

THE INADEQUACY OF THE OLD COVENANT AND THE HOPE OF THE NEW

It is important to locate Deuteronomy in the story of Scripture, for then we see that even as Israel's history is unfolding within the covenant God has created—there is an indictment over the inadequacy of this covenant, and a longing for a greater covenant to come.

The call of the old covenant. The premise of the old covenant that is explained fully in Deuteronomy can be summarized with Leviticus 18:5—**You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.** In other words: *do this and live. Obey and receive life.* A survey of some of the main passages in Deuteronomy shows that *Do this and live* is an important thread in the book. 4:1—**And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you.** 6:24—**And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day.** Read 30:15-18 to see this as well—God is setting before his people the choice of life or death. If they obey him and follow the stipulations of the covenant, they will receive blessings and life; if they disobey him and rebel against his commands, they will receive curses and death. Thus, Deuteronomy clarifies the call of the old covenant: *do this and live.*

The problem of the old covenant. The old covenant would have worked... except for the problem of Israel (and our) inability to keep God's law. There is some irony in Deuteronomy because of this. We read *do this and live*, and then we read sections like Chapter 9 where Moses recounts how Israel is rebellious and stubborn—and how that was shown in the Golden Calf story. When God called Israel to act obediently to receive life, they instead responded with disobedience and rebellion leading to death. And yet: the point of Deuteronomy is not that we would read and think first of Israel's failure (although they did); the point is that we would read and think of the inability of the old covenant to produce what it was calling for. The old covenant called for changed living, but it didn't supply the power needed to make that happen. This is best summarized in Deuteronomy 29:4. **But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.** It's an indictment on Israel, but even more so on the inadequacy of the old covenant to bring heart change. God did not give them a new heart—and so outward change was impossible. This is how Deuteronomy views the old covenant.

Summarizing Gary Millar, Jason DeRouchie writes, “The strange paradox of Deuteronomy is that Moses rightly calls for obedient choices in response to God’s grace yet stands convinced that Israel will fail to deliver the faithful response for which God calls.” That’s the problem and tension of Deuteronomy—is there any hope to be found?

The promise of the new covenant. Comparing Deuteronomy 10:16 with 30:6 summarizes the inability of the old covenant to change hearts—but the forward-looking hope of what God will one day do in the new covenant.

Deut. 10:16—Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

Deut. 30:6—And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Whereas Deuteronomy 10:16 portrays the individual as the subject called upon to perform personal heart circumcision (a reality we know impossible in the old covenant) Deuteronomy 30:6 looks forward to when the LORD as the subject will in the future perform heart circumcision on his people. 30:6 also defines the end goal that will be accomplished through this heart circumcision—the purpose being that the one circumcised of heart will love the LORD with all of them, the goal of Deuteronomy being now achieved (see Deut. 6:4-6). The circumcision language is important for several reasons: 1) it tells us that surgery, or change is needed 2) unlike circumcision in the OT, what is needed is an inward, heart-level surgery 3) that only God can perform. The inability of the old covenant leads us to the solution of Deuteronomy 30:6—only by God working, on hearts, to change us at the core of who we are provides any hope for true change and covenantal living with him. Deuteronomy is beautiful, for in the midst of the clearest indictment in Scripture against the old covenant’s inability to save us, we get the hope of a new heart that God will give to his people in the future.’

The realization of this new heart. Thankfully, even in the midst of such discouraging realities of the rebellion of the people, Deuteronomy ends on this word of hope. That God is working a master-plan of changing hearts in a new covenant. This idea and promise becomes further developed across the Old Testament. The two main passages to know are Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36-37. Jeremiah 31 speaks of *heart inscription*—that God will take the law that was external and write it on the hearts of his new covenant people, such that we can internalize it and know it (31:31-34). Ezekiel 36 speaks of *heart replacement*—where God would replace our heart of stone (think Deut. 29:4) with a heart of flesh, life—such that we would (now having the Spirit) be able to follow him and love him.

Again, ultimately that the goal of the covenant would be achieved—we would be able to know and follow God in fullness, in true relationship. This difference is summarized in 2 Corinthians 3, as we read last month. Now living in the new covenant—not a covenant of death but life, not condemnation but righteousness, not veiled, but glorious, not hindered but free. Because the Lord has done this work on our hearts in the new covenant, we can truly know him, such that we are being holding his glory and being transformed more into his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18). That is the good news of the gospel, and it is the promise of a better covenant that Deuteronomy looks forward to.