

## Deuteronomy 19

### Covenant Renewal

Deuteronomy 27-34

#### Moses last discourse

27 Now Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, "Keep the whole commandment that I command you today. <sup>2</sup> And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. <sup>3</sup> And you shall write on them all the words of this law, when you cross over to enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you. <sup>4</sup> And when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. <sup>5</sup> And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. You shall wield no iron tool on them; <sup>6</sup> you shall build an altar to the LORD your God of uncut stones. And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, <sup>7</sup> and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God. <sup>8</sup> And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly." (27:1-8)

This is Moses' last discourse to the people of Israel. He had reminded them of their history (deliverance from Egypt and faithlessness at Kadesh Barnea), given them the 'Ten Words' and spelt out the way that was to be interpreted and lived out in their community. It was a passionate plea to the people to keep to the ways of God, the ways that he had so laboriously spelt out. And so as he began his last discourse to the people, he began saying, 'Keep the whole commandment that I command you today' (27:1). The words of the law were to be engraved on stone at another time (27:2, 8), when they entered the promised land. Moses brought down the two stone tablets before, but that generation of Israelites had died in the desert. This act of engraving the 'The Words' in stone needed to be done again for this generation as they entered the promised land. These words are permanent and will not change with time. They are the words of the eternal covenant.

#### Curses 27:9-26, 28:15-68

<sup>15</sup> "But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. <sup>16</sup> Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. <sup>17</sup> Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. <sup>18</sup> Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. <sup>19</sup> Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

There are two lists of the curses. The first one in chapter 27 relates to the violation of the commandments. The second list in chapter 28 is longer and necessarily so because of the waywardness of the human heart. This serves as a reminder to the people of the consequences of departing from the way of the Lord. 'Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart (Ps. 36:1). The covetousness of the human heart is not an easy thing to deal with and it is only the creator God can change that.

#### Blessings 28:1-14

<sup>28</sup> "And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. <sup>2</sup> And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. <sup>3</sup> Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. <sup>4</sup> Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. <sup>5</sup> Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. <sup>6</sup> Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

A very shallow and simplistic understanding of the blessings and curses is this: blessings are for obedience and curses are for disobedience. That is the understanding from a contractual framework. However, Deuteronomy was not written from the contractual framework. Yes, it is law but it is law arising from a covenantal relationship. It is like warning our children out of love for them, not warning and watching from the side to catch them when they do wrong. Rather, we obey the law not primarily because of the rewards (blessings), but because of the covenantal relationship. It is living in the covenantal relationship, i.e. expressing our love for the other, for God or another person. The blessing of prosperity (28:11) and others are secondary to the relational. We must not reverse the creational order.

### **Covenant Renewal 29:1-29**

<sup>2</sup> And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: "You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, <sup>3</sup>the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. <sup>4</sup> But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear. <sup>5</sup> I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn off your feet. (29:1-5)

It is just so easy to hear (read) these words of Moses in a legal context. Time and time again Moses reminded them that these laws are covenantal. It is because of what God had done for them in delivering them from slavery in Egypt, and for us it is the delivery from the slavery of sin by Christ who gave Himself for us on the cross.

What follows in this chapter is a recounting of the events of the past from the delivery from Egypt to the time when they were on the verge of entering the promised land, the fulfilment of their hopes. It includes a fairly concise account of the past forty years.

### **Repentance and Forgiveness 30:1-20**

<sup>30</sup> "And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, <sup>2</sup> and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, <sup>3</sup> then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. <sup>4</sup> If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. <sup>5</sup> And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. <sup>7</sup> And the LORD your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you. <sup>8</sup> And you shall again obey the voice of the LORD and keep all his commandments that I command you today. <sup>9</sup> The LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, <sup>10</sup> when you obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

This is a significant passage in Deuteronomy, not just because it is Moses closing remarks, but it gives the answer to the stubbornness of Israel. It states clearly that forgiveness and repentance are the inevitable components of the covenant. Israel would not be able to keep the commandments and would certainly depart from the Lord. This is a statement of the grace of God and the second chance given to Israel. But the whole process did not depend on Israel taking the initiative, but God. Earlier, Moses had told Israel that they need to 'circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn' (Deut. 10:16). Can they do it? No, they can't and so Moses told them that God will do it for them.

<sup>6</sup> And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Circumcision is a sign of the covenant. It is what the respondent to the covenant does. However, the covenant is essentially what God does and Moses was using this expression to highlight the point. To love the Lord with our whole being is something that God does for us – the circumcision of the heart.

If you would allow me some poetic licence, this could be translated into modern language. Sin has infected the pericardium (covering) of the heart and caused it to thicken, thereby preventing the heart to beat as it should. Three and a half thousand years ago, Moses taught us some anatomy too. What needs to be done is to excise this covering of the heart (pericardium), a procedure that the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel told us that God will perform. The covetousness of the human heart can only be treated this way. This is the only way in which we can be truly loving God.

I would like to close this section of our study with a reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan. The practical application of the *shema* is best summarised by Jesus in this parable. The lead question to the parable is this. A lawyer put this to Jesus, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' (Luke 10:25). Of course, they knew the answer which is the *shema*, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.' Jesus applauded them and told them, 'do this, and you will live' knowing full well that they were unable to do that (Luke 10:27-28).

Unable to trap Jesus, they posed another question, 'Who is my neighbour?' Again, they knew the answer. However, to this question, Jesus gave them a slap in the face, citing the priest and the Levite. They did not care for the injured person. They knew what to do, but did not (could not) do it. On the contrary, the Samaritan, not having the law but did what the law prescribed. In conclusion, Jesus again told them to do likewise, knowing full well they were unable to do it.

The parable is well known. The person the Jews hated is the one who looked after the injured person. This is not law but covenant. God's covenant of love is expressed in our covenant with those whom He has created regardless who the person may be. It is not duty but love. It is not law (Pharisee) religion or law, but the circumcision of the heart.

This is the promise of the covenant, forgiveness, second chance. The book begins with the second chance given to Israel to enter the promised land. Here at the close of the book, Moses reiterated this important principle of grace again to all Israel.

This closes the third discourse of Moses. The following chapters narrate the concluding stages of Moses' life, including the appointment of his successor, Joshua, and the blessings to Israel. Here, I will only deal with the song of Moses and his death.

### **Song of Moses 32**

<sup>19</sup>"Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel. <sup>20</sup>For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to give to their fathers, ... (31:19ff)

The song of Moses is not just a song for celebration. It is a song for teaching and a witness to the God who delivered them. And so Moses began with these words reiterating the importance of hearing the words of the Lord (the *shema*). This opening stanza sets the tone of the song and indeed for the book of Deuteronomy.

1. Moses began by calling on heaven and earth and the declaration of the nature of God (1-4).

2. This second stanza spells out the relational basis of the words and why they should listen (5-6).
3. The nurturing in this relationship: recounting what God had done for them (7-14).
4. Turning away from the covenantal relationship: the indictment. (15-18).
5. Provoking the Lord to anger: the judgment (19-25).
6. The assurance of Israel's deliverance (26-38).
7. The promise of deliverance – second chance (39-43).

### **Death of Moses 34**

<sup>5</sup> So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD, <sup>6</sup> and he (God) buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day. ... <sup>10</sup> And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, ... (34:5-6, 10)

Just as the Lord preserved Moses in a basket on the river bank in Egypt, He now put Moses to his eternal rest. ' he was God's chosen charismatic leader in Israel, God's spokesman, God's agent. In him were concentrated all the great offices of Israel – prophet, ruler, judge and priest. If some who held these were great, Moses was the greatest of them all.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J A Thompson, *Deuteronomy* (IVP: 1974), 320.