

Deuteronomy 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Deuteronomy chapter 5 He said, He said,

On it you shall not do any work, you or your son, or your daughter, or your male servant, or your female servant, or your ox, or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder, and you shall not commit adultery, and you shall not steal, and you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor, and you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.

These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice, and he added no more.

[2 : 40] And he wrote them on two tablets of stone, and gave them to me. And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders.

And you said, Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live.

Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire, as we have, and has still lived?

Go near and hear all that the Lord our God will say, and speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it. And the Lord heard your words when you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me, I have heard the words of this people which they have spoken to you.

They are right in all that they have spoken. O that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever.

[3 : 49] Go, and say to them, Return to your tents. But you stand here by me, and I will tell you the whole commandment and the statutes and the rules that you shall teach them, that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess.

You shall be careful, therefore, to do as the Lord your God has commanded you. You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess.

Deuteronomy chapter 5 returns us to Exodus 20, reiterating the Ten Commandments or the Decalogue. This was given over forty years ago at Sinai or Horeb, and now it is revisited as they are about to enter into possession of the land.

Moses speaks of the events of Sinai as occurring in the memory of most of his audience. This might seem strange to people who think that the whole generation of those who came out of Egypt died in the wilderness, and this is a new generation.

In some senses it is, but a significant number of the people that Moses is talking to were present as children, or as teenagers. They witnessed the events of Sinai, and so this isn't something that their parents told them about.

[5 : 03] They saw it with their own eyes. Beyond those who were children at the time, there would also be a great number of women who did not die out with the men who were destroyed from the first generation. Beyond all of this, Moses also speaks about the experience of Israel in the Exodus and the wilderness as if a living body of memory that is constantly being returned to and renewed.

The Ten Commandments were at the core of the covenant document. These were the central principles that were expounded and unpacked in all of the rest of the material. In the present context, these Ten Commandments are the basis for all the laws that follow.

It is the introduction to the main body of the book. The claim that there were Ten Commandments is something that we get from the text itself in Deuteronomy 4, verse 13. 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.

The structuring of the commandments in terms of the number 10 divided into two tables is something that is common to most accounts of the law. The tablets of stone are the great symbol of the covenant document.

God takes Israel to himself as he delivers them out of Egypt and brings them to Sinai where a covenant is made with them. They are taken as his bride, or according to a different metaphor, as his firstborn son.

[6 : 22] And this document is not just a dry series of laws that will be enforced by judges in the life of Israel. It is the document that expresses God's relationship with his people, and his people must meditate upon it and delight in it, and live it out in all areas of their lives.

The laws, as Moses recounts them here, differ from those in Exodus chapter 20 in some slight ways. For instance, the rationale for the Sabbath in the fourth commandment has changed from that given in Exodus chapter 20.

In Exodus chapter 20, it focuses upon creation, that God created in six days and rested on the seventh. Whereas here, the emphasis lies elsewhere. It's upon the Exodus.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. There are further details of this commandment that differ from those that we have in Exodus chapter 20.

For instance, the purpose of the law is given in part, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. That was not found in Exodus chapter 20. Again, therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

[7 : 31] That is another statement that is not found in the earlier body of law. It is also a statement found in the fifth commandment for honouring father and mother. A commandment that also includes an additional element in the statement and that it may go well with you.

Beyond some other minor changes, we see that the order of items in the last commandment have changed. In Exodus chapter 20, verse 17, we read, Whereas here, it says, The change in order might seem minor, but there is something significant about it, in so much as the wife is removed from the house, as it were.

The wife stands apart from the household in a way that she doesn't in Exodus 20, and then the rest of the items of the household are listed. Looking through the commandments, there are a number of things that we can observe.

First of all, they seem to move from the most serious offences down. So it begins with offences against God, having another God beside the Lord, then various other offences of worship, moving down through the Sabbath, to honouring father and mother, and then into various commandments concerning one's neighbour.

The first five commandments can be contrasted with the later five commandments, in that they have explanations, or warnings, or rationales, or some other thing attached to them, such as a promise.

[9 : 07] The final five commandments, by contrast, tend to be just straightforward imperatives. In Deuteronomy's list of the ten commandments, we also recognise that the Lord's name is found in each of the first five commandments, but not in the ones after that.

The first five commandments seem to deal with vertical offences, offences against those who are over us, God particularly, but then also father and mother. And the next five commandments are commandments dealing with offences against our neighbour.

There is a logic as we follow through them as well. First of all, we notice that there are two positive commandments at the centre. There's the laws concerning the Sabbath day, to remember it and to keep it holy, and then there's the commandment concerning honouring father and mother, which is not a negative commandment, in the form of, you shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, or you shall not bear the name of the Lord your God in vain.

It's a positive commandment. And at the very heart of these things, we see a positive vision emerging, like the marble that must be removed by the sculptor to reveal the great image beneath.

The commandments list a number of things that must not be done, surrounding some positive things that must be done. And when you remove those negative things, what you see emerging is the positive vision at the heart.

[10 : 20] A vision of people giving rest and enjoying rest. A vision of people remembering and celebrating the great works of deliverance and creation of the Lord. A vision of father and mother joined together, male and female, in peaceful union, and then peace between the generations and honour between the generations.

This is the positive vision at the heart of the law, and all the rest of the law surrounds this. The law can also be summarised in two great principles. The first great commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

And then the second is to love your neighbour as yourself. That first greatest commandment is found in the chapter that follows this. And the other is found in Leviticus chapter 19. In the Ten Commandments, there's also a movement through from one commandment to the next, which can elaborate and develop certain principles.

So the first great commandment begins with the statement of the Lord's deliverance, which both introduces the first commandment and the commandments as a whole. At the very outset, it lays out the principle of exclusivity and faithfulness to the Lord.

And then it moves on into an elaboration of what that means in the second commandment, that a carved image or a likeness of anything in heaven and earth that is worshipped is again usurping the place of God.

[11 : 38] It's standing in the place of God and it is a form of spiritual adultery. And then from there into a further commandment, a commandment concerning bearing the name of the Lord in vain.

That bearing is not just a matter of cussing. It's not just a matter of taking a vow and not keeping it in the name of the Lord. It can also include the fact that Israel has the name of the Lord placed upon them.

The notion of bearing the name of someone can be found in Exodus chapter 28, where the high priest would bear the name of Israel into the presence of the Lord. Israel bears the name of the Lord before the nations and they must not bear the name of the Lord in vain.

Faithlessness to the Lord is not just seen in serving other gods. It's not just seen in idolatry and setting up images. It can also be seen in unfaithfulness that causes others to blaspheme his name.

Much as we bear our family name and we must live in a way that honours our family name, Israel bears the name of the Lord their God and they must bear it with honour before the nations.

[12 : 39] The fourth commandment concerns the Sabbath day and as we've looked through the covenant in Exodus particularly, we've seen the Sabbath day as the core commandment of the covenant.

This is the sign of the covenant, particularly expressed in Exodus chapter 31, but also seen elsewhere. It is the Sabbath principle that sums up their deliverance from Egypt and this is why, in this particular context, it is the rationale for the celebration of the Sabbath because they have been released from Egypt, they have to celebrate this day of release and give rest to their servants too.

It's an expression both of the principle of creation that God rested on the seventh day, but also the principle of redemption, the principle of deliverance from slavery that they experienced as they were taken out of Egypt.

The importance of the Sabbath is seen, particularly in places like Leviticus chapter 23 and 25, as it's expanded into an entire festal calendar and then into things like the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee.

One thing that the law of the Sabbath highlights is that God is a God of time. God is a God of time in creation, but God is also the God of time in redemption in history. God has acted in history and he acts according to particular rhythms.

[13 : 56] These must be remembered and they must be observed. And Israel, as it celebrates this day, will participate in the meaning of what God accomplished in the Exodus. They will give liberation to their servants as God gave liberation to them as servants of Pharaoh.

Israel's deliverance from Egypt is never intended to be an event in the past that's left behind, that's a foundation of the nation that's then forgotten. No, it's supposed to be instituted in their ongoing life.

And every time they celebrate the Sabbath day, they are looking back to that original event of deliverance and instituting it in their ongoing life as a principle to observe. The Christian celebration of Sunday has a similar principle.

We are looking back to the principle of new creation and of new covenant. The Sabbath day looked back to the original creation and the event of the deliverance from Egypt. We look back to the new exodus that Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection and the new creation that he brought in as he rose from the grave.

In many respects, the fifth commandment is a transitional commandment. It has many of the features of the first five. It has the name of the Lord mentioned within it. It has the lengthy explanation or rationale for the commandment.

[15 : 10] And it also deals with vertical relationships. However, at this point, we're moving from our relationship with God primarily to our relationship with other human beings. The commandment to honour father and mother as it gets impact elsewhere includes the way that we must honour other figures that God has set up in society.

Our submission to father and mother is also a submission to leaders that have been placed over us in different roles. Honouring father and mother should not, however, just be thought of in terms of obedience.

Honouring is a far broader principle than that. We can honour father and mother, for instance, in honouring the sacrifices that they have made, the seeds that they have sown in their lives, tending, watering, protecting, and then bringing those seeds to harvest so that the work of a people can continue over multiple generations, that each generation is not in rebellion against the one that has preceded it.

And the rationale for this is that people's days may be long in the land, that it might go well with them. When the generations are at peace with each other, this will be the natural result.

You can see the same principle in relationship to the second commandment. I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

[16 : 31] Thousands being generations. Faithfulness continuing over generations has a cumulative effect and it builds up a great legacy that can be passed on and continued.

But it's a fragile thing. In a generation that abandons the faithfulness of their fathers and mothers, all can be lost. Beyond the broader generational principle, we should also observe that it refers to father and mother.

This is not just about honouring your father. It is about honouring both of your parents in their distinct stations in life and in their respective labours. The two fundamental bonds that lie at the heart of any society are the bonds between men and women and the bonds between the generations.

In father and mother, male and female being brought together, and the honouring of both of them in the generation that arises from them, we're seeing all these bonds being held intact and the integrity of society being secured at its very heart.

If the Lord is the true and the living God, the unique creator of all things, it might seem that the most fundamental form of rebellion against him would be to take life.

[17 : 39] Creatures cannot create life, but we can destroy life. Murder is a fundamental assault upon those created in the image of God. It is for this reason an assault upon God himself.

It should not surprise us that Satan is described as a murderer from the beginning. God created mankind in his image. He also created mankind male and female, and the image of God is expressed in the bringing together of male and female.

If murder is a fundamental assault upon the image of God, then adultery, or anything else that attacks the bond of marriage, is an assault upon that expanded sense of the image.

Beneath the heading of this commandment is included a great host of sexual sins. If the most fundamental attack upon the image of God is murder, and the more extended attack upon the image of God is seen in adultery, there is an expansion of the notion of attack upon persons in the eighth commandment concerning not stealing.

To steal from someone is to take something that is an extension of their person. When someone steals from us, there is a violation of our integrity. It is a seizing of our property, of something that is proper to us.

[18 : 48] But I am not just my life, nor my life and my union with the person of the other sex in the bond of marriage, nor even in those things plus my property. I also have standing in society.

I have a name. I have a reputation. I have a status. And all of these things can be assaulted in different ways. And the ninth commandment particularly relates to those things.

It relates to the various ways in which we can use systems and laws to attack other people, words to slander them or otherwise to offend against their dignity. And the tenth commandment takes these principles even further.

Envy is something that is fundamentally opposed to the dignity of my neighbour. In envy is found the great seed of antagonism towards my neighbour. In envy, I want to be my neighbour.

I want to occupy his place in the world. I want to occupy his possessions. I want his house to be my house. I want his wife to be my wife. His existence and his well-being is experienced as a slight against my person.

[19 : 52] The ten commandments bring this sin to light and they challenge it. This sin that lies at the heart of so much dysfunctional social relation. We should also observe the way that the tenth commandment turns the attention in.

We are no longer thinking about an external action here. We're thinking about a posture of heart. And as that is appreciated, it will influence the way that we read the entire body of the ten commandments.

The ten commandments are ultimately fulfilled not in a set of prescriptions and proscriptions, but in a posture of heart. In loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and loving your neighbour as yourself.

It's a posture of heart. And the tenth commandment draws our attention to where the root problem lies. And once that root problem has been observed, the nature of the health that it undermines will also be perceived.

All of these commandments were received in the context of the theophany of Sinai, a theophany that was glorious and dreadful that terrified those who saw it and struck awe into their hearts.

[20 : 56] Through publicly speaking to Moses in such a manner, God confirmed that he had been speaking to Moses all along. As Israel witnessed the terrifying voice of the Lord, the divine source of the covenant, and also the authorisation of Moses was made very clear.

Furthermore, once they witnessed these things, they called for Moses to go in before the Lord for them because they could not approach the Lord themselves. So Moses' intermediation for Israel occurred at their own request.

In the later part of this chapter, then Moses is justifying and providing the rationale for his place relative to Israel. This is something that was established by and testified to by God, but also something that the Israelites called for themselves.

A question to consider. When we think about law, we might think about dry and dusty tomes of legal statutes on the record that lawyers and others might pore over.

We do not think of something that is a living part of the life of a people that they return to and meditate and reflect upon and chew over and delight in. But that is exactly what the law is within the book of Deuteronomy.

[22 : 05] Simply looking at this chapter, what are some of the ways in which the law as it is recounted here differs from what we would usually think of as law and what lessons might we learn from that?