

THRESHOLD  
BIBLE STUDY

WHOLEHEARTED  
COMMITMENT

PART TWO

Deuteronomy  
[16-34]

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**I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the Lord our God, but also with those who are not here with us today.** DEUTERONOMY 29:14–15

## Wholehearted Commitment (Part 2)

**T**his second part of Deuteronomy continues the exhortations of Moses that make up the entire book. The setting is the same as the first part: the plains of Moab, at the threshold of the promised land. Israel has been freed from the bondage of Egypt, entered into covenant with God at Mount Sinai, and passed forty years in the wilderness being formed by God into a holy nation, a people who belong to God alone. But in order to attain the future that God desires for them, they must commit themselves wholeheartedly to the covenant relationship that God has established with them.

Deuteronomy not only expresses the content of Israel's covenant with God, but it is written in the form of a covenant document, a treaty between a king and his vassals. Beginning with the preamble (1:1–5), the document continues with an historical prologue (1:6—4:49). The core of the document consists of the general stipulations (5—11) followed by the specific stipulations (12—26). The document then concludes with blessings and curses (27—28) and witnesses (30:19; 31:19; 32:1–43). This treaty form is more than a literary device used to form Deuteronomy; it is the ceremony itself in which the covenant was periodically renewed. By being written down and proclaimed to the people, the covenant document gained authority and permanence.

In Deuteronomy, the ancient treaty form that expresses worldly subservience is transposed to Israel's relationship with God. Like the other nations around them, the Israelites submitted themselves to a powerful lord. But Israel's submission was not to Egypt or some other kingdom; Israel owed its allegiance to God alone. Unlike the compliant obedience demanded of vassals to a worldly king, Israel's allegiance was to be expressed in a relationship of love, loving God with their whole heart, soul, and might.

Following the exhortations of Moses to obey the commands of the covenant, Deuteronomy concludes by referring to other events of the renewal ceremony. The people formally agree to be God's people (26:16–19), receive instructions for renewing the covenant when they enter the land (27), and hear the blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience (28). Then Joshua is commissioned as Moses' successor, both in the public ceremony (31:7–8) and privately in the tent of meeting (31:14–23), and Moses instructs the Levites to renew the covenant every seventh year (31:10–13) and to place "this book of the law" beside the ark of the covenant (31:26). Finally, Moses writes down the words of a song about God's fidelity and teaches it to the Israelites (31:22; 32), then he blessed all the people (33).

This renewal of the Sinai covenant on the plains of Moab is driven by the approaching death of Moses. Since Moses had been the mediator between God and the people when the covenant was formed at Sinai, Moses and the covenant seemed inseparable. Now, the time had come to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land, but Moses had been forbidden by God to set foot in the land. It was time for Moses to step aside and for Joshua to assume the leadership of the people. Thus, as Moses speaks the words of Deuteronomy, he is addressing the people as one who would be with them no longer.

Deuteronomy leads up to a moving description of the death of Moses. Instructed by God to go up on Mount Nebo, rising above the plains of Moab, Moses gazes over the river into the land that the people will enter. Although he is unable to enter, his last moments will be spent once again in communion with God on a mountain. As Moses dies, the Torah of Israel is complete. And a new life for God's people begins.

### Reflection and discussion

- What is significant about the fact that Deuteronomy is written in the form of a covenant renewal ceremony?
- Why does Moses require wholehearted commitment from those he is addressing?

### Legal Language is not Legalism

Although Deuteronomy contains lots of legal language—enumerating commandments and the consequences of breaking them—it teaches that the relationship with God is most important. Laws are given to guide God’s people in the relationship. Because the book is a collection of sermons rather than just a list of laws, Deuteronomy contains some of the most beautiful and inspiring texts of the Old Testament.

The heart of the relationship with God is love. God first moves toward his people in love, and the relationship implies that God’s people respond to God in love. The law of the covenant, then, expresses God’s love and indicates the way in which God’s people must live so that their lives reflect their love for God. The covenant is a continuing relationship, which must be renewed periodically with a recommitment but activated every day by every Israelite. To break the covenant was to disrupt the relationship of love. Without love there could be no covenant.

The tendency to view the covenant simply as a legal contract, consisting of legalistic adherence to rules, had to be continually refuted. As an expression of a living relationship, the covenant necessitated a wholehearted commitment, binding God’s people personally to their loving God. An essential aspect of this relationship was its freedom. Israel was not enslaved to God, as they had been to Pharaoh. The fetters of their old bondage were broken, and now they were free to serve God as their true king.

The variety and detail contained within the specific stipulations of the covenant (12—26) indicate that that no area of life is irrelevant for members of the covenant community. This legislation includes regulations for Israel’s sanctu-

ary, religious festivals, idolatry, the conduct of war, sexual crimes, diet, slavery, financial matters, and much more. Some matters seem to be of great concern while others appear relatively insignificant. Ancient Israel did not make a distinction between the religious and the secular, or the sacred and the profane, as we do today. The collection of legislation contains a mixture of ceremonial, religious, civil, and criminal law because all of life was under the dominion of God.

The regulations comprise both communal and personal responsibility. The nation remains healthy in its relationship with God as long as its members are devoted to the covenant. Although individuals were responsible for their own sin and could be punished for it, the sin of its members endangered the whole community. If an individual committed a crime but could not be found and brought to justice, then the whole community was responsible for dealing with the evil and seeking God's forgiveness for it.

The people declared that the Lord was their God, and God declared that they were to be his "treasured people," a people "holy" to God (26:18–19). To declare that the Lord was their God, but to live as other peoples lived, would be the worst kind of hypocrisy. Running throughout the stipulations of the covenant are warnings concerning the dangers of idolatry and foreign religious practices. Keeping in mind the weaknesses Israel showed in the wilderness, the laws of the covenant illustrate the ways in which loyalty to God could be compromised and in which the intimacy of the covenant could be forfeited.

The list of blessings and curses that follow the stipulations of the covenant express the effects of loyalty and disloyalty for the whole community (27—28). Obedience to the Lord of the covenant results in blessings, long life, possession of the promised land, and bountiful crops, while disobedience leads to adversity. Renewing the covenant contrasted the bright prospect of a future with God and the bleak despair of a future without God. The choice of God's people meant life or death. The fertility of their land or the strength of their army would make no difference when the living relationship with God is broken.

In light of this understanding of Israel's legal code, we see how inaccurate is any portrait of ancient Israel or Judaism as a legalistic religion. The object of every stipulation is the maintenance of a living and personal relationship with the Lord of the covenant. This highest possible privilege is an intimate relationship with God whose essence is love. But the refusal of that great blessing brings about the curses, the inevitable outcome of rejecting the God of blessings and life.

### Reflection and discussion

- What prevents the legal language of Deuteronomy from being legalistic?
- Why does Deuteronomy contain such a mixture of ceremonial, religious, civil, and criminal law?

### Mosaic Laws for Israel's Hardened Heart

Although Deuteronomy radiates God's love for the Israelites and the devotion that should characterize the response of God's people, the book also contains some of the strongest condemnations, the harshest laws, the most severe punishments, and the most horrific curses of any biblical book. In order to comprehend this juxtaposition of texts, we must understand that the laws of Deuteronomy (Deut 12—26) do not necessarily express God's ideal for his people. In the context of other parts of Scripture, we realize that some laws were adaptations or compromises introduced by Moses because of Israel's hardened heart and sinfulness. For example, centralizing Israel's worship to one divinely designated place, giving Israel permission for a king, commanding the complete destruction of enemies, and approval of divorce—these represent moral compromises to divine ideals expressed in other parts of Scripture.

Regarding the place of Israel's worship, earlier legislation from the law code of Mount Sinai allowed great freedom of choice for offering sacrifice to God in many locations (Exod 20:24–26). But Israel's abuse of this liberty led to its restriction. Because Moses feared the distortion of Israel's practices if shrines are permitted throughout the land, the code in Deuteronomy sanctions sacrifice “only at the place that the Lord will choose” (12:13–14).

Concerning permission for a king, none of the previous texts of the Torah foresaw any kind of royal institutions for Israel. Earlier teachings focus on God alone as Israel's king. But in Deuteronomy we find for the first time the possibility that Israel might appoint a human king to rule them (17:14–15). The legislation of Moses provides for this prospect because God's people had shown themselves incapable of being governed only by a prophet and a priest during their wilderness wanderings.

Likewise, in previous legislation, there is no mention of utterly destroying Israel's enemies after their conquest. Yes, Israel was earlier commanded to destroy the altars of false gods, forbidden to make a covenant with foreign peoples, and ordered to drive them out of the land. But in Deuteronomy, Israel must destroy every adversary who does not flee. Certainly this rule for Israel's warfare is one of the most difficult issues for those who read the Old Testament. But here we must realize that it does not express God's ideal. In other parts of Scripture, especially the prophets and the gospels, we find far more ideal expressions of God's will. With regard to Deuteronomy, we must admit that extinction of enemies expresses a moral compromise because of Israel's tendency to succumb to the temptations of paganism, which include fertility rituals and child sacrifice. These rules of war for engaging with enemies seem to be necessary, as Moses says, "that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God."

Again, in the case of divorce, we see that not all the laws of Deuteronomy have lasting value or express God's ideal. In the famous exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees over divorce, Jesus states that Moses allowed divorce because the Israelites were "so hard-hearted." Deuteronomy's allowance for the man to write "a certificate of divorce" (24:1–4) seems to be a compromise of a more ideal practice, the teaching quoted by Jesus from Genesis concerning the one-flesh bond of husband and wife (Matt 19:3–8).

These examples demonstrate that Deuteronomy's law code is not unbending and eternal. Certainly, these laws do not possess the same degree of holiness and permanence as the ten commandments that God commanded at Sinai. Rather, as Moses states, they serve as a witness against God's rebellious and stubborn people, demonstrating just how hard the hearts of the Israelites had grown in their wilderness journey.

Deuteronomy makes a distinction between the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai and "the covenant that the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in the land of Moab" (29:1). The covenants are separated by the experiences of Israel in the wilderness for forty years. Whereas the laws of the Sinai covenant are repeatedly prefaced by the words "the Lord spoke to Moses," Deuteronomy is presented as the speech of Moses himself. None of the laws in the central code of Deuteronomy are prefaced by "the Lord spoke to Moses." Jesus alerts us to this distinction when he attributes

the law of divorce to Moses rather than to God. Rather than the passive recipient of God's word as at Sinai, Moses himself is the lawgiver in Deuteronomy. Certainly he is authorized by God to make the covenant with Israel, but there is a greater distance in Deuteronomy between God and the laws.

So, as we read the laws in Deuteronomy, we must read them in the context of the whole of Scripture. Those that seem at odds with laws and principles stated elsewhere in the Bible may be examples of Moses adapting or compromising God's highest will to the sinfulness of Israel. Knowing Israel's weaknesses and many failings, he had to persuade the people to listen well, calling them to loving obedience, while at the same time warning them of the consequences of falling away from the intimacy of the covenant bond. Some laws guide God's people through the ages, and other laws have a built-in obsolescence.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- Why was it necessary at times for Moses to compromise God's ideal for his people in this book of the covenant?
  
- What should I do when I read a law in these chapters that seems at odds with God's will as it is expressed in other parts of the Bible?

### **Reading the Second Part of Deuteronomy**

As we listen to Moses exhort God's people to obey the laws of God, we hear his sense of urgency, for obedience is the way to life and disobedience the way to death. Pleading with the Israelites to follow God's laws, he proclaims God's love for them and warns them of the consequences of rejecting that love. He reminds the people of all God has done for them and all that he yet wants to do for them.

We continue to read Deuteronomy, then, as our exhortation to accept God's love and follow in his way. These words are no less urgent for us to hear than they were for the Israelites gathered east of the Jordan on the eve of entering into the promised land. Of course, we read in light of the completion of the covenant in Jesus Christ. We can transpose the exhortations of

Moses to our relationship with God through the new covenant, reminding us to remember all that God has done for us and to heed his commands so that we may have life to the full.

Although there is no ideal place to divide the Book of Deuteronomy into two parts, this second part begins with Moses' description of the three pilgrimage feasts that Israel will celebrate each year. Like Deuteronomy itself, each of these feasts will bring God's people on a journey in order to renew and recommit themselves to the covenant.

As we continue studying this Book of Deuteronomy, let us keep our finger on the pulse, feeling the heartbeat of God's word. Let God's transforming word renew our motivations, decisions, memories, and desires. Since we are each responsible for who and what we worship, the object of our deepest desires and affections, let us continue to choose the way of life. As we read, reflect, and pray, may God direct us to hold fast to him with wholehearted commitment.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- What do I share in common with the Israelites as they gathered across the Jordan in preparation for entering the promised land?
  
- How do I hope God's word given to Moses works within me as I study the remainder of Deuteronomy?

### **Prayer**

*Lord God, who blessed your people throughout their journey in the wilderness, turn my heart to your word and open my heart to your way of life. Prepare my mind and heart to receive these inspired words of Moses as I continue to study the Book of Deuteronomy. Show me how to meditate on these words each day so that they lead me to prayer. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, stir up in me a desire to respond to these words and allow them to transform my life. Keep me faithful during these weeks to the challenges of study and prayer that your word offers to me.*

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS, GROUP SESSION 1

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1. If the group is meeting for the first time, or if there are newcomers joining the group, it is helpful to provide name tags.
2. Distribute the books to the members of the group.
3. You may want to ask the participants to introduce themselves and tell the group a bit about themselves.
4. Ask one or more of these introductory questions:
  - What drew you to join this group?
  - What is your biggest fear in beginning this Bible study?
  - How is beginning this study like a “threshold” for you?
5. You may want to pray this prayer as a group:

*Come upon us, Holy Spirit, to enlighten and guide us as we continue this study of Deuteronomy. You inspired the authors of Scripture to reveal your presence throughout the history of salvation. This inspired word has the power to convert our hearts and change our lives. Fill our hearts with desire, trust, and confidence as you shine the light of your truth within us. Motivate us to read the Scriptures, and give us a deeper love for God’s word each day. Bless us during this session and throughout the coming week with the fire of your love.*
6. Read the Introduction aloud, pausing at each question for discussion. Group members may wish to write the insights of the group as each question is discussed. Encourage several members of the group to respond to each question.
7. Don’t feel compelled to finish the complete Introduction during the session. It is better to allow sufficient time to talk about the questions raised than to rush to the end. Group members may read any remaining sections on their own after the group meeting.
8. Instruct group members to read the first six lessons on their own during the six days before the next group meeting. They should write out their own answers to the questions as preparation for next week’s group discussion.
9. Fill in the date for each group meeting under “Schedule for Group Study.”
10. Conclude by praying aloud together the prayer at the end of the Introduction.