

A Tale of Two Mountains

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[0 : 00] Please sit down and if you'd like to open the Bibles at page 159 to Deuteronomy chapter 27. During this year we've had already two blocks of sermons on Deuteronomy in the January-February period and then after Easter and this is our third and final block as we look at the last few chapters of the book over the next five or six weeks or so.

So we're up to chapter 27 and let's pray now that God will speak to us from His Word. Heavenly Father we thank You that You are a God who speaks, who reveals Yourself and Your purposes to humanity through the words of Scripture.

We pray that You'll open our hearts and minds now not only to believe and to understand but also to follow and obey Your Word that we may bring glory to Your name and the name of Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well Israel is on the threshold here in Deuteronomy. 400 years in Egypt is over. It ended with the exodus from Egypt and now 40 years of the wilderness is almost over.

Israel is at the end of that 40 year period. They're on the plains of Moab in what is modern day Jordan, overlooking the north end of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River, across to the wilderness country of Judea up to where Jerusalem is and Bethlehem, looking up the Jordan Valley towards the Galilee.

[1 : 33] Here they are on the edge of the Promised Land, the threshold of that land. They've been on the border before, 40 years earlier, where they failed to enter and conquer the land and in a sense chickened out when they sent spies into the land and they were then condemned in a sense for 40 years to be in the wilderness.

But now before them lies again the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey as it's been called, the land that had been promised to Abram 600 years earlier.

The whole point of Deuteronomy in effect is that it's a sermon by Moses, their leader, at the threshold of the land to urge them to cross the Jordan, to conquer the land, to live obediently in the land and to look forward to God's blessings in the land.

It's particularly poignant because Moses is about to die. They know that. Indeed in the last chapter, chapter 34 of this book, Moses dies on the top of Mount Nebo here overlooking the Promised Land.

It's a sermon that reminds Israel of their past failure, their failure to conquer the land 40 years before that is recounted at length in chapter 1 and 2, their failure at Mount Sinai 40 years before where they built a golden calf and worshipped it.

[2 : 54] That's recounted in chapter 9. The bulk of the book, chapters 5 to 26, are in effect the laws under which Israel is to live.

Chapter 5 gives the Ten Commandments and chapter 6 the Great Commandment of loving God with all your heart, soul and strength. And from chapters 12 to 26 goes through the details of Old Testament law.

A comprehensive list that all of life is to be lived in obedience to God. Laws that we've seen earlier this year encompass issues to do with worship, idolatry, care of the poor, sexual laws, laws of property, laws to do with the leaders of the nation, laws to do with warfare and a whole range of other topics.

That ended in chapter 26 and now we come to the climax of the book in a sense. The sermon of Moses finishes at the end of chapter 30. So chapters 27 to 30 are the climax of the sermon and then comes some postscript type chapters 31 to 34 dealing with some other issues.

Chapter 27 focuses on a ceremony that Israel is to conduct after they have crossed the Jordan and entered the land. A ceremony that's to mark the conquest of the land, the victory of Israel in taking the land.

[4 : 26] The details I think are quite striking and intriguing in many ways in fact. And far from being what we would expect a victory celebration to be like, the details of this ceremony are quite different.

For example, if we anticipated a victory celebration, we'd have a ticker tape parade down the main city and we'd have a sort of self-congratulatory, boastful sort of event.

We are the greatest, we are the champions, all that sort of hype. But what we find here is quite different, very far from that sort of boastful, arrogant, proud celebration.

Indeed, we find here a celebration of taking the land that is almost odd in the way that it's set up. Let's see what those details are and the first thing to note is where it occurs.

Verse 4 mentions Mount Ebal and verses 11 to 13 mention Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, two mountains are the focus of this.

[5 : 32] These mountains lie in the centre of the land. They're about 40 kilometres north of Jerusalem and roughly halfway between the Jordan River on the east and the Mediterranean Sea on the west, the boundaries of the land.

So it's fairly central, close to what much, much later was called Samaria by the time of the latter part of the Old Testament and then in Jesus' day. In between these two mountains that are not great tall snow-capped things, they're sort of prominent hills in effect.

In between them, indeed on the shoulder of the two mountains, is the town of Shechem, which literally means shoulder. When I take a group to Israel later this year in November, December, sadly, most likely, we will not be able to go to Shechem on that trip.

But certainly a highlight of the last two trips that I've done to Israel was to visit Shechem. Indeed, the first time I went in 1995 to Shechem, I just went with a few friends, not a whole group.

It wasn't safe for a whole group to go. And when we got there, we ended up being escorted by a Jewish soldier with his submachine gun on his shoulder because he said, I just want to be careful.

[6 : 50] You can never tell. Well, this is West Bank Territory. It's very close to the city of Nablus, which is often a bit of a hot spot of sort of uprisings and tension.

Not quite as bad as the Gaza Strip, but it's a bit of a tense spot, which is why these days it's unsafe to go there. But Shechem was the ancient town in between the shoulders of Mount Gerizim in the south and Mount Ebal in the north.

It's sort of a vast amphitheatre in a way. It's sort of, imagine the MCG, but on a much, much bigger scale. It's a few kilometres across from mountain to mountain.

And in those days, when there weren't cities and bustling traffic, quite possibly with several thousand people on one mountain, as verses 11 and 12 say, and several thousand on the other, as verse 13 says, you could probably hear the tribes shouting across to each other from Mount Gerizim to Ebal and back again.

Why this place? Not because it's the centre of the land, but because the first time Shechem virtually occurs in the Bible is when Abram gets there.

[8 : 00] If you remember the famous chapter of Genesis 12, God makes promises to Abram. He begins by saying, go to the land I'll show you, and I will make your name great, I'll give you many descendants, through you the world will be blessed, and so on, at the beginning of Genesis 12.

But the actual promise of land only comes a bit later in that chapter, when Abram arrives in the land and comes to Shechem. And there, in Genesis 12, verse 7, God promises to Abram and his descendants the gift of the land that Abram now sees.

So it's highly appropriate that at the place that God promises the land is the place where Israel's arrival will mark the fulfilment of that promise, and God's faithfulness to keep that promise of land.

Shechem was also the place that Jacob comes back to, after being out of the land for 20 years, gathering all his wives and children. And it's also the place which, later on, this ceremony is actually conducted in Joshua 8, and later on, Joseph, if you remember, Joseph died in Egypt, and commanded that he would not be buried in Egypt, but that his body embalmed and kept in a coffin to be taken back to the land of promise.

And it's here, later, that Joseph is buried. And indeed, when I was there in 1995, they showed me what they said was the tomb of Joseph. It looked a very new tomb to me, but subsequently, sadly, it's been destroyed by a Palestinian uprising since 1995.

[9 : 31] But it may or may not have been Joseph's bones. We'll never know that. But it's at this place, Shechem. So that's the first thing, the location. It marks the promise of the land.

And this ceremony is, in part, marking God's faithfulness to his promise of giving the land. Three things are mentioned in the first part of the chapter about this ceremony.

Firstly, plastered stones, in verses 2 to 4. On the day that you cross over the Jordan into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and cover them with plaster.

You shall write on them all the words of this law when you've crossed over to enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

So when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones about which I'm commanding you today on Mount Ebal, and you shall cover them with plaster. This is a practice of the ancient Near Eastern world, apparently, sometimes to set up stones inscribed with words of laws.

[10 : 44] A couple of them you can see in places like the British Museum. Hammurabi's law code from ancient Babylon, for example, and some from Egypt. What's perhaps a little bit unusual here is that they're covered in plaster.

The covering in plaster would mean that you could read it much more easily than engraving the law on the stone itself, but it means that it wouldn't last forever because the plaster would eventually wear off in the weather and rain and wind and so on.

But it would be, at least initially, a witness of God's law. And all the words of this law, as it says here in verse 3, would mean probably virtually the whole of the book of Deuteronomy, at least chapters 1 to 30.

That is the sermon that Moses preaches in Deuteronomy. Perhaps what is most surprising is where these plastered stones are placed. If you were choreographing this ceremony and you've got two mountains opposite each other, sort of like the great southern stand of the MCG and the new northern stand of the MCG, and you've got six tribes in one and six in the other, as verses 11 to 13 say, then I imagine that if you were choreographing this, you'd probably put all the bits and pieces in the middle, that is, on the centre wicket, in effect, of the MCG, well, the Shechem MCG.

But actually that's not where these plastered stones go. Verse 4 tells us that they go on Mount Ebal, on one of the sides, on one of the hills.

- [12 : 19] But what's even perhaps more surprising initially is that Mount Ebal is the mount that signifies curse. Verse 11 and 12 talk about Mount Gerizim being the mount of blessing, and verse 13 talks about Mount Ebal being the mount of curse.

So here we have the law of God, which so often is praised and revered and talked about in terms of being sweet and perfect in the Psalms, for example.

But here these plastered stones of God's law are placed on a mountain of curse. And that's quite striking, it seems to me. What it's reminding us of is one of the functions of God's law.

God's law does point to what is perfect and ideal. At that level it points us to God's standards. It's sweet, it is perfect. The law of the Lord is perfect, Psalm 19 says.

But in pointing us to what is perfect, at the same time the law of God makes us realise that we fall short of that perfect standard.

- [13 : 27] That is, as we hear the law that says, love God with all your heart, soul and strength, it reflects back to us and we realise, I don't do that. When the law tells us not to covet, it tells us what the perfect standard of God is, but it exposes the fact that we covet.

And the law has that function. It's a piercing diagnostic function. It pierces our hearts and exposes our sinfulness, our deficiencies, our lack of meeting God's standards.

As we hear the law of God and his perfect standards, whether it's Ten Commandments or Great Commandments or other laws, one of its functions is to make us realise that we all, without exception, fall short of the glory of God.

We fail to meet the perfect standard of God's law and therefore we come under the wrath of God, his holy anger against sin. We sit under a curse of God on the sin of this world.

And that's the function of placing these plastered stones on Mount Ebal, the Mount of Curse, because it reminds us that we are under a curse because we fail God's standards.

- [14 : 43] That seems to be the function also of the second half of this chapter. Twelve curses are listed there. Curse be anyone who does this, that or the other. It's a slightly strange mix.

It's not the Ten Commandments. They're different things that are mentioned, a range of possibilities. Some of them are secret things and it reminds us that even when we fail God's standards, even when we commit sins in secret, others may not know.

We may never be brought to justice on earth, but God knows the secrets of our hearts. Indeed, as we prayed in that opening prayer, before whom no secrets are hidden.

That's God. And notice how the chapter ends, cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them. And if you've read through from chapters 5 to 26, the detail of the law of God given, you cannot fail to acknowledge that at least at some points we fail to observe God's law.

We fall short of His glory. We are under, in the end, God's curse. Now this is quite a striking thing.

- [15 : 57] It's not the world's view of humanity here. Our world thinks that we are good. Our world thinks that we can do whatever we want to do. That our human potential is unlimited.

We can be whoever we want to be. But the biblical and true view is that we fail. We cannot overcome our own imperfections and sins.

We cannot save ourselves. We cannot become perfect no matter what intent or resolve we have to do that. When I was on, just on holiday after teaching for a few weeks, last week I had a week in Laos and I ended up travelling for three days, I think, with a guy from Japan.

Happened to sit next to me in a bus and in the end we were travelling the same places for the next three days. And he was a lawyer from Japan, a Buddhist, and his mother and father represented different strands of Buddhism.

I don't know much about Buddhism but his mother's strand, he said, was in effect, I need a saviour. His father's strand, which seems to be more orthodox Buddhism, is you can save yourself through disciplines of meditation so that ultimately you can arrive at Nirvana or whatever you call it.

[17 : 14] And this man said he preferred his father's Buddhism. But he said, but I don't know how to meditate. I can't actually do it. And I said to him, isn't that a bit strange that you pursue a view of Buddhism that has a high view of your ability to meditate and climb the ladder to Nirvana and yet you acknowledge you can't do it.

And he agreed it was a paradox but he was determined that eventually he would pursue that to where it left. And I said, well, let me say, I think you need a saviour.

I think your mother's view is better and I think Jesus is the saviour. Well, our conversation didn't develop much further from that on that issue. But the world's view of humanity is that we can save ourselves.

We're good. But the reality is, the Bible's view is, we aren't. We fail. No matter how good we are, we cannot reach God's perfect standards.

And ultimately, everyone, Jew or Gentile, male or female, young or old, in any age, in any place, we actually need saving from the curse of God against sin.

[18 : 24] Well, thankfully, this is not the end of the story here because the second thing that is on Mount Ebal, next to the plastered stones, is an altar. Verse 5, Well, the bit about the iron tool is picking up an instruction back in Exodus that the altars of God, of God's people, Israel, in the Old Testament, were to be unlike the altars of the other nations who worshipped other gods.

Theirs were stones that were cut by iron tools so that they were smooth and clean, a bit like bricks, I suppose, and you would have a smooth built altar. But the altars commanded in the Old Testament were to be uncut stone, stone that you just pick up from the field and you put it together.

It might look a bit rickety or something like that, but it was different from Canaanite worship. That instruction would prevent Israel from using a Canaanite altar, although they disobeyed the law so many times in their history.

And this altar was to be built and an altar is there for sacrifice. That's what an altar is. It's the place of sacrifice. And on this altar would be offered, as verse 6 says, burnt offerings to the Lord your God.

Burnt offerings are just one of a number of Old Testament sacrifices. It's the basic sacrifice to deal with sin. Leviticus 1 begins its section on sacrifices with burnt offerings.

[19 : 59] And it's called a burnt offering because the whole animal is burnt, destroyed, sort of, you know, a really, really overcooked barbecue. Nothing is able to be eaten.

The whole lot is burnt. And the idea is the whole lot is burned because the animal, in a sense, is given in its entirety to God because it's dealing with sin.

That's the first, the basic sacrifice of the Old Testament. The idea is that the sacrifice of that animal takes away the sin of the offerer.

Now here, we have two things, plastered stones and an altar for sacrifice, side by side on Mount Ebal. and what they show us is actually profound.

The heart of God is declared through these two things. God who is perfect and holy in his standards, demonstrated by the words of the law on the plastered stones, but at the same time and without compromise, a God who is merciful, who provides an altar for sacrifice for sin.

[21 : 15] That's what God is like. Not one or the other, but both in their entirety together consistently. A God who is perfectly holy, but a God who is perfectly merciful at the same time.

It's a consistent biblical view. It's not a New Testament view alone. It's a Bible's view, Old and New Testament. God who is holy and who is merciful.

And here we see that represented by these instructions of what to build on Mount Ebal. What Deuteronomy here is teaching us is even clearer in the New Testament.

Not different, but clearer. For here we get the holiness and the mercy of God put side by side together on Mount Ebal. And where we find that perfectly expressed, where the heart of God is most revealed to the world, is on the sacrifice of the cross of Christ, where wrath and mercy perfectly meet.

Indeed, what is being revealed here in Deuteronomy 27 is exactly what Paul is arguing in that second reading we had from Galatians chapter 3. All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse for it is written and Paul now quotes from this chapter in Deuteronomy, Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.

[22 : 43] But then he goes on to say Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. That is, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross takes away the curse that hangs over us for our sin because Christ is our substitute for our sins.

You see, the altar and the plastered stones here on Mount Ebal are pointing us, are leading us, are driving us to the greater sacrifice on the Mount of Calvary in Jerusalem on the first Good Friday.

A sacrifice once for all, a sacrifice more costly than the sacrifice of a goat or lamb or bull. Now, our church service actually follows this sort of pattern, interestingly.

Our church service like a communion service in the Anglican service often begins as we have today the great commandments. Jesus said, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength.

A summary of the law and the function of that is to make us realise that we fall short of that standard and later on in our service we'll confess our sins, we'll acknowledge that we fail God's law.

[23 : 57] We haven't loved God, with all our heart, soul or strength or our neighbour as ourself and we will confess our sins and we'll hear words of forgiveness that base that forgiveness on the sacrifice of Christ.

In effect, the same theology and pattern that we see here in Deuteronomy 27 where the law exposes our sin but then the altar deals with our sin. Same pattern, same theology.

But there's one more dimension to be added. In verse 7, after the sacrifice of burnt offering, the instruction is make sacrifices of well-being and eat them there rejoicing before the Lord your God.

The sacrifice of well-being would typically come after a sacrifice of burnt offering. The first animal is burnt entirely because sin is being dealt with. But sin having been dealt with, another sacrifice is made but this is like a meal, it's a barbecue.

A bit of it is burnt entirely, that's God's portion because it represents the fact that now the people whose sins are forgiven and God are actually having a meal together.

[25 : 06] It's a fellowship, a sacrifice of well-being or fellowship or peace. That is, now we are back right with God. Our sins are dealt with. Forgiveness is ours. And so we celebrate, we rejoice, we eat and rejoice.

It's not an individual alone, it's a household and indeed including the priests, it would be a party type meal, a celebration type meal and that's what's commanded in verse 7.

When sins are dealt with, there is reconciliation with God, peace with God that is to be celebrated and rejoiced in. That's a typical pattern of Old Testament sacrifices and again that pattern we see in our Anglican service of the Lord's Supper.

Having heard God's law summarised and recognising our sin, having confessed our sins and hearing that Jesus' sacrifice brings us forgiveness and atonement, today we'll celebrate the Lord's Supper and we will eat and drink, admittedly tokens in bread and wine, but it is meant to be a feast of rejoicing.

That it's not just a solemn occasion of something between me and God but a corporate event for the people of God forgiven for our sins, we are to rejoice together that we are at peace with God through the sacrifice, not of a bull or goat, but from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

[26 : 29] The Bible you see knows, even in the Old Testament, that our relationship with God is grounded in God's grace and mercy. Our relationship with God does not come from our righteousness.

we're not to presume upon our relationship with God, we're not to presume to eat of the bread and drink of the cup, but rather to do so trusting in God's many and great mercies to us in Christ.

The theology of Deuteronomy 27 is a consistent theology in the Bible. It's a gospel theology of a people who are sinners but are saved by the grace and mercy of God.

it points us and drives us to the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ on Good Friday. So as we today celebrate the Lord's Supper and do so a couple of times every month in this service, let us do so with renewed joy at the forgiveness of sins that Jesus' death brings us.

Let us do so with renewed awareness of the fact that we are sinners needing a saviour, that we cannot save ourselves. Let us praise God that the curse under which we lived has been removed by Jesus who took it on himself on our part.

[27 : 53] Let us praise God from whom all blessings flow in Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.