

Deuteronomy 1 Historical Setting and Review

Last week, we began our study of the book of Deuteronomy with an overview or survey of the book. Today we'll begin looking at the text itself.

The first four chapters of Deuteronomy are mostly a review of the experiences of Israel between the time it left Egypt and the time it entered the PL.

In this series of messages, Moses is trying to encourage the people and prepare them for this tremendous task to conquering the PL. But before they begin, he wants to remind them about a few things.

The main themes in this first chapter are God's authority and Israel's rebellion against God. Moses is reminding the people of their failure and warning them not to repeat that same mistake.

And we need that same encouragement to recognize God's authority and we need a warning about what might happen if we rebel against God.

I. Historical setting (1:1-5)¹ (a bit of a review of what we covered last week)

A. Speaker – Moses -- *These [are] the words which Moses spoke to all Israel*

1. Liberals and other Bible deniers question whether Moses really wrote the first five books of the Bible, but here we have a very clear statement that these are Moses' words.

NT authors also affirm that Moses wrote this material.

Moses was God's chosen, authoritative spokesman. God spoke to Moses "face to face, as a man talks with his friend" (Ex 33:11). Moses spoke to the people on behalf of God.

2. Vs 3b—Moses spoke to the children of Israel..., and then vs. 6 begins the record of what he said. So these are the Lord's commands, God's words to Israel. The authority does not come from Moses; it comes from God.

App: The highest authority is always God and God's word. God has spoken, and we are obligated to obey what God has said.

¹ The outline largely follows the one given by Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 15.

3. Vs. 5b *Moses began to explain this law*

- a) The word “explain/declare” (בִּאֵר) means “to make clear, to expound.” So he’s teaching the law clearly, telling the people the meaning of the law.
- b) .5end “this law” is “torah.” Most of the book is an explanation or exhortation regarding the law. It’s a series of sermons or messages exhorting Israel to obey God’s commands.

App: That’s essentially the same job that the pastor has—explain the word of God and exhort people to obey it. The authority always comes from God’s Word—the Bible is the final authority for faith and practice. We are obligated to respect and obey God’s word.

B. Audience – vs. 1 *all Israel*, God’ chosen people. The OT law was their constitution, and Moses is explaining how the law applies to them.

C. Location – vs. 1 *on this side of the Jordan in the wilderness, ...*

Vs. 5a—this side (i.e. east) of the Jordan in the land of Moab, just north of the Dead Sea. Today, this is the kingdom of Jordan.

Note verse 2: It’s an eleven-days’ journey from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea—about 150 miles. KB is the place where Israel rebelled against God and hesitated to enter the Promised Land. Instead of entering at that time, they wandered around in the desert for another 38 years. A journey that normally would have taken less than 2 weeks ended up taking almost 40 years—all because of disobedience and rebellion.

Moses seems to be warning the people not to repeat the rebellion of KD. “Remember what happened last time...”

.2 Note that Horeb is the same as Mt. Sinai. Mt. Seir is simply the land of Edom.

.4 refers to the “Amorites.” The Amorites were basically the same people as the Canaanites. The people who lived in that region were normally called Canaanite or Amorite. The two kings mentioned, Sihon and Og, were the kings on the east side of the Jordan; Og in the north and Sihon in the south. Israel had just conquered that area, and that’s where the nation was when Moses spoke these words.

D. Date—this would have been about 1405/6 BC. 40 years had passed since the nation left Egypt. They had been wandering around in the desert ever since their refusal to enter the land at KB.

.3 The first day of the 11th month would have been sometime in January or February according to our calendar. This was about a month before Moses' death.

E. These details show that all of this happened historically. This is not myth or legend; this is historical narrative, a description of what happened to real people at a real place and time—about 3500 years ago.

II. First address—review of God's mighty acts for Israel (1:6-4:40)

The first part of the book is a review of the events that had happened since they left Egypt 40 years ago. As they are encamped at Moab, ready to cross the Jordan into the PL, Moses reminds Israel about what God had done for them.

BTW, biblical scholars have noticed that the language and arrangement of this material has much in common with the treaties used between kings and their subjects in the 2nd millennium BC. These treaties would often begin with a historical review of the relationship between the parties of the treaty. The king would remind his subjects about what he's done for them in the past, and that would motivate the subjects to continue to observe the stipulations of the treaty/covenant. So there is good evidence to believe that this material came from that time frame.

A. Experiences from Horeb to the Jordan (1:6–3:29)

1. The command to leave Horeb (1:6–8)

a) Moses reflects back to the time almost 40 years before when the nation was gathered at Mt Horeb (aka Mt. Sinai). God had given Moses the law, and now they should leave there and begin the conquest of the PL.

b) .6 Note the authority for all of this—"the LORD our God," i.e., Yahweh our Elohim. Yahweh is the personal, covenant name for God; he is the God of Israel. They are his people, and they are obligated to obey him.

God "spoke to us." God is the authority, and we have his word; we know what he wants us to do.

God has spoken to us, and we must obey his commands.

- c) *.7 go to the mountains of the Amorites...* God had previously promised this whole region to Abraham.

Genesis 15:18 ... *LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates*

The PL extends from the Med and the Nile on the west to the Euphrates on the east, and from Lebanon in the north down to the Red Sea in the south. Israel never conquered that entire area, but they were entitled to it; it is their inheritance. God gave them this land.

- d) *.8 go in and possess the land...*

(1) God gave Israel the legal deed to this land; they own it; it's their inheritance.

(2) Just like a king can give his land to whomever he wants, so God as the owner of the entire earth gave this land to Israel. Now they need to go in and take possession of their own land.

App: If any people have the right to the PL, it's Israel. God gave them this land, and they conquered it. Jews have been in that land since the time of Abraham.

The Jews did not choose this land; God did. It's called the Promised Land because God promised it to Israel. This is the chosen land for the chosen people. So now God is beginning to fulfill his promises given centuries before.

App: One of the most common themes we find in the Bible is that God fulfills his promises. Israel is now ready to conquer the land that God promised to Abraham; God is causing this promise to be fulfilled. Moses urged the people to do what God had commanded them to do—go in and possess the land that God had promised to them.

App: We can be sure that God will fulfill his promises to us as well. And obedience is often the key to enjoying God's promises.

2. The appointment of leaders (1:9–18)

- a) .9, 12 Moses was unable to bear the burden of leading the people all by himself (Num 11:14). The nation had become too large for one person to govern all by himself. You may recall that Moses' father-in-law suggested that he delegate responsibility to others (Ex 18:13f).

Note vs. 10—God had promised Abraham that his offspring would be like the stars of the sky in number (Gen 15:5; 22:17; 26:4, etc). This large population was an evidence of God's fulfilling that promise.

.12 Notice why Moses found leadership so hard—problems, burdens, complaints. Israel had become a huge nation, and people were constantly appealing to Moses to solve their problems.

App: Delegation of authority is biblical. When you cannot fulfill your responsibilities, it may be time to enlist help. You may need to delegate responsibility to others.

Further, we all live within structures of authority. We have to recognize those who are “heads” over us and submit to their leadership.

- b) .13 The people chose “wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes,” and Moses set them in place as “heads over you.”

App: Note the principle here: leaders should be wise, understanding, and knowledgeable. The people who show the highest personal character should be placed in positions of leadership/authority.

The church certainly needs leaders with these qualities—cf. NT qualifications.

We should all aspire to be the kind of people that are worthy of having authority—wise, understanding, and knowledgeable people.

Would anyone choose you for having those qualities?

- c) .15 a list of the leaders and judges; they would take care of the more simple cases, and they'd bring the more difficult ones to Moses (.17end).

Principle: Sometimes it's necessary to defer to an authority or an expert. We have to recognize our own limitations and ask for help from someone who knows what he's doing.

- d) .17 Impartiality is an important element of righteous judgment. Those in positions of leadership must not fear any man and or be impressed by the reputation or standing of anyone coming before them for judgment.

App: Impartiality, fairness, and justice are Judeo-Christian values. Everyone—from rich to poor, from great to small—is worthy of equal treatment. God himself sets the standards for what is fair and just. We must all be just, fair, and impartial in our dealings with others—“the judgment is God's” (vs. 17).

It's a common human weakness to show favoritism to people based on wealth, power, prestige, or family relationships. But we cannot show partiality when judging the issues between people.

3. The spies sent out at Kadesh Barnea (1:19–25) (Num 13-14)

- a) .19 They left Mt. Sinai/Horeb and traveled through the “great and terrible wilderness” and eventually came to KB—located in the south of the Promised Land, below and west of the Dead Sea.

This is *not* the spot where they eventually entered the PL 38 years later, by the Jordan River. This is south of the PL.

- b) .21 Moses encouraged the people to go into the land and begin the conquest.

Moses exhorts the people not to be afraid several times in Deuteronomy.

App: Sometimes, doing the right thing is a fearful proposition. We know what we should do, but we are afraid or discouraged. Courage is doing what needs to be done in spite of fear. We cannot allow fear to prevent us from acting.

- c) .22f The people requested that they send in spies to search the land and bring word back about it (cf. Num 13:23f). Moses sent the men, and they came saying that the land is good (vs. 25b).

Moses does not include it here, but we know from the account in Numbers 13 that only 2 of the spies encouraged the nation to go ahead with the conquest, while 10 of the spies discouraged the project. Caleb and Joshua saw the *possibilities*, but the other saw only the *problems*.

Remember that the intent of sending the spies was not to determine whether to enter the PL. The intent was simply to get the lay of the land, to reconnoiter and prepare for conquest. But that's not how it worked out. The evil report from the spies turned out to be the basis for ...

4. The rebellion against the Lord (1:26–46)

We find here several aspects of this rebellion:

- a) .26 They rebelled against God – “you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the Lord.”

Quote: Rebellion of this kind was nothing short of high treason, hence the apparently extreme measures of judgment that ensued including and culminating in the sentencing of that generation to die in the desert, never to enter the land of promise.²

- b) .27 They falsely accused God.

To claim that God hated them is equivalent to claim that God has rejected them; he's broken the covenant with them. It looked like the Amorites were about to destroy them (.27end), so they concluded that God must hate them. Charging God with hatred of them, after all that God had done for them, is perhaps the worst allegation of all against God.

App: We must not assume that difficulty and danger mean that God is against us. God expects us to persevere through danger and difficulty by trusting in him to enable us.

- c) .28 They complained and discouraged the others.

² Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 75.

- (1) Greater and taller people
- (2) Cities “fortified to heaven”
- (3) Sons of Anakim there
- (4) Results: terror, discouragement; grumbling and complaining; i.e., rebellion.

You may recall that some of the people suggested that they return to Egypt (Num 14:4). All hope was lost.

App: Just like complaint led to discouragement among Israel, so complaint can do the same in a church. When a few people are dissatisfied and begin complaining, an attitude of discouragement can sweep through the entire church. And when that happens, the church often stops functioning properly and achieves nothing.

- d) .29-31 Moses tried to encourage the people to go ahead with the plan. They must remember what God had already done for them—the exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna that sustained them, Mt. Sinai, the victories over hostile nations, etc.

.30-31 It’s true that Israel would not be able to conquer the PL by themselves; God would enable them to do it. God would “carry” them like a man carries his son. I.e., they were totally dependent on God, but God would make it happen.

Quote: From beginning to end, the enterprise was his, and, one could almost say, Israel was along only for the ride.³

This should have been Israel’s finest hour, the day of their triumph as they enter the PL. They should have trusted God because of all that he had done for them already.

³ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 79.

- e) .32 “Yet, for all that...” In spite of what God had done for them already, they refused to believe the Lord. The project seemed too difficult, and so they gave up. God was not powerful enough to carry out this plan. This was too much, too hard, too dangerous. Let’s go back to Egypt.

Numbers 14:1 *So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night.*

App: That kind of discouragement might happen to us as well. If something seems to be too hard, we begin doubting God. Vs. 27—this must mean that the Lord hates us; God is against me because things are not going my way.

When facing difficulties, we should remind ourselves about how God has provided for us in the past and that he has a plan for us for the future. That’s part of trusting God.

- f) .34 the result—the Lord was angry and declared that the men of that generation would not enter the PL.

The soldiers who should have been leading the charge into the PL would never enter it. Only Caleb and Joshua from that generation would enter, plus the young people—those under 20 years old.

Cf. 2:14b—all that generation of the “men of war” had died; that suggests that the women and children survived. None of the soldiers from the first generation survived, other than Joshua and Caleb.

.35 **Principle:** Disobedience causes disaster. That whole generation of soldiers died in the wilderness over the next 38 years. That’s a very costly result of rebellion.

.36, 38 **Principle:** Obedience results in blessing. Caleb and his children (and all the young people) and Joshua would enter the PL

It’s in our own best interests to obey the Lord.

- g) .37 God was also angry with Moses for his failure and would not allow him to enter the PL.

Principle: Leaders are not exempt from discipline and chastisement. Moses lost his right to lead the people into the PL.

.38 Joshua would be the next leader, and he would have the privilege of experiencing the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.

- h) .39 The people were apparently claiming that if they entered the PL, their children would be victims.

That was one of the excuses they gave for not entering the PL when they should have. Moses promises that the children, whom they thought would die, will be the ones to inherit the land—the children would be the *victors*, not the *victims*.

App: When we don't want to do something, we can usually find an excuse. Parents often use their children as an excuse for not doing things—even not to obey God.

- i) .40 God commanded them to turn around and head into the wilderness/desert, south toward the Red Sea. Instead of going north into the PL, they had to go south, into the desert.

- j) .41-45 The people felt bad about their failure to enter the land and confessed that what they had done was wrong. They decided that they would go up after all and attack Ai. But now it was too late for repentance; they attempted to enter the PL, but they were defeated.

So they were sorry that they rebelled, and then they rebelled again! That suggests that their repentance was not genuine.

Quote: They rebelled at first out of cowardice and unbelief in the Lord's ability to fight for them. They rebelled a second time in arrogance (v. 43) thinking they could win the battle without His help.⁴

And the result was that the Israelites lost the battle with the Amorites.

⁴ Jack S. Deere, "Deuteronomy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 265.

.46 The nation ended up staying in KB for “many days— Israel remained around that area for most of the 38 remaining years.

Little did they realize at the time what their decision would mean for them. Because of their rebellion against God’s commands, they ended up spending the next 38 years in the desert and that whole generation died. Even though they regretted their actions and tried to turn things around, there was nothing they could do to reverse course. These were, in some ways, wasted years. They were standing by, doing nothing for all those years.

App: The clear principle here is that rebellion against God is very costly.

Another principle we find here is that life often consists of windows of opportunity, doors that are open only temporarily. Life amounts to decision we make and the consequences of those decisions.

As the Bible says, we reap what we sow. You make a decision, and you face the consequences. Once we’ve made a decision or taken an action, there is often no turning back, no reversing the effects/results of the decision, even if you repent and try to make things right. If you rebel against God, the results might be profound and tragic. You might never recover or get back to where you were.

The best course of action is always to obey God from the beginning. That way, you avoid all the problems that naturally result from disobedience.

Note vs. 42—“I am not among you.” Without God’s presence, they were bound to fail. Same with us today. All things are possible with God, but “without me, you can do nothing.”

.45 Even though the people “wept before the Lord” because of their defeat, “the Lord would not listen....” They had rebelled and suffered defeat, then cried about it. But their weeping made no impression on God.

Isaiah 59:1–2 *Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear. 2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.*

When God commands us to do something, we'd better do it promptly and with the right attitude. Even if we repent, we may have to deal with the consequences of our sins.

That concludes Deuteronomy 1. Israel had to face up to the fact that God had been very good to them, yet in spite of that, Israel as a nation had rebelled against God.

The warning to us is to avoid that same pattern. We want to be like Joshua and Caleb, who encouraged the people to obey God and go up into the PL. We don't want to be like all the others who discouraged the people by complaining and doubting God.

These principles still pertain today—obedience leads to blessing, and rebellion leads to disaster. The best choice is always to recognize God's authority, obey God, and trust him to fulfill his promises.