NOT LAW BUT TORAH

Most people have little interest in reading Deuteronomy, often because they think it consists of a bunch of laws that either they already understand or are no longer applicable. But this is a wrong picture of this book. Deuteronomy is not law at all! It is sermons. It is covenant. It is Torah (which means guidance or teaching in Hebrew). It is life.

Moses is about to die, Israel is about to cross the Jordan, and Moses wants to encourage and remind the Israelites of their covenantal commitment to God. He longs to inspire and motivate them, to move their hearts to greater faithfulness to Yahweh. And yet the people are already rebellious (see Deut. 31:27) and seem to have forgotten all their parents went through and how God helped them. So, Moses preaches a series of sermons and then writes them down, structured in the form of an ancient Hittite treaty/covenant that the people would be familiar with. The covenant begins by recounting all that the initiating party (God) had done in rescuing and helping the receiving party (Israel) of the covenant. Deuteronomy 1–4 is full of all the ways God has helped Israel in their journey.

The story Moses tells is a story of grace; God’s grace in helping a people bent on rejecting Him. And this grace is all the more reason that the people are to respond with obedience. But this obedience flows out of a heart of love and gratitude for salvation, not in order to be saved.

So, even at this most crucial juncture, Moses is not trying to browbeat the people but instead to win their hearts, their minds, their allegiance to God.
Write out Deuteronomy 1:19–37 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Deuteronomy 1:26–33. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIP

God is all about relationships. Deuteronomy seeks to move the hearts of the people into closer relationship with God. God is the one who saves them. God is the one who has grace when they fall. God is the one who leads and guides them. God provides, and God restores.

And yet, when difficulties came, Israel was quick to turn against God and blame Him for the difficulties. At that point, it was much easier for them to listen to others than to God. As noted in Deuteronomy 1, they gave in to fear instead of remembering the mighty works God had already done for them in the past. Not only that, even sending the spies showed a lack of faith. And though Moses and the two faithful spies were speaking encouraging words, the people instead chose to focus on the negative and discouraging words.

Israel had already been through two covenant ceremonies in the past year and had broken both of them (not going up on the mountain in Exod. 19; golden calf incident in Exod. 32). This would be the equivalent to God being jilted for another lover on two occasions. And God had even wanted to start over with a new people (Exod. 32:9-10). Yet He chose to forgive and hope that real change would happen. But instead, the relationship resulted in even more affairs, and even greater betrayal. God is a personal being, whose heart is broken when His people choose to reject Him who loves them so deeply.

It is easy to look at Israel in their continued and recurring horrific choices and wonder how they could come to such a place after God had done so many miracles for them. But this is the condition of the human heart; we naturally prefer death to life, and we prefer to doubt and fear instead of trusting in the God who made us and delivered us. And when we are in a new trial, it is easy to forget the past deliverance. Moses reminds the people of all the times God has delivered them, not to berate them but so that they are less likely to forget in the future when another trial comes.

This is why the middle part of Deuteronomy, the next section of the covenant, fleshes out each of the Ten Words (the Decalogue is never called “commandments” in Hebrew; Moses calls them the Ten Words) in more detail. Since the people had continued to keep their hearts away from God and refused to listen to His voice, God gave them many examples of what their lives would look like when their hearts were in tune with His. Then the covenant ends with blessings and curses, which were a normal part of covenants as well, reiterating the choice that the people needed to make between life and death.
GOD’S EMOTIONS

Christians often talk of God as though He is above emotions, and that emotions are only human characteristics. Because of this, many people feel uncomfortable sharing their true emotions with God, perhaps thinking that He cannot understand or handle them. However, this idea comes from the theological concept of impassibility, which teaches that God is not able to feel anything in response to what someone else does. Unfortunately, this idea has pervaded Christian thought for centuries and still affects much of theology today, but it is not a biblical concept. The Bible is full of God’s emotions and His personal responses to His people.

God portrays His relationship with His people as a marriage, implying deep love and commitment and emotional attachment. This is why God responds with such anger and grief when His people sin. God is a personal being, who feels infinitely more deeply than we ever will. God never sins in His emotions, but this does not mean He does not have them! In Deuteronomy 1, Moses recalls God’s anger when the people believe the lies of the spies instead of trusting in God’s power to save them, as He had in so many past miracles (vv. 32–36). To God, their doubt was a personal attack, showing that they had not given Him their hearts, and He was wounded to the core. God had done so much for them, bringing them from Egypt, working mighty things in their behalf, and holding them close to Himself; yet they act as though they do not care. This betrayal cuts deep. Amazingly, God still forgives them and bears long with them (four hundred years of their betrayal until He allows the exile).

To further help the people understand the emotions God feels, God often calls prophets to go through the same experiences as He did, so that they feel the same emotions and can therefore express God’s emotions to Israel. For instance, Hosea is asked to marry a prostitute, who is unfaithful to him, and then asked to marry her again (Hosea 1:2, 3:1). Hosea feels anguish and pain at her betrayal but also anger at the continued repetition of it, as she seems to flaunt his love and forgiveness. This experience directly parallels the persistent unfaithfulness of Israel, and the anguish mixed with anger that God feels as a result (Hosea 11:1–11). Far from being a God who does not understand, God feels deeply and shares emotional experiences with us. He also feels great joy and happiness when we choose to follow Him and become His people!
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Numbers 13:25–14:12
Exodus 32:1–26
1 Kings 19:1–18
2 Chronicles 20:1–24
Joshua 1:1–9
Hosea 11:1–11

What other verses come to mind in connection with Deuteronomy 1?

Review your memorized verse from Deuteronomy 1:19–37.
JESUS IS YAHWEH

First of all, it is important to realize that Yahweh in the Old Testament is Jesus! There is good evidence for this all through the Bible. Yahweh is God’s covenant name, His personal name that He uses in relationship with His people. Yahweh creates humans, and Jesus created all (cf. John 1). Yahweh is the mediator between God and humans, even before He becomes human (cf. Prov 8). And while Yahweh is one God, there are two persons who are Yahweh mentioned many places together (cf. Judg. 6; Mal 3). In addition, the angel of Yahweh is the one who appears to people many times, and they think He is a man or an angel at first, but then realize He is God (cf. Judges 13). But the angel of Yahweh is the one who appears to Moses in the burning bush and says, “I am Yahweh” (Exod. 3)! Yahweh is the one who speaks to the people from Sinai. And in the New Testament, Paul makes clear that “Jesus is Yahweh” (Rom. 10:9). This concept revolutionizes how to see the Old Testament. Jesus has always been seeking the hearts of His people, as well as desiring to be close to them.

In Deuteronomy 1, Yahweh is the one who is giving them the land (v. 21). God always gives us good things, even when we doubt if they are good or not. God does not ever bring fear or terror, and sometimes He speaks through other people to remind us not to be afraid. Satan is the one who is seeking to get us to think that God only wants to destroy us, but those are lies. God longs to bless us abundantly! And yet, God allows us to make our own choices about listening to Him or not. He never forces Himself upon us.

This passage also describes many aspects of Yahweh’s parental relationship with His people. Whether or not you have had a good earthly father, Yahweh is your eternally good heavenly father (v. 31). Earthly fathers will sin and hurt us, but Yahweh will carry us and hold us close like we have always wanted a good father to do. Not only that, but Yahweh will fight for us and protect us (v. 30). When we have enemies on all sides, we do not have to be afraid, because Yahweh is all powerful and will defend us. And even when we reject and betray Him, Yahweh will never leave us but will always stay by our side and remind us of His love and desire to deliver us from our lives of sin and suffering.

Meditate on Deuteronomy 1:19–37 again and look for where Jesus is.

What is He saying to you through these texts?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

How does seeing Yahweh as Jesus change your picture of Him?

Prayer: How do you respond to seeing Jesus in this way?

Read more at www.inversebible.org/deut01-6
THE TWELVE SPIES

“The people were enthusiastic; they would eagerly obey the voice of the Lord, and go up at once to possess the land. But after describing the beauty and fertility of the land, all but two of the spies enlarged upon the difficulties and dangers that lay before the Israelites should they undertake the conquest of Canaan. . . .

“Now the scene changed. Hope and courage gave place to cowardly despair, as the spies uttered the sentiments of their unbelieving hearts, which were filled with discouragement prompted by Satan. Their unbelief cast a gloomy shadow over the congregation, and the mighty power of God, so often manifested in behalf of the chosen nation, was forgotten. The people did not wait to reflect; they did not reason that He who had brought them thus far would certainly give them the land; they did not call to mind how wonderfully God had delivered them from their oppressors, cutting a path through the sea and destroying the pursuing hosts of Pharaoh. They left God out of the question, and acted as though they must depend solely on the power of arms.

“In their unbelief they limited the power of God and distrusted the hand that had hitherto safely guided them. . . . They accused their leaders of deceiving the people and bringing trouble upon Israel.

“The people were desperate in their disappointment and despair. A wail of agony arose and mingled with the confused murmur of voices. Caleb comprehended the situation, and, bold to stand in defense of the word of God, he did all in his power to counteract the evil influence of his unfaithful associates. For an instant the people were still to listen to his words of hope and courage respecting the goodly land. He did not contradict what had already been said; the walls were high and the Canaanites strong. But God had promised the land to Israel. ‘Let us go up at once and possess it,’ urged Caleb; ‘for we are well able to overcome it.’

“But the ten, interrupting him, pictured the obstacles in darker colors than at first. . . .

“These men, having entered upon a wrong course, stubbornly set themselves against Caleb and Joshua, against Moses, and against God. Every advance step rendered them the more determined. They were resolved to discourage all effort to gain possession of Canaan. They distorted the truth in order to sustain their baleful influence. It ‘is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof,’ they said. This was not only an evil report, but it was also a lying one. It was inconsistent with itself. The spies had declared the country to be fruitful and prosperous, and the people of giant stature, all of which would be impossible if the climate were so unhealthful that the land could be said to ‘eat up the inhabitants.’ But when men yield their hearts to unbelief they place themselves under the control of Satan, and none can tell to what lengths he will lead them.”

( Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1890), 387–89.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What are some things that God has done to deliver you in the past?

Who are some people that God has used to encourage you?

How can we intentionally remember what God has done for us in the past?

What are some practical ways that we can put ourselves in positions where God can remove the fear from our hearts?

How can we encourage others in times of difficulty, without glossing over the problems?

How does the structure of the covenant impact how you view Deuteronomy?

How do God’s emotions impact your view of your relationship with Him?