

Deuteronomy 26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 26 When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, and have taken possession of it, and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose to make his name to dwell there. And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us. Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God, and you shall make response before the Lord your God.

A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous, and the Egyptians treated us harshly, and humiliated us, and laid on us hard labour. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground which you, O Lord, have given me. And you shall set it down before the Lord your God, and worship before the Lord your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you, and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your towns and be filled, then you shall say before the Lord your God, I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all your commandment that you have commanded me.

I have not transgressed any of your commandments, nor have I forgotten them. I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or offered any of it to the dead.

[2 : 15] I have obeyed the voice of the Lord my God. I have done according to all that you have commanded me. Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel, and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey. This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and rules. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart, and with all your soul. You have declared today that the Lord is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice. And the Lord has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honour, high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised. Deuteronomy chapter 26 marks the conclusion of Moses' second sermon, which began at the end of chapter 4. Within this sermon he laid out the Ten Commandments, and then commandment by commandment unpacked their import. The point of all of this was to encourage Israel and its leaders to meditate upon the law. When we first see the Ten Commandments they can seem fairly commonsensical, and we might wonder why they are seen to be so important. However, I hope that as we draw to the end of Deuteronomy's unpacking of them, we are beginning to appreciate their power as a source of wisdom.

This chapter concludes the great sermon of Deuteronomy then, and the central section of the entire book. However, it is much more than simply another collection of laws, such as those we have seen for the preceding sections. Much as chapters 6 to 11 is an extended sermon upon the general theme of the First Commandment, but one which sums up the entire meaning of the Covenant, so chapter 26 is the same for the Tenth Commandment, and it returns to the theme of worship. This chapter can be divided into three sections. The first section, verses 1 to 11, deal with the theme of God's grace to Israel and to Israelites, as they were made fruitful within the land. The second section, verses 12 to 15, concern the obedience of Israel in response. And then, verses 16 to 19, the theme of blessing and covenant commitment on both Israel and the Lord's part. It is a chapter with a number of different declarations within it, in verses 3, 5, 13, 17 and 18, and it functions in part to ratify the covenant.

There are three great declarations. In verses 1 to 11, declaration of what God has done for Israel in the presentation of the firstfruits. Verses 12 to 15, declaration of Israel's obedience in the context of the tithe of the third year, and verses 16 to 19, reciprocal declarations of covenant commitment.

Verses 1 to 4 prescribe the offering of firstfruits. Firstfruits are a sign of entering into the possession of the land and of the Lord's blessing within it. As part of the ritual, the offerer of the firstfruits formally declared the Lord's fulfillment of his promise. In verses 5 to 11, there is a confession and celebration of the Lord's acts for Israel. Following the handing of the firstfruits to the priest, the worshipper makes a formal declaration of the Lord's great acts of deliverance. From Jacob, the wandering Aramean, to the exodus, to their entry into the land. The offering of the firstfruits is situated within the context of this story, as a demonstration of the Lord's fulfillment of his word or promise. The declaration is powerfully personalized. The offerer places himself within the story, within the history himself. Jacob is my father. The events of the exodus happen to us.

[6 : 05] Once again, the importance of memory is being emphasized and underlined. It's been so prominent a theme at the beginning of the section of Deuteronomy that we're in, and it's foregrounded again here.

The worshipper situates himself in an ongoing history, reminding himself who he is in the light of God's work with his people. Personally retelling the history is an obligation for each Israelite man. The offerer then rejoices before the Lord, understanding his own harvest as a participation in the redemptive history of the Lord's dealings with Israel. He celebrates with his household, and then also with the Levite, with the sojourner and others, expressing thanksgiving, coupled with generosity. Verses 12-15 speak of obedience and the third year tithe.

Every third year Israel had to lay up the tithe within its towns for the use of the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow. This is described earlier on in chapter 14 verses 28-29.

At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

The blessing experienced by the Israelite, the blessing he declared in his offering of his firstfruits in verses 1-11, had to be enjoyed by the poor and the marginal of the land too. Once again, Deuteronomy returns to the need to have a society in which it isn't everyone for themselves, but in which every person gets to enjoy the fruits of the Lord's blessing, and everyone has a duty to ensure that the labour and the life of their brother isn't one marred by futility. The tithe wouldn't be offered before the Lord, but a declaration was made concerning it before the Lord.

[8 : 01] The Israelite declaring that he had done as the Lord required. He had to remove the sacred portion from his house, as to hold on to it or to consume part of it would be a very serious transgression, taking what wasn't his. As a person keeping the covenant, he calls for God to bless Israel.

And it is important to note here that covenant keeping is not presented as something that's impossible to do. It's presented as something that's to be expected. The commandments of the covenant, are fairly straightforward, and provision is made for sin. Israel's failure isn't because the covenant requires absolute sinlessness. It doesn't. But because Israel rebels against the Lord, even when the Lord did everything to make it possible for them to live in fellowship with him.

The chapter ends on a fitting note in verses 16-19, with a pledge and ratification. It sums up the entire speech and returns to the themes that began the exposition of the commandments in chapter 6.

Israel declared its commitment to obey all of the commandments of the Lord, with all of their heart, and with all of their soul. The Lord declared Israel to be a people for his treasured possession, a people holy to him, set apart and above other nations. Now this entire section falls under the tenth commandment, as the conclusion of the entire teaching concerning the commandments.

How do we overcome covetousness? We overcome covetousness by practicing contentment, by thanksgiving, with its elements of remembrance and celebration, by practicing generosity, and by sharing with those who have less. Something that we're seeing here, that we see at various other points, is that the law is not fulfilled primarily in do-nots, but in positive practices. And the positive practice of thanksgiving before the Lord, remembering what the Lord has done for you, sharing with the rest of the Lord's people, and knowing joy and contentment in all that he has granted you, is how you fulfill the commandment not to covet. The law is fulfilled not by avoiding sin, but by pursuing righteousness.

[10 : 06] Also, problems of the heart, problems to do with covetousness, can be helpfully addressed by healthy practices, by practices that commit us to remembering what God has done, committing us to celebration of his goodness to us, commit us to charity and sharing with those in need, and commit us to practices of contentment. Such practices are good ways to smoke out the sin, and to provide a context and a stimulus for the corresponding virtues to take root in people.

If you want to deal with your heart, give thought to your practices. A question to consider, why might it be appropriate that this section gives so much attention to the context of a celebratory feast?