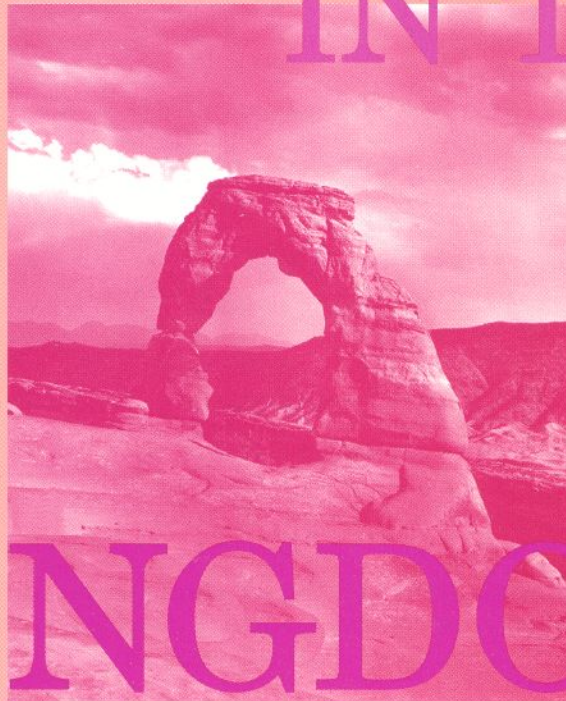


DEUTERONOMY:
CITIZENSHIP
IN THE



KINGDOM
OF GOD...
AND THE U.S.A.

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by William M. Ramsay

DEUTERONOMY

Citizenship in the Kingdom of God ... and the U.S.A.

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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Deuteronomy

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Introduction

Men's BIBLE Study

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life . . .
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word" (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1) We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2) We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3) We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals." Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning. The pastor will serve as a resource for leaders in this study but may or may not be a leader, as determined by each study group.

4) We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5) We will listen for "the question behind the question." Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6) We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7) We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes and answering questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing your answers with others, even when you worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the preceding seven "rules."

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has

been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passage. Others are intended to help the students think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword, often a story relating to the story that has just been discussed.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study God's word together in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study, the leader will find Scripture quotations. These quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout the study, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. Asterisks (*) are placed beside those sections of each lesson that may be omitted or summarized by the leader for the sake of time. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson as shown in the study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

Deuteronomy

INTRODUCTION

"Why did you pick Deuteronomy?" my wife challenged me. "Why Deuteronomy?" a friend exclaimed in surprise. Perhaps the simplest answer is this: A case can be made that Deuteronomy may be the most important book in all the Old Testament.

Your Jewish neighbor will tell you that the most revered books in all the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament, are the first five, "the books of Moses," the Pentateuch. Among these, Deuteronomy is uniquely honored. If your neighbor is an Orthodox Jew he may pray with verses from Deuteronomy strapped on his forehead and his arm, and verses from Deuteronomy may be in a little box above his front door. He knows Deuteronomy 6:4–9 as the *shema*, from the Hebrew word for "hear," as in "Hear, O Israel," with its Great Commandment about loving the Lord your God with all your heart. Your Jewish neighbor strives to obey the Ten Commandments, found in Deuteronomy 5, and he observes the three Mosaic festivals described in Deuteronomy 16.

Christians of the New Testament church loved this book, too. Its writers quoted from four books of the Old Testament more than from any others: Psalms, Genesis, Isaiah, and Deuteronomy. When Jesus was being tempted, it was from Deuteronomy that he found the words he needed to turn back Satan (Matt. 4:1–11). He reminded the rich young ruler of the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:6–21; Mark 10:17–22). When Jesus was asked which commandment is the greatest, he quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 (Mark 12:29–30). Indeed, one way Christians described Jesus was as a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15; Acts 3:22). Passover (Deut. 16:1–8) provided the backdrop for the Christians' Holy Week, and the Holy Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost (Deut. 16:9–12; Acts 2).

Why Deuteronomy? In *Deuteronomy* (John Knox Press), part of the Interpretation series, Old Testament scholar Patrick D. Miller, Jr., sums up its importance like this: He calls Deuteronomy "the center of Old Testament theology."

The Setting and Origin of the Book

A careful reader of Deuteronomy discovers a puzzle. The book is commonly said to be by Moses; some Bibles even use the heading "The Fifth Book of Moses." A close reading, however, shows that it cannot really be written by Moses—at least in the form we have it. What makes this most obvious is that it contains an account of Moses' own death and burial (ch. 34). Also phrases show its later

origin. The first verse speaks of Moses as "beyond the Jordan"; obviously this is written by someone who is now on the Israel side of the river, which Moses never reached (cf. 1:5; 4:46). A giant's bed "can still be seen," apparently years later (3:11). And we not only have the story of Moses' death, but we are told that "no one knows his burial place to this day," apparently long after Moses (34:6).

This need not surprise us. We are told plainly that long after Moses' death Joshua "made statutes and ordinances ... and wrote these words in the book of the law of God" (Josh. 24:25–26). Apparently the law was a living, growing thing, added to by God through great leaders as new occasions required. All the law of God was thought of as "the law of Moses," but Deuteronomy should be interpreted as being a revised edition of that law published long after Moses' death, intended for a new day.

To understand Deuteronomy fully, therefore, you need to think of three historical times.

First, imagine that you are a Hebrew around the year 1220 B.C. Your parents escaped from slavery in Egypt. You were born in the wilderness. For years you have heard that God has promised you a homeland, fertile and temperate. But you have known nothing but the hot, dry desert. Now, however, you have come to the border of that promised land. Moses, now too old to lead the invasion of that land himself, gives three great addresses to you and the others. The time has come. At last God is going to give you a homeland. There you and your neighbors are to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). But whether your new nation can prosper depends upon the faithfulness of the people. If you keep the Ten Commandments and the other laws of God, if you honor God with the weekly sabbath and the three festivals each year, remembering always what God has done for you, then you will be blessed. "Remember . . . remember . . . remember," Moses preaches. Then all will be well. But if you forget . . . Deuteronomy is to remind you of this covenant as you begin life in a new land.

Now, imagine that you are in the seventh century B.C. For most of that century, evil King Manasseh has suppressed the worship of the Lord, selling out to the powerful emperor of Assyria in exchange for that pagan ruler's patronage. Prophets and priests have been executed. Worship of the Lord has become almost an underground movement. Manasseh has even sacrificed his own son to a pagan god. But soon after his death, a bloody revolution has broken out. Finally, Manasseh's eight-year-old grandson has been placed on the throne,

and the prophets can emerge from hiding. A few years later they bring forth Deuteronomy—or part of it—from hiding in the Temple. It is to be a kind of constitution for the kingdom of God, a version of God's law edited for a new day. King Josiah himself has it read to you and all the people. You tremble at the curses about which it warns. You glory in the blessings it promises. You solemnly covenant that you will keep this law. As a matter of fact, it turns out to be too late. A generation later you and your grandchildren are kidnapped and deported to Babylon as slaves. But at least you know why. You and the others had forgotten to keep God's law.

But there is a third time for which this book is written: right now. Over and over Deuteronomy says that it is for all generations. It is "for all time" (4:40). The covenant was "not [just] with our ancestors . . . but with us, who are . . . alive today" (5:3). You are to "recite [these words] to your children" (6:7). Future governments should "have a copy of this law" (17:18). That covenant, Moses says, is for "those who are not [yet] here" (29:15). This book is for us today, for all who would live as citizens of the kingdom of God.

The Content of Deuteronomy

Perhaps the best way to summarize the message of this book is to quote part of the challenge that ends Moses' third speech:

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of

the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments . . . then you shall live . . . and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray . . . I declare to you today that you shall perish . . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life . . ." (30:15-19).

Two themes should be especially noted. (1) The word "remember" occurs thirteen times in Deuteronomy, and "do not forget" nine times. Israel must remember God's goodness to them, and they must remember God's covenant and its commandments. (2) The word "love" occurs twelve times. No other book of the law says so much concerning the love of God and that we are to love God in return.

The first session of our study will look at the first of Moses' three sermons, noting especially its review of how God cared for Israel and how unfaithful they had been. The next four sessions will be on Moses' second sermon, focusing on the Ten Commandments, the great law about loving God, the law's emphasis on justice for all, and the three great festivals of worship. Session 6 will review the third and last sermon, with its challenge to choose the way of life and blessing, not the way of destruction. The last session will review the life of Moses and, more briefly, this seven-session study of Deuteronomy.

Here is one outline of Deuteronomy.¹

Deuteronomy			
At the Edge of Canaan, Moses Reviews Their Redemption and Challenges Israel <i>"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart . . ." (6:5)</i>			
Moses' First Address; History and Challenge <i>Chapters 1—4</i>	Moses Second Address; What the Covenant Requires		Moses' Third Address: Challenge for the Future <i>Chapters 29—30</i>
<p>A review of God's care of Israel and their frequent rebellion, 1—3 Therefore, the challenge: remember to keep the covenant, 4</p>	<p>The Heart of the Law <i>Chapters 5—13</i> The Ten Commandments repeated, 5 The <i>shema</i>, 6 Remember this covenant, 7—9 Two basic requirements of the covenant: love God, and care for the needy, 10—11 Worship <i>one</i> God in <i>one</i> place, 12—13</p>	<p>Miscellaneous Laws <i>Chapters 14—28</i> These include such diverse concerns as help for the needy, 15; three annual feasts, 16; and laws about kings, sexual relationships, criminal justice, honesty, etc., 17—26 Blessings for those who keep the covenant, and curses for those who do not, 27—28</p>	<p>The Last Days of Moses <i>chapters 31 - 34</i> Moses writes the law and commissions Joshua to succeed him, 31 He sings of God's deliverance of Israel, 32 He blesses each tribe. 33 Then Moses dies, looking across to the promised land, 34</p>

Author: Traditionally Moses, more likely it is the work of prophets and scribes in the seventh century B.C.

Theme: In spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, God has delivered them; therefore, love God and keep the law.

Most Important Passage: The *shema* (6:4-9) is basic to Judaism, and Jesus called it the greatest commandment.

¹ William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 63.

Some Additional Helps

Here are some books that may be useful in your study of Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) is a recent commentary by Patrick D. Miller, a highly gifted scholar, aimed at teachers as well as ordinary clergy.

The Mercer Commentary on the Bible (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1994) and *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971) each include paragraph-by-paragraph commentaries on Deuteronomy, along with other books of the Bible.

A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) gives a scholarly commentary.

The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), includes both exegesis and exposition—interpretation and meaning for life.

Edward P. Blair, *Deuteronomy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1964), Volume 5 of "The Layman's Bible Commentary," gives a brief and readable discussion of the book, chapter by chapter.

The writer's own summary and brief discussion of Deuteronomy is found in *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, by William M. Ramsay (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

(Note: The leader may wish to review some of the material on the introductory pages of this study booklet before beginning the following study of Deuteronomy 1—4.)

Searching for Fellowship

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually as a group.)

WHAT DO MEN REALLY WANT? The cover of *Newsweek*, June 24, 1991, shouted the question, and its cover story described some men who have sought answers in what may seem strange ways.

Fed up with leading lives of quiet desperation, men are pouring their hearts out to one another, seeking comfort in the power of brotherhood. Men: construction workers, college professors, computer salesmen. In the suffocating dark of a tepee, squatting on naked haunches by a mound of sizzling rocks, they re-enact the sacred rituals of the Sioux and Chippewa, purifying their souls in the glandular fellowship of sweat. Men: media consultants, marketing consultants, media-marketing consultants. With hands cramped from long hours at keyboards, they smack in happy abandon the goatskin heads of their drums, raise their voices in supplication to west African tribal gods more accustomed to requests for rain than the inchoate emotional demands of middle-class Americans.

To many other men, these rituals from one branch of the "Men's Movement" may seem pagan and bizarre. But millions of men can, in a broader sense, sympathize with a movement that "looks inward. It seeks to resolve the spiritual crisis of the American man ..."

"What do men really want?" the cover of *Newsweek* asked. Near the end of the article it proposed an answer: "They know what they are seeking. They are seeking communion with other men, an 'honoring' or a 'blessing,' as it is called," a blessing in a caring community.

A "blessing" and a caring community are exactly what Deuteronomy promises. Its way of achieving them, however, is quite different from what *Newsweek* describes. Instead, Deuteronomy lays down a program of

worship, fellowship, and life that challenges ancient Israel—and us—to receive blessings which endure forever. It is our thesis that, through group study of Deuteronomy, men today may still be led toward something of that genuine blessing and community men still want and which Deuteronomy says God promised through Moses long ago.

The book of Deuteronomy comes to us following a time of bloody crisis. Evil King Manasseh has murdered prophets and erected a pagan shrine on the Temple mount in Jerusalem (2 Kings 21). By selling out to the king of Assyria, he held his throne for fifty-five years. But two years after his death, popular revolutionaries assassinated Manasseh's son and set on the throne his eight-year-old grandson, Josiah (2 Kings 22). Now the political allies of the prophets began to regain power. At the right moment, a book of God's law, probably all or part of Deuteronomy, was brought forth from hiding in the now repaired and purified Temple. Josiah ordered that it become the law of the land, a kind of constitution for Israel. Josiah's kingdom, he resolved, would become, in effect, the kingdom of God.

Though tradition ascribes Deuteronomy to Moses, historians warn that the book itself indicates that it was written at a later time.¹ The book, however, does recall a critical moment early in Israel's history, as critical as that when Josiah became king. It reminded its readers how back in Moses' day, Israel had been poised on the banks of the Jordan, ready to enter the promised land. In the form of three sermons attributed to Moses (chs. 1—4; 5—28, and 29—31) it presented this challenge: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God . . . walking in his ways, and observing his commandments . . . the LORD your God will bless you . . . But if your heart turns away . . ." (30:15-17). There was a big "if" about the future; but *if* they remained faithful, then in their new homeland they might achieve the blessing and community men seek in every age.

Moses' first sermon reviewed the history of what God had already done for them and challenged them now to go forward.

¹ Some reasons for this view are given in the Introduction to this study guide.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Deuteronomy 1:6—18. With a pencil or pen note briefly your answers to these questions, and then compare your answers with others in the group. (Note: There are no "wrong" answers to these questions.)

How would you have felt if you had been an Israelite man told by Moses that you must now go into battle and take the promised land?

What seem to be the chief duties and qualifications for leaders in the community Moses has set up?

How practical do these requirements seem for leadership in their new fellowship in the promised land, or for us in the U.S.A.?

A History of Ups and Downs

(May be summarized by the leader of the group, or read individually.)

Moses continues his sermon by reviewing the history of Israel up to this point. He recalls how, forty years before, God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and had brought them through the wilderness to the border of the promised land. Their spies had reported that it was a good land. But, overcome with fear, they lacked the faith to go in.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Now Moses reviews their history for the intervening forty years. He recounts their history—and ours?—from God's perspective.

If you had been an Israelite, what reasons would you have given for not going into the land that God had promised you?

Why, as God sees it, did they fail to take the land?

As you understand it, what is the point of this passage in relation to the time of King Josiah, or to our own day?

Why are they (and we of later generations) to keep the commandments of this God?

The Climax: Remember!

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually.)

Moses builds his first address to a great climax. "Remember." "Take care." "Do not forget." Over and over he pleads with Israel to be faithful in the days ahead to the covenant into which they had entered at Sinai (or Horeb). They must show their gratitude for God's rescuing them by keeping the commandments. Down through the generations they must remember the history of God's faithfulness, even though they had been unfaithful.

What parallels, if any, can you think of between the experience of Israel and the history of the U.S.A.?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read the climax to Moses' sermon in Deuteronomy 4:31-40. Briefly note down your answers and then compare them with others.

What is the God like who has made a covenant with these people?

Newsweek asks, "What do men really want?" How would you answer?

Afterword

Every Thanksgiving we remember those brave Calvinists who were the first settlers in New England. Shortly before they left, they received news that an earlier group of two hundred settlers had given up; disease had killed three-fourths of them by the time they reached America. Yet our pilgrims set sail, inspired, they said, by "a great hope . . . for propagating and advancing the gospel . . . in those remote parts of the world." The night before they landed at Plymouth Rock, at the shore of the New World, they drew up their own version of Deuteronomy, the Mayflower Compact.

Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and the Advancement of the Christian Faith ... a Voyage to plant the first colony in the northern Parts of Virginia; [we] do . . . mutually in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick... .

Many died that winter, but what a blessed community was born with that covenant! Could it happen again?

Looking Ahead

Read Deuteronomy 5, or at least 5:6-21, a kind of summary of the Old Testament's understanding of the constitution of the community Jesus called "the kingdom of God." Which commandment would you say we most need? Some reasons for this view are given in the Introduction to this study guide.

The Basic Laws of God's Kingdom: The Ten Commandments

GOD'S TOP TEN LAWS

Deuteronomy 5

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

A cruel dictatorship, an underground resistance movement, a popular uprising, a period of anarchy, and finally, an eight-year-old boy placed on a throne—all these were prelude to the bringing forth from the Temple the hidden book of Deuteronomy. The party of the prophets and priests of the Lord had prepared the way. Now there would be order. For one brief shining moment the law of God became the law of the land. Josiah resolved to make the kingdom of Josiah the earthly manifestation of the kingdom of God.

Deuteronomy proposed a kind of limited monarchy. Not only were there laws of justice that the king must enforce, there were laws restricting what the king might do. But the most important laws were laws for the individual citizens of that kingdom. Of all the Old Testament laws, the Ten Commandments give, in compact form, the fullest statement of what it means for a man to live in this world as a citizen of the kingdom of God.

The Bible itself makes clear the importance of these ten laws. For one thing, it tells them to us twice (Ex. 20:1–17 and Deut. 5:6–21). Note also that among the laws in both Exodus and Deuteronomy these ten are given first. Other laws were given in other ways, but we are told that the Ten Commandments were "written with the finger of God" (Deut. 9:10). They were on two tablets of stone—stone, apparently, so that they would never perish. They were to be carried everywhere Israel wandered in the wilderness, placed in the sacred covenant box, the Ark (Deut. 10:1–5). Most importantly for Christians, when the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he should have saved, Jesus began by reminding him of at least some of the Ten Commandments (Mark 10:17–19).

Presbyterian tradition has often summarized God's moral law by citing the Ten Commandments.) We have done so in relation to what they imply, interpreting them in the light of two other commandments—one of which also comes from Deuteronomy—which Jesus quoted: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and

love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:32–40). And so we will study them as a guide to being both citizens of the United States and citizens of the kingdom of God.

Though Deuteronomy is the edition of the law brought out of the Temple in 621 B.C., it claims the authority of Moses, who lived probably around 1290 B.C. Although historians tell us of law codes from emperor Hammurabi and others long before Moses' day, we may believe that the Ten Commandments go back even to Moses because they were so revered. Whatever their historical origin, however, they are laws from God. We will study them now.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read the prologue to the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:1–6) and note your answer to these questions. Compare your answers with others.

For whom are these commandments given?

What do these verses suggest why they are to be obeyed?

1 See, for example, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, questions 41–81.

Now read the commandments themselves (5:7–21) and compare answers:

1) No Other Gods (5:6–7)

Which of the following seems to you the worst violation of this commandment?

- About 10,000 Texas Muslims recently gathered in Houston to praise Allah and celebrate the end of the fast/feast of Ramadan.
- For too many men, "Work has replaced God as the source from whom all blessings flow. The escalating gross national product, or at least the rising Dow Jones index, is the outward and visible sign that we are progressing toward the Kingdom of God; full employment is grace; unemployment is sin. The industrious, especially entrepreneurs with capital, are God's chosen people, but even laborers are sanctified because they participate in the productive economy."²

Or what would you say is the worst common violation of this commandment?

2) No Idols (5:8–10) Which is the worst violation?

There are idols in some thirty Hindu temples in Los Angeles.

From his youth in Little League, to pushing his five-year-old into a soccer team, to heading the Boosters Club for old State U, Joe devotes his time, money, and children to sports. (In Tennessee, some sports enthusiasts actually choose to be buried in orange and white caskets, the colors of the state university sports teams!)

Or what would you say is the worst common violation of this commandment?

² Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 55.

3) Revere the name of the Lord (5:11)

Which is the worst?

Using God's name lightly, especially in abusive language.

Singing a hymn without really meaning the words.

Or what would you say is the worst violation of this commandment?

4) Keep the sabbath (5:12–15). Note the reason given for obeying this commandment. It is a kind of early wage-hour legislation.

Which of these men seem to you to best understand this commandment?

Ed Herring, 6'8", 330 lb. star lineman from Brigham Young University, who has turned down the chance to be a high draft pick and a millionaire because the NFL plays its games on Sunday.³

Those businesses that each year make the "Best Places to Work" list because of their concern for their employees.

Or what example would you give of someone who really keeps this commandment?

³ According to a Scripts Howard News Service story by Rick Morrissey, printed in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 8, 1995.

5) **Honor your parents (5:16).** In 1993, one in ten Americans was sixty-five or older. By 2020, one in five will be.

What does our responsibility for the old imply that we must do?

- *About such government programs as social security and healthcare?*

- *About other things such as*

6) **Do not murder (5:17).** Our prison population has now topped one million, the second highest rate in the world. Still, one in twenty families each year experience rape, murder, robbery, or assault. Apparently, caging more people doesn't solve the problem.

What do you think we should do to help people in our country fulfill this law?

Do note how Jesus deepens this command in Matthew 5:21-26.

No adultery (5:18). Here is one implication of the command to be a faithful husband: "A man may discover that being a superb provider, which he believed to be the most important responsibility of a husband, is not very important to his wife. For his wife, the times spent together as a family may be more important than the raise her husband might get if he spent extra time working after hours."⁴

What else would you add about the responsibilities of a faithful husband?

8) **Do not steal (5:19).** One estimate is that self-employed men report only 41 percent of their income for tax purposes.

What would you add to the list of the most common violations of God's law about being honest?

9) **Do not lie (5:20).** According to a recent survey, "A third of college-age men, [and] a fifth of college-age women say they would lie to get a job."⁵

Where do you suppose our young people learn this behavior?

4 Ayala Pines and Elliot Aronson, *Career Burnout: Causes and Cures* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 217.

7)

5 Reported by William Rasberry of the *Washington Post* in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, October 19, 1993.

10) Do not covet (5:21). "Greed is good," announces the crooked stockbroker in the movie *Wall Street*. Greed, he claims, is what keeps the capitalistic system going. With state lotteries multiplying and casinos everywhere, in many parts of the country gambling is described as the principal "growth industry."

Why in heaven—or in the world—do you suppose God gave this commandment?

Afterword

Two more things are especially worth remembering about the Ten Commandments. The comic cartoon "Farcus" shows a caricatured Moses holding the two stone tablets and gazing at a cloud. "They counteroffered with ten *suggestions*," he tells God, "and want a guarantee on the promised land thing." But really, the Ten Commandments are given as unconditional, with no "ifs," "ands," or "buts."

And do remember that when the rich young ruler claimed that he had kept the commandments pretty well, Jesus still asked for something more. Read what Jesus said in Mark 10:21.

Looking Ahead

Rabbis count 613 different commandments in the books of Moses. To learn what is the most important, and how to make sure we don't forget it, read the next chapter of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, in preparation for our next session.

three

The Greatest Commandment: Love the Lord Your God with All Your Heart

THE GREAT LAW

Deuteronomy 6—9

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually as a group.)

"Prioritize." The experts in the planning process have given us that new word. I can't find it in my old dictionary, but now every business executive knows it. "Remember that the main thing is the main thing," successful planners tell us. Put first things first. Get your priorities straight. Indeed, research shows that if a business wants to change, it should not start by listing the problems it faces. That is likely to produce excuses, blaming everyone else, and frustration. If you want to get somewhere, you need to decide first on a clear, main goal.

Moses knew that too . . . and so did Jesus!

Rabbis have identified 613 different laws in the first five books of the Bible. Seeking to trap him as an ignorant carpenter trying to appear to be a teacher, Jesus' enemies asked him which of all those 613 was the most important. Jesus seems not to have hesitated. He quoted a verse of Deuteronomy, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5; Mark 12:29-30).

We will study that commandment and some of its implications for us today. It is the first duty of any man who would be at the same time a citizen of the U.S.A. and a law-abiding citizen of the kingdom of God.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read carefully Deuteronomy 6:4-9, note briefly your answers to these questions, and then compare your answers with the others in the group.

What do you think it means to "love the LORD your God"?

According to this passage, does it matter which God you love?

yes

no

In what way, if any, do you think it would be wrong to worship Buddha or Allah or Krishna, provided you were sincere?

Do you think God should be more important in your life than

your wife?

your children?

your job?

Why and in what way?

"Enforcing" This Commandment

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

The laws of Moses set up penalties for disobeying many of its laws. Advocating the worship of any other god merited the death penalty (Deut. 13:6—10). If you were guilty of perjury in a trial you must suffer the penalty for the crime of which you had falsely accused someone (19:16—19). If you slandered a woman you were fined one hundred shekles (22:19). But how can you make sure people will love God? Moses gave two answers.

One is this way: Devout Jews were to write down Deuteronomy 6:4—5 and "bind [these verses] as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (6:8—9). If you know any strict Orthodox Jews, you know that many keep this commandment quite literally. On a plane to Israel, for example, you may see Hasidic Jewish men praying at dawn. Strapped to their foreheads and their left arms are small cases, *phylacteries*, containing Deuteronomy 6:4—9 and three other passages from the law of Moses. And over the door of the house of a devout Jew one may see a *mezuzah*, a small case containing Deuteronomy 6:4—9 and 11:13-21. You cannot enter such a home without being reminded about love and about God.

Literally binding the Great Commandment to one's head and heart is an external symbol of what must be an inward commitment. Moses' other way of seeing to it that God's people remembered to love God down through the centuries was the religious education of their children. "Recite them [the commandments] 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" (6:7). Down through the centuries, in his home, every man was to be responsible for seeing that his children learned to love the Lord and keep God's commandments.

Christians abandoned the use of phylacteries and mezuzahs. Some Christian fathers seem also to have abandoned their responsibility for the religious education of their children. Here are some statistics, some of them frightening, about our fulfillment of God's command to teach our children the law of God:

- A survey of thousands of teenagers found that a "positive family life" was the most important factor in their avoidance of "at-risk" behavior.
- Half of all teenagers in our churches do not talk with their fathers about God.
- Two thirds of these teenagers report no family devotions in their homes.
- Asked to choose 5 out of 30 positive influences on their faith, 64 percent of men in a major study listed their mothers, but only 34 percent named their fathers.¹

- Indeed, in another study, not related to church, it was found that fathers actually devote an average of only about eight minutes a day to talking with their children about anything.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Deuteronomy 6:6—9, about the responsibility of fathers toward their children, and discuss with the group your answers to these questions:

Here are three activities that research shows have a profound effect on the religious development of children and young people.

Can you tell the group about any one of these experiences in your own life, as a parent or when you were a child, that helped you develop as a Christian?

- Parent—child talks about the faith.
- Family devotions in the home.
- Working together as a family in a service project.

Can you tell the group about some other activity that helped you to grow as a Christian?

Which are you more concerned about your child receiving:

- religious education, or*
- secular education? Why?*

¹ The survey of church youth was conducted by the Search Institute and is reported at length in *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage*, by Eugene C. Roehlkepartain. Copyright ©1993 by Search Institute. Reprinted by permission of Abingdon Press.

How do you demonstrate to your children this relative importance?

What additional motivation does the New Testament give?

Reasons for Keeping This Commandment

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

There is a popular kind of religion that says the reason you are to live a good life is this: God will reward you if you do and will punish you if you don't. That is, at best, only a half truth. In the Bible we love God because God first loved us. First, God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. They made no claim that they deserved it, but God "redeemed" them, set them free. Now, *therefore*, they were to respond to God's love for them by loving God in return.

They were repeatedly warned, however, that if they strayed from the love of God their children would reap some consequences.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Deuteronomy 7:7-11.

What reasons do you find in this passage for loving God and keeping God's commandments?

Afterword

What does it mean to love God? Perhaps poet Leigh Hunt gives us a clue, based on what Jesus taught (Matt. 12:28—30). In his classic poem "Abou Ben Adhem," he tells of a good man who dreamed one night that he saw an angel recording the names of those who love the Lord. "And is mine one?" he asked. "Not so," said the angel. Somewhat shaken, but "cheerily still" About replied,

"... I pray thee, then,
Write me as one who loves his fellow men."
The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night It
came again with a great wakening light,
And showed the names whom love of God had blessed;
And, lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest!²

Looking Ahead

What sort of life does "loving God" imply for individual citizens in the kingdom of God and for the nation itself? For next week's answers, read Deuteronomy 10—15, or at least study 10:12—19 and 15:7—17.

² Leigh Hunt, "About Ben Adhem," in *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*, James Dalton Morrison, ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948), p. 395.

four

With Liberty and Justice For All

GOVERNMENT BY GOD

Deuteronomy 6—9

Introduction

(To be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

It sounds almost blasphemous to propose it, but try reverently to imagine this: Suppose God suddenly became president of the United States. Suppose the seraphim were congress. And imagine a legion of angels, armed with lightning, enforcing God's laws. What kind of president would God be, and what would America be like?

Really, that fantasy should not seem utterly strange to Christians. It is simply one incomplete effort to translate into modern language part of what we pray for when we say, "Thy kingdom come." Deuteronomy was intended to be a kind of constitution for the kingdom of Israel, and that nation was intended to try to be like the kingdom of God (Ex. 19:6).

That kingdom will come when Jesus comes again in glory. In the meantime, God has chosen to work through human beings. We ourselves are responsible, with God's help, to make our nation as close an approximation as we can to that government by God, which we are studying. And, whether this is good or bad, major responsibility for leadership in the United States still falls primarily not on women, but on men. In March of 1995, the Department of Labor announced that in the Fortune 2000 industrial and service companies, only 5 percent of senior managers were women. Much smaller companies no doubt have a similar pattern: Men dominate. Only six of the one hundred senators are women, and the proportion is much the same in the House of Representatives. Men have the top positions in most professions. Even in the church, women ministers usually are limited to being associate pastors or pastors of very small churches. We should try to eliminate the "glass ceiling" above which women are often denied the chance to rise. But in the meantime, we must recognize that if America is to be more like the kingdom of God, in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, then the heaviest responsibility for leading business and government in that direction still rests primarily on men.

Before we examine the image of God as "governor," here is a little background on the passages we will study.

Most of Deuteronomy consists of three sermons, attributed to Moses, given as the people are about to enter the promised land and become a new nation. We saw that the first sermon reviewed the history of how God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and had brought them through the wilderness. We have been studying the second sermon, beginning with the Ten Commandments and the Great Commandment. Two themes recur. The words "remember" or "do not forget" occur twenty-two times in Deuteronomy; and the word "love" appears 122 times. Israel is to remember what God has done for them. God has set them free; God has loved them. Now they are to respond by *loving* God and *remembering* to keep God's commandments. That is the basis for Deuteronomy's picture of government by God.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

For a summary of the theme of God's government, read Deuteronomy 10:12-19. Briefly note your answers to these questions and then compare what you think with the ideas of others in the group.

What five things does this Lord require of us, and what do you suppose each of these means?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

According to 10:13, God has commanded these things for our own well-being.

Can you tell the group about one specific way in which keeping God's commandments has resulted in well-being for you, for someone else, or for the nation?

According to 10:14-15, why is Israel to love God?

What in the world do you suppose is meant by the command "Circumcise, them, the foreskin of your heart" (10:16)?

Now we come to the picture of what kind of "king" (or president)? Deuteronomy tells us to think of God as being.

List some characteristics of God and God's government as you find them in 10:17—19.

God's government is particularly concerned about which groups?

What implications for our own government do you see in this picture of God as king and judge?

Specific Laws About Justice and Liberty

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually or by the group.)

Israel had not yet come to realize that even the most humane slavery is wrong. But Israel did set unusual restrictions on slavery. Every slave was to have the Sabbath completely free from work (Deut. 5:14). Not even an alien could be required to work that day. And six years was as long as a Hebrew man or woman could be kept in involuntary slavery. Then this servant must be set free, with a substantial bonus.

God's law also placed severe restrictions on the economy, designed to make sure that no one profited by another's poverty. All debts were to be forgiven every seven years.

Going by these laws literally is hardly practical for our industrial, urban society. Applying the principles of concern for the poor and for the people who work for us, however, is essential for any society that seeks to model itself on the idea of government by God. In the United States thirty-five million people are below the poverty line. Women and minorities make up a disproportionate percentage of the poor. Seeking to balance the national budget, we cut back on programs for the homeless. Voters may need to look at some commandments given by our Ruler.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Deuteronomy 15:7-18. Note briefly your answers to these questions and compare them with others in your group.

According to 15:7-9, in God's government, what is our attitude supposed to be toward people in need?

According to 15:10-11, how will people in our society at the top of the economic scale fare in relation to those people at the bottom?

According to *Newsweek*, "While most employers still offer 'dreadful' work environments, many enlightened bosses are beginning to transcend their marketplace woes, increasing employees' participation, improving sensitivity to family issues, and adding more fun to the workday." Perhaps these "enlightened bosses" are putting into contemporary practice some of the principals of the Fourth Commandment and Deuteronomy 15:12-18. What do you think?

Do most employers offer "dreadful" work environments?

yes no

A substantial bonus.

Can you tell the group an employer who made the workplace a pleasant environment in which to toil either hours a day?

Afterword

As a child, you were taught to stand proudly, place your hand on your heart, and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. We boast that we want to be—and that in some sense we really are—"one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Sooner or later, many of us make a pilgrimage to Philadelphia, see Constitution Hall, and stand in awe before the Liberty Bell. What too few people realize, however, is that the inscription on that bell, so symbolic of what is best in America, is from the law of Moses. It is from a passage that describes periodically letting the land lie fallow for ecological rehabilitation, the forgiving of all debts owed by the poor, and the freeing of slaves. That inscription provides a motto for citizens of the U.S.A. who would be at the same time citizens of the kingdom of God: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" (Lev. 25:10, KJV).

The General Assembly of 1984 approved for study a forty-eight-page paper entitled "Christian Faith and Economic Justice." It is helpful for any group wanting to do a detailed study of the subject.

Looking Ahead

Every nation has its holy days and holidays. Israel traced three of theirs back to Moses. To see what they were and what they may suggest about our own worship, study Deuteronomy 16. If you can, read on through the rest of Moses' second address, which ends with chapter 28.

Introduction

(To be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Deuteronomy laid down laws about criminal justice, welfare for the poor, equal treatment for women who work for you, limits on what the king could do, property disputes, and a host of other "secular" matters. It also laid down some provisions for worship. Their ceremonies seem strange to Presbyterians, but through studying them, we may learn some principals that still apply.

Worship is often not the highest concern of Presbyterian men. Let's imagine three who may especially need this study.

Tom Loner. "I can worship God out in the woods by myself," Tom assures us. "I don't need church. My wife goes, but I think the whole thing is set up for women. They love all that singing and those robes." Tom Loner is a nice man, but he doesn't make it to church very often.

Dick Consumer. "Church? I love it," Dick announces. "That church Honey and I go to now is like a spiritual filling station. By the end of the week I'm running on empty. But we shopped around and found a church that really fills me up again. That preacher's sermons are short and to the point. And that one-hundred-voice choir! We get a lift every time we go. No more of that dull old-time stuff for us!"

Harry Bored. "I go to church every Sunday. I've been sitting in this pew every Sunday since I was a child forty years ago. It's been a lifelong habit. But why in the world does God Almighty want to be 'praised'? I get bored with all those prayers and preliminaries. I wish they would just go right to the sermon and get it over with."

Each of these people has a point. Tom can worship God alone in the woods or at home. Worship can give Dick a weekly lift. And even when it seems meaningless, church is a good habit for Harry, and he even appreciates the sermons. But each of these men lack a fully biblical understanding of worship. It is quite possible that Tom, Dick, and Harry had their counterparts in ancient Israel.

Three great Jewish festivals, still regularly celebrated today by our Jewish neighbors, are said to go back to Moses and Deuteronomy 16. Without proposing that we Christians should appropriate those three in their ancient form, we may learn something from them.

Questions for Study and Discussion by the Group

(The leader might want to divide the participants into three groups, assigning **Passover** to one group, **Weeks** or **Pentecost** to another, and **Booths** or **Tabernacles** to a third, then letting them report their findings to the whole group.)

- 1. To learn about the first of the Jewish festivals, *Passover*, read Deuteronomy 16:1-8. Compare your answers to these questions with others in the group.

Why did the Jews celebrate with worship at the Passover?

After the Temple was destroyed and the Jews were scattered over the world, they celebrated Passover in their homes. But as long as it was still possible to worship at the Temple, they were commanded to do so. *Why do you suppose God gave the command found in 16:5-6, requiring group worship?*

How would you explain to Harry Loner the importance of worshiping together?

Do remember, by the way, that it was during the Passover season that Jesus ate the last supper with his disciples, transforming the Passover for Christians (Matt. 26:17, 26-29).

What do we Christians celebrate at the Communion service?

2. To learn about the next festival, the Feast of Weeks, read 16:9-12. It is also called Pentecost because it comes fifty days after Passover. It seems to have originally been a harvest festival, a kind of ancient equivalent of our Thanksgiving. Dick shopped around until he found a worship service where he could really get a lot of help.

Do we worship in order to get something?

yes

no

What would you tell Dick is the purpose of worship as suggested by the Feast of Weeks?

Incidentally, recall how Pentecost was transformed for Christians the day the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples (Acts 2).

3. The third Mosaic festival was the Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles). Read about it in 16:13-15. Orthodox Jews still build little brush shelters on their lawns and eat their meals there during this October festival. It reminds them of how God cared for them when they had only tents in the wilderness. At this feast season *everyone* was to rejoice; it was a big celebration.

What does Harry Bored need to learn from this festival about the nature of worship?

It is carefully stipulated that all people, with particular reference made to slaves of both sexes, orphans, widows, and aliens, are to share in the feast. But do note on whom the responsibility for worship is most particularly set, according to 16:16.

Why do you suppose that was the law?

Worship was to be no substitute for justice. Note what is the main thing in 16:18-20.

Some Elements of Worship

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

The Directory for Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (W.1.2003) lists the varied elements of Old Testament worship:

Fasting and feasting,
rejoicing and wailing,
marching and resting,
dancing and clapping hands,
purification and dedication,
circumcisions and anointings,
burnt offerings and sin offerings,
doing justice and mercy,
making music and singing to the Lord.

Not even Harry would be bored with all that! In a way, it reminds one of the "worship" in the branch of the Men's Movement described in Session 1. Harry wonders why God wants to be "praised." But Harry shouts himself hoarse cheering winning plays at football games. Worship is celebration. It may also involve confession. Harry isn't a perfect husband, so from time to time he tells his wife, "I'm sorry!" and he means it. Worship is our expression of love in response to God's love. The Lord is a personal God. Just as Harry wants his wife to express love for him, so God wants us to express our love for the Lord.

Look at one more passage, 26:1-12. Here we see especially two more elements of worship. The worshiper was to recite a kind of creed. Read it in 26:5—10. It recalled what God had done for God's people. And in 26:12 we have one more element: tithing, for the Levites (ministers) and for people in need from all races. Tithing, giving 10 percent of one's income for the work of the Lord, has been a guide for Christian giving down through the centuries. It is proposed, not simply as a legal requirement, but as an expression of our love in response to what a loving God has done for us.

The leader might distribute copies of the church bulletin and ask the group to discuss these questions:

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What elements in our Sunday worship are like those in Israel's worship?

How is the meaning of our worship like or different from theirs?

Afterword

The Directory for Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) begins with these words: "Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to the triune God. In worship the people of God acknowledge God's presence in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God's claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed. In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God's service in the world." That Directory, part of the *Book of Order*, is an excellent source for those wanting further study of what Presbyterians believe about worship.

"The Fall of the Wall: The Untold Story"—so Ann Clark headlined her article in *reNews*, December 1994. She describes how in 1982, in Leipzig, Germany, Pastor Christian Fuehrer began meeting with the members of his church each Monday night to pray for peace. By October 9, 1989, these worship services had grown so large that the communist government became uneasy. The authorities decided to pack the church at the next meeting with police and party members. But 70,000 others gathered outside the church, lit with candles, and marched peacefully. Soon one million marched in East Berlin. Dictator Honecker resigned, and the Berlin Wall came down. Of course there were other factors, but worship services did make a difference!

Looking Ahead

Read Deuteronomy 29—30 for Moses' third and last address. Or at least study 30:11-20, Moses' challenge as Israel faces its future.

Challenge for the Future

THE GOD OF WRATH WARNS US

Deuteronomy 29—30

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

God is a God of love—Yes! But Deuteronomy says that God is also a God of "anger, fury, and great wrath" (Deut. 29:28). God's covenant promises blessings—Yes! But it also warns of "all the curses written in this book" (29:11—26; 28:16—19). The path Israel would take was up to them.

The idea of God angrily punishing our sin is not a popular one today. We live in a time of moral relativism, when too many people ask, "Who is to say what is right or wrong?" The gospel is sometimes perverted until it becomes simply cheery "positive thinking." But punishment is not only a repeated theme in the Old Testament, it has a place in the teachings of Jesus. (See, for example, Matt. 25:41—46.) Violating the Ten Commandments is sin, and whether we like it or not, the Bible says that sin has consequences.

Now we must guard against some misunderstandings of Deuteronomy's theology—that good brings blessings and sin brings disaster. First, Deuteronomy does not make the hope of salvation the reason for obedience. God had already saved Israel, rescued them from Egypt. They were to keep the covenant in loving response to God's grace. Second, books like Job and Ecclesiastes warn us that poverty and illness are not necessarily signs of sinfulness. Bad things do happen to good people, and sometimes evil people appear to live happy lives. Finally, the gospel assures us that ultimately God treats us all better than we deserve.

With these cautions, look at Moses' third and last sermon (chs. 29—30). Israel is poised to enter the promised land. Moses presents the nation with a challenge. If in that new land the new nation keeps God's covenant, they will be blessed. But if they forget, he solemnly warns, they will be so cursed that "all the nations will wonder" at what happened to this people (Deut. 29:24).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Moses begins by reminding Israel how God has saved them (29:1—9). Next (29:10—15), he calls upon them all—men, women, and children—to renew the covenant made with their ancestors at Sinai. They are to enter into that sworn contract somewhat as a Presbyterian promises faithfulness when he makes his profession of faith. Next (29:16-19), Moses moves to warnings about what will happen if Israel fails to keep that covenant.

What do you suppose is meant by God's warning that "it may be that there is among you a root sprouting poisonous and bitter growth" (29:18)?

What kind of sin could cause the horrors described in 29:19—20?

The particular disaster about which Moses warns is that the day may come when they will "see the devastation of that land . . . all its soil burned out . . . unable to support any vegetation" (29:22-23).

Can you suggest an example showing how it is really true that sin can destroy soil or water or air in our own day?

There are hints of other disasters if God's people fail to keep their covenant promises. What do you think:

Would God be more loving if the Lord simply blessed us no matter what we do?

yes

no? Why?

“Choose Life”

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Part of the reason God confronts us with a choice is this: God treats us as *men*. Men are not computers, even as many computers can "think." Men are not animals. Adults are no longer children or even adolescents. Real men and real women can make morally responsible decisions. And so God's challenge comes, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. *Choose life*" (30:19; italics added).

In our own day the concept of morally responsible choice has tended to fade. We have learned to be very tolerant of what was once regarded as immorality. The man addicted to alcohol or other drugs is regarded as irresponsible; he is sick with the illness of alcoholism or drug addiction. The man who gambles away his family's savings is sick. The shrewd salesman who makes a living by selling inferior goods is excused if he stays within the law. The man who leaves his wife and children can be excused on the grounds that he is "no longer in love." The embezzler of company funds can blame it on a deprived childhood.

There is something good about tolerance. The genuine alcoholic is not likely to be helped by any effort to make him feel ashamed of himself. He probably drinks in part because he can't deal with the shame he already feels. But alcoholism is not much of a problem in Arabia; Muslims simply choose never to start drinking. The man who chooses never to go to a casino is not likely to become addicted to gambling. At some point each of us makes a choice. Human beings have free will. One mark of maturity is the ability to predict that choices will have consequences. One who has become a real man has learned that if he plays with fire he may get burned; he chooses not to play with fire.

And so, through Moses, God issues the challenge. The people are on the edge of the promised land. The future stretches before them. They are free to take either of two paths. Their future depends on the choice they make. It is up to them. "Choose life."

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read carefully Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

What are the two choices these people face?

What will the right choice require?

What promises are made if they make the right choice?

What will happen to them if they make the wrong choice?

What example can you suggest to the group of a nation or an individual that made the right choice and received a blessing?

Afterword

The wording varies within different congregations, but when you made your profession of faith it was probably much like the vows outlined in the *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).¹ First, there were the "renunciations" of the sin. Here are the words spoken by the minister and responses like those you may have made:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God,
do you turn from the ways of sin
and renounce evil and its power in the world?

I do.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ
and accept him as your Lord and Savior,
trusting in his grace and love?

I do.

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple,
obeying his Word and showing his love?

I will, with God's help.

The minister now asks about your belief in Christ, perhaps using the Apostles' Creed. Then he may have asked you to make covenant promises somewhat like these:

Will you be a faithful member of this congregation,
share in its worship and ministry
through your prayers and gifts,
your study and service,
and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of
Jesus Christ?

I will, with God's help.

With God's help, evil is renounced; the goodness of life and the grace of Christ is embraced. Perhaps Moses would have liked John Oxenham's poem:

To every man there openeth
A Way, and Ways, and a Way.
And the High Soul climbs the High Way,
And the Low Soul gropes the Low,
And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.
But to every man there openeth
A High Way and a Low.
And every man decideth
The way his soul shall go.²

Looking Ahead

Our last session deals with the last days of Moses, reviewing the life of a great man. Read chapters 31-34, or at least study 32:4-21.

¹ *Book of Common Worship*, prepared by the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 449-51.

² John Oxenham, "The Ways," as found in *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*, James Dalton Morrison, ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948), p. 300.

seven

The Legacy of a Great Leader

MOSES' MONUMENT

Deuteronomy 31—34

Introduction

His brother Aaron was a priest, but Moses was a layman, deeply involved in the down-to-earth work of government. He was a lawyer, educator, administrator, legislator, judge, political revolutionary, writer, general of the army, founder of a nation, and prophet. Four of the first five books of the Bible come to us as the "Books of Moses." As noted in the introduction to this series of studies, historians debate just how much of the Pentateuch, as we have it, actually came from Moses' pen. But clearly he is its dominant character, the dominant character of all the Old Testament, and one frequently cited in the New Testament. With his death, high on Mt. Pisgah, not only Deuteronomy but the Pentateuch comes to an end.

Moses had liberated his people from slavery in Egypt and had led them through the wilderness to the edge of the promised land. We have studied the three sermons Deuteronomy says Moses delivered in that critical situation. Deuteronomy now gives a long poem, a kind of swan song, describing Moses as he warns Israel once more that they must be faithful (ch. 32). He blesses the tribes (33). And now (34) he is ready to die.

At Hebron a pilgrim can see what are supposed to be the tombs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but of Moses we read, "No one knows his burial place to this day" (34:6). His is an unmarked grave. One who has studied the Old Testament, however, might assign to Moses the famous epitaph written for Sir Christopher Wren. The architect is buried in the crypt of his masterpiece, St. Paul's Cathedral in London, in what in itself is a relatively modest grave. But it bears this inscription: "Reader, if you seek his monument, look around you." If you seek Moses' monument, look back over Deuteronomy, over all the "Books of Moses," and indeed over the Old Testament and Israel itself.

The story of the death of Moses is simply and movingly written. Listen and follow in your Bibles as it is read now. (Read or have someone in the group read Deuteronomy 32:48–52; 34:1–12.)

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

The writer of Deuteronomy ends by reminding us of "all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent [Moses] to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land. And ... all the mighty deeds and the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed" (34:11–12).

What were some of those signs you can remember and why did Moses perform them? (Exodus 5–14 tells those stories.)

Caroline Atherton Briggs Mason wrote this epitaph for Abraham Lincoln:

His grave a nation's heart shall be,
His monument a people free!

In what ways would this be an appropriate epitaph for Moses?

A few weeks before his death, Martin Luther King, Jr., described what was in a sense the epitaph he would like:

And if any of you are around when I have to meet my day . . . tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn't important. . .

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. . . . I want you to say that day, that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry . . . to clothe those who were naked . . . to visit those who were in prison, I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. . . . I just want to leave a committed life behind.'

So here is a hard question:

Take a few minutes, write at least one thing you would most like said about you after you die, and share it with whoever is sitting next to you.

Of Goals, Visions, and Frustrations

One suspects that if you could have asked Moses what he would like to have on his tombstone, he would probably have said he would like two things: "I led them to the promised land," and "I kept them faithful to their covenant with the Lord." He did not succeed in accomplishing either goal.

Moses' first, abortive effort at freeing victims of injustice resulted in an angry response from one of the very people he yearned to liberate. He had to run for his life (Ex. 2:11—15). Moses' first sermon in Deuteronomy (1—4) reviews how the people rebelled in the wilderness (1:26). The second sermon (5—28) includes the reminder that even at Horeb (Sinai) he found his followers worshipping a golden calf. Moses became so angry he smashed the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written (9:8—17)! That second sermon included great commandments, promised blessing, and warnings

of curses. And it commanded ceremonies as reminders. But in spite of the challenge of Moses' third sermon, the first and second books of Kings tell the sad story of how Israel forgot its covenant. Moses' worst fears were realized: The people who had been meant for the kingdom of God were carried away into slavery in the kingdom of Babylon.

And Moses himself never entered the promised land. It is not quite clear how Moses "broke faith with [God] . . . by failing to maintain [God's] holiness" (32:51). When God told Moses simply to command a rock to bring forth water, in a rage against unfaithful people he struck the rock twice. Perhaps that outburst suggested he was claiming that he, not God, was working the miracle (Num. 20:1—13). In any event it is clear that after forty years of hoping, he died short of his goal.

There are two hints, however, that Moses' heroism had not been in vain. (1) He died still holding onto a vision. Though at age 120 he could not enter, "The LORD showed him the whole land, Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali" and on and on "as far as Zoar" (34:1—3). (2) He knew he left behind a successor he had trained. We are told that "Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him" (34:9). Through that successor God's goal would be accomplished.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

The night before his death, Martin Luther King, Jr., used language derived from the story of Moses, saying that he had "been to the mountain" and that, though he himself might not enter in, his people would enter, and that he had "seen the promised land."

What other men can you think of perhaps not famous, who died true to a noble vision even though they could not themselves see it achieved?

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Testament of Hope*, p. 267, as quoted by James A. Harnish, *Men at Mid-Life: Steering Through the Detours* (Nashville: Dimension for Living, 1993), p. 118.

Would you want to imitate these "failures"? Why?

"The Final Exam"

This is the end of our study of Deuteronomy. Research shows that reviewing does help learning. So think back over this course and compare answers to these questions:

1. *As far as you can tell from Deuteronomy, what are the most important characteristics of a citizen of the U.S.A. who seeks also to be a citizen of the kingdom of God?*

2. *What in this study has meant most to you and why?*

3. *What, if anything, can you tell the group that you would like to do as a result of this study?*

Afterword

Abraham and Jacob died not having received the promise God had made them, but viewed it from afar by faith (Heb. 11). Remember one other who, in a sense, died a "failure," not yet seeing the kingdom of God for which he lived. When Matthew began to write his picture of Jesus, it was to the figure of Moses that he turned. He described how, like Moses, this child had to be hidden from the king, how he had to flee for his life, how "out of Egypt" (Hos. 11:1) God called him to Israel, how he spent time alone in the wilderness, how from a mountain he delivered the new law of the new covenant, the law of love, how he led a group of often rebellious followers, and how he died with his dream apparently unfulfilled. But Matthew could add that from another mountain, Jesus, now risen and triumphant, could remind his followers of his new *torah*, a new law or teaching. And this new and far greater Moses gave us the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18).

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Thanks so much for doing them... "

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