

### Day 1 – Deuteronomy 1:1-8 ‘The Words’

Today we begin a new series in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. It’s a belter, and – despite being written over 3,000 years ago – contains so much practical wisdom for us today. But it’s a book that most of us know very little about – so today let’s begin at the very beginning, which, as somebody once said, is a very good place to start.... Some words from the biblical scholar David Pawson help us to set the scene:

“Every Jewish synagogue includes a large cupboard, usually covered with a curtain or a veil. Inside the cupboard are some scrolls wrapped in beautifully embroidered cloth. These scrolls are the law of Moses. They are called the *Torah*, which means ‘instruction’, and are regarded as foundational to the whole Old Testament. They are read through aloud once a year.

“When a scroll was removed from the cupboard, the first part would be unrolled to reveal the opening words. The book became known by these words. [Hence Genesis is the Greek word for ‘beginning’ because the first words of this book are ‘In the beginning’.] The book of Deuteronomy is simply called ‘The Words’ because the first phrase in the Hebrew [– and in most modern English translations –] is ‘These are the words’.”

So, why isn’t this book called ‘The Words’ in our English bibles? Pawson again:

“When the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, they had to think of a more appropriate name. ‘Deuteronomy’ comes from two words in the Greek language, *deutero* which means ‘second’ and *nomos* which means law. The name gives us a clue to its content....”

Indeed it does! The setting for Deuteronomy is the east side of the River Jordan (v1), just before God’s people are going to enter The Promised Land (which is the story of the book of Joshua). They need a re-telling of God’s law (‘the second law’) for two reasons: first, the first generation of those who left Egypt has died – a new generation needs to hear the wisdom of God afresh; second, as they are about to cross the Jordan, they need to remember *why* they are doing this, and what sort of life God intends for them to live in this beautiful new land.

So in Deuteronomy we get, if you like, a ‘greatest hits’ of the law, plus – like all good re-releases – some new material, too. At its heart, though, two phrases recur exactly 40 times (one for each year in the desert – no coincidence) and both appear here in v8: ‘the land the Lord your God gives you’ and ‘go in possess to the land’. A reminder that God’s provision is *gift*, not earned... but that we need to take hold of God’s gracious gifts, to live as if we believe that they are true. That would require the Israelites’ active co-operation, even perhaps real cost: but very little of what is truly worthwhile in this life can be gained without effort and sacrifice.

Two precious words for us today, as we begin this series. Take a moment today to give thanks for God’s gifts to you. And pray for grace to seize them, to live as if these gifts were gloriously true – and to have grace in the spiritual battles you may face to do so. Take heart: ‘the battle belongs to the Lord’.

**Day 2 – Deuteronomy 1:9-18 ‘Shared responsibility’**

It’s always a blessing – and a challenge! – when the passage you’re preparing a reflection for feels like it’s directly addressed to you. When first written, this reflection was posted late – the reason being ‘unexpected work stuff’ which prevented me writing it the day before. Sometimes a natural ‘pinch point’ in work is inevitable; nevertheless, the long to-do list on my desk at the time now feels like a fitting backdrop to the words we read today.

One of the great strengths of the Church is that everybody matters: everybody has a role to play, everyone can contribute. The gifts of the Spirit are poured out on *all* Christians, and in fact the New Testament places great emphasis on shared responsibility. We are all stones in God’s building (Ephesians 2:21-22, 1 Peter 2:5). Leaders are not meant to shoulder the burden alone – indeed a core part of their task as leaders is to equip and release *everyone else* to serve (Ephesians 4:11-13).

What is less well known is this sense of shared responsibility is not an innovation which occurred in the time of the early church – it goes all the way back to the formation of God’s people more than 3,000 years ago. In today’s passage Moses reminds them that he delegated leadership throughout the people: you can read the story for yourself in Exodus 18, although in Deuteronomy Moses misses out the bit that it was his dad who told him that he couldn’t do it all himself – a piece of parental wisdom that Moses then repeats to the people (v9)!

With his dad’s words ringing in his ears, Moses describes how he devolved leadership and authority (vv15-16), only dealing with the hardest things himself (v17). It remains a good model for us today – and one that all leaders (myself included) usually need to be reminded of regularly.

This is one of those passages where the implications are obvious, but no less valuable for committing to our great God in prayer: if you’re a leader, ask yourself if you’re giving enough away; and pray for grace to keep doing so. If you’re not in overall leadership, God still has a plan for you. He’s given you gifts and passions for a reason – use them! If you feel God nudging you, why not offer your gift somewhere – or to someone – today? And if you can spare a moment to pray for me, and other church leaders you know: I would love that! We need all the help we can get.

**Day 3 – Deuteronomy 1:19-46 ‘Learning and listening’**

How do we acquire knowledge? Historically much of our education system relies on the idea of listening in order to learn. We listen to teachers, process the information we receive and enlarge our knowledge. In recent times, a much greater emphasis has been placed on active participation; but it’s still true that a large part of our secondary and degree level education – and our church ‘education’ too – involves listening attentively (as best we can) in order to learn.

Today’s passage, though, tells us that sometimes it’s the other way around. Learning is more than just academic knowledge – it is the grounding of understanding in experience. We learn as much by what we see and experience, as by what we hear or read – if not more so. As a result, those who use their experiences to learn tend to get better at listening, too – and, sadly, the reverse is also true.

The journey of Israel which led to the Book of Deuteronomy is a case in point. What Moses narrates to the people today revisits a period of just a few months in their history – from soon after their miraculous escape from Egypt to the point at which they are about to enter the land God had promised them. In this short space of time, they had seen numerous extraordinary miracles: the rescue from Egypt, the safe crossing of the Red Sea, the provision of manna in the desert and water from the rock, the visible presence of God in cloud and fire... the list goes on. So much profound spiritual experience to witness and treasure.

With so much evidence, surely this God could be implicitly trusted for whatever happened next? ...Apparently not: ‘In spite of this, you did not trust in the Lord your God.’ (v32) Whatever they had experienced, they had learned nothing. They turned against Moses and refused to go into the Promised Land.

This lack of learning had a sad post-script – having failed to learn, they then failed to listen (v43): they ignored Moses’ warning not to put things right in their own strength and got a beating for their trouble (v44).

It turns out that growing in wisdom and trust works both ways: we listen in order to learn better; *and* we also learn in order to listen better. Think about your experiences at present: what are you learning? And how is what you’re learning helping to you to listen afresh to what God is saying? May God grant us all grace to be great learners, and even better listeners!

**Day 4 – Deuteronomy 2:1-37 ‘Long enough’**

Most of us are slow learners in life – I certainly am. It took me 17 years to learn how to drive! (In the spirit of full confession, strictly speaking I passed after a year, but didn’t enjoy it, and then didn’t sit behind the wheel for another 15 years, before taking more lessons and finally getting confident enough to pootle around regularly.)

Joking apart, most of life’s really valuable lessons take time to absorb. As we get older, we often find ourselves reflecting something along these lines: ‘if only I’d known this or done that when I was younger, I would have saved myself so much heartache.’ But of course we didn’t know this or do that when we were young, because we hadn’t learned the deep lessons of life. Those lessons take time.

What’s true for us was also true for God’s people. As we saw yesterday, their faithless disobedience when given the chance to enter the Promised Land cost them forty years of aimless wandering in the wilderness – both literally and metaphorically. But today, Moses reminds them of a fresh word God spoke (v3): ‘You have made your way around this hill country long enough.’

‘Long enough.’ What a great word of encouragement that must have been! But how did God know that it was long enough? That they had learnt their lesson, they had learned how to trust and obey? The answer comes in this apparently ‘filler’ chapter, which meanders quite literally through the country outside the Promised Land. Several times the Israelites are told not to stop in various regions, and they move on accordingly. Nothing to see here....

Then they’re told to walk through one more territory (Heshbon) – but God has also spoken that this is one they are to capture. Sure enough, the king tries to attack them as they wander peacefully through his land... big mistake – the Israelites fight back and defeat him.

What is the point of this lengthy narrative? Simply put, it shows that Israel had learned to listen; they had learned to trust and obey the Lord. Three times the Lord told them to walk on, and leave the land alone – three times they obeyed. Then he told them to be ready to fight if attacked – and they obeyed. Their time of wandering had indeed been long enough. Now they were ready.

As you read and pray today, you may be aware of something you’ve been (slowly) learning. Or perhaps you’ve had ‘wilderness’ times when God taught you something immensely precious. You may even be in wilderness time now. Take heart – God is with you in the wilderness, as he was with the Israelites. It may feel too long; but the Lord only ever allows it to be long enough.

**Day 5 – Deuteronomy 3:1-29 ‘An interim period’**

Sometimes the pattern of life is clear. Sometimes it isn't. And sometimes we know where we're heading and what the final outcome should be: but it doesn't happen quickly, or in quite the way we expect. Often in these circumstances we spend some time in an 'in-between place' – an 'interim period'.

Psychologists talk about 'liminal moments' – 'liminal' meaning a threshold which we cross from one place to another. But liminal times are often much longer than moments – they might in fact be whole seasons or periods or our lives. You could say that the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land is one big 'liminal moment', lasting a bit over forty years. It was an extended 'interim period' – between one reality and another, one era in the nation's life being replaced by a new one.

Today's passage describes a much shorter interim period within this season: in particular, with reference to two particular transitions. The first was the fate of the two and a half tribes who were not going to settle west of the River Jordan, and therefore did not need to cross it. They had just conquered the territory they were going to inhabit (vv1-11) and, from this point, could just have downed spears and got on with life (vv12-17).

However, Moses has one more job for them – or rather, God does, communicated via Moses. The men of the tribe were to assist their fellow tribesmen in helping to conquer the land west of the Jordan (v18), leaving their families to settle down in the land (v19). Once they'd lent their assistance, then they could return and settle permanently (v20).

The second 'interim period' was the handover of leadership of the Israelites. Moses wanted one little peek at the Promised Land while he was still leader (vv24-25), but God says that it is enough for him to see it from afar (v27): instead he is to commission Joshua to take on leadership (v28).

Both of these important matters were only resolved in time to come: Joshua is commissioned in chapter 31 at the end of Deuteronomy, and the Eastern tribes do exactly as asked (Joshua 1:12-18), only returning across the river later.

There's encouragement for us here. Some of you may feel in one of those 'liminal seasons' or 'interim periods'. Something in your life – or perhaps a whole season in your life – is drawing to a close, and yet the new season has not yet started. This 'halfway place' is difficult, unsettling. Take heart from today's passage: God is faithful, he *is* with you in the place of transition; and if he intends for you to reach that new place, he will make it come to pass. The message of Deuteronomy is ultimately one of trust. God is faithful – as we begin this week, may the Lord grant us all grace to cling on to him, in whatever season of our lives we find ourselves.

**Day 6 – Deuteronomy 4:1-8 ‘A light to the nations’**

Where do we go to find real wisdom in how to live? What approach to life really works? These are huge, profound, fundamental questions; and across the world, they are asked by countless people, all seeking the answers. The global ‘Personal Development’ market – in other words, the industry sector dedicated to help people find these kinds of answers – was worth a mind-boggling \$41 billion in 2021, and is predicted to grow by more than 5% annually this decade.

Although the majority of people who pay for this stuff are younger (almost three quarters under 45), that still means that more than a quarter of this market is made up of people who are middle aged or older. The quest to find out how life really works doesn’t end in the first half of your life.

Interestingly, this enormous market splits roughly 50/50 between things you read and personal contact (trainers, life coaches, seminars etc) – which makes the point that real wisdom is both knowledge and experience.

How do we reflect on this as Christians? In particular, what do we really think about the way God intends for us to live? On one level, it is right to acknowledge that to live faithfully as followers of Jesus often brings real challenges. Increasingly, we swim against the tide of our culture. On the other, sometimes it’s easy to forget that God has created a pattern of living for us that *really works*. It is meant to enable us to live well.

Certainly this is the point that is emphasised here at the start of chapter 4, as Moses starts to get into the nitty-gritty of his farewell sermon. He boils down the life of faith to its barest and simplest essentials: ‘hear... follow... live...’ (v1). We need both *knowledge* (to hear i.e. listen) and *experience* (to follow) – and if we do that we will *live* well.

In fact, the quality of a life which faithfully follows the Lord will be obvious to those around us – see verses 6-7 for the intended response of Israel’s neighbours, who (if this kind of life is actually lived by Israel) will have to admit that the Lord’s design for humanity really does work. To obey God’s commands is good for us – not easy, certainly, but ultimately beneficial.

I’m not saying that you shouldn’t spend money on ‘personal development’! But it’s quite encouraging to recognise that by far the world’s best manual – the bible – is available for us to read for free at any time. And as we try to hear, follow and live, may God open the eyes of our family, friends and neighbours around us to see a life which is full of ‘wisdom and understanding’ – and to come to praise our great Lord as a result.

**Day 7 – Deuteronomy 4:9-14 ‘Not forgetting’**

Walk around any of our churchyards in Walton parish (we have four which all date back at least 600 years), and you'll find lots of fascinating old headstones. Most of them are fashioned out of York stone or limestone, and the very oldest date back more than 200 years. The inscriptions are always poignant; but, it is difficult to read many of those that are more than a century old. Both York- and limestone are affected by water. Little by little, repeated rainfalls have worn away the surface. It's hard to imagine that a solid object like a headstone could be effectively dissolved by British rain: but over a long enough period, that is effectively what happens.

The idea of something slowly fading away over time lies at the heart of today's reading. Yesterday Moses exhorted his listeners to observe God's law carefully – to hear and to follow, that they might truly live. Today he reminds them that the task of doing this requires them to 'watch yourselves closely' (v9). Why? Because it is easy to forget.

That might seem strange when you remember all the mighty acts of God that the Israelites had seen: Moses takes them through some of them again in verses 10-13. In particular he reminds them that they (or their ancestors) were actually present in person when God spoke the heart of the law (vv12-13). It was not just something delivered in abstract fashion: it was personal.

This idea of the law as something relational is something we'll come back to repeatedly in the days to come – but today, Moses focuses on how easy it is to forget everything which, deep down, we know to be true. How does this happen? The answer lies in a beautiful phrase we find in v9: we allow them to 'fade from our heart'. Like the old headstones, little by little what was once etched on our hearts washes away.

On a daily basis this change is barely noticeable; however, over the years, it takes its toll. What was once so clearly written on our hearts fades. The solution is to do what Moses tells the people do: to keep *choosing to remember*. We watch our hearts closely (v9), and revisit those moments when the presence of God was real (v11) and his pattern for life was clearly recognisable (v13).

Choosing to remember is like taking a little chisel and re-etching the divine letters written on our hearts. Take a few moments today to do just that. Get that little spiritual chisel out! And may God continue to grant us grace not to forget, nor to let what we know of his love and grace fade from our hearts.

**Day 8 – Deuteronomy 4:15-31 ‘Who do you worship?’**

Never forget that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. That simple piece of advice is often shared by the celebrated evangelist J. John – and it’s well worth repeating here. It’s so easy to take our eyes off the ball, to miss the wood for the trees.... and all kinds of other mixed metaphors!

The Old Testament law can seem a complicated beast: and at one level it is, there are literally hundreds of commands, and we’ll be covering some of them over the coming days. But at its heart, the essence of the law is very simple: *God first*. Ultimately it is about who we worship – if we dedicate ourselves to worshipping the Lord, we won’t go far wrong.

Moses knew this, of course – and although he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, he knew exactly what temptations awaited them, which he spells out in today’s passage. Every tribe, every culture had its own idols, with their associated rituals. Many of them were abhorrent: some involved child sacrifice, others mass orgies. All of them relied on a fundamentally distorted view of divine character. Their gods were little tyrants: capricious, unpredictable, often malevolent.

By contrast, the true Lord, the only Lord, the maker of heaven and earth – known to Israel as Yahweh, and worshipped by us now as Father, Son and Spirit – was none of those things. He was merciful (v31), generous (v21), consistent in character and action. This God can be trusted – and Israel knows that, they’ve seen countless signs of the reality of his presence and provision. In other words, they don’t need their heads turned by other idols.

That remains true for us today. We might not keep images of wood or stone, or worship the sun and moon – but worship is really another way of describing what we give our best time, energy and money to. In that sense, we can have all kinds of idols now. Why not take a few moments today to re-dedicate yourself to the one true Lord, our great and merciful God?



**Day 9 – Deuteronomy 4:32-43 ‘God of fire’**

I’m sure some of you yesterday found yourself wondering why I made no reference to verse 24, and Moses’ description of God as a ‘jealous God’. Was I just being evasive, avoiding something that made God sound a bit more like the false deities around him?

Thankfully not – yesterday had plenty of food for thought already, and today’s passage helps us to understand that reference a bit better. We now find repeated references to God’s presence with his people in the form of fire: in verse 33, and twice in verse 36. (To understand what Moses was referencing here, take a look at Exodus 24, especially v17.)

Why did God appear to his people in fire? At one level, that is God’s choice to make! But, if it’s appropriate to try and discern the mind of God in these things: fire was understood by people of the time to be the most powerful force they could think of – and also, rightly used, the most beneficial. People needed fire for light, for warmth, for cooking, for construction, and for purifying dirty things.

All of these benefits – enlightenment, provision, purification – are rightly ascribed to God. God’s presence with them in fire was certainly awesome, but also attractive. When God spoke ‘out of fire’, it was a living symbol that his words were both wise and pure.

Just as fire purifies things, so Israel’s contact with the God of fire was intended to purify them too. As we saw earlier this week, God’s plan was for them to lead lives which conspicuously modelled a better way of living. Part of this better way was by making *this* God, the one true God, the centre of their worship. When God describes himself as jealous, this is not to be understood as the capricious insecurity of other gods – God doesn’t need our full attention to be secure within himself. Rather, he is simply stating the nature of Israel’s close and intimate covenant relationship with him. His ‘consuming fire’ burns off our impurities, as well as giving us light, warmth and provision.

‘Refiners fire, my heart’s one desire is to be holy.’ So goes a well-known worship song. I wish I could say it was my one desire! But hopefully it is my best desire – and may it be yours, too. May God grant us all grace to be filled with his purifying, warming, *life-giving* fire.

**Day 10 – Deuteronomy 4:44-5:5 ‘God of Covenant’**

No doubt as you read today’s passage you already had one eye on what was coming next! Like the warm-up act at a concert, today’s passage is the lead-in to one of the most famous passages in the bible, and one of the most profoundly significant in the whole history of human society. Although many cultures have versions of what we know as The Ten Commandments, this is the original, and best. (In fact, it’s the digitally remastered re-release of the Exodus original, to continue/stretch the musical metaphor, but we’ll come to that on Monday.)

However, if today’s passage feels like a warm-up for the main event, think again. This lead-in is necessary: in fact, we couldn’t have tomorrow’s passage without one phrase tucked away at the start of chapter 5, verse 2: ‘The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb.’

It’s the word ‘covenant’ that makes all the difference. A covenant is an unbreakable promise, a solemn commitment based on love. It’s not a contract, which can be broken by either party – which is just as well in this case, as we break the contract so often with God – it’s unconditional.

This matters because it sets the giving of the law in the context of an unconditional, ultimately unbreakable relationship: between God and us. God (through Moses) is about to call God’s people to a life of obedience – but he does so, *only after* he has affirmed this unbreakable loving relationship first.

The message of scripture is that God always takes the initiative. God acted first to save his people – and only then does he call us to obedience to his commands. This was the pattern for Israel; it also remains the pattern for us, too. We receive God’s undeserved love and grace first – and then it reflects in a transformed life.

Next week, we’ll get into the meat of what became the foundational ways to structure human life and society. But let’s never forget that it starts from love, from salvation, from God’s initiative towards us. He saves, he blesses – and we respond with loving commitment and obedience. And may that thought lift our hearts in praise to his glorious name. Amen!

**Day 11 – Deuteronomy 5:6-10 ‘I am the Lord’**

And so we arrive at one of the best known passages in all Scripture – and probably the only bit of the bible still in the consciousness of much of the UK population. Ask anyone what bits of the bible they know, and I would guess – even in our secular culture – that the majority of people would say ‘The Ten Commandments’. Could you name all ten before we start? Don’t worry, I’m not keeping score!

The Ten Commandments still form the basis of our law – at least the second half of them do. Almost nobody can disagree with the fundamental ethical viewpoint encapsulated by its attitude to preservation of life, faithfulness, telling the truth and respecting property and people.

What is often missed, however, is the motivation for these laws. If we can all agree that murder, lying, stealing etc are wrong, *why* are they wrong? It is Jesus himself who gives us the answer. When asked what the two most important commandments are, he replies: ‘Love God, and love your neighbour.’ The Ten Commandments are the first (and most powerful) attempt to articulate these two foundational instructions. Commandments 1-4 put love for God into practice, 6-10 describe what love for neighbour looks like. Commandment 5 (honouring parents) is arguably both: although it appears to be a ‘neighbour’ command, God’s revelation as our divine parent places particular value on how we treat our human parents. Food for thought there...

Either way, the point is: we love our neighbour *because we love God*. Even the very concept of the intrinsic worth of a human being is rooted in each of us being made in the image of God. It all comes back to God. (...which is why, as an aside, UK laws relating to commandments 1-4 have largely been repealed in recent decades, because that connection between God and the law has been lost.)

More specifically, it doesn’t just come back to any God, but to The Lord (v6) – this is God’s special, personal name, given to Moses (and therefore all God’s people). It is *this* God that saves us (v6), who is the only God to worship (v7) and for love of whom we do not worship other things (v8).

What we also learn about this God is how loving He is. Notice how sins only get punished to 3 and 4 generations, but his love is shown to 1,000 generations (vv9-10). As Puritan writers such as Thomas Goodwin put it, his ‘strange work’ is judgement, but his ‘natural work’ is *love*.

It is good to be reminded today that the Ten Commandments are ultimately an expression of love – for God, and neighbour. May the Lord grant us grace to be filled with his love (lavished on a thousand generations!), and to reflect that in how we live, loving our neighbours as ourselves.

**Day 12 – Deuteronomy 5:11-15 ‘Respect and rest’**

Today we come to two of the commandments which are, perhaps, harder to observe than they used to be. Words like ‘blasphemy’ and ‘sabbath’ sound pretty old-school – which is a sure sign that (so-called) ‘modern’ society treats these things with much less care than previous generations did.

Each of these commandments remain vitally important for any follower of Jesus – the challenge for us is to be aware of how our culture nags away at their intrinsic value. Take swearing: we all live and work in environments where we will encounter swearing. And most of us will do our best to avoid using certain words. But it’s easy to get inoculated, to draw our boundaries more loosely.

In particular, the phrases ‘oh my God’ and ‘OMG’ (its abbreviation) have become so widespread in our culture that I have noticed lots of Christians using them in recent years. You could argue that this is ‘low-level’ – it doesn’t use any of the personal names for God, which are specifically prohibited by the third commandment. But it is still misdirecting our worship at some level.

The answer, I believe, is twofold: first, we find alternative ways of expressing surprise. Behaviour is habitual: get used to using different phrases and they’ll stick soon enough! Second, we channel our language in positive ways. At the root of all forms of swearing are emotions which our tongues can’t control, especially using words in aggressive ways. If we learn to take a breath, to re-frame our anger, we may still have something hard to say, but we won’t need to resort to swearing to verbalise what we’re feeling.

This idea of a positive approach is also very useful when it comes to the principles of Sabbath. Observing a true Sabbath is way harder than it used to be. Since we allowed Sunday trading almost 30 years ago, so many people now have to work on Sundays or lose their job. Here is where Jesus’ teaching is so important: the Sabbath is made for us, and not the other way round. If society as a whole doesn’t have a Sabbath any more, each person and family still needs to build rest into their lives in other ways. As a minister, my Sabbath is Friday – it has to be! What’s yours?

Let’s not forget, though, that Sabbath is not just about personal rest. Today’s passage makes it clear that it is also about justice and love of neighbour (vv14-15). So we also practise Sabbath by leading lives which minimise the effect on *other people’s rest*. That is perhaps more challenging – but also just as powerful.

Ultimately, these commandments are here for our flourishing. A life of gentle speech and life-giving rest is the sort of life most of us want. May the Lord grant us grace to keep growing into this kind of kingdom life, even (perhaps especially) in this challenging season.

**Day 13 – Deuteronomy 5:16 ‘Honouring parents’**

Back when I was a youth worker (many moons ago), my line manager had a magnet on the door of her fridge, which read: ‘Take revenge: live long enough to be a problem to your children.’ It always made me chuckle in my 20s – and as I get older, I start to understand where she’s coming from!

Today we look at the fifth commandment – probably the most complex one of all. What does it mean to honour our parents, especially after the time when we no longer have to obey them? This latter comment is a good place to start. When we’re young, the way to live out this command is fairly obvious; but, as we grow into adults and our parents also get older, the roles reverse and our parents become increasingly dependent on us: so what does ‘honour’ look like then?

As we observed a few days ago, this command sits between the ‘God’ and ‘neighbour’ sections for good reason: since one of the golden threads of Scripture is to learn to relate to God as a divine parent, so our relationship with our parents is placed before all the other ‘neighbour’ commands, a sign of the unique nature of the parent/child relationship.

This command is also the only one with a consequence specified – if we obey it, there are good outcomes indicated: ‘so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the Lord your God is giving you.’ We may not have a ‘promised land’ as such today: but the sense that this command has implications beyond our day-to-day faith is striking.

So what does ‘honour’ look like? There is far too much we could say for a short reflection today, and no doubt it will look different for each family situation. Certainly we will try to think the best of our parents, perhaps to remember them at their best too (as they decline or pass away). We will want to internalise and live out the best of what they gave us, and whilst they will all have had flaws we will be tolerant of their shortcomings and not publicise them inappropriately.

A word, too, for those who did not have parents, for whatever reason: my sense is that the effect of this command passes to those who fulfilled the parental role in their lives. There will (hopefully) be people who we can honour for what they gave us, who contributed to the ways it ‘has gone well with us.’

This command, perhaps more than any other, goes deep into our lives. We need help with all the commandments – but perhaps especially with this one! May God grant us all grace to honour our parental figures, that it too may go well with us.

**Day 14 – Deuteronomy 5:17-20 ‘The heart of obedience’**

Today’s passage is totally straightforward – isn’t it? Of all the commandments, these four are by far the best known and most accepted. Nearly every legal system around the world is based on them, and very few would disagree with their importance.

But there’s a problem – and it’s one that Jesus picked up on, and used as the basis for his own ethical teaching. The problem is not with the commands themselves, of course, which are true and right and good. The problem is what lies beneath. These particular acts – murder, adultery, stealing, lying – are obviously wrong behaviours: but their roots lie much deeper. As Jesus explains:

‘You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgement.’ (Matthew 5:21-22)

In other words, murder is only the visible tip of the moral iceberg. Behind nearly all violence lies the internal emotion of anger. If this anger gets out of control, and develops into resentment or contempt or hatred, that is the fertile soil for an act of violence which ensues.

Jesus goes on to make the same point about feeding the lustful desires which lead to adultery, or the lack of integrity which causes people to lie or to make false oaths. The heart of the matter, he says, is the matter of the heart. Jesus’ teaching adds a new depth to these timeless commandments. To really live them, he says, it is not enough simply to ‘not murder’: we need to cultivate an inner life which does not nurture resentment and contempt.

Conversely, if our hearts are right – and filled with the fruit of God’s transforming Spirit – then we will naturally fulfil these commandments.

Jesus’ radical insight sets the bar higher: but it also liberates us from ‘lowest common denominator’ morality. We aim higher than simply not murdering or not lying; we aim towards being people of peace, gentleness and transparent truthfulness and integrity: where thoughts match words match actions.

I don’t know about you, but I need help to be that kind of person! And thankfully, the Spirit of Christ gives us that help. I invite you to join me in this prayer: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, fill me with your Spirit, the Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – that who I am would flow out into how I live. For your sake, Amen.’

**Day 15 – Deuteronomy 5:21 ‘Radical contentment’**

In mid-nineteenth century America, business leaders faced a problem. Rapid industrialisation and mechanisation meant that machines could do the work of many people, and had put hundreds of thousands of people out of work. Core national values (strongly influenced by many families’ Puritan/Calvinist heritage) encouraged people to live simply, but this only exacerbated the problem. If people lived content with little, they didn’t need much industry to make stuff, which both reduced business leaders’ profits and kept the workforce small.

The choice was clear: either to stick with ‘core values’ at a cost to business, or to encourage people to consume more. The profit-motive won out: and the consumer society was born. It soon spread to Britain – then the world’s largest economy – and thereafter across the world. It remains the dominant driving force in our society now.

Consumerism works by feeding discontent – without discontent it can’t survive. Industry makes lots of products which we don’t strictly need: so marketing has to create a felt need (for something we often didn’t know we needed!) – which the product then addresses. Most successful advertising relies heavily on the twin motivators of identity and envy. We buy products because we think they are for people like us (or, even better, for the sort of person we want to be), or because we see someone we know who has one and we want to keep up.

In this context, today’s passage speaks a timeless and prophetic word. To our economic culture largely built on the power of envy, the message is the same as it always was: beware! It also reminds us that envy is nothing new, it’s a basic human instinct – which of course is why consumerism as an ideology has been so successful. It taps into the tenth commandment, one first given to human beings more than 3,000 years ago.

It also struck me afresh that perhaps the reason that this commandment comes last is because the power of ‘coveting’ underlies much of what causes the issues addressed by commandments 6-9. It is the one commandment which speaks openly about our inner life, the importance of which we looked at yesterday.

In contrast, the follower of Jesus is called to a radical contentment. That’s not to say that we despise material things: the Lord gave us a good world to enjoy. But we do sit lightly to its trappings. We choose to be grateful for what we have, rather than endlessly lamenting what we do not have. We also see behind the false masks presented by the people who are offered to us as ‘models’, but whose inner lives are empty and miserable. This commandment is ultimately about not judging by appearances, but rather living out of a deeper, joy-filled reality.

May God grant us all grace to find radical contentment. And, in consequence, may he fill our hearts with gratitude and joy today.

**Day 16 – Deuteronomy 5:22-33 ‘The God who speaks’**

After the drama of the Ten Commandments, today’s passage might feel like something of an interlude. Everyone takes a breather – including Moses – before the detailed (re-)giving of the law commences in chapter 6. But it’s worth noticing one detail which is often overlooked. What makes this first, and foundational, part of the law so important is that God speaks it directly to his people.

From this point on, Moses becomes the person who deals directly with God, and writes down the commands he receives (v31): but the Ten Commandments were ‘proclaimed in a loud voice to *your whole assembly* there on the mountain from out of the fire’ (v22). Everybody heard them!

The idea that the one true God speaks is a theme woven throughout Scripture. At the beginning of creation, God *said*: ‘Let there be light.’ Why does he say it when the world is formless and empty? Because this God communicates; he speaks directly into his creation.

All religions have their prophets, those who claim to have received revelation from God: the gift of prophecy is valuable, and remains an important spiritual gift in the Church today. But only Yahweh – the one true God, now worshipped as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – communicates *directly* with his creation, and the people that live in it.

This idea that the Almighty Lord of the universe can speak is an awesome one: the Israelites had had their fill after the Ten Commandments, at which point they asked Moses to do the rest of the job for them (vv25-27). In contrast, we can sometimes get a bit too comfortable with the idea that God speaks: a bit of awe would probably do us no harm!

That said, this passage also sets the scene for the ultimate revelation of the God Who Speaks: the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ – God in human form. This Jesus communicated with us directly, and his words have been captured for every generation in the Scriptures. It is no surprise that the Word made flesh opened up the richness of the Ten Commandments more deeply than any human, before or since (as we saw two days ago) – after all, it is the same God who speaks.

As we close our reflections in this amazing chapter, give thanks that we worship a God who speaks – and still speaks, to all who would hear. May we re-capture a sense of that awe, and may God inspire us to continue to learn and to live the glorious depth and richness of his eternal words. Amen.



**Day 17 – Deuteronomy 6:1-5 ‘Wholehearted love’**

‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’ This is the famous question which a teacher of the law posed for Jesus in the week before he died. Jesus gave him an even more famous answer: ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ (Mark 12:29-30, also in Matthew 22:37-38)

So, according to Jesus himself, what we are reading today is the most important piece of Scripture in the whole Old Testament – the commandment of all commandments. So I guess we had better take notice!

There’s little I can say today that hasn’t already been said – but there’s no harm in saying it anyway. Ultimately the power of this foundational passage rests on two very simple but profound truths: first, there is only one God, whose name is the Lord. Whatever other powers in the universe there may be, whatever gods and idols other cultures worship, God’s people are to worship *this* God, revealed to them as the Lord (‘Yahweh’ – ‘I am’). It is this God who has rescued them, sustained them and promises them his continuing faithful love. Stick with the Lord and they’ll be OK.

Second, our response is simply to love this God with *all of ourselves*: heart, soul and strength. (The Greek-influenced culture of Jesus’ day added ‘mind’ as a separate entity, but it’s the same basic idea.) As we know, to love God has practical implications, so this is not ‘holy huddle’ thinking, divorced from real life. Rather, it sets the frame of reference for how we live, what decisions we make, how we speak, what our priorities are, and so on.

In fact, everything that Moses goes on to say in the rest of this book is an outworking of this fundamental instruction: love God wholeheartedly. It’s not a bad way to start our weeks, either. If we aim for that – however far we may fall short! – we won’t go far wrong. Spend a few minutes today offering the Lord your love, and praying for grace to live in the light of that (his light!) today, and this week.

**Day 18 – Deuteronomy 6:6-9 ‘On our hearts’**

The bible has never been more available than it is today. It's not only that there are multiple translations in everyday language, we can read its wisdom in every type of format: paper, kindle, radio, audio books, internet, social media. There are Manga bibles for cartoon enthusiasts, Instagram feeds for Millennials, and David Suchet's dulcet tones for the rest of us!

And yet, it might be observed that the more easily available the bible is, the less we value it. Theological training centres now have to add extra biblical study modules for those training for ordained ministry, because our generation simply doesn't know our bible as well as our parents or grandparents.

In contrast, in many countries around the world, the church is growing but bibles are incredibly rare. I remember reading Brother Yun's autobiography growing up in Communist China 50 or so years ago: there was one bible for the whole underground church. Families were allowed to have it for a few days before passing it on (in secret) – in that time, Yun would spend hours at a time memorising as much as he could, because it would be weeks before he could read the text on the page again.

This story could be replicated in 2022 in dozens of places. The bible is now available in over 2,000 languages covering more than 90% of the world's population: a remarkable feat and far more than any other text; but there are still about 4,000 languages left to tackle, spoken by approximately 500 million people.

In an oral culture like the people of God in Moses' time, when only the priests would have direct access to the text, today's passage emphasises the importance of grounding the text of scripture in our lives: learning, talking, internalising. If our generation recently had a phase of WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets, ancient Israel did that too (v8) – and had the headbands to match!

However old (or young) we are, however long we've been a Christian, we can never invest too much in scripture. May this ancient prayer be ours, and may God grant us grace to put it into practice: *'Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life. Amen.'*

**Day 19 – Deuteronomy 6:10-25 ‘Who gets the credit?’**

We humans are good at giving ourselves the credit for our successes... and blaming others for our failures. It's the story of Adam and Eve replayed a million times every day all around the world. We get to be our own gods – except when we're not, when of course it's somebody else's fault! (And whatever your take on that story, its underlying message about human inclinations is timeless, universal and utterly consistent with what we know of human behaviour.)

Moses knew all this, of course. He'd seen enough of his own people up close to know their foibles. His own personal story, too, made him very aware of the shortcomings of the human condition. So in today's passage, he is utterly realistic about one of the biggest temptations the Israelites would face when they had settled in the Promised Land, and got used to living in 'cities you did not build, houses... you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant.' (vv10-11)

Would God get the credit? Or would they congratulate themselves on *their* successes, their hard work, their luck, their moral worth? Would they remember the hand that God had played throughout in getting them to that point, and resolve to keep putting him first?

We know the answer to that – and, you suspect, Moses does, too; which is why he is so direct about the importance of holding fast to God. And the key to achieving this is to *keep remembering*. 'Do not forget the Lord,' Moses counsels, and goes on to describe the right message to hand down to future generations (vv20-25).

In that sense, this passage is an extension of what we looked at over the last two days: of holding fast to the word of God and resolving to put God first. It's noteworthy, I think, that so much emphasis is placed on what we communicate to younger generations. As a wise old head once observed, the church is always one generation from extinction: it remains of paramount importance to communicate the wisdom of God afresh in every generation.

The high point of the Sunday School movement is now more than 100 years ago in the UK, and far fewer young people today have access to conversations about faith. That said, what I have also observed in my own engagement with children and young people is a much greater openness to faith and God than might have been the case 30 or 40 years ago. The generations that were inoculated against real faith by formulaic presentations of 'religion' have gone: will we take the opportunity presented to us to offer the life-changing, life-giving Word afresh? Let's pray for God to raise up a new generation who will hear just that!

**Day 20 – Deuteronomy 7:1-6 ‘The Hard Question’**

Today’s passage is one of the reasons why most people – even Christians – don’t read much of the Old Testament. And yet: if we believe that ‘all Scripture is God-breathed’, we have to tackle passages like this head-on, and ask the hard questions. Why it is here? Why the destruction? To try and answer that, I’ll reprise a Daily Inspiration I wrote for a similar passage in Joshua...

The central question which the bible addresses, and which is the besetting problem of all human history, is the corruption of the human heart. God made us to walk with him, in loving intimacy and joyful obedience. But we just don’t. Mostly we either won’t, or can’t. This is the universal human condition – but it’s not what we were created to be. So how do we restore this loving relationship, how do we live the kind of life God calls us to?

By the time of today’s passage, the people already had God’s law, given to them through God’s encounters with Moses, and a whole history of God’s miraculous intervention in their lives. But they were endlessly distracted by the cultures around them: so the solution was to live in a land where there were no other influences. That is why they are told to purge all other inhabitants: to create an environment in which they could obey God’s law completely, and in doing so, become a model society which demonstrated to the rest of humanity the right way to live.

It failed, and even before his death, Moses knew why, and told them so – the problem was not God, or his law, but us: ‘Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God. There it will remain as a witness against you... For I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn from the way I have commanded you. In days to come, disaster will fall on you because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord.’ (Deuteronomy 31:26,29)

Harsh words: but proved true, again and again. The people’s heads were turned by the pagan cultures around them (v4), whose religions not only included worshipping other deities, but some truly abominable practices: child sacrifice was not uncommon in parts of the land they were settling. We need to beware seeing the tribes they were fighting against as ‘innocents’ – brutality was normal, and there was little concept of the individual: tribes lived, or died, together.

Ultimately, the Old Testament shows us that we need another way, a better way. And God gave us a radical new solution: he would take the evil of the world – my evil, your evil – upon himself, and then dwell in our hearts directly. This new solution is promised later in the Old Testament, but also embedded in ‘glimmers of grace’ throughout its pages. Even here, in this most challenging of passages, we see it. God chooses an undeserving people (v6) – more on that tomorrow, but it reminds us that, even with the Law as their guide, it would always be grace that governed their relationship with God.

Today, we can give thanks that, little by little, God led humanity towards a better way. It may be some way off in Deuteronomy, but there are echoes even here. Grace is the beautiful, subversive idea which runs like a golden thread through all of Scripture: and which has, gloriously, saved you and me.

**Day 21 – Deuteronomy 7:7-8:5 ‘Parental love’**

None of us get to choose our families. For many of us, that’s (mostly) a good thing; for some, not so much. I don’t presume to answer that question for you: all I can share today is that one day in January 2003 massively expanded my understanding of God’s heart. That was the day my first child was born, a beautiful daughter – and I simply couldn’t help falling in love with her.

Before the event, I had occasionally worried what sort of bond I would feel with our child? I imagine I was not alone as a future parent in wondering, and worrying: what if I don’t love my child? As it turned out, I needn’t have worried. For me, the bond was immediate, and overwhelming.

Suddenly I knew the helplessness of a parent, and especially of parental love. Whilst we might carry the responsibility for raising our child, there is also a sense in which they (especially as newborns) have all the power. Everything revolves around them, and we as parents give large parts of ourselves to their wellbeing.

So when God describes his love in parental terms, I think I started to understand what that really meant after January 2003. Today’s passage begins with what feels like quite an unsatisfactory explanation for why God chose Israel. God chose Israel because he loved them... and that’s that. It’s almost as if God (via Moses) can’t really explain it. He loves them for who they are: he can’t help it, he just does....

This sense of overwhelming love is given further expression at the start of chapter 8, when God refers to his role in Israel’s life in parental terms. Here, alongside his role as parental provider for Israel (vv3-4), he also outlines the disciplinary task of the parent (v5); if that seems a bit on the stern side, Jesus would later develop this image of God as the lovesick father in the famous story of the Prodigal Son.

There are lots of tough verses in the middle of our passage, the force of which I’ve tried to address in previous reflections; but today, I wanted to pull out the ‘golden threads’ – the words and images which come to take centre stage as Scripture progresses. The helpless love of God, his role as parental carer and provider, the promise of blessing to those who abide in his love – these ideas don’t just start in the new Testament, we see them here.

Our experiences of human parents can make it hard to trust God’s parental love. Pray for grace and revelation in these deep truths – and may God’s loving provision and direction continue to light our path today.

**Day 22 – Deuteronomy 8:1-20 ‘To know our hearts’**

Much of today’s passage feels like a reprise of the last few chapters – and that is, to a large extent, true. From Moses’ perspective, this foundational teaching can never be repeated too often! But there are two lovely extra insights here to lighten our path today:

The first is the famous reference which Jesus himself uses in his testing in the wilderness. When Satan tempted him to satisfy his hunger by turning stones into bread, Jesus quoted from this very passage: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.’ (v3)

Scholars have rightly pointed out the connection between Jesus’ obedience and Israel’s disobedience in their respective testings in the wilderness, and that, as a result, Jesus becomes the ‘new Israel’ – the new “source” of God’s people. If God’s people so often did not live by the Word of God, Jesus did, and in doing so, modelled a new way – indeed, became a new focal point for God’s saving activity.

Where I’d like to land today, however, is God’s analysis of the purpose of the wilderness journey for his people. It was not just to humble them – the answer we expected – it was also *to know what was in their heart* (v2). Since the Lord probably knew this anyway, I wonder if the force of it was as much to reveal to the people of Israel what was in their own heart, as to what it showed God.

Self-awareness is such a valuable commodity. I’m sure we all know people who lack it, as well as those who have it in abundance. And healthy self-knowledge goes well beyond our likes and dislikes, and even beyond our personality and gifts: we also need to know our *hearts*.

What’s in my heart today? What’s in yours? This sort of question may not be easily answered: but it is often the key to life itself. Or, as Scripture puts it elsewhere: ‘Above all, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.’ (Proverbs 4:23)

What God was teaching Israel goes beyond priorities and behavioural obedience: it was to know their hearts. May God grant us grace, too, to know our hearts: and may our hearts bend ever closer to God’s own heart, that we might be children of peace, light and hope.

**Day 23 – Deuteronomy 10:12-22 ‘He is your praise’**

From this point, there’s a slight change of tack in how we’ll approach this extraordinary book of Deuteronomy: we will sometimes use certain passages to act as a summary for a longer section. Although every verse of Scripture matters, I’m also conscious that these are daily reflections to encourage you in faith, rather than systematic bible studies. So I hope you’ll forgive the slightly broader approach – those who would like to read the entirety of the text are always very welcome to do so!

Today’s passage therefore, is the highlight of the longer section covering the entirety of chapters 9-11. These chapters largely reprise everything Moses has said in the preceding chapters: like a good preacher, Moses is keen to emphasise the key points before moving on. And what we read today pulls together most of the fundamentals of life and faith, not just for the Israelites but for us too.

First, this God – the Lord – is great: ‘the God of gods Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome.’ (v17) There is no-one like him, and certainly no other god or idol comes close. The uniqueness of the Lord is something we should hold dear, and hold fast to always.

Second, this great God loves his people – he can’t help it! God ‘set his affection on your ancestors and loved them’ (v14); and because he is faithful to his covenant love, he also ‘chose you, their descendents, above all nations.’ Just like Israel, we don’t earn or deserve God’s love, we simply receive it and rejoice in it.

Third, our response is to love God in return: ‘to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul’ (v12). And God makes it clear that this includes loving all the people God has a particular heart for: the vulnerable and the stranger (vv18-19).

As an aside, if God’s strong emphasis on care for the ‘foreigner’ jars with God’s instruction to destroy the inhabitants of the Promised Land, God makes it clear in this section that this destruction is a judgement on the wickedness of these particular peoples (9:5), especially because their religious practices involve sacrificing their own children, an appalling blasphemy (12:31). Once the land has been settled, however, the Israelites are to model a new way – the way of welcome and generous hospitality.

Ultimately God’s people are reminded that the Lord is not just their God, he is their praise, too. They are to delight in the Lord, and to retain that joyful gratitude that empowers any truly enduring journey of faith. Our generosity towards others is a reflection of God’s generosity towards us. May the Lord be our praise, too – and may we have grace to love and serve him with heart and soul.

**Day 24 – Deuteronomy 12:1-19 ‘A dwelling for his Name’**

Where do human beings go to meet with God? Throughout history, human beings have wrestled with this question. It might be mountains, or caves, or other places felt to have a particular ‘presence’. For the previous forty years, Israel in the wilderness had been blessed by the permanent presence of God, dwelling with them in a pillar of cloud by day, or fire by night. The tabernacle had been a movable place of worship where the people met with God, and presented their prayers, offerings and sacrifices.

But as they prepare to enter the Promised Land, today Moses addresses a new question: where would their centre of worship be? At this stage, the answer given to the people is that there would definitely be a central place, but that God had not revealed it yet: ‘Then to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name – there you are to bring everything I command you.’ (v11)

This place would be the focal point for the Levites (v12, the priestly tribe who looked after worship) and also for the tithes of God’s people: food dedicated to the Lord could be eaten there (v18) as well as distributed to the priests (v19).

Looking back, we know that the place chosen was Jerusalem, which in time became the site of the great temple promised to David and built by Solomon. This was the worshiping centre of the world, where the people would travel on pilgrimage several times a year for the big festivals, and where, on the Day of Atonement, God would meet directly with the High Priest and sins would be forgiven.

All this was unknown to Moses and the Israelites in Deuteronomy 12 – but equally, as we reflect on today’s passage in the light of Christ, the glorious truth of the bible is that, thanks to Christ, God is able to dwell in the hearts of all who follow Jesus. Each of us individually, and as church communities, are described as ‘temples’ – i.e. places where God dwells and meets with his people.

If you are a Christian, you are a temple! *You* are a place where God dwells, by his Spirit. Lovely as it is to have beautiful buildings where we can worship God (and we are blessed with many of those today), we are not reliant on them to meet with the Lord – because you are a dwelling for his Name.

Since God dwells with us, we can therefore, offers our prayers and sacrifices to God first in our hearts before we offer them in physical places or to particular people; every day can be a spiritual pilgrimage to meet with God; and it is from the ‘temple’ of our hearts that generosity and gratitude flows.

So today, give thanks that God dwells with you. And may your heart be a fitting dwelling for his Name.



**Day 25 – Deuteronomy 12:20-32 ‘Life in the blood’**

If I were to ask you ‘what brings life?’, I wonder what you would reply. I expect many of us might say ‘water’; others would perhaps say ‘sunlight’, some might even say ‘soil’. The odd wag might even say chocolate – or, as Forrest Gump would have it, a box of chocolates!

Not many of us, I imagine, would instinctively say ‘blood’. But that is the core teaching of today’s passage: God’s people are given freedom to eat meat whenever they like (v20) – but not the blood, for ‘the blood is the life’ (v23, or to quote older translations, ‘the life is in the blood’).

Most of us are probably aware, at least partially, of kosher (Jewish) food laws. This command remains foundational for the kitchen and shopping practices of all orthodox Jewish families, and is still practised today. But it rings strange to our ears: why is blood so important?

There isn’t time here to go into detail, but we can observe, firstly, that blood is treated as important from the start of Scripture. When Cain killed Abel, his blood ‘cried out to God from the ground’ (Genesis 4:10). Forbidding the shedding of blood essentially became the basis of the Sixth Commandment, which we looked at recently i.e. not to kill – the blood of a human victim is treated much like the blood of an animal here in this passage: it matters.

Significantly, when God saved his people in the original Passover (Exodus 12), it was the blood of the lamb on the doorposts that was the sign which protected them. The blood of the Lamb saved the people...

...and still does! It’s also the way in to this passage for us. This is one of those sections of the Law that we can view through the light of Christ and of the New Testament. Jesus fulfils today’s teaching in two ways: in dietary terms, he declares all foods clean (Mark 7:19). Whilst the early church still asked non-Jewish Christians to respect the sensibilities of Jewish converts (Acts 15:20), we are no longer bound by the strict requirements of this law.

However, Jesus is also the fulfilment of it in a very special way. The blood of the lamb saved the people in the original Passover – and also on the Cross. Jesus becomes the Lamb of God, who by the shedding of his blood, ‘takes away the sin of the world.’ (John 1:29)

Today, we can indeed give thanks that our life is found in the blood – the blood of Christ, who is your salvation, and mine. Amen!

**Day 26 – Deuteronomy 14:22-29 ‘Generosity as worship’**

I grew up in a household that tithed. In other words, at least 10% of our household income was given away, offered as an act of worship. Although money in our home was always tight, time and again my mum and dad saw evidence of God’s provision, occasionally miraculous. So they kept tithing – and God kept providing.

When I turned 22, the Lord prodded me to tithe, too. I was on a very modest wage at the time – albeit my bed and board were covered – but felt that it was something I had to do. The day after I made my decision and committed the money, my nan unexpectedly gave me a cheque which more than covered what I’d committed to give for several years! God always repays.

Although the principle of the tithe is enshrined as part of God’s law in today’s passage, it goes back way further, to the time of Abraham and his encounter with the priest-king Melchizedek (Genesis 14:20). So it pre-dates the Law, and therefore many Christians have considered it to be a principle with ongoing relevance. Some would even say that, if 10% was the norm in the age of the Law, it would have to be the minimum in the age of grace – certainly not less. That’s a moot point, though it has always struck me as having a certain logic to it.

The point is, though, that the tithe is not really about the number – it’s about the heart. To give away 10% of what we have is a means by which we ‘revere the Lord your God always’ (v23). In the time of Israel, the offering was partly used to allow families to go on pilgrimage in order to celebrate the religious festivals (vv23-25); partly to provide for the priests who organised the worshipping life of God’s people and who had no income or land of their own (v27); and partly to provide for the vulnerable (vv28-29) – all obvious ways in which the offering was dedicated to God as an act of worship.

For us, too, our generosity is still to be exercised in similar ways: to resource the worshipping community of God, to care for those on the margins and also to help feed our own spiritual lives. We may agree or disagree as to whether 10% remains the benchmark: but generosity remains a prime way in which we worship.

May the Lord continue to grant us grace to be generous, and to offer our tithes for his glory. Why not take a few minutes today to seek the Lord for wisdom as to whether he is calling you to be generous in any particular way?

**Day 27 – Deuteronomy 15:1-11 ‘Generosity as freedom’**

We live in a society built on debt. At time of writing, the UK owes £2 trillion (£2,000,000,000,000) which equates to a £30,000 debt for each individual Brit. Our economic system is likewise built on debt: limited companies are able to borrow money and the servicing of these debts generated by profits is returned via dividends to shareholders. We finance our houses via debts (which we call mortgages) and, on top of this, the average household also owes more than £5,000 in other debts.

So it is quite striking to read in today’s passage that Israel is commanded to cancel all debts every seven years. It’s one of those passages that makes us raise our eyebrows and think: ‘Well, how on earth does that work??’

It seems much too idealistic, yet at the same time the passage is very realistic. It recognises the reality of poverty (v11) and also of our human nature (v9). Ultimately, as always, the purpose of the law is to inspire trust in the Lord. If Israel practises this huge step of faith, God will always provide (v4) – indeed, more than that, they will be so prosperous that, internationally, they will always be lenders rather than borrowers (v6).

Sadly, it’s likely that the people of Israel rarely obeyed this command – there are enough references in the prophetic books to indicate that it proved too much a leap for a people, whose trust and loyalty was so often divided. However, it’s interesting that, in the New Testament, the very first church in Jerusalem directly references this very passage. The Spirit-filled community of grace finally practised the principle of radical generosity enshrined in this passage of the Law, such that no-one was in chronic need (Acts 4:34 – echoing v4 of this passage).

We can also reflect that the Lord’s Prayer calls us to forgive our debtors (we which tend to soften to ‘those who sin against us’, but in one version of the text it is literally ‘those in our debt’). The point of this line in the prayer is that we respond as God does towards us. We may not have any financial debts to call in, but we can cancel the spiritual debts (wrongs) of others as freely as God does towards us.

Ultimately the path of generosity is the path of freedom. An open hand (v8) indicates an open heart. May God grant us all grace to live with such open hearts – people whose own debts have been cancelled by our loving Lord.

**Day 28 – Deuteronomy 15:12-18 ‘Redemption in practice’**

Our daughter is currently at university, in the middle of a 4-year course. Like most students, she receives loans for tuition fees and living expenses, which will total approximately £70,000 by the time she finishes. Some of you may know that the interest rates on these loans have recently risen significantly. We’ve already calculated that, with the job she is training to do on leaving university, and the statutory payment plans which apply to student loans, her debt will never be repaid. In fact, by the time she reaches 53 – the age at which loans are finally rescinded – she will owe the government approximately £250,000!

Although almost every student in the UK now has a lifetime of debt to look forward to, and it is probably fair to question whether this is a sensible way to finance higher-level education, we can at least be thankful that such loans are eventually cancelled. In many places around the world, however, millions of people face personal debts that will never be repaid, and which have awful consequences.

Today’s passage deals with the thorny subject of bonded labour, and again it is helpful to note as we start that it is a text rooted in the reality of the world as we experience it. For all that the Law establishes the benchmark for an ‘ideal’ society, it recognises the reality that some people do fall on hard times, and may be forced to take drastic measures to keep themselves alive. One such measure is to take a loan from a wealthier neighbour, which is paid back through working for them – this is the principle of bonded labour, and an estimated 20-25 million people around the world live with this reality today.

What is radically different about the biblical vision, however, is that such an arrangement must be time limited. If someone is forced through circumstance into indentured servitude, it cannot be for more than six years, after which they are to be freed (v12) – and not just freed, they are to be set up with basic resources to flourish again (vv13-14). The goal is not exploitation but liberation – and God pointedly reminds his people that their ancestors knew what genuine slavery felt like (v15). In effect, this command is a practical outworking of the general principle of treating others as the Lord has treated us.

Sadly, most of the bonded labourers around the world today are forced into debts that can never be repaid: to all intents and purposes they are slaves. The toll of human misery is immense – but there are organisations, such as the International Justice Mission, who see it as their calling before God to try and put things right for at least some of those trapped in such servitude. Today, let’s pray for them and for all who seek to apply God’s heart for justice in the world today.

And may God grant us all grace to be those who work for the freedom and flourishing of others.

**Day 29 – Deuteronomy 16:1-17 ‘Rhythms of grace’**

In the UK, we enjoy seven Bank Holidays throughout our year – Christmas Day, Boxing Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday, May Day, Spring Bank Holiday and August Bank Holiday – and the original idea behind them is that they function as national days of rest: national Sabbaths, if you will.

With the possible exception of May Day, they are also linked to our religious festivals: the ones around Easter and Christmas are obvious, the others have been secularised in modern times – what we now call the Spring Bank Holiday used to be connected to Whitsun (another name for Pentecost) and the August Bank Holiday to Harvest. So in theory, they were holy-days and not just holidays.

That’s not just a pun, by the way. Most of you probably know that ‘holiday’ literally means ‘holy-day’: in other words, such times of joyful rest were also opportunities to renew our faith. For much of the population, that connection has been lost – although I hope renewal remains a core part of our holidays, regardless – but all of these basic ideas go back to the life of God’s people, and specifically to what we read in today’s passage.

One of the striking things about God’s Law is how many holidays God encourages them to take! In all, in addition to the weekly Sabbath, there are no less than 30 days of celebration and rest commanded – and still are, by the way. Three of the biggest seasons of celebration and remembrance are itemised by Moses to the people in Deuteronomy 16: the annual festivals for Passover, for the early harvest (known as the Festival of Weeks, seven weeks after Passover) and then for the main harvest (known as the Festival of Tabernacles, which also reminded the people of their forty years in the wilderness).

At the heart of each of these festivals is a celebration of God’s gifts to them: the gift of rescue from Egypt, the gift of provision from the land, the gift of provision in the wilderness. They are permanent national reminders of grace – God’s undeserved generosity.

And let’s also note that they are corporate celebrations – whilst families celebrate the Passover meal itself, the idea of a much larger collective celebration is central to all of these festivals.

For all that society has lost much of its roots of faith, we still enjoy the benefits of what the Jewish people (via the Law) have taught us about the importance of these rhythms of grace. Our own national holidays – even in secular 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain – are still explicitly modelled on the original patterns of these Jewish festivals. Easter, Pentecost and Harvest are our successors to the Festivals of Unleavened Bread, Weeks and Tabernacles. May God grant us a renewed desire to appreciate these ‘rhythms of grace’ and, if we happen to be approaching a particular celebration at the time of reading this, to be filled with gratitude for the Lord’s provision in our lives.

**Day 30 – Deuteronomy 16:18-20, 17:8-13 ‘Blind Justice’**

Visit any law court in the West (and quite a few in other parts of the world) and there’s a good chance you’ll see a statue of Lady Justice. This figure is a representation of the Roman word for justice (*iustitia*), or the Greek goddess of justice (*Dike*), so as an idea it goes back millennia. Usually Lady Justice is depicted with scales in her hands, symbolic of the ‘weighing’ required in the fair administration of justice; often, though, she is also depicted blindfold.

Why? The reason is that ‘justice is blind’, as the old saying goes – in other words it tries to be objective, it isn’t swayed by the power or reputation of those who are involved. ‘Without fear or favour,’ as the police motto goes.

However, it turns out that while true justice is blind in regard to the personnel involved, injustice can also be blind, in a different way: in today’s passage we learn that a bribe ‘blinds the eyes of the wise’ (v19) – and isn’t that a wonderfully evocative phrase? Wisdom is what allows us to see things clearly, so a bribe therefore acts as a blindfold, removing the recipient’s capacity to act only on what he or she sees i.e. the evidence presented.

The advice is clear: ‘follow justice and justice alone’ (v20) – and the reason is compelling: ‘...so that you may live.’ Injustice damages human wellbeing, our ability to know true and abundant life. So it really matters!

Today’s passage also considers another dilemma: what if the case is too hard to judge? In this instance, Moses instructs that the matter should be taken to the priests (v9): since the priests’ duty is to worship and pray, the implication is that, for the trickiest cases, a higher power should be involved – they should seek the wisdom of God in prayer, as well as the judgement of those who are most likely to know the mind of the Lord. It is texts such as these that form the basis for American courtrooms, which even today have ‘In God we trust’ inscribed above the wall of the judge.

Nowadays priests may no longer be consulted – for which I am quite relieved! – but the need for objective justice, administered in the sight of Almighty God, remains as great as ever. Our legal system is creaking at present, so it seems an opportune moment to pray for all those whose calling is to serve in the administration of justice. And may God also grant us grace to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

**Day 31 – Deuteronomy 17:14-20 ‘The true king’**

Today’s passage looks at the nature of godly leadership. Israel was actually designed to be a theocracy – that is, they had no ruler but God – however our text begins with the very realistic assessment that, when they had settled in the Promised Land, they were likely to want a human ruler.

It is fascinating that Moses correctly predicted that their motivation would not be a high-minded pursuit of good governance, but a basic violation of the tenth commandment: alongside coveting neighbours’ possessions, God could also have added: ‘you shall not covet your neighbour’s king!’

Again, we see a great deal of realism in the starting point of Deuteronomy – the Lord understands human nature, as does Moses after 40+ years of leadership. As a result, we get some priceless advice on what a true leader should look like, which can be summarised under three principles:

*Integrity:* the great writer on the spiritual life Richard Foster commented that the three greatest human temptations were ‘money, sex and power’ – and ‘twas ever thus. Three thousand years earlier, Moses here sets out exactly these temptations for any would-be leader; for a king, these equated in verses 16 and 17 to horses (to resource an army i.e. power), multiple wives (sex) and gold (money).

*Wisdom:* but not just any wisdom – the king was to be devoted to God’s Word. Just like God would command Joshua at the start of the next book, any would-be king of Israel should read God’s Law every day: and not just read it, he should ‘follow carefully all the words of this law’ (v19).

*Humility:* power corrupts, as the old saying goes, and ultimately the corrupting effect of power is to instil a sense of superiority in those who wield it. But a godly leader lives differently: a true king should ‘not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites’ (v20).

Sadly, Moses’ warnings came true: the people in the time of Samuel wanted a king for exactly this reason, and the temptations of kingship warned about here soon became endemic. However, there was a king to come who modelled God’s way perfectly: the Servant King himself. And the Spirit of this Servant King is well able to empower leaders who seek to model themselves on the pattern of Christ. Today, let us pray for all leaders in church and nation, that we would all heed this timeless advice – and that the people may flourish as a result.

**Day 32 – Deuteronomy 18:9-22 ‘The true prophet’**

For as long as humans have lived, we’ve wanted to know about things which lie beyond ourselves. We can likely trace this back to Eden, and our particular fondness for ‘wanting to be like God’ (Genesis 3:5). Every culture has its mystics and sages, and even in our so-called ‘modern’ society, interest in such things has hardly waned – arguably it is in fact greater than it’s been for many years.

Whilst such interest is as old as time, the consistent refrain of scripture is that we need to look in the right place. Spiritual knowledge only comes from two sources: God, or that which is opposed to God, which we usually call the devil. In other words, nothing in this space is neutral – and in our passage today, God’s people are given clear instructions where to look, and also where *not* to.

Verses 10-11 list many banned practices, some of which are very much alive and well today – but all of which find their energy in this basic desire to know things beyond ourselves: whether it’s the future, or what happens after death, or accessing extra power for this life. And God (via Moses) is particularly blunt: this kind of stuff is the very reason that whole nations are being judged.

On the other hand, God *does* speak (and continue to speak) – and he chooses to do so through certain appointed people. Moses is the obvious person that comes to mind at this point: but in this passage Moses explicitly says that there will be others with the same gift, also appointed and anointed by God. These people came to be known as prophets – and the word literally means ‘mouth’: they are God’s mouthpieces.

As we know, the latter pages of the Old Testament are full of the fruit of this promise – and prophets also appear frequently in the New Testament as well. The gift of prophecy remains a gift to be used by God’s people, for God’s people. However, this text is important because it is also quoted in the New Testament as a specific reference to Jesus: in Acts 3:22 Peter uses it in one of his early evangelistic sermons. Jesus, it turns out, is the true, and greatest, fulfilment of this wonderful promise: the One through whom God speaks (v15) and to whom the people must listen (v18).

As we’ve come to see, so much of Deuteronomy finds its highest meaning when viewed through the lens of Christ. The Christ who speaks remains our divine guide: my hope and prayer is that Christ continues to amaze me, to inspire me and to teach me – may God grant us all grace to ‘listen to him’.



**Day 33 – Deuteronomy 19:1-14 ‘Cities of refuge’**

We all love the idea of ‘safe places’ – places of sanctuary, of protection. For many of us we like to imagine our home as being such a place, or a particular room in our home; for others, it’s a place of worship; it might even be a remote spot, somewhere quiet where we feel free.

The idea of refuge has a long and noble history, pre-dating even today’s passage. And it remains current today: we build refuges for those escaping domestic violence, and the word ‘refugee’ now applies to all fleeing places of danger or crisis, and seeking safety and sanctuary elsewhere.

Today’s text forms a key part of our modern understanding of refuge – albeit within a very specific context related to justice. As the Promised Land was being settled, the Israelites would need to establish the rule of law and a functioning system of justice. In particular, after what would be years of military conflict, it would be vital to re-establish the basic principle that in peace-time, the shedding of blood was forbidden by God’s law. Innocent blood in particular, must not be shed (verses 10 and 13). And if blood was shed, that had to be avenged i.e. repaid by blood, such that justice was satisfied.

The Jewish law established what became the fundamental building block of all legal systems, including ours today: ‘an eye for an eye’ – in other words that the punishment fits the crime. But what if someone was killed accidentally? Should that mean the death sentence? Cities of refuge were the answer. Three were immediately set aside (v2) – with three more in time to come (v9) – where a killer could flee (v5).

We learn from other passages (e.g. Joshua 20) that, whenever this happened, the killer could plead his or her case that the death was accidental: if the elders agreed, then instead of the death penalty, the offender was allowed to live in this city until the death of the serving High Priest – at which point they could return home, and the family of the deceased were not allowed to take revenge.

It’s a wonderful idea, and hundreds, even thousands, of years ahead of its time. Today we give thanks for the vital work of all places of refuge across the world. It also reminds us that, ultimately, God is our refuge: ‘God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble,’ as Psalm 46 begins. Most powerfully of all, this God shed his own blood as satisfaction for our sins – the ultimate spiritual refuge.

Take a few moments to dwell in God’s ‘refuge’ today... and pray, too, for all who seek to offer refuge to others – practical expressions in our world of the eternal refuge of God.