

WHY DEUTERONOMY?

We pick back up in the narrative story of the Old Testament this month with Deuteronomy. It is a massively important book for how we understand the development of the people of Israel, the storyline of Scripture, and how we interpret our faith in light of the new covenant. Here are several reasons we chose to study Deuteronomy in March.

It serves as a hinge point in Israel's history. Let's recap Israel's story to this point. We studied Genesis—and saw God make promises to the line of Abraham regarding descendants, blessing, and land. As Genesis closes, the slavery of God's people in Egypt is foreshadowed. Exodus then recounts the story of God bringing his people out of slavery in Egypt to instead serve him in the land. This new relationship needs to be fleshed out. So from Exodus 19-Numbers 10 (including entire book of Leviticus), the narrative of Scripture parks at Mt. Sinai as God explains the covenant, how Israel is to serve him, and how they will meet him in the tabernacle through the work of priests and sacrifices. From there, Numbers explains how God brings them to the promised land. Only instead of taking it as he commands, they respond in fear, and ultimately he wipes out the first wilderness generation. So as we come to Deuteronomy, we see: the second generation of Israel, being taught by God what the relationship of the covenant is to look like, as they are on the edge of the promised land. That is why I say it is a hinge book: for it is focused on looking back (what God has done in saving them as a people) and looking forward (what God is going to do in bringing them into the land). As you read, notice these aspects being blended together, and realize why it makes sense in light of the moment of Israel's history. This idea could be proven from all over Deuteronomy, but 6:10-15 is indicative. Moses looks forward to the goodness God is going to give his people in the land, but he warns them not to forget the God that has saved them, such that they would go their own way after other gods. It is a crucial hinge point in Israel's history: *will they learn from their mistakes and remember God as they enter the land? Or will they fall off and devote themselves to other gods?*

It functions as a constitution, or a charter, for Israel. The name Deuteronomy comes from the Septuagint (Greek edition of the Old Testament) and means “the second law.” As you read Deuteronomy you may recognize a lot of overlap from Exodus-Numbers. But remember: Moses is relaying God's word to a new generation. He is imploring them to not make the same mistake as their fathers in forgetting God. As they are coming into the land—a massive step in realizing what God has promised—they need a “governing document” to know how to live. Really, Deuteronomy serves as an in-depth explanation of Exodus 19:4-6—where God said that he had saved the Israelites; was calling them to obey his voice and keep his covenant; and said that as they did so, they would be his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. Deuteronomy is an explanation of what it means to follow God in covenant relationship. Understanding that idea will help you in some of the middle chapters where it may be easy to get bogged down. *Why is it talking about that?!*

Well—like any nation—its founding documents need to be thorough and explain how they are to operate in certain situations. This mindset will help us see the purpose of passages that may seem obscure to many. Additionally, use this principle (Deuteronomy as Constitution for Israel) to help inform how you see Deuteronomy flavor the rest of Israel's history in the Old Testament.

It explains why the old covenant wasn't enough. I will save most of this discussion for a separate article—for it is one of the main themes of Deuteronomy. We learn in this book how Israel—with all that God had done for them, how he had miraculously worked to save them—could still be hard-hearted, stubborn, and rebellious (how he often classifies them in this book). The answer: the old covenant was not enough, for it couldn't change hearts. But thankfully, Deuteronomy looks forward to a greater covenant—and a greater covenant mediator—who is able to change hearts. As you read, look for ways in which the old covenant is seen to be insufficient (and compare with 2 Corinthians 3 as we recently read).

It displays God's marvelous character—which then fuels our holy living. People associate Deuteronomy with law-flavored legalism. Don't make that mistake. The same God—full of grace—stands behind the words of Deuteronomy. What we find in this book is that God's character and action motivate our changed living. Notice that even as God calls his people to holiness and right living, he does so based on his nature as their God. An example of this would be in Deuteronomy 10:17-22. Moses delivers God's command for the people to care about justice for the fatherless, widow, and to love the sojourner. But even in those commands, he grounds it in God's power and exclusivity (17), and the salvation that he has brought them from Egypt (21-22). Don't see law and rules and immediately roll your eyes; see a holy and merciful God calling his people into rightful covenant living in light of him. They may not have had the changed heart to understand this, but we do. Which means now we can think in the same way through the gospel: a holy and merciful God calling his people (us!) to rightful covenant living (holiness) with him.