

Deuteronomy 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 4 But you who held fast to the Lord your God are all alive today.

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them, and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who when they hear all these statutes will say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people, 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? Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.

Make them known to your children, and your children's children, how on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.

And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire.

[1 : 5 2] You heard the sound of words, but saw no form. There was only a voice. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments.

And he wrote them on two tablets of stone. And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully.

Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.

And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.

But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day. Furthermore, the Lord was angry with me because of you, and he swore that I should not cross the Jordan, and that I should not enter the good land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.

[3 : 1 3] For I must die in this land, I must not go over the Jordan. But you shall go over, and take possession of that good land. Take care lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you.

For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. When you father children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, so as to provoke him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.

You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed. And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you. And there you will serve guards of wood and stone, the work of human hands that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.

But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart, and with all your soul. When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God, and obey his voice.

For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you, or destroy you, or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them. For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened, or was ever heard of.

[4 : 50] Did any people ever hear the voice of a God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any God ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself, from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?

To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God. There is no other besides him. Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you.

And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire. And because he loved your fathers, and chose their offspring after them, and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day.

Know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above, and on the earth beneath. There is no other. Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you, and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time.

Then Moses set apart three cities in the east beyond the Jordan, that the manslayer might flee there. Anyone who kills his neighbour unintentionally, without being at enmity with him in time past, he may flee to one of these cities and save his life.

[6 : 21] Beza in the wilderness on the tableland for the Reubenites, Ramoth in Gilead for the Gadites, and Golan in Bashan for the Manassites. This is the law that Moses set before the people of Israel.

These are the testimonies, the statutes and the rules, which Moses spoke to the people of Israel when they came out of Egypt, beyond the Jordan, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, in the land of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon, who Moses and the people of Israel defeated when they came out of Egypt.

And they took possession of his land and the land of Og, the king of Bashan, the two kings of the Amorites, who lived to the east beyond the Jordan, from Aroah, which is on the edge of the valley of the Anon, as far as Mount Syrian, that is Hermon, together with all the Araba, on the east side of the Jordan, as far as the Sea of the Araba, under the slopes of Pisgah.

In Deuteronomy chapter 4, we move into the next phase of Moses' teaching. This is still Moses' first address, but it's the conclusion of it. Moses has described their journey to the land, and now he moves to discuss their future life in it.

If Deuteronomy chapters 1 to 3 focus particularly upon obeying the Lord's specific directives about going into the land, fighting against their enemies, and these sorts of things, now we're focusing upon obeying the Lord's commandments.

[7 : 40] And in particular, they're supposed to learn from things like their failure at Baal Peor, where they were promiscuous and idolatrous, the events described in chapter 25 of Numbers.

All of this is providing exhortation for their future obedience within the land. They are on the brink of entering to the land, and they need to be prepared for the faithfulness that the Lord requires of them.

This all provides them with reasons for obedience. In encouraging them to keep the law of God, Moses provides them with a number of motivations or reasons for obedience.

First of all, they're supposed to learn the lessons of places such as Baal Peor, the lessons of disobedience to the law of God, and the things that happen to those people that reject the Lord and rebel against him.

A further motivation is found in the reputation that they'll gain for wisdom as they obey the law of God in the sight of the nations. They're supposed to learn, again, from the theophanic encounter at Horeb or Sinai, the way that they witness the glorious presence of God and his voice speaking to them.

[8 : 45] They're supposed to think about the threat of exile and scattering, and use that as a spur to faithfulness. They're supposed to consider the uniqueness of the Lord and his relationship with Israel, a relationship such as no other nation enjoys.

And they're supposed to recognise that as they obey the law of God, they will flourish in the land. It's a possibility opened up for them in their future. The third address of Moses, in chapters 29 to 30, returns to these themes.

And these two addresses frame the central section of the book. It is the first two commandments that Moses especially emphasises in this book. They must have no other gods besides the Lord, and they must not worship idols.

They should have learned the lesson of Baal Peor, where they yoked themselves with Baal. They also need to learn the lessons of Horeb and the Exodus. They are both proof of the Lord's uniqueness, and also the fact that God should not be represented in any physical form.

The passage moves backward from their current situation in Beth Peor, back through the experience of Horeb, and back to the earlier part of the events of the Exodus, and God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

[10 : 00] Looking back upon their itinerary, they're supposed to see the developing revelation of God, and what it means to be faithful or unfaithful, and the consequences of those things.

It's an exhortation to obedience again, with the warning of banishment if they reject the law. There's a repeated emphasis upon consideration, upon mindfulness, remembering, pervading the text.

They are to remember what they have witnessed, and to learn the lessons of what they have seen. They are given commandments and rules. Is there a difference between these things? Some have suggested that commandments are those things that are more transparent to our understanding.

We know why God tells us you shall not murder. But rules are a bit less apparent. A rule is something like the law concerning the red heifer.

There are ways in which we can understand that, but it requires deep meditation and reflection. It's not immediately apparent. They are charged not to add or to subtract anything.

[11 : 01] Now, clearly, there's going to be added case law. They're going to reflect upon the laws that God gives them, and develop them into further case law, speaking to specific situations.

They're going to have positive law that addresses situations that are not envisaged within the law as it's given Sinai. There are many ways in which they will add to this body of law, but they're not supposed to add anything that's replacing it.

They're not supposed to add in a way that would subvert the fundamental uniqueness of the Lord at the heart of Israel's life. And I think the import of this particular instruction is more apparent when we see it in the context of the chapter in which it's placed, where the focus is upon not serving gods other than the Lord, not bowing down to idols, not making idols.

That is what it would mean to add or subtract, to do the sort of thing that they were doing with Baal Peor, the way that they would be adding to the worship of God the worship of some other God.

From the events of Baal Peor, they're supposed to learn not just the consequences of rebellion, but also the preservation of the righteous. Those who stood firm were preserved. As they live by the law, it will prove to be a blessing for them.

[12 : 15] The law is connected here with wisdom, and it's a wisdom that will be seen in the sight of the whole nations. They live in the sight of the nations. What happened to Israel at the Exodus?

What happened to Israel at Horeb? What happened to Israel in bringing them into the land is something that has significance for the whole of the world. They are a light to the Gentiles.

What God is doing with Israel is a lesson for all peoples to learn from. It's a revelation of who the creator God is. It's a revelation of the way his world works, the principles by which we're supposed to approach it.

There is something different about Israel. They are a people who dwell alone. A people who are set apart from the nations, has an example to the nations. The other nations are supposed to look at this people and say, what a wise and understanding people.

What a people that they have their God so close to them. The law here is connected with wisdom. The law itself is a manifestation of wisdom. The commandments that are given are commandments that stand out from the nations.

[13 : 20] The nations all have laws. But when you look at the laws of the nations and compare those and contrast them with the law of God, you'll see the difference. There is something about the nation of Israel that sets them apart.

And it's not that they're particularly numerous. It's not that they're particularly powerful. What sets them apart is the wisdom of the words that God has given to them. It's the near presence of the Lord to them.

And in these things, they will find their glory if they persevere in them. The connection of wisdom with law also highlights the importance of meditation upon the law. The law is not just a series of rules to be enforced by Israel's leaders, with criminals and transgressors to be punished.

That's not the purpose of the law primarily. The purpose of the law is to train people in righteousness. This is a means by which people will gain wisdom, insight into the world.

It's a means by which the society will become one of justice. And this law is given not just for the civil authorities of Israel. It's given for all the people. And for all the people to meditate upon, to reflect upon, to chew over this law constantly.

[14 : 29] And as they chew over it, to recognise the deeper logic of it. It's a training in truth and ethics. It's a training in what it means to please the Lord. It's a training in what it means to live well.

And as we go through the book of Deuteronomy, it should become apparent that it is precisely in the interplay between the condensed principles and the expanded principles that literacy and understanding in the law and in the world will be achieved.

And Israel's kings, in particular, were supposed to have the law of God written out by themselves that they could reflect upon it on a regular basis. This is something that's celebrated in the Psalms.

The person who is righteous meditates on the law of God day and night and becomes like a fruitful tree planted by streams of water. This is something that we see in Psalm 119 in particular, as David goes through all the different ways in which the law is his delight, brings him understanding and wisdom and truth.

And the Israelites are charged to teach this law to their children. They're supposed to pass it on to generations after them. And in that process of passing it on, to come to a deeper understanding of it themselves.

[15 : 38] You can look back to Genesis chapter 18 verse 19 to see some of the importance of what it means to teach children the law of God. God says concerning Abraham, Israel must learn the lessons of Horeb, the lessons of Sinai and the great theophanic appearance of God's glory.

They're supposed to act as a historical witness to this event. Now many of the people who are hearing Moses here were not actually present 39 years previously at the events of Sinai and theophany there.

But Israel itself is a historical witness to these things. And these things pass down generation after generation. So each generation shares in that fundamental event.

In the same way, the church is called to be a continuing historical witness to what God has done in Christ. They heard a voice, but they saw no shape. The Lord is a God who speaks.

And you relate to the Lord primarily through his word, through reflecting upon his law, not through making or bowing down to images in the way of the nations. Idolatry is seductive and appealing.

[16 : 58] And the people must be vigilant against it. Idolatry presents people with a way of controlling God, of limiting God, of having some sort of handle upon God. It's a theological technology perhaps, a way of manipulating God and putting God into our service, of making God safe.

But God is a consuming fire. God is a jealous God. He will not be replaced by our fetishes, by those things that we put in place of him. The many ways in which we seek to efface him and relate to something that's far more domesticated and safe.

But God is not a safeguard. Heaven and earth are called as witnesses. If they reject the covenant, they will perish from the land and be scattered among the other peoples, in sharp contrast to the blessings of faithfulness.

However, even in the death of exile, hope is held out for them. And as I mentioned earlier, these themes are returned to in Deuteronomy chapter 29 and 30, in chapter 30 verses 1 to 6.

[18:18] And he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you.

Israel's experience of God is unique, as is what God has done for them. They witnessed the theophanic glory of God at Sinai, and they heard the voice of the Lord. They saw no shape, so they should not make an idol.

The Lord alone is God, in heaven above and on earth below. This is a strong statement of monotheism. And this statement of monotheism is a keynote for understanding the book of Deuteronomy.

Israel is relating to the God who created all things, the God who rules supreme and unrivaled over all others. All other powers are beneath him. All other powers are created, but he is uncreated.

That the law that this people has, the law that has been given to them by the Lord, that as they obey it, they grow in wisdom. And that that wisdom is something that sets them apart, that makes them different.

[20 : 33] And we have the description of the cities of refuge in Numbers chapter 35, verses 9 to 34. The manslayer could flee to the city of refuge and find safety there. And he would remain there until the death of the high priest.

How would you summarise Deuteronomy chapter 4's critique of idolatry?