

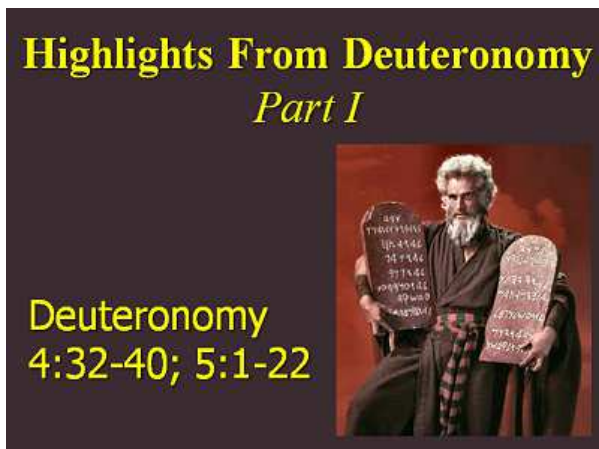
# Freed for a Purpose

*(Highlights from Deuteronomy, Part I)*

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — April 30, 2017

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## Deuteronomy 4:32-40 ESV



“For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?”

To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him. Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the

midst of the fire. And because he loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day, know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.

Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time.”

## Deuteronomy 5:1-22 ESV

And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them. The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, while I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain. He said:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 7 You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

“Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

“You shall not murder.

“And you shall not commit adultery.

“And you shall not steal.

“And you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

“And you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. And you shall not desire your neighbor’s house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.’

“These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me.”

With today’s teaching we begin a five-part study of the Book of Deuteronomy, which will occupy us through the remainder of the Easter season until Pentecost. Deuteronomy has 34 chapters, so we’re able to present only some of the “highlights” of this important book. Of the Old Testament books quoted in the New Testament, the three most often cited are the Psalms, Isaiah, and Deuteronomy — which is interesting because these three books come from the three sections of the Hebrew Bible: The Law or Torah (Deuteronomy), the Prophets (Isaiah), and the Writings (Psalms). When Jesus, risen from the dead, appeared to his disciples he told them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). So to understand what it means for Jesus to come announcing the kingdom of God, and then to be crucified and raised again from the dead as Israel’s Messiah and our Redeemer, we need to pay attention to the Hebrew Scriptures and not limit our study to certain books of the New Testament.

**The Hebrew Bible**

The Pentateuch	The Prophets	The Writings
Also referred to as "The Law". Includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.	Includes former prophets such as Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Major prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Also 12 minor prophets.	Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles.

**Jesus: "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." (Luke 24:44)**

What is Deuteronomy? It’s the fifth book of the Torah, or Law of Moses — the basic Scripture of Israel. The Law is also called the Pentateuch, a Greek term than means the “fivefold book.” In the Pentateuch we read first about beginnings, which is the meaning of the name *Genesis*. There we learn the purpose of people, as God’s agents made in his image, and how human sin spoiled the world God had set up. We also learn what God did to begin undoing that damage by calling Abraham to be the father of a special people who would take his name to all nations. We follow the history of that family until the time of the *Exodus*, when God delivered them from slavery in Egypt and gave them his Law on Mount Sinai (or Horeb). What follows through *Exodus*, *Leviticus* and *Numbers* are more laws, especially for Israel’s worship, and the record of their travels toward the land God had promised them. So finally we arrive at the point where Israel is poised to enter the land of Canaan and take possession of it.

**Deuteronomy (Devarim)**

**"These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel" (1:1)**

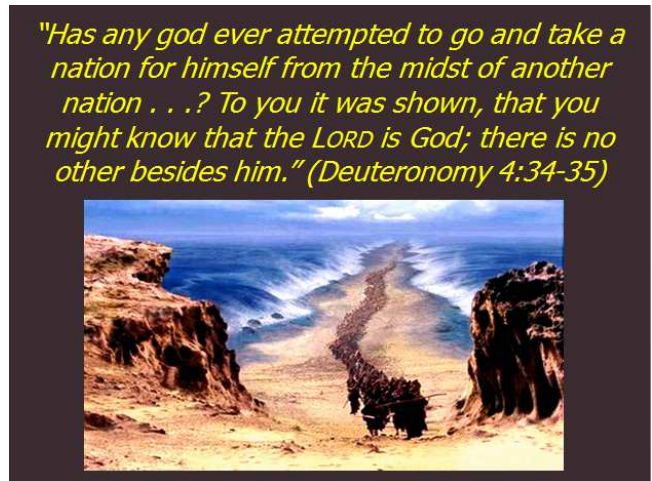
It’s at this point that we come to the Book of *Deuteronomy*. The Hebrew name of this book is *Devarim*, meaning “words”; it’s derived from the opening words of the book, *‘eleh haddevarim asher dibber mosheh ‘el-kol-yisrael* — “These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel.” But we know the book by the Greek term Deuteronomy, which means “second law.” That’s because Deuteronomy is a long sermon by Moses in which he restates many of the laws that were given earlier in the Pentateuch, especially in Exodus. But Deuteronomy itself isn’t really “law,” it’s *preaching* from the Law — what

scholars call *parenesis*, exhortation or advice. In other words, Moses is basically preaching from a text — the laws given earlier — in much the same way a modern preacher will teach from a Scripture text and give his interpretation of it, and urge his congregation to take it to heart and walk by it. Then, after Moses finishes this

very long sermon, he leads the people in a reaffirmation of their covenant, or the agreement or treaty the Lord has made with them, with faithfulness to the Law being the conditions of the agreement. (We'll get to that in our final session.) Finally, Deuteronomy records the death of Moses and how Joshua succeeds him as the leader as they cross the Jordan into the Promised Land.

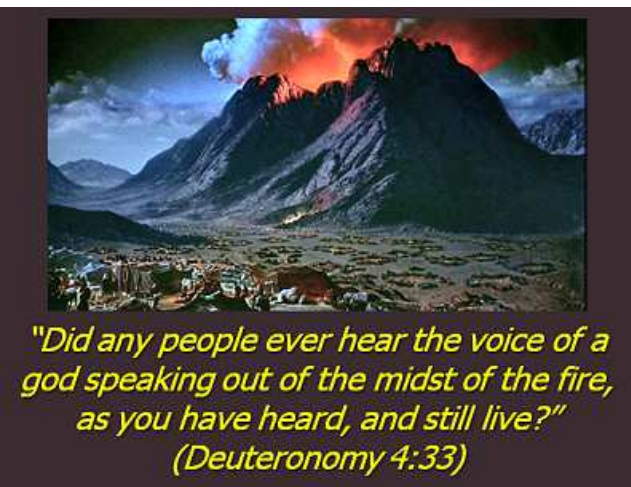
All of that is a long introduction to the book we're about to study. But we need to get into our first "highlight" section and see what it has to say to us. The first several chapters of Deuteronomy are a restatement of Israel's travels from Mount Sinai to the east side of the River Jordan, and how the Lord gave them victory over the nations and kings that stood in their way. Now, as Israel is poised to cross into Canaan, Moses reminds them that their escape from slavery was the Lord's doing, and something no god had ever done for any other people:

"Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him" (Deuteronomy 4:34-35)



It wasn't because Israel *deserved* to be set free, Moses implies. The reason the Lord brought them out of Egypt was because of the promise, or the covenant, that he had made with their fathers — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and those that followed them. It was because the Lord *loved them*, and was faithful to them, that he set them free. And it wasn't only that the Lord liberated them; he set them free *for a purpose*, to serve him according to his Law, a way of life he sets before them. So, to Moses, it's not only amazing that God liberated them; what's just as amazing is that he spoke to them the words of his covenant:

"For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? . . . Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire" (Deuteronomy 4:32-33, 36).



The result of all this is that we know the Lord, *Yahweh*, is not just the God of Israel. Indeed, he is the *only* God, and rules over all creation — just as the Torah states in the Bible's very first verse: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." So Moses restates Israel's belief in one God: "Know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other" (Deuteronomy 4:39).

The conviction that God is One is fundamental to biblical faith, and it separates God's people from every other nation that worships multiple deities. The apostle Paul restates the conviction in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6: "For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords' — yet for us there is one

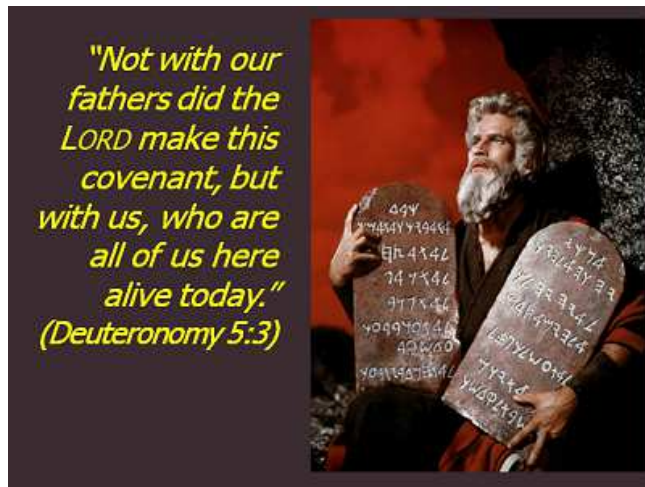
God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." Today that belief in one God, the Creator, is challenged by certain movements in our culture. For example, a weekend ago large rallies took place around the world in favor of science, or what some people call "science," because these people are afraid the earth will be destroyed unless governments act to stem what they believe to be the causes of climate change. One marcher even carried a poster that said, "Science Saves People." In other words, belief in "science" has become a religion,

and science is hailed as the savior of all. But no true scientist regards science as the source of such blatantly religious truth. To counter false religions like this, the Bible's message of one God, the Creator, is needed as urgently today as it was in the ancient world of Moses, the prophets of Israel, and the apostles of the New Testament.

Finally, in this section, Moses' words suggest two motivations for loyalty to the Lord and his way. The first motive is *gratitude* for what the Lord has done, both in rescuing his people and in giving them his principles for life. As Psalm 147 states, "He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the LORD!" (Psalm 147:19-20). God sets people free and gives them a way to stay connected to him by being faithful to what he requires.

Moses states the second motivation this way: "Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may *go well with you . . .*" (4:40). Abiding by the principles of God's moral law is a key to a prosperous and fulfilled life. In the Hebrew Bible the entire book of Proverbs is devoted to drawing out the connection between honoring God's way and successful living, and nothing in the New Testament suggests otherwise.

Now we turn to our second passage, from Deuteronomy, chapter 5. Moses is about to preach from what we call the Ten Commandments, or as the Hebrew Bible calls them, the "Ten Words." But first he makes this interesting statement: "The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today" (5:2-3). What does this mean? Israel received the Ten Commandments right after the exodus from Egypt, as recorded in Exodus 20. But since then Israel has been wandering in the wilderness, and now it's forty years later when Moses is giving this sermon we call Deuteronomy. So how can he say that the Lord made this covenant "not with our fathers . . . but with us"?



Here we have an important principle of biblical faith and worship: the principle of *re-presentation*. By reciting the commandments given on Mount Sinai forty years ago, Moses is bringing that awesome event into the present time — and therefore he's placing his Israelite audience back into that original event. It's not just that he's asking

Israel to *remember* what happened four decades earlier, when the Lord spoke to them from the mountain. It's not only remembering, it's more like re-enacting the event so the current generation can participate in it. The covenant, the agreement between the Lord and his people, is renewed or re-presented with each new generation of worshipers so they can experience it for themselves.

Does it not strike you that we do the same with Holy Communion? When we share the loaf and the cup that Jesus distributed to his disciples in the upper room, in effect we're placed back into that original event as participants along with those who first followed the Lord. When we hear the words of Jesus, "This is my blood of the new covenant," in effect he's present with us today offering that same cup to us, the token of our bond with him. And the same holds for the bread; as Paul writes to the Corinthians, "The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). Like Israel listening to Moses here in Deuteronomy, we're not just remembering or looking back at events of long ago. We are actually taking part in those events as they're re-presented for us today.

Now let's have a look at the Ten Commandments themselves. We won't go through the commandments line by line, because they're familiar to us. But we'll comment on just one, the fourth commandment about observing the Sabbath. As you know, this is the second time the commandments appear in the Pentateuch. The first time was in Exodus 20, when Israel was at Mount Sinai receiving the Law. In Exodus the reason for observing the seventh day of rest is this: "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:11).

But here in Deuteronomy, Moses gives a different reason. You're not to do any work on that day, he says, and neither are your servants or your animals or your guests. Why not? "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (5:15). The Sabbath has a humanitarian purpose here. People aren't supposed to be defined by being part of the economic machine. Who we are as human beings, made in God's image, is more than how we define ourselves by our occupation.

Typically if someone asks us, "What are you?" we might reply, "I'm a mechanic, or a teacher, or a farmer, or a technician," or what have you. We tend to define ourselves by the work we do. Here, Moses is saying that where we fit into the economy isn't the whole story of our lives; take one day off just to remember you're a human being — because you used to be slaves, working 24/7, but the Lord set you free! The Sabbath, in other words, isn't supposed to be a burdensome set of rules about what we couldn't do. Unfortunately, that's what the Pharisees had turned it into, and that's why they had a problem with Jesus when he did good on the Sabbath and said the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. In other words, Jesus understood Moses' point but the Pharisees couldn't see it.

But let's back up a minute. We know the Sabbath is the one commandment that isn't restated in the New Testament. So we don't observe a specific "seventh day" of rest, because as Paul says in Romans, "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). Nevertheless, the principle still holds: we're not to define our lives economically by working 24/7, but we're to "rest."

**Resting: Unproductive idleness, or fulfilling your purpose?**



*"Arise, O LORD, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might" (Psalm 132:7-8)*

*"There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. . . . Let us therefore STRIVE to enter that rest." (Hebrews 4:10-11)*



*"Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God." (Deuteronomy 5:12-14)*

But here's another angle on this idea of "rest." Resting doesn't just mean idleness or relaxing or being unproductive. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience" (Hebrews 4:9-11). What did it mean for God to "rest" on the seventh day of creation? Did it mean for him to say, "I worked six days so now I'm through, I can just sit back and relax"? In the Bible, "rest" doesn't mean relaxation or idleness. It means coming to the place

where you're supposed to be, and fulfilling your proper role. It means "coming home" to where you belong. That's what the Lord does on the seventh day of creation: he takes up residence in the temple he has created for himself on the first six days.

Psalm 132 seems to reflect a sacred procession into the Temple, the House of the Lord. "Let us go to his dwelling place," the singers chant. "Let us worship at his footstool! Arise, O LORD, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might" (Psalm 132:7-8). In other words, when God "rests" that means he enters his temple to receive the worship of his people, and govern his creation. For you and me to "rest" in this biblical sense means for us to emulate our Creator. It means to "come home" to where we belong. It means to fulfill the purpose for which God has made us: to be his agents in managing his creation, through doing good for people. The "work" we do to benefit others and give glory to God is actually the "rest" to which we're called. So resting isn't a passive thing; it's an activity. As Hebrews urges us, let's *strive* to enter into that rest and fulfil the mission to which the Lord has called us.

Now some concluding remarks about the Ten Commandments in general. First of all, some people complain that they're so *negative* — "Thou shalt not ... Thou shalt not." What they don't realize is that commandments that forbid specific things — like stealing, committing adultery, or lying under oath — are really liberating, not restricting. By specifying a few areas in which we're to exercise restraint, they set us free in all other areas. If the commandments were all positive — "You *must* do this, or that" — our activities would be highly restricted and controlled, as they are for Muslims who *must* pray six times a day around the clock. The Ten Commandments actually set us free to manage most of our lives as the Lord gives us wisdom and opportunity.



Secondly, the Ten Commandments aren't a *religious* thing, as people claim who insist on removing them from public places like courthouses. *No society* could function if murder, thievery, marital unfaithfulness, neglecting parents, and the like are not somehow held in check. The Commandments, for the most part, are just plain common sense that work in any culture, whether people believe in God or not.

Lastly, exactly what are the Ten Commandments of Deuteronomy? Are they a set of rules, or are they really something else? What's Moses doing here in Deuteronomy — is he passing legislation, or is he *preaching*? Moses is actually leading a worship service, a ceremony of recommitment to the Lord's covenant before his people take that major step of entering the Promised Land. The recitation of God's words is a *ceremony* through which God manifests his presence. When his people repeat the words of the Lord, he appears to them as he did in revealing himself on the holy mountain, and they're brought once again into his presence. So the Ten Commandments are *an act of worship*, and when we repeat them we're pledging our faithfulness to him and giving glory to his name.

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