

Actions Have Consequences

(Highlights from Deuteronomy, Part V)

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — July 2, 2017

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Deuteronomy 28:1-6, 11-20

"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. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.

"Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. 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. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. . . .

"And the LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your livestock and in the fruit of your ground, within the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. The LORD will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.

"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. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. 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. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

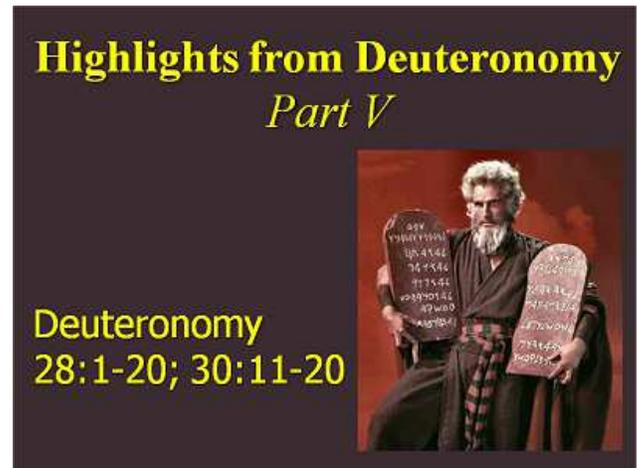
"The LORD will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me." *[This continues for 48 more verses.]*

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

"For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

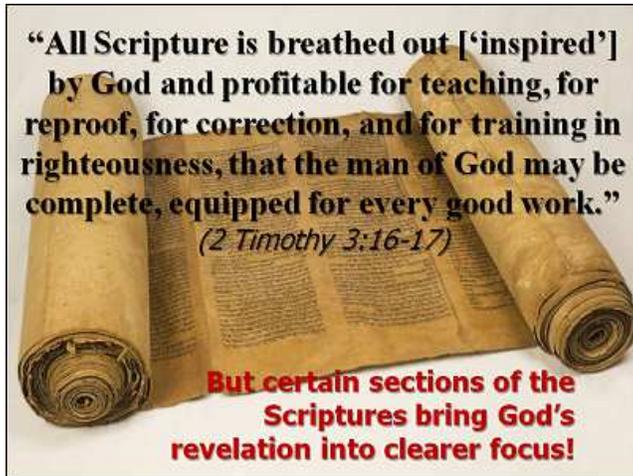
"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."



With this fifth installment we conclude our series of teaching on "Highlights from Deuteronomy" (a series that was interrupted by Pentecost, then two guest speakers, and then our community worship service in the park). I know that you've been eagerly awaiting the completion of this series! Seriously, these teachings have been important because, as I've mentioned before, Deuteronomy is one of the three Old Testament books most often cited in the New Testament. For example, when Jesus resisted the testing of the devil in the

wilderness, all three of his quotations from the Word of God were from Deuteronomy. Just to review quickly, the name Deuteronomy is the Greek name for this book which in Hebrew is called *Deverim*, "Words"; Deuteronomy means "second law," because this book is a long sermon by Moses just as Israel is about to set foot in the promised land of Canaan; and in this sermon he reminds the people of their long, forty-year trek since the Exodus from Egypt, and develops for them the significance and impact of the laws they received from the Lord on Mount Sinai.

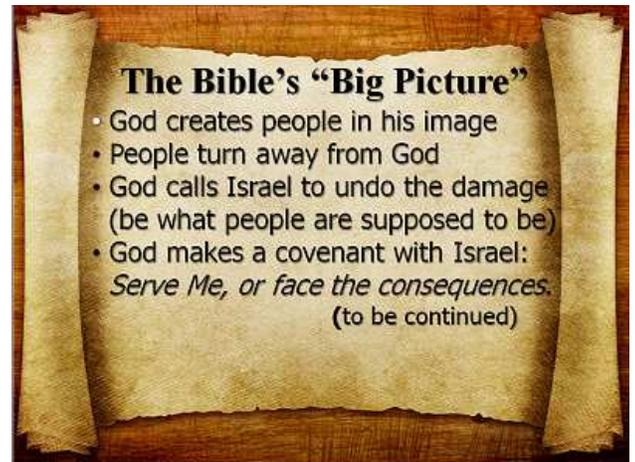


The selections from Deuteronomy we have read today are some of the most important sections of the entire Bible. As the apostle Paul stated, writing to Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out [or 'inspired'] by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Nevertheless we all recognize that there are certain parts of the Holy Scriptures that bring God's revelation into clearer

focus for us. These final chapters of Deuteronomy, especially the parts I have read, make up a key section that brings to expression what the Bible is all about. Let me explain.

First, we need to look at the "big picture" the Bible lays out concerning God's plan for his universe. In the beginning, people have been placed in the world to be God's representatives, made in his image and charged with the proper management of what the Lord has made. But people made a choice to go their own way, not God's way, as the account of Adam and Eve makes clear. So the Lord called a special people to do what the first human beings had failed to do. He called Abraham to be the father of a new family that would bless all nations, and when that people whom we call Israel were bound in slavery he brought them out in the Exodus and gave them a way of life they were to follow in the land he was giving them.

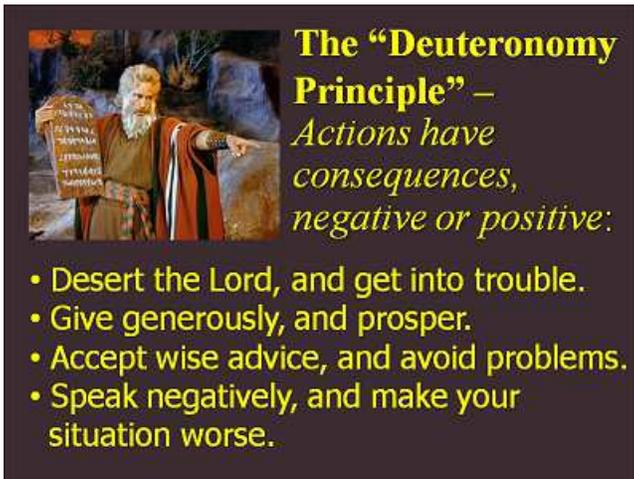
So God established a covenant, or treaty, with Israel: he will be their God, if they will be his people. The basic stipulation of this agreement is that Israel must be loyal to Yahweh, the Lord, alone; if they remain loyal, and follow the benevolent and righteous way of life he has given them in his law, they will prosper and succeed in life. But if they turn away and follow other gods, and ignore their true Father, then this treaty includes a sanction; they will be cursed with all kinds of bad things like sickness, poverty, defeat, and exile. In these final chapters of Deuteronomy, Moses spells all this out for the people as they're about to enter the land of Canaan: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).



So Deuteronomy places before us that basic decision the Scriptures put before every man, woman, and child: Either choose the Lord as your governing authority, be loyal to him, and follow his way of life — or else experience the consequences in a wasted, pointless, or even stressful or disappointing life filled with grief and pain. This is the universal principle of *action and consequence*. It's as solid a principle of human behavior and interaction as the laws of physics, for example Newton's third law: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction" — or better, perhaps, for every action there is *a corresponding reaction*. Actions have consequences, for God has built that structure into his universe. As the apostle Paul puts it, "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (Galatians 6:7).

Of all sections of the Bible, perhaps it's the Book of Proverbs that stresses this principle — we could almost call it the "Deuteronomy principle" — most consistently. I just picked out some sayings in Proverbs at random

that express the principle of action and consequence. For example, Proverbs 11:24: "One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want." When we're stingy with our resources, we just run into more financial problems. Proverbs 28:27 is similar: "Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes [from their need] will get many a curse." Or take Proverbs 16:7: "When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him." If we live the way the Lord wants us to, no one will be able *truthfully* to complain about our behavior. What about Proverbs 22:29: "Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men." Developing our God-given talents and abilities creates a way to relate to influential people. Proverbs 27:12 says, "A prudent [person] sees danger and hides himself; but the simple go on, and suffer for it."



The "Deuteronomy Principle" –
Actions have consequences, negative or positive:

- Desert the Lord, and get into trouble.
- Give generously, and prosper.
- Accept wise advice, and avoid problems.
- Speak negatively, and make your situation worse.

How many people do you and I know — family members, friends, or whomever — who have done things guaranteed to get them into trouble and suffered for it, even though they've been cautioned about these things by wiser heads? Similarly, Proverbs 29:1 warns: "He who is often reprov'd, yet stiffens his neck [that is, won't listen to correction] will suddenly be broken beyond healing."

Prideful, self-serving behavior leads not to approval but to ruin, as Proverbs 29:23 states: "One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor." We see how the relation of acts to consequences affects the area of government, as well as personal life, for Proverbs 29:12 reminds us, "If a ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked." We can observe what's happening in our country when highly placed leaders listen to "fake

news." And there's a consequence when powerful people try to coerce good people into abandoning their principles, as Proverbs 28:10 insists: "Whoever misleads the upright into an evil way will fall into his own pit; but the blameless will have a goodly inheritance." Eventually, leaders who try to corrupt others will become the victims of their own corruption.

A famous proverb usually goes like this: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Proverbs 22:6 sounds like a promise, but in Hebrew it's actually a warning: If you let a child do whatever he wants — that is, the "way he wants to go" — and don't restrain him, then when he grows up it will be hard to turn him (or her) away from the self-centered life style that inflicts pain on others, especially those closest to him or her. How often we've witnessed that scenario, to our sorrow! And one of my favorite proverbs is 18:21: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits." If we go around with complaining, negative comments about our situation we will only perpetuate that situation and make it worse. *We build our world by what we say about it*, and if we want matters to go well for us we had better speak creatively and positively about God's possibilities for our life. As Jesus warned us, "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37).

Actions have corresponding consequences. This works in the negative as well as the positive, even if some people believe they can do things without any consequence — as we've seen in recent news. If you use the media to continually attack members of a certain political party as deplorable, unspeakably evil, not worthy of life; if you parade an effigy of the severed, bloody head of the President who belongs to that party; if, in effect, you call for the elimination of everyone who holds that party's views — then, sooner or later somebody will take an automatic rifle and try to murder as many representatives of that party as he can.

All the sayings we've described from the wisdom of Proverbs bolster the "Deuteronomy principle" of action and consequence, that underlying principle of God's agreement with his people: If you remain faithful to the Lord and his way you will be blessed, but if you ignore the Lord and go your own way it will definitely not go well with you. And we can easily see how Jesus, in his teaching of the kingdom of God, builds on this principle. In his teaching we find what some have called the "laws of the kingdom," where Jesus makes it clear that the relation of act and consequence still applies. For instance, take his words in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For

everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:6-12).

But in Jesus' preaching the relation of action to consequence goes beyond mere good advice about successful living — advice any wise and astute person could give. This "Deuteronomy principle" applies to how people relate to Jesus himself, as the bringer of God's kingdom.

Consider, for example, his words in Matthew 11:27-30: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." We find our "rest" — that is, not just relaxation but the productive, successful, happy life God intends for people made in his image — when we come to Jesus and place ourselves into his family. But if we refuse that invitation the consequence for us is the same as that of ancient Jerusalem, which wouldn't recognize that God had visited them in the person of Jesus to reestablish his rule in the world. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," cried Jesus, "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! Behold, *your house is forsaken!*" (Luke 13:34-35). Because people had other ideas about what Messiah was supposed to do, they couldn't accept that God was bringing his kingdom, his new creation, into reality in the world through this teacher from Galilee. And they experienced the consequences when Jerusalem and its beautiful Temple were destroyed by Rome in the futile Jewish revolt of AD 66-70.

The "Deuteronomy Principle"
(actions have consequences) in the teaching of Jesus:

- Ask, and receive.
- Seek, and find.
- Treat others the way you'd like to be treated.
- Come to Jesus, and find peace and rest.
- Receive the Messiah, or face desolation.



So in these final chapters of Deuteronomy Moses give God's people the foundational principle of Scripture: "Serve the Lord, and him alone, and walk in his way, and therefore experience his blessing." In this way, God's people are to live out what was lost when Adam and Eve turned away from the Lord; they are to live out what it means to embody the image of God the Creator, bringing peace, blessing, and good to this earth and all who live on it. Actions have consequences.

The Bible's "Big Picture"

- God creates people in his image
- People turn away from God
- God calls Israel to undo the damage (be what people are supposed to be)
- God makes a covenant with Israel: *Serve Me, or face the consequences*
- Israel disobeyed, went into exile.
- Israel's Messiah took the curse on Himself to set God's people free.
- In His resurrection, the image of God is restored.

But, as we survey the whole plan of the Bible, we realize that *something went wrong here*. Israel failed to live up to the agreement God made with them. They turned to other gods, they listened to other voices. They deserted God's way and allowed injustice to prevail, despite the warnings of their prophets. The people the

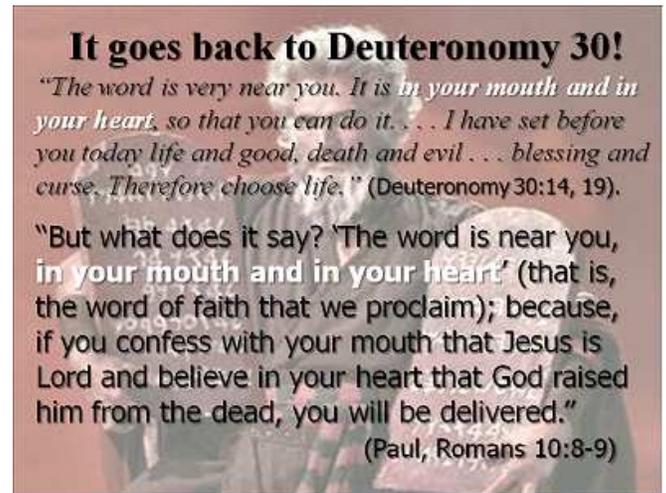
Lord chose to deal with the problem of human sin became part of the problem. As a result the sanctions of God's treaty with them took effect, and they came under the curse of defeat, destruction, and exile in Babylon — the very curses spelled out by Moses in Deuteronomy 28. And six centuries later, under domination by the foreign power of Rome, they still felt themselves to be in exile even though they lived once again in the land of Judea and Galilee. The glory of the Lord had filled the Temple of Solomon, their great ruler. But despite the efforts lavished on the new Temple begun by King Herod, a work continued by those who followed him, they could never claim that God had returned to them to dwell in his house as before, and forgive their sins. How

could God return to his people? What could happen to forgive their sins, lift the curse of disobedience from their shoulders, and restore their faithfulness to the covenant the Lord had granted them?

Somebody had to step into Israel's place and uphold the agreement with God. Someone had to affirm Israel's confession of faith, the *Shema*: "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." The Lord didn't abandon his choice of Israel; a faithful Israelite had to fulfill that plan. Somebody had to take the curse upon himself so that God's people could be set free. Someone needed to "bear their sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). But this could be done only by Someone who, by his faith and his faithfulness, *rolled all Israel up into himself*. Only a Messiah, the anointed of the Lord, could do this, drawing the curse to himself like a lightning rod so that God's forgiven people could become what Adam and Eve were called to be: his image-bearers in this world. And only by being *raised from death* could this Someone be recognized as Messiah, the anointed Son of God, who in his resurrection embodies God's new Israel, his new creation that displaces the old world, distorted and decayed as it has become through human disobedience.

And so Peter declares on the day of Pentecost: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. . . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and [Messiah], this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:32, 36). As Paul puts it, "Christ [i.e., the Messiah] redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree' [citing Deuteronomy 21:23] — so that in [Messiah] Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" Galatians 3:13-14). In the new people who have entered into Jesus' resurrection through baptism into his death, the mission God gave to Israel to undo the damage of Eden can now go forward once again.

It's easy, and sadly too common, for preachers to short-circuit this story and tell you that Jesus died so your sins could be forgiven and you could "go to heaven." That's inventing a "gospel" that doesn't exist in the Bible. We don't really understand all that Jesus came to do unless we understand the whole sweep of the Bible's story. It all goes back to Deuteronomy 30, where Moses sets before God's people the choice: "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, . . . blessing and curse. Therefore choose life." It goes back to those words from Deuteronomy 30 that the apostle Paul quotes in Romans 10: "The word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deuteronomy 30:14). Here's Paul's full quotation:



It goes back to Deuteronomy 30!
"The word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. . . . I have set before you today life and good, death and evil . . . blessing and curse. Therefore choose life." (Deuteronomy 30:14, 19).
"But what does it say? 'The word is near you, **in your mouth and in your heart**' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be delivered."
(Paul, Romans 10:8-9)

But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be [delivered]. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is [rescued]" (Romans 10:6-10).

Here's Paul's great statement of *action and consequence*: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved [rescued, delivered]." It's through membership in Jesus that you and I can experience the life of blessing the Lord promises to all who pledge their faithfulness to him, and faithfully keep his Word. Actions have consequences: that's the "Deuteronomy principle." And the action of living and abiding in Jesus has the consequence that we enjoy the benefits God decrees for those who keep faith with him. It has the consequence that we become bearers of God's image in this world, so that his kingdom comes, and his will is done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Text ©2017 Richard C. Leonard