I give to you that you love one another.

He alone had the authority to add a new commandment and yet even that new commandment is really just a summary of the old.

[24 : 05] Certainly we have no authority to alter God's law ourselves. No authority to adapt to the changing fashions of our times.

God's law is unchangeable. Third notice, disobedience brings judgment. Moses reminds them in verse three of just one example of that.

What happened at Baal Peor? The women of Moab there had persuaded them to worship their gods and 24,000 of them died.

They must never, never make that mistake again. Fourthly, obedience brings blessing. He says in verse six, keep them and do them for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the people who will say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

The laws of God are good laws and they are designed to bring happiness to people. We ought not to regard them as an imposition upon us but rather as a gift.

[25 : 30] No other nation was as wise as Israel having laws like these. We ought therefore to treasure them and obey them.

Finally, notice they were to teach them to their children and their children's children. Deuteronomy 7 verse 9 speaks of God keeping covenant with those who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations.

Quoting that Psalm 105 speaks of the law as the word he commanded to a thousand generations. But what about us today?

Let's look now at what God has promised us as Christians and what he requires of us. Now we don't of course have the promise of the land.

That was specifically for Israel. Israel. But as the spiritual children of Abraham, we do have a better promise.

[26 : 45] As I said to the children earlier, we have the promise of a far better land, heaven itself. Peter says in 1 Peter 1 verse 4, we have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

There's an even grander promise in 2 Peter 3 and verse 13. According to his promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

What a promise. And God never forgets his promises. He always keeps his word. We've been waiting a long time for it now.

Christians have been waiting 2,000 years. Perhaps we wait many years more, who knows?

Perhaps the Lord comes tomorrow, perhaps he comes in 1,000 years.

But he will come, and that great, glorious promise of a new heavens and a new earth will be fulfilled. God keeps his word.

[27 : 59] we have a better land promised to us. We also have a better covenant. Glorious though the old covenant was, it has now been superseded by the new covenant, which is even better.

That new covenant is announced in Jeremiah 31, verse 33, for this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after these days, declares the Lord, I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people, and no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

That glorious new covenant is fulfilled by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for our sins, to obtain forgiveness for us, and who sent his spirit into our hearts to teach us his ways.

Jesus makes that clear at the last supper when he took the cup and he said in Luke 22, this is the new covenant in my blood.

This new covenant is extended not just to Israel, but to all who trust in Christ, as many as the Lord our God shall call from all over the world.

[29 : 48] Now, concerning this new covenant, we're told in Hebrews 8 and verse 13, in speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete.

Christ, he says, is the mediator of a new covenant, a better covenant, enacted upon better promises. And the old covenant, he says, is ready to vanish away.

God's law. But that doesn't mean that it's irrelevant. After all, the promise of the new covenant is that God will write his laws on our hearts.

And the reason that we need forgiveness is because we've broken God's law. So God's law still matters. And therefore, Deuteronomy still matters.

However, the new covenant is different from the old. The great weakness of the old covenant was that Israel didn't keep God's law, and indeed couldn't.

[30 : 59] Nothing wrong with the law. The law of God is perfect. But we aren't. The Old Testament saints felt that.

read the 119th Psalm, for example, which we sang from. And it's one long cry for help. He wants to obey, but he knows that he falls short.

Effectively, David is saying throughout, Lord, I obey. Help my disobedience. The new covenant answers that cry.

With the power to obey, and forgiveness when we don't. So far as obedience is concerned, it's the difference between the law written on tablets of stone, and the law written in our hearts.

So far as forgiveness is concerned, it's the difference between animal sacrifices that looked forward to Christ, and Christ himself.

[32 : 07] The question is, are you living in the light of the new covenant? The first thing is to be saved. We can never be saved by obedience to the law.

As Paul says, by the works of the law, no human being shall be justified in his sight. God is to be saved by God. If our text in Deuteronomy 4, 13, and 14, if that was the end of the Bible, if God simply said, here it is, here's my law, go out and do it, otherwise you'll be judged.

Where would we all stand? We would be doomed, wouldn't we? Because none of us has kept that law entirely.

We've done our best, perhaps, but we've not kept it. And we won't, because we're sinful at heart. Instead, Paul says, we are justified freely by the grace of God through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Christ has fulfilled the law for us. First by obeying the law himself, and then by bearing the penalty of the law for our sins. And we're saved simply by faith in him.

[33 : 28] That great exchange takes place. Our sins are placed upon him, and his righteousness is given to us. Our sins are forgiven, and we are counted righteous in his sight.

That's the first thing. Full and free salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. And if you haven't yet trusted in Christ for that salvation, you need to do so.

Now. But having been saved by Christ, we ought to walk in the ways of Christ. He expects that. And we will want it. Because God's laws are written on our hearts. Christ's ways are, of course, God's ways. His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, is simply an exposition of God's law.

Interpreted, broadened, deepened for this new age of grace. The delicate balance between the old and the new covenants is well expressed in 1 Corinthians 9 in verse 21.

[34 : 46] Where Paul says that although we are not under the law as a way of salvation, we are not without law.

But we are under the law of Christ. Israel had many reasons to obey God's law.

First, because it was commanded. Second, because it brought blessing. Third, because it avoided judgment. But also, there was gratitude.

Remember how the Ten Commandments began. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. God had brought them out of slavery. And given them a wonderful land.

Of course, they should obey him. How much more should we obey Christ? Who has saved us from our sins.

[35 : 50] And promised us heaven. And the Spirit of God enables us to do so. May the Lord help us all to live as the new covenant children of God.

Amen.