

Preamble to Deuteronomy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 14:12–14, Ezek. 28:12–17, Gen. 3:1–7, Gen. 12:1–3, Acts 7:20–36, Exod. 19:4–8.*

Memory Text: “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8, NKJV).

The book of Deuteronomy, of course, did not arise in a vacuum. As with everything in life, Deuteronomy exists in a context; and, as with everything in life, that context plays an important role in understanding what the book means and what its purpose is.

A lot of history came before it—a history that explained the circumstances, not only of the book itself but also of the world and environment that created its context. Just as it would be hard to understand the purpose and function of a windshield wiper outside the context of a car, it would be hard to understand Deuteronomy, especially in light of our theme (Deuteronomy and present truth), outside the context in which it arose.

Someone had read Russian Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*—about 1,500 pages—in just three days. When asked what the book was about, the reader replied: “It's about Russia.”

To cover in one week's lesson the thousands of years of history before we come to Deuteronomy is to do somewhat the same thing. But by focusing on the highlights, we can see the context needed to best understand this book, so rich with “present truth.”

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 2.

Love, to Be Loved

First John 4:8 says, “God is love.” However simple those three words (four in Greek), the idea behind them is so deep, so profound, that we can barely grasp their implications. They don’t say that God loves, or that God reveals love, or that God is a manifestation of love, but that God *is* love. *Is* love—as if love is the essence of God’s identity, Himself. As fallen human beings, with only a few pounds of tissue and chemicals in our heads with which to grasp reality, we just aren’t able to comprehend fully what “God is love” means.

But we can, certainly, understand enough to know that it’s very good news. If, instead of “God is love,” the verse said “God is hate” or “God is vindictive” or “God is indifferent,” this revelation about Him could have been something to worry about.

And the truth that “God is love” helps us better understand the idea that God’s government, how He rules all of creation, is reflective of that love. Love permeates the cosmos, perhaps even more than gravity does. God loves us, and we, too, are to love God back, in return (*see Deut. 6:5, Mark 12:30*).

Love, though, to be love, must be freely given. God cannot force love; the moment He does it’s no longer love. Hence, when God created intelligent and rational beings in heaven and on earth with the ability to love, the risk always existed that they might not love Him back. Some didn’t—and, hence there exist the origins of what we know as the great controversy.

Why do the following texts make sense only in the context of the freedom, and the risk, involved in love? *Isa. 14:12–14, Ezek. 28:12–17, Rev. 12:7.*

Especially insightful is Ezekiel 28:15, which shows that though this angel, Lucifer, was a perfect being created by a perfect God, iniquity was found in him. It was not because he had been created with that iniquity to begin with. Instead, created with the ability to love, Lucifer had true moral freedom, and despite all that he had been given (“Every precious stone was your covering”), this angel wanted more. One thing led to another until, well, there was “war in heaven.”

In some places you can buy robot dogs, which will obey your commands, never soil the carpet, or chew the furniture. Would you, however, have any kind of meaningful relationship with this “dog”? How does your answer help in understanding why God wanted beings who truly could love Him back?

The Fall and the Flood

Almost every school child has heard the story about an apple falling on Isaac Newton's head, and voilà! Newton discovered gravity. Whether or not an apple really fell on his head isn't the crucial point; instead, the point is that Newton's great insight (he didn't discover gravity, either; anyone who fell down already knew about gravity) was to understand that the same force that dropped the apple (gravity) also kept the moon in orbit around the earth, the earth in orbit around the sun, and so forth.

This was important because for millennia many people believed that the laws that governed the heavens were different from the laws that governed the earth. Newton showed that this belief was wrong.

And though Newton's contribution was in the area of natural law, the same principle holds true with moral law. The same freedom, the freedom inherent in love, that led to Lucifer's fall in heaven led to humanity's fall on earth, as well.

Read Genesis 2:16, 17 and Genesis 3:1–7. How do these verses about perfect people, in a perfect environment, created by a perfect God, also reveal the powerful truth of the freedom inherent in love?

After the Fall, things went from bad to worse, even to the point where the Lord said about humanity “that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (*Gen. 6:5, NKJV*). And if their thoughts were bad, their actions surely were, as well, until things got so evil that the Lord destroyed the entire world with the Flood—in a sense giving humanity a chance to start over, a kind of second creation. However, as the story of the Tower of Babel shows (*Gen. 11:1–9*), humanity still seemed intent on defying God. “When the tower had been partially completed, a portion of it was occupied as a dwelling place for the builders; other apartments, splendidly furnished and adorned, were devoted to their idols. The people rejoiced in their success, and praised the gods of silver and gold, and set themselves against the Ruler of heaven and earth.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 119. Thus, besides confusing their language, God scattered the fallen race across the face of the earth.

Take a mental note of your thoughts throughout the day. What does this teach you about the state of your own heart?

The Call of Abram

Abram (later called Abraham) first appears in the genealogy of Genesis 11, which comes right after mention of the scattering from Babel.

Read Genesis 12:1–3, the call of God to Abram. Today, looking back after the cross, after the death of Jesus and the spreading of the gospel, how do we understand what God was promising to do through Abram?

Many centuries later, the apostle Paul, in seeking to deal with the heresy of the Galatians, pointed back to Abraham's call, showing it to be an early expression of what God's intentions had always been: the gospel to the world. "Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham" (*Gal. 3:7–9, NKJV*).

Abraham's call was first expressed in Genesis 12; much of the rest of Genesis is the story of his blood descendants, one dysfunctional seed after another, creating one messed-up family after another, and yet, through them the promise eventually was to be fulfilled, reaching a crucial milestone with the call of Moses.

Read Acts 7:20–36, the martyr Stephen's depiction of Moses and the Exodus. How does this fit in with God's initial promise to Abraham?

In a world steeped in ignorance, error, and a general lack of the knowledge of truth (things have not changed much in more than three thousand years, have they?), the Lord called out a people, His people, Abraham's seed, from Egypt. In them He sought not only to preserve knowledge of the truth, that is, knowledge of Him, Yahweh, and the plan of salvation, but also to spread that knowledge to the rest of the world.

Today, how do we as Seventh-day Adventists see ourselves in relation to the rest of the world? That is, what parallels exist between us and ancient Israel? More important, what responsibility does this parallel place on each of us individually?

The Covenant at Sinai

The Exodus and all that it entailed, from the blood on the doorpost in Egypt to the drama at the Red Sea—what an experience! No doubt it made an impression on those who lived through it. (And those who died, from the firstborn children in Egypt to the soldiers at the bottom of the sea, God will judge them fairly.) As the Lord said: “ ‘ “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself” ’ ” (*Exod. 19:4, NKJV*).

Why did the Lord do this stunning and dramatic rescue, actually taking one nation out of another nation, or, as Moses himself said to them: “ ‘ “Or did God ever try to go and take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?” ’ ” (*Deut. 4:34, NKJV*).

Read Exodus 19:4–8. Why did the Lord call the people out from Egypt?

It was as simple as that. God called them out, the seed, the descendants of the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And with these descendants the Lord established His covenant, and they would be, indeed, “ ‘ “a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine” ’ ” (*Exod. 19:5, NKJV*). This relationship was central to the covenant.

This idea of a “special treasure” (*segullah*), however, could be (and it was, in fact) easily misunderstood. Their specialness came not from anything inherently holy and righteous in and of themselves. Instead, it was because of God’s grace given to them and because of the wonderful truths that He had bestowed upon them—truths that they were to follow and, as a “kingdom of priests,” eventually spread to the world.

God then gave them some of the stipulations of the covenant, too (their end of the deal, so to speak), the Ten Commandments (*Exodus 20*), and then this covenant was ratified. Having sprinkled a newly constructed altar with the blood of the offerings, Moses “took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people” (*Exod. 24:7*). The people again declared that they would obey.

“When Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood . . . and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, ‘This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you’ ” (*Heb. 9:19, 20, NKJV*). What does the blood signify, and why is it so important, even to us today?

Apostasy and Punishment

“All that the LORD has spoken we will do” (*Exod. 19:8, NKJV; see also Exod. 24:3, Exod. 24:7*). Though, no doubt, the people had meant those words each time they said them, sacred history shows that, unfortunately, their actions time and again contradicted their words. Though they were the chosen people, though they had entered freely into the covenant with the Lord, they didn’t keep up their end of the deal, which really came down to one thing.

What was the crucial component for Israel in regard to the covenant?
Exod. 19:4, 5.

The call to obey God, to keep His law, was no more legalism than than it is now (*see Matt. 7:24–27; John 14:15; James 2:20; Rom 6:11, 12*), and yet, again and again the children of Israel failed to keep up their end of the deal.

Indeed, early on, even in the very sight of Mount Sinai itself, they fell into rank apostasy (*see Exod. 32:1–6*). Unfortunately, unfaithfulness seemed to be more the norm than the exception, and, thus, instead of quickly entering into the Promised Land, they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

Read Numbers 14:28–35. What was the punishment meted out to the nation because of the people’s refusal to trust what the Lord had told them to do?

Then, as now, so often disobedience occurs as a result, not just of outright rebellion (though that does happen), but from a failure to trust in what God tells us. What made this sin even more heinous for Israel was the fact that, as God Himself said, all these men had “seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times” (*Num. 14:22, NKJV*). Despite all that they had seen and experienced, they still refused to obey the Lord and to take the land, despite God’s promises that they would succeed (*Numbers 13, Numbers 14*).

Think about what was said above: that so often disobedience comes from a lack of trusting in God’s Word to us. Why is this true, and how can we, indeed, learn to trust in God more?

Further Thought: For a deeper and well-thought-out study on the great controversy theme, based on the idea of God as love, and written by a Seventh-day Adventist, see John Peckham's *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018). The fact that this work has been published by a non-Adventist press shows how good biblical scholarship can reveal the reality of the great controversy as depicted in Scripture.

“In brief, I argue that God’s love (properly understood) is at the center of a cosmic dispute and that God’s commitment to love provides a morally sufficient reason for God’s allowance of evil, with significant ramifications for understanding divine providence as operating within what I call covenantal rules of engagement.”—John C. Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil*, p. 4.

“The decree that Israel was not to enter Canaan for forty years was a bitter disappointment to Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua; yet without a murmur they accepted the divine decision. But those who had been complaining of God’s dealings with them, and declaring that they would return to Egypt, wept and mourned greatly when the blessings which they had despised were taken from them. They had complained at nothing, and now God gave them cause to weep. Had they mourned for their sin when it was faithfully laid before them, this sentence would not have been pronounced; but they mourned for the judgment; their sorrow was not repentance, and could not secure a reversing of their sentence.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 392.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Discuss the question of free will and love. Why must love, to be love, be freely given? Given all the suffering in the world, some would argue that love was not worth it. How would you answer that challenge?
- 2 With obedience so central to the whole Bible, what then is legalism? What factors can turn an attempt to be faithful to God and to His Word and commandments into the trap of legalism?
- 3 In class, discuss the question asked at the end of Tuesday’s study regarding the parallels between ancient Israel and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. What are those parallels, and why should we be concerned about them?