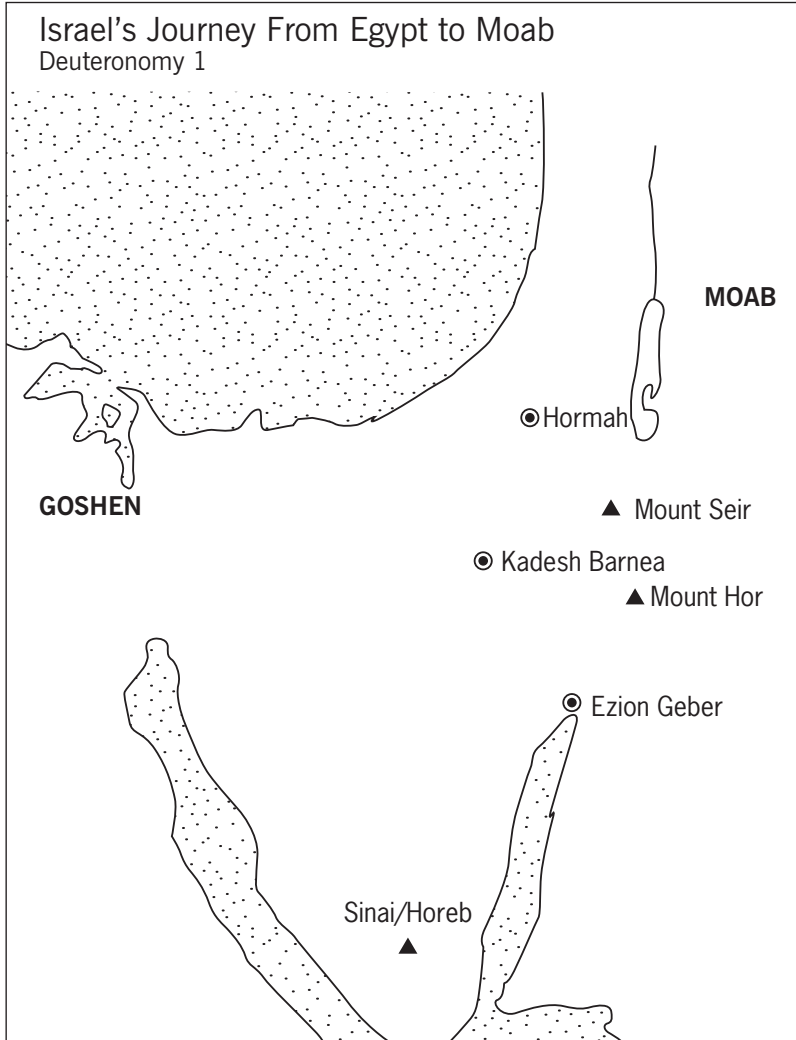


1

The importance of obedience

Please read Deuteronomy 1:1-46

Works of literature can be slotted into several different categories. The various types of prose writing include novels, short stories, essays, biographies, histories, journals, letters, speeches and sermons. I can vividly remember my English literature teacher at school listing these genres and placing the sermon last in his list because, he claimed, ‘This is the most boring of all and no-one in their right mind would want to read them.’ This, all too frequently, is the view that people (even professing Christians) have of sermons. However, the very fact that you are reading this commentary shows that you have some desire to read a sermon. The book of Deuteronomy can best be described as a sermon, or a series of sermons, and the Holy Spirit has included it in the Bible for our blessing.



Setting the scene (1:1-4)

Deuteronomy records the sermons which Moses preached on the plains of Moab, east of the River Jordan, just before the people of Israel entered the land of Canaan. 'These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the desert east of the Jordan' (1:1). Similar words of introduction are found in 4:44-45 and 29:1, and it is commonly recognised that the three main sections or sermons of Deuteronomy are 1:1-4:43, 4:44-28:68 and 29:1-30:20.

The sermons in Deuteronomy were preached 'in the fortieth year' after the people of Israel had left Egypt (1:3). They had defeated the Amorite kingdoms to the east of the River Jordan (1:4) and were about to enter the promised land of Canaan. This was an unusual approach, but they had come to this point because of their stubborn refusal, forty years earlier, to enter the land at Kadesh Barnea. Moses notes that 'it takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road' (1:2); yet it took the Israelites forty years to arrive at the borders of the promised land. Thirty-eight of those forty years had been spent wandering in the wilderness. Those years of wandering were about to come to an end. The people of Israel were about to leave the wilderness and make the land of Canaan their home.

In 1:1-4:43 Moses traces the events that brought the Israelites to the borders of the promised land. Then in 4:44-26:19 he sets out the law code which was to govern the way they would live in the promised land. The historical narrative explains the importance of the law code. The people of Israel were the Lord's people and they were about to take possession of the land which God had promised them. This was a task which would require military discipline and dedication for, as the redeemed people of Jehovah, they were also the Lord's army.

One of the first lessons an army recruit must learn when he enters military service is the importance of following orders. Lives, and even battles, may be lost if soldiers decide that they can ignore the orders of their commanding officers. Sometimes the commanding officer gives out difficult orders, but a soldier must obey. This is a mindset that needs to be cultivated, and it was not something that came naturally to the people of Israel. Many of us might say the same about ourselves. It often takes a lifetime of disciplined obedience, walking with God and feeding upon his word, to learn to be a soldier in his army (see 2 Timothy 2:3). The book of Deuteronomy has many lessons to teach us in this regard, for it is a training manual in godly living. In it we see how Moses trained the Israelites to live as God's people in God's land. In this opening chapter we are introduced to God's people and the task that lay before them.

A nation under God (1:5–8)

Moses began his sermon by reminding Israel of the events that had taken place at Horeb (or Sinai as it is better known) shortly after the exodus. 'The LORD our God said to us at Horeb ...' (1:6). Horeb was the mountain where God entered into a covenant with the family of Jacob, thus transforming it from a family of tribes into a nation. Moses repeatedly reminds the Israelites of this foundational event because it defined the character of their nation. They are a nation in covenant with God and this is the thread which runs through Deuteronomy.

The purpose of the national gathering in Moab was to renew that covenant before advancing into the promised land. The Israelites would again renew that covenant after they had entered into the land (see 27:1–7). Recent studies have shown that written covenants or treaties were commonly used at the time of Moses to regulate the relationship between a conquering

king and his subject people. These treaties had standard features (there was a preamble, a historical prologue, an exposition of the obligations, a witness clause, and a list of sanctions; a memorial was erected, an oath was taken and the witnesses were identified). Some of these are found in Deuteronomy.

The reason for this similarity with secular treaties of loyalty is obvious. For many years the Israelites had been slaves of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, yet God had heard their cries for help and liberated them from the tyranny of this earthly king so that they might become his people. In this new relationship the Israelites were to enjoy freedom from slavery and oppression. Yet they were not without a sovereign, for God was their king and they were his subject people. This new relationship was ratified at a formal ceremony at Horeb when God came down upon the mountain and gave his law. He declared that he had chosen Israel out of all the nations on the earth to be his favoured nation. In response, Israel was to serve only Jehovah as their God; and in his law Jehovah set out exactly what he required of them.

Moses' purpose was not simply to revisit the past and contemplate the great events which had taken place at Horeb. It had not been God's desire that the Israelites stay at Horeb to worship him in isolation in the wilderness. Moses reminds the Israelites of God's direction in 1:6-7:

You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Break camp and advance into the hill country of the Amorites; go to all the neighbouring peoples in the Arabah, in the mountains, in the western foothills, in the Negev, and along the coast, to the land of the Canaanites and to Lebanon, as far as the great river, the Euphrates.

God wanted them to possess the promised land, and this is the first of many wonderful descriptions of the land which God had promised to Abraham's descendants.

At Horeb God repeated the promise which he had made many hundreds of years earlier to Abraham that his descendants would possess the land in which he then lived as a stranger. 'Go in and take possession of the land that the LORD swore he would give to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to their descendants after them' (1:8). The key words in this promise are the words *give* and *land*.

Notice how the verb *to give* is used twice in 1:8. First of all it describes what God had already done. 'See, I have given you this land.' He had already made over the title deed to the Israelites. The land was theirs. The only problem was that the Canaanites were squatting on it. To remedy this problem God promised that he would give the Israelites actual possession of the land. 'Go in and take possession of the land that the LORD swore he would give to your fathers.' What God has promised to give, he will in fact give.

This gives us an insight into the character of God. He is a giving God. Without their asking or desiring, God had given this good land to Israel. Moreover he gave it freely. This is true not just of the promised land, but of every gift that God gives. 'Every good and perfect gift is from above ...' (James 1:17). We see the greatest manifestation of God's goodness in his gift of salvation in Christ. 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ...' (John 3:16). The gospel itself is possible only because God is a giver.

God's promised gift was the *land* of Canaan. It is described

in 1:7. The scene which Moses set before his hearers is breathtaking. We will return to this amazing panorama later in 11:24, 33:6-25 and 34:1-4. Just as the snow-capped mountains and beautiful valleys of New Zealand provided a spectacular setting for Peter Jackson's production of *The Lord of the Rings*, so the hills, valleys and plans of Canaan provide the backdrop for Deuteronomy. They were set before the people of Israel to whet their appetite for God's promised blessing. This promise reaches its ultimate fulfilment in a Messianic king who 'will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth' (Psalm 72:8).

Along with God's blessing came a challenge. 'Break camp and advance into the hill country of the Amorites ... Go and take possession of the land.' The Israelites were not simply to admire the land and rejoice in their privileged status. They were to take the land. When God said 'Go', they were to move forward. They were to leave the spiritual mountain-top at Sinai and move forward into difficult terrain where they would face hostile nations. Many of us enjoy times of spiritual blessing when we can withdraw from the business of the world for prayer and meditation upon God's word. Yet we must leave these and go into the spiritual battlefield to serve our Saviour and preach his gospel. We go at God's command with his promise. 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age' (Matthew 28:18-20).

A nation organised under leaders (1:9-18)

God kept the promise he had given to Abraham in Genesis 15:5: 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them ... So shall your offspring be.' By the time that Abraham's descendants reached the borders of the promised land they had become a large nation. This blessing brought

new challenges for Moses. In 1:9–10 Moses said to the Israelites, ‘You are too heavy a burden for me to carry alone. The LORD your God has increased your numbers so that today you are as many as the stars in the sky.’ This was not a complaint, for Moses wanted even more of God’s blessing. ‘May the LORD, the God of your fathers, increase you a thousand times and bless you as he has promised’ (1:11). However, he recognised that the task of leading this multitude was more than he could bear on his own. ‘How can I bear your problems and your burdens and your disputes all by myself?’ (1:12; see also Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 3:5).

At the time of the exodus Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, could see that he was being overwhelmed by his workload and advised him to appoint deputies (see Exodus 18:1–26). At that time Moses put the suggestion to the people and they agreed with him (1:13–14). “Choose some wise, understanding and respected men from each of your tribes, and I will set them over you.” You answered me, “What you propose to do is good.” As a result, commanders were appointed over the units of fighting men (1:15) and judges were appointed to hear disputes (1:16). Moses’ role was as an appeal judge for ‘hard’ cases. However, God was the ultimate judge over all, ‘... for judgment belongs to God’ (1:17).

Two features of this new administrative system have implications for us today. First of all, *these men had authority over the people*. Moses told the Israelites in 1:15, ‘So I took the leading men of your tribes ... and appointed them to have authority over you.’ Although Moses made the appointment and they were answerable to Moses, ultimately they received their authority from God. Moses, too, was a servant of God who had been appointed to rule God’s people. Later, in the law code at the

heart of Deuteronomy, Moses will have much more to say about the important work of civil rulers such as elders, judges and kings. All these public servants do their work for God, and the people must be subject to them as unto the Lord. This is what the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 13:1: ‘Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.’

The second point to notice about Moses’ charge to the leaders of the Israelites is that *these men have a responsibility to rule the people well*. According to Moses they were to be ‘wise and respected men’ (see 1:13, 15). They were to listen to cases ‘fairly’ (1:16). In particular, they were not to ‘show partiality in judging’ (1:17). True justice is meant to be blind, in that it does not look at the face of those who come to court seeking a resolution of their dispute. Justice does not look at a person’s social status, bank balance, skin colour or family connections, whereas partiality shows favour to some on account of these things. In Deuteronomy 16:18–20 Moses will apply this principle more broadly.

Sadly, today the evils of corruption, nepotism and bribery are rife in many countries and they cause immense social problems. The cost of basic services is often grossly inflated because officials line their pockets with bribes. This is a perennial problem, and many centuries later James 2:1–4 described corrupt officials as ‘judges with evil thoughts’. They have more regard for men who offer rewards than they have for God, who seeks righteous conduct in every area of life. They forget that they are answerable to the Judge of all.

A nation under orders (1:19–46)

The importance of following God's orders became apparent when Israel went to take possession of the promised land. Moses reminds them of their first, unsuccessful, attempt to enter the promised land at Kadesh Barnea.

a. God's goodness was confirmed (1:19–25)

By following God's direction, the people of Israel came to the land that had been promised to Abraham. God had told Moses that the land was 'a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey' (Exodus 3:8). However, before going into the land the people sought a report: "Then all of you came to me and said, "Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us and bring back a report about the route we are to take and the towns we will come to'" (1:22). They gave some very sensible reasons for seeking information about the land of Canaan. However, was there a hint of reluctance in their actions? Were they unsure that the land really was as good as God had said? Why did they want a second opinion?

In Deuteronomy this spying expedition is presented as an idea coming from the people, while in Numbers 13:1 it is presented as the Lord's command to Moses. These accounts are easily reconciled if we understand the Lord to be sovereignly directing both the desires of the people and the actions of Moses. Of course, not everything the people desired was pleasing to God or Moses; but in this instance the people's desire was good (1:23). "The idea seemed good to me; so I selected twelve of you ..." The report which the spies brought back to the people confirmed that the Lord had indeed brought them to a good land. "Taking with them some of the fruit of the land, they brought it down to us and reported, "It is a good land that the Lord our God is

giving us” (1:25). The people need not have doubted the Lord’s goodness or his abundant provision.

b. The people were paralysed by fear (1:26-33)

In spite of all the good things that the twelve spies had seen in the land, their report emphasised the difficulties which lay before the Israelites. Ten of the spies warned against entering the land because the people of the land were strong and their cities were well fortified. ‘The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky. We even saw the Anakites there’ (1:28). The mere mention of the Anakites was enough to terrify anyone. The Anakites were a fearsome race of giant warriors whose reputation made other nations quake (see 9:2). Yet there was no need to fear because, as Moses pointed out, ‘The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you ...’ (1:29-31). Even the Anakites would be driven out (see Joshua 11:21-22; 14:12; 15:14) and their fortified cities would fall to the Israelites.

At this stage the Israelites were unwilling to believe that, with God’s help, they were able to drive out the Canaanite inhabitants of the land. The report of the ten spies unnerved the people. In spite of Moses’ appeal (1:29-31) they refused to go into the promised land.

Then I said to you, ‘Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them. The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes, and in the desert. There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place.’

Their fear was a failure to trust God. 'In spite of this you did not trust in the LORD your God' (1:32).

Fear is a powerful emotion with disastrous consequences, as F.D. Roosevelt recognised during the depression years of the 1930s when he told the American people that all they had to fear was fear itself. These verses show the spiritual consequences of fear. Fear can so fill our minds that we lose sight of all hope. Our focus on the darkness can be so intense that we do not see the light. When we do not look to the Lord or rely on him we lack the strength which he supplies to those who trust in him. The fear which blinds us may be a fear of Satan or of evil men; a fear of illness, pain or death; a fear of failure and condemnation by God. Peter was afraid of the wind and the waves and when he turned his focus from Christ to them he sank into the waters (Matthew 14:30). The antidote to paralysing fear is the faith that looks to God, listens to his word, and remembers what he has done.

When I am afraid,
 I will trust in you.
 In God whose word I praise,
 in God I trust; I will not be afraid.
 What can mortal man do to me? (Psalm 56:3-4)

c. The Lord refused admission to the promised land (1:34-40)

God was angry with the people because of their disobedience and unbelief. He was angry with the spies (excepting only Joshua and Caleb, who urged the people to trust the Lord, see 1:36, 38). He was also angry with the whole generation of Israelites that followed their lead. 'Not a man of this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to your forefathers' (1:35). Instead, their children, who had not participated in their sinful decision ('the

little ones ... who do not yet know good from bad'), would enter the land (1:39).

The Lord God was also angry with Moses. 'Because of you the LORD became angry with me and said, "You shall not enter it [the promised land] either"' (1:37). In Numbers 20:12 we read that Moses was not permitted to enter the promised land because of a later incident when Moses struck the rock rather than speaking to it. Moses refers to this explanation in 32:51-52. Clearly there were multiple reasons why Moses was denied entry into the promised land. Both his own sin and the sin of the people lay behind God's refusal. Sin is complicated and messy. It weaves a tangled web which ensnares both those who sin and others. Its implications reach farther than we imagine and affect people in ways we do not expect. However, God is always just and compassionate in his dealings with us.

d. The people added to their sinfulness by rejecting their punishment (1:41-46)

As the Israelites faced the prospect of retracing their steps through the desert and back to the Red Sea, the stupidity of their actions dawned on them. They changed their minds and decided that they would like to take possession of the promised land after all. 'Then you replied, "We have sinned against the LORD. We will go up and fight, as the LORD our God commanded us"' (1:41a). Without waiting for God's response, they put on their weapons and set off to attack the Canaanites, 'thinking it easy to go up into the hill country' (1:41b).

By this time it was too late. Moses warned the people of Israel that the Lord would not go with them (1:42-43) and, as a result, they would be an easy prey for the Amorites. 'You will be defeated by your enemies ...' The Lord's warning came true and Moses

reminded them of the tragic consequences of their disobedience. 'The Amorites who lived in those hills came out against you; they chased you like a swarm of bees and beat you down from Seir all the way to Hormah' (1:42, 44). When they cried out to God, 'he paid no attention to your weeping and turned a deaf ear to you' (1:45). For a time the Lord withdrew his face from them, and they languished in the desert of Kadesh for 'many days' (1:46). Like sailors stranded on a desert island they were lost and hopeless, but they had lessons to learn from this experience.

The Israelites were doubly punished (they missed out on the blessings of the promised land and they suffered defeat at the hands of their enemies) because of their double disobedience (they refused to go in when the Lord told them and they went in when the Lord told them to go back to the Red Sea). Their punishment was especially severe because their sins were hidden under a mask of piety. First of all we see the sin of *false repentance*. The Israelites confessed that they had done wrong; but they refused to submit themselves to God's leading in the future. To this they also added the sin of *arrogant presumption*. They expected God to be thankful for their delayed obedience and bless them as though their sin had never happened. They showed no evidence of true sorrow for their sin because they had no understanding of the sinfulness of their actions. If God had blessed them with an easy victory at this point their sinful way of thinking would have continued unchallenged.

Living under God's lordship means *learning to grieve over sin*. When it dawned on the Israelites that they had foolishly rejected the land of the covenant and that they faced another long period in the desert, they must have been bitterly disappointed. As they thought of the privations which lay ahead of them they were truly sorry that they had been so foolish, yet their

disappointment was not the same as true repentance. It was essentially selfish. It is not to be confused with true sorrow for sin which leads to repentance. It is all too easy for us to say that we are sorry for our sin when we see the consequences of our sins staring us in the face; but true repentance grieves over the dishonour which our disobedience causes to God as well as the disappointment which we bear.

Living under God's lordship also means *resolving to accept that God's chastisements are just*. Even though the eternal consequences of sin are removed forever by the atoning work of Christ, God's redeemed people may still suffer temporal and temporary consequences of sin while on earth. One whole generation was condemned to wander in the wilderness because of its rebelliousness. Their words in 1:41 may sound pious and well-intentioned. "Then you replied, "We have sinned against the LORD. We will go up and fight, as the LORD our God commanded us." So every one of you put on his weapons, thinking it easy to go up into the hill country.' They were, however, deeply defiant. Rather than learning from their failure, they dug in their heels and refused to bear God's chastisement.

There are important lessons which Christians today can learn through disappointment and failure. These chastisements may take many different forms—illness, unemployment, financial ruin and the loss of peace of mind. Yet we know that all these proceed from the sovereign providence of God. In response we are to ask, 'What might God be teaching us? Where might we have sinned? How might God be calling us to repentance?' For the Israelites, true repentance meant accepting the disappointing prospect of many more years in the desert. For us it means following our repentance with a new resolve to do the will of our Father in heaven.

Transjordanian Kingdoms
Deuteronomy 2 & 3

