

Deuteronomy—

A stepping stone to Christ

2. Love, law and obedience

Simeon Guntrip

The second part of this study shows the prominence of love as a theme in Deuteronomy, a love that stimulates obedience and has eternal life as its outcome.

THERE ARE twenty-one references to love in Deuteronomy, four times as many as in the rest of the Law put together. One such occurrence is when Moses refers to how God chose Israel from among the nations to be His witnesses on the basis of His love towards them: "The LORD did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the LORD loved you" (7:7,8). We have also been chosen on the same basis; that is, not because we are intrinsically better than anyone else but because God "*first loved us*" (1 Jno. 4:19; cf. Rom. 5:6-8) and has revealed Himself in His Word to us. This knowledge should provoke us to reciprocate His love, in accordance with His Word.

"Thou shalt love the LORD thy God"

Though implied in the Law, Deuteronomy furnishes us with the first occasion in Scripture where we are explicitly commanded to love God. It occurs as part of the previously unheard and challenging command, "thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut. 6:5).

Variations on the above form of words occur six more times in Deuteronomy (4:29; 10:12; 26:16; 30:2,6,10), with only a handful of future occurrences: the words of David (1 Kgs. 2:4) and Solomon (8:48), and in accounts of the reigns of Asa (2 Chron. 15:12,15) and Josiah (2 Kgs. 23:25), significantly all concerning reforming periods in Israel's and Judah's history. It is a rewarding exercise to probe further the connections between these occurrences and Deuteronomy. The specific command to "love the LORD thy God" is repeated five times during this message (Deut. 11:1; 19:9;

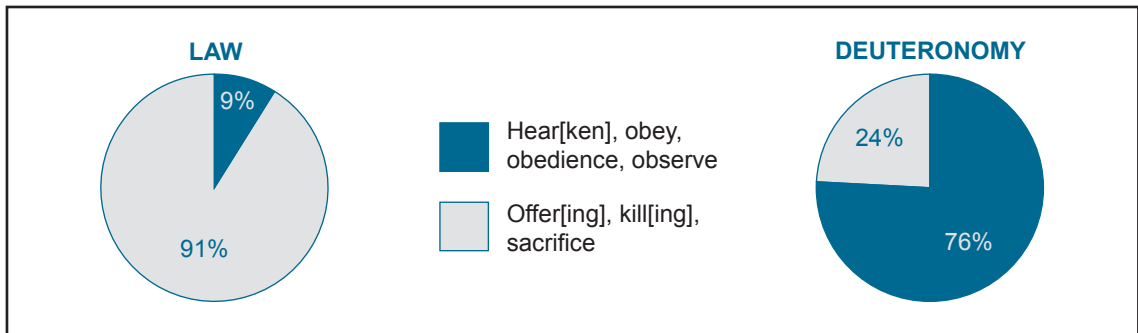
30:6,16,20), and does not occur again until Jesus uses the same phrase in Matthew 22:37 when encouraging people to gain a proper perspective in their worship of God.

This last reference concerns the time when Jesus was asked, "which is the great commandment in the law?". In his reply he not only picks up the phrase under consideration from Deuteronomy, but goes on to show that this love of God is to be manifested in us and extended to our neighbour: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind . . . And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (vv. 36-40).

Deuteronomy, then, highlights how love should underpin all our worship of God, and that worship is not about mere adherence to the letter but about willing obedience and service to the Almighty Creator. Paul in Romans makes it explicit that the Ten Commandments are only, and ultimately, fulfilled by the more exacting characteristic of love as defined by God's Word: "for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law . . . Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (13:8-10).

God wanted, and still wants, obedience to Him to be motivated by love, rather than law, just as we do in our families. This is why he has given us free will, allowing us to *choose* to worship Him with a willing heart: "And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul" (Deut. 10:12).

A true love of God will be revealed in *wanting* to hear and obey Him. God desires free-will offerings, not forced offerings. Samuel said to Saul, "to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam. 15:22).



Deuteronomy drives this principle home by emphasising words and ideas that relate to hearing and obeying¹ rather than sacrifice and killing.

The box above shows the distribution of selected key words within the Pentateuch dealing with either sacrifice or obedience. The first pie chart shows the usage of these words as found in the Sinaitic Law (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers) and the second shows the usage of the same words in Deuteronomy.

From this it can clearly be seen that the emphasis in Deuteronomy is about hearing and obeying God's Word. It challenges the state of the heart and mind, the inner man, from which outward commitment will flow, and encourages us to develop a character based on the values and principles of God as revealed in His Word rather than considering that the Law can save in itself.

Life and death

In Deuteronomy 5:26, for the first time in Scripture, God is described as "the *living God*", which the writer to the Hebrews no doubt alludes to when exhorting the household of Christ not to neglect the God That had brought them out of bondage in Egypt: "take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the *living God*" (3:12).

Life becomes a prominent theme in Deuteronomy, and in particular the phrase, "all the days of thy life" (4:9; 6:2; 16:3; 17:19). This phrase is being used to contrast with the only earlier use of the same phrase: "cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it *all the days of thy life*" (Gen. 3:17). Deuteronomy projects the reader's attention forward from this cursed state in Eden to consider the means by which this curse can be reversed and life found. Deuteronomy is now looking forward to the one who is able to remove the curse and give eternal life (Jno. 5:25,26). The *living God* wants a "*living sacrifice*" (Rom. 12:1) rather than dead animals.

The Sinaitic Law is referred to as "the ministration of death" (2 Cor. 3:7) because "it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins" (Heb. 10:4). By way of contrast, the words which Moses delivered in Deuteronomy should be regarded as life-giving words, for we read, "Set your hearts unto all the words which I testify among you this day, which ye shall command your children to observe to do, all the words of this law. For it is not a vain thing for you; because it is *your life*" (32:46,47).

Again, it is in Deuteronomy that God makes the appeal for all generations to choose life: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore *choose life*, that both thou and thy seed may live: that thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey His voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto Him: for He is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the LORD swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them" (30:19,20).

So it is the words of God and of our Lord that give us life (Jno. 6:63; 2 Tim. 3:15). It is interesting that the writer to the Hebrews, when encouraging true believers to "labour . . . to enter into that rest", as the children of Israel were to enter it, goes on to say, "For the word of God is quick [Gk. *living*], and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow". The Word is more effective than the sword, then and now, as it is a "discerner of the thoughts and intents of the *heart*" (4:11,12). It is Christ who became the *living sacrifice* (10:7-12), and through whom a "*living way*" (v. 20) has been opened up for us.

(To be continued)

1. 'Obey' and 'hear' come from the same root word in the Hebrew; when we hear God, His expectation is that we obey!