

Exposition of the Book of Deuteronomy

Sunset Bible Church Adult Sunday School 2021

Week 6: Judges, Kings, Levites, and Prophets (16-18)

For you are a people holy to YHWH your God, and YHWH has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. – Deuteronomy 14:2

Outline of the Class/Book

- Week 6: Judges, Kings, Levites, and Prophets (16-18)
- Week 7: Pursuing Covenant Relationship (19-25)
- Week 8: Blessings and Curses and Moses' Third Address (26-30)
- Week 9: The Death of Moses (31-34)

Opening Discussion: What did you notice or observe as you read that you had not noticed before? What stood out to you?

- How do these chapters describe God? What can we learn about God in these chapters? How is He portrayed?
- What questions do you still have about the text? What didn't make sense?

Moses' Second Speech and the 10 Commandments: Deuteronomy 6:1-26:15 (the bulk of Moses' second speech) can be understood as building upon the 10 Commandments given in Deuteronomy 5.¹

4. **Honor the Sabbath Day (14:22-16:17):** Laws on tithing, Sabbatical years, and feasts .
5. **Honor your parents (16:18-18:22):** Laws for judges, laws for kings, laws for priests, laws for prophets.

Moses' Second Address: Explaining the Grace of YHWH (4:44-29:1)²
Proclaiming the Dimensions of Covenant Relationship (12:1-26:19)

Feasting in YHWH's Presence (15:19-16:17): This constitutes the fifth time in the Pentateuch that these feasts have been instructed. For counter-reference, see also Exodus 23:14-17, 34:18-26; Leviticus 23:1-44; and Numbers 28-29. This text assumes a familiarity with previous passages but it is included here as an aspect of what it looks like to honor God throughout the week as well as the calendar year.

- **Feast of Passover (16:1-8):** Passover and the month of Aviv are to be celebrated because YHWH rescued Israel in the month of Aviv. An animal is to be sacrificed with unleavened bread – a reminder of their time of affliction and the haste with which they left Egypt so that they do not forget what God did for them. The Passover lamb is only to

¹ John H. Walton and Andrew E. Hill, *Old Testament Today, 2nd Edition: A Journey from Ancient Context to Contemporary Relevance*, Second edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2014).

² Outline adapted (with minor alterations) from: Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy* (Zondervan Academic, 2012).

be sacrificed in the town YHWH has given them. They will eat unleavened bread for six days and have an assembly on the seventh.

- **Feast of Weeks (16:9-12):** The Feast of Weeks begins seven weeks after the beginning of harvest. This is to be celebrated with sons and daughters, male and female servants, Levites and foreigners in their towns, and the fatherless and widows. They are to remember that they were slaves in Egypt and follow these decrees carefully.
- **Feast of Booths (16:13-15):** The feast of booths is to be celebrated seven days after the produce has been gathered. This is also to be celebrated with everyone in the household and those without households. This is intended to be a joyful festival.
- **Summary (16:16-17):** Three times a year, all Israel is to gather before YHWH in the designated place. Each one should bring a gift in proportion to YHWH's blessings.
- **Notes:**
 - One could get the wrong idea reading these texts through the lens of "law." These festivals, as with the Sabbath, are meant to be joyful occasions. The rituals set forth would not have been experienced as burdensome, but more analogous to how we experience Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter – as traditions that facilitate celebration and joy. Joy and celebration are important aspects of a proper relationship with God. It is vital to interrupt periods of work with occasions that remind you of the goodness and bounty that comes from God and to celebrate these with God's people.
 - Note that nobody is to be excluded from celebration because of their poverty. These are national holidays and those too poor to celebrate are to be incorporated into the families around them.
 - Note also that the gifts given are in proportion to wealth. Everyone is to bring something, but the cost is determined by wealth so as to not be prohibitive to those who cannot afford what others can.
- **Four Emphases:** Christopher Wright summarizes four primary emphases of the text regarding festivals:
 - There is an emphasis on **history** (remembering who you are and what God has done for you).
 - There is an emphasis on **joy** (Israel is called to rejoice in their remembrance of God and His relationship with His people).
 - There is an emphasis on **inclusiveness** (all of Israel, regardless of socio-economic status or having/not having a family, is to be included in these celebrations).
 - There is an emphasis on the reciprocal nature of blessing and giving (as God has blessed you, there is an obligation to utilize the blessing to bless others).³

Covenant Relationship and the Pursuit of Righteousness (16:18-18:22)

- **The Judiciary as the Executors of Covenant Righteousness (16:18-17:13):**
 - **Judges:** Judges and officials (or, scribal judges, see note below⁴) are to be appointed in every town. They are to judge fairly (which looks like):

³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994). Pg. 201

⁴ Block, *Deuteronomy*. 402

- Do not pervert justice or show partiality.
 - Do not accept a bribe (this blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the innocent)
 - Follow justice and justice alone.
- **False Worship:** Do not plant a tree as an Asherah poles, erect sacred stones, or sacrifice an animals with a defect. If a someone is found violating the covenant by worshipping another God or one of the heavenly bodies, it must be investigated thoroughly, requiring the testimony of two or three witnesses. If it is true, then the guilty person is to be taken out and stoned and the evil purged from them (note the witnesses are the first to throw the stones).
- **Difficult Cases:** If a case that is too difficult comes before a judge, they are to take the case to the (tabernacle/temple) and the priest and judge who is in office and they will judge the case. All that they say must be done. Anyone who shows contempt for them shall be put to death.
- **Notes:**
 - **Trees and Stones:** Trees were common meeting places for worship in the ANE and were symbols of fertility. The fear here is that a tree could become an Asherah and a stone could become an idol. There are to be no semblances or hints of idolatry in Israel.
 - **Stoning:** As has been noted before, stoning entails the entire community taking responsibility for the death of the condemned. The witnesses throwing the first stone adds gravity to their role. They are accepting that their witness has led to the death of this person, whose blood is on their hands if innocent (as it is, to a lesser extent, on the entire community).
 - **Judge and Official; Priest and Judge:** Judge and official could be two people, a judge and an official, or could be one person, a judge who is an official. Similarly, “the priest and judge” could be understood as priestly judge or as two people, priest and judge.
- **The King as the Embodiment of Covenant Righteousness (17:14-20)**
 - **The Kind of King Israel is to Have:** When Israel enters the land, they will decide to set up a king for themselves like the other nations. When they do this, they need to appoint a king chosen by YHWH.
 - **Restrictions on Kings:** The text gives several requirements/restrictions on kings:
 - He must be an Israelite (not a foreigner)
 - He must not acquire a great number of horses for himself or go to Egypt to get more of them.
 - He must not take many wives or his heart will be led astray.
 - He must not accumulate great quantities of silver and gold.
 - **Writing the Law:** When he takes the throne, he is to write for himself a copy of the law on a scroll and he is to read it all of his days so that he will learn to revere YHWH and follow the laws and decrees. He is not to consider himself better than his fellow Israelites but is to keep the law himself.
 - **Notes:**

- **A king like the other nations:** Although the Israelites will ask to have a king like the other nations, the restrictions given make it clear that they are to have a king who is NOT like the other nations. All of the things that an Israelite king is not to do are activities expected of Ancient Near Eastern kings. They are also actions that, especially beginning with Solomon, they actually do and are precipitate Israel's decline.
- **Horses:** Horses in the hand of a king are for the purpose of offensive campaigns to conquer other nations. Israel is to be satisfied with the land YHWH has given her, no more, no less.
- **Wives:** For a king, a multitude of wives are indicate of a multitude of political alliances. Solomon's first wife was the daughter of Pharaoh and the beginning of what will become a disastrous alliance with Egypt.
- **Wealth:** Multiplying wealth means multiplying taxes and becoming a burden on the people. Again, this was common with ANE kings, but not to be true of the kings of Israel. The splitting of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms was brought on in large part by the heavy taxation handed down by Solomon which his son Rehoboam refused to lighten.
- **A copy of the Law:** The King's primary responsibility is to lead Israel in her faithfulness to the covenant. In order to do this effectively, he must know the Law! He is to read and study it so that he learns to revere YHWH.
- **Not better than His fellow Israelite:** This is not an anti-hierarchical statement but indicates that the king also is under authority. He is not better than his fellow Israelite in the sense that he too is under God, which means he is under God's Law and is required to know and obey it.
- **The Levities as Community Barometers of Covenant Righteousness (18:1-8)**
 - **Inheritance:** Levi has no allotment of inheritance with Israel but are to live on the food offerings presented to YHWH and YHWH is their inheritance.
 - **Provision for Priests:** The share of the priests from bulls and sheep offered as sacrifices are the shoulder, the internal organs, and the meat from the head. They are to receive the firstfruits of the grain, wine, oil, and wool for YHWH has chosen them to minister in His name.
 - **Levites:** If a Levite moves from one of the towns of Israel to the place of the tabernacle/temple, he may minister there like his fellow Levites and share in their benefits.
- **The Prophets as Agents of Covenant Righteousness (18:9-22)**
 - **Banned "prophetic" practices:** When they enter into the land, they are not to imitate the detestable practices of the nations around them. The practices forbidden by name are:
 - **Human sacrifice:** Sometimes practiced, especially in association with Moloch, by the surrounding peoples. This was usually an attempt to manipulate the gods by arousing them to sympathy or impressing them by the intensity of one's devotion.
 - **Divination/sorcery:** Attempts to read the minds of the gods, usually by reading the stars or, more commonly, animal intestines.

- **Interpretation of omens:** Attempts to read the minds of gods by interpreting the meaning of events.
- **Witchcraft:** Attempts to manipulate the gods with magic.
- **Casts spells:** Using spiritual/demonic power to cast curses.
- **Medium/spiritist:** Calling up the dead (as the Witch of Endor in 2 Samuel).

Anyone who does these things is detestable before YHWH. It is because of these practices that YHWH drove out the nations before them.

- **A Prophet like Moses:** The nations that will be dispossessed listen to sorcery, but Israel is to not permitted to. In the future, YHWH will raise up for Himself a prophet like Moses and they must listen to him. YHWH will put His words in His mouth and He will say everything YHWH tells him and those who do not listen will be held to account.
- **Testing Prophets:** But a prophet who presumes to speak in YHWH's name or who speaks in the name of another god is to be put to death. How can they tell if a prophet has truly spoken in YHWH's name? If a prophet proclaims that something will take place and it does not come true, this prophet is not of YHWH.
- **Notes:**
 - **Prophet like Moses:** In the New Testament, Jesus is understood to be a fulfillment of this promise. He, like Moses, will speak directly for God. Hebrews contrasts previous prophets as those through whom God spoke indirectly and from Moses who served as a servant with Jesus through whom God spoke directly and who is a Son and the exact representation of His being. John calls Jesus the "Word" – He is himself the revelation of God. Fittingly the question is did He really speak for God or not? If so, then the proper response is to obey and follow Him, if not, then putting Him to death was proper. The Gospels are aware of this and, with Deuteronomy 18 in the background, the "test" of Jesus' legitimacy is His prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem which occurred in AD 70.

Reading Deuteronomy Together: You can certainly benefit from this class by attending and taking part in the discussions, but I believe you will benefit that much more by committing to reading through Deuteronomy along with the class. To the end, Nancy Strohm will be preparing reading guides every week with the goal of helping you to observe the text and be prepared to discuss the text the following week. You can choose to read each section in a single sitting, spread it out through the week, or just attend the class and continue with your current Bible reading plan. If you do choose to read with us, here is the reading for each week:

- Week of 10/31: Deuteronomy 19-25