

Deuteronomy 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 May 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 10 At that time the Lord said to me, Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to me on the mountain and make an ark of wood.
- And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets that you broke, and you shall put them in the ark. So I made an ark of acacia wood and cut two tablets of stone like the first, and went up the mountain with the two tablets in my hand.
- And he wrote on the tablets in the same writing as before the ten commandments, that the Lord had spoken to you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.
- And the Lord gave them to me. Then I turned and came down from the mountain, and put the tablets in the ark that I had made. And there they are, as the Lord commanded me. The people of Israel journeyed from Beeroth-Ben-Ajeachan to Mozerah.
- There Aaron died, and there he was buried. And his son Eliezer ministered as priest in his place. From there they journeyed to Godgoda, and from Godgoda to Jotbatha, a land with brooks of water.
- [1 : 0 4] At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister to him, and to bless in his name to this day. Therefore Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers.
- The Lord is his inheritance, as the Lord your God said to him. I myself stayed on the mountain, as at the first time, forty days and forty nights. And the Lord listened to me that time also.
- The Lord was unwilling to destroy you. And the Lord said to me, Arise, go on your journey at the head of the people, so that they may go in and possess the land which I swore to their fathers to give them.
- And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good.
- Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heavens of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers, and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day.
- [2 : 1 5] Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.
- He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.
- You shall fear the Lord your God, you shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen.

Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven. Deuteronomy chapter 10 continues the narrative of the preceding chapter.

At this point it is still not clear whether Moses' intercession had its intended effect or not, but God re-establishes the broken covenant, writing the covenant on the tablets of stone, which will be placed in the ark.

[3 : 17] Moses points out that they are still there, a testimony to the restoration of the relationship. The fact that the tablets are placed in the ark not only protects them, but it symbolically situates them in the presence of the Lord, for his remembrance and for his enforcing of the covenant.

We don't know where the places that are mentioned after this actually are situated. Aaron's death is spoken of, but perhaps this is to make clear that the judgment for his sin with the golden calf finally came to him later.

In many respects these verses could be seen as diversion from the course of Moses' argument, because he returns to the subject of his intercession on Mount Sinai again in a few verses' time.

At that time Levi was set apart. Now it seems clear that this was not later on at the time after Aaron's death, but rather after the sin with the golden calf, when they rallied to Moses in chapter 32 of Exodus.

They had opposed idolatrous worship, so they are made the guardians of Israel's true worship. Their task is to carry the ark, to minister to the Lord, and to bless in his name.

[4 : 20] The benediction was a central part of the priestly calling, though its significance may often be understated by people. Numbers chapter 6 verses 22 to 27. The Levites have no inheritance in the land, but the service of the Lord is their inheritance.

This is in part in fulfilment of Genesis chapter 49 verses 5 to 7. Simeon and Levi are brothers, weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council.

O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstringed oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel.

I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel. This is a negative judgment upon Simeon and Levi, arising out of their actions in chapter 34 of Genesis, after the affair with Dinah.

While both of them were scattered, Simeon had an enclave within Judah, and Levi was scattered throughout the nation in its different cities. It seems that for Levi, the judgment was turned into a blessing.

[5 : 45] The very scattering among Israel, that was their punishment, became something that set them apart. Their inheritance was the Lord, and so they did not have a special inheritance within the land.

Rather, they had the tribal cities, that were scattered as enclaves throughout the rest of the nation. Likewise, the violence and the vengeance, that characterised Levi in chapter 34 of Genesis, and in chapter 49 in the blessing and judgements upon the sons of Jacob, is something that is turned into a positive trait, as we see in the characters of Moses, in Aaron, the Levites in chapter 32 of Exodus, and characters like Phinehas in chapter 25 of Numbers.

Their violence is tamed and used for the service of God, as their zeal is used to lead Israel out of slavery, and then as that zeal is used to guard jealously, the holiness of Israel to the Lord.

And the scattering of Levi is not merely something that sets them apart as a tribe, it's a means by which Israel itself can be established in a common identity, as this one tribe is scattered throughout all of their tribal areas, constantly alerting them to the fact of their common identity, lest they should retreat into tribal separatism.

Furthermore, at the heart of Israel's life are people who are dependent upon the hospitality of the nation, of the various tribes. These are people who will be identified with the aliens and the strangers, the poor and the marginal.

[7 : 13] At the heart of Israel is a diaspora, and Israel itself will later become a diaspora, a scattered people among other nations, but yet set apart within them, a testimony to the God that they serve, as the Levites were a testimony to God, as they were scattered throughout the nation.

If the various tribes were like great trees planted within the land, the Levites were like the birds that nested in their branches. There is a third reference to Moses interceding on the mountain here, which makes clear that this is a theme that's been running through throughout.

Deuteronomy chapter 9 verse 18, And then in Deuteronomy chapter 9 verse 25, And when that situation is finally resolved, there's a calling back to the beginning.

At the beginning, in Deuteronomy chapter 9 verse 12, the Lord said to him, Arise, go down quickly from here, for your people whom you have brought from Egypt have acted corruptly. And then in chapter 10 verse 11, And the Lord said to me, Arise, go on your journey at the head of the people, so that they may go in and possess the land, which I swore to their fathers to give them.

By this point, Moses has made definitively clear that Israel's standing with the Lord is not upon its own righteousness. At this point, on the basis of the Lord's undeserved favour, he presents Israel with what the Lord calls them to.

[8 : 58] As Geoffrey Tugay observes, as elsewhere in Deuteronomy, the accent here is upon underlying attitudes, not upon mere surface obedience and adherence to commandments.

The letter of the commandments is not the primary thing, important though it is. Rather, true obedience will arise from a spirit of love, trust and devotion.

Deuteronomy, among many other things, is a great body of teaching against legalism. Now, that seems surprising to us, because it's a book about the law. Indeed, it's named after the law. But the fact is, as we look closely, it's a book about faith.

It's a book about devotion to the Lord, about love of the Lord. And these are the things that lie at the heart of Israel's relationship to the Lord. Not mere external obedience to the commandments.

The commandments are given to them for their own good. And they will recognise this to be the case, as a spirit of true obedience is cultivated in them. And such a spirit will naturally lead to willing, and not grudging or resentful surface obedience.

[10 : 01] This is the true obedience that is called for. Obedience that springs from a willing and devoted heart to the Lord. Israel has been set apart by the Lord. But the Lord isn't a mere national deity.

Many have thought about the religion of Israel as a sort of henotheism. There are many gods in the world, but there's only one god that Israel serves. So the Egyptians can serve these particular gods.

The other nations around about can serve the Baals and these other sorts of gods. But Israel is going to serve Yahweh. But God is the God of the whole earth and the heavens.

This should heighten Israel's awareness of the depth of grace. God is above all other gods and powers and rulers and authorities. God is unique. He's the uncreated one.

He's the one who has made all things. And Israel is faced with the reality of this God's immense grace towards them. The creator God has chosen them for himself.

[11 : 01] Moses charges them at this point to circumcise their hearts. They're about to enter into the land and they must prepare their hearts accordingly. As they stand on the brink of entry, they must rededicate themselves to the Lord.

Circumcision was always a physical sign that needed to be confirmed in a posture of heart. It was a sign and seal of the righteousness that is by faith. Dedication of oneself to the Lord in a physical sign needed to be fulfilled in spiritual dedication.

The circumcision of your heart corresponding to the circumcision of your flesh. The Lord is not a partial God. He can't be bribed. He's a God of justice. He regards the widow and the fatherless and takes up their case.

Those who do not have a man in their life. The widow, who has lost her husband. And the fatherless, who's not just an orphan but someone who does not have a father. God is the one who acts on behalf of such persons.

He also loves the sojourner, the one who does not have the security of membership of the society, the same political or civil privileges. Israel itself is reminded at this point that they were once sojourners and they must have an attitude to the sojourner in their midst that shows that they have learnt the lessons from how it felt when they were sojourners.

[12 : 17] Israel is to live as the firstborn son of this God, not trusting in their own righteousness, not trusting in some special entitlement that they have and they are supposed to reflect his character to the world.

The Lord is not a tame God. He's not a God in Israel's possession, not a God under their control, not a God who is beholden to them or a God to whose favour they are entitled.

Rather, he is the Lord of lords, the God of gods, the creator of all, heaven and earth. He has graciously taken them for his own and they must never presume upon his grace and persevere in sin, but they must cleave to him.

Moses' sermon continues to chart a way between the insecurity of fear and the over-security of presumption. A question to consider.

How might the uniqueness and the character of God make devotion to him different from devotion to the gods of the pagan nations?