

THRESHOLD  
BIBLE STUDY

WHOLEHEARTED  
COMMITMENT

PART ONE

Deuteronomy  
[1-15]

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TWENTY-THIRD  
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**Keep these words that I am commanding you today  
in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them  
when you are at home and when you are away,  
when you lie down and when you rise.**

DEUTERONOMY 6:6–7

## Wholehearted Commitment (Part I)

**T**he Book of Deuteronomy memorializes events that took place at the threshold of the promised land. The people of God have completed their forty-year formative period—freed by God from the slavery of Egypt, established in their covenant with God from Mount Sinai, and tested through a generation of trial in the wilderness—and are on the verge of crossing over the Jordan River and entering the land that God has sworn to give them. But, before entering their new life, Moses speaks to them in a series of encouraging exhortations that constitute most of Deuteronomy.

The words of Moses, which find their source and authority in God, inform the listeners about their past and future, teaching them the ways of God's covenant. Moses, their mediator before God, urges them to listen with their heart and obey all that the Lord asks of them, to exhibit wholehearted commitment to the relationship that God has formed with them. These words echo through the centuries and call God's people back, again and again, to the plains of Moab east of the Jordan, where Moses speaks. By receiving these words, every generation is called back to the threshold, the place of entry between wilderness and promise.

The Israelites listened to these words of Moses again when they gathered to renew the covenant after their initial victories in the promised land. Joshua read these words of “the book of the law” before the whole assembly of Israel. Indeed, every seventh year—whether in times of plenty or famine, in times of conquest or defeat, in times of expansion or exile—God’s people were commanded to read the book and renew the covenant, returning in their minds and hearts to that crucial moment between wilderness and promise, to be instructed again and to pledge their wholehearted commitment.

Jesus himself reflected on Deuteronomy as he was completing his own forty-day formative period in the wilderness. When Jesus was tested by Satan, he responded to the demonic temptations to pleasure, possessions, and pride by quoting three times from Deuteronomy (8:3; 6:16; 10:20). As Jesus was about to enter his public ministry, Jesus must have pondered this book as he committed himself wholeheartedly to his messianic mission. As the new prophet like Moses (18:15–18), Jesus went forth to complete the covenant that God had made with his ancestors.

For both Jews and Christians, to study Deuteronomy is to return to the threshold and to recommit to the covenant. Although the past is recalled and the future is anticipated, history and hope only serve to emphasize the importance of the present moment. This air of immediacy permeates the whole book as God’s people recommit to the covenant with God. “Now” is the significant moment that Moses stresses in his addresses. He brings his people to the moment at which he can exclaim, “This very day you have become the people of the Lord our God” (27:9). Every time God’s people renew their commitment to God is the “now” and “today” of Deuteronomy.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- Why does Moses require wholehearted commitment from his listeners?

- In what ways does the setting of Deuteronomy determine its focus and its immediacy?

### **The Place of Deuteronomy in Scripture**

Deuteronomy is the most significant book of the Old Testament in that every other book that follows it in the Bible is dependent on it. Serving as the conclusion of the five books of Moses and the beginning of the historical books that follow it, Deuteronomy builds a bridge between the Torah and the other books of the Old Testament. The early chapters of the book look backward to recount many of the events from Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, and its later chapters look forward to Israel's future, offering ominous predictions of Israel's fate but also holding out the hope of God's mercy and blessings. Because Deuteronomy expresses the final and definitive form of God's covenant with Israel through Moses, it functioned as Israel's political and theological constitution for the rest of its history. It is the guiding document for the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, and its influence can be found throughout most of the prophets and even into the wisdom literature.

Deuteronomy has always been an important writing in the rabbinical tradition of Judaism. As part of Israel's Torah, the most authoritative section of the Scriptures, it is read in a yearly cycle in the synagogue. Its verses form many of the traditional 613 commandments of the rabbis. Parts of the book are recited daily by contemporary Jews, and its verses form the texts for many traditional prayers and festivals. Because Deuteronomy sought to free the Israelites from excessive attachment to sacrifice and priesthood, it helped Judaism survive the exile and has encouraged rituals for all Jews that teach love and reverence for God.

Deuteronomy is the source for the idea that all Jews are obligated to study the Torah and teach it to their children. Various practices that reinforce

the truths of faith, such as affixing the mezuzah to doorposts and the wearing of tefillin and the fringe, all have their origins in Deuteronomy. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the library of a Jewish sect at Qumran, the most common books discovered were Psalms and Deuteronomy. The many citations from Deuteronomy found in the New Testament testify that this fifth book of the Torah was widely accepted as an authoritative book at the beginning of the Christian era.

Deuteronomy was a vitally important book of Scripture for Jesus and the apostolic church. Because Deuteronomy proclaims the good news of what God has done for his people—redeeming them from bondage, guarding them with his healing care, and joining them in covenant—the book has a gospel-like quality. It proclaims the core of Israel’s good news, God’s saving acts through Moses, creating God’s own people and establishing a relationship of love with them. Indeed, no book is quoted more often in the New Testament except for Isaiah and Psalms.

It is impossible to say, perhaps even inappropriate to ask, who actually wrote the pages of Deuteronomy. The tradition at the core of the book surely dates to Moses himself. Yet Moses is not the author in the sense that we ascribe the authorship of books today—the one who sets pen to paper and writes from beginning to end. Rather, Moses is the *author-ity* behind the text of Deuteronomy, as he is for all five books of the Torah.

Although some scholars speculate that Deuteronomy originated during Israel’s later periods, the time of the divided monarchy or even the exile, many indicators point to its more ancient roots. For example, the book does not reflect the covenant with King David, Israel’s hope in the dynasty of David, or God’s choice of Jerusalem as Israel’s center of worship. If Deuteronomy were a book written to support the monarchy in Jerusalem, surely it would have mentioned David, the city, and its temple. Although later periods of Israel’s history surely influenced the text of Deuteronomy, the core of the book reflects the ancient Mosaic tradition and covenant.

Deuteronomy has been linked with the reforms of King Josiah in the seventh century BC (2 Kings 22—23). Many have suggested that the “book of the law” discovered in the temple during Josiah’s reign was either the book of Deuteronomy or an earlier version of it. When the book was read to him, the king was stunned, realizing that his people had strayed far from the cove-

nant and were calling down disaster upon themselves. Since it had been many years since the people had committed themselves to serving God alone and loving him with all their heart, soul, and might, Josiah led all the people in the kind of covenant renewal ceremony described in Deuteronomy. The king then began to rid the land of pagan idolatry and centralize the worship of God in Jerusalem. This narrative of Josiah is a graphic illustration of the impact reading Deuteronomy can make. Unfortunately, for all of Josiah's reforming zeal, he was succeeded by kings who fell back to infidelity to the covenant.

While firmly grounded in Israel's history under Moses, Deuteronomy is also a future-oriented book, looking not only to Israel's immediate future in the promised land but Israel's ultimate purpose and destiny as a blessing to all the nations. Although the book contains many elements of hope and anticipation, it also contains tragic features, as expressed by the blessings and curses of the covenant. Life in the promised land is received as a blessing, but the curses come to dominate the history of Israel until at last it ends with the curse of exile from the land and the scattering of the Israelites among the nations. The curses of the covenant function not just as a warning but as a prophetic anticipation of the course of Israel's history. Given the greatest possible privilege, God's people neglect their high calling and bring upon themselves the covenant curses, consequences inflicted not with divine vindictiveness but as the inevitable outcome of rejecting a relationship with their loving God.

Beyond this judgment, however, Deuteronomy contains the anticipation of restoration and new life interwoven with blessings to the nations. The gospels demonstrate that Jesus himself linked his own mission to the restoration of Israel. In this way the New Testament shows that the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah is the climax of the saving history of Israel. The tragic outcome of Deuteronomy's covenant is finally surmounted by the new covenant in Christ. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy: "Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them" (27:26). Then he explains that Christ has saved God's people from the covenant curses by taking them on himself: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'" (Gal 3:13; Deut 21:23). In this way, the death of Jesus is the climax of Deuteronomy's tragic curses, and his resurrection is the



beginning and guarantee of the restoration of God's people. In the context of the whole of Scripture, the book of Deuteronomy does not lead to doom but shapes the mission of Jesus and Paul. It has become an essential key to the entire narrative of salvation, so that the blessings promised to Israel might come to all the nations.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- In what ways is Deuteronomy a bridge-building book?
- Why is it essential to read Deuteronomy in the context of the whole Bible?

### **The Challenges of Violence**

One of the primary obstacles that people encounter when they begin to study the Old Testament is the amount of violence in the texts. Not only do the biblical books describe violence between individuals, families, or nations, but many texts suggest that God sanctions this violence and even commands his people to inflict violence on others. A particular challenge in Deuteronomy is found in those passages where God orders the Israelites to destroy all the residents of the lands that they conquer. Here are a few important points to consider when reading passages that seem excessively violent.

First, remember that the Scriptures speak out of the cultural condition and the spiritual state of God's people. In earlier understandings of God, Israel's enemies seem also to be the enemies of God. But later understandings reveal a God who loves the enemies of Israel as much as his own people. God's self-revelation in Scripture is gradual and progressive. God slowly changes the minds and hearts of his people so that they may receive more and more understanding of his character.

Second, realize that the violent images of God are only some of the many depictions of God in the Bible. The primary biblical images are of a merciful and compassionate God. This description of God—"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"—is repeated in Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Psalm 86:5, Nehemiah 9:31, and Joel 2:13. So, when we read a passage that seems to depict God as violent, we can recall the many other verses that describe God as faithful, generous, and loving. We begin to overcome the challenges of violence in the Bible by reading violent passages within the context of Scripture's entire narrative.

Third, understand that the wrath of God in the Bible is a just hatred of evil and injustice. God's anger is not vengeful, but the response of an all-good, all-loving God to the evil within his creation. God's wrath is the good news that the outrage we feel over the world's injustice is first of all outrage in the heart of God. This means that divine wrath is not a contradiction of God's goodness but an expression of it, a way of describing God's absolute hatred of all evil and injustice and his coming to set matters right.

Fourth, view all depictions of God in the Bible through the lens of the crucified Christ. The gospels reveal a God who defeats evil by dying out of love for his enemies, and he calls his people to do the same. Jesus reveals fully a self-sacrificing, enemy-loving, sin-bearing God who opposes violence and commands his people to refrain from violence. Because this is the truest and fullest image of God, we must abandon all attempts to defend the violent character often ascribed to God.

And fifth, realize that biblical passages contain both a literal sense and fuller senses to find deeper truths. The literal sense is what the author of a passage meant to communicate in the context in which it was written. The fuller senses are the meanings of a text in light of God's full revelation in Christ and

in the context of the whole Bible. When God's people come to understand more about God's true character, they are able to look back and find divinely intended meanings in earlier writings that the original authors could not have perceived. The theologians of the early church taught that since all Scripture is divinely inspired, the Holy Spirit will enable us to see beyond the surface appearance of problem passages and help us understand deeper truths being revealed there.

So, when we read, for example, that God commanded Israel to put to death the Canaanites and destroy all their cities, we might first consider the passage within its historical setting. In the Canaanite cities, the spread of wickedness was so pervasive that immorality, degradation, and barbarity invaded every facet of life. Children were sacrificed to pagan gods. Male and female prostitution took place right in the temple as part of the religious rites. Idol worship was rife and the society wholly contaminated. The evil was contagious, and God's people were in danger of being infected as well. So, the destruction of the Canaanites can be read as a protective measure for God's people.

However, in the light of later passages from the prophets and the teachings of Jesus, we see that violence is an action that is opposed to God's desire, threatening the just order that God intends. So, seeking a fuller sense of the passage, we can read it as God commanding his people to rid themselves of all evil and injustice.

If we worship a God who fights with violence, we will feel justified doing violence in God's name. Not only does Jesus refuse to use violence, but he chooses to lay down his life out of love for his enemies while commanding his followers to be willing to do the same. Unfortunately, this nonviolent image of God has been compromised throughout Christian history, and the image of a God fighting on behalf of his people has been used to justify war and genocide.

In a sense, we need to read the Bible backwards to understand its fullest meaning. Begin with the person of Jesus Christ, letting this Christ-centered understanding of God's word affect the way we read the whole Bible. In fact, this was the expectation of ancient Judaism as well. The rabbis taught that when the Messiah comes, he will open everyone's eyes to the true meaning of Scripture and resolve its many puzzles and mysteries. This is what Paul did after his conversion experience. He began to understand the Torah and the

prophets in the light of Christ. Christ is the key to unlocking the full meaning of all passages of Scripture.

Paul writes to his readers in Corinth and explains that when unbelievers read the Old Testament, their minds are covered with a veil and they are unable to understand: “Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” (2 Cor 3:15–16). Then he goes on to say that the Holy Spirit enables the believer to see the divine glory that is revealed in Christ and to understand the true revelation contained in the Old Testament.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- Which of these points might be most helpful when interpreting violent passages?
- Why is it important to read the whole Bible through the lens of the crucified Messiah?

### **Reading Deuteronomy with the Heart**

The Book of Deuteronomy has rightly been called “the heartbeat of the Old Testament.” When we feel the pulse of Deuteronomy, we are in touch with God’s will for the Israelites. The book reaches its spiritual heights as it

describes God's love for his people and the total, passionate devotion that should characterize the response of his people to that love.

In biblical language, the heart is the center of a person, the core of one's inner life and personality. It is the source of one's deepest motivation, decisions, memories, and desires. For this reason, the heart is the place in which a person encounters God, in which God works to cause conversion, enlightenment, and renewed life.

God "set his heart" on Israel (7:7), choosing them out of all the people of the earth, simply because he desired to love them. Throughout Deuteronomy, God's love is described as faithful and steadfast. In return, God wants us to seek him and love him with our whole heart, soul, and might. God often tests the hearts of his people. When God led Israel through the wilderness for forty years, allowing them to experience hunger and thirst, he was testing them, "to know what was in [their] heart, whether or not [they] would keep his commandments" (Deut 8:2).

God warns his people against being "hard-hearted or tight-fisted" toward those in need (15:7). Many of the laws found in Deuteronomy are the foundations for Christian social teachings and the church's focus on justice for the poor and the outcasts. Deuteronomy's many laws concerning forgiveness of debts, payment to laborers, care for immigrants, and the rights of the poor express the exhortation of Moses to "open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land" (15:11). God cares not only about the actions of his people, but he wants those actions to have an interior motive, to be the work of a generous heart.

The Lord looks at the heart and cares about our attitude and motivation in every aspect of life. God's laws are never arbitrary but intended to teach us how to love him. When Moses had finished speaking all these words of Deuteronomy, God said to Israel, "Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today; give them as a command to your children, so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law. This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life; through it you may live long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess" (32:46-47).

As we study this Book of Deuteronomy, let us listen for the heartbeat of God's word. For God wants to convert the hearts of all people. Let God's transforming word work deeply to renew your motivations, decisions, mem-

ories, and desires. We are all responsible for who or what we worship, the object of our deepest desires and affections. If we choose to honor power, pleasure, possessions, or any other idol, we choose the way of death. God urges his people to choose the way of life: “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him” (30:19–20). As we read, reflect, and pray, let us ask God to direct our hearts so that we may choose the way of life in all we do.

### **Reflection and discussion**

- On what do I fix my heart? Do I need a heart checkup?
  
- What will help me to feel the pulse of Deuteronomy during this study?

### **Prayer**

*Lord God, who manifested your fidelity and love to the Israelites, turn my heart to your word and open my heart to your way of life. Prepare my mind and heart to receive these inspired words of Moses as I read the Book of Deuteronomy. Show me how to meditate on these words each day so that they lead me to prayer. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, stir up in me a desire to respond to these words and allow them to transform my life. Keep me faithful during these weeks to the challenges of study and prayer that your word offers to me.*

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS, GROUP SESSION 1**

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1. If the group is meeting for the first time, or if there are newcomers joining the group, it is helpful to provide name tags.
2. Distribute the books to the members of the group.
3. You may want to ask the participants to introduce themselves and tell the group a bit about themselves.
4. Ask one or more of these introductory questions:
  - What drew you to join this group?
  - What is your biggest fear in beginning this Bible study?
  - How is beginning this study like a “threshold” for you?
5. You may want to pray this prayer as a group:

*Come upon us, Holy Spirit, to enlighten and guide us as we begin this study of Deuteronomy. You inspired the authors of Scripture to reveal your presence throughout the history of salvation. This inspired word has the power to convert our hearts and change our lives. Fill our hearts with desire, trust, and confidence as you shine the light of your truth within us. Motivate us to read the Scriptures, and give us a deeper love for God’s word each day. Bless us during this session and throughout the coming week with the fire of your love.*
6. Read the Introduction aloud, pausing at each question for discussion. Group members may wish to write the insights of the group as each question is discussed. Encourage several members of the group to respond to each question.
7. Don’t feel compelled to finish the complete Introduction during the session. It is better to allow sufficient time to talk about the questions raised than to rush to the end. Group members may read any remaining sections on their own after the group meeting.
8. Instruct group members to read the first six lessons on their own during the six days before the next group meeting. They should write out their own answers to the questions as preparation for next week’s group discussion.
9. Fill in the date for each group meeting under “Schedule for Group Study.”
10. Conclude by praying aloud together the prayer at the end of the Introduction.