The Sum of It All

"These forty years the LORD your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing" (Deuteronomy 2:7).

Week 10, Day 1

DEUTERONOMY 6–8

It could well be argued that Deuteronomy 6 is the most important chapter of the Old Testament because of the Shema, verse 4: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone."

Judaism identifies this sentence as the center of Jewish thought, upon which all other Jewish belief turns. No wonder, then, that the people are commanded to keep this word in their hearts, recite it to their children, talk about it, and make it an emblem on forehead and doorpost (6:7-9). There is a passion in this command that we should make our own.

There's a toughness about Chapter 7, reminding us that love has demands. But there's a wonder in love, too, and verses 7 and 8 celebrate it when they say, essentially, "God loves you because he loves you." Logic can find no further explanation. Here is a precursor (as in other places in the Hebrew Scriptures) of what the New Testament will call grace.

Moses assures the people that victories and blessings await them: prosperity in their work, health of body, and conquest of even their most fearsome enemies. But with all of these favors, there is a peril. In that new land, having "eaten your fill" and when "all that you have is multiplied" (8:12-13), it will be very easy to forget "the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (8:14). How could they be so ungrateful, we wonder, until we look carefully at some of our own experiences with God.

PRAYER: In days of prosperity, let me never forget you. Amen.

What can you think of in the New Testament that might be as crucial to the Christian as Deuteronomy 6:4 (the Shema) is to the Jew?

Week 10, Day 2

DEUTERONOMY 9–11

A poet speaks of "the prophet's righteous scorn." This is the quality we feel in these chapters. One senses Moses' wrath even over the stretch of the centuries and through the printed page. He remembers how he pleaded with God for this people, and he is determined that his efforts shall not have been in vain. He understands our human capacity for self-adulation. These people who "have been rebellious against the LORD from the day [they] came out of the land of Egypt" (9:7) are likely someday to think, "It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to occupy this land" (9:4). We human beings have an astonishing ability to rationalize our past wanderings once we are on track for a brief time.

When the spies researched the land a generation before, they warned that it was a land that would eat its inhabitants. A greater hazard now faces the people, that they will be devoured by unbelief, compromise, and idolatry. Moses gives instructions that are almost fierce in their intensity, to be sure they will keep their purity. It's all up to them: a blessing and a curse have been set before them, depending on whether or not they obey the commandments of the Lord.

You and I live in a pagan world, too. But for us, the enemy is more subtle and not so obviously threatening. Like the Israelites, we're constantly in danger of compromising our souls.

PRAYER: Make me sensitive, O Lord, to the subtle matters that would destroy me, and draw me close to your purposes; in Christ my Lord. Amen.

There is a remarkable coming-together of personal religion, grace, and social religion in Deuteronomy 10:12-22. List the elements of faith you find in these moving verses.

Week 10 Reading Schedule

Week 10, Day 3

DEUTERONOMY 12–14; PSALM 50

For a time like ours, when the key words are pluralism and broad-mindedness, chapters 12 and 13 may seem harsh and narrow-minded. But we need to hear the message. There is a point at which breadth means not only shallowness but also an absence of content and character. Israel lived among practices that were abominable in the way they debased both ethics and morality; to cooperate with such practices would eventually bring disaster. We should seek to understand other points of view and even to see what we can learn from them, but we should also hold fast to the integrity of our beliefs.

The problem is particularly complicated when it arises within the family (13:6-11), because there is a clash of loyalties. Jesus dealt with a comparable issue in his call for full discipleship (Matthew 10:34-39). The physical severity of Deuteronomy is not there, of course, but the issue is the same. It is a hard word, and we shouldn't be too quick in brushing it aside or in taming it to fit our thinking.

The laws regarding clean and unclean foods were meant to protect the health of the people, which was surely important. They were also to underline the fact that the Israelites were separate from the nations around them. Consider how hard it was for Simon Peter to leave these dietary regulations when a vision used them as a sign that Gentiles were to be welcomed into the church (Acts 10:9-16).

PRAYER: Help me, I pray, to have a breadth of mind toward those who are now different from me, and a singleness of commitment to you. Amen.

How do we maintain integrity of faith in a pluralistic culture?

Week 10, Day 4

DEUTERONOMY 15–17

God was calling the Israelites into a way of life in which worship and ethics would dominate. Instead of accumulating endlessly, getting ever more to pass on to one's heirs, there were to be regular opportunities for starting again with a clean slate. This would assure that there would be "no one in need among you" (15:4). But it was

not a naively optimistic approach; it was built on the hard realization that "there will never cease to be some in need on the earth" (15:11).

Such a program could succeed, of course, only in a nation or a community bound together by a common religious commitment. It is at this point that economics, ethics, and worship come together. Properly, then, there is again a review of several major religious festivals; these occasions were the spiritual power undergirding the political and economic structure. Our values need to be lifted up on occasions of sacred celebration.

The day would come when Israel would want a king. But he must remain close to the people in his lifestyle, not accumulating silver, gold, horses, and wives. Above all, he is to be a student of God's Law, having it near at hand so he can "read in it all the days of his life"—not simply to accumulate knowledge or as an act of piety, but "so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God" and follow God's path (17:19). Ideal? Yes. Attainable? Yes. Did Israel have it often? No.

PRAYER: Help me, O Lord, to be a source of light in a pluralistic and secular society, to your glory and to human gain; in Christ. Amen.

What significance, if any, do you find in the way a discussion of the holy days is interspersed with various social and ceremonial laws?

Week 10, Day 5

DEUTERONOMY 18–20

The poet Robert Frost said that good fences make good neighbors. Laws are such fences. They make it easier for people to live together in harmony: So that the tribe of Levi shall know what portions of the sacrifices are theirs (18:1-8), there are specific regulations regarding the cities of refuge (19:1-13) and careful limitations on the use of witnesses (19:15-21). And especially, the ancient boundaries shall be respected, not only because to move a marker is a theft from your neighbor, but because the land is, ultimately, the Lord's (19:14).

We usually think of Moses as a great lawgiver and political leader, but he is identified here as a prophet (18:15-22)—that is, he was one who spoke for God. This is what made his leadership unique. Thereafter there would be national leaders and

there would be prophets, but with the possible exception of Saul, the two were not again combined, at least not on a continuing basis.
Are you troubled that the Old Testament gives rules for warfare and encouragement for Israel in times when their enemies outnumbered or outpowered them (20:1-20)? The Bible is a wonderfully realistic book. It not only holds up ideals for perfection, as in the Sermon on the Mount and 1 Corinthians 13, but also gives pragmatic insights for living in a less than perfect world. War was as commonplace in that ancient world as the baseball season in ours, and the people had to know how to live with it.
PRAYER: Give me, I pray, a faith that is pragmatically tough so I will know how to cope with life when it is short of your will. Amen.

What restraints that respect life do you see in the instructions for war in Deuteronomy 20?

Week 10, Day 6

DEUTERONOMY 21–23; PSALM 51

Religious people are sometimes accused of being so heavenly-minded they're of no earthly use. No such accusation can be made against the rules laid out in Deuteronomy. They are wonderfully down-to-earth—so much so that they may at times seem quaint to people far removed from a relatively simple, primitive society. It doesn't take too much imagination to adapt many of the rules to life in the twenty-first century.
There is a severity to the laws—as in, for instance, the issue of a rebellious son (21:18-21)—because this is a nomadic society where order is a crucial issue. But there is also great care for those who may be at a disadvantage, such as the woman taken captive in war (21:10-14) or the firstborn who is the son of an unloved wife (21:15-17). And there is practical neighborliness, if an ox or sheep has strayed or a donkey or ox has fallen on the road (22:1-4); and there is a kind of pre-liability law (22:8), not simply to protect one from a lawsuit but because if there were an accident you would "have bloodguilt on your house" (22:8). Neighbors can feel free to eat one another's produce in passing; in their ancient culture this was not theft. But to take a container or use a sickle was (23:24-25).

All of these commandments, both small and great, rest on the same foundation: the responsibility to "the LORD your God." If God is truly paramount in our lives, right conduct must follow.
PRAYER: Dear Lord, may I always remember that you are an issue in every detail of my life, great and small; in Jesus' name. Amen.

How might the rather down-to-earth, common-sense laws of Deuteronomy 22 be applied in our time?

Week 10, Day 7

DEUTERONOMY 24–26

Someone has said that a society can be judged by the way it treats those who are least able to defend or care for themselves. So many of the commands in Deuteronomy are for the protection of the poor or the alien. When you collect for a loan, you wait outside for the pledge (24:10-11), thus respecting the dignity of the borrower; and if the pledge is a poor man's garment, you return it to him in the evening because it is his only nighttime covering (24:12-13). So, too, you pay wages at sunset so the day laborer has food for his family (24:14-15). You extend justice to the alien because "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt" (24:17-18). You purposely leave some food behind when you harvest, so the poor can glean on your property (24:19-22). If you will so live, "it will be to your credit before the LORD" (24:13).
Personal honesty also rests in godly belief. You have honest weights and honest measures because "all who act dishonestly, are abhorrent to the LORD your God" (25:13-16).
If Israelites heard the Law rightly, all of life had a divine glory about it. The harvest time was more than simply an issue of abundance; it was a reminder of the One who had given this land to their ancestors when they were slaves (26:1-15). With the tithe of the harvest one is able to bless the "aliens, the orphans, and the widows" (26:13); thus a person's resources become a quality of mercy rather than just wealth.
PRAYER: O Lord, help me see that what I have is yours and that I am privileged in being able to share it with others; in Christ. Amen.

Week 10 Reading Schedule

List instances in Deuteronomy 24 and 25 where the Law seeks to protect the helpless or disadvantaged.

Prayer Time
Let us pray daily for our nation, for all nations, for our churches, for all our appointed spiritual leaders, and for ourselves that we will be sensitive to the contribution we might make to spiritual renewal.

How the Drama Develops DEUTERONOMY 6–26
We are constantly tempted to compartmentalize our faith. This is business, we say (or politics, or "life"), and this is religion, and we watch carefully lest the two should meet. Not so with Israel—and not so with true biblical religion. These chapters in Deuteronomy mix the sacred and secular as if they were intended to be one—as, indeed, I'm confident God intends—not that our sacred should become secularized but that we should redeem the secular and infuse all of life with the quality of the sacred.
For instance, Deuteronomy 16 begins with regulations regarding the Passover, the Festival of Weeks, and the Festival of Booths, then—without any real transition—a paragraph on the appointment and conduct of judges and public officials. And then again, just as abruptly, a rule defining forbidden forms of worship. A scholar might suggest some later compiler brought these materials together carelessly. I doubt it. The Hebrew regard for its sacred Scriptures didn't countenance casual handling. I think, rather, that the mixture of events had its own sacred logic. Our logic seems often to be that the sacred belongs here, and the secular there; Deuteronomy's logic is that they belong together—indiscriminately, in fact. Living this way brings blessing to life: "Observe them [these rules] diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you" (Deuteronomy 6:3).
The logic, of course, is this—that all of life is lived under the hand of God. Some meats are forbidden. Why? Because the Lord has declared them unclean (14:3-21). We may reason that it is because these animals were greater health hazards, and

perhaps they were. But the Law had its own bottom line: God said so. Is someone in financial need? "Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted"; don't even "entertain a mean thought"—and in the end, "the LORD your God will bless you" (15:7-11). The rule is very pragmatic and very humane: Life is lived under the hand of the Lord God. In truth, these laws wouldn't work unless people saw them as from the Lord. Come to think of it, it's hard to think of any way to make laws effective except as we hold before us a concept of a God who is holy and who desires holiness of us. And people need a good memory too. The Jews are told to be just to aliens and orphans because "remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there" (24:17-18). And when first fruits were brought to God's house, it was to be with a humbling song of gratitude: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor" (26:5). Unless we have a good memory (good in a moral sense as well as an intellectual sense), we will not have a proper impetus to godly living.

No wonder, then, that these laws were to be taught to the children, repeated at home and while traveling, and worn on hands and foreheads and on the doorposts of houses (6:6-9). Obeyed, they convey order and beauty to life; ignored, life falls apart. The word religion comes from a word that means "to bind or tie back," probably in the sense of tying us back to God. But good religion also binds all of life together so it is whole and effective. That's what these laws, ultimately, are all about.

Seeing Life Through Scripture

I'm surely not a naysayer, but I worry about what is happening to our public culture. How is it that life has become so cheap in so many parts of a country that is so wondrously blessed? And how come those who have the most seem so ignorant of the needs of those who have the least? And how is it that we have become, in less than a generation, a nation of gamblers, where the nightly television news zeroes in on lotteries? And why are the most intimate human relationships portrayed so freely on television and movie screens—and so often in degrading and amoral ways? And how sad that the name of God is most often heard in the public forum not as a blessing or a prayer but as a curse.

We need some sort of spiritual renewal in our land. Obviously such renewal ought to begin with the religious community. But are enough of us serious enough about God that we might be leaven in our lumpy society? Indeed, are we serious enough that

we are willing to reform our own ways, so that a secular culture might have an example to attract and a pattern to imitate? What is our obligation to the time in which we live? And come to think of it, how much difference, if any, can we make? Is it possible, in a society like ours, to see a revival of faith that would cause a mass change in conduct, such as has happened at other times? Or is that no longer a possibility?

Kalas, E. J. (2016). The Grand Sweep: 365 Days From Genesis Through Revelation. Abingdon Press.

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