

Lecture 7: Deuteronomy, the Circumcised Heart, and the Gift of the Land

Introduction to Biblical Theology · Dr. Thomas Schreiner · The Master's Seminary · 28 minutes

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Before you watch

On the plains of Moab, Moses preaches the whole story to a new generation: a people loved for no reason but love, a life summed up in clinging to the LORD, worship regulated by God's word, and a failure foretold before the land is even entered. Then Joshua opens, and the second leg of the promise comes true. Listen for the promise beneath the promises: a God who will one day circumcise hearts.

The lecture, section by section

1. The story so far

Schreiner gathers the threads. The story is the kingdom: God, always King, reestablishing his rule over the earth through the offspring of the woman. The flood showed that the serpent's offspring never finally triumph. The promise narrowed to Abraham: land, offspring, and, easy to underplay, universal blessing, for God's intention was always the world. Genesis labors over getting the children; Exodus redeems them from the serpent-king; Sinai binds them in a conditional covenant whose blessings answer obedience and whose curses climax in exile; Leviticus keeps the presence; Numbers buries a faithless generation and raises a new one. Now Deuteronomy: the people stand on the cusp of a land like a new Eden.

2. Grace precedes demand

Deuteronomy 7 gives the covenant's deepest logic: the LORD set his heart on you not because you were many, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because he loved you, keeping the oath he swore to your fathers. He loved you because he loved you: the reason terminates in God himself. The prophets indicate Israel was estranged from the LORD even in Egypt; deliverance was pure grace. This people is the apple of his eye, carried like an eagle carries its young, named Jeshurun, which the old Greek translation renders beloved. The old song has it right, taken rightly: there is no reason in us.

3. The LORD who fights and gives

Through Deuteronomy's opening chapters, as Gary Millar observes, it is the LORD who disposes territory and determines the outcome of battles. The land will be gift before it is ever conquest.

4. The vocabulary of belonging

Deuteronomy piles up its words: keep, do, serve, worship, listen, love, hold fast. The word for holding fast, *dabaq*, to cling, is the marriage word, a husband and wife cleaving to one another; Israel is to cling to the LORD himself. And the commands come under every name, statutes, rules, testimonies, ways, torah, instruction. To be the people of God is to live gladly under his covenant lordship, and that is still what it means to believe.

5. Justice for the vulnerable

The book returns again and again to justice, to the poor, and, strikingly, to wives, who in the ancient world were particularly exposed to injustice. God's law speaks his unchanging will into a particular culture. The pastor's calling, Schreiner adds, is to preach the obligation itself, justice, generosity, protection of the weak, while the policy questions of how a society best does these things are matters on which Christians may legitimately differ.

6. Herem inside, peace outside

Inside the land, total destruction was commanded; outside it, peace was to be offered to peoples who would submit. Against recent writers who conclude Israel sinned in the conquest, Schreiner is plain: the text clearly presents these commands as God's own. God writes over every human life; he decides when people live and when they die. The commands are hard, and they are his.

7. The place the LORD chooses: worship regulated

Deuteronomy 12 fixes worship at the place the LORD will choose, deliberately unnamed: Shiloh first, Jerusalem later, for the place can move. What cannot move is the principle: worship is not left to Israel's creativity but regulated by God's word. Schreiner owns the regulative principle, with common sense, and offers a modern test: Scripture explicitly commands the public reading of Scripture, yet many churches now scarcely read the Bible or pray in their services, against the practice of the whole Christian centuries. Worship is fundamentally about faithfulness, not creativity.

8. The failure foretold

At the book's end Moses tells Israel plainly that they will disobey and go into exile. Deuteronomy 29 says something stranger still: you saw the signs and wonders, yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand, eyes to see, ears to hear. God has not given it, and they are guilty for lacking it: sovereignty and responsibility, side by side once more.

9. The circumcised heart

Then, past the exile, the promise: the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, and you will love him with all your heart and soul, and live. Schreiner reads it as regeneration itself, the only soil in which the great commandment can grow, for no one loves God with the whole heart until God has changed the heart. A remnant in every generation knew that circumcision, Moses and Joshua among them; Deuteronomy 30 looks to the day the whole people will, and that day is the new covenant.

10. Joshua: the second leg of the promise

Joshua is a huge step forward: Israel enters the land. Count the years from Abraham, on any dating of the exodus, and the promise took hundreds of years to reach this day. God is not in a hurry, Schreiner confesses, though he himself is; God works out his purposes in his own time, and his people learn patience under the promise. And the land entered is itself an anticipation of paradise.

11. A book made of land

Joshua's very vocabulary is soil: land over a hundred times, boundary and border dozens more, inheritance everywhere, so that when the New Testament says inheritance, Joshua should ring in the ears. The book's shape: chapters 1 to 5, Israel enters the land; 6 to 11, takes it; 12 to 22, divides it; 23 to 24, serves the LORD in it. The boundary lists where modern eyes glaze are recorded in loving, meticulous detail, what Stephen Dempster calls a kind of geographical overkill, precisely because it is their land, and place matters to embodied people. Dempster's *Dominion and Dynasty*, Schreiner adds, is the best Old Testament theology he knows, and mercifully short.

Scripture in this lecture

Deuteronomy 6, 7, 12, 20, 29, 30; Joshua 1, 6, 24; Matthew 22; 1 Timothy 4

Key terms

Grace precedes demand

Deuteronomy's order, and the Bible's: chosen and loved first, the fewest of peoples, then summoned to obey.

Dabaq, to cling

The marriage word, cleave, used for Israel's covenant devotion: holding fast to the LORD himself.

Herem

The total destruction commanded within the land, while peoples outside it were offered peace: God's own rule over life and death, never Israel's private violence.

The regulative principle

Worship governed by what God has commanded rather than by human creativity: faithfulness before novelty.

The circumcised heart

Deuteronomy 30's promise that God himself will change hearts to love him: regeneration, known by a remnant then, pledged to the whole people in the new covenant.

Inheritance

Joshua's word for the land parceled out in loving detail: the vocabulary the New Testament borrows for what God keeps for his people.

Comprehension check

Circle your answers, then check them against the key on the last page.

1. Why did the LORD set his love on Israel, according to Deuteronomy 7?
 - A. They were the most numerous of peoples
 - B. He loved them because he loved them, keeping his oath to the fathers
 - C. They alone had worshiped him in Egypt
 - D. Their obedience had earned it
2. What do the prophets indicate about Israel in Egypt?
 - A. They were faithful worshipers
 - B. They knew nothing of God at all
 - C. They were mostly priests
 - D. They were estranged from the LORD, so the deliverance was pure grace
3. The word dabaq, to cling, is drawn from where?
 - A. Marriage: a husband and wife cleaving to one another
 - B. Warfare
 - C. Farming
 - D. Temple architecture
4. Deuteronomy shows special concern for justice toward whom?
 - A. Kings and priests
 - B. Traveling merchants
 - C. The poor and wives, the especially vulnerable of that world
 - D. Foreign armies
5. What is the pastor's calling regarding care for the poor?
 - A. To prescribe government policy from the pulpit
 - B. To preach the obligation of justice and generosity, while policy questions remain matters where Christians may differ
 - C. To leave the subject to others
 - D. To address it only in private
6. How did God's command differ inside and outside the land?
 - A. It was the same everywhere
 - B. Peace inside, war outside
 - C. There was no warfare at all
 - D. Inside the land total destruction was commanded; outside it, peace was offered to those who would submit
7. How does the lecture answer the claim that Israel sinned in the conquest?
 - A. The text clearly presents the command as God's own, and God rules over every life
 - B. Israel misunderstood Moses
 - C. The accounts are later legend
 - D. Joshua exceeded his orders

8. What does Deuteronomy 12 establish about worship?
 - A. Worship wherever one pleases
 - B. Worship only in Jerusalem, which is named there
 - C. Worship at the place the LORD chooses, for worship is regulated by his word
 - D. Worship without sacrifice
9. Which commanded practice does the lecture say many churches now neglect?
 - A. Weekly fasting
 - B. The public reading of Scripture in the service
 - C. Annual pilgrimage
 - D. Singing in parts
10. What is the circumcision of the heart promised in Deuteronomy 30?
 - A. A ritual reserved for priests
 - B. A figure for trying harder
 - C. Israel's national mourning
 - D. Regeneration: God himself changing hearts to love him, fulfilled in the new covenant
11. What does the long stretch from Abraham to Joshua teach?
 - A. God is not in a hurry: he fulfills his promises in his own time
 - B. The promise had failed
 - C. Israel had forgotten the promise
 - D. The dates cannot be trusted
12. Why are Joshua's boundary lists so detailed?
 - A. Scribes were paid by the word
 - B. For military strategy alone
 - C. Because it is their inheritance, recorded in loving detail: place matters
 - D. To test the reader's patience

Talk it over

1. He loved you because he loved you. When you explain to your children why God loves your family, how close do you stay to that answer, and what quietly creeps in to replace it?
2. Worship, Deuteronomy says, is about faithfulness before creativity. Walk through an ordinary Sunday at your church: where is the word read, prayed, sung, and preached, and is anything commanded being crowded out?
3. Moses told Israel plainly that only God's circumcising of the heart would make them love him. Where are you working on behavior, in yourself or your children, in a place only a new heart can reach, and what does that turn your prayers into?

One verse to carry

Deuteronomy 30:6, the promise beneath the promises: the LORD your God will circumcise your heart, so that you love him with all your heart and all your soul, and live.

Go further

Stephen Dempster's *Dominion and Dynasty*, commended in the lecture as the best short Old Testament theology, and Gary Millar's study of Deuteronomy both stand behind this lecture.

Lecture 7 Comprehension Check

1. B. He loved them because he loved them, keeping his oath to the fathers (*outline section 2*)
2. D. They were estranged from the LORD, so the deliverance was pure grace (*outline section 2*)
3. A. Marriage: a husband and wife cleaving to one another (*outline section 4*)
4. C. The poor and wives, the especially vulnerable of that world (*outline section 5*)
5. B. To preach the obligation of justice and generosity, while policy questions remain matters where Christians may differ (*outline section 5*)
6. D. Inside the land total destruction was commanded; outside it, peace was offered to those who would submit (*outline section 6*)
7. A. The text clearly presents the command as God's own, and God rules over every life (*outline section 6*)
8. C. Worship at the place the LORD chooses, for worship is regulated by his word (*outline section 7*)
9. B. The public reading of Scripture in the service (*outline section 7*)
10. D. Regeneration: God himself changing hearts to love him, fulfilled in the new covenant (*outline section 9*)
11. A. God is not in a hurry: he fulfills his promises in his own time (*outline section 10*)
12. C. Because it is their inheritance, recorded in loving detail: place matters (*outline section 11*)