

Deuteronomy: The blessing of obedience

What was the language in your home as you grew up about the necessity of obedience? Did you hear a lot of, "If you'd like to do what you've been told to do, a hundred times, I'd be really grateful"? Did you hear, "I really don't care if you obey me or not -- just let me know what your plans are"? Or did you hear, "Obey me, right now, or else!"?

The next set of questions I would like to ask would be around the theme of how you internalized obedience as you were growing up. What I mean by that is, what did the word "obey" come to mean to you, especially emotionally? Did you find yourself feeling resentful, angry, rebellious, when you were told to obey? Or, were you a compliant teenager who liked nothing better than to be told what to do? Did the word "commandment" bring negative or positive thoughts and feelings to you?

As I was thinking about the next book in the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy, and trying to figure out which of several themes really stood out, I kept coming back to the idea of the blessing of obedience. God's expectation for His people was that they would obey the commandments He had given them and that it would be good for them. They would prosper in a whole variety of ways: victory over their enemies, abundance of crops and herds, blessings in their homes and in their national life. It got me to thinking about the word "obedience", about why it seems like such a hard pill to swallow, and why God seems to think it's such a great deal. So, we'll go to the book in order to see what it tells us about obedience.

Deutero means "second" and *nomos* means law, so the focus of this book is the second telling of the law. The law, as we saw earlier, was given in great detail in the books of Exodus and Leviticus, which cover the commandments God gave Israel in what seems like the first few weeks after they had been rescued from Egypt.

Deuteronomy describes where they were at, forty years later, after the rebellion in the wilderness described in the book of Numbers, and after God had punished that whole generation by making them wait it out, outside of the Promised Land, living in limbo until their generation passed away. Now they are ready. Those who had been adults when the Red Sea parted and God led them out of Egypt -- but who had later turned around and said that they wanted to go back there -- that generation was gone. A new generation stood in the Jordan Valley, just east of the land God had promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. A new generation who would trust God was ready to move in and to take possession of the land.

And in this place, Moses speaks to the people. The book of Deuteronomy is this speech, or speeches; the final instructions Moses will give to Israel. It includes the law, the Ten Commandments that he had received on Mount Sinai, but it also includes a lot of teaching, particularly on the subject of "remembering". And the remembering begins with a speech about their journey north from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea, the place from where they were to enter the Promised Land some 40 years

earlier and it focuses on the rebellion that resulted in their return to Sinai and their extended stay in the desert.

In chapters 2 and 3, Moses recounts the wilderness wanderings and their recent victories over two kings with territory east of the Jordan River. Then comes chapter 4:

And now, Israel, listen carefully to these laws and regulations that I am about to teach you. Obey them so that you may live, so you may enter and occupy the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. Do not add to, or subtract from, these commands I am giving you from Yahweh your God. Just obey them.

And then we drop down to verse 6:

If you obey them carefully, you will display your wisdom and intelligence to the surrounding nations. When they hear about these laws, they will exclaim, "What other nation is as wise and prudent as this!" For what nation has a god as near to them as the LORD our God is near to us whenever we call on Him? And what great nation has laws and regulations as fair as this body of laws that I am giving you today? But watch out! Be very careful never to forget what you have seen the LORD do for you. Do not let these things escape from your mind as long as you live! And be sure to pass them on to your children and grandchildren.

Let's just summarize the benefits of obedience that Moses has mentioned so far:

1. Obey these laws so that you may live! Obedience to God's laws is life-giving, which I assume means that God is both protecting your life - and your obedience to His dietary requirements is healthy for your body.
2. Obey them so that you may enter and occupy the land that has been promised to you. God is giving you the land -- He is fulfilling His promise -- but you have your part and your obedience will result in your success.
3. If you obey you will display your wisdom and intelligence to the surrounding nations. Now, Israel didn't quite get what God was saying here, but He was letting them in on His bigger plan, which was to display His glory, not just in Israel, but to all peoples. His plan was to show the nations of the world the blessing that would come to a people who knew, and who obeyed, the One true God. Everyone wants to be thought of as wise and intelligent, and I'm sure that some of those who heard Moses say this were thinking about themselves, but God's vision went far beyond this group of people, to people around the globe who had never even heard of Him before.
4. The fourth blessing is that these laws are fair. They don't favor the rich or the powerful or the religious insiders. They are laws that reflect the justice and the goodness of a God who cares for every person equally.

With the blessings comes a warning, the big warning of the book of Deuteronomy, repeated again and again: "Be very careful never to forget!" Israel would be called on to have great trust in God in the months ahead, and once the land was settled they would drift away from that faith and their experience of God being with them ... and so Moses tells them to remember and to teach these things to their children and

grandchildren.

In chapter 5, Moses repeats the Ten Commandments and reminds the people that when God spoke from Sinai, while the mountain was blazing with fire and the people were overcome with the fear of Yahweh, they begged Him to speak only to Moses:

But now, why should we die? If Yahweh our God speaks to us again, we will certainly die and be consumed by this awesome fire. Can any living thing hear the voice of the living God from the heart of the fire and yet survive?

And Moses tells them that the LORD heard their request and was pleased with it:

Oh, that they would always have hearts like this, that they might fear me and obey all My commands. If they did, they and their descendants would prosper forever.

Here is a further blessing of obedience; doing well, prospering in life, living in health and abundance and joy and peace. “Oh, that they would always have hearts like this.” In the next chapter he adds the promise of long life:

If you obey all His laws and commands, you will enjoy a long life ... Be careful to obey. (6:2,3)

And then, at the end of the chapter, these words:

The LORD our God commanded us to obey all these laws and to fear Him for our own prosperity and well-being, as is now the case. For we are righteous when we obey all the commands the LORD our God has given us. (6:24,25)

Again, we see that God’s laws are for our own prosperity and well-being. Obedience is not an oppressive restriction on our freedom, but a blessing that preserves and improves our life.

In my New Living Translation of the Bible, chapter 7 is given the title “The Privilege of Holiness”, and it starts with some instructions on how to avoid being compromised by the pagan religions of the people who were then living in the land. The first paragraph ends:

“For you are a holy people, who belong to the LORD your God. Of all the people on earth, the LORD has chosen you to be His own special treasure.” (7:6)

We skip down to verse 12 and read this:

If you listen to these regulations and obey them faithfully, the LORD your God will keep His covenant of unfailing love with you, as He solemnly promised your ancestors. He will love you and bless you and make you into a great nation. He will give you many children and give fertility to your land and your animals. When you arrive in the land He swore to give your ancestors, you will have large crops of grain, grapes, and olives, and great herds of cattle, sheep and goats. You will be blessed above all the nations of the earth.” (12-14)

Over and over and over, throughout this “second telling of the law”, Moses urges the

people to remember the great things God had done for them, and to obey His good laws. In chapter 8, v. 6:

So obey the commands of Yahweh your God by walking in His ways and fearing Him.

In chapter 10, vv. 12, 13:

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? He requires you to fear Him, to live according to His will, to love and worship Him with all your heart and soul, and to obey the LORD's commands and laws that I am giving you today for your own good.

In chapter 11, vv. 8,9:

Therefore, be careful to obey every command I am giving you today, so you may have strength to go in and occupy the land you are about to enter. If you obey, you will enjoy a long life in the land Yahweh swore to give to your ancestors and to you, their descendants -- a land flowing with milk and honey.

Down to verse 13:

If you carefully obey all the commands I am giving you today, and if you love Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul, and if you worship Him, then He will send the rains in their proper seasons so you can harvest crops of grain, grapes for wine, and olives for oil.

Down to verses 31,32:

When you are living in that land, you must be careful to obey all the laws and regulations I am giving you today.

The next chapter, 12, verse 28

Be careful to obey all My commands so that all will go well with you and your children.

Chapter 13, v. 18:

Yahweh your God will be merciful only if you obey Him and keep all the commands I am giving you today, doing what is pleasing to Him.

Chapter 15, vv. 5 & 6:

Yahweh your God will bless you as He has promised. You will lend money to many nations but will never need to borrow! You will rule many nations, but they will not rule over you.

That's a lot of text ... you are no doubt getting bored by the repetition of it by now. But notice this with me - God speaks about obedience to His laws as a source of blessing. Yes, there are curses and consequences for disobedience and those consequences can be very grave, but the focus, the weight of these passages, is on the side of God's blessing.

Do you hear that? God asks us to obey Him because it will bring about good for us. It will result in the kinds of material blessings and spiritual blessings that these passages describe. It will result in glory going to God as people look at the lives of obedient people and see God's hand of blessing on them. God isn't some kind of two-headed monster that loves us on the one hand and then tells us to live an unhappy, unfulfilling life on the other. It's because He loves us that He asks us to live a certain way, to do certain things, to follow a path that He's laid out for us. Not

because He wants to keep joy out, but because He knows how to let joy in ... and make it stay.

As I suggested earlier, Deuteronomy also contains some intense warnings about the fruit of disobedience. We, or at least I, read these warnings or curses, and feel, "Oh, that's so harsh. It feels like there's so little room for error, and such overwhelming hardship that results from failure. Is God really that unbending, that cruel?"

And then I think what's at stake. A life that is lived outside of God's love is a life that's lived in fear - fear of the unknown, fear of the future, fear of the judgment, fear of the cruelty of mankind, fear of evil spirits. If you visit any animist tribe of people around the world today you will encounter a culture that is controlled by fear.

A life that is lived outside of God's law is a life that is lived with uncertain morality, uncertain ethical choices, where values shift with the mood of a culture, where judges can make the law appear to be saying the opposite of what it was intended to say.

A society that rejects God's law becomes a society that is wide open to corruption, to displays of raw power from those who have it, to the strong taking advantage of the weak and the rich taking advantage of the poor. That's why you see in Deuteronomy a clear call for taking care of the poor, of provision for those who fall on hard times, for a way of escape for them. That's also why you see in our culture a rise in blatant corruption, political discourse which seems to bypass truth almost completely; the signs of decay are too numerous to mention. We in the West are in trouble because we were doing so well that we thought we could keep it all going without God. There is no longer a reverence for Him, for His commandments, or for His authority to rule what He created. Instead, there is this pervasive belief that we're on our own, and it's not producing much comfort or hope. Here's a quote from a student at McGill University during a Christian apologetics event held there in the past couple of weeks. He is from Singapore, he used to be a Christian, and is now without hope or peace:

I'm a physicist and I think we're alone in a universe that doesn't care about us. If my conclusions lead to nihilism and despair, how can I live? (and then) ... How can I find out if what I left is really true?

He is perhaps a reluctant atheist, but His willingness to adopt the beliefs of an anti-God academic world has left him close to despair. The same is true for so many who have abandoned God's morality in search of sexual freedom. They have found that the world of abortion, of S.T.D.'s, of loveless relationships, has left them empty.

Let's keep it simple. The Bible teaches that God loves us - there can be no confusion about this. And it also says that He has given us rules to live by that, when they are obeyed, will produce an abundance of blessing in our lives. But we are free to refuse the blessing, to choose to go our own way and to live with the consequences of those choices. As long as we are obedient to God's laws, He is bound by His covenant to bless us, but if we choose to defy them, He is no longer bound -- and we have no excuse, do we?

I'll close with some further words from Moses, describing the blessing that God was willing to guarantee His people. After telling them that His blessing would be on their towns and the countryside, their children and their fields, that it would include fertile fields and flocks, baskets overflowing with fruit, an abundance of bread, victory over their enemies and storehouses filled with grain, he says:

The LORD your God will bless you in the land He is giving you. If you obey the commands of Yahweh your God and walk in His ways, the LORD will establish you as His holy people as He solemnly promised to do. Then all the nations of the world will see that you are a people claimed by Yahweh, and they will stand in awe of you.

That's God's vision for how to demonstrate His character and His purposes to the world that lives detached from His commandments. He wants them to see how good life can be ... through us! Years ago I read a challenging book of philosophy entitled "After Virtue". In it, the author suggested that the world we live in had rejected Christian virtue and that our only hope was to preserve the things we know and value in what he called "communities of light". That's one of my hopes for us; that we wouldn't become too modern, too sophisticated, or too compromised, to live within the laws of God, to trust Him to bless us within those boundaries, and to preserve truth and love and goodness for now and for the uncertain future our world faces.