

Chapter 11 Deuteronomy 1-34

The Message of Moses

“The Lord has declared this day that you are his people, and that you are to keep all his commands. He had declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised.” Deuteronomy 26:18-19

Word-shaped leaders like Moses keep us from forgetting *our* story. They are bold in setting forth the down-to-earth truth of the Story and resist all efforts to render the sovereign plan of God as a grand theory void of personal, life-changing meaning. The sovereign plan of God is *the* truth to be reckoned with. It is not an overarching idea based on the people’s choice or personal opinion, but it is the absolute revelation of God calling for human submission and obedience. We are not responding to general theories about divinity, inspired by our imagination, but to God’s specific, detailed, unfolding plan for all humanity.

“In my judgment,” observed Kofi Annan, who at the time was the secretary-general of the United Nations, “one cannot have a real mission without a sense of history. You need to look back” (Barbara Crossette, “Annan seen as one of most provocative leaders in U.N. history” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 1/16/2000, A-27). Kofi Annan’s perspective relates to our understanding of salvation history. It is important for the followers of Christ to know their history in order to engage their mission. It gives us a depth of awareness and understanding that shapes our commitment to Christ and roots our confession in the action of God. We look back, not to live in the past, but to advance according to God’s will. When I was growing up I was fascinated by early American history, yet how much more important it is to be shaped and moved by God’s salvation history story. It is important for Americans to understand the lives of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, but exploring the message and life of Moses is vital for all Christians. Every nation has a story, but only one story is for the nations. If we want to move forward we need to know our history.

One of the network newscasts has a segment I especially enjoy, entitled, “Everyone has a story.” Every week a young reporter picks a person at random and tells their story. Then he or she blindly throws a dart at a map of the United States and wherever it lands is where the reporter goes next for his story. When he arrives in the community he opens up the phone book and blindly points to a name and number and that is his subject for the following week’s broadcast. The reporter invariably comes up with a fascinating angle on the person’s life and proves that everyone does have a story. I have been especially impressed by some of the Christians the reporter has interviewed. Although it may not come out explicitly that they are followers of Jesus, it is evident in their stories. God’s great salvation history story shapes their lives and proves that while everyone has a story, only one story redeems our story.

This is the Story that shatters our preconceived notions about God and gets our attention in ways

we never would have chosen, left to ourselves. It is *the* Story that shapes the destiny of world history. There are no small thoughts here and the claim behind this story is like none other. "Above all," insisted the apostle Peter, "you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but people spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:20-21). Moses was such a person.

The title "Deuteronomy" literally means "second law" and comes from the early Greek version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. The title is misleading if it is interpreted to mean that the fifth book of Moses is a new and different version of the law of God, for nearly everything in Deuteronomy can be found in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. In some ways these four books make us think of the Gospels. The same true story is told from four different angles. Exodus describes the beginning of the wilderness experience and Deuteronomy comes at the end, but the basic thrust remains the same. God delivers the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob out of Egyptian bondage and makes them into his "treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:5-6). They were chosen for the sake of the unchosen, because God wants "all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4).

In Exodus and Leviticus we are presented with a series of *set apart* ways, acts, places and things which God used to *set apart* his holy people, Israel. In Numbers, God's *set apart* people *set out* in the wilderness. Yahweh gave them everything they needed to be a healthy, holy community, but they constantly rebelled against God and turned against his appointed leader, Moses. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses wrote the final book in the series, to recap where Israel had been and where it was going. In a word Exodus is about *deliverance*. The theme of Leviticus is *dedication*. The focus of Numbers is on *direction* and the key for Deuteronomy is *declaration*. The fifth and final book centers on the message of God. Deuteronomy sums up this *set apart* series by describing Israel's *set above* status, not for Israel's glory, but for God's glory. If you want to know the difference between proclamation and propaganda study Deuteronomy.

The Message and the Messenger

Moses was led by the Holy Spirit to emphasize the life-saving, community-shaping message of God which was based on the bond of love Yahweh established with his people Israel. The Hebrew title for the fifth and final book of the Pentateuch is drawn from the first line, "These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel..." (1:1). Deuteronomy is a series of messages preached by Moses, Israel's prophet-pastor. His emphasis on the Word reminds us of the apostle John's emphasis in the fourth gospel. From beginning to end we are reminded that God's covenant people are shaped by the Word of God. We are saved by God's truth, guided by his direction, shaped by his commands, and inspired by his promises. God's Word is his very own signature, spelling out his loving sovereignty in specific ways that save and sanctify us. Moses "proclaimed to the Israelites all that the Lord had commanded him concerning them" (1:3). He was a communicator, not an innovator (R. Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy*, p.31). He was entrusted with the responsibility of delivering the whole counsel of God. Neither Moses nor his congregation were to add or subtract from what God had commanded (see 4:2;12:32). In the eleventh month of the fortieth year, as Israel camped on the plains of Moab, Moses "began to expound this law"

(1:5). For one last time Moses tells the story with clarity and conviction.

Like the four gospels, there is a particular emphasis in each of the wilderness books. The redemptive history of Exodus, the sanctifying laws of Leviticus and the relational dynamics of Numbers, are brought to a fitting climax in the powerful, passionate proclamation of Moses in Deuteronomy. The story is told with such emphasis and repetition, that no one can possibly say that they didn't get it! After a lifetime of patient endurance, prayerful intercession, and moments of utter frustration, Moses brought his ministry to a close with one final review and reaffirmation of God's covenant. He put his soul into this series of messages which rehearsed the blessings of obedience and reiterated the consequences of disobedience. He didn't write his memoirs, but proclaimed God's message.

Deuteronomy sets the stage for Israel's move into the Promised Land. The time had finally come to move forward and Moses was determined to set the record straight and prepare the people for action. Before they could embark on their mission they needed a true grasp of God's salvation history story. Moses began, "The Lord our God said to us at Horeb, 'You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Break camp and advance...See, I have given you this land. 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'" (1:6-7,8).

The message of Moses reflected his *humility*, his *realistic appraisal of the people*, and his *total reliance on the Lord*. His leadership was unique, and without precedent in Egyptian and Canaanite cultures. He led, neither like an Egyptian pharaoh nor like a Canaanite feudal king. Moses was what we should all aspire to be, "the servant of the Lord" (34:5). It was never his ambition to rule these people. Israel was always too much for him to handle. "You are too heavy a burden for me to carry alone...How can I bear your problems and your burdens and your disputes all by myself?" (1:9,12).

"It is at this very point," observes Raymond Brown, "that the reader is confronted with the stark difference between natural and spiritual leadership. As the world views it, the self-confidence and self-assertion of the leader is a vital factor in successful management. The biblical concept of leadership begins not with natural ability but with personal inadequacy" (Brown, p.33). Forty years of frustration and disappointment are described by Moses more with resignation than indignation. The people's rebellion had taken its toll on him, "Because of you the Lord became angry with me also and said, 'You shall not enter it, either...'" (1:37). Moses stated this for the record. It wasn't said in bitterness. His account was truthful and impartial. When Israel followed the Lord's direction in the wilderness they received his blessing.

The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything (2:7).

Yahweh waited for an entire generation of fighting men to die off before giving the signal to "set out" for the Promised Land. But now the time had come and the Lord was prepared to go ahead of Israel. "This very day I will begin to put the terror and fear of you on all the nations under

heaven. They will hear reports of you and will tremble and be in anguish because of you" (2:25).

At times Moses delivered this message like a concerned parent and at other times he was as emphatic as any of the prophets. But it is obvious that he also spoke as Israel's wounded leader. He did not conceal the fact that he was deeply disappointed not to be able to enter the Promised Land. "I pleaded with the Lord," he openly shared. "O Sovereign Lord, you have begun to show your servant your greatness and your strong hand. For what god is there in heaven or earth who can do the deeds and mighty words you do? Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan--that fine hill country and Lebanon" (3:23-25). No one had engaged Israel's history and future more personally and passionately than Moses. He represented the authority of God and he embodied the future hope of a deeply personal relationship with Yahweh. But even Moses felt the consequences for setting aside the will of God. He had met evil with evil and he bore the punishment. He freely shared his heart with the people, "Because of you the Lord was angry with me and would not listen to me. 'That is enough,' the Lord said. 'Do not speak to me anymore about this matter.'" (3:26-27; see Numbers 20:11-12). What is significant is that Moses was willing to use his own rejection as a testimony to the holiness of God. If God demanded obedience from Moses, would he not demand it from his people? If God made Moses suffer the consequences of his actions, would he not punish Israel for disobedience? Who better to deliver the Message of God than a seasoned prophet-pastor whose own life illustrated the integrity of God's Word.

In the end, it was time for Moses to go to heaven and it was time for Joshua to lead. It was time for the people to realize that they would no longer have Moses as their leader. His death was a reminder that they were not dependent on human leadership, but on God's direction. It is significant that Moses was buried in an unmarked grave (34:6). What was said of Moses was true through out his career, "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3).

Set Above

The meaning of the message was that God in his love chose Israel in her need to be his chosen people. What the apostle Peter said of the church applied first to Israel, "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:10). Israel's blessing and privilege among the nations was unprecedented. "He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised" (26:19). God chose to make a great nation out of an enslaved people. He redeemed them from bondage and set them apart to be a holy people. Yahweh honored the promise he made to Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2-3). Now Moses could say to the people of Israel, "The Lord your God has increased your numbers so that today you are as many as the stars in the sky" (1:10). For forty years they had set out in the wilderness under the Lord's direction and they had "not lacked anything" (2:7). God had elected to reveal himself to Israel in a way that distinguished them from all other nations.

Moses preached the message with passion,

"Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous 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?"

"You were shown these things," Moses declared, "so that you might know that the Lord is God; besides him there is no other... Because he loved your forefathers 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. Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other" (4:33-39).

God chose one nation among the nations to bring the message home that Yahweh was the God of creation and the Lord of history. There is no other!

One of the means God chose to establish the superiority of Israel over the nations was conquest. Israel's integrity and survival as the people of God depended upon following God's specific command to destroy totally the nations that occupied the Promised Land. No one who has heard Christ's Great Commission to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," (Mt 28:19) can hear God's command for Israel to annihilate "seven nations larger and stronger" than itself without being shocked. But it is rather pointless for those who have benefitted from Israel's survival as the medium through which the gospel was delivered to sit in judgment on God's extreme measures. If the holy and merciful God saw fit to apply his judgment early, in order to preserve the identity of his people, who are we to question Yahweh's sovereign will? Evidently the evil of the indigenous people was so terrible and destructive that God called for absolute destruction. In the case of especially heinous crimes many have seen the wisdom of the death penalty. What is shocking about this judgment is that God's verdict falls on entire societies, but the nature of this judgment is even less extreme than what is described in the book of Revelation.

Under no circumstance was Israel to accommodate herself to the surrounding cultures. They were a serious threat to her relationship to the Lord and the message of Moses made this explicitly clear.

Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (7:2-6).

The Israelites were especially vulnerable to the pagan religious and sexual practices. As we will see later the power of the fertility cults to impact Israel was profound and helps explain why the Lord commanded them to completely destroy the occupants of the Promised Land. The warning

through Moses was clear, “Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God” (20:18). It was even wrong for Israel to inquire about their neighbors’ gods. Moses warned that the innocent sounding question, “How do these nations serve their gods?” was a snare that led inevitably to the conclusion, “We will do the same” (12:30).

The message of Moses makes it clear that Yahweh’s election of Israel was not based on their numerical strength (7:7) nor their righteousness (9:4), but on Yahweh’s “covenant of love” and his judgment against “the wickedness of these nations” (9:4). Moses was under no illusion that Israel earned God’s favor. On the contrary they were “a stiff-necked people” (9:6). The Lord’s affection toward them was based entirely on divine mercy, not human merit. We see already how God works. The redemptive pattern fulfilled in Christ is established early. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). “It was because the Lord loved you,” Moses declared, “and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (7:8).

Some may be surprised to learn that the gospel of love has such deep roots in the message of Moses. We see the message of the New Testament clearly expressed in the Old Testament. What the apostle Paul said of the church included Israel, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves" (Eph 1:4-6). Israel foreshadows the Church and the Church fulfills Israel. Sinai points to Calvary.

The simple dichotomy between Law and Grace does not do justice to God’s choice of Israel as his treasured possession. The substance of Moses' preaching was his call to obedience, which was based entirely on God's covenant of love. "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God;" Moses declared, "he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands" (7:9). Everything Moses said about the law was framed by God's grace. The narrative flow of Deuteronomy from Mount Sinai to Mount Nebo stresses God's loving patience with a people who had a forty year history of resistance and rebellion against the will of God. Nevertheless God's love persisted for their sakes and ours.

Israel was *set apart* and *set above* for the holy purpose of revealing the one and only God. "There is no one like the God of Jeshurun (the upright one or Israel), who rides on the heavens to help you and on the clouds in majesty. The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (33:26-27). The church is also *set apart* and *set above* for the holy purpose that we may "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:9).

The Law of Love and the Love of the Law

Through his labor of love, Moses emphasized that Israel was chosen by God’s love and empowered by this love to trust and obey the commands of God. To love is to obey and to obey

is to love. At times the church has driven such a wedge between the law of love and the love of the law that it is difficult for many to appreciate that obedience is the evidence of love. If love is measured in feelings rather than faithfulness, we will find it difficult to appreciate the message of Moses. If we react to Moses' emphasis on the decrees, laws, commands, precepts, and statutes of the Lord, we may find ourselves more like the Israelites than we care to admit.

C. S. Lewis observed:

"Speak about beauty, truth and goodness, or about a God who is simply the indwelling principle of these things, speak about a great spiritual force pervading all things, a common mind of which we are all parts, a pool of generalized spirituality to which we can all flow, and you will command friendly interest. But the temperature drops as soon as you mention a God who has purposes and performs particular actions, who does one thing and not another, a concrete, choosing, commanding, prohibiting God with a determinate character. People become embarrassed or angry. Such a conception seems to them primitive and crude and irreverent" (*Miracles*, Fount, 1947, pp.83-34).

His emphasis on the law stressed the specificity of God's sovereignty and spelled out the importance of taking God at his word. It was a privilege, not a penalty, that God had revealed his will so explicitly and practically. As Moses said, "What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (4:8).

Our culture sways from moralistic self-righteousness to relativistic self-pleasure. Neither extreme captures the meaning and purpose of the will of God. Not only are we as a culture confused over what is morally right and wrong, but we have also lost our bearings on the moral purpose and the moral order of life itself. Morality is not a sequence of independent choices to which we respond either morally or immorally. The scope of true moral order living embraces the totality of life. It encompasses family life, the preparation and purposes of vocation, the stewardship of resources, respect for the environment, and the pursuit of justice. It involves knowing how to suffer and how to comfort the suffering. It means living today in light of eternity and preparing for a good death. Morality concerns our motives and ambitions, our hopes and dreams. Morality is what the Bible calls righteousness and righteousness is what God determines is right.

I recall the reaction of a physician in a seminar I led on moral medicine. He claimed that 99 percent of the time he goes about doing surgery and meeting the needs of his patients without ever facing a moral issue. He had concluded that medical ethics was limited to controversial issues like abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, surrogate motherhood, etc. What he did not realize was that everything in medicine involves morality: our view of science and nature, the role of the servant-physician, the ethos of the medical profession, the purposes of technology, the accessibility of health care, the responsibilities of the patient, ministering to the dying and comforting the living. Nor did he realize that the Christian physician may make moral decisions on controversial issues like abortion and euthanasia, yet destroy the moral order of his profession and his testimony as a Christian by treating the disease and not the patient, by serving himself and not society, and by trusting in his own self-sufficiency. Moral-order thinking applies to

everything from medicine to merchandising and from parenting to politics.

The impetus or inspiration for moral order living comes from within. Righteousness is rooted in heartfelt convictions, rather than imposed as an unwanted standard. It is for this reason that Moses stressed the role of the heart. The motive for obeying the law was love, not dread, and Moses made his appeal on relational, not legal grounds. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts" (6:4-6). Love is the refrain that runs through Moses' preaching. "What does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? (10:12-13). Love is the theme he emphasized. "Love the LORD your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always" (11:1). Love was so tangible and real that Moses had no qualms about commanding love. "For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess" (30:16).

In the tradition of Moses, Jesus stressed the relationship between love and obedience. "Whoever has my commands and obeys them," Jesus said, "he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (Jn 14:21). We find this emphasis especially in the writings of the apostle John, which helps affirm the kindred spirit we sense between John and Moses, two prophet pastors. John's review of Jesus' emphasis reminds us of Deuteronomy. "If anyone loves me," Jesus said, "he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me" (14:23-24). The inseparable link between love and obedience is spelled out in John's epistles: "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome..." (1 Jn 5:3).

The apostle Paul's prayer for the servants of Christ at Philippi reminds us that moral discernment and action are the consequences of genuine love. It is a matter of the heart. "This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:9-11). True spirituality makes Christian ethics inseparable from authentic love. The choices of the heart proceed from an education motivated by love and abounding more and more in knowledge and depth of insight (see *Choices of the Heart*, pp.32-34).

Consistent with Moses' emphasis on love was his conviction that the precepts and commands of the Lord were to be held in the heart before they were listed on the books. "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it" (30:14). Moses urged the Israelites to internalize the commands of God, "so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live" (4:9). According to Moses, obedience was

never a matter of technical compliance with the letter of the law, but a heartfelt fulfillment of the spirit of the law. "The LORD your God commands you this day to follow these decrees and laws; carefully observe them with all your heart and with all your soul" (26:16).

If the foundation for the commands and precepts of the Lord rested on God's covenant of love and true obedience depended on heartfelt conviction, then the best context for teaching the law was in the family. Moses entrusted parents, rather than scribes and lawyers, with the responsibility of communicating the Word of God to future generations. For Moses the best opportunity to instill the Word of God was in the normal course of daily life. "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (6:7; see 11:18-21). Parents were meant to engage their children in meaningful dialogue about the Lord's covenant. "In the future, when your son asks you, 'What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?' tell him: 'We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...And if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness'" (6:20-25).

The preaching of Moses reflected a parent's heart and a father's concern. Moses was as much a parent as he was a prophet. He embodied the truth, mentored obedience and modeled faithfulness. For forty years he cajoled, entreated, affirmed, warned and even threatened the people of Israel, calling them to be faithful. He was a determined prophet and devoted parent, who would not let Israel forget what the Lord had done for them. "Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart," Moses warned (4:9; see 8:11). He left no doubt as to the tragic consequences of forgetting. "If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed" (8:19).

As far as Moses was concerned, obedience was no mystery. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (29:29). The Law of the Lord was far easier to understand than to remember. It is one thing to know right from wrong, it is another thing to hold it dear. To be consciously aware of the will of God is different from obeying it conscientiously. Moses feared that Israel would drift away. "Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day" (8:11). Moses was like a father to Israel. He was old enough to be a great grandfather, but no mention is made of his children's children. His parental love embraced *all Israel*. Moses stood before a great nation and in the tradition of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob he blessed the people. As Jacob blessed his twelve sons nearly five hundred years before, Moses blessed the twelve tribes of Israel (33:1-29). Their future lay ahead of them in the Promised Land, but their faithfulness depended on being able to listen and learn to fear the Lord their God and follow carefully all the words of this law (31:12). The message of Moses was a classic example of contending "for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). The apostle Paul was in the tradition of Moses when he wrote, "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ

Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you--guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (2 Timothy 1:13-14).

Blessings and Curses

When today's Christians are asked what interferes with authentic Christian community we often point to such obstacles as the pace of modern life or poor communication or the high mobility inherent in many careers. We tend to think first of social and cultural issues, but judging from Deuteronomy, Moses would have insisted that the biblical community rested on moral, ethical and spiritual grounds. The solidarity of the people of God depended upon their faithfulness and obedience to God's Word. Community rested on a shared moral commitment under Yahweh, rather than in a mood of excitement or in relational feelings. As we've seen love is primarily a commitment, not a feeling. Moses emphasized this: "Love the Lord your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always" (11:1).

The inclusiveness of the people of God is emphasized throughout Deuteronomy by the phrase *all Israel*. It is used repeatedly to underscore the scope of Moses' preaching ministry, the sphere of his leadership, and the solidarity of the people of God. The story begins, "These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the wilderness east of the Jordan" (1:1). And Deuteronomy ends on the same note, "For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel" (34:12). Although Israel was divided into different tribes with each tribe assigned their own location, and certain tribes given special duties, all Israel was under one set of God-given commandments. Diversity could not be used as an excuse for disobedience. No one could ever say that any statute or precept didn't apply to them. The identity and solidarity of the people of God rested on total obedience to the whole counsel of God. The strength of their community life depended upon God's revelation. Their relationships were ordered and directed by the Word of God.

We find shocking the extreme measures ordered by God to preserve this unique identity and powerful solidarity. The order is repeatedly given, "You must purge the evil among you" (13:5). God commanded the death penalty for false prophets and for anyone else who encouraged idolatry (13:1-18; 16:21-17:7). Capital punishment was also applied to those who showed contempt for the judge or priest, as well as to those who committed perjury (17:8-12; 19:16-19). "All the people will hear and be afraid, and will not be contemptuous again" (17:13). As expected, those who committed premeditated murder and kidnaping were given the death penalty. "Show him no pity. You must purge from Israel the guilt of shedding innocent blood, so that it may go well with you" (19:13; 24:7). But we are shocked to learn how rebellious sons were eliminated. The parents of "a stubborn and rebellious son" were directed to bring him before "the elders at the gate of [their] town" and say, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard." "Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid" (21:20-21). The death penalty extended to prostitution, fornication, and adultery. The refrain is repeated with emphasis, "You must purge the evil from among you" (22:21). The strength and purity of the community as a whole was obviously God's top priority. Proven violators of God's clearly stated laws were subject to harsh penalties both as punishment and a

warning to others to obey the law. Moses expressed the expectation behind these extreme measures. "The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you" (19:20).

The purpose of God's punitive justice was to preserve the integrity and righteousness of Israel and to make her into a holy nation, a testimony to the nations, and an illustration of what it meant to live as a community in righteousness, purity and fidelity. God's desire for his people to be holy is just as great in the New Testament as it was for Israel in the Old Testament. But the emphasis has shifted from an external law and the severity of judgment to an internal transformation and the sanctifying work of Christ's grace. The same God who dictated the harsh judgment against rebellious young people reaches out to prodigals with love and mercy (Lk 15:11-24). Christians should not think that righteousness matters less to God now under grace than it did under law. Jesus emphasized this heart righteousness in all of his teaching, especially in the Sermon in the Mount. The apostle Paul declared that the grace of God "teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age..." (Titus 2:12). And the apostle Peter wrote, "I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul" (1 Pet 2:11). In the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, both the mercy and severity of God are brought to bear on the believing community. From the beginning to the end of God's salvation history, there is no doubt that God demands personal and communal righteousness.

Therefore the severity of God's punitive justice should be seen in light of his mercy, which sought to preserve the integrity of the community and to prepare us for the grace of Christ. It was merciful for God to use extreme measures to keep his people from idolatry, violence, sexual immorality, and anarchy. We should also note the importance of God's pro-active social justice. God's provision for due legal process, truthful witnesses, and cities of refuge was important in preserving justice. God's concern for orphans, widows and the poor emphasized the importance of protecting the whole community, even its weakest members. Besides admonishing the people not to be "hardhearted or tightfisted" toward the poor (15:7), God instituted laws which helped preserve economic justice and prevent the rich from getting richer and the poor from getting poorer. Israel was faced with the moral imperative of the poor. "Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart...There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers [and sisters] and toward the poor and needy in your land" (15:10-11).

The message of Moses left no doubt that God's blessing followed obedience and God's curse followed disobedience. No one could fault Moses for obfuscation. No one could charge him with failure to disclose the whole counsel of God. No one could ever say he waffled on the truth. In fact, Israel's prophet-pastor did much more than just lay out the truth, he drove it home with power. He spoke of future scenarios that would put Israel at risk theologically! He imagined what they would be like when they were successful financially:

"...When you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud

and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery...You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today" (8:10-18).

Moses looked ahead to the time when Israel would say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us" (17:14). He warned them against choosing a king who would build himself up and accumulate horses, wives, and large amounts of silver and gold. He imagined the temptations they would face when they entered the Promised Land. "Do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there," Moses commanded. "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you" (18:10-12).

Obedient to the Lord's direction, Moses conveyed the message in every effective form imaginable. He used Israel's history, his own story, straightforward exposition and powerful exhortation. He reiterated the message over and over again. He left no ambiguity. He rebuked, admonished, preached, and pleaded. Yet Moses made his strongest appeal on the basis of the character of God.

"To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. Your forefathers who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky" (10:14-22).

Moses even gave specific directions for what was to be done as soon as they crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. Israel was to build an altar to the Lord on Mount Ebal, cover it with plaster, and write the words of the law on it (27:1-8). Israel's first act was to reaffirm Yahweh's covenant in writing and then they were supposed to give a response. Six tribes were to stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people and six tribes on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses. The consequences for obedience and disobedience were publicly declared before all of Israel in a highly visual manner drawing everyone into participation. The alternatives set before the people could not have been clearer.

The story of how Moses communicated the Lord's message to Israel ought to challenge every pastor, every parent, every true friend in Christ, to proclaim the whole counsel of God clearly and compellingly. Moses removed all mystery, all excuses, and spoke the Word of the Lord plainly.

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it (30:11-14).

One Greater Than Moses

Contrary to some interpreters, the gospel according to Moses knows nothing of a quid pro quo relationship between Israel and Yahweh. Israel deserved zero, merited nothing, and yet by God's mercy received everything. Grace set Israel free, set them apart for holiness, set them out to do God's will, and set them above the nations so that everyone would know that God is God, and that he keeps "his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands" (7:9). For forty years Moses delivered this message of Yahweh's love, until he stood on Mount Nebo and looked out over the Promised Land. He was a hundred and twenty years old. His eyes were strong and so was his strength, but it was time for him to die. The Lord said to him, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it" (34:4). Much later in the story we will meet the resurrected Moses in conversation with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

As we've seen, Moses embodied the hope of a personal relationship with God. He was not the hope itself, but he experienced it and reflected it. The message Moses communicated and the communion with God he experienced pointed forward to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He saw the future coming, when he declared, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (18:15). This is the prophecy Philip referred to when he found Nathaniel and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). After Pentecost, Peter made this same point to the Jerusalem crowd, "For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you'" (Acts 3:22). Before he was stoned to death, Stephen used Moses as a type for Christ. He compared Israel's rejection of Moses with the Jewish rejection of Jesus. Stephen declared before the Sanhedrin, "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people'" (Acts 7:37).

Jesus made it clear that the roots of his gospel were in the message of Moses. "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets," he observed, "they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Lk 16:31). He was even more direct when he said, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (Jn 5:46). And when the risen Lord Jesus met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke informs, "And beginning with Moses and all the

Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk 24:27).

There is no comparison between the greatness of Moses and the greatness of Jesus. Moses was the messenger; Jesus is the Message. He declared, "I am the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6). As the author of Hebrews wrote, "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house" (Heb 3:5-6). To which the author adds, "And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast." The fulfillment of the message of Moses in the Gospel of Christ ought to be a powerful encouragement for us to stay in the story. For one day we will sing "the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb" in eternity. It goes like this: "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages" (Rev 15:3).