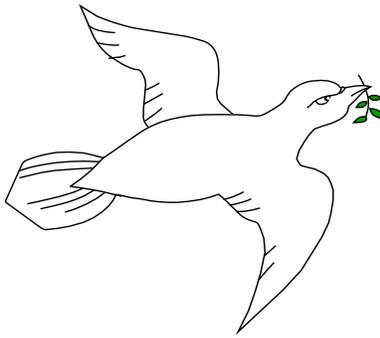


Now Choose Life!

Deuteronomy for a Renewing Church



Reading an ancient text for a vibrant church in today's interconnected world.

Edited by Dr. Mark W. Hamilton

Now Choose Life!

Deuteronomy for a Renewing Church

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Lesson 1

“Introduction to Deuteronomy: Joy and Peace for the Exodus People”

Lesson 2

“The God Who Brings People to Life” (4:32-40; 6:4-8)

Lesson 3

“Renewing Ethics” (5:6ff.)

Lesson 4

“How to recover from Failure” (chap. 9:1-12, 10:12-22)

Lesson 5

“The Faith that lives on after us” (chap. 11)

Lesson 6

“Renewing Worship, Part 1” (chap. 12:29-13:18)

Lesson 7

“Renewing Worship, Part 2” (chap. 16)

Lesson 8

“A renewed concern for the oppressed” (chap. 15:1-18)

Lesson 9

“Leaders for a renewing people” (17:14-18:22)

Lesson 10

“Renewed relationships among people” (chaps. 19, 24)

Lesson 11

“Renewed generosity and compassion” (chap. 26)

Lesson 12

“Choose Life! Moving into the Future” (30:11 ff.)

A Brief Description of Each Lesson

Lesson 1

“Introduction to Deuteronomy: Joy and Peace for the Exodus People”

Deuteronomy as literature takes the form of a sermon by Moses that sets forth the covenant between God and Israel. The covenant depends on God’s gracious action in liberating Israel during the exodus, not on human achievements of any source. The proper human response to this grace, however, is a life of worship, ethical behavior, and concern for the poor and marginalized.

Lesson 2

“The God Who Brings People to Life” (4:32-40; 6:4-8)

This week’s text reminds us that faith is not a purely individual pursuit. It arises out of a people’s response to God’s initiative on their behalf. It passes from generation to generation, as each age encounters God’s grace in its own time. This faith does not involve merely the acceptance of information about some past experience. Rather, it comes alive over and over again as each generation finds God living in their midst, calling them to a life of generosity, ethical behavior, and worship. The task of the older generation, whether parents or not, is to pass along to children an awareness of, and appreciation for what has happened to the people who have placed their trust in the God who does wonders.

Lesson 3

“Renewing Ethics” (5:6ff.)

The Ten Commandments outline basic commitments of Israel’s ethics. First, ethical behavior derives from the character and actions of God, not arbitrary rules. Since God has acted graciously, so do we. Conversely, failure to recognize God as the source of life and hope leads to oppression and neglect. Second, the commandments concern basic human justice, the care of the powerless (strangers, servants, and even animals), and a life of nonviolence and contentment. Third, ethics takes the form of concrete behaviors and rituals, such as Sabbath, that remind us of higher commitments than personal happiness.

Lesson 4

“How to recover from Failure” (chap. 9:1-12, 10:12-22)

A temptation facing people of faith is confidence in our own righteousness, a sense that our failures are somehow less than those of others. The opposite is also true: failure can lead to despair. Deuteronomy 9-10, however, note that despite Israel’s failures, God remains faithful and asks us of us only worship of him and respect for our fellow human

beings. Recover from failure comes through repentance and humble acceptance of God's gift of a new way of life. The people of God, having failed, can help each other move beyond failure to new mountain peaks of the spirit.

Lesson 5

"The Faith that lives on after us" (chap. 11)

This lesson builds on that of January 20 but extends it in two directions. First, what are the outcomes of a life of faith? How far can we take Deuteronomy's description of the blessings awaiting Israel? Second, what mechanisms exist for passing the faith on to the next generation (verses 18-21)?

Lesson 6

"Renewing Worship, Part 1" (chap. 12:29-13:18)

This section, following the section allowing for slaughter away from the sanctuary and thus for a secular life, discusses the difference between worship of idols and worship of the God of Israel. True worship reflects the character of God and human indebtedness to God for the grace showered upon us. The community of Israel is to protect itself from idolatry so that it can focus on the true nature of God. Contemporary worship should reflect this attention to the character of God by focusing on the story of his redemption, fleshed out in the ministries of Word and Table.

Lesson 7

"Renewing Worship, Part 2" (chap. 16)

This section focuses on sacred time, that is, those times of the year when Israel commemorated God's deeds and committed itself to living in ways that extended grace to the community and the world. Since Israel was enslaved in Egypt, it is to live mercifully in Canaan. Worship in Israel, along with its focus on the majesty and generosity of God, expresses charity toward the poor, justice for the oppressed, and a passion for a better world for all.

Lesson 8

"A renewed concern for the oppressed" (chap. 15:1-18)

Grace comes not merely to individuals, but to entire groups of people. Israel, when accepting God's grace, takes on the obligation of caring for those who suffer poverty, injustice, or sickness. Specific mechanisms for care of the poor are laid out in this text. Today's Christians must ask what application these verses have for our lives today. What will it mean not merely to hand out charity to the poor, but to live side by side with them as the people of God?

Lesson 9

“Leaders for a renewing people” (17:14-18:22)

Given Israel’s high calling to be in covenant with God, the choice of leaders who will share the values and commitments of the covenant seems imperative. These chapters examine the duties, character, and goals of prophets, priests, and kings, as well as the responsibilities of followers toward such leaders. Since the need for quality leadership has not abated, today’s Christians must continue to ask what sorts of leaders they need and how they are to select, affirm, and support them. Leaders need to ask how they are to serve the church in its mission of living out God’s grace in the present world.

Lesson 10

“Renewed relationships among people” (chaps. 19, 24)

These chapters fit into a larger section of laws on all manner of economic, social, religious, and interpersonal issues. The goal of all the texts is to create a society in which violence, jealousy, and rivalry are minimized, while peace, justice, and loving relationships are accentuated. These texts afford Christians an opportunity to think deeply about our responsibilities to the most vulnerable members of society, as well as those who have violated society’s norms.

Lesson 11

“Renewed generosity and compassion” (chap. 26)

The confession of this chapter recognizes that Israel began as one nation among many and reached its present status on the basis of God’s grace. By restating the basic story of Israel’s redemption and by inviting each generation to embrace this story, Deuteronomy draws a close connection between what God has done and what we should do. Specifically, Israel is to show concern for the poor and those serving as priests, is not to confuse worship with mourning, and is to embrace the commands of God *with joy*. The chapter also reminds us that renewal of the present can come by reexamining the past.

Lesson 12

“Choose Life! Moving into the Future” (30:11-20, 34:1-12)

Chapter 30 concludes the main part of the book, in which Israel agrees to live by the covenant that God proposes. Chapters 31-34 form a conclusion to all of Exodus-Deuteronomy (the life of Moses), serving as Moses’ obituary and final words. Chapter 34 describes the passing of an era and the beginning of another, but at the same time reminds

us that the two eras are connected by the abiding presence of the God who freed Israel in the Exodus. These texts thus offer Christians hope in the face of ever-present change.

Introduction to Deuteronomy: Joy and Peace for the Exodus People

The book of Deuteronomy, a farewell speech attributed to Moses, combines a number of types of literature, including laws, poems, and narratives. The speech lays out for Israel the options of life and death. All of the types of material of the book fit into the ways the book lays out the way of life.

The laws cover many topics, from the sublime to the mundane. As a whole, these laws aim to create a new society in which justice, freedom, and pain will reign. The norms of human existence in which one's economic value triumph over all else do not apply in Israel.

The poems in chapters 32-33 describe the future of Israel as it lives under the blessing of God. Within the book, they constitute the final song with which Moses leaves the people.

The book's final narrative is the death scene of Moses. The emphasis here is not so much on the death as on the fact that Israel's history goes on, now under Joshua.

Deuteronomy marks the conclusion of the Pentateuch, the story of the creation of Israel. It should be understood in the context of everything that precedes it, especially the stories of Exodus.

Outline of the Book

1:1-5	Introduction (the time and place of the book)
1:6-4:40	The first speech, a summary of the origins of Israel with theological commentary
4:41-43	A note on the three cities of refuge
4:44-49	A bridge between the first and second discourses of the book
5:1-11:32	The second speech, the laying out of the laws for Israel
12:1-26:15	The code of laws
26:16-27:26	The founding of Israel before the entry into the promised land
28	Blessings and cursings
29	More on the covenant

30	A promise of return after repentance
31	The charge to Joshua
32:1-43	The “Song of Moses”
32:44-47	An epilogue to the “Song of Moses”
32:48-52	God’s Command to Moses to climb the mountain
33:1-29	The blessing of Moses
34	Moses’ death

A note: A major way in which the book of Deuteronomy presents itself is as a covenant. Originally, a covenant was a treaty between two monarchs. Each undertook certain responsibilities, the violation of which incurred certain penalties. Chapters 1-4 form a historical summary similar to those in ancient treaties. Chapter 28 retains that genre’s old form of blessings and curses. So, at some level, Deuteronomy is a treaty between God and Israel.

The God Who Brings People to Life

Deuteronomy 4:32-40, 6:4-8

Goal: to reflect on the origins of our faith and practice in the gracious actions of God. We are who we are because God has first acted among us.

This lesson covers two texts in Deuteronomy, the first in the book's initial sermon, the second in the second sermon. Each has a similar point and function.

4:32-40 clinches the whole argument of the first part of the book. God has, the text notes, acted in human events in a decisive and unprecedented way. The exodus has no parallel in human experience. Accordingly, the nation that has benefited from God's actions must live a life of obedience that leads to life. As one scholar has put it, Deuteronomy is the program for a revolution in human affairs. Under the new regime, humans live creatively and generously with each other under the leadership of God.

This paragraph lays out some of the major themes of the book:

- The revelation at Sinai
- The contrast between God and idols
- Relatedly, the contrast between Israel and other nations
- The need for God to discipline, or spiritually form, his people
- The promise to the ancestors

Some of these themes are picked up and expanded upon in 6:4-8 (and 6:20-25). The emphasis there falls upon the need for educating the future generations about the mighty deeds of God, since they are not witnesses to them. Education in Israel is to be

- Systematic
- Persistent
- Tied to the rhythms of life
- Visible and dramatic
- Reflecting the crucial issues that Israel faces

Notes

In teaching these texts, one should stress their emphasis on education and their insistence that the behavior of the people of God ultimately responds to the behavior of the God of these people. In particular, discussion in class might center around questions of:

1. What is education in the church? How do educate each other in ways that allow us not merely to acquire Bible knowledge, but to grow more fully as disciples. What would this education look like?
2. If we were to make a list of God's deeds among us, what would that look like?
3. Deuteronomy mentions God's care for the ancestors. How important are the behaviors of past generations to us? What can we learn from them? What are the limits of our following them?

4. How can we help each other grow in spiritual disciplines?

This week's text reminds us that faith is not a purely individual pursuit. It arises out of a people's response to God's initiative on their behalf. It passes from generation to generation, as each age encounters God's grace in its own time. This faith does not involve merely the acceptance of information about some past experience. Rather, it comes alive as each generation finds God living in their midst, calling them to a life of generosity, ethical behavior, and worship. The task of the older generation, whether parents or not, is to pass along to children an awareness of, and appreciation for what has happened to the people who have placed their trust in the God who does wonders.

Points for Reflection

1. Deuteronomy seems to make a connection between God's actions and our actions. What is that connection, and how does it affect how we live today?
2. Describe how your faith has been influenced by the lives of your parents or others of their generation. What did you see in them that made God seem real in your own life?
3. For parents: what dreams do you have for the faith lives of your children? Discuss these with your children.
4. For children: how did your parents come to faith in God? What are their commitments in regards to service of those around them? Ask your parents to discuss these issues.
5. For those without children at home: How can you encourage the younger generation in their walk of faith? What concerns or hopes do you have regarding them?

For Prayer

Thanks for past generations who passed their faith on to us; intercessions for parents, teachers, and ministers who will pass it on to the next generation. Prayer for children as they learn how to live as people who trust in God.

“O God, you have taught us through your blessed Son that whoever receives a little child in the name of Christ receives Christ himself. We give you thanks for the blessing you have bestowed upon this family in giving us a child [children]. Confirm our joy by a lively sense of your presence with us, and give us calm strength and patient wisdom as we seek to bring our child [children] to love all that is true and noble, just and pure, lovable and gracious, excellent and admirable, following the example of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.” (From the *Book of Common Prayer*, adopted)

Renewing Ethics

Deuteronomy 5

The Ten Commandments outline basic commitments of Israel's ethics. First, ethical behavior derives from the character and actions of God, not arbitrary rules. Since God has acted graciously, so do we. Conversely, failure to recognize God as the source of life and hope leads to oppression and neglect. Second, the commandments concern basic human justice, the care of the powerless (strangers, servants, and even animals), and a life of nonviolence and contentment. Third, ethics takes the form of concrete behaviors and rituals, such as Sabbath, that remind us of higher commitments than personal happiness.

Following the sermon in chapters 1-4, Deuteronomy begins to lay out the terms of God's relationship with Israel. The Ten Commandments (or Decalogue) are the most succinct, most easily remembered statement of the values Israel is to have.

Goals:

1. To talk about values Christians share and how they foster those values.
2. To discuss how moral values relate to basic theological claims of the Christian faith.
3. To understand how values develop and change in response to new situations (but also in response to the unchanging nature of God).

Outline of the Chapter:

- 5:1-5 Prologue to the Ten Commandments
5:6-18 The Commandments Themselves
5:19-6:3 Epilogue to the Commandments

Commentary

- Parallel texts appear in Exodus 20 and, with some expansions and modifications, in Exodus 34.
- The Decalogue in all its versions begins with the nature of God. Ethics follows from the character of the deity we worship.
- Deuteronomy emphasizes that God is one, not many. Although we take monotheism for granted, the biblical writers do not. They understand the temptation toward idolatry that humans always face.
- The Ten Commandments move from the nature of God to the nature of human relationships (honoring parents; observing Sabbath; avoiding violence, betrayal, and envy).
- Interpreters count the Commandments in different ways. Some merge the first two and split the last one, on envy, into two (wanting someone else's animals, wanting their human relationships). Either way, you still end up with 10.
- The third command, on taking God's name "in vain," seems to refer to swearing false oaths. Note that in his list of the commands in Jeremiah 7:9, the prophet Jeremiah lists "swearing falsely" as a basic command. The rabbis always understand the Third Commandment this way, as well. On the other hand, any abuse of the divine name could come under scrutiny according to this commandment.

- Note the length of the Sabbath commandment and the richness of its theological explanation. Here we see in brief the basic attitudes Israel is to have toward the weak and the strong.
- On the other hand, note the brevity of the remaining commands. It is as if their value is too obvious to deserve much comment.

Notes on the Prologue and Epilogue:

The Prologue emphasizes the wonder that the hearers of the text have at their good fortune. They, not their ancestors, not anyone else – they are the ones who have experienced God's grace.

The Epilogue expands this thought by noting precisely what they have seen. The wonders of their experience of God surpass description. Moreover, their experiences have no parallel in those of other people. Pagans have never experienced God in this way.

In our own context, we could think more fully about what the relationship with God means.

Points for Reflection

1. Deuteronomy anchors its ethical system in the gracious actions of God. How do our ethical commitments connect to our understanding of the nature of God? Give examples. Are there disconnections between our behavior and our view of God? Again, give examples.
2. A major aspect of Deuteronomy's ethic is concern for the poor. How well are you doing with this? What else needs to be done? What specific practices can be put in place to welcome the poor to your community?

How to Recover from Failure

Deuteronomy 9:1-12, 10:12-22

A temptation facing people of faith is confidence in our own righteousness, a sense that our failures are somehow less than those of others. The opposite is also true: failure can lead to despair. Deuteronomy 9-10, however, note that despite Israel's failures, God remains faithful and asks us of us only worship of him and respect for our fellow human beings. Recover from failure comes through repentance and humble acceptance of God's gift of a new way of life. The people of God, having failed, can help each other move beyond failure to new mountain peaks of the spirit.

Goal: to think through the ways in which we as believers should understand failure and use it to grow.

This week's readings are parts of two separate sections of the long sermon that began in chapter 5:

Deuteronomy 9:1-10:11 is a warning against hypocrisy and arrogance
Deuteronomy 10:12-11:32 is an encouragement to an ethical life

Failure

The opening text rehearses the story of Exodus 32-33, the Golden Calf episode. Most of the material repeats that in Exodus; to it the sermon adds other stories of murmurings in the desert now found in Numbers.

The failure here is one of idolatry, with all its dire consequences. Note that failure is not of individuals only, but of the entire people of God.

Deuteronomy brings up this material for a rhetorical purpose. Israel, because it is about to succeed in entering the land, risks overconfidence and self-importance. As before, then, the text reminds its readers that our behavior must be grounded in God's behavior, and our confidence must be in God.

Recovery

What does recovery look like? Notice that failure was linked to idolatry, and recovery is based on faithfulness to God and on ethical living. What is the connection between worship and ethics? The Bible's basic assumption is that those who love God will love their neighbor. There are some other basic assumptions in 10:12-22:

- Recovery comes from remembering our basic relationships and commitments;
- Recovery comes from remembering who God is;
- Part of the story of Israel is about failure;
- Israel (and by implication, the church) can recover from failure;
- God's love for Israel's ancestors leads Him to be forgiving of present sins;
- God's love for Israel endures across generations;

- God's concern for the weak must be translated into action by the people of Israel themselves (10:18-19);
- The community has some responsibility for bringing about recovery after failure.

Points for Reflection

1. What constitutes failure and success for Christians? How do we measure failure?
2. Given your definition of failure, what would recovery look like?
3. How can the church help us recover from failure?

The Faith that Lives on After Us

Deuteronomy 11

This lesson builds on Lesson 3 but extends it in two directions. First, what are the outcomes of a life of faith? What does such a life look like in our situation? How do we understand Deuteronomy's description of the blessings awaiting Israel? Second, what mechanisms exist for passing the faith to the next generation (verses 18-21)?

Goal: to dream about the future of our families, congregations, and the church at large.

This chapter concludes the unit that began in 10:12. In fact, it marks the end of a major part of the book that began in 5:1. This bigger section is a sermon exhorting Israel to obey the instructions they are about to receive beginning in chapter 12.

Chapter 11 opens with a call to love God, who, the previous paragraphs remind us, is the awe-inspiring creator of the world who has also redeemed Israel from slavery. Verse 2 then reminds us that God's people come to faith in different ways, some as eyewitnesses to marvelous deeds, some as learners who have been nurtured in a community of believers. The next few paragraphs remind the readers of every generation what the core parts of Israel's story are.

Verse 8 begins a paragraph encouraging Israel to be faithful so that they can inherit the land of promise.

Verses 10-12 are a parenthesis explaining just what land Israel is inheriting and how it is different than Egypt.

Verses 13-17 again encourage obedience, offering both promises and threats.

Verses 18-21 return to the main topic of the chapter (and our discussion). Faith must be passed from one generation to the next. This transmission must be deliberate, sustained, and systematic. It must take place through instruction, ethical behavior, and ritual. The goal of this education is the creation of a new kind of people, Israel.

Verses 22-25 promise blessings to the obedient community.

Verses 26-32 conclude the chapter with one last mention of the choice Israel is to make: will they choose life, or death?

Points for Reflection

1. What are the implications of the fact that people come to faith in different ways? How should that fact shape how we teach, preach, and otherwise minister to each other?
2. What is the content of the faith we pass on to the next generation? How do we decide what should be passed on and what should not?
3. How does a Christian worldview (one shaped by faith) differ from other possibilities? How does one foster a Christian worldview?

Renewing Worship, Part 1

Deuteronomy 12:29-13:18

This section, following the section allowing for slaughter away from the sanctuary and thus for a secular life, discusses the difference between worship of idols and worship of the God of Israel. True worship reflects the character of God and human indebtedness to God for the grace showered upon us. The community of Israel is to protect itself from idolatry so that it can focus on the true nature of God. Contemporary worship should reflect this attention to the character of God by focusing on the story of his redemption, fleshed out in the ministries of Word and Table.

Goal: to investigate the nature and purpose of worship and the sacred.

Commentary

The Old Testament explores the rich dimensions of worship in many ways. Psalms of lament and praise give voice to the hopes and fears of faithful groups and individuals. Leviticus describes how sacrifice works, not to bribe God (see also Psalm 50), but to heal the wounds of the world caused by sin. 1 Kings 8 and Ezekiel 40-48 think about the magnificence of the temple, a place of divine revelation. The prophets, meanwhile, critique those who easily ignore ethics even while they worship the God of ethics.

Deuteronomy also explores the meaning of worship. 12:1-28 modifies the practice of sacrificing at many sanctuaries (see 1 Samuel 10:8; 1 Kings 3:2, 4) by allowing slaughter of animals that were not sacrifices. Sacrifice can thus take place at only one site, Jerusalem (cf. 1 Kings 8).

12:29-32 follows up on the previous section by reminding Israel of the temptations of idolatry. The problem is with syncretism, the incorporation of pagan elements in our worship.

Chapter 13 considers three cases of apostasy:

13:1-5 takes up the case of the prophet who seeks to lead the people astray.

13:6-11 considers apostasy led by someone near you.

13:12-18 envisions the whole nation insuring that no part of it can bring about apostasy.

Application

Certain major theological points underlie this text:

1. God is at the center of the life of faith.
2. Humans are always tempted to replace God with something else.
3. The community of faith must be always vigilant about this.
4. True worship can lead one to a life of joy and hope.

In this lesson, one may well focus on chapter 12:1-28, which emphasizes the joy of worship. It is also important to think about how worship can focus on God.

Points for Reflection

1. How do you think God works among Christians today? How does this understanding influence your personal worship life?
2. How does your understanding of God reflect the worship of the congregation of which you are part?
3. How do you understand the nature of the Christian person redeemed by God? How does this understanding impact private or corporate worship?
4. What practices in place (or not yet in place) in your congregation reflect the theology of worship laid out in Deuteronomy?

Renewing Worship, Part 2

Deuteronomy 16

This section focuses on sacred time, that is, those times of the year when Israel commemorated God's deeds and committed itself to living in ways that extended grace to the community and the world. Since Israel was enslaved in Egypt, it is to live mercifully in Canaan. Worship in Israel, along with its focus on the majesty and generosity of God, expresses charity toward the poor, justice for the oppressed, and a passion for a better world for all.

Goal: to examine how times of worship shape the rhythm of the life of the faithful person.

Commentary

This chapter describes a yearly cycle of festivals that gives a rhythm to Israel's life. In part the cycle coincides with the agricultural cycle, but these are not merely harvest festivals. They are also tied to Israel's remembrance of its own history.

16:1-8 is about Passover (in March-April). Notice the theological rationale for the festival: liberation from Egyptian slavery. Notice also the rhythm of the festival itself.

16:9-12 is about Pentecost (in May-June), again emphasizing the concern for the vulnerable in the community.

16:13-15 is about Tabernacles/Sukkoth (in September). This is a time, coinciding with the final harvest, of public celebration.

16:16-17 summarizes the section, emphasizing the human response to worship.

Application

Again, the theological motivations for worship are emphasized. We come to God because he is praiseworthy, because He hears our pleas, because we are in covenant with Him.

One might ask: how does a cycle of worship, perhaps even a yearly cycle, shape the life of a community? How important is the creation of such festivals for us now? To what degree and in what ways does the basic Christian story inform our worship? How much room for creativity should we exercise in worship?

As in the previous lesson on worship, the intent is to help class participants move from theology to action in an informed way.

Points for Reflection

1. See the questions for the previous week.
2. How does your congregation organize its cycles of time (weekly, monthly, yearly)? How does this use of time reflect the church's understanding of God and itself?

A Renewed Concern for the Oppressed

Deuteronomy 15:1-18

Grace comes not merely to individuals, but to entire groups of people. Israel, when accepting God's grace, takes on the obligation of caring for those who suffer poverty, injustice, or sickness. Specific mechanisms for care of the poor are laid out in this text. Today's Christians must ask what application these verses have for our lives today. What will it mean not merely to hand out charity to the poor, but to live side by side with them as the people of God?

Goal: To help the class think about our obligations to others, particularly those who are poor or otherwise vulnerable.

The Old Testament includes many texts concerned with social justice. The prophets in particular call Israel to account when it neglects the vulnerable in order to allow elite groups to aggrandize themselves. Good examples of these practical concerns include Amos 2:6-8 and Amos 6, among many others.

Deuteronomy 15:1-18, meanwhile, offers both ideals for social and practical suggestions for implementing the ideals.

Verses 1-6 introduce the practice of the Sabbath Year, a practical way of limiting indentured servitude. The law here connects to that of Exodus 23:10-11. Note that the specifics of the rule are appropriate in a society in which most people are peasants practicing subsistence farming. But the principles behind the practice may be more portable. Verse 4 lays down the goal of Israel: the absence of poor persons. The rest of the chapter thinks about how to reach that goal.

Verses 7-11 describe appropriate ways of distributing funds to others. Notice the relational language throughout these verses. The discussion is not about abstract programs, but about real people.

Verses 12-18 specify a procedure by which a servant may remain in a family context.

Points for Reflection

1. What goals for social justice should Christian communities have? Why?
2. What practical means should be in place for accomplishing these goals? How do we assess success or failure of these means?
3. Given the fact that Israel was a state, and the church is not, how do we translate the goals of Deuteronomy into contemporary practice?
4. Much of the language of the chapter is relational ("brother"). How would we translate that relational sense of social justice into practice?
5. Note that this chapter immediately precedes that on worship. What precisely is the connection between worship and social justice?

Leaders for a Renewing People

Deuteronomy 17:14-18:22

Given Israel's high calling to be in covenant with God, the choice of leaders who will share the values and commitments of the covenant seems imperative. These chapters examine the duties, character, and goals of prophets, priests, and kings, as well as the responsibilities of followers toward such leaders. Since the need for quality leadership has not abated, today's Christians must continue to ask what sorts of leaders they need and how they are to select, affirm, and support them. Leaders need to ask how they are to serve the church in its mission of living out God's grace in the present world.

Goal: to help the group think about how leadership styles reflect (or fail to reflect) the vision that God has for the church.

This section of Deuteronomy considers three modes of leadership in ancient Israel. In principle, the same person can fill more than one role (Jeremiah and Ezekiel were both priests and prophets, for example). But the roles or modes of leadership are distinct. The prophet speaks for God about the present and God's will for it. The priest offers sacrifices that heal the breach between God and humanity, as well as teaching people the Law. The king of course rules, functioning as the country's executive and judiciary.

Today's reading breaks into three sections:

17:14-20 is the "Law of the **King**." It accepts the reality of monarchy but tries to check its power by limiting (1) tax-collecting and wealth preservation; (2) the size of the military; and (3) diplomatic relations (which is what the limit on harem size is about). Moreover, the king must submit to the instruction of the Levitical priests, who provide checks and balances to his power.

18:1-8 describes the role of the **priests**, and in particular the need for the community to take care of them. Since Levites do not hold land, the community must care for them. Verses 6-8 insure that all priests have the same rights to offer sacrifice (and thus to receive part of them), regardless of where they live.

18:9-22 explores the question of the nature of revelation, and in particular the role of the prophet. In contrast to Canaanite practices of divination, the Israelite prophet could not manipulate God but could only wait divine inspiration of whatever form. The expectation of a prophet like Moses reminds one of Jeremiah's self-image (see for example Jeremiah 28). All prophets are to be like Moses in that all receive the divine word with a sense of awe and wonder.

Points for Reflection

1. What principles of leadership underlie this text? How do we translate them into action in our own time?

Renewed Relationships Among People

Deuteronomy 19 and 24

These chapters fit into a larger section of laws on all manner of economic, social, religious, and interpersonal issues. The goal of all the texts is to create a society in which violence, jealousy, and rivalry are minimized, while peace, justice, and loving relationships are accentuated. These texts afford Christians an opportunity to think deeply about our responsibilities to the most vulnerable members of society, as well as those who have violated society's norms.

Goal: to learn to think practically about how to build relationships with people. Note that the focus is not on the specifics of the laws in Deuteronomy, but in the principles underlying them. The temptation will be to get bogged down in the details without seeing the bigger picture. It is important to emphasize that these laws set forth principles that lead to other applications in other settings.

Chapters 19 and 24 are part of a longer section of randomly arranged laws that ends in chapter 26.

19:1-13 concerns the cities of refuge. In a culture in which blood feud and revenge killings were common, the goal of the chapter is to set up a mechanism for limiting violence. The operative principle is, then, that violence is to be limited as far as possible and that social and legal mechanisms have that as a goal. A parallel to this text appears in Numbers 35.

19:14 is an appendix to the law on manslaughter. A cause of blood feud is the movement of boundary markers. Cheating causes strife.

19:15-21 is a second appendix to the law on manslaughter. Capital cases in ancient Israel required two witnesses.

NOTE: Verse 21 is the so-called *lex talionis* ("law of the talion"). Contrary to popular opinion, the goal of the verse is not to encourage revenge but rather to limit it. Punishment must fit the crime.

24:1-4 permits divorce in the case of irreconcilable differences. The vagueness of the law led to prolonged discussion in both Jewish and Christian ethical thinking. See Matthew 19 etc.

24:5 exempts newlyweds from military service.

24:6 forbids taking millstones as collateral on a loan. That is, lenders cannot deprive creditors of their means of livelihood.

24:7 kidnapping and enslavement are capital offenses.

24:8-9 a brief rule on leprosy. See Leviticus 13-14 for further commentary on leprosy.

24:10-13 picks up the theme of verse 6, with varying means of livelihood.

24:14-15 forbids oppressing vulnerable people.

24:16 calls for individual responsibility for crimes. Again, compare this to chapter 19's rules on feuds. Deuteronomy is trying to move a society from family responsibility to individual responsibility, and from a culture ruled by family custom to one ruled by law.

24:17-18 again picks up the theme of verses 6, 10-13, this time adding a theological justification.

24:19-22 again instructs Israel to care in practical ways for poor people.

Points for Reflection

1. Several principles underlie these laws, including: (1) the brotherhood of all Israelites; (2) the necessity for caring for the vulnerable; (3) the need to move from principle to practice. How would we work out these principles in Abilene today?
2. Given the differences between ancient Israelite society and ours, how do we move from these laws to our situation?

Renewed Generosity and Compassion

Deuteronomy 26

The confession of this chapter recognizes that Israel began as one nation among many and reached its present status on the basis of God's grace. By restating the basic story of Israel's redemption and by inviting each generation to embrace this story, Deuteronomy draws a close connection between what God has done and what we should do. Specifically, Israel is to show concern for the poor and those serving as priests, is not to confuse worship with mourning, and is to embrace the commands of God *with joy*. The chapter also reminds us that renewal of the present can come by reexamining the past.

Goal: To begin to tie together all the implications of our study of Deuteronomy.

Assumptions of the chapter: This chapter concludes the long series of laws in the previous chapters by setting forth some basic principles about Israel's life:

1. Israel reached its present condition through grace, not merit.
2. Being in Israel implies obligations to the vulnerable.
3. Being in Israel demands reverence for, and gratitude toward, God.
4. Being in Israel creates confidence in one's standing before God.

Commentary:

26:1-11 emphasize God's gift and the human response to it. Israelites do not confine themselves to individual prayers of thanksgiving but have a ritual through which they thank God. During it, they bring part of their goods to God, and then recite the story of their people. Verses 5-9 are often called a Credo, or statement of core beliefs (compare the word "creed").

This Credo affirms God's mighty acts in history: (1) the choice of Abraham; (2) the deliverance from Egypt; (3) the gift of the land. As Deuteronomy repeatedly emphasizes, God acted on Israel's behalf because of an old promise to the ancestors. God, being a keeper of promises, keeps this one.

26:12-15 repeat instructions for caring for the vulnerable and tie the obligation to a promise.

26:16-19 extends the idea of promise. Keeping the commandments will not go unrewarded. A gracious God will keep his commitments to Israel.

Points for Reflection:

1. What is the relationship between behavior and blessing? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Deuteronomy's way of linking the two?
2. This chapter connects the story of Israel to their behavior. How important is it to remember our story? How do we move from story to action?

Choose Life! Moving into the Future

Deuteronomy 30:11-20, 34:1-12

Chapter 30 concludes the main part of the book, in which Israel agrees to live by the covenant that God proposes. Chapters 31-34 form a conclusion to all of Exodus-Deuteronomy (the life of Moses), serving as Moses obituary and final words. Chapter 34 describes the passing of an era and the beginning of another, but at the same time reminds us that the two eras are connected by the abiding presence of the God who freed Israel in the Exodus. These texts thus offer Christians hope in the face of ever-present change.

Goal: to call the church to action on the basis of the story of God's redemption of us. This lesson provide the classes an opportunity to summarize what they've learned in the series and to think about practical implications of the book.

Chapter 30 exhorts Israel to commit to the covenant laid out in the book.

30:1-10 summarizes what the commitment to the covenant means, repeating much of the previous two chapters. However, a new element appears here. Verses 3-4 anticipate the Exile from the land and promise return to it. Note that God's grace can cover over even the most extreme human failure.

30:11-14 note that the commandments of God, even the most obscure, are understandable, helpful, and thus keepable. It lives in the heart (thoughts, reflections) and mouth (words, storytelling, rituals) of the people

30:15-20 call on Israel to reciprocate God's love for them. The relationship with God does not depend on a grim adherence to duty, but on love.

Chapter 34 reports the death of Moses, following his blessing of the people in two separate songs (Chapters 32 and 33). Anticipating Joshua 1, this chapter links the story of exodus and wandering to all the subsequent history of Israel. The events of Moses' time do not remain in the past, but serve as a model for all times, all circumstances. The covenant remains forever.

Points for Reflection:

1. What are the implications of saying that the law is "not in heaven"? It seems to mean that human interpretation is an unavoidable part of dealing with revelation, but how far can we/should we take this? What are the risks of not taking it far enough?
2. Moses passes the baton to Joshua and his generation here. How do we do this successfully in our church today?
3. What actions could/should result from our study so far?