

**Study 4: The Law Is My Delight**

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**Introduction.** The vocation of Moses was the vocation of Israel in miniature. The place where Moses first heard the call of God and the place where Israel was to seal its covenant were the same, Mt. Sinai. This, of course, was no accident. Moses' mission was to lead one people out of the misery of slavery, and it was the mission of that people to be the channel of salvation for all men.

Our task in this Bible Study is to understand the nature of Israel's mission as expressed in the covenant of Sinai, and to see how the covenant was worked out through the Law. In other words, we want to discover the place of the Law in the life of both the people and the individual.

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**Reading. Now open your Bible and read: Deuteronomy 4:1-40 and 26:1-30:20**

[You may also want to read the account of the giving of the Law as found in Exodus 19-24]

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**Background.** For the first time in our study of the Bible we come across one of its great themes, *The Law*. For the pious Israelite this expression embodied a way of life which, if observed carefully, assured him of God's favor. Since this idea of the Law as a complete way of life is so basic to an understanding of the Old Testament, it is worthwhile to examine, if only briefly, the Law of Moses.

In origin it drew on the common law of the whole ancient Middle East, but it possesses a tone and a spiritual quality that sets it far above all other contemporary legal codes. Its concept of justice, while seemingly harsh to today's reader, was really quite merciful by the standards of its time. One of the unique qualities of this early Hebraic legal code was its concern for the weak and defenseless, the widow and orphan, and its insistence on the dignity of women.

Its most unique quality, though, is its description of God as above and beyond His creation. It completely rejected the prevailing ideas of the other religions of the time in which God was identified (or confused) with the forces of nature. We'll come back to this idea when we visit Genesis 1-11.

Another interesting feature of early Jewish Law was its use of an historical framework in which to place laws. Sometimes historical events offer motives for obeying the law, or a practical application of the law, to make the particular law more meaningful to those who are expected to observe it.

**Deuteronomy's Message.** Deuteronomy was written as a series of Mosaic addresses or sermons to the people just prior to their entry into the Promised Land. As such, it contains some absolutely beautiful descriptions of the moral life. Its message might best be summarized as: *love and righteousness go together*. To love God means also to love and deal justly and uprightly with one's neighbor.

Deuteronomy tells of the one, true God who is a *living* God, not a god made of wood or metal or stone. He is also a *jealous* God because He cannot remain indifferent when His people turn away from Him. He is a *loving* God in that He exercises the most amazing providence on behalf of His Chosen People. And He has chosen them, not because of anything they had done or any qualities they possessed, but because He loved them and was determined to keep the promises He had made to their fathers.

The people in turn must *fear*, that is, reverence, Him as the Almighty God, as the One and Only God who is always upright and just in all His ways. But most of all, they must return love for love. They must have an intense, personal devotion that gives God their undivided loyalty in every phase of their lives.

**Key Sections & Passages.** Highlight these parts of Exodus in your Bible by writing these key words in the margins.

✠ Dt 4:1-40. *Keep God's Law!*

✠ Dt 26. *The Widow and the Orphan* – the wedding of worship and social justice

✠ Dt 30. *Choose Life!* – Moses' final appeal to the people

- † **Dt 4:1-40.** Deuteronomy provides what we might call an *inspired commentary* on the events of the Exodus. It's perhaps the purest form of historical writing, as the Jews understood this type of writing. For the Jew of this day, historical writing didn't simply report events and dates; rather, it explained the significance of the events. Today we would likely call this a philosophy or theology of history. The passage chosen here from Deuteronomy is a beautiful and eloquent expression of wonder at God's loving care for His people.
- † **Dt 4:11-12.** The cloud that covered the mountaintop, along with the thunder and lighting, were a theophany, a visible sign of God's presence.
- † **Dt 4:15.** The repeated prohibition against representing God in some material form was to emphasize God's spiritual nature. Because of the people's idolatrous background and the pagan world in which they lived, there was real danger of their backsliding into idolatry.

**Old and New Testaments.** Thoughts on the unity of the Old and New Testaments as found in Deuteronomy.

- † **Influence of Deuteronomy.** The Book of Deuteronomy was so influential that it is quoted well over 30 times in the New Testament. And if we add the number of times it was alluded to or indirectly quoted, we find it referred to in well over 100 passages of the New Testament.
- † **The Great Commandment (Mk 12:29-30).** When Jesus was asked which was the most important of the commandments, he immediately answered by quoting *Dt 6:4-6*.
- † **The Temptation in the Desert (Mt 4:4,7,10; Lk 4:4,8,12).** When the devil appears to Jesus and tempts Him during His forty days in the desert, Our Lord turns to the words of Deuteronomy to answer Satan: *Dt 6:13,16*.
- † **The Spirit of Deuteronomy (Mt 23:1-39; Jn 14:15, 15:10).** Jesus also re-calls His disciples to the true spirit of Deuteronomy when He warns them of the danger of an exclusively legalistic approach to God. Such an approach, although outwardly free from blame, dispenses with the very heart of the truly moral life. It tends to obviate the need for repentance and the total gift of self to God by leading one to believe that holiness and salvation can be achieved solely through one's own efforts. (Such beliefs arose in the early Church under the guise of the Pelagian heresy; and still exist today.)
- † **St. Paul on this same Spirit. (Rom 3:7-31; Gal 5:13-6:18).** St. Paul tells his followers that it is faith which supports the law and brings it to perfection.

**Questions.** We can easily drift along, observing God's law merely out of habit. But if we take the words of Deuteronomy to heart, we will add the following to our regular examination of conscience: Do I regard God's law as a source of life? Do I make the observance of that law an expression of love and gratitude?

Now let's consider some possible questions for our group discussion:

1. Does the Law given to Moses and his people differ from Christian Law? How?
2. How does the concept of God in Deuteronomy differ from that of the pagan world?
3. What motivation is given the Jews to obey the Law? Illustrate by reference to the text.
4. Discuss *Dt 26:16-19*. To what extent do these verses reflect the spirit of the entire book?
5. In what sense is the Christian free of the Law?
6. The word "today" is used repeatedly in Deuteronomy, many times more than in all the other books of the Pentateuch. What do you think is the significance of that?
7. How does Jesus relive and redeem the experience of the Israelites? How does He reveal Himself as the "new Moses?"
8. How might the book of Deuteronomy provide an outline of genuine renewal for the Church today?