

An introduction to Deuteronomy - The uniqueness of God

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[0 : 00] Bible and turn to the book of Deuteronomy and chapter 4. And the reason for doing this before we pray is simply because the song that we have just sung hopefully is still very fresh in our mind. And the reading, I didn't actually, I knew, I always asked what is the theme of the messages going to be. And he always chooses the most appropriate hymns and songs and that. But with this new one that he's introduced, speaks very much into the very verse or two verses that I'll be reading from chapter 4. So Deuteronomy chapter 4 and verses 7 and 8. Chapter 4 verse 7 and 8.

So this is put in a question to the people of God. And these are the sort of rhetorical questions. 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 rulers so righteous as all this law that I set before you this day?

They're the two verses and we'll come back to them in a moment. Turn again please to Deuteronomy chapter 4 and I'll read those two verses through to us once more.

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 set before you today?

If I was to put the message of Deuteronomy into just one sentence, it would be that God prepares his people for a great occasion.

[2 : 26] But the occasion isn't just one day. It's a new land, a promised land, filled with blessing. In other words, you could call it revival proper.

Not a proper understanding of revival, but revival proper in the sense that it's not just about the transformation of hearts, but it's about the blessing of the land completely.

Everything is blessed. You go out into the field and there's fruit on the trees, there's wheat in the field. Your living conditions are blessed, the environment is blessed, everything, the people are blessed.

But what Deuteronomy teaches is in many ways the same thing that the prophets have to say and that is sometimes people are not always ready for revival proper or blessings proper because of the involvement that comes prior to any of that happening.

But the issue here in Deuteronomy is that God wants to show his people just how unique he is and how unique they are in relationship with God.

[3 : 39] And the moment they get that, their confidence is restored back into God, their trust and obedience is restored and suddenly they're ready to enjoy the blessings.

Now we've all been there where you don't give a good gift to someone who can't handle a good gift because they just spoil it. And so God here wants his people ready for the blessings they're about to inherit because he doesn't want them to waste it.

He doesn't want them to throw it all away. And so that's a good enough reason to read Deuteronomy in and of itself but Deuteronomy is one of those books that doesn't get read.

And it probably doesn't get read because it's in the first half of the Bible and it probably doesn't get read because it's in one of the first five books of the Bible. Most people give Genesis a good go but the moment they get into like Exodus or Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, you know, it becomes a little bit more difficult.

However, the issue here is that it's a very relevant book but if you've already made your mind up over the fact that it's not relevant then you don't actually get around to reading it.

[4 : 50] But what you will find if you do begin to read is that as you read you will be surprised at just how relevant it is. You'll be surprised at just how quickly it speaks into what you're actually going through.

In other words, Deuteronomy is basically saying don't be like the child who says to his mother, I don't like that. And then the mother having to say to the child, well how do you know whether or not you like it?

You've never had it before. Right? Why is it that we make up our mind about what we like to taste before we've ever tasted it? Well how do you know? The truth is we don't know.

But these mental imaginations are what actually put us off or encourage us to eat something. By way of illustration, if I said strawberries and ice cream you're able to mentally imagine that and you go, hmm.

But if I said liver and onion ice cream or suddenly your mental imagination tells you immediately that's not a good combination. I'm not going to like that.

[5 : 55] But my question to you is how do you know? Have you ever had it? Right? Okay. You don't know.

You've already put yourself off it even though you've never tried it. You're doing exactly the same thing that you tell children not to do. Okay? Now I can agree that liver and onion ice cream is probably a bit of a push but nevertheless the principle's the same.

That you turn yourself off by your mental imagination of what you think it'll be like. And Deuteronomy suffers from that kind of mental imagination. In other words, I've already imagined what it's going to be like and so I'm not going to read it.

I've already imagined what Jeremiah's going to be like and so I'm not going to read it. You know. And these type of mental imaginations get in the way of us actually getting down to a book that would be tremendously beneficial for us.

Another reason for reading the book of Deuteronomy would be this. That it might just be Jesus' favourite Old Testament book. And the reason I say that is because it is the one book that he quoted from probably the most.

[7 : 06] So don't you want to read the book that Jesus quoted from? You know, when somebody quotes a book to me I think, oh, not only do I like hearing what you said but I'd quite like to hear why you're now repeating it.

I'd like to read their book. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy a lot. And so that seems to be a good enough reason in and of itself to read it. It is God's word.

And Deuteronomy is full of riches that you will miss if your mental imagination of it doesn't allow you to read it. If you've already put it on the shelf if Deuteronomy was a book all by itself and not actually in the canon of scripture and it was just on your shelf it may never get read.

It may even get misplaced and lost altogether. But the surprising thing about Deuteronomy is it probably has more things to say about your life now than you can possibly imagine.

And one of the things that it has to say or at least introduces to is the uniqueness of God and how unique we become by being in relationship with God.

[8 : 16] Okay? how unique God is and how unique you become by being in relationship with God. In other words God doesn't want you to learn about him in a classroom.

He doesn't even want you to learn about him in a textbook situation an exam situation in sort of a sterile conditions and then you leave all your work on the table and you go out into the real world and suddenly God's not there.

No. God in Deuteronomy wants his people to know him through the bread that they eat. God in Deuteronomy wants his people to know him through the water that they drink. God wants his people to know him when they have to roll up their sleeves and work the fields.

God wants to be known by his people there and then in real life situations. And so for these people who want to think well I'm going to learn about God I'm going to take a course on the doctrine of God.

Well that may be incredibly beneficial but I don't think God can be treated that way. I don't think you can learn a portion of God in a classroom. I think for anybody to truly know God they have to know all of God in all of life.

[9 : 29] Not independently learn it you know separated from doing the dishes. You know it's great that God's sovereign but what good is that now that my washing machine's broke.

The thing God needs to be learnt and understood and related to in everyday life. And that's what Deuteronomy introduces us to.

God wants you to know him when you roll up your sleeves when you eat at the table and when you get a glass of water from the sink. That's where God wants you to know him. Now the issue that we're coming to here is the uniqueness of God in chapter 4 verses 7 and 8.

Now the reason why we have to be introduced to the uniqueness of God is because God wants to convince his people to trust him. God goes out of his way in the book of Deuteronomy or at least he reminds his people just how far he has gone to convince his people to trust and obey.

Over and over again God wants his people to trust him and he's not satisfied until the whole of their life is committed to him.

[10:40] Not a part but a whole of your life is committed to God and God sees the parts that are uncommitted. He sees the bit where you're holding it back for yourself and what you give and so the type of involvement that God will have in your life is to gain ground.

Okay, God is constantly wanting to gain ground in the parts of your life that are not yet surrendered to him. God doesn't back off and say I'm happy with 50%.

Okay, this person's been through a lot lately I'm happy with 40%. No, God wants all of you and so everything that God does is to get all of you but God does it in a way where he will convince you to trust him and obey him all the more.

You won't be when you give up more you won't be trying to hold on to it. You will be willingly handing it over to him surrendering. There will be no fight. You will see that it is actually the right thing to do.

So what we notice here in verse 7 and verse 8 is that God has no equal. God has no equal. He can't be compared to anybody else on the earth.

[11:53] He cannot be compared to any of the gods in any of the other nations. Now, God is not saying here that other nations have gods. He's simply affirming the fact that other nations believe that they have gods.

Lower G. You know, he's not affirming that God sits on the shelf with lots of other gods and you get to choose which one you want. No. The lower G gods are gods of people's imaginations.

They may be made out of wood or clay or silver or metal or gold but they are imaginations of people. And if you want to go and see them you have to go to them.

But here in verse 7 God is reminding us that he is a god of nearness. Not that you are near to him but that he is near to you. And idols can't do that.

You know, you worship these people who worship statues in the middle of somewhere have to go to it. But what we're told here is that God is comparing himself to the idols of the nation saying look wherever you go I'm right with you.

[12:59] My nearness to you is a convincer. You don't even have to come and find me. You don't have to come back here. You don't have to go there. Wherever you are I am there.

That's not like anything you can find in any other nation. That wherever you are I am. And then in verse 8 he has this to say.

That the way I am with you is righteous. That I give you statutes I give you rules I give you laws that are righteous.

In other words I don't give you anything that will corrupt you as a nation. I don't put anything into your family to wreck it. The laws that I give you the righteousness that I give you is for your own prosperity.

It's for your own blessing. I'm doing nothing to corrupt you. Now this is important because throughout the history of God's people they corrupt themselves plenty of times and have to be brought back into the faithfulness of God where God demonstrates again and again and again well I'm still here I haven't gone anywhere.

[14:07] But just like children who can be brought in from the outside made clean told to wait here and then they wander out again get dirty how did that happen?

Right? And that's what believers are like with God. We have this tendency of being able to be made clean by God only to get dirty all over again. But God's laws are righteous laws because God's people are known as one way and one way in particular throughout the whole of human history. How do you understand what a church is? In other words I could take you to plenty of rooms throughout this country with people in them. Four walls lighting music but how do you know it's a

church?

I could even take you to a supermarket where you can have music lighting food tea and coffee and people and a few chairs but how do you know what's the distinctive? Well the distinctive is how people worship.

What sets God's people apart in the world as God's people is how they worship God. How they love God. How they follow Him. Because if you're not doing that then you're no different than the other nations around you.

[15 : 23] What sets you apart as someone belonging to God is how you love Him. How you worship Him. How you sing. How you pray.

How you commit your life to His ways His laws rules and not your own. That's worship. It's more than that of course but that is part of it here in verse 8.

Now the meaning of all of this is really important so I want to give you an example and the example I want to give you is in the context here of nearness the end of verse 7 whenever we call upon Him. And so that's the issue of prayer. And the point that I want to make is this that God is the only one in all of creation who can answer prayer. That's the way I understand it.

I want you to think about that for a moment. That if God is the only one in all of creation who can answer prayer then that means that no prayer on earth anywhere else that is offered to anyone else is actually praying or could be answered.

[16 : 30] Now we look at these nations that bow down kneel on a carpet in a particular direction at a particular time of the day three or five times a day and we go well they must be praying.

But they're not praying at all. They're going through the motions. They're doing something that looks like praying but who's going to answer? Who's actually there on the other end?

No one. It's a bit like saying well Christians believe in Yahweh and Muslims believe in Allah.

In other words the Muslims God is Allah and the Christians God is Yahweh. I'm sorry? The Muslims have a God? No. There is only one God.

The Lord our God. And that kind of clear distinctive simply rules out everything else. So if there is only one true God and his God is the triumphant God of scripture the God that we believe in then everything that comes with that God including prayer means that the only prayer that is possible in the whole of creation is the prayer that happens between God's people and himself.

[17 : 41] Nowhere else can prayer be offered up and answered. Because prayer only exists because God exists. In other words if God didn't exist neither would prayer.

And if God wasn't near and we couldn't call upon him prayer couldn't be offered. Now you could go through mantras it'll be alright tomorrow it'll be okay tomorrow in the morning it'll be fine it'll all go away.

And you can go through those mantras and people can even encourage you to you know say a prayer and to who. But the issue here that God is making to his nation to his people is that nobody else in the world has what you have.

no one else in the world has someone listening to them that can actually answer anything that you ask him. No one in the world has that apart from you.

That's what you have even sat here this evening. You have a God who will answer your prayers and nobody else but Christians have that. That's how unique God is and how unique you are by belonging to God.

[19 : 00] Now there are a few other examples when it comes to prayer which we're not going to concentrate on because we don't have the time but the other issue here is clearly God's faithfulness towards us in that he is always near.

Now this is something that God's people have to get used to because of how unfaithful they are and the reason I mention that is because God's faithfulness doesn't diminish by our level of unfaithfulness.

In other words it's not a balancing trick that if our unfaithfulness increases that God's faithfulness diminishes as though it's some kind of scale. That's not the way it happens. However unfaithful we may be God continues to be faithful towards us and that's the encouraging thing because I can have a bad day where I wake up in the morning and I don't want to be like Jesus and it's hard to surrender my life and to go through the struggle of not wanting to do what I want to do but doing what God would call me to do and lay down my life every morning all over again but God isn't going to go wow you've really struggled this morning I'll give you 50% of me.

No God is always faithful all the time even to unfaithful people and so therefore you can't have more of God's faithfulness by being more faithful but that shouldn't give you reason then to be unfaithful okay now I understand I've been around Christians long enough to know that that's how their logic works that if I've been faithful for five days I can have a day off I've been praying at least three times a day and I've been praying long and hard and God you must have something for me at the end of the week what you're doing there or at least what you're expecting is the more you put in the more you get out and the failure of the understanding is that what you're arguing is the more I do the more faithful God will be towards me no God remains completely faithful towards you despite your level of faithfulness or unfaithfulness always faithful now it is true that

God blesses it is true that God honours those who honour him that is true but God doesn't play a tit-for-tat game he doesn't play the scale game God remains faithful to his people despite their continual unfaithfulness and that is encouraging for when we are unfaithful but it's definitely not a call to be unfaithful okay it's encouraging for when we are unfaithful but it's not an encouragement to be unfaithful and this leads us to why perhaps Deuteronomy is actually called Deuteronomy in fact it's one of the reasons for why Deuteronomy is called Deuteronomy Deuteronomy means second law not that there's a second law but there is a second giving of the first law a retelling of the first law a second giving of the original law and the reason why that's so important is because of the tendency that God's people have of saying well that was then this is now now when you live a Christian life and that line comes out that was then this is now that's a bit like the danger zone that's a bit like facing the red triangle when you should stop but you continue but that was then this is now attitude is actually something that

[22 : 40] Jesus himself had to address in the New Testament they're failing to make an important distinction of God's word and himself that God's word cannot be separated from God that if God is eternal then so is his word eternal well that makes sense but if God is unchanging then so his word is unchanging and so the argument of that was then this is now doesn't hold up but people who want to see change in accordance with what they think change should be will use that was then and this is now argument but this is what Jesus had to say about it years later he said do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them for I say to you until heaven and earth pass away not an iota not a dot will pass away from the law until it is all accomplished Matthew 5 in other words what

Jesus is basically saying for those people who want to say that was then this is now he says you've got it all wrong in other words Jesus is effectively saying that it doesn't pass away it gets fulfilled in other words you begin to see what the law is really there for but people in his day were doing that very thing that was then we can leave that behind we've moved on since then we're now in the 21st century come on you're not still going to hold me to that and what Deuteronomy is trying to say to his people to God's people is that God is going to stick to the same law he doesn't need a new law because the old one or rather the original one is sufficient for life and faith and purpose and understanding in other words you don't need something new you just need a new understanding of the old and that's exactly what Jesus gives it's not that he's telling them something and take a second look and the reason why that's important is because

God's law is righteous in other words it promotes righteousness it promotes goodness in the church it promotes goodness in the family it promotes goodness in society in other words if everybody in the world kept the Ten Commandments wouldn't you want to live in a world like that well it's simple because you all begin to understand that not that we can keep the Ten Commandments without the grace of God but you begin to understand that the law is righteous you begin to understand that it's good for society in other words I can leave my car unlocked I can leave my house unlocked right because everyone's going to hold to the commandment don't steal and that's a good thing so it's not just good for my neighbour it's good for everyone because we're all agreeing that this is not just honouring God but it's actually good for the people that live in it and now the reason why this is important is because they're about to go into a promised land they're about to go into a land full of great blessing of revival proper you could say and the trouble is unless

God's people are ready for it they're not ready for it in other words God will never say when we get there I want you to be on your best behaviour God's never going to say something like that because you should be behaved at home not just away from home but too often God's people make the condition well as long as you're good here I guess that's the most that I could ask for just when we get there be on your best behaviour God isn't worried about what the neighbours think he just

doesn't care the reason why God wants his people to behave rightly is because there is such a thing as right behaviour and the reason why he'll never say when we get there beyond your best behaviour is because best behaviour should be expected now not then and so the reason for this righteous law is to create in them a right behaviour before they enter into the land before they enter into this place of blessing they need to be able to go in there not 50-50 on their obedience and 50-50 on their trust they need to be able to enter into the land righteously obeying God's laws trusting God God ok ok why because if they don't if you're only on your best behaviour when you're there well the problem that I have is what do you do when you're not that's the issue here's the final consideration as we close as an introduction to this book of Deuteronomy that God wants to convince you to trust him that as you read Deuteronomy what you're reading are convincers for you to trust and obey him in life the whole of life for all of life but God is smart enough to know when you're copying somebody else's work ok I want you to think about that God wants to convince you to trust and obey him but God is smart enough to know when you are copying somebody else's work now I'm about to say something that if you're a school teacher and [28 : 18] I know that many of you in this room are school teachers I'm not going to tell you anything new you're going to know this like the back of your hand in fact you could probably tell me a thing or two regarding this you know the problem of copying all too well and I remember a time when the teacher was telling me it could have been my best you can still remember certain teachers Mrs.

Horton she was shorter than me but boy did she have a voice on her she was a great teacher I liked her but you knew she was strict and she called me over one day and she said did you copy his answers and of course being a good Christian boy I said no no you know there's just some people that you couldn't be honest with because you think what's going to happen next well I did and I said yes I did in the end I said yes I did copy his answers and then Mrs.

Horton said this to me teachers you know exactly what I'm going to say Daniel if you had to copy his answer because you didn't know what the answer was how can you tell whether not his answer is the right one well I thought I was being pretty smart and copying but this was like a whole new level of logic that I never even encountered that suddenly my brain is overload and I'm thinking hang on a minute let me just say that again so she said Daniel if you have to copy somebody's answer because you don't know the answer well suddenly it made sense suddenly I began to realise what she was getting at I thought this was the quick route to finishing the exam to finishing and it was a side by side it wasn't a serious one of being able to leave the room and being able to do what I want so she did the very thing that I was expecting her to do she sat me on a table all by myself and gave me an exam of equal difficulty and she said I had to stay there until it was completed because it wasn't a timed exam and then one thing became apparent it wasn't that I had copied that wasn't the problem and Mrs.

Horton knew that that wasn't the problem the problem was I didn't know how to do the working out and that was the issue copying was simply a result or the consequence of me not being able to do the working out for myself you see life with God means that God looks for more from you than just you coming up with the answer and God knows when you've copied and many many Christians know the answers that they do because they've copied them but God wants you to show you working out the only way your Christian life will be strong where you will be able to defend the faith that you actually have as if you're able to show you working out and this isn't about passing and failing as a Christian this isn't about well if

[32 : 02] I pass then I'm a real Christian if I fail then I'm not a real Christian it isn't about that what it's about it's about knowing the difference between what is true and what is can you do the working out can you tell the difference between what is right and wrong what is good and what is bad and so God in our Christian life will get us to sit down and do our working out but sometimes this does have something to do with salvation and that's why it's so serious and the examples found in the New Testament when Jesus said why why do Lord in other words Jesus is saying look you're coming up with the right answer but I know that you're coming up with the right answer because you've copied somebody else because the next thing he has to say is and you do not do what I say in other words

I know that you've come up with the right answer because perhaps you've copied the disciples perhaps you've heard other people around me say similar things that must be the right thing to say so I'll say it but Jesus goes one step further and says why and suddenly the moment he asks why these people can't show they're working out they're unable to show they're working out and that is a salvation issue Mark 7 and Luke 6 see in a world where Christians believe different things and they

do believe different things the issue isn't that oh it's all okay the issue is why do you believe what you do can you show you working out from God's word that's the issue so here's the exhortation remember we live in a world where there is difference and as long as there is difference there will be different things to believe and different things to trust but the Lord our God is one and the Lord our God is unchanging okay the Lord our God is one and the Lord our God is unchanging and God wants his people to show their working out in trust and obedience so that we will know that we are part of the uniqueness of God amen amen amen