

ANDREW WILSON

THIS IS FOR YOU
TO READ, TO LOVE
THE LAW OF GOD.
THIS IS FOR YOU
TO FEED, HELPING YOU
MEDITATE ON GOD'S
WORD DAY BY DAY. THIS
IS FOR YOU TO LEAD,
EQUIPPING YOU TO
TEACH THE BIBLE TO
OTHERS. THIS IS
DEUTERONOMY
FOR YOU



ANDREW WILSON

DEUTERONOMY FOR YOU



CONTENTS

Series Preface	7
Introduction	9
1. Two Promises <i>Deuteronomy 1 – 3</i>	17
2. The Ten Words <i>Deuteronomy 4 – 5</i>	33
3. The First Word (Part I) <i>Deuteronomy 6 – 7</i>	49
4. The First Word (Part II) <i>Deuteronomy 8 – 11</i>	67
5. The Second and Third Words <i>Deuteronomy 12 – 14</i>	83
6. The Fourth and Fifth Words <i>Deuteronomy 15 – 18</i>	99
7. The Sixth and Seventh Words <i>Deuteronomy 19:1 – 23:14</i>	115
8. The Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Words <i>Deuteronomy 23:15 – 26:19</i>	131
9. Blessings and Curses <i>Deuteronomy 27 – 29</i>	147
10. Restoration <i>Deuteronomy 30 – 31</i>	163
11. A Rock and a Refuge <i>Deuteronomy 32 – 34</i>	177
Further Study	193
Glossary	195
Bibliography	205

SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Deuteronomy For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- NIV: New International Version, 2011 edition. (This is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated.)
- ESV: English Standard Version

INTRODUCTION TO DEUTERONOMY

Imagine being asked to design a book of the Bible from scratch to instruct and encourage 21st-century **believers***. What would you include? What topics would receive the most attention? How would you shape it to make it as impactful as possible?

You would probably want to begin with the basics. The identity and character of God would be an obvious starting point. You could introduce people to the nature, name and attributes of **Israel's** God, using a combination of stories, catchphrases, memory aids, prayers and songs. You could explain the **gospel** by making clear our problem and God's solution. The person and work of Jesus would also be vital. Perhaps you could show how Jesus is our great prophet, who reveals God's ways to us; our great priest, who bore the curse of sin for us by hanging on **the tree**; and our great king, who governs the world with righteousness, justice and mercy.

Presumably you would want to give some kind of overview of the whole biblical story. Many modern people struggle to piece Scripture together, so maybe your book could join all the key events into a continuous narrative: the **Exodus**, the **conquest**, the **judges**, Israel's kings, the **Exile**, the **return**, the **new covenant** and the restoration of all things. Ideally your overview would not just drown readers with facts but show them what they mean. What are the main themes of the biblical story? What encouragements and warnings are there for today's church? How should the history of God's people in the past shape life in the present?

Another important element would be to give some clear and memorable teaching on how God's people should actually live. This is always tricky because it could easily turn into a blizzard of instructions covering virtually everything. But there are ways of making it simple. You could shape it around a well-known set of instructions like the Ten

* Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 195).

Commandments (or what I refer to as the Ten Words), so people could see how God's ancient law applies in specific situations. Maybe you could use **alliteration** to highlight the key words. If you were feeling really brave, you could boil it all down to a single phrase. "The Greatest Commandment" has a nice ring to it.

You might even want some teaching on the life and mission of the church. How do we become part of God's people? Who should lead us, and how should they be trained? How should we read Scripture, fast, pray, give and worship? How should leaders shepherd their churches, and how should parents shepherd their children? When should we meet and for what purpose? How are God's people called to advance, expand, demonstrate his justice and witness to his presence in an unbelieving world? How can we fight sin and overcome the devil? What happens if we don't? What happens if we do? Can we be sure that God will look after us in faithfulness and grace, come what may? And where does it all end?

Given the title of the book you're holding, I'm sure you can see the punchline of this little thought experiment coming a mile away. Nonetheless, here it is: if you were designing a book of the Bible from scratch with the aim of encouraging and instructing 21st-century believers, you might well write something very similar to the book of Deuteronomy.

The Puzzle

Christians do not generally think about Deuteronomy that way. If we were to survey the contemporary church on the popularity of each book of Scripture, it would not surprise me if Deuteronomy got one of the lowest scores. Lots of Christians have never read it; lots of **pastors** have never preached through it; and lots of those who have read it (or even preached through it) have not really understood it. If you spend some time visiting Jewish households in Israel, you will find plenty of homes with passages from Deuteronomy on the doorpost or in the living room. If you do the same with Christian households in the West, not so much.

And this is the great puzzle of Deuteronomy. There is no book in the Bible where the Western church's view is more at odds with the view of the **prophets**, the **psalmists**, the **apostles** and the Lord Jesus.

Prophetic books like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and 1 and 2 Kings have the footprints of Deuteronomy all over them, in a way that very few churches in my city do. The Psalms keep going on about how beautiful and enjoyable God's law is: "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Psalm 119:97, ESV); "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul ... sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb" (19:7-10,ESV); "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law" (119:18). My guess is that even among those who have read Deuteronomy multiple times, some Christians today would struggle to say they find it delightful, sweet and wonderful.



The apostles
quote
Deuteronomy
more than us.

The apostles quote Deuteronomy in their preaching far more than we do, from **Peter's evangelistic** message about Jesus the great prophet in Acts 3 (which is based on Deuteronomy 18:15) to Paul's famous promise in Romans 10:9 that "if you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (which draws from Deuteronomy 30:14). Even more striking is the fact that Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy in his confrontation with **Satan** at the start of his **ministry** (Matthew 4:1-10; Luke 4:1-13), and quoted it again at the end of his ministry when asked what the greatest commandment was (Matthew 22:37-38). Most people I know, if asked to recommend a book on **spiritual warfare** or a verse that summarised the whole Bible, would probably start elsewhere.

This is odd and not just because of the difference between their view and ours but because, in principle, Deuteronomy should have something for everyone. Yet for all its riches—its profound teaching, life-giving hope, soaring poetry and joyous promises—it is often neglected, misunderstood or even ignored altogether.

Why is this? In short, it is because we do not understand it. It opens with a journey, full of places we don't recognise and can't picture; it centres on a code, full of laws we don't follow and can't comprehend; and it ends with two poems, full of lines we don't sing and can't remember. We know it is God's word, important and useful and joyful. We want it to be fuel for reading and writing, feeding and fighting, leading and delighting. We just can't make sense of it.

That's why I have written *Deuteronomy For You*. Happily, there are dozens of excellent resources out there on this marvellous book, from **commentaries** and journal articles to podcasts and online videos, and I will highlight a few examples at the end, but this guide is an attempt to make the meaning of the book as clear as possible—and as thrilling as possible—for people who believe that “man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:3). For ordinary Christians. For you.

The Shape of Deuteronomy

In my experience, the main thing that stops people from making sense of Deuteronomy is confusion over its shape. Large sections of it seem like a jumble of random commands. (When major translations feature subheadings like “Miscellaneous Laws”, it's a sign that people are foggy on the structure.) It can be hard to see the connections, let alone a sense of plot, between the different parts of **Moses'** sermon. Without any structure, it can seem to the reader to be a formless and shapeless mess, like a collapsed soufflé.

So here is the good news: I think there are three good clues to the shape of Deuteronomy. If we get our heads around them, they will help us orient ourselves in each passage, join the dots between the different sections, grasp the narrative of the book and understand what Moses—and ultimately God—is saying. Let me start with the clearest indication and then move outwards to the more contested ones.

The first is pointed out by nearly all modern scholars: Deuteronomy is a covenant treaty, and it is structured very similarly to other ancient

covenants in this period. These “suzerainty treaties” between a king and his subjects were common in the ancient Near East. They had a number of standard elements, which went roughly like this: “This is a treaty between King X and People Y. I am your king, and I have done (or will do) this. You are my subjects, and you must do that. If you do, good things will happen. If you don’t, there will be trouble. Here are some witnesses.”

Deuteronomy uses these elements too, with the Lord as the king and Israel as the subjects. There is a preamble, introducing the parties to the treaty, followed by a historical narrative, explaining the backstory to the covenant and the good things the LORD has done for his people (chapters 1 – 3). The heart of the document contains the stipulations or terms that God places on Israel (chapters 4 – 26). After this there is a list of blessings and curses for Israel, depending on whether they keep their side of the treaty or not (chapters 27 – 30). Finally the treaty is ratified and attested to by witnesses (chapters 31 – 34).

The second clue to the shape of Deuteronomy is a bit more subtle, but I think it is compelling. Many Christian interpreters over the centuries have pointed out that the large central section of the book (chapters 6 – 26) follows the structure of the Ten Words (quoted in chapter 5). There is room to debate exactly where some of the sections start and end, but for my money, the overall picture is remarkably clear:

Chapters	Ten Words	Summary of Deuteronomy
6 – 11	I. Have no other gods	Love and serve the Lord with all your being
12 – 13	II. Make no images	The Lord’s chosen place; do not worship idols
14	III. Do not profane the name	clean and unclean practices and foods; tithes
14 – 16	IV. Keep the Sabbath	The sabbatical year, holy days and feasts

Chapters	Ten Words	Summary of Deuteronomy
16 – 18	V. Honour your parents	Godly leadership: judges, priest , kings and prophets
19 – 22	VI. Do not murder	Manslaughter; warfare; unsolved murders; the curse
22 – 23	VII. Do not commit adultery	Sexual immorality; rape; exclusion; indecency
23 – 24	VIII. Do not steal	Usury ; divorce; manstealing; economic injustice
25	XI. Do not bear false witness	Legal processes; levirate marriage ; just measures
26	X. Do not covet	Generosity, firstfruits , tithes and giving to the poor

In other words, the heart of Deuteronomy is a sermon structured around the Ten Words, which lays out how God wants Israel to live, and what will happen if they do or do not obey.

The third clue, which I have mentioned already, is alliteration. Plenty of **commentators** have drawn attention to the way Moses uses key Hebrew words like *shava* (“**s**wear”), *shama* (“hear/obey”), *shamar* (“keep/guard”) and *shuv* (“turn/return”). But if we look carefully, this alliteration continues throughout the book. Most of the Ten Words have their own key term, like *sheva* (“seven”), *shafat* (“judge”), *shafakh* (“shed/spill”) or *shakhav* (“lie down”). The blessings and curses repeatedly warn against being “destroyed” (*shamad*), and the two poems at the end of the book are Moses’ “song” (*shirah*) and a blessing on each “tribe” (*shevet*).

If we put all of those clues together, we get something like this:

Chapters	Content	Key Word
1 – 3	Historical Narrative: Israel's story so far	<i>Shava</i> (swear)
4 – 5	A Call to Obedience: the Ten Words	<i>Shamar</i> (keep, guard)
6 – 11	1st Word: love and serve the LORD with all your being	<i>Shema</i> (hear, obey)
12 – 14	2nd Word: the LORD's chosen place; don't worship idols	<i>Sham</i> (there)
14	3rd Word: clean/unclean practices and foods; tithes	<i>Shem</i> (name)
14 – 16	4th Word: the sabbatical year, holy days, feasts	<i>Sheva</i> (seven)
16 – 18	5th Word: judges, priests, kings and prophets	<i>Shafat</i> (judge)
19 – 22	6th Word: manslaughter, warfare, unsolved murders	<i>Shafakh</i> (shed, spill)
22 – 23	7th Word: sexual immorality, rape, exclusion, indecency	<i>Shakhav</i> (lie down)
23 – 24	8th Word: usury, divorce, manstealing, economic justice	<i>Shalem</i> (complete, pay)
25	9th Word: legal process, levirate marriage, just measures	<i>Shave</i> (false, empty)
26	10th Word: firstfruits, tithes, giving to the poor	<i>Shakhah</i> (worship)
27 – 29	Blessings and Curses	<i>Shamad</i> (destroy)
30	A Promise of Restoration: circumcised hearts	<i>Shuv</i> (turn, return)
31 – 32	Witnesses: a new leader and a new song	<i>Shirah</i> (song)
33 – 34	The Departure of Moses: final blessings and death	<i>Shevet</i> (tribe)

Hopefully that overview will help you navigate your way through the book. From the point of view of a Christian reader today, the key sections are probably the call to obedience (chapters 4 – 5), the **application** of the first commandment (especially in chapter 6), the promise of restoration (chapter 30) and the Song of Moses (chapter 32). We will see why as we consider each passage.

There are a number of other introductory questions to consider—authorship, date, background and so on—but we will reach those in the opening chapters. It is time to start. Introductions are important, but there is only so much waiting around a person can stand before the journey begins. As Moses puts it, “You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Break camp and advance...” (Deuteronomy 1:6-7).

1. TWO PROMISES

SHAVA: “SWEAR”

Some books of Scripture keep you guessing. If you read John’s Gospel, you don’t find out who wrote it until the final paragraph, and you don’t find out why they wrote it until just a chapter before that. The prophet Joel could have written his book in any one of four different centuries. People are still debating who wrote books like Judges, Kings and Hebrews, as well as when and where.

Others lay their cards on the table immediately. Many of the prophets tell us exactly who, when and where they are in the opening sentence and then get straight to the point of their message. Luke introduces both his Gospel and Acts with a very clear address to the reader. Paul usually jumps right in too: *Paul, to the church in Galatia, what in the world are you playing at?* (I paraphrase.)

But few openings rival Deuteronomy for clarity. In the opening eight verses, we learn all that we could possibly wish to know about who is saying what to whom, when, where, how and why. We will make much better sense of what follows if we pay attention to these details than if we skim through them in a hurry to get to the substance of the book. (Readers who want to know why some modern scholars think Deuteronomy was written many centuries later, and why I think they are wrong, should consult the further reading section at the end of the book.)

Deuteronomy **1:1*** tells us who (Moses) is addressing whom (all Israel), and how: “Moses spoke”, in what we might regard as an

* All verse references from the main passage in focus in each chapter are in **bold**.

extended sermon, as opposed to chiselling something on tablets or writing them a letter. It also tells us where: “in the wilderness east of the Jordan”. If your Middle Eastern geography is a little hazy, and places like Suph and Dizahab might as well be on the moon, then it may help to look at a map of Israel’s journey. Having been set free from slavery in Egypt, Israel has crossed the Red Sea and travelled through the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula, and they now stand on the eastern side of the River Jordan, “in the territory of Moab” (v 5), just to the north of the Dead Sea. They are ready to cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan as soon as God gives the word—but first, Moses prepares them for the task by speaking to them about “this law” (v 5) and how they should live in “the land that the LORD swore he would give to your fathers” (v 8).

The key question, however, is not “what” but “when”. If Israel had obeyed the LORD, then when they had left Horeb (v 6—Horeb is also known as Mount Sinai), their journey to the place where they could go in to possess the land would have taken less than two weeks: “It takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road” (v 2). Yet Moses is not making this speech after two weeks, two months, two years or even two decades, but in the fortieth year (v 3). That delay is not an accident. Israel were not wandering for 40 years because they got lost, walked around in circles for a bit and gave up. Rather, they were suffering the judgment of God for their constant rebellion against him, as Moses will detail later in this chapter. The cloud of God’s presence, which dwelt in the midst of Israel’s camp—and without which Israel had no hope whatsoever of conquering the land—had brought them into the wilderness rather than leading them into Canaan. And God had kept them there for an entire generation, waiting for the rebels and grumblers to die before he brought their children into the **promised land**.

There are two notes of hope here, though. One is that Israel’s fortunes in battle have begun to change. Their wilderness track record of military bungling and dietary grumbling has shifted with the generations; through God’s power they have recently defeated

Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan (**v 4**). These two foreign kings with strange names appear, perhaps unexpectedly, in the Psalms (135:11; 136:19), and it is because they represent a turning point in the story of God's people. The overthrow of Sihon and Og demonstrates that, for all Israel's failures, they remain very loved and God remains very powerful.

The other note of hope is the reminder of the Lord's commitment to give his people the land. As Moses begins his sermon (Deuteronomy **1:6**), he highlights both the command to Israel ("go in and take possession of the land") and the promise of God ("that the LORD swore he would give to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", **v 8**). The fact that Israel never inherits all the territory mentioned here, stretching from the Mediterranean seacoast to the River Euphrates (**v 7**), is down to them. But the fact that they inherit so much, in spite of their failures in the books of Joshua and Judges, is down to God. Scripture, as it so often does, balances human action with divine gift.

Leadership Development

The stage is set for an account of Israel's journey. Moses has got them—and us—ready for a description of how the young nation went from receiving the Ten Words (that is, the Ten Commandments) at Sinai to preparing to enter the land in Moab. He will pick that story up in a moment, and it will take us through to the end of Deuteronomy 3. But first he does something that is both puzzling and revealing: he describes the process of selecting Israel's leaders.

This is puzzling because it would not seem to be the obvious next move. If someone had asked me to summarise the narrative of Israel's wilderness journey, I doubt I would have started with an account of the leadership structure recommended by Moses' father-in-law in Exodus 18. I would probably have jumped straight to Numbers 10 and got on with it.

But this is also revealing because it shows that leadership development is at the heart of what Deuteronomy is about. Very few books of

the Bible, besides Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, spend as much time as Deuteronomy on the appointment and instruction of leaders. Remember, Moses is addressing a generation who he knows will no longer have him to lead them once they enter the land (**1:37**; Numbers 20:1-13) and who will not yet have a king. How then will they be governed? In many ways Deuteronomy is a manual for the judges who will be the answer to that question.

The reason why leaders are needed, Moses reminds them, is that God is faithful. "You are too heavy a burden for me to carry alone," he explains, because "the LORD your God has increased your numbers so that today you are as numerous as the stars in the sky" (Deuteronomy **1:9-11**). In multiplying Israel so abundantly, God has done nothing more than keep his promise to Abraham. But growth brings challenges. Myriads of people mean myriads of problems. And Moses quickly found that he could not carry all Israel's problems, burdens and disputes by himself (**v 12**). He needed a cadre of "wise, understanding and respected men" from each tribe to help him (**v 13**)—and the people recognised the wisdom of this (**v 14**). The apostles experienced the same growth challenges (Acts 6:1-7), and these are ones that pastors today will still recognise.

When appointing and commissioning leaders, churches could learn a lot from Moses' focus here on authority, responsibility, impartiality and humility.

There is no use in appointing leaders if they do not "have authority over you" (Deuteronomy **1:15**). Judges and tribal chiefs, just like elders and deacons, must be authorised to take certain decisions for the good of the people; if they do not have that authority, then every decision will either bounce up to the senior leader (in this case Moses) or descend into a democratic bunfight. We need (literally) "heads", a word which Moses repeats three times but which often gets lost in translation (**v 13, 15, 17**).

Not all leaders will have the same responsibility, however. Some will be more effective at overseeing larger groups, and some will excel

in smaller contexts, which is presumably why people are variously appointed “as commanders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens and as tribal officials” (v 15). Notice that this is not a measurement of godliness. Each of these men, whatever the scale of their responsibility, is required to be wise, understanding and respected (v 13). But anyone who has spent any time in organisational leadership—even if it is not at the same scale as Moses!—will know that the skills required to lead thousands are different from those required to lead tens.

The primary charge Moses gives them is to act “fairly” and never to “show partiality” (v 16-17). There are several scenarios to which this applies. Judges might wish to favour an Israelite over a “foreigner” (v 16). They might prioritise cases brought by influential and wealthy people and neglect or ignore those brought by unknown, poor ones; they might be afraid of some people and skew their judgments accordingly (v 17). But you can only represent an impartial Judge if you pass impartial judgments and “hear both small and great alike”. Leaders can serve God’s people without being strategic thinkers or polished communicators, but not if we are prone to bias and partiality.



The primary charge Moses gives them is to act “fairly”.

It sounds like a high bar, and it is. But Moses finishes his charge with a comforting note: “‘Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it.’ And at that time I told you everything you were to do” (v 17-18). Having Moses as a backup when things got sticky must have been hugely reassuring for those leaders who felt disqualified for the task before them. At the same time, for those more inclined to self-assurance and pride, there is an important challenge to work with humility here. Some cases will be too hard for you. You will need to rely on the wisdom of others. If Moses couldn’t carry the burden on his own, then the chances are that you won’t be able to either.

Two Reversals

In some ways, Israel's wilderness journey was a reversal of Genesis. In other ways it was a reversal of the Exodus.

Adam and Eve fell because they failed to listen to God over whether or not they could eat fruit (Genesis 3:1-7). So did Israel, according to this passage. The obvious difference, and the reason why Israel's journey is a reversal of Genesis 3 rather than a rehash of it, is that Adam and Eve were told not to eat good fruit, and they did. Israel was offered good fruit to eat, and they didn't.

The fruit in question was brought by spies. Having travelled from Horeb through the "vast and dreadful wilderness", Israel was poised at Kadesh Barnea, ready to "go up and take possession" of the land the LORD was giving (Deuteronomy **1:19-21**). They suggested spying out the land first. Moses liked the idea, so he chose one man from each tribe and sent them on a reconnaissance mission (**v 22-23**). The land was every bit as bountiful as God had promised it would be, with bunches of grapes so large that it took two men to carry them (Numbers 13:23). They called the place "Eshkol", meaning "cluster" (Deuteronomy **1:24**) and took back fruit as proof that "it is a good land that the LORD our God is giving us" (**v 25**)—although we know from Numbers 13:31-33 that ten of the twelve spies were distracted from the giant clusters by the clusters of giants (called the "Anakites" in Deuteronomy **1:28**). Yet, in a dramatic reversal of Eden, Israel refused to listen, refused to eat, and refused to believe.

There follows one of the most devastating paragraphs in Scripture: "But you were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, 'The LORD hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us'" (**v 26-27**). There are several tragic ironies here. Israel was delivered because God loved them; here, they claim it was because he hated them. They think they will be destroyed if they enter the land; in fact, a whole generation is destroyed because they don't. Crucially, the people have completely forgotten that "the

LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes" (**v 30**). The entire nation had witnessed God's miraculous deliverance, and to that day the Lord had accompanied Israel in cloud and fire (**v 33**), guiding them by his presence and keeping them cool by day and warm at night. *You saw with your own eyes*, Moses says movingly, "how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son" (**v 30-31**). They did not need to be afraid (**v 29**). Yet still "you did not trust in the LORD your God" (**v 32**).

Consequently, Israel experienced a sort of reverse Exodus. Instead of pressing forward to enter the land, they were sent backwards towards the Red Sea (**v 40**), as if they were going back to Egypt. Instead of humbly conquering by the strength of God, they arrogantly tried to conquer in their own strength and were resoundingly routed (**v 41-43**). (Notice that it is possible to disobey God either through fearful timidity or through swaggering overconfidence, because both reflect a heart that is reliant on self rather than on God.) Instead of chasing down their enemies as God had promised, they were chased themselves by the Amorites who were "like a swarm of bees" (**v 44**), and they ended up back where they started at Kadesh (**v 46**). An entire generation was disinherited, including Moses himself (**v 37, 39**). The only exceptions were Caleb, "because he followed the LORD wholeheartedly" (**v 36**), and Joshua, "because he will lead Israel to inherit it" (**v 38**).

This appalling reversal is highlighted by some clever plays on the Hebrew words for "swear" and "hear". First we read this: "When the LORD heard [*shama*] what you said, he was angry and solemnly swore [*shava*]: 'No one from this evil generation shall see the good land I swore [*shava*] to give your ancestors'" (**v 34-35**). These two divine promises—to disinherit the evil generation but to give the land to Israel nonetheless—are the backbone of this entire section.

A more subtle wordplay follows: "I told you, but you would not listen [*shama*] ... You came back and wept before the LORD, but he paid no attention [*shama*] to your weeping and turned a deaf ear to

you” (v 43, 45). It sounds like an ear for an ear. Israel did not hear God, so God (temporarily) chooses not to hear them.

But not permanently. That will become clear as the rest of Deuteronomy unfolds. And beyond that, it will be made clearest on the night when another Joshua who follows the Lord wholeheartedly and leads Israel to inherit God’s promises sits down for a meal with his friends. He offers them food, and indeed grapes, from the new world they are going to be given. He reminds them of God’s **Passover** promise to redeem them from slavery. Only this time they take, eat, hear, and believe (Matthew 26:26-29).

Questions for reflection

1. What does the opening of Deuteronomy teach us about the danger of disbelieving God’s promises?
2. How do these chapters show God’s grace and mercy towards the sin of his people?
3. How do these truths encourage you today?

PART TWO

Three Nations Israel Should Not Fight

The first chapter of Deuteronomy brought us the bad news: that through rebellion, unbelief and grumbling, the Exodus generation forfeited the promised land. The next two chapters present a more encouraging story. God's promise to Israel still stands, and the second generation will inherit it. Their recent travels on their way to the land provide the proof.

Moses starts by reminding Israel of three encounters that did not lead to conflict—with Edom (**2:1-8**), Moab (**v 9-15**), and Ammon (**v 16-23**)—before describing two which did in the next section. These three encounters are narrated in very similar ways, with repeated phrases, identical rationale, and extended comments about historical background and terminology (which many translations put in parentheses). When recurring patterns like this appear in Scripture, it is always worth noting them and considering what they might have to teach us.

All three accounts begin with orders not to fight the people whose land Israel are passing. The first concerns Edom, the descendants of Esau, whose land is the furthest south (and is best known today for the ancient city of Petra, familiar to everyone who has seen *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*). The Lord is very clear: “They will be afraid of you, but be very careful. Do not provoke them to war” (**v 4-5**). As Israel move north, with the Dead Sea to their left, they receive identical instructions about Moab (**v 9**) and Ammon (**v 19**): “Do not harass them or provoke them to war”.

This might seem surprising. Israel will shortly be conquering all sorts of cities and territories, and we know from the rest of Scripture that Edom, Moab and Ammon were frequently thorns in the side of God's people and suffered judgment accordingly. We also know that Edom and Moab were extremely unhelpful towards Israel in this period, denying their requests, raising an army against them, cursing them and

leading them into **idolatry** (Numbers 20:14-21; 22:4-6; 25:1-5). So why does God order that they are not to be fought or even provoked?

The answer is the same in each case: *this land is not your land*. God, in his faithfulness to Abraham's family, has given the land of Edom to Esau's descendants (Deuteronomy **2:5**), the land of Moab to Lot's descendants through his older son (**v 9**), and the land of Ammon to Lot's descendants through his younger son (**v 19**). As we know, the Lord has a bountiful land marked out for his people Israel, and he has sworn to give it to them. So there is no need to squabble with Edom, Moab or Ammon, whom God calls "your relatives" (**v 4**). In fact, they should pay for anything they use on the way (**v 6**).

God confirms his gift of territory to these three nations by giving us some historical backstory. We often assume that Israel was unique in seeing God drive out giant-like peoples before them to give them a new land. (These giant-like people were variously called Emmites, Rephaites or Zamzummmites, much as different languages today might identify Germany, Allemagne and Deutschland as the same place.) But no: Moab's land was previously inhabited by "a people strong and numerous, and as tall as the Anakites" (**v 10**). So was Ammon's, until "the LORD destroyed them from before the **Ammonites**, who drove them out and settled in their place" (**v 21**). God did the same for Esau's descendants "when he destroyed the Horites from before them" (**v 22**), enabling them to settle "just as Israel did in the land the LORD gave them as their possession" (**v 12**). As members of Abraham's family, each of these nations were given territory by God. The exception that proves the rule was the conquest of Gaza by the Caphtorites (**v 23**), sea people from Crete who were later known as Philistines and who bore no relation to Abraham or what he was promised.

In the midst of these three accounts sit two reminders of God's activity for Israel, which pick up on the two things God "swore" in Deuteronomy 1. (This passage is structured like a Big Mac, with the parts about Edom, Moab and Ammon as the buns and the parts about Israel as the two patties.) The first reminds them of God's promise of

favour: “The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything” (2:7). The second reminds them of God’s promise of judgment: “By then, that entire generation of fighting men had perished from the camp, as the LORD had sworn to them. The LORD’s hand was against them until he had completely eliminated them from the camp” (v 14-15). Yet even this judgment is a means of future blessing, as God’s judgments so often are; it clears the decks for Israel to cross the River Zered and move towards the land. “So we crossed the valley” (v 13).

Two Kings Israel Should Fight

A friend of mine used to sing in the choir at Liverpool Cathedral. He once described the challenge of singing Psalm 136:18-20: “[to him] who killed mighty kings—his love endures forever; Sihon king of the Amorites—his love endures forever; and Og king of Bashan—his love endures forever”. It is theologically challenging because most of us are hazy on who these two men were, why they were killed and why that deserves to stand alongside God’s creation of the stars (v 7-9) as a reason to praise him. It is musically challenging too. No matter how cherubic a choirboy you are, you cannot make the word “Og” sound attractive.

There is not much I can do about the second of these, except to point out that Og means “long-necked” and his bed was nine **cubits** long and four cubits wide (Deuteronomy 3:11), so the grim sound of the name is probably part of the point. On the first challenge, though, we saw in Deuteronomy 1 that the defeats of Sihon and Og are the first military victories of the second generation and are therefore a turning point in the wilderness story, serving as confirmation that God will continue to fight for Israel and give them the land in spite of their previous failures. In a sense, the defeats of Sihon and Og, which Moses recounts in 2:24 – 3:11, provide a double testimony to

God's victorious faithfulness, so that his word might be confirmed by the words of two or three witnesses (17:6). That's why their deaths appear in the Psalms, and it's also why they get so much space here.

We immediately notice the contrast with Edom, Moab and Ammon. After three cycles of instructions not to provoke people because their land has been given to them, our attention is seized by the sudden change when it comes to the Amorites: "See, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his country. Begin to take possession of it and engage him in battle" (**2:24**). From now on, God says, the nations will be in "terror and fear" of Israel and will "tremble and be in anguish" (**v 25**).

The obvious question is: why? What is the difference? We have already touched on part of the answer: namely the Lord's faithfulness to Abraham's family (specifically Esau and Lot) and their descendants. But there is another clue in the Abraham story. When God first makes a covenant promise to give him offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky, he adds that there will be a delay before those offspring inherit the land, "for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Genesis 15:16). Now, as Israel approach their inheritance, the Amorites and their king are going to face the judgment they have long deserved.

There is a personal dimension here too. Sihon responds to Israel's request of safe passage with unprovoked aggression. Moses sends messengers "offering peace", committing not to leave the main road and insisting on paying for everything (Deuteronomy **2:26-29**); Sihon not only refuses to let them through but comes out in battle against them instead (**v 30-32**). Partly this is simple old-fashioned bullying tactics from a Bronze Age strongman. But in an echo of the Exodus story which does not bode well for Sihon, it also happens because "the LORD your God had made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate in order to give him into your hands" (**v 30**).

The results are devastating. The Lord gives Sihon and his armies into Israel's hands; the Amorite fortifications are utterly destroyed, leaving

no survivors and with only the animals left as plunder (**v 31-37**). When Israel approaches Bashan, King Og makes exactly the same mistake as Sihon (**3:1-2**) and faces exactly the same consequences (**v 3**): all 60 of their fortified towns are captured along with many unwalled villages (**v 4-5**), with their livestock taken and armies destroyed. The result of the Amorite campaign is that Israel “took all the towns on the plateau, and all Gilead, and all Bashan as far as Salekah and Edrei” (**v 10**).

Many readers are understandably troubled by the violence here, especially the references to complete destruction: “leaving no survivors” and encompassing “men, women and children” (**2:34; 3:3, 6**). This is something we will consider in more detail when we get to Deuteronomy 7. For now, however, we should note three things. First is that the cities being spoken of here were fortified military garrisons rather than population centres; they functioned more like castles than residential or commercial areas. Second is that hyperbole—the accepted use of exaggeration for effect—was a common feature of ancient battle narratives in this part of the world, and people knew that “men, women and children, leaving no survivors” referred to a comprehensive victory rather than a literal obliteration of every last person. (We might describe a sporting or political victory as “smashing” or “obliterating” our opponents, but we would be alarmed if anyone took us literally.) And third is that Moses himself suggests we should read this as hyperbole when he tells us that the cities were “destroyed” on the one hand, but “captured” and “given” to three Israelite tribes on the other (**3:6, 12**). This makes it likely that we are talking about a crushing defeat rather than total war.

Three Encouragements

Israel are still on the eastern side of the River Jordan. They will not cross it and enter the land properly until the start of the book of Joshua. But they have taken plenty of land from the Amorites on the eastern side of the river, as we have just seen, and they were eager to settle it. At this point Moses reminds the people that in the past he allocated that

land to two and a half of Israel's twelve tribes: the Reubenites and the Gadites (**v 12, 16-17**), and the half-tribe of Manasseh (**v 13-15**).

This posed two potential problems. One is that it split the nation into two sections, which could cause misunderstandings later (as indeed it did—see Joshua 22). The other is that it would make Israel's army smaller and weaker. If the men in the eastern tribes decided that they had plenty of land already, and didn't want to fight for territory that they would never settle in, then the nation as a whole will suffer.

Moses therefore put a condition on their inheritance. "All your able-bodied men, armed for battle, must cross over ahead of the other Israelites," he explained, "until the LORD gives rest to your fel-

low Israelites as he has to you, and they too have taken over the land that the LORD your God is giving them across the Jordan" (Deuteronomy **3:18, 20**). The women, the children and the animals could stay behind on the east side of the river, since they were not fighting (**v 19**). But the men of battle age needed to fight for their brothers' territory on the western side, just as their brothers have fought for theirs. When the

land was conquered and God gave rest to the nation, then the fighting men could return home.

The unity and solidarity of God's people here is vital for our doctrine of the church. In this passage we see the people of God united across space, despite being on opposite sides of a river. Moses also presents them as united across time, by continually addressing the people as if they had witnessed events that took place before most of them were born (**1:19-46**). Israel is one and, in a similar way, it reminds us that the church of Jesus Christ is one. If one part suffers, or conquers, or (in this case) has battles to fight for their inheritance, then everyone does.

The unity and solidarity of God's people is vital for our doctrine of the church.



The rest of the chapter contains three encouragements for us. First Moses recounts the time he spoke to Joshua and assured him that the kingdoms ahead of him would meet the same fate as the kingdoms behind him had (**3:21**): “Do not be afraid of them; the LORD your God himself will fight for you” (**v 22**). Then Moses reminds the people that at that time he spoke to God and asked permission to enter the land, because the events he had seen—plagues, angels, Passover, escape, cloud, fire, the parting of the Red Sea, bread from heaven, water from the rock, and the rest—were only just the start of what he knew God would do. “Sovereign LORD, you have begun to show to your servant your greatness and your strong hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do?” (**v 24**). These are two (literally) en-couraging statements, putting courage into our hearts on the basis of God’s track record in the past and his commitment to see it through in the future.

The third statement looks more negative. Moses again recalls that in response to his plea to be allowed to enter the land (**v 23-25**), God told him he would never enter it and should stop asking, leaving it to Joshua instead (**v 26-28**). There is a nice bit of wordplay here, which works intriguingly well in British English: Moses asks if he can “cross” (*avar*) into the land, and the LORD says no because he is “cross” (*avar*) with him on account of the people (**v 25-26**). But how is this anything other than a terrible disappointment for Moses? Why is it encouraging?

Because the death of Moses makes Israel’s inheritance possible. Moses is a wonderful leader, but he can only take the people so far; to receive all that God has for them, they need a new leader, a Joshua, who will take them through the Jordan River into the land of promise. And that is a powerful picture of what was to come. The Law of Moses was also a wonderful gift, as we will see throughout Deuteronomy, but it could only take God’s people so far; the apostle Paul calls it a guardian who leads us to Christ (Galatians 3:24). What we really need, if we are to receive the fullness of our inheritance, is a new

Joshua—a Yeshua, pronounced “Jesus” in English—who will take us through the waters of baptism into the land of promise.

Moses has taken Israel as far as he can. It will fall to Joshua to cross the Jordan when the people move on from near Beth Peor: “Commission Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he will lead this people across and will cause them to inherit the land that you will see” (Deuteronomy **3:28-29**). Given their failures so far, and the challenges ahead of them, Israel are in desperate need of a Joshua who is courageous, faithful and obedient. So are we.

Questions for reflection

1. God blesses us despite our sin. How does this passage help you have a greater sense of God’s grace in your life?
2. Israel’s leaders were to be unbiased and impartial. How will you follow that example in the areas in which God has given you the task of leadership (i.e. at home, at work, in the church)?
3. What expectations do you bring to Deuteronomy? Ask God to show you more of himself as you read it.

2. THE TEN WORDS

***SHAMAR*: “KEEP”**

Seen and Unseen

The introduction is over. The scene is set. A detailed historical narrative has explained how **Israel** have reached the plains of Moab, on the verge of entering the promised land—much of which involved reminders of their rebellion and God’s faithfulness. Now **Moses** tells the people what to do about it. If the key word in Deuteronomy 1 – 3 is *shava* (“swear”), as the **LORD** swears to destroy the Exodus generation but lead their children into the land anyway, then the key word in Deuteronomy 4 – 5 is *shamar* (“keep, guard, take care”), as God charges Israel to “keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you” (**v 2**).

The change of focus in the text is made obvious by the language. Until this point, Moses has been speaking in the past tense, using indicatives to describe what has already happened: “the LORD said”, “we turned”, “you would not go up”. Now he suddenly switches to imperatives, or words of instruction. The opening verse alone includes five examples which will feature prominently in the rest of the book: “hear”, “follow”, “live”, “go in” and “take possession” (**v 1**).

It is followed by two things they must not do: namely “do not add to what I command you” or “subtract from it” (**v 2**). This instruction is echoed in the final chapter of Scripture (Revelation 22:18-19), which implies that the temptation to supplement God’s word or chop bits out of it was not unique to ancient Israel. The early church, for example, had to contend with both adders (like the writers of the **Gnostic**

Gospels) and subtracters (like the **heretic** Marcion, who tried to remove all the Jewish portions of the New Testament). In more recent centuries, we could think of adders like Joseph Smith, author of the Book of Mormon, and subtracters like Thomas Jefferson, who literally took scissors to the **Gospels** to take all the miracles out. Moses warns against both.

Instead of adders or subtracters, God's people are to be keepers, guardians, and carers (that key word, *shamar*). That means guarding the words of God themselves, by ensuring that subsequent generations neither elaborate on or chip away at them. But it means two other things as well. First, it means that Israel need to actually keep God's commands, rather than merely knowing them ("observe [*shamar*] them carefully" (Deuteronomy **4:6**), unlike the Israelites who followed the Baal of Peor and were destroyed (**v 3-4**; Numbers 25:1-18). And, secondly, it means that Israel need to keep, guard and watch their own lives, and make sure that they do not forget all that God has done for them: "Only be careful [*shamar*], and watch [*shamar*] yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them" (Deuteronomy **4:9**).

There are two main reasons for this. One is what we might call evangelistic: "This will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations" (v 6). When Israel keeps God's commands, the surrounding nations will marvel at the greatness of Israel because their Lord is so near and their law is so righteous. "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws?" (**v 7-8**). **Pagans** worship gods who are fickle and distant. When they see evidence of a God who is both proximate in prayer and just in judgment, they are drawn to him and his people.

The other reason is **experiential**, based on what Israel have seen and what they have not seen. Again, wordplay does a lot of

work here. “You saw with your own eyes what the LORD did at Baal Peor” (v 3). “See, I have taught you decrees and laws” (v 5). “Do not forget the things your eyes have seen” (v 9). The people have seen astonishing things, from the recent judgment at Moab (v 3-4) stretching right back to “the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb” (v 10). “You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness” (v 11). Remembering what they have seen is critical to keeping the law.

But so is remembering what they have not seen. “Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice” (v 12). The gods of the nations are made of wood and stone; they can be seen but not heard. The LORD, on the other hand, is the invisible, **transcendent** Creator of all things; he can be heard but not seen. Israel was unique in worshipping the Maker, not the made. And at Sinai, when Israel heard the LORD but saw nothing, “he declared to you his **covenant**, the Ten Words, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone **tablets**” (v 13, my paraphrase). That’s why Moses is teaching the law to Israel (v 14), and that’s why Israel should keep it.

Jealous and Merciful

We need to talk about jealousy. Deuteronomy in general and this chapter in particular are both impossible to understand without making sense of **verse 24**: “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God”. In a culture where jealousy is almost always portrayed as a bad thing—from Shakespeare’s “green-eyed monster” to the seething resentment that rival siblings might feel over each other’s toys—the proclamation of God’s jealousy can feel like an awkward admission: an embarrassing reminder of the primitive pettiness of Bronze Age religion. When was the last time you sang a song praising God for being jealous? When did you last hear a sermon on the subject?

Here is the problem: in modern English, most people do not distinguish between jealousy and envy. The two words seem almost identical. Yet in reality they are almost opposite concepts. Envy, which is frequently exposed in Scripture as a family-destroying, bone-rotting, Christ-killing work of the flesh, is a fierce desire for something that rightly belongs to someone else (e.g. Proverbs 14:30; Matthew 27:18, ESV; Galatians 5:21). Jealousy, by contrast, is a fierce desire for something that rightly belongs to you. Envy is when you want to sleep with someone else's husband or wife; jealousy is when you don't want anyone else to sleep with yours.

When we grasp that, we can see that if a perfectly faithful lover is jilted by their beloved, it is not wrong for them to feel jealous; in fact, it would be wrong for them not to. We can see this even in our own relationships. If I did not feel jealous about someone else having an affair with my wife or taking my children from me, I would not show how much I loved them but how little (none of which is to excuse forms of sinful and controlling jealousy in a relationship). And the point is much sharper when we consider things from God's perspective. If the LORD, having taken Israel out of Egypt and carried them through the wilderness, were to see his people building idols and worshipping foreign gods, fierce jealousy would be the only appropriate response. That is how lovers react when they are betrayed—and the greater the love, the greater the betrayal and the greater the jealousy.

This is the reason why Moses reiterates his instruction to “watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol” (Deuteronomy **4:15-16**), whether in the shape of a human, animal, bird, fish or heavenly body. These examples work backwards through the creation week, starting with humans on day 6 and finishing with the sun, moon and stars on day 4, as if to show their increasing distance from the worship of God on day 7. Note, also, that these things are “apportioned to all the nations under heaven” (**v 19**), who at this point are still living in what Paul later calls “ignorance” that God has “overlooked” (Acts 17:29-30). But Israel is different: “The LORD took you and brought you out of the iron-smelt-

ing furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are" (Deuteronomy **4:20**). Iron-smelting furnaces were where images were made. Through the Exodus, God has formed Israel into his image-bearers, not his image-makers. They are the "smeltees", not the smelters. And so are we. That is important to remember, even if the idols we are tempted to make are from things like money, sex and power rather than producing deities of metal, wood and stone.

This is personal for Moses. He has experienced the consequences of God's jealousy for Israel: "The LORD was angry with me because of you, and he solemnly swore that I would not cross the Jordan ... I will die in this land" (**v 21-22**). On the face of it, this sounds harsh, although we get a fuller version of the story in Numbers 20:10-13. But Moses is not bitter. Rather, he urges the people to learn from his experience. "Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol" (Deuteronomy **4:23**) because "the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (**v 24**).

All of which makes it a colossal relief to read the next paragraph. Admittedly it starts ominously, with the possibility—later a reality—of Israel falling into idolatry once they are settled in the land (**v 25**) and facing destruction and exile as a result (**v 26-27**). *If you really want to worship foreign gods, Moses says, then you will* (**v 28**). As Aslan famously puts it, "All get what they want; they do not always like it" (C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*, p. 174.) But then comes hope. Moses issues the following promise. If, in the end, Israel come to their senses in the pigsty of exile and seek the Lord, "you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul" (**v 29**). This is a prophecy, not a mere possibility: "In later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him" (**v 30**). The reason for this is that besides being a jealous God, "the LORD your God is a merciful God" (**v 31**). His jealousy brings judgment, but his mercy brings restoration. His jealousy will take them into exile, and his mercy will bring them back again. Ultimately, the consuming fire of his jealousy and the overflowing waters of his mercy will meet at the cross.

Incomparable

There is only one God. Nothing and nobody in heaven or on earth can compare with him.

In the final section of this chapter, Moses again calls both heaven and earth as witnesses to the uniqueness, otherness and exceptionalism of the Lord, grounding his incomparability in three realities that Israel have experienced for themselves. “Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of?” (v 32). From the time of creation until now, and from one end of heaven to

Nothing has
happened
anywhere that
resembles the
Lord’s dealings
with Israel.



the other, there is a deafening silence. The answer is no. Nothing has happened anywhere, ever, that resembles the Lord’s dealings with Israel in the Exodus, at Sinai and in the **conquest** that was to come.

Moses starts with Sinai rather than the Exodus. “Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived?” (v 33).

He soon returns to this point: “From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire” (v 36). Initially that appears surprising. Sinai came after the Exodus, not before it, and the Exodus seems to us like a much more dramatic example of God’s incomparability than the giving of the law. But Moses does not see it this way, for two reasons.

First, as he has argued already in this chapter, God’s uniqueness is bound up with the fact that he can be heard but not seen, as opposed to the gods of the nations, who can be seen but not heard. (Isaiah 40 – 46 makes a similar point in an extended and often hilarious way. So does **Elijah** on **Mount Carmel** in 1 Kings 18.) No other people have ever heard the voice of God speaking out of the fire, without seeing anything. Quite the opposite: they have seen an image

of a god emerging from a fire, without hearing anything. Second, the defining encounter in Moses' own life also centred on hearing the voice of God speaking out of fire. This is what happened to him at **the burning bush**, when the divine name was first revealed to him (Exodus 3:1-22). So for Moses, these twin encounters in which God spoke from within the fire on Mount Sinai are foundational to God's utter otherness.

He then moves on to the Exodus. "Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?" (Deuteronomy **4:34**). The answer, clearly, is no. The Egyptian "gods" were systematically humiliated by the ten plagues: Hapi the Nile god, Heket the frog-like fertility goddess, Geb the dust god, Apis and Hathor the livestock gods, Nut the sky god and Ra the sun god, right up to the ultimate Egyptian deity, Pharaoh himself. None of them could defend themselves, let alone the Egyptians. Only the Lord has the power to work wonders like these. "You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other" (**v 35**).

Finally he moves to Israel's more recent victories, and the conquest of the land which they foreshadow. "Because he loved your ancestors and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as it is today" (**v 37-38**). Notice the logical sequence here: love > election > Exodus > victory > inheritance. God loved your fathers, so he chose their "**seed**," so he delivered you from Egypt by his "**face**" (*paneḥ*, sometimes translated "presence"), so you have defeated nations that are bigger than you, so you are inheriting the land. The final link in the chain is the conclusion: God is incomparable. "Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There

is no other" (v 39). So you must "keep" [shamar] his commandments, that it may go well with you (v 40).

We are now ready to hear the Ten Words. Very shortly we will. But in a move that modern readers find totally baffling, after all this protracted build-up, Moses stops speaking and unexpectedly sets apart "three cities east of the Jordan, to which anyone who had killed a person could flee if they had unintentionally killed a neighbour" (v 41-42). Whenever Israel conquers parts of the land, they set up cities of refuge to protect people from vengeance in cases of manslaughter, and these cities play a significant role in Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua. (As yet there are only three because Israel have not yet crossed the Jordan and only the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh have received their inheritance.) Presumably setting up cities of refuge would not be our first priority when conquering new territory. But the God who helped an oppressed nation to flee and save their life, because of his compassion, insists on helping unfortunate individuals to "flee into one of these cities and save their life" (Deuteronomy 4:42). Before law comes mercy. Those of us who are apprehensive about God's law, and anxious about the ways we have broken it, can find great comfort in the fact that even in the book of the law itself, mercy comes first.

Questions for reflection

1. How will keeping God's commands today have an impact on the wider community that you are part of?
2. Think of ways that you are tempted to add to or subtract from God's word. When are you most likely to ignore it and adapt it to fit your own sinful desires?
3. Ask God to help you have a right view of his word and to trust and obey it, even when you find it hard.

PART TWO

The Face, the Fire and the Fear

The whole of **the Mosaic law** can be summarised in Ten Words. In Exodus, in Deuteronomy, in Christ's teaching in the Gospels, in Paul's letters, and in the history of the church, these Ten Commandments have served as a summary of how God calls his people to live.

They shape a large section of **the Sermon on the Mount** (Matthew 5:21-48). Jesus teaches that kingdom living involves rooting out anger, not just murder (sixth word); lust, not just adultery (seventh word); divorce, not just theft (eighth word); oaths, not just false witness (ninth word); refusing to give, not just coveting (tenth word). The Ten Words appear in Jesus' challenges to the **Pharisees** (Mark 7:9-23) and the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-19). They shape the **ethical** teaching of Paul's letters (1 Timothy 1:8-10). They are also central to the church's **catechisms**, of which Luther's Small Catechism (1529) and the **Heidelberg Catechism** (1563) are the best examples.

More importantly for our purposes here, they shape the book of Deuteronomy as a whole. For the next 22 chapters, Moses' sermon will be ordered around the Ten Words. They represent the conditions of the covenant that the LORD is making with Israel, so it is important that Israel understand how they apply: what it means to have no other gods before him, what honouring your mother and father looks like, what qualifies as sexual (un)faithfulness and so forth. Just as a pastor today might point out that the ninth word means telling the truth in all of life and not just the courtroom, with examples of what that might mean, so Moses goes through all kinds of scenarios to show how obeying the Ten Words will look in practice. That is the essence of Deuteronomy 6 – 26.

Before listing the Ten Words, however, there is a brief recap of the book so far. "This is the law Moses set before the Israelites. These are the stipulations, decrees and laws Moses gave them when they came out of Egypt and were in the valley near Beth Peor east of the Jordan"

(4:44-46), after defeating the Amorite kings Sihon and Og (v 46-47) and settling in the land east of the Jordan (v 48-49). Moses “summoned all Israel” (5:1) and reminded them of the covenant that God had made with them in Horeb, and the importance of keeping it (v 2).

Even in this short summary, there are a couple of striking details. One is Moses’ insistence on what we might call the corporate solidarity of Israel. This has come up before, but it is particularly emphatic here because it involves a denial as well as an affirmation: “It was not with our ancestors that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today” (v 3). Bear in mind the fact that the vast majority of people listening to Moses in Moab were not actually present at Sinai—and the fact that their fathers and mothers were—and you will see how challenging this statement is for individualist Westerners like us, who prefer to think that we are personally and solely responsible for all our achievements. *The covenant was not just with our fathers*, Moses says; *all of us were present in the body of our ancestors* (see Hebrews 7:10 for a comparison). *In that sense*, “the LORD spoke to you” (Deuteronomy 5:4), *even if you weren’t physically there. You will all receive blessings if you keep it, and you will all face judgment if you don’t.*

Notice also how Moses summarises the encounter at Mount Horeb, highlighting the face, the fire and the fear. “The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. (At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain)” (v 4-5). Sinai was a direct, personal, face-to-face encounter between the Lord and Israel; at the same time, it was an awesome, fear-inducing experience of fire and storm, thunder and lightning, which is why Moses had to stand between them and God. Divine encounters typically involve that mixture of infinity and intimacy, glory and gospel, majesty and mercy, fiery fear and face-to-face encounter.

The Ten Words

Rescue comes before rules. **Redemption** comes before instruction. Lots of people do not really notice it, even if they have read the Ten Words many times, but the first thing the Lord gives Israel is not a command of what they must do to be saved but a reminder of how God has saved them already. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (**v 6**). First deliverance; then direction. First **grace**, then **works**.

We should not underestimate the importance of the chronology here. God does not speak his words of command to Israel when they are still enslaved in Egypt. The Exodus is not conditional upon effort. No, God liberates Israel first, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, freeing them from captivity through the blood of a slain lamb, leading them to safety with pillars of cloud and fire, drowning their enemies in the waters of the Red Sea, and providing them with miraculous water and heavenly bread. Only then does he give Israel the Ten Words, in which he lays out the way he wants them to live in response. We see the same sequence in the life of Abraham, as Paul makes clear in Romans 4, and of course in the gospel of Jesus. First he frees; then we follow.

The central thing the Ten Words are about is God himself.

Because the Ten Words are so well known, and because they are gradually elaborated over the next 20 or so chapters, we will not go into detail here on each of them individually. But this is a good opportunity to reflect on the Ten collectively. What are they about? How are they ordered? What story do they tell?

It might sound obvious, but the central thing the Ten Words are about is God himself. They reveal his name ("the LORD your God", Deuteronomy **5:6**), his redemption ("who brought you out of the land of Egypt", **v 6**), his oneness ("you shall have no other gods

before me”, **v 7**) and his invisibility (“you shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything”, **v 8**). They affirm his jealousy (**v 9**), his justice in holding the guilty to account (**v 11**), and even more his steadfast love, which lasts to a thousand generations and outstrips his punishments by several orders of magnitude (**v 10**). If we look carefully, they also point towards the Lord’s holiness in the requirement to observe the Sabbath (**v 12**), and his generosity in giving Israel the land and blessing them if they honour their parents (**v 16**). There are other things to say about the nature of Israel’s God, but this is a pretty comprehensive start.

At the same time, the Ten Words are about the recent story of Israel. The Exodus is mentioned twice, at the start of the first word (**v 6**) and the end of the fourth word (**v 15**), and the commandments follow its basic shape. The Lord displayed his utter **sovereignty** over the Egyptian gods (first and second words), revealed his name at the burning bush (third word) and gave Israel rest from their enemies (fourth word), who were dishonouring their fathers and particularly their mothers (fifth word) through a regime of killing (sixth word), theft (eighth word) and economic injustice (tenth word). Just as the Declaration of Independence only makes sense within the history of 18th-century Britain and America, so the Ten Words draw their meaning from the events of Exodus 1 – 15.

Another way of thinking about the structure is as a list of priorities for life. The Ten Words start with God (Deuteronomy **5:7-11**) before moving to society (**v 12-15**), then family (**v 16**), life (**v 17**), sex (**v 18**) and property (**v 19-21**). As Christopher Wright points out, however, “In Western society at least, modern culture has almost precisely inverted this order of priorities” (Wright, *Deuteronomy*, p. 66). There is still a widespread commitment to protecting people from the consequences of libel and **perjury** (ninth word) and theft (eighth word). Most people would rather nobody committed adultery (seventh word), at least against their friends and family members, and we all oppose many forms of killing (sixth word), although the number of groups who can become casualties of exemptions from this rule

from this rule—the very young, the very old and so forth—seems to be growing in many Western countries. But honouring parents (fifth word) and keeping the Sabbath (fourth word) seem like relics of a bygone age, while being flippant with God's name (third word) is near universal. And opposing the first and second words is virtually sacrosanct. Western democracies will tolerate many things, but passing laws about which gods or images you can worship is not one of them.

The only indication of structure made clear in the text itself is the writing of the Ten Words on “two stone tablets” (**v 22**). It is probably too neat to say that the first tablet is basically “love God” (the first to fourth words) and the second is “love your neighbour” (the fifth to tenth); loving God and loving neighbour are too intertwined to separate them as cleanly as that. After all, much of the fourth word relates to how we give rest to others (**v 14**), and equally, what makes disrespect for parents, murder, adultery, theft and perjury so wicked (**v 16-20**) is their assault on image-bearers of God. A better way of thinking about the structure starts by recognising that all of the first five words mention “the LORD your God,” and none of the last five do. It may be that the tablets have five words on each, like two hands with five fingers, rather than four on one and six on the other.

Christians and the Law

Some readers may be getting nervous by now. There are hundreds of commandments and stipulations in the **Torah**, so why all this focus on ten of them? For some of us this might indicate an excessively low view of the law: a cherry-picking approach in which ten rules are retained for Christians to follow and the other 600 dismissed out of hand. For others it might indicate the exact opposite: an unduly high view of the law in which scholars and pastors like me, worried that Christians might actually be free from the whole law, try and smuggle ten of them back in again. So we should ask: is there anything special about the Ten Words? And is there any indication that they are still authoritative for Christians today?

The short answer is: yes, and yes.

The slightly longer answer starts with this passage. There are numerous indications in the text that the Ten Words are unique in their significance, even before we get to the way they are used in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. They have a name, for a start: they are called simply “the commandments” (**v 22**) or “the Ten Commandments” (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13). We then learn that they were “proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire”, which is not said of the rest of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and that “he added nothing more” (**5:22**). Most uniquely, they were handwritten by the finger of God: “He wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me” (**v 22**). Subsequently they were kept inside the **ark of the Lord** (10:1-5) as a permanent record of God’s covenant with Israel. All of this suggests that the Ten Words have a uniquely exalted status within the law as a whole.

The weightiness of the Ten Words is underlined by the physical phenomena that accompanied their proclamations at Sinai and the terrified response of the people. Five verses in a row mention the “fire” out of which God spoke these words **5:22-26**), which—along with the mountain, the clouds, the darkness and the voice—prompted the leaders of the people to ask Moses to approach God on their behalf, out of fear for their very lives (**v 25, 27**). Perhaps surprisingly, God approved of Israel’s reverence and longed for it to continue, that their children might flourish (**v 28-29**). But again, the focus quickly reverts to the need to keep God’s words and not just hear them: “Keep all my commands always” (**v 29**); “Be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you” (**v 32**); “Walk in obedience to all that the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper” (**v 33**).

Christians, likewise, are urged to be doers of the word and not just hearers of it, lest we deceive ourselves (James 1:22) and become like a man building his house on the sand (Matthew 7:26). “If you love me,” Jesus says bluntly, “you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15, ESV). So the difference between new-covenant Christians and

old covenant Israel is not that Israel had to keep God's commands while Christians do not. That is how some people today picture it, but neither Jesus nor the apostles put it that way. The difference, as we will see in more detail in Deuteronomy 30, is that while Israel failed to keep God's commands, those who are united to Christ by faith will be enabled to go beyond them by the person of the **Holy Spirit**. So while the law is not over Christians today, it is not under us either. If we want a spatial analogy, the one that both Moses and Paul give is that the law is within us (Romans 2:15; 7:23), enabling us not just to avoid murder and adultery but **wrath** and lust as well (Matthew 5:21-48).

To switch to a musical analogy, the Ten Words are like scales and arpeggios. They train us in the structure of reality, the key notes we need to learn, the relationships between them, and the habits we must form if we want to play and live well. As we grow, saved by God's grace and equipped by his Spirit, we learn all kinds of chords and rhythms that go beyond the basic ten—and both Deuteronomy and the Sermon on the Mount are full of examples. But we never remove any of the notes or disregard their essential structure. In fact, the more we grow, the more we include them in our repertoire (just as arpeggios turn up in compositions from Pachelbel's Canon in D and the "Moonlight Sonata" to "Hey Jude" and "Hotel California"). In the next 21 chapters, Moses will teach Israel how.

Questions for reflection

1. How are you "shamar" ("keeping, guarding, taking care") of God's word in your life?
2. How do you view God's jealousy? How will this attribute of God impact your life today?
3. How have these chapters changed or reinforced your view of the Ten Words?