

The Choice of a New Generation | Deuteronomy

The Priorities

Deuteronomy 10.12ff

11.5.17

"Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the LORD'S commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good? ¹⁴ "Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. ¹⁵ "Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day. ¹⁶ "So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer. ¹⁷ "For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. ¹⁸ "He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹ "So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ "You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name. ²¹ "He is your praise and He is your God, who has done these great and awesome things for you which your eyes have seen. ²² "Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.

We've been reading through the fifth book of the Bible...the Fifth Book of Moses, Deuteronomy. It's really not a story...but a series of teachings given by Moses to the new generation (children of the Exodus Generation)... Moses is preparing this next generation to go into the Promised Land and he's instructing them how to live and how to represent YHWH, the Unique God who chose/saved them.

Today, we consider... a kind of dynamic in this book that's puzzling to some modern readers...especially if you're a believer in Jesus Christ...it's puzzling to read Deuteronomy because it seems to put forward a picture of the spiritual life based on KARMA... In other words, the previous generation was denied access to the Promised Land because they disobeyed and the New Generation will go in...IF they obey. And for most people... that seems...logical... It seems like it's fair... It's basically how everything works here on planet earth... It's all "This For That" (quid pro quo) – for every action there's a reaction... If you work hard, you get wages...a raise...a promotion. AND it makes sense that religion and spirituality would work the same way... BUT that's NOT what we teach around here...it's NOT what Christianity teaches – Christianity is built on GRACE not karma.

So... is Deuteronomy...un-Christian...pre-Christian and thus not based on grace? How to understand this book...and so much of the Bible before you come to Matthew, Mark, Luke and

John...Is the Old Testament based on works/law/karma and is the New Testament based on Good News and grace?

And this brings up a similar issue – motivation. If grace is the basic structure of the Bible then WHY should people obey? Is it ever ok to obey because you fear the consequences...or want benefits/rewards?... Are we required to obey?

Let's look at: 1) Order of Operations
 2) Mystery of Motivation
 3) Wisdom of Weakness

“Order of operations” is a mathematics term...I'm using it in a different way... and let me come right out with it – the basic order the whole Bible teaches is that God initiates... God rescues... God chooses and that leads to new life...to a response...to change.

The basic order of operations in the whole Bible is grace leading to obedience... NOT the other way around. This is the Story of the Upside-down Kingdom... where God finds His people in a big mess, in dire straights...we are dead in our sins/guilt and we have become spiritually unresponsive...and God makes the dry bones come alive (Ezek 37) ... AND then, He begins to save us from all destructive forces ...enemies outside ourselves and enemies within.

Religion and morality and self-help all work the other way: you perform and then you get what's owed to you. In the Bible, you get rewarded based on the performance of Someone else... FIRST you get rewarded and THEN you begin to change...to move in the direction of obedience: “to fear God, to walk in His ways, to love Him, to serve, to keep His law” (12).

And that's the order in Deuteronomy: the God of Abraham came to Abraham when he was a “wandering Aramean” (that's Deuteronomy 26, v 5). God was NOT waiting for Abraham to measure up. He came to this pagan man who lived among idol worshipers and HE initiated a relationship with him.

And the great saving event of the Old Testament, the Exodus...the plagues... crossing the sea ...rescue from slavery – that was all God. He wasn't responding to anything in the Israelites... He rescued and rewarded them before they were good/worthy.

The book of Deuteronomy is a picture of a rescued people...recipients of grace...forgiveness...new life AND recipients of God's oath... They've been rewarded because of what Messiah would do for them in the future. AND “NOW” (see the first word!), “NOW” in response to grace, they are to live differently...NOT holiness that eventually wins God's favor – but God's favor by His own initiative...God's grace leading to change/holiness (opposite of karma).

I mentioned last week, maybe THE key word in this book is “TODAY”...and if you add “This day...” and “NOW”...it adds up to like 85 times... And that points to this basic dynamic, this order of operations: “NOW that you have been chosen...now choose to go with God. You are declared holy (before you ARE holy) but having been declared holy...now become what I declared you to be.”

You SEE this basic order in today’s passage: v. 15 “Yet on your fathers did the LORD your God set His affection to love them...” Oh! God loved them because they were looking for Him...NOPE. Because they were trying to please Him. NOPE! He set His affection on them just because...that’s what He wanted to do...to show His grace...

So that’s the basic “order of operations” in the whole Bible – it’s NOT that you get holy and then get God’s favor...it’s that you get rewarded/grace and then it begins to change you...you move toward holiness.

Second, the Mystery of Motivation... and this is a big topic because...motivation really IS a mystery. We ask our little children, “Honey, WHY did you do that?”

“I dunno...”

And then we grow up...and we still don’t really know why we do what we do... We go to a guidance counselor and then a therapist (I’m PRO-therapist!) and she helps us to figure it out: was it my genetic predisposition? Was it some trauma I experienced as a child? Was it the dysfunctional home where I was raised? Was it just some mysterious choice I made traceable to nothing... just a mystery?

But for the New Generation...for the Israelites and for US...motivation is almost always a complex matter... We DON’T know WHY we do WHAT we do.

And God is NOT opposed to providing them (and us) with a variety of motivations or reasons to obey.

Sometimes He says things like, “So that it will go well with you in the Land I am giving you...for your good (13)” You might think, “Ahhhh-HA! I knew it! It’s karma!”

And I admit...this can be a little confusing but it’s helpful if we work through it... God is showing His people that His instruction is good and beneficial and it leads to fullness and flourishing for those who obey it... He’s saying, “My commands aren’t just odd and arbitrary...they have real purpose - happiness.”

The whole command section begins in chapter 12 and the instructions apply to all of life... sexuality and construction sites...and caring for the environment and eating... clothing... agriculture ... warfare...hygiene... crime/punishment... NO AREA OF LIFE GOES UNADDRESSED!

And God is saying, “My instruction is for the thriving and prosperity of this people... To do what I say is to enjoy life and to enjoy community...and to enjoy a true relationship with Me...v. 13 FOR YOUR GOOD... To reject My teaching is to invite destruction into self, into society and into your walk with Me.”

Many of the laws are similar to saying, “Look – this automobile has a few basic fluids – if you put oil in the radiator and water in the gas tank and gasoline in the crankcase – your car will not flourish!”

Sometimes God will say, “IF you do such-and-such, I will step in and STOP it...I will drive you from the land... I will make you serve idols... I will bring all sorts of calamity against you...” In other words, it’s NOT just what we’d call the “natural consequences” but supernatural intervention...BUT even THAT is only a way of saying, “I chose you...I set My love on you...I did great/mighty deeds to save you...AND I WILL NOT SIT BY AND ALLOW YOU TO DESTROY YOURSELVES.”

There are times when God will allow lying to take its toll on a person... times when the sort-of “built-in” moral consequences do their work...and the habitual liar looks around and sees that all his friends are gone because... people want to get away from liars.

And there are other times when God will step in... and bring some seemingly unrelated pain into my life to get my attention. BUT as we read Deuteronomy we have to remember: these choices are NOT going to make God choose them (they’re already chosen).

The laws are about the enjoyment of life and the accurate representation of Him to a watching world.

And that brings up the last point – the Wisdom of Weakness. In this passage, God mentions three of the categories to which He returns repeatedly...in Deuteronomy and in the rest of Scripture...especially the Prophets: His great love/concern for the weak.

In v. 18, Moses says about God: “He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien/immigrant by giving him food and clothing...”

To these three categories there is often added a fourth: the poor...and NOT ONLY is God saying, “When you go into the Promised Land, you must care for these special objects of My affection...you must show the world what mercy/love look like... MY nation will be just and merciful because I am JUST and MERCIFUL.”

But God ties the richest motivation of ALL to this mandate, “So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Gospel motivation!

My people will always be a nomadic people - even when they're in the Land they will have to make three pilgrimages per year...always traveling (because this world is not their home)...and you will always remember that YOU were strangers/aliens in Egypt but I RESCUED YOU! The richest motivation!”

And therefore when you look on weak/needy people (poor, widows, immigrants, orphans) I want YOU to see a reflection of your true self. You may build big houses and think you're safe...big families and THINK you belong and are secure...you may be young and THINK you're strong/invulnerable... BUT when you see a weak person (elderly/displaced/poor) look at that person and realize, “Ah-HA! That is a real picture of the true me.”

Had the God of Abraham not chosen me and then come for me...I would be a despised alien/immigrant excluded and enslaved... The slave is my brother... the poor man shows my inner condition...the weak and elderly illuminate/expose my true self.

No wonder Jesus Christ said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Mat 5.3)

I think it was Tim Keller who said, “The Christian cannot have a middle-class spirit – he must be poor in spirit...because that is what we ARE apart from grace.” We have to circumcise our hearts and not be stiff-necked and stubborn...God’s Spirit will combat that within us...He won’t leave us with spiritual amnesia ...but will say, “Love the alien – he is YOU!”

And no wonder Jesus Christ came...a Stranger...and was excluded...alienated...rejected...and beyond weak – He became powerless for us as He carried our debt and freed us from our guilt and slavery.

And whatever our government does with immigration, WE, the people of grace will say, “We are all immigrants – strangers to the Kingdom of God and God in Jesus Christ brought us in...we can relate to the excluded...and we also know the joy of embrace...and we want that for others...the wisdom of weakness... God, in Christ IS our praise...