

## Deuteronomy (Part 1)

### Purpose and Introduction

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It has become my custom the past six or seven years to begin the feast with a message involving some fairly significant news indicating an end-time prophecy in the process of being fulfilled. I drew on Daniel 5, and the handwriting on the wall incident to provide a title. "The handwriting on the wall" has become a cliché, maybe in many parts of the world, but certainly in the United States, to indicate that we should know, because of circumstances, where things are headed long before they actually come to pass.

The subjects have been things like abortion, earthquakes, AIDS, murder and violence in the streets, and immorality in government. But never has there been an event of such magnitude as this year's September 11 bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In addition to the spectacular tragedy of around 3,000 people losing their lives, it has been a very revealing reaction, or maybe the lack of reaction—both of them together—of the American people.

As a people, we Americans not only seem to have a very firm conviction of unjust victimization, but also an almost overwhelming claim of innocence and a virtually uncomprehending mindset toward the nature of the place of God, and what our response should be in all of this.

These events have significantly changed American lives and attitudes toward many things. It seems that we—especially the government—are involved in an introspection and evaluation of virtually everything except whether we truly have a good relationship with the true God. The result is going to be that there will be no significant spiritual changes for the better.

I am going to set this very inviting subject aside, because I think it more important for us, in both the short and the long run, that I proceed tonight to lay the ground work for the subject that we are going to go through in this series during this Feast of Tabernacles.

I think our subject is fitting for this time in the history of the church—very fitting. Even though it does not directly touch on specific prophecies that signal the end-times, it provides excellent themes that will help us in a way of review of who, what, and where we are personally in our relationship with God. I think that our subject is just what the doctor, our Doctor, ordered for this time.

So turn with me to Deuteronomy the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter.

**Deuteronomy 31:9** So Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel.

Notice two categories of people there—the priests and the elders. It was given to the leadership, both the religious leadership and the civil leadership.

**Deuteronomy 31:10-11** And Moses commanded them [the leadership of the nation, religiously and civilly], saying, "At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing."

I do not know whether 2001 is technically a year of release, but it was in 1994 that I first decided to obey this command and now another seven years has past. If we calculate from Herbert Armstrong's ordination somewhere around Pentecost in 1931, we just passed a 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Seventy divided by seven equals 10. According to that calculation it would be a year of release. Evelyn and I were baptized on September 19, 1959, twenty-eight years after Herbert Armstrong's ordination. Seven equally divides twenty-eight into four years of release, and so that looks interesting too. Just two

weeks ago tomorrow marks the 42<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Evelyn's and my baptism. That too is equally divided by seven into six years of release.

I was ordained a local church elder in April of 1966. It is now thirty-five years since that event, and that too equally divides into five years of release. To the best of my knowledge, 1994 marked the first time that a minister of the church of God in this era followed this command, at least in the detail that I gave it then. Until such time as God confirms a true year of release, we are going to follow through once again, because God commands that it be done every seven years in the Feast of Tabernacles. It is very needful, because Deuteronomy occupies a significant place in Scripture.

**Deuteronomy 17:14-19** "When you come to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, and possess it and shall dwell in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me,' you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses; one from among your brethren shall you set as king over you; you may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. But he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, for the LORD has said to you, 'You shall not return that way again.' Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn not away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself. Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes.

The reason why:

**Deuteronomy 17:20** That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, that he turn may not aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel.

If it was good enough for the kings of Israel, it ought to be good enough for those who are *going* to be kings to do the same thing. Maybe we are not going to write it. Maybe we should make it a little goal we are going to accomplish through the year. Of course, I am sure that what God intends is not that we just write it down, but as we write it down, inscribe it upon our minds by meditating upon the things that we are writing down.

Part of the purpose of this series is to give you themes that appear in the book of Deuteronomy that have very much to do with you right now and over the next few years, and for what you are going to be doing in the Kingdom of God as well. In many ways, brethren, Deuteronomy qualifies as a *Reader's Digest* version of the entire Bible. In an encapsulated form, everything necessary to understand for salvation is contained within it.

God did not say, "I want you to write down Exodus," or "I want you to write down Leviticus," or any of the things that might be written in the future, even Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and of course the writings of Paul. Way in advance of your and my time He said, "I want you to write down Deuteronomy!"

As we go through here, you will begin to see why Deuteronomy and *no other book* of the Bible is signaled out in that way. I have already given you a big clue—that everything necessary for salvation is encapsulated within the *Reader's Digest* version of the entire Bible—Deuteronomy. You can get a quick overview of everything that is necessary for salvation right in one book.

Christopher Wright, in his commentary on Deuteronomy, says, "Deuteronomy has been aptly described as the heartbeat of the Old Testament." He goes on to say, "If you feel the pulse of Deuteronomy, you are in touch with the life and rhythm of the whole Hebrew Bible." I think he was a bit too conservative there, because it is not just the Hebrew Bible, it is the whole Bible.

Adam Clarke says in his introduction to Deuteronomy, "It may be safely asserted that very few parts of the Old Testament scripture can be read with greater profit, by the genuine Christian, than the book of Deuteronomy."

Deuteronomy's contents weigh heavily on the New Testament. According to the United Bible Societies, it is cited 195 times in the New Testament. Only Psalms and Isaiah are quoted more frequently. When Satan challenged Jesus at the beginning of His ministry, all three of His replies to Satan's temptations were cited from Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy is written in the general form of a treaty, another word for a covenant. It contains Israel's creed. I want you to see Israel's creed in Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

**Deuteronomy 6:4-5** Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one! [Remember that, because it has great bearing on what is in the book of Deuteronomy.] You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Where do you think Jesus got the first and the great commandment of the law? He got it out of the book of Deuteronomy.

In Deuteronomy, God is presented as the God who acts and, at the same time, He is not distant from His people! We will see that a little bit later in the series. He said, "You don't have to go way over the sea or anything. I'm right there!" That is something we have to learn to make a part of our life because our faith depends upon our knowing and believing that God is there!

In the book of Deuteronomy, we are a people redeemed from slavery, and our relationship with God is a covenant one. In the book of Deuteronomy sin is expressed as a breaking of the covenant, the marriage agreement between God and Israel. Every doctrine significant to salvation is broached within its contents. It contains a brief overview of the history of the Israelitish people. It touches on faith, our election by God, laws, sanctification, forgiveness, justification, grace, God's sovereignty and providence, judgment, holiness, our pilgrimage, making choices, and the closeness of God.

Deuteronomy is uncompromisingly, almost ruthlessly, monotheistic. It almost throws in our face that Yahweh alone is God and there is *no* other. But more important than that is that there is, perhaps, no other book in the Bible that defines the character of God so completely.

The first commandment in Deuteronomy—and this is a paraphrase by putting things together that appear within the book—is not merely, "You shall believe Me and have no other gods." But rather, in Deuteronomy He is presented as, "I am Yahweh, the God of redemptive power and action demonstrated in the Exodus liberation. You shall have no other gods to *rival* Me." This is understandable, because we all have false gods, big or small, to one degree or another, but none of them better rival God for first place in our life.

Whenever we baptize anybody, we always go through Luke 14 where Jesus said, "You have to love Me more than father, mother, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, or anything else, and your own self also." That is the way it is supposed to be in marriage, is it not? Your spouse—your husband or your wife—is **it**, and there is no rival for your affections.

Deuteronomy is particularly filled with instruction on what it means to be the people of God, to be entrusted with the knowledge of God, and to be challenged to not merely believe that knowledge, but to live it by faith, and to live it in such a way that others around you see it and are aware.

This book is directly aimed at God's witnesses. "You are My witnesses," Isaiah said later in Isaiah 43. This book is aimed at the witnesses. At the end of this short sermon I will tell you why.

Deuteronomy's unique position as a portion of Scripture is shown by a privilege, a distinctive honoring, no other book in the entire Bible has been given. Turn with me to Deuteronomy 5. We are going to go through a whole sequence of events here, but this will get us started.

**Deuteronomy 5:22** "These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly, in the mountain from the midst of the fire [he's talking about the Ten Commandments], 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."

So God spoke the Ten Commandments, wrote them in stone, and gave them to Moses and then what did he do with them?

**Deuteronomy 10:1-2** At that time the LORD said to me, "Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to me on the mountain and make yourself an ark of wood. And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets that you broke; and you shall put them in the ark.

Verses 3, 4, and 5 show that God followed through and Moses followed through. Moses put them in the ark. Now just a little bit of review on the ark.

**Exodus 25:10-11** "And they shall make an ark of acacia wood; two and a half cubits shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its width, and a cubit and a half its height. And you shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and out shall you overlay it, and shall make on it a molding of gold all around."

**Exodus 25:17** "You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two and a half cubits shall be its length and a cubit and a half its width."

**Exodus 25:20-22** "And the cherubims shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you [the two tables of stone]. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel."

The ark was a chest, like a cedar chest. Using an 18 inch cubit, it was 45 inches long, 27 inches wide, and 27 inches high. The top, or the lid, was the mercy seat.

**Exodus 40:17-21** And it came to pass in the first month of the second year, on the first day of the month, that the tabernacle was raised up. So Moses raised up the tabernacle, fastened his sockets, set up its boards, put in its bars, and raised up its pillars. And he spread out the tent over the tabernacle and put the covering of the

tent on top of it; as the LORD commanded Moses. He took the Testimony and put it into the ark [there is the two tables of stone], inserted the poles through the rings of the ark, and put the mercy seat on top of the ark. And he brought the ark into the tabernacle, hung up the veil of the covering, and partitioned off the ark of the Testimony, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

We are still not up to Deuteronomy yet, but now we have a pretty fair foundation. Let us go to II Chronicles. What we are going to read here took place about 400 years later. That is a lot longer than the United States has existed.

**II Chronicles 5:10** Nothing was in the ark except the two tablets which Moses put there at Horeb, when the LORD made a covenant with the children of Israel, when they had come out of Egypt.

This was when Solomon built the Temple and everything was being prepared for it. They put the ark on the inside, but in the process of putting it on the inside, they opened it up and there was nothing in there except the two tables of stone. I do not know what happened to the manna, which had been in there, or Aaron's rod which budded. Somehow or another through the years it was lost. But we are going to bring this thing right up to date by turning to Revelation 11, just to give you a little idea of the importance of the ark in the history of Israel, and to make a connection between the church of God and the people of Israel as well—something that is yet future.

**Revelation 11:15** Then the seventh angel sounded [just so we have a bit of the time element here]: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever!

John was given a vision.

**Revelation 11:19** Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of His covenant was seen in His temple. And there were lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail.



At the very end of man under Satan's rule on the earth, the ark of the covenant is focused on, and though the earthly counterpart is not mentioned, I would have to assume that it still exists and that the tables of stone are still inside. Why I turned to this verse is because I wanted you to see the context in which the ark appears. God's judgments are underway. Christ is returning.

The mercy seat represented, symbolically, God's throne—the place where He sits and reigns over all that He has created.

**Hebrews 4:14-16** Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

The author of Hebrews here associates the throne of grace with mercy and the inference is obvious. The mercy seat and the throne of grace are one and the same. The mercy seat is that place, symbolically, from which God governs and judges. That is why the ark and its seat were shown in Revelation 11:19. God is shown symbolically sitting on the Ten Commandments. They are the legal basis of His judgments. The place is symbolic then of judgment and mercy being dispensed from the seat of God's government.

Let us go back to Deuteronomy and we will tie this all together.

**Deuteronomy 31:24-26** So it was, when Moses had completed writing the words of this law [he is talking about the book of Deuteronomy] in a book, when they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying: "Take this Book of the Law, and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there as a witness against you."

Now how about that? No other book in the Bible is accorded these privileges. It alone is to be read every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles in the year of release. No other book is assigned to that. In addition to that, *no other book in the Bible was placed anywhere close to the ark*. Even though it was not inside, I think you begin to see what the book of Deuteronomy is to the mind of God and why He requires we at least spend one time in seven years going through it as completely as we can during the Feast of Tabernacles.

You might ask why this was done. I think perhaps the *Keil Delitzsch Commentary*, Volume I, page 462, tells us as good of a reason as I have been able to find:

The tables of the law [the Ten Commandments] were deposited in the ark and the book of the law was to be kept by its side [i.e., the ark's side]. As it formed, by its very nature, an elaborate commentary upon the Decalogue, it was also to have its place outwardly as an accompaniment to the tables of the law for a witness against the people in the same manner as the song in the mouth of the people. [The song referred to is mentioned in Deuteronomy 31:21].

Deuteronomy is an elaborate commentary on the Ten Commandments. You know what a commentary does. The Ten Commandments are just very brief statements, but a commentary expands them out, defines, and shows applications in specific areas of life so that we will have a better understanding of them.

So besides the Ten Commandments, Deuteronomy contains statutes, judgments, health laws, blessings and curses, and ceremonies, all of which amplify the Ten Commandments and are binding unless otherwise shown. There are entire books written that show you how Deuteronomy expands on the Ten Commandments.

Symbolically, God sits on the legal basis of His judgments. But, right at His side is an elaborate commentary on that legal basis, symbolically giving Him counsel toward making His judgments on those individuals and nations that stand before Him.

So there are very good reasons why God commands us to review Deuteronomy once every seven years. It contains teaching on the most essential elements of His purpose. What we are going to do in this series is isolate dominant themes that parallel our experiences.

While we are in Deuteronomy 31, let us go back to verse 9 once again and get a running start to a couple of other verses.

**Deuteronomy 31:9-13** So Moses wrote this law, and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. [He made them responsible for bringing it before the people.] And Moses commanded them, saying: "At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess."

Here is the stated purpose for doing the reading every seven years. The intent was that the whole of Israel—men, women, children, aliens—would hear, be taught, fear the Lord, and observe to do all the words of this law. As such, the people would have no excuse for not having some familiarity with God's sovereignty, His providence and grace, their origins, their redemption from Egypt, His instruction as to how they should live, and His purpose for them.

Notice how God picked the time it was to be done. It was to be done when the people were filled with harvest-time gratitude. "Wasn't God good! Look

at how great a harvest He gave us. If He will give this, maybe there is something good to hear in His Word." In addition to that, it was done in the midst of widespread liberation of debt and release from slavery in the year of release. Is God a psychologist or what? Of course He is.

So every seven years the people would be reminded of a working knowledge of the conditions pertaining to them as being the covenant people. All of this then was within the setting of the Feast of Tabernacles which pictures, year by year, God's generosity in providing for them.

The subject material in Deuteronomy covers the whole community in virtually every imaginable situation of life and as such, forms a sort of constitution for Israel. There is a bit of a minor argument among Old Testament scholars as to whether Leviticus or Deuteronomy comes closest to being Israel's constitution. My vote goes for Deuteronomy because it is more general and broader in its application. Leviticus is specifically aimed at the priesthood—one particular group of people who had grave responsibilities, no doubt—but I think the broadness and the generalities of Deuteronomy are applicable.

There are a number of ways that the book can be divided according to general subject material. I mentioned one to you already. Some scholars have gone to the place where they have actually broken down the sections that apply to the first commandment, the second commandment, the third commandment, the fourth commandment, and they give you chapter and verse. It is interesting that when they do that, there are big blocks of paragraphs that apply to those commandments specifically. All ten commandments are directly covered.

But I am going to give you another one that is going to be used rather loosely by me and it is this: Chapter 1:1-5 [this is the easiest one of all] is just a brief preamble identifying the speaker and the ones being spoken to.

Chapters 1:6—4:49 are a historical prologue relating to significant events in the relationship between God and Israel. This section is very important because, basically, it is telling why Moses wrote the other things that are in

the book. It is because of what happened in Israel's past, in the previous forty years mostly. That becomes the subject material that Moses covers in more detail a little bit later.

Chapters 5—11 begin with a repeating of the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20 and then expands off into other commandments, broadly outlining the terms of the relationship. In other words, it is an expanded view of Exodus 21—24.

Chapters 12—26 are more detailed stipulations that God required of the Israelites. Two of the more famous ones are in chapter 12 and chapter 14. Chapter 12 has all of the instructions regarding the centralization of worship in Israel, the place where He would place His name. Eventually that became Jerusalem. Chapter 14 has the tithing instructions in it as well as the clean and unclean things. So, that gives you some kind of idea of what is between chapters 12 and 26. They are detailed stipulations.

Chapters 27 and 28 are the blessings and curses. I think we all know chapter 28 pretty well, but chapter 27 is the lead-in to chapter 28. And then chapters 29—30:18 are miscellaneous exhortations and instructions. This is the one that ends, "Choose you this day. I set before you on this hand and on that hand, and so forth. . ."

Chapters 30:19—32:52 are specific witnesses against Israel. And then chapter 33 through the end of the book are prophecies regarding Israel's future and closing remarks. He gives prophecies regarding each one of the tribes. The book closes with Moses' death.

One author wrote that the clearest feature of Deuteronomy is its call for total loyalty to Yahweh as the sole God.

Turn with me to Deuteronomy 4:33. A little bit later in the series I am going to touch on this again, but I want you to put yourself in the place of the Israelites as Moses is speaking. Just envision in your mind's eye that you were on the lower parts of Mount Sinai. The reason I want you to do this is because, spiritually, the same thing has happened to you that happened to these people.

**Deuteronomy 4:33-35** Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live? Or did God ever try to go and take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an out-stretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD Himself is God; there is none other besides him.

God has opened *your* mind, and that has not happened to very many people on earth! You have been accorded something that has been withheld from billions and billions and billions of people! *You sit here tonight able to hear and understand*, and there are billions of people out there who cannot hear, that God has not given them the ears to hear. The very reason for their election and for ours is that we might be stewards and witnesses of the knowledge of this unique God and what He is doing. That is why there are so many strong calls against idolatry in Deuteronomy. *We have no excuse!*

This is God's witness against you and me. He is testifying against us as to our responsibility. We must have a total commitment to His saving truth. All other gods are but lifeless and powerless substitutes. Because of this, Deuteronomy has a direct link to the prophets who came along later, proclaiming God's judgments upon Israel at the hands of the nations. The prophets in turn embellished upon the exhortations of Deuteronomy giving their own powerful calls for repentance within the context of their times, imploring the people to return to meeting the conditions of the covenant, while also proclaiming God's judgments upon the nations and Israel's eventual vindication.

Why is Deuteronomy important for us? There might be dozens of answers and every one of them might be right, but I want you to think of this one. We are going to go back to Genesis 18 to be reminded of something God said regarding Abraham.

**Genesis 18:17** And the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing. . .

He was getting ready to blast Sodom and Gomorrah into smithereens. Now why did He say this?

**Genesis 18:18** . . . since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?"

Now again, think of yourself in regard to this. You are a descendant of Abraham, spiritually. You are one of his children. You are Abraham's seed and God's ultimate purpose is for His children and Abraham's children (who are also God's children) to be a blessing to *all* nations. There is a universal goal to our existence. What God does in, for, and through His children is to eventually benefit all of mankind.

**Genesis 18:19** "For I have known him [I know Abraham], in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him."

Modern translations translate that, "For I have chosen him so that he will direct his children." This is happening to us. Abraham did it in his lifetime, but God is carrying on the same purpose through Abraham's descendants who were taught. There is an unbroken chain that goes all the way back to what Abraham did.

The book of Deuteronomy is for a people on a mission. The mission is only indirectly to take the gospel (or to take God's way) to the world. Rather, it is for us to be prepared in a unique way for doing this. It is not for the purpose of confronting people or challenging people with God's message, rather it is to *be* God's message. Did you hear what I said? *It is for us to be God's message!* The sons of Abraham will be God's message by their lives, by living the message. Deuteronomy's message is not a matter of going but of being—living as the people of God before all.

The book of Deuteronomy is directed at God's witnesses so that we can be His witnesses. It is the book of preparing for the time that we will be the witnesses and we will see this as we go along.