

Deuteronomy 30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Deuteronomy chapter 30 And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

And the Lord your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you, and you shall again obey the voice of the Lord and keep all his commandments that I command you today.

The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, when you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this book of the law, when you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?

Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it? But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

[1 : 56] See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you will surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him.

For he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

When the curse described at the end of Deuteronomy chapter 29 has fallen upon Israel, is there any hope left? In chapter 30, Moses makes clear that there is a way back from such a position.

[3 : 11] The language of returning, turning, and restoring is prominent here, as is the expression, with all your heart and with all your soul, in verses 2, 6, and 10. Moses speaks of a two-fold return, a return to the Lord and a return to the land from exile.

It's a double homecoming, to borrow Jonathan Sachs' expression. And this recalls chapter 4, verses 29 to 31. 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.

The Lord will hear them, and restore them from their exile. And this chapter anticipates Israel experiencing a time of blessing and faithfulness in the land, but then turning away from the Lord, and facing the curse of the covenant described in different ways in the last few chapters.

They will be in the state of exile. Then they will call to mind the blessing and the curse, which explain the course of their history, and will wholeheartedly turn back to the Lord. It will be the act of remembrance that provides a way back to the Lord, and to the blessing.

[4 : 29] The devastating experience of the curses falling upon them need not be the end of the story. When they return to the Lord, the Lord will restore their fortunes. He will even make them more numerous and prosperous than they were before.

The Lord is not setting up his people to fail. His desire is that they thrive in his land, in fellowship with him, and he will ultimately secure the purpose of the covenant, by bringing them back to himself.

He will accomplish their renewal himself, circumcising their hearts. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant, but the problem had always been that the covenant was just external to them.

They had not taken it into themselves. And yet God promises that he will internalize the covenant for them, marking their hearts with it. The Lord had earlier charged them to circumcise their hearts, in chapter 10 verse 16.

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 4 is similar. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord. Remove the foreskin of your hearts.

[5 : 32] O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds. Yet God promises that this charge that he gives to Israel, to circumcise their hearts, will ultimately be something that he fulfills himself.

In Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34, we have the great promise of the new covenant. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers, on the day when I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour, and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord. For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.

For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. The weak point of the covenant was always the wayward hearts of the people, and the Lord is promising that he is going to address this problem personally.

[6 : 47] When this occurs, they will be blessed in all respects of their national life, as the Lord takes delight in prospering them. The covenant was never something that the Lord was ambivalent towards. His intent was always that the covenant achieve its purpose, and loving communion between him and the people be secured.

And as the people themselves will prove insufficient for this, God assures his people that he will accomplish it in their hearts himself. Verses 11 to 14 look back to chapter 29, verse 29.

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. Robert Alter comments upon the teaching of these verses, remarking that in Deuteronomy, having given God's teaching a local place and habitation in a text available to all, proceeds to reject the older mythological notion of the secrets or wisdom of the gods.

It is the daring hero of the pagan epic, who unlike ordinary men, makes bold to climb the sky or cross the great sea to bring back the secret of immortality.

This mythological and heroic era is at an end, for God's word, inscribed in a book, has become the intimate property of every person. The law contains great depths and wealth of wisdom, but it isn't far off from anyone.

[8 : 09] This word is in the mouths of Israel, and can be in their hearts as they memorise it, meditate upon it, learn its principles of wisdom, delight in it, and sing it forth. This was always the calling of the law, in Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 4 to 6.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

Now on the immediate level, that's clearly a commandment, but we could also read it as a promise. God is promising that one day, these words will be on the hearts of his people. He's going to write them on their hearts, so that each one of his people are acquainted with him, know his character, and feel that they can approach him.

The law is, at its heart, a remarkably democratic document. It isn't written merely for a scribal, judicial, or royal elite. It doesn't require the great feats of epic heroes, the deep learning of philosophers, or the wandering of mystical pilgrims.

It is written for the learning, understanding, and practice of every Israelite, from the least to the greatest. It isn't a shadowy and arbitrary set of principles, imposed upon them from without.

[9 : 23] It's a book full of rationales, explanations, persuasion. It's designed to enlist the will, the desires, and the understanding. God is close to every single Israelite, not just the high priest, the sage, the prophet, or the king, but in his presence at the heart of the nation, every single Israelite can know what it is to have fellowship with the living God.

The reality of Israel's calling and the law has to be taken into the heart of each Israelite individual. Oliver O'Donovan describes something of this. We may say that the conscience of the individual members of a community is a repository of the moral understanding which shaped it, and may serve to perpetuate it in a crisis of collapsing morale or institution.

It is not as bearer of its own primitive pre-social or pre-political rights that the individual demands the respect of the community, but as the bearer of a social understanding which recalls the formative self-understanding of the community itself.

The conscientious individual speaks with society's own forgotten voice. Each individual Israelite has to take the history of the nation into himself or herself to make it their own, to make it part of the fabric of their being, to memorise this word, to reflect upon this word, to delight in this word.

They are to live out of the word, to make it the source of their self-understanding, their sense of the world around them and their purpose within it. The chapter ends with Moses placing the choice that Israel faces before them in its starkest form.

[10 : 54] It's a choice between life and death, prosperity and destruction. These two things are not symmetrical. As Moses makes very clear, the Lord is on the side of life.

To reject the Lord and the giver of life is to choose death. Death isn't just a punishment that the Lord strikes Israel with if they reject him. Rather, it is the natural consequence of rejecting him. Heaven and earth are summoned as witnesses to the covenant that Israel is entering into. With the blessings of the fertility of the earth and the rain from the heaven, they will be sources of God's blessing to Israel.

While the law generally comes in the form of command, in this sort of chapter, we see that the law is also a promise. The Lord will ultimately realize the intent of the covenant so that people enjoy faithful life in fellowship with him.

However, the challenge to Israel that day is whether they will achieve this end the easier way by heeding the Lord's voice and responding to him or whether they must learn the hard way through experiencing the devastation of the curse.

[11 : 59] A question to consider. In what ways could we see the work of Christ and the Spirit as fulfilling the promise of God in this chapter to circumcise the heart?