

Hear, O Israel

M. W. Bassford, 2-6-11

When we think of the great sermons of the Bible, our mind naturally turns to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which we have recorded for us in Matthew 5-7. If asked to come up with a second sermon, we would probably turn to Paul's sermon on Mars Hill from Acts 17. There are many other reasonable candidates in Scripture for the title of "great sermon", but one of the most impressive sermons of all is one that we rarely consider. It is the book of Deuteronomy.

Even though it far exceeds any of the New Testament sermons in length, and it would probably take us several hours to read out loud, Deuteronomy is still worthy of our study. It represents the final words of Moses to the children of Israel, and we see his basic aim in Deuteronomy 4:1. As Moses begins this oration, Israel stands on the banks of the Jordan. They are about to cross into the land of Canaan, but Moses is not going with them. God has already warned him that as punishment for his sin at the waters of Meribah, he was going to die in the wilderness like so many others before him. Deuteronomy, then, is everything that Moses wants to say to a people that has proven to be stubborn and obstinate, that has made his life miserable for the past 40 years, that is nonetheless a people that he loves and wishes to succeed.

Some portions of this book-long sermon aren't going to be especially applicable to us today. Because the Law of Moses has been nailed to the cross, we don't have to be concerned about the rules for tithing, for instance. However, others of the final words of Moses have lost none of their vigor. We serve under a different law, yes, but we serve the same God, and many of the principles that govern our interaction with Him have not changed since the beginning. We're going to spend the next half hour or so, then, mining Deuteronomy for insights. Let's listen when Moses says, "Hear, O Israel."

God's Will.

Immediately after this keynote phrase, Moses next warns the people against **ADDING AND SUBTRACTING**. Let's read together from Deuteronomy 4:2. Many people in the religious world today would be baffled that God would ever say such a thing. After all, He's a God of love, and that means that we can do whatever we want to and He's going to be OK with it, right? Not so. As we see from the physical creation all around us, God is a very precise God. He designs everything to work just so, and He doesn't leave room for anybody else to monkey around with His design. Just to cite one example, even a small change in our body chemistry would kill all of us instantly. God's plan for us cannot be improved upon.

Now, let's be honest, friends. Is a God who is so precise in the physical world going to be any less precise in the spiritual world? Is He just going to use the Holy Spirit to reveal a bunch of slop that we in our human wisdom can improve? What a ludicrous notion! Just like everything else God does, His word is just the way He wants it, and it establishes a plan for a church that is just the way He wants it. When we fail to do something that God has commanded, or when we add something that He has not commanded, we wreck His plan and short-circuit His will. Let's faithfully obey Him instead.

This becomes even more important when we recall **THE SEVERITY OF GOD**. Moses points to one instance of this severity in Deuteronomy 4:3. In fact, this incident had taken place perhaps only several weeks before Moses is speaking here. It would have been very fresh on the minds of the Israelites. Some of the Moabite women had seduced Israelite men to lie with them and to worship their gods. In response, God sent a plague against Israel and demanded that all of the idolaters who survived the plague be executed. There was nothing light about apostasy. It had to be punished swiftly and severely.

Today, we must remember that God feels the same way about the sins that pull us away from Him. Just like Satan used Moabite women in the time of Moses, he uses all sorts of allurements today. Sadly, Christians who pursue those allurements can also expect to feel God's wrath. That wrath begins in this life when we suffer because of the physical consequences of our sin. If we do not repent, we can expect that wrath to continue with harsher punishments in the life to come. Sin is deadly serious business, friends, and if we practice willful sin, God will not overlook it.

As we remember that, though, we must also remember **THE KINDNESS OF GOD**. Moses describes how this kindness was revealed in Deuteronomy 4:4. Even though plagues normally spread without regard for righteousness, God took such care of those who obeyed Him that none of them suffered for the evil of their brethren. The children of Israel had spent the past 40 years in one of the most hostile places on earth, but God never ceased to protect and provide for them.

Once again, brethren, God's nature hasn't changed. He continues to protect and provide for His people today just as faithfully as He did when they were wandering in the wilderness. He won't always give us what we want, but He will always supply what we need. What peace we can find in that knowledge! What joy it gives us, knowing that no matter what life has

in store for us, even through the most difficult times, God will be right there with us and will continue to bless us. As wonderful as that is, it's just a shadow of the peace and joy we will know in heaven, all because of the kindness of God.

This understanding of God's kindness should shape the way that we understand **THE PURPOSE OF HIS LAW**. Moses elaborates in Deuteronomy 4:5. God didn't say to His people, "I expect you to obey Me. The end." Instead, that obedience came with a purpose, and it came with rewards. If the children of Israel held fast to God's law, they could expect to take possession of the promised land, and they could expect to remain in it for as long as the earth endured.

God's law for us today has the same purpose. He gave it to us so that we too could inherit the promised land, not a few acres of dirt in Palestine, but the eternal kingdom of heaven, where we will reign with Jesus forever. God loves us, eternal life is the single biggest blessing He can award us, and everything in His law is calculated so that we can receive that blessing. Obedience to God's law will not always make us happy in this life, but that's because it is not designed to make us happy in this life. Earthly happiness for us is God's secondary purpose, but it's not His primary purpose. Especially when we have lived wickedly before, keeping God's commandments will sting sometimes. When we feel that sting, though, we must ask ourselves: Is it better to rejoice here and suffer forever, or is it better to suffer here and rejoice forever? Let's live accordingly.

Our Lives.

Of course, the law is not for us only. We must also consider **OUR IMPACT** when we obey. Moses describes one effect of obedience in Deuteronomy 4:6. His point is that the godliness of the children of Israel wasn't going to occur in a vacuum. When they lived wisely and righteously, the nations around them were going to notice and glorify God.

Likewise, we must be aware of the impact of a wise and righteous life today. Just to pick one area, it tears at my heart when I read about the suffering that goes on in worldly families. They have to deal with divorce, alcoholism, hatred and quarreling between family members, and a host of other problems. When I was growing up, I never had to deal with any of that in my family. My home life was an oasis of happiness, and I enjoyed that happiness because both of my parents were wholly committed to the Lord. When we are wholly committed to the Lord in our families, make no mistake, friends, the people around us are going to notice. They're going to wonder why we have it so good, why we aren't wrestling with all of the problems they have in their families. God's wisdom, evident in our lives, is going to point them back to their Creator.

Thankfully, we don't have to work out this obedience by ourselves. Instead, we can rely on **GOD'S NEARNESS**. Look at the rhetorical question that Moses asks in Deuteronomy 4:7. What nation indeed had a god as close to them as the God of Israel? They had to go to the temple to see their idols, but the Israelites had their God with them every second of every day. We must also remember that we serve a God who is just as close to us. As was true of the neighbors of the Israelites, our neighbors today don't serve a God who is as close to them. They have to rely on priests and pastors to learn what they think is His will. We don't. We cut out the middleman. We learn God's will directly from His inspired word, and as a result, God is closer to us than to them. In the same way, we don't have to pray to Mary or a whole pantheon of saints. We get to make our requests known directly to the Father, and we know that the prayer of the humblest of His people is just as precious to Him as the prayer of the preacher or the elder. How blessed we are to have a God so near!

We should also appreciate what this implies about the dignity of **OUR NATION**. Moses raises this fascinating point in Deuteronomy 4:8. His point isn't that the nation of Israel was somehow intrinsically great. His point is that God gave Israel His law, and that made them great. Today, brethren, we may be humble, we may be few in number, but we have God's law, and that makes us great too. There is no other group of people on the face of the earth that knows the blessings we know, and there is no other group of people that has a shred of hope of eternal life. And yet, so many Christians love to badmouth the Lord's church, and run it and its members down. Isn't that a shame? Certainly, all of us have room for improvement, both individually and as a church, but let's not confuse that with contemptibility and worthlessness. Jesus thought we had worth. In fact, Jesus thought every one of us had such worth that He was willing to die for us. How dare we consider the church for which Christ died, and regard it with contempt! Let's honor the greatness of God and of His church.

Finally, we must be sure to teach these things to **OUR CHILDREN**. Let's pay attention to Moses' warning in Deuteronomy 4:9. Sure, the children of Israel were on fire for the Lord right then, but that didn't guarantee anything about where they would be 20 years down the road, or where their grandchildren would be 100 years down the road. Today, we must be vigilant to preserve our faith, to keep the zeal that is in us alive, and we must also be vigilant to awaken and sustain that zeal in the hearts of our children and grandchildren. We must allow the words of Moses to open our eyes to the nobility of our calling. Our church is great, our hope is great, but most of all, our God is great. His service is the most important thing on earth, and we must do everything we can to make sure that His service continues even when we ourselves are dust.