



Ruled by a Gracious God: The Goodness of the Law (Deuteronomy 1:1-5)
Matthew Williams

INTRODUCTION: WHY DEUTERONOMY?

The legitimacy of any authority outside myself has fallen on hard times. Believe whatever you want to believe. Just don't cross the line and tell me you're right and I'm wrong. Or that I have to do whatever you tell me to do. I'm an American. I have the right to be and do exactly what I want to be and do.

Expressive individualism shows up all over the place. What do I feel like doing? Who do I feel like spending time with? What sort of home would I enjoy? Or what kind of congregation will meet my needs?"

The very idea of seeking let alone heeding an authority other than my own desires is culturally incoherent. The standard advice goes like this. Respect yourself enough to do whatever you want to do and let other people deal with the consequences. The great problem, of course, is that we're living like the emperor with no clothes.

I can pretend I've discovered the ultimate authority and it's me. In fact, the longer I act the part, the more convincing the narrative becomes. However, that doesn't change the brute fact that our very existence, not to mention the rest of the cosmos, testifies to a very different spiritual reality, a reality we deny to our peril. The God who made the world and everything in it is the present and future authority with whom we have to do.

Psalms 96:10–13, "The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved... He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness." How does the King of Kings exercise his authority in our life? Through the perfect gift of his Word – his law, testimonies, and commands. Your response to the Word of God is your response to the authority of God.

Over the years, I've noticed there are parts of God's Word Christians tend to neglect. Case in point, the Old Testament law. The stories in Genesis, Exodus, or Numbers are interesting enough. But then we get to Leviticus or Deuteronomy and think, "Good night! What does not eating ostriches, moving a neighbor's landmark, or keeping the feast of Booths have to do with life today?" So we opt to leave well enough alone and camp out in the New Testament on all the encouraging stuff Jesus did and said.



But the whole “gospel good, law bad” approach quickly runs into some big problems. For example, in Matt 4, when Jesus himself is parrying back temptation from the devil by appealing to the authority of God’s Word, where does he turn? He quotes the book of Deuteronomy, not once, but three times.

Brothers and sisters, *every* part of God’s Word is necessary for life and godliness, not just back then, but today, Old Testament law included. Jesus did not abolish the law through his life, death, and resurrection. He fulfilled it. The application of the law changes. The authority and relevance do not.

Then and now, both before Christ and after Christ, Romans 7:12 is true. “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” And that’s why I’m eager to begin a new sermon series in Deuteronomy entitled, “Ruled by a Gracious God.”

Deuteronomy is all about the nature of God’s authority *over* his people in the context of covenant relationship *with* his people. Don’t think God must have been into the “authority” thing in the Old Testament and more into the “relationship” thing in the New. From the dawn of creation, he has *always* been righteously and gloriously committed to a gracious rule, pouring out the unmerited fullness of his goodness and summoning his image-bearers to respond by embracing him accordingly.

Understanding Deuteronomy is the key to understanding the entire Old Testament. It summarizes God’s dealings with his people in the first four books of the Bible and sets the spiritual trajectory for all the historical and prophetic books that follow. Ultimately, Deuteronomy points forward to Jesus, the new prophet like Moses, who brings the saving work God began under the Old Covenant to completion through the New.

Open your Bible to Deuteronomy and let’s read the first five verses. (Duet 1:1-5) I want to unpack this passage in a way that sets up the rest of the series. So let’s consider the author, the setting, the content, and conclude with some guidelines for interpreting the law in light of Christ.

1) THE AUTHOR: A PROPHET LIKE MOSES

Deuteronomy wastes no time identifying Moses as the primary author. V. 1, “These are the words that Moses spoke to Israel...” Moses was the prophet par excellence in the Old Testament. Born in a Jewish family but raised in the household of Pharaoh, the Lord



used him to rescue the descendants of Jacob (or Israel) out of slavery in Egypt and lead a nation of several million people to the border of the land of Canaan.

Deuteronomy largely consists of three speeches or sermons Moses delivered to the nation of Israel shortly before his death. There are obviously some narrative sections Moses couldn't have written, such as the account and aftermath of his death in chapter 34. Nevertheless, subsequent books of the Bible explicitly affirm Mosaic authorship, including Matthew 19 where Jesus himself refers to portions of Deuteronomy as what "Moses commanded" or "Moses allowed".

Moses' authorship reminds us we're not reading a mere collection of rules like the Code of Virginia. We're listening to a sermon where Moses has specific pastoral aims in view. Deut 32:46-47, "Take heart to all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life..."

How could Moses claim as much? Because he didn't speak according to his own wisdom. He spoke (v. 3) "according to all that the LORD had given him in commandment to them." Moses' words were God's words, given to him through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That's what made them "Your very life" for the people of Israel. It's what makes them life for us today.

What Moses says, God says, such that for Israel to ignore or disobey Moses was to ignore and disobey God. And for us to ignore and disobey Deuteronomy is to ignore and disobey God. Remember that especially as we work through difficult portions of this book. These are God's Word to us!

We must not start with, "Does this feel relevant?" We start with, "Lord, I'm listening. Help me to understand and obey." That's what it means to read the Bible on its own terms and in its own categories. Don't get hung up on the ostrich. What is God communicating to us? How is he revealing himself to us? And how must we respond? Listen to the divine author and obey.

2) THE SETTING: WARNINGS AND PROMISES

When God speaks through his Word, he does so to a particular people at a particular moment in history. Look again at verse 1. "These are the words that Moses spoke *to all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness, in the Arabah...*" Where is Israel as Moses



preaches to them? They're in northern Moab, poised to enter the promised land of Canaan, about to face the greatest spiritual test of their lives. When they enter the land, will they remain faithful to God or not?

Canaan was riddled with paganism, a place where it would be ever-so-tempting to worship gods in their own image whom they could see and touch and manipulate. The allure of spiritual compromise would be strong. Moses is also about to die. He won't go into the promised land with Israel. Deuteronomy are his last words to the nation, words of preparation for an imminent physical and spiritual battle.

Think of a parachutist about to jump out of a plane, a boxer about to enter a ring, or a football coach gathering his team around him before the second half kickoff. You can feel the tension. The future is fast approaching and about to unfold in one of two drastic ways. Either you go God's way and succeed, Israel. Or you go your way and fail. So listen up! Pay attention! Take my words to heart and follow the Lord. We face the same choice every moment of the day. Will I go God's way or my way?

The contextual reference to "The wilderness" in v. 1 is easy to overlook. Not so for the Israelites. She'd been there for 40 years! She wasn't supposed to. God didn't rescue her out of Egyptian slavery in Exodus 14 to usher her into a barren desert!

Immediately after the exodus, Moses led the nation to Horeb (or Mt. Sinai) where the Lord revealed the majesty of his glory and reaffirmed his relationship with his people. From there, it was only a short march (11 days verse 2 says) to Kadesh-barnea, a region on the southern border of Canaan. They should have been in the promised land in less than two weeks!

That was 40 years ago. Why? Because the people rebelled against the Lord. They gave into their fears about the difficulty of conquering the land instead of trusting the Lord. Despite all the mighty acts of salvation Israel witnessed, and even though the Lord had said, "Do not fear. I am with you. I will help you. Your enemies don't stand a chance before me!" she still said "No" and refused to obey.

The Lord judged her accordingly. They spent the next 40 years wandering in the wilderness until everyone who disobeyed the Word of God died. What should have taken 11 days took 40 years because of Israel's unbelief. Deuteronomy begins with a sober warning about the consequences of human unfaithfulness.



But that's not the only contextual reference at the outset of the book. Look at verse 4. "Moses spoke to the people of Israel...after he had defeated Sihon the king of the Amorites...and Og the king of Bashan." In Numbers 21, when Israel was still in the wilderness but approaching Moab, two different kings tried to destroy her. Both failed. Listen to what the Lord says to Moses prior to the battle with Og.

Numbers 21:34-35: "Do not fear him, for I have given him into your hand, and all his people, and his land. And you shall do to him as you did to Sihon, king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon. So they defeated him and his sons and all his people, until he had no survivors left. And they possessed his land."

What do those experiences near the end of Israel's years in the wilderness tell them and us? There's a bigger context, a bigger story going down than human failure and sin. It's the steadfast love of the Lord and his faithfulness to keep his promises to us even though we fail to keep our promises to him. Deuteronomy 1:4 isn't a random historical reference. It's a milestone to the mercy and redeeming power of God! You have failed me again and again, Israel. But I will not leave you or forsake. I will finish the work I began.

Aren't you grateful, friends, that when we are unfaithful God remains faithful? Yes, there's a sober warning in verses 2-3. Let's not repeat the last 40 years. But there's a precious promise in verse 4. God is still able to do today the very things we didn't trust him to do yesterday. He's the same, yesterday, today, and forever. The divine warrior who defeated real enemies like Sihon and Og can do it again and will do it again if we are willing to trust him.

Two applications for us. First, when like Israel the biggest battle is still in the future, when the conflicts in your marriage have yet to be resolved, when the injustice in your workplace has yet to be addressed, when the besetting sin in your life has yet to go away, **do not overlook the significance of little victories along the way** that remind us God is at work and we can trust him.

Did you control your tongue last night? Praise God. Has your longing deepened for Jesus to right every wrong? Praise God. When you feel troubled, do you turn toward the Lord through prayer or reading his Word a little faster than you did a year ago? Praise God. Israel was still experiencing the consequences of her sin when the Lord delivered her in amazing ways. Do not confine God's goodness to a future season of spiritual maturity or growth in godliness or after you win the big battle, so to speak. He is faithful today, brothers and sisters.



Here's the second application. For Israel, the biggest battles had yet to be won. **For you, Christian, the biggest battle has already been won.** It was won at the cross, confirmed at the empty tomb, where your King, King Jesus, resoundingly defeated the power of sin and death.

Yes, life in this world is full of enemy encounters. But every one of them assails you as a mortally wounded foe. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. And we contend for godliness with a faith fueled by confidence in his victory.

My heart is noticeably less anxious and more peaceful when I'm watching a recorded football game I know my team has already won. I can savor every moment, every play, without the slightest bit of concern over the final outcome. That's the assurance we have through the gospel, brothers and sisters. Warning of the consequences of human unfaithfulness pushes us from behind. Promises of God's faithfulness pull us from the front. As the context of Deuteronomy served Israel, may it also serve us.

3) THE CONTENT: A COVENANT DOCUMENT

Look at the very end of verse 5. "Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to explain this law." When we read a book like Deuteronomy, we don't want to impose our own 21st century, American understanding of what the law is onto a book written nearly 3,500 years ago. So what exactly is this "Law" Moses sets out to explain?

The name our English Bibles assigned to the book is a bit unhelpful in this regard. Deuteronomy literally means "second law," but that's not what the book really is. It's a renewal and expansion of something the Lord entered into with Israel a generation earlier at Mt Sinai, a relationship consisting of oath-bound promises called a covenant.

The entire story of the Bible is carried along the back of various covenant relationships God established with his people or a representative of his people. Whether you're talking about Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, David, or Jesus, there's a consistent pattern. God graciously takes initiative to act on our behalf and we are commanded as his people to trust and obey him accordingly.

There are unconditional elements – God will do this no matter what – and conditional elements – God will do this if the human partner acts in a certain way – in every



covenant. And there's a significant element of continuity between them because the God who makes them doesn't change. The promises God makes to King David build on the promises God made to Israel and Abraham.

But there's also a significant amount of discontinuity. Later covenants carry forward and expand promises embedded in earlier covenants in ways that cause the glory of the new kind relationship to exceed the glory of the kind of relationship that came before. For example, the people of God under the Old Covenant were a mixed multitude. Some loved the Lord and wholeheartedly followed him. Most didn't.

Not so the people of God under the New Covenant. We are not defined ethnically by our family connection to Abraham. We are defined spiritually, by our union with Jesus Christ through faith in him. Those who hold fast to him are *not* a mixed multitude. *Every* one of us, not just some of us, have had our hearts radically transformed through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to trust and obey Jesus. Jesus is the True Israel, the obedient Son, the faithful human partner, who bears the curse of sin and death that we deserve and gives the blessings of life with God that he deserves!

Though Deuteronomy anticipates the necessity and nature of the New Covenant, especially in Chapter 30, it's fundamentally an Old Covenant document. It both renews and supplements the covenant God made with Israel in Exodus 19:4–6. "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

The Lord gave Israel the 10 commandments at the same time, explaining what faithfulness to her covenant Lord required. That's the covenant Deuteronomy affirms and expands. And not just in a chapter or two, but through the structure of the entire book! The way Deuteronomy is put together closely parallels the structure of Hittite treaties from the 14th century between a ruler and his subjects.

You have a preamble in chapter 1. A historical prologue in chapters 1-4 reviewing all God has done thus far for his people. Chapters 5-11 contains general stipulations. Chapters 12-26 detailed stipulations. Chapters 27-28 lists specific blessings and curses for keeping or failing to keep the stipulations in chapters 5-26. And witnesses to the covenant are identified in chapters 30-32.



So yes, this book contains all sorts of laws explaining what faithfulness to God in the land looks like. But all of that instruction, all of that content, comes in the format of a covenant document that shouts by its very structure of God's commitment to relationship with his people. That's radically different from the ancient Greek or Roman law codes! As Daniel Block observes, "This book presents the law as a gift of grace to guide the redeemed in the way of righteousness, leading to life."

Deuteronomy is not a bunch of random rules. It's a relational document capturing God's heart for his people and the kind of life they must live in order to enjoy relationship with him. No part of it is legalistic. Not once does the Lord tell Israel to try and "Earn" relationship with him.

He graciously initiates. He graciously redeems. He rescues her from her enemies through mighty acts of salvation and says, "Now trust and obey me for your good and my glory." The obedience of faith in Scripture is never a work of merit. It's always a response to God's mercy.

CONCLUSION: READING THE LAW IN LIGHT OF CHRIST

You could summarize the entire book this way. God is faithful despite our sin, so trust him, obey his Word, and conquer the land. It's Moses' way of teaching Israel what it means to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut. 6:5). But that raises an important question. "Are you saying, Matthew, that what Deuteronomy meant back then is what it still means today?"

Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that **the essential meaning of Scripture never changes because the original intent of the divine author never changes.** Though God speaks at a particular cultural moment, Scripture is not the product of human culture. It's a revelation of the unchanging character and will of God.

The meaning may be expanded. It may be carried forward and transformed in unexpected ways by later revelation, but it will never mean one thing back then and something utterly and completely different today. In that sense, Deuteronomy is just as authoritative for us as it was for Israel.

And yet there's a critical sense in which the way we apply the original meaning of Deuteronomy must change because our covenantal context has changed. For we no



longer live under the Old Covenant. We live under the New Covenant, a new way of relating to God that Deuteronomy itself anticipates and later biblical revelation confirms.

Jeremiah 31:31–34, “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...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...For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

The Mosaic or Old Covenant, built on a code of law, has been replaced by the New Covenant, built on the person and work of Christ. Such that the Old Covenant is no longer in force. As Paul declares in Romans 10:4, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness (or right standing with God) to everyone who believes.” The key to right standing with God is no longer found in the law. It’s found in Christ.

That doesn’t make the law bad. It simply reminds us Jesus is immeasurably better! Indeed, the law itself points forward to him again and again. So how does the person and work of Christ change the way we read and apply the law?

It will not do to divide the law into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories, keep the first one, and ditch the second two. Matthew 5:17 tells us Jesus came to fulfill the whole law, not just part of it. So does that mean we just ditch the whole thing? Not so fast.

We are not under the law or obligated to obey the Mosaic law in a *direct or covenantal sense*. We are under the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21). And what is the law of Christ? Doug Moo’s perspective is helpful. “It is the demand of God that is binding on Christians since the coming of Christ.” And what do those demands include? All the demands of the Mosaic law as they have been fulfilled in Christ. Thus, the Mosaic law remains applicable and authoritative in our lives, but only indirectly, or as it has been fulfilled in Christ.

I’ll give you an example. How do we apply the command in Deuteronomy 10 to keep the sabbath? We ask three questions. **First, “What did this command mean for Israel?”** It meant they must cease from their labors on the 7th day of the week. **Second, “What’s the underlying spiritual principle in play here?”** In other words, why would God require them to do such a thing? Because it reminded them of their dependence on the God who provides and gave them an opportunity to renew their trust in him.



Third, “How is this command transformed by Christ and the New Covenant he inaugurated?” In this case, Hebrews 4 leads the way. Jesus is our sabbath rest! We are no longer obligated to not work on the 7th day of the week, as much as there is wisdom in establishing regular patterns of work and rest. We are obligated to hold fast to Christ, to find spiritual rest not in the absence of our labor but in the perfection of his. On this side of the cross, we “Keep the Sabbath” by renewing our trust and confidence in Jesus through the weekly gathering of the saints.

The more we understand what it meant to keep Sabbath under the Old Covenant and why it mattered, the more equipped we will be to keep Sabbath under the New Covenant and why it matters. Rightly interpreted, every aspect of the law revealed helps us to understand the fullness of Christ, what it means to love God first and best, and your neighbor as yourself.

Jason Meyer is right. “The law of Moses is not just relevant for our lives; it is refreshing to our souls. It stirs up our hearts as a thing of delight to meditate upon day and night.” We need this book, brothers and sisters. We need to see what it looks like to be ruled by a gracious God.

In an age where authorities are automatically suspect, Deuteronomy points us in a radically different direction. God’s rule over his people is an exceedingly good thing. From the actions of future kings to her responsibility for impoverished laborers, every aspect of Israelite society is regulated by the Word. Our place in redemptive history may be different, but our fundamental need is the same. We need to experience the joy of living in submission to God’s rule.

Deuteronomy reveals the goodness of the Lawgiver. It exposes our sin and need for a Savior. It deepens our wonder at the perfect obedience of Christ. And it shows us what it looks like to wholeheartedly embrace his rule in our lives.

As we linger over these pages, may the Spirit teach us to say with the psalmist, “Oh how I love your law...Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart...I hope for your salvation, O LORD, and I do your commandments. My soul keeps your testimonies; I love them exceedingly” (Ps. 119:97, 111, 166-167). Let’s pray and ask for the Spirit’s help.