

# A Good Land

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[ 0 : 00 ] Sorry about Deuteronomy. Most people groan inwardly when they hear about Deuteronomy. But I've been having a wonderful time with it this year, so I'm hoping that I can get your enthusiasm for Deuteronomy worked up.

It probably is the book that put the whole Bible together. You know, it's because of Deuteronomy that the Bible is there.

The theory that one person has about this, which I'll pass on to you, you can meditate on it, is that you remember Josiah gave money to rebuild the temple. That's way on in Chronicles somewhere. And when they were tearing down the temple, they found this manuscript. And they took the manuscript to the king, and the king read it, and he repented deeply and had it read to all his people.

And then they had a great renewal of the covenant on the basis of having read these ancient scriptures that they had lost and seen how far they had departed from them over the generations since they were written down.

[ 1 : 18 ] Now, the reason I say that what they think may have happened then is that under the impetus of finding Deuteronomy, they then looked around and found the other books of the Old Testament, put them together into the Torah.

Then they subsequently added the wisdom literature and the prophets, and that formed the foundation on which the New Testament was built in terms of the anticipation of Christ in the Old Testament and the realization of him in the New.

So it's really a very important book. The fact is that it's a series of sermons by Moses. I mean, this is Moses preaching in that passage that Sean read for us just now.

This is Moses preaching away. And he gives these sermons at a particular time in the history of the people when they are on the borders of the promised land.

You remember, Moses went up to the top of the mountain, and he looked out and he saw the promised land. And he was not going to go into it. So this is his final address to the people that he has been with for 40 years before he dies and they go on.

[ 2 : 50 ] So it's a very interesting passage. It's not, I mean, it has to do with leadership because in all the history of the world, it's hard to think of a leader who is superior in accomplishment to what Moses did in hammering out on the anvil of time a people of God.

A fantastic story of leadership. It's also an amazing story of how a nation got together, which has a certain amount of relevance in our society.

How do you bring a disparate people together into one nation? How do they become one nation?

And it was Moses' skill in leadership that brought all these tribes that hundreds of years before had gone down into Egypt, had been humiliated, subjected to statutory labor, and made into slaves and almost lost their identity when God raised up Moses.

And Moses challenged the king, the God king who was the Pharaoh and said, these people you must let go, you know.

Let them go. And so it was Moses' persistence that led them out of slavery, out of Egypt, into the wilderness. And it was there in the wilderness, if you remember, that they had this dramatic experience of God, a most unusual experience of God, with trumpets and clouds and fire and the whole mountain quaking and tremendous fear.

[ 4 : 44 ] And out of that, God spoke. And all those things were simply backdrop to the fact that God spoke to his people and they heard him.

And that establishes the kind of basic contact by which people have lived in relationship to God ever since then, is that God speaks and we hear and obey.

That's the name of the game. That's what your life is all about. God has spoken and you are to hear and obey. Are you getting on?

Are you getting on? Well, that was how it began.

And, you know, there wasn't something for them to see. There was a voice to be heard and to be obeyed. And what Moses did, you see, was he broke the power of the God-king Pharaoh to whom they were slaves.

[ 6 : 01 ] He took them out of Egypt and out of slavery into the wilderness. There they had this dramatic encounter with God, the Lord, the I am that I am God.

And he said, I will covenant to be your God. And this is how I want you to behave. And I want you to behave this way because I have set you free.

You have set you free from bondage in Egypt and now you are my people and you are going to be in bondage to me. And I am going to be your king and I am going to be your God and I am going to lead you and you're to have loyalty to nobody else.

There is no other king who will be over you. And he drew up a treaty with them. The treaty was in terms of the law.

And the law is, in a sense, the whole of the Torah, the five books of the Bible. And he said, this is my law for you as a people and you belong to me.

[ 7 : 16 ] Now they had the choice of continuing to wander northward and gradually be absorbed by the tribes that were there and then come under subjection to the Hittites or one of the other northern kingdoms and become assimilated in that.

But instead of that, Moses said, you're going to be a different kind of a nation. You're going to be the nation that God has chosen and your business as a nation is to obey that God no matter what happens.

So it was a very dramatic moment. And Deuteronomy is the record of Moses talking to these people on the eve of their crossing the Jordan and going in and taking the land.

And that's why this passage begins if you look at it. And be careful to follow every command I am giving you today. You may not know much, but you know what I've told you.

So be careful to follow it. You know, most of our religious life is an investigation of the mysterious transcendental realities that are beyond human knowing.

[ 8 : 35 ] And we speculate in that field all the time. But what Moses says, it's not knowing what you don't know, it's obeying what you do know that is the basis of this relationship.

So he says, be careful to follow every command so that you may live and increase, multiply, enter, possess the land the Lord has promised on oath to your forefathers.

Just let me remind you, they've been released from slavery, they have been brought into a covenant relationship with God, they have had 40 years of testing in the wilderness, they have been, in a sense, hammered into a self-conscious nation of people under God, and now, having been duly constituted as a people, they are to be given a land, and they're going in to take possession of it.

And so it says, be careful to follow. And then he says, and this is one of the words that comes over and over and over again in Deuteronomy, and you can read it for yourself.

Remember, remember, remember, remember, which alternates with don't forget. Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these 40 years to humble you and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.

[ 10 : 13 ] He wanted to bring you to the place where you had to make a decision. You know, the great freedom of the contemporary society in which we live is that we can mostly avoid decisions.

But God reduced them to a kind of daily dependence upon him to know what their decision would be. And we live in a world of deferred decisions.

But they were brought to the place where God would know and they would know with respect to God what their decision would be, whether they would keep his commandments or not.

Verse 3, he humbled you, causing you to hunger, and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known. This was God's humbling or disciplining process, as one other translation puts it.

He humbled them, and then they were hungry, and he had to feed them, and he provided them with manna. You know, when you're off in the wilderness and you dream of a milkshake and a hamburger from McDonald's or something like this, they were off in the wilderness and they

dreamed of the leeks and garlic of Egypt and those kinds of wonderful food.

[11:40] And they thought about them. And what did God give them? Manna. It sustained life, but nobody got very excited about it. You know, it's like nobody wrote a recipe book on what to do with manna to make it charming and palatable.

None of that. This was strictly a sustenance diet for them for a long time. God gave it to them. And the reason it says he gave it to them was to teach them one fundamental reality, and that was that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Now, you know the absolute priority in our society of bread. I've got to put bread on the table. I've got to earn my bread.

That becomes the absolute priority of survival in our culture and in our society. Nothing stands in the way of making sure there's bread on the table.

But what Moses was teaching them, what the Lord was teaching them, that bread is, in a sense, dispensable.

[13:02] Anything will do, even manna. You can live on that if you need to. But the thing that is not dispensable is your dependence upon the God who speaks to you.

That's what you need. And we are meant to come to those moments in our life when in our extremity there is nothing we can eat, nothing we can drink.

What we desperately need is some word from God. And you know that people in their circumstances can easily find themselves in that position where there is the thing they need is some word from God.

I had a sad experience this summer in that it's a kind of interesting story.

I had a parish in Kingston about 30 odd years ago and one Sunday morning a mother and her 18 year old blonde daughter came to church and the blonde daughter had a big straw hat on and she was a very attractive girl and she came to the church and they became just a part of that tiny little church and became came to faith in Christ there.

[14:29] And as years went by the blonde daughter married a beautiful young RMC cadet and the two of them went off and they had twin boys and the twin boys we were asked to be the godparents of the twin boys and we were kept in touch with them through photographs and things like this which at Christmas and letters trying to keep in touch with them though we saw them very rarely and then I I saw Michael which was one of the twins when he was grown up and in the Air Force and he he wanted to get married and he was a bit troubled about getting married and what it meant and I saw him two or three years ago at Trenton when we were down east and we had we had lunch together and then on the end of end of July we got news of that big Hercules plane that crashed in Alberta and he was the pilot of it and so that with all the promise in the world and all

I mean you've had experiences like this I'm telling you about my experience and being called upon and you know that he has a young wife who's due to have a baby next month and it was just you know bread isn't enough there's got to be some word from God in the in that's that's what we depend on in our in our human life in our existence we need that that's the most fundamental reality by which we are to live our lives is that God should speak to us a word because we get beyond the place easily where bread is all we need we have deeper needs than that and one of the things the scripture allows you to do is to have deeper needs than bread on your table something is more important than that and of course that's why

Jesus quoted this passage when he was in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights and afterwards he hungered and Satan came and said turn these stones into bread and Jesus said you don't live by bread you live by the word of God and that's that's the bond that's the kind of life giving reality the word of God heard in faith and obeyed that's what your life is dependent upon and there it is in Deuteronomy a long time ago so it's been there switching now to the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy fear the Lord your God serve him only take oaths in his name you can see the kind of structure of of the of the community that that was being set up a community whose fear was God were to serve him and take oaths in his name they weren't you know they weren't

Nazis serving Hitler they weren't they were people who feared God who served him and who took oaths in his name that's why God had brought them out of captivity to set them free to be his servants and to serve him that's what he did it for now you're not to follow other gods the gods of the people around you for the Lord God who is among you is a jealous God and jealousy is you're jealous of something that belongs to you you may be envious of something that doesn't belong to you or that you haven't got but you have a right to be jealous of what does belong to you and

jealousy is a burning kind of thing I don't know if you have ever been deeply jealous but it's physically a painful thing to experience and in

God this jealousy is related to the fact that he is a consuming fire and if you offend the jealousy of God you are consumed by the fire so it's a terrible picture of the power of God when it says that he is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you and he will destroy you from the face of the land because you belong to him and he makes that claim upon you as a people that's what Moses told him and then he says don't test the Lord your God as you did it that's when they grumbled and complained until God was forced to give them water they didn't trust him they demonstrated their mistrust unbelief set in as it does to us so often when we test the

[ 20 : 09 ] Lord in our unbelief verse 17 says be sure to keep the commands of the Lord your God the stipulations and decrees he has given you that's that obedience thing again keep yourself constantly aware of them do what is right and good in the Lord's sight so that it may go well with you and you may go down you may go in and take over the good land that the Lord has promised your forefathers so it was utterly they were utterly dependent upon the necessity of obeying God if they expected to claim the land which God had given them so that was the passage that I wanted to read with you today to try and introduce this but as I prepare and get ready to talk to you one of the things that gets hold of me in a big way is a sense that what we're seeing here makes all sorts of assumptions which the world in which we live and work does not make you know that it the problem is described by

Jeremy Bates he was here at the university this spring and he talked about the way our world thinks and the kind of he says these are the strands that run through the contemporary thinking of people that make faith in God belief in the Bible trust in Christ obedience to God all totally irrelevant they just don't apply and so if we were to try and transfer what I'm seeing here out onto that street corner there I would be reduced to a quivering idiot maybe I am anyway but I hope that at least you respect me a little bit anyway he says this is the way people in our society think one that the gods of this present world are dead science technology utopia progress ideologies that creates a spiritual vacuum because all those things in which we believe they've gone but the second thing it says that you can't get behind the text in other words you can read the Bible but there is no other reality than your encounter with the

Bible when you read about the resurrection the resurrection is a great idea but there never needs to have been a resurrection for that story to have been written all you have is the text when you read about Jesus Jesus is a great idea but there is no historical reality to it there is nothing behind it and I thought about it in terms of this lawyer who's been appointed to prosecute or to defend the man accused of crashing that plane at Lockerbie remember they said I think that it was four years ago and you remember it came out on the headlines and out in the news and the horror and shock of it that ran around the world and pictures of it and the testimonies from people whose relatives had been on that plane and all the immediacy of it that happened within a day then through the effect of the media that begins to be a story within a week it becomes kind of history within years it becomes a kind of significant event from which we learn certain things develop certain prejudice accommodate certain hatreds learn to be afraid of certain ideas all that begins to happen and why it happened and when it happened and that it happened all becomes in a sense incidental and somewhere way down the line it'll all come into court and when you get into court and start examining people's motives and the things that directed them the whole thing will become a story and it will become almost impossible to get back to the shocking reality of the event that took place and there'll be very few people who know about it and you see that's what happens is that it's very difficult for us even with an historic event within our lifetime to be able to come up against the hard evidence of what actually took place and the only thing you can do now is presumably go to the loved one of someone who died in that thing and they can share their personal grief over that event and it would you know people will write books in months and years to come saying what happened there and try and recreate it well the

New Testament you see takes an event within in Moses time the event was when God met them on Mount Saniah the event for us is when God met us in Jesus Christ on the cross and the insistence of Deuteronomy and the insistence of the New Testament is remember remember remember get back to that event recognize that that's where it all comes from it's not something you can do with as you like it's not something you can fantasize about it's not something that has meaning simply because it's a good story there's an event that took place God revealed himself and you need to get

back to that event back to that circumstance and that was the you know that's that's something we've given up doing the third thing just to finish this and I'll quit we live in a society which says one the gods are dead two you can't get behind the text the celebration of pluralism which means more choices more freedom and Jeremy quotes Alan

Bloom as saying our business is not to correct mistakes so we can be right but to learn not to be right at all you know that we're not right about anything and you see the the final thing it says that and our society has concluded that in religious pluralism God is completely unknowable so that's the society in which we are trying to bear witness to Jesus Christ a society which says all the gods are dead none of them has any relevance that the text is all you have there is no reality behind it that that the more choices people have the more freedom they have and finally that God is unknowable completely unknowable so don't talk about him well you see you see what happens when you go back to

[ 28 : 00 ] Deuteronomy and Deuteronomy becomes the pattern for the whole of the scriptures he says there is the living God who met you in the wilderness at Sinai there was an event when God gave the law and you have the law in your hands and that law is given to you not so that you will have the law but so that through it you will know the God who gave it it's not just what's the written text that you have to deal with it's the God who gave it that you have to deal with and thirdly that in a matter of pluralism where there are more choices and more freedom that that that's why why this is the first and great commandment thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your mind with all your soul with all your strength there will be no other gods but one and you see that's the God we know it's the only God we know if you're a scientist you may conjure up some other concept of

God if you're a philosopher you may if you're an environmentalist you may there are all sorts of ways in which you might conjure up some God idea but the only God we know is the God of Adam the God of Abraham the God of Jacob the God of Moses the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ that's the only God we know that's the only God who has made himself known to us that's the God with whom we have to deal well this was about the good land and the good land was the land which God promised and said this belongs to you if you trust in me if you lose your trust and obedience to me you lose the land and that was the story of what happened let me pray God we thank you that you have spoken to us we may not know all there is to know in fact we know very little of what there is to know we know that you are the God who has commanded us to go in and possess that which you have made available to us and that we possess it not by our own wit or by our own strength but because you have promised and you will fulfill that promise help us our God to hear your word and give us grace to obey it we ask in Jesus name amen to be to be you and Nobody is