

## INTRODUCING MOSES'S TESTIMONIES

### A Sermon on Deuteronomy 4:44–49

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Today marks our church's one-year anniversary of weekly worship gatherings. Praise the Lord for providing and protecting. My heart warms with affection for you as members of Sovereign Joy, and my love for you has only grown the last several weeks as we've walked through flames together. We don't yet know what God is forging, but as Tolkien highlighted in *Fellowship of the Ring* how fire alone could disclose the writing on the one great ring, the heat of the past weeks is increasingly disclosing the law of God written on your hearts. You have acted so responsibly, revealing both your ownership of our church and your commitment to the glory of God in the face of Christ. I praise the Lord for you, and I am eager to journey forward with you to glorify God by making mature disciples through the Word and Spirit for the joy of all peoples in Jesus Christ.

Today also marks the start of a preaching series through Deuteronomy 5–11, which shapes the heart of this amazing book that calls God's people to love him with all. Paul said, "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4; cf. 2 Tim 3:16). Deuteronomy is Christian Scripture that God gave "for our instruction" that we might gain "hope." With this, Jesus noted, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me" (John 5:46). As we walk through one of Moses's sermons in Deuteronomy, we get to consider how these words bear witness to Christ (5:39).

I say these things fully recognizing that Paul said that Moses's law multiplied transgression (Rom 5:20; Gal 3:19), exposed sin (Rom 3:20), and brought wrath (4:15). Why preach through a book filled with laws that brought death to God's people due to their inability to obey perfectly? Doesn't Paul stress that the old law-covenant of Deuteronomy bore "a ministry of death" and "a ministry of condemnation" only to be superseded by the new covenant's "ministry of righteousness" (2 Cor 4:7, 9)? Doesn't Paul highlight that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4)? Why then would we as Christians want to focus on the law of Moses?

These are important questions, and the challenges only increase when we see that Paul equally said that this same law includes "the embodiment of knowledge and truth" (Rom 2:20) and that "the law" of Deuteronomy "is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (7:12). Why did this book inform and influence the old covenant seers, sages, and song writers more than any other, and why was this book one of Jesus and Paul's favorites? When the devil tempted

Jesus in the wilderness, verses in Deuteronomy shaped three of his responses (Matt 4:4, 7, 10; cf. Deut 8:3; 6:16, 13), and later Jesus said the “most important commandment” was Deuteronomy’s foundational call to love the one God with all (Mark 12:29–30; cf. Deut 6:4–5). Paul pointed to Deuteronomy to celebrate that we can be saved if we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:8–9; cf. Deut 30:14). Deuteronomy helped justify Paul’s mission to the Gentiles (Rom 15:10; cf. Deut 32:43), and he recalled Deuteronomy to highlight how Christ became a curse for us so we may be justified by faith (Gal 3:11, 13; cf. Deut 21:23).

Deuteronomy is Christian Scripture that matters for Christians. While the book served as a constitution for the united tribes of Israel and detailed the old Mosaic covenant relationship of which we are not a part, it also foretells how Israel would disown this relationship and how God would work through a new covenant prophetic mediator who would forever ensure lasting relationship and a universal kingdom. The church today is part of that new work, called the new covenant in Christ, so we can begin to see how Deuteronomy was written “for our instruction” to awaken “hope” in a trustworthy God who is faithful to his promises.

Turn to Deuteronomy 4:44–49, which introduce Moses’s second sermon and clarify its nature, audience, and historical setting. The words come from unnamed narrator, whose principal role in the book is to let us hear Moses’s final words to a community he had been shepherding for forty years. If God told you that you would die tomorrow, what would you say to the people you’ve loved and lead for four decades? Along with a warning song and a death-bed blessing, Moses’s four sermons in Deuteronomy supply his last words before death. Collectively they are called “the book of the law” (Deut 29:21; 30:10; 31:26), but you should think of them less as the legal dictates of a judge and more as the passionate guidance of a father to his children—the instructions of a shepherd who cares deeply about the heart and future of his sheep. This is what we will get in Deuteronomy 5–11. But first we must hear the narrator’s heading for this larger unit and his preamble to the second sermon. Follow along as I read Deuteronomy 4:44–49.... Pray with me....

### **The Law of Moses (4:44)**

To grasp properly a passage’s lasting significance, we must query the author’s intent. Some texts seek to instruct, calling for faith or action. Others seek to motivate, clarifying promises or warnings designed to guide other stated goals. Still other texts, like this one, seek to inform. So, as we consider Scriptural application today, you’ve gained what God intended if you better understand in a way that readies your heart for what is coming. We are to think rightly about issues like the speaker’s identity and authority and the timing and setting of his words.

We must remember that God does not include superficial details in his text. The Spirit gave us these words on purpose, and we must consider why.

Our text has a double heading, the first of which comes in 4:44: “And this is the law that Moses set before the people of Israel.” While absent in the ESV, verse 44 begins with a conjunction that links this heading to the book’s beginning. 1:1 opens, “These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel,” and now 4:44 adds, “And this is the law that Moses set before the people of Israel.” The first sermon in chapters 1–4 is categorized as “words,” and then the several messages that run from chapters 5–28 are together designated as “the law.” The “words” in chapters 1–4 supply the historical context and implications of the covenant God is here renewing in the region of Moab, and then the “law” in chapters 5–28 clarifies the content of the covenant itself.

Next, we must rightly grasp this concept of *covenant*. It’s a special formal relationship between two parties based on binding promises with God as witness. Legal contracts like land purchases could include a penalty but wouldn’t incur the wrath of God if you failed your commitment. In contrast, covenants included blessings and curses that God would carry out based on whether the human party was faithful to the stipulations. The world’s story told in the Bible develops through a progression of these special relationships between God and humanity.

Deuteronomy’s messages summarize the Moab covenant, which gets its name from the region of Moab, north of the Dead Sea, where Moses gave his final sermons. The Moab covenant renews the relationship God initiated with Israel at Mount Sinai after the exodus. This collective relationship is often referred to as the Mosaic covenant, because Moses is the human instrument God used to formalize the relationship. In Galatians 3, Paul speaks of this old Mosaic covenant when he writes, “The law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God [to Abraham], so as to make the promise void” (Gal 3:17). God had pledged that the world would be blessed through Abraham, and the old law-covenant that Yahweh gave to Israel four centuries later through Moses at Sinai and then through Deuteronomy could not annul those earlier promises.

As salvation history progresses, Israel’s condemnation in the age of Moses’s law gives rise to the age of faith in Christ. Thus, the new covenant supersedes the old. Again, Paul says in Galatians 3, “Before [the age of] faith came, we were held captive under the law [of Moses], imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Gal 3:23–26).

When Paul speaks of law, he almost always refers to the Mosaic law-covenant as detailed in Deuteronomy 5–28. When the narrator introduces this section of Scripture with the heading, “This is the law,” he highlights that what follows supplies the commands and prohibitions for enjoying a lasting relationship with God. But the same section also clarifies the blessings of life that will come if they obey and the curses of death that will result if they don’t. The language of “law,” therefore, summarizes the body of the covenant—both the directives or instructions that guide the relationship and the promises and warnings that motivate it. When Paul says, “the law is holy” (Rom 7:12), and, “I delight in the law of God in my inner being” (7:22), and when he says, “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness” (10:4), he refers to the law-covenant in Deuteronomy that is here introduced with this heading, “This is the law that Moses set before the people of Israel” (Deut 4:44). The content here provided the legal framework for Israel’s future in the promised land. It is this law by which judges were to render justice (16:18–20), kings were to rule (17:18–20), and priests were to teach (33:10). It is this law that the future prophet like Moses would fulfill and clarify and that the new covenant community would then follow (18:15, 18; 30:8, 14).

Finally, the passage associates Moses, not God, with this “law.” Yet these concepts are not at odds, for Moses operates as an ambassador of the heavenly court whom Yahweh commissioned with a word for the people. Moses stands as the mediator of the covenant because he represented God before the people, serving as God’s mouthpiece, and then represented the people before God through prayer. The “law” is indeed Moses’s law, but he is merely the messenger, clarifying for Israel the revelation of God, who is king over all. Elsewhere Scripture refers to the special relationship between Yahweh and Israel as the *old* covenant because it stands in contrast to the *new* covenant, for which Jesus is the mediator. The old covenant includes “the law of Moses,” whereas the new covenant includes “the law of Christ” (cf. 1 Cor 9:20–21; Gal 6:2), whom Deuteronomy calls a prophet like Moses.

### **The Demands of the Moab Covenant**

Whereas the “law” of Moses in 4:44 introduces several speeches, the new heading in 4:45 announces only the second message, which has two sections—chapters 5–11 and 12–26. We read, “These are the testimonies, the statutes, and the rules, which Moses spoke to the people of Israel.” Chapters 5–11 read like a sermon and are the “testimonies,” whereas chapters 12–26 sound more like laws and are the detailed “statutes and rules.” Chapters 5–11 provide three “testimonies,” each beginning with “Hear, O Israel” (5:1; 6:4; 9:1), that urge Israel to love Yahweh with all by heeding the covenant stipulations that follow (5:1; 11:32).

Having clarified the messenger, audience, and nature of the sermon that follows, the narrator now wants us to consider the significance of several features of history and geography that ready us to interpret properly what Moses is about to preach. Let's look at each of these in turn.

### **The Timing**

"Moses spoke to the people of Israel when they came out of Egypt" (4:45). The greatest act of divine deliverance in the Old Testament era was the exodus, when Yahweh rescued Israel after 400 years of bondage to Egypt. Thus, we read, "The LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt" (4:20). Highlighting the uniqueness of this event, Moses adds, "Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?" (4:34). Moses's law is here framed in the context not of enslavement but of freedom. The narrator stresses that Moses's call to love God with all in Deuteronomy 5–11 comes as a response to saving grace and not as a means for gaining it. In view of how much God has won for them, will they turn from evil and cling to good?

### **The Location**

"Moses spoke to the sons of Israel ... beyond the Jordan in the valley opposite Beth-peor" (4:46). The region of the Jordan River is far east of Kadesh-Barnea in southern Judah where Israel initially tried to enter the promised land. Chapter 1 retells how the nation arrived at this southern outpost of the promised land and sent in twelve spies, who returned celebrating the land's fruitfulness. Yet the people refused to enter, claiming, "The people are greater and taller than we" (1:28). Even after Moses emphasized, "The LORD your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes" (1:30), the people "did not believe the LORD" (1:31). So, God declared, "Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers" (1:35), except Caleb and Joshua. So, for the next four decades the exodus generation became a walking mortuary, dying at a higher rate than expected as God led them through the wilderness. Moses then says, "And the time from our leaving Kadesh-Barnea until we cross the brook Zered [near where Deuteronomy is preached] was thirty-eight years, until the entire generation, that, the men of war, had perished from the camp, as the LORD had sworn to them" (2:14).

Noting that Moses was speaking in the region of the Jordan recalls not only God's justice in punishing the first generation but also his mercy in allowing a new generation to rise and enter the promised land. There are still people to whom

Moses gets to preach, and this is a testimony to the kindness and steadfast love of God. He hasn't changed, and we should be forever grateful. Had he wiped out Israel in the wilderness, hope would be dashed for blessing to rise from the offspring of Abraham. Yet while the curse remained, hope was sustained, and one evidence is in Moses preaching to a new generation in the region of the Jordan.

Next, the narrator highlights that Moses's message arises "in the valley opposite Beth-peor" (4:46). This note cautions all readers. After the exodus generation was dead, Peor was the spot where the prophet Balaam incited the new generation of Israelites "to act treacherously against the LORD" in sexual immorality and idolatry. This resulted in God bringing a plague on the people that killed 24,000 (Num 25:9; 31:16). The plague happened only weeks before Moses's sermons in Deuteronomy, so the wounds of loss were fresh. 4:3 reads, "Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal-peor, for the LORD your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of peor." The sins of the parents had already become the sins of the children, and 24,000 experienced the curse of death. Approaching Moses's law rightly in Deuteronomy requires that we sense God's holiness and feel the tragedy of sin and condemnation. God takes sin seriously, and so should we. We may easily pass over this small geographical comment, yet its presence is to awaken certain reactions in readers who have ears to hear. Do you hear God warning you, urging you to guard yourself from sin?

Finally, with respect to location, we read,

Moses spoke ... in the land of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon, whom Moses and the people of Israel defeated when they came out of Egypt. And they took possession of his land and the land of Og, the king of Bashan, the two kings of the Amorites, who lived to the east beyond the Jordan; from Aroer, which is on the edge of the Valley of the Arnon, as far as Mount Sirion (that is Hermon), together with all the Arabah on the east side of the Jordan as far as the Sea of the Arabah, under the slopes of Pisgah. (4:46–49)

For a retelling of Israel's engagement with Sihon and Og you can read chapters 2–3, but in their being called the two Transjordanian "kings of the Amorites" recalls the notice God gave to Abraham that his offspring would be afflicted 400 years and would not yet possess the promised land because "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen 15:16). Obviously, in God's purposeful providence (2:30; 3:2), these two kings' refusal of Yahweh's terms of peace completed the measure of wickedness that God had determined for their destruction, and Yahweh gave them and their lands over to Israel. Israel claimed territory from the northern part of the Dead Sea east of the Jordan all the way up 60 miles north of the Sea of Galilee near Damascus. Moving into the battles, God told Moses, "This day I will begin to

put the dread and fear of you on the peoples who are under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you” (2:25). And then after the victory, Moses prayed, “O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servants your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours?” (3:24). Why does God display such great acts of power? Moses tells us: “that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him” (4:35).

### **Conclusion**

Today’s passage has sought to inform with necessary data so we can rightly hear Moses’s call to love God with all in Deuteronomy 5–11. The biblical narrator has elevated both Yahweh’s power and pardon, his punishing hand and his preserving grace. In the wilderness, God destroyed the doubting warriors of the exodus generation, and at Peor he brought a plague that killed 24,000 who followed the wicked ways of the world. Yet a new generation remained to whom Moses spoke God’s words, thus highlighting God’s amazing mercy. With this, in the weeks leading up to Moses’s message, Yahweh had delivered the two Amorite kings of the lands beyond the Jordan River over to the Israelites, recalling the great power he had earlier displayed when defeating Egypt at the exodus. The God who promised that he would give Israel a resting place in the promised land was able to do it. But would the new generation heed his Word or follow in the rebellious ways of their forefathers? Yahweh is still holy, and his power remains unmatched.

Furthermore, our present journeys through fire remind us that we are still awaiting our own greater promised land—the new heavens and earth. The questions remain: Will we hear and persevere? Will we fail, or will we follow? In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul recalls some of the same stories mentioned in our passage. He notes of the exodus generation, “With most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness” (1 Cor 10:5). Paul then adds:

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were.... We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (10:6–12)

May we enter Deuteronomy eager to gain greater knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Moses’s law still matters, and his testimonies in Deuteronomy 5–11 are still speaking to all who have ears to hear. May God help us receive.