

Living as God's Covenant People
Studies in Deut. 1-11, #1

"Deuteronomy:
The Book of the Covenant"

--CEFC 5/28/17

How big is your Bible?

The Bible comes in all sizes, of course—

I've got a number of different-sized Bibles myself—

This big one I've used for close to 30 years;

and then a smaller I bought last year—NIV11

Then I've got this even smaller Bible I can slip into my pocket.

Of course, I also have a Bible on my phone.

I've even had a Bible that fit in my wallet--

The Bible, 1245 pages, printed in microform in one square inch!

It was so small that I've lost it!

I can't find it anywhere!

But when I ask "How big is your Bible?",

that's not what I have in mind.

Let me ask my question another way--

How many books does your Bible contain?

The proper answer, if you look in your table of contents, is 66.

But think again--

How many books of your Bible do you use,

how many books could you use, if you wanted to--

to allow God to speak to you?

I ask the question because I've found that most people, most Christians,

operate with pared down and diminished versions of the Bible.

There may be 66 books between the covers,

but, in fact, there could just as well be 5 or 6.

Most people include the Gospels--

perhaps the Book of Acts and possibly a letter or two of Paul.

And then from the Old Testament maybe just the Psalms.

But that's about all.

If they attended Sunday School as a child they may know some Bible stories,

but they probably couldn't tell you where they can be found.

Though the Bible is a much talked about book,

though its divine origin and infallible teaching

is sometimes defended with great urgency,

it remains, even among Christians, a sadly neglected Book.

Like so many other "Great Books"--

It is revered, but not read.

In our increasingly secular society, this is increasingly so--
Biblical illiteracy is on the rise.

Various polls report that
though 7 out of 10 Americans say they are Christians,
only 3 out of 10 teenagers know why Christians celebrate Easter.
And less than 40% of all Americans know who preached the Sermon on the Mount.
Many think that it was delivered by someone on a donkey.

Please, don't misunderstand me.
I'm not condemning anyone for being ignorant.
Don't feel threatened by your own lack of knowledge,
as if you don't belong here.
If you think the Sermon on the Mount was delivered from a donkey's back--
I'm glad you're hear this morning.
You're just where you ought to be.
I welcome you heartily!

But when we consider what a gift this book is to us--
when we consider that it is God's word to us
that holds the key to life itself,
how sad that we treat it with such indifference./

Well, beginning this morning I want to add a book to your Bibles--
not by adding to what God has already revealed,
but simply by opening up a book that for many, I'm sure,
may seem like foreign territory--
The Book of Deuteronomy.

This morning I want to take a broad look at the book by way of introduction,
and then in the weeks to come this summer
we will focus our attention on chapters 4-11,
which I think form its heart.

I want us to read and study this book together,
mining its vast treasures,
and so increase the size of our Bibles.

"But why Deuteronomy?" you may ask.

I could respond simply by saying, "Why not?"
Paul instructed Timothy that "**All Scripture is God-breathed
and is useful for teaching, rebuking,
correcting and training in righteousness,
so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**"

In one sense, it doesn't matter where we turn in the Bible--

God will have something useful and good for us there.
And as Jesus revealed to his disciples,
all its books ultimately point us to himself./

We can go anywhere in the Bible and be blessed,
but more specifically, Deuteronomy is important,
first of all, because of its place in the Old Testament.
It is the last of the five books of Moses,
which are the first five books of the Bible—
books which are called the Pentateuch,
or sometimes the Books of the Law—or simply the Torah.
Deuteronomy sums up what has gone before in the Pentateuch
and lays the foundation for what comes after—
the books of history and of the prophets—
which all refer back to the themes we find in this book.

But it's also important that we study Deuteronomy
because it was obviously very important to the first Christians.

The writers of the New Testament quote from Deuteronomy over 80 times;
And along with Genesis, Isaiah, and the Psalms,
it is among the four most quoted books of the Old Testament.

How can anyone doubt its immense value when you consider that
when Jesus himself was tempted by Satan in the wilderness,
three times he responded with the words, "**It is written---**"
and each time he quoted a passage from Deuteronomy.

The student is not above his Master--
If it was important to our Lord, it better be important to us!

The Book of Deuteronomy is important--not out of mere academic interest,
so that we can improve our chances when we play Bible Trivia.
It is important because of what it teaches us about our God,
our relationship with him,
and what it means to live as his people.
And it lays the foundation for our understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And in this regard, this morning I want us to focus
on three major themes that emerge from the book--

- I. God's Law
- II. God's Grace
- III. God's Covenant with his people

"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us,"
Paul writes to the Christians in Rome,
"so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures
we might have hope."

May God's Words be useful to us this morning for "**teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that each of us may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**"

So then, the Book of Deuteronomy--
The first thing that comes to mind
when you think of this book is Law--

The name itself—*deutero-nomos*--comes from the Greek for "second Law"--
signifying that on the plains of Moab, within sight of the promised land,
Moses was giving the law of God for a second time
to a new generation of Israelites.

In these sermons to the people, Moses expounds the law to them--
In Chap. 5 he repeats the ten commandments
which had first been given on Mt. Sinai,
and then through chap. 26,
he sets forth the further commands and decrees of the Lord.

"**Hear, O Israel**" we read over and over--
"**Hearken to the voice of the Lord**"
"**Serve the Lord**"
"**Fear the Lord**"
"**Hold fast to the Lord**"
"**Walk in the ways of the Lord**"
"**Do that which is right in the eyes of the Lord**"
"**Be careful to perform the commandments and statutes of the Lord**"

These are all common expressions throughout the book.¹

This is a book of God's law./

We can't go into any detailed discussion of this law now,
but three aspects of it are important to notice--

1. First, God's law in Deuteronomy is **comprehensive in its scope**--
It covers all of life.

When you read through this book you will find regulations
concerning the full spectrum of life--worship in the temple,
the conduct of government,
ways of doing business,
and aspects of life in the home.

In chaps. 12-26 we see the laws touching on such widely different topics as
--the treatment of captives in war,
--how you should cut your hair,
--what kind of insects you can eat,

¹ cf. Thompson, pp. 31f

- how to determine if a person is a false prophet,
- what to do with a rebellious son,
 - and what you should do if you find a bird's nest
with a mother bird and her young still in it.

Nothing in life is outside the sovereign rule of God.

There is no separation of one's private life from one's public life.

There is no separation between the secular and the sacred.

God's righteous will is to control all of life, in all its dimensions.

He is the creator of heaven and earth--everything is his.

God's law is comprehensive in its scope

2. Second, we see that God's law is **universal in its application**--

It applies to all people.

Certainly there are some laws that regulate specifically priestly functions,
but the law as a whole was to be taught to and obeyed by everybody.

Toward the end of the book, Moses says--

"Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, . . .

**All of you are standing today in the presence of the Lord your God—
your leaders and chief men, your elders and officials,
and all the other men of Israel, together with your children and your wives,
and the foreigners living in your camps
who chop your wood and carry your water"** (29:9-11).

From the lowest to the highest--

all are held accountable for their response to the law of God.

Repeatedly we see the emphasis given to children--

**"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.
Impress them on your children."** (6:6,7)

But what applied to children applied also to the king--

for even the king was to be responsible to this law--

chap 17--**"When the king takes the throne of his kingdom,**

he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, . . .

It is to be with him and he is to read it all the days of his life

so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God

and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees

and not consider himself better than his brothers

and turn from the law to the right or to the left" (17:18-20).

There could be no absolute monarch in Israel,

for God himself was the real King--

and before his throne everyone else stands on level ground.

There can be no separate levels of application of this righteous law of God.

It is not just for some religious elite, but every person in society--
no exemptions; no excuses.
We all stand as equals before the law of God.

God's law is universal in its application

3. And third, God's law is unconditional in its demand--

When the lawyer asked Jesus what was the first and foremost commandment of the law,
Jesus replied by quoting Deut. 6:5--

**"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your mind."
This is the first and greatest commandment,"** he said (Mt. 22:37,38).

with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your mind.

There is no limit to what God expects from us--it is unconditional--
God demands our all.

"You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," Jesus said,
but he wasn't being original.

Deuteronomy says as much, as it tells us that
God will settle for nothing less than his perfect holiness in his people.

This is the law of God as found in this book--
comprehensive in its scope
universal in its application
unconditional in its demand.

Now, we have to understand that this law was given to Israel, as a nation state,
at this particular stage in the unfolding of the redemptive plan of God.

The coming of Jesus as the fulfillment of all that the law sets forth
changes the way this law functions—

For one thing, the church today is not a nation state.
As people living on this side of the saving work of Christ
in his death and resurrection,
we now view this law through the lens of the gospel.

But it is still true
that you cannot read the book of Deuteronomy
without coming face to face with
God's absolute holiness.

His law reflects his nature--
perfect in his moral character,
righteous in all that he does,

laying down an absolute standard for his people.

I dare say, you cannot read this book without coming face to face with
your own utter sinfulness--

Who can say they measure up to what God requires?
Who is good enough, morally pure enough, to stand in his presence?
No one.

This is a book about God's law--
both an inspiring topic,
and also a convicting one.

"But how is this book relevant to us?" you may ask.
We as Christian believers are not under the condemnation of the law, you say—
and that's right.
But rightly understood, neither were the people Moses addressed--
which leads to the second theme that stands out
in this Book of Deuteronomy.

II. It is a book about God's grace.

Just think for a moment--
Why was Israel the recipient of God's Law in the first place?
Did they ask for it?
Did they seek it? -- NO.

The revelation of God's law was at his initiative.
He took the first step.
The Lord God first revealed himself to Abraham
and promised that he would make of him a great nation--
and that he would be his God and the God of his descendants.

And in faithfulness to that promise,
God first preserved Abraham's ancestors in a time of famine through the care of Joseph
when they went down to Egypt,
and then years later
the Lord rescued Abraham's ancestors from the hand of Pharaoh,
when he delivered them from the bondage of slavery.

That's God's grace--
Isn't that how the Ten Commandments begin--
not with "**You shall have no other gods before me**"
but with "**I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt,
out of the land of slavery.**"

If Deuteronomy is a book about God's law,
it is equally, if not more so, a book about God's grace./

Just consider the use of the verb "to give" (נתן)--
it occurs 167 times, and 131 of these have God as the subject.
He is the one who gives to his people.

Most tangibly, he gives to them the promised land.

As Moses addresses them in this book
they stand on the threshold of the promised land of Canaan--
35 times Moses speaks of "**the land which the Lord your God gives you.**"

They were about to enjoy
"a land with large, flourishing cities they did not build,
houses filled with all kinds of good things they did not provide,
wells they did not dig,
and vineyards and olive groves they did not plant . . ." (6:10ff).

They had no natural right to that land.
The Lord was going to punish its Canaanite inhabitants for their sin,
by driving them out,
but "**Understand,**" Moses says in 9:6, "**it is not because of your righteousness
that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess,
for you are a stiff-necked people.**"

The land was a gift from God--undeserved, unmerited.
The Lord had made a promise to the Patriarchs—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
and in Deuteronomy he is on the verge of fulfilling that promise.
They were to be given a homeland./

The Israelites had no claim upon God's goodness.
They could only receive the land for what it was--
a gift of God's grace.

One cannot understand the God's law given to Israel
without first appreciating the priority of God's grace.

Their Law-giver is first their Redeemer.

You may feel offended that someone gives you
a whole list of rules and regulations
on how to operate and care for your new car,
unless, of course, they have first given you that car.

The Lord, Yahweh, instructs his people on how they should live in the land,
only after he has first given them the land.
He instructs them on how they should live as a holy nation,
only after he has made them his people.

Law and grace--
demand and promise,
obligation and gift,
responsibility and freedom--
these are held together in Deuteronomy--
and that bond is tied in the third great theme of the book--

III. God's Covenant with his people.

The word "covenant" occurs 28 times in the book.

29:1--"**These are the terms of the covenant
the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab.**"

29:12--"**You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God,
a covenant the Lord is making with you this day and sealing with an oath,
to confirm you this day as his people,
that he may be your God as he promised you
and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.**"

A covenant is an agreement between two parties
establishing the terms of their relationship--
a business contract is a form of covenant;
an international treaty is a form of covenant;
a marriage is a form of covenant.

A covenant is based on a promise—
a promise that may be more or less conditional,
and generally, a covenant takes place between two equal parties
who voluntarily enter into a mutually beneficial agreement—
with each side having certain duties and certain privileges.
That's what you see in business, and usually in marriage.

But sometimes an agreement occurs between unequal parties--
the relationship is imposed by a superior party on one that is inferior,
and the latter has to accept the terms as they are laid down by the other side.

A prime example of this in the ancient world
is found in the treaties that the rulers of vast empires
made with the small vassal kingdoms that came under their control.

The Imperial King would promise protection
in exchange for the support and tribute of the vassal states.

The vassals really didn't have much choice in the matter,
but this arrangement provided security in troubled times.

These kinds of covenants were common in the Ancient Near East in the time of Moses,
and they took a standard form, usually with five parts—
which we can see reflected in the Book of Deuteronomy--

1. First was the preamble—

with something like "These are the words of the king of . . ."
We see this in the first five verses of chap. 1—
esp. v. 3—"Moses proclaimed to the Israelites
all that the LORD had commanded him concerning them."

2. Next these ancient treaties had a historical prologue—
They recorded the previous aid given by the Imperial Lord to the vassals,
and the debt that they owed him for this deliverance.

We see this is in the first three chapters of Deuteronomy—
Beginning from Mt. Horeb (also known as Mt. Sinai) forty years before—
Moses recounts in 1:9-18 the fact the people had grown so numerous,
just as the Lord had promised,
that he had to appoint leaders to help him manage the administrative load.

Then in the rest of chap. 1
he reminds them how they had rebelled against the Lord
who then had them wander in the wilderness
until that whole generation had died.

Then in chaps. 2 and 3 Moses recounted how the Lord brought them to this point—
about to enter the promised land,
giving them great victories over the kings of Heshbon and Bashan.
The land was to be God's gift to them—
they simply had to trust him and go in and take it.

3. The third part of the ancient near eastern treaty dealt with stipulations—
which spelled out the obligations of the vassal state,
outlining the tribute that was due.

Following that pattern, Moses sets forth the law of God—
first in a general form in chaps. 4-11
and then more specifically in chaps. 12-26.
This was the kind of life the Lord required his people to lead
which would reflect before the nations
his character as their holy God.

4. The fourth part of the treaty set forth the
provision for the public disposition of the treaty—
its public reading so that everyone would be aware of the obligations.

This essentially is what Moses is doing through the sermons
recorded in this book.

And in chap. 31 Moses instructed the priests to read this law before all the people
every seventh year
when they gathered for the Feast of Tabernacles (31:9-14).

5. Finally, ancient treaties included the invocation of divine witnesses
and the blessings and curses
on those who obeyed or violated the treaty stipulations.

We find these graphically spelled out in chaps. 27-30.

Moses says in 30:15—"See, I set before you today **life and prosperity,**
death and destruction. . . .

19 "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you
that I have set before you **life and death, blessings and curses.**

Now choose life, so that you and your children may live

20 and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice,
and hold fast to him.

For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land
he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

Because the Book of Deuteronomy follows this Ancient Near Eastern structure very closely,
many believe that this structure holds a clue
to the meaning of the book as a whole.

Yahweh, the Lord, is the great King

who has entered into a relationship with Israel.

He has rescued them from the oppression of Pharaoh,

and has made them his people.

He is the sovereign Lord who makes this relationship possible by his grace,

and it is only on his terms that it can be sustained.

The Lord had bound himself to his people--

he had made promises to them--

he would protect them and provide for their well-being.

Their responsibility was simply

to live in accordance with the stipulations of the covenant.

This was to be the means of life and blessing.

The Lord had made his promises,

and he would keep them;

and in return, they were to make theirs, and to live them out.

The Lord had given them the land--

now they were simply to go in faithful obedience and take possession of it--

knowing that their Lord would be with them, defeating their enemies.

The Lord had made them his people--they were his treasured possession.

He had made them holy--

set apart from the other nations as belonging to him.

Now they were to live as his holy people.

Israel was commanded to keep the law because it was a holy people,

not in order to become one.

"Holiness" was a term of relationship, a term of covenant.

It was first of all an established fact,

not a spiritual ambition.

The law shows how this holiness is to express itself.

The covenant binds law and grace together.

And I think it is best to see this covenant of Deuteronomy as simply an extension of the covenant that the Lord had made with Abraham years before,² which Pastor Mark Fesmire talked about last week—Gen. 12.

When Abram was 75 years old,

Gen. 12:1 **The LORD had said to [him], “Leave your country, your people
and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.**

Gen. 12:2 **“I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.**

Gen. 12:3 **I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”**

Then this covenant was reaffirmed in Gen. 17:1—

**“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said,
“I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.
2 I will confirm my covenant between me and you
and will greatly increase your numbers.”**
3 **Abram fell facedown, and God said to him,
4 “As for me, this is my covenant with you:
You will be the father of many nations.
5 No longer will you be called Abram;
your name will be Abraham,
for I have made you a father of many nations.
6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you,
and kings will come from you.
7 I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you
and your descendants after you for the generations to come,
to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.
8 The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien,
I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you;
and I will be their God.”**

The Lord had graciously promised Abraham his blessing—

 he would make of him a great nation
 his descendants would live in a spacious land,
 and he would be their God.

And his covenant required a response of faith, issuing in obedience.
That is the only way the relationship could work.

² On the continuity of these covenants, cf. Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, III.220.

What human relationship can shed some light
on this covenant between the Lord and his people?

I think of one that you may not consider contractual at all--
that between parents and their children.

It's not a relationship between equal parties--
the parents hold all the cards;
they are in the position of power
(sorry about that, kids).

The children have no real voice in the matter--
they are born into the relationship.

But by a natural love, in a sense, the father and mother pledge themselves
(or, at least, they ought to pledge themselves)
to provide for the well-being of those they have begotten.
It is a relationship of love--unmerited love.

But this love is not without its stipulations, or responsibilities, or expectations.
The children are to learn to live
in a way that is appropriate to the relationship--
loving and honoring their parents,
living in a faith that issues in obedience.

But the relationship of grace precedes all that.
The parents' love comes first.

This is one of the things that Susan and I have always tried to emphasize in our kids--
Our love as parents comes before our children's performance.

Occasionally when we would see one of our boys trying almost painfully to please us,
we just want to say--"relax"--"lighten up"
"What you're doing is great, but you don't have to earn our love.
Don't get confused.
Our love always comes before your performance."

Do you ever need to be reminded of that in your relationship with the Lord?
I know I do--
Think about his covenant with you--
There are times when you may need to relax--and remember--
His love comes before your performance.

It always does.

Moses reminds the Israelites of the Lord's fatherly love for them--
he says, "**you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son,
all the way you went until you reached this place**" (1:31).

"Know then in your heart," he says in 8:5, "that as a man disciplines his son,
so the Lord your God disciplines you."

"Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?" (32:6).

Live as his beloved children.

This is the essence of the covenant.

But here's the catch—

Here's the tension we see right through the entire Old Testament.

The Bible makes it very clear that Israel does not live as the Lord's beloved children.

They are seen to be a stiff-necked, rebellious son,

who turns from the Lord again and again.

The Lord had made a promise that through them, he would bring blessing to all nations,
but they fail to live up to their side of the covenant.

Do how will God's promise ever come to pass?

How will God's blessing ever come to all nations?

This is where the gospel comes in—

God himself enters into history as a man,

as an Israelite—

as the representative Israelite,

to fulfill the human side of this divine-human covenant relationship.

The Emperor takes the role of the vassal servant;

the Father sends his Son—

to be the son that Israel was meant to be.

And in the gospel we see that it is ultimately only through the life and death of the one Son
who lived out this covenant relationship before his Father perfectly,

that the blessing can come to all nations,

and we can enter into that covenant relationship ourselves.

It is through faith in Christ—

as we are joined to Jesus—

that we enter into that same covenant of grace—

now known as the "new covenant"--

and we become children of Abraham ourselves—

and come to know God as our gracious Father.

The Book of Deuteronomy--

It shows us Moses giving his farewell address to the people

reminding them of the covenant relationship

established with them on Mt. Sinai forty years before.

But Moses' address reminds us that this covenant at Sinai

was not a once-and-for-all event.

It must be taken up and reaffirmed by each new generation--

and in a sense by each one of us every day.

So where are you in your relationship with God?

Perhaps you can look back in your past history
and remember that God has once saved you.

You turned to Jesus in faith,
and the Lord brought you out of the slavery of Egypt—
that slavery to sin—
and he made his covenant with you on some mountain top.

But maybe that seems like forty years ago--
you've been wandering, sometimes stubbornly, disobediently.

But now God has your attention again--

He is calling you to reaffirm the covenant he once made with you--
to recognize his love for you in Christ
and to respond in faithful obedience. /

Or perhaps you have never experienced God's grace before at all.

You're new to the camp,
still wondering what's going on, feeling ignorant but interested.

You can relax--

there is no test of Biblical literacy
required to enter into a relationship with God--
only a heart that is willing to respond in faith.

No matter where you stand in your relationship with God,

he invites you to enter into that covenant relationship with him--
to own him as your Master and King,
as your God and your Father,
as you look to Jesus as the one who fulfills your covenant responsibilities.

Consider the holiness of his law and repent.

Consider the wonder of his grace and respond in faith and trust.

And as a result enter into that covenant relationship with God our Father
through Jesus Christ his Son.

Prayer—

**"All Scripture is God-breathed
and is useful for teaching, rebuking,
correcting and training in righteousness,
so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."**

May this be true for us today.

Living as God's Covenant People
Studies in Deuteronomy 1-11, #1
May 28, 2017

"Deuteronomy: The Book of the Covenant"

We begin our study of this book by considering its
Three Big Themes:

I. God's Law

A. **Comprehensive in its scope:**
It covers all of life.

B. **Universal in its application:**
It applies to all.

C. **Unconditional in its demand:**
God demands our all.

II. God's Grace

The God who demands
is a God who first *gives*.

III. God's Covenant with His People

A standard Ancient Near Eastern Treaty form:

1. Preamble
2. Historical prologue
3. Stipulations
4. Provision for the public disposition of the treaty
5. Invocation of witnesses, and blessings and curses

*The Lord's fatherly love comes before our performance.
We are to respond to his love with faithful obedience.*

Sermon Discussion:

**"Deuteronomy:
The Book of the Covenant"**

- What are your favorite books of the Bible? What books do you rarely, if ever, read? Read 2 Tim. 3:16,17.
- Review the Bible story up to the point of Deuteronomy so that everyone understands what is happening.
- What are the various purposes of the Old Testament law in the life of the Christian? How is Jesus the "fulfillment" of the law (cf. Rom. 10:4; cf. also 1 Cor. 9:20,21)?
- How is the grace of God emphasized in the Book of Deuteronomy?
- How does the gospel overcome the tension of the Old Testament with regard to the covenant stipulations—how can God keep his promise when the Israelites cannot keep theirs?
- Ask God to "expand your Bible" through our study of Deuteronomy this summer.