

## Exegesis Deuteronomy 30:11-20

### Context

The Pentateuch is the first five books of the Bible. It begins with the account of how God created all things and then created a people for himself. The people were saved from slavery in Egypt by God and were wandering in the desert. God set out laws for them. The Book of Deuteronomy, traditionally ascribed to the Prophet Moses, spells out many of these laws. This book deals with the laws given to Israel just prior to its entry into the land God promised to them through their ancestor Abraham.

### Deuteronomy

It has been noted that for Deuteronomy “the law forms a central core.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most important chapter is Deuteronomy 30. There Moses tells the people that they must obey God, wherever they roam, to have his blessing and a relationship with him. He warns of the consequences of disobedience. The passage is focussed on this life only. The real theme of the passage is how only obedience to the law can lead to peace and life and prosperity. Moses does not give new laws in this section but is exhorting the people to keep the laws given in the book.

“Deuteronomy is in fact three things at once: it is a book of laws, it is a book of sermons and it is a historical book.”<sup>2</sup> Nobody today really thinks it is historical.

I see the chapter as being the first two of these. It at first glance appears to be merely a sermon by Moses. But it is more than that. He speaks as one laying down the law of God and as one who has the authority of God. As prophet of God, divine sovereignty and divine providence were able to ensure that he would speak infallibly. “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God.”<sup>3</sup> This is very strong.

<sup>1</sup> Gooder P, Pentateuch: A Story of Beginnings, (T & T Clark, 2000) p. 99

<sup>2</sup> Payne, DF, Deuteronomy (Westminster John Knox Press, 1985) p. 3

or  
<http://books.google.ie/books/about/Deuteronomy.html?id=GratXc9ShOgC>  
 books.google.ie

<sup>3</sup> Deut. 30:15,16

“The impassioned speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy may be seen as manifestations of grace, since Moses the prophet of God par-excellence, reveals to the people what they need to survive and thrive in the land”<sup>4</sup> That is truer of the last speech which is in Deuteronomy 30 than of the rest. The part we study is contained in Moses’ last address to the people.<sup>5</sup> I sense that its message is strong and uncompromising because Moses had predicted that there would come another prophet after him but did not say when he would come. So Israel would have to cope without having prophet to oversee its relationship with God. Moses needed to leave a lasting impression and give them a sermon to remember. They were going to be on their own. No longer would they be able to access God through his prophet. They had to remember what God had already revealed through Moses and keep that divine message on their lips. They were reminded that God’s “word is very near you; it is in your mouth”<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Vogt P T, Interpreting the Pentateuch: An Exegetical Handbook (Kregel Publications 2009) p. 85,

<sup>5</sup> Bekken P J, The word is near you: a study of Deuteronomy 30:12-14 in Paul's Letter to the Romans in a Jewish Context (Walter de Gruyter GmbH and Co, 2007) p. 3

<sup>6</sup> Deut. 30:14

## The Meaning of the Passage and what Christians Can Learn from it

Moses tells the people, “Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you” 7. He is referring to the laws revealed by God.

The New Testament teaches that because nobody is able to obey the law perfectly that we are forced to go to God and ask him to save us for we cannot do it by ourselves. The passage at 30:12-14 says that what Moses commands on divine authority is not too difficult for the people and the word is near to them and not far away and they have it in their hearts and on their lips. It says the reason the word is so near is so that they – and implication we - can obey all the commandments.

The apostle Paul “instead of interpreting Deut 30:12-14 in terms of Law and actions in obedience to the law which locates righteousness in Israel as the people of God, Paul transfers it to the righteousness received on the basis of faith in Christ and available to Jews as well as Gentiles.” 8

This is one of Paul's distortions. Nothing in the book envisages the coming of anything like Christianity.

It is stressed in the New Testament that we have to obey all the commandments. We have “to do all his commandments; for he that allows himself in the breach of one commandment involves himself in the guilt of contemning them all, James. 2:10.” 9

Patrick D Miller stated that “Obedience to the commandments ... is a quite possible achievement” 10

Christians say we cannot obey God without the help of his grace, his supernatural assistance. God never commands the impossible. But as we are so rebellious we will not avail of his help. If so then it must not be thought that obedience is possible without God.

The passage says that the word of God is not far away from the people but in their hearts and in their mouth. This clearly states that the passage is the word of God. Just as importantly it implies that they have no excuse for ignorance of the law. There is no room here for the way many Christians are making excuses for sinners and bad people.

7 Deut. 30:11

8 Bekken P J, The word is near you: a study of Deuteronomy 30:12-14 in Paul's Letter to the Romans in a Jewish Context (Walter de Gruyter GmbH and Co, 2007) p. 154

9 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/deuteronomy/30.html>

10 Miller P D, Deuteronomy (Westminster John Knox Press, 1990) p. 49

It is said that the passage shows that Moses “anticipated the new covenant, since he knew Israel would fail to keep the Sinaitic covenant” 11. He didn't need to be a prophet to foresee what their disobedience would lead to.

The passage hints at the coming of salvation in the future. “I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction” 12 It indicates that Israel is to love the Lord “to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands” and then it will “live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.” 13 It does this by saying that it is love of God expressed by obedience rather than obedience itself that will bring the life and prosperity. This reminds some of the New Testament teaching that those who turn to God in faith depending on him alone as saviour through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ will be empowered by God to love. But the text gives no reason to imagine that the salvation promised is to be got in another world.

Moses warns the people, “If your heart turns away ... if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods” then “you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land.” 14 The most important part of the warning is about the heart turning away. It reminds us that we do not need to actually start adoring new gods to turn away from God. Things like pride, alcohol, money etc can become gods for us. Moses is certain that turning away from God will lead to destruction and sooner rather than later. He does not necessarily imply that God will directly send this destruction. He could mean that if we turn away from the one being who is truly lovable we wipe out love in ourselves and become destructive and thus we will not thrive.

The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.” Israel as it was then was unable to love God as it should. The quotation indicates that God will cut away the evil inclinations. This is a promise to send divine grace. Grace saves us from our natural weakness and sinfulness and makes holiness possible. It is God working within us to change us. The apostle Paul in Romans speaks of the fulfilment of the promise the one who is a true Jew having been circumcised in his heart by the Holy Spirit of God, John Wesley wrote, “This promise principally respects the times of the gospel, and the grace which was to be then imparted to all Israel by Christ”. I do agree with this interpretation. <http://www.christnotes.org/commentary.php?com=wes&b=5&c=30>. I do not agree for it assumes too much.

Adam Clarke stated that the people “are exhorted to love the Lord, obey his voice, and cleave unto him, that they may inherit the land promised to Abraham.” 15

It is impossible to believe that the only reward would be that Israel would inherit the land. It is easy to believe that this was one of the rewards. The passage is clear that God will give rewards to those who love him and that indicates the possibility that he may resurrect them to enjoy everlasting life.

11 MacArthur J F, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, (Thomas Nelson Inc, 2005) p. 499

12 Deut. 30:15

13 Deut. 30:16

14 Deut. 30:17,18

15 <http://www.godrules.net/library/clarke/clarkedeu30.htm>

Deuteronomy is the final book of the Pentateuch. It “develops the seriousness of sin in much the same way as the earlier books ... Deuteronomy highlights how seriously God takes sin” 16 This is seen very clearly in Deuteronomy 30 which really summarises the blessing of obeying God and the curse of sin – sin is thinking you know better than God and you declare yourself independent of him.

Moses finishes off with an oath, “I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses” 17 This reinforces the solemnity and extreme importance of the sermon. Moses is also affirming his own authority as prophet. He does not say that the law sets before them life and death but that he does.

He says, “The LORD is your life”. This indicates that the people are to realise their complete dependence on God for life and therefore quality of life. This teaching is another way of expressing the absolute necessity of divine grace. It underlines the fact that without God there is only misery and loss and death because we are made for him and need him. This should be linked to what Deuteronomy 30:2 states, “Return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul”.

16 Vogt P T, *Interpreting the Pentateuch: An Exegetical Handbook* (Kregel Publications 2009) p. 78

Finally

The passage could be entitled *The Choice*. Life and death, a blessing and a curse are the options laid before the people. It certainly helps us atheists be sceptical about the alleged holiness of Christians who claim the passage has authority over them.

The passage refutes the idea that the laws were simply civil laws given by God. He says that the people of Israel must make these laws “to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses [them] among the nations.” If they were mere civil laws Israel would be exempt from them if they conflicted with the law of another country that they began to reside in. Israel is bound to obey God’s law no matter where it roams or what nation has civil authority over it. This reminds us of Jesus’ teaching that we must love God with all our hearts indicating that we must do so even if this means civil disobedience. John MacArthur wrote that many Evangelical scholars noted “the similarities between the structure of the book and the ancient Near Eastern treaty form” (see *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*).

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