

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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"THE FOURTH OF JULY: A GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY."

Text: Deuteronomy 4:7

I have chosen to locate the introduction of this Fourth of July sermon in the ancient book of Deuteronomy, one of the five Old Testament Books of Law (The Torah) mainly because it deals with the national responsibilities of The Chosen People. To salute the glory of a nation is one thing, to announce its accompanying responsibilities is another. Tradition says that Moses wrote the Book as a summary of God's commands, prior to the time that he died and the people of Israel made their way across the Jordan to the Promised Land under Joshua.

Deuteronomy is often overlooked and forgotten when the Old Testament Books of Law are studied: Genesis begins with the creation of the world and ends with Joseph becoming prime minister of Egypt. Exodus explores the release of the people of God from the bondage of Egypt, when a new king arose in that land "who did not know Joseph." It features Moses, the Ten Commandments and the trek through the Wilderness of Sinai, all great events, and memorable.

Most Christians, however, would be hard pressed to pass a quiz on the contents of Leviticus or Deuteronomy. In fact, more than a couple of the people I asked about our book, answered my question by referring jokingly to "Old Deuteronomy," one of the lead cats in the Broadway Musical which bears the name of "Cats," not Deuteronomy, the last book of The Torah.

The title of the Biblical book, to give you a little hint, simply means "words" or "laws", literally "second laws." It is largely that, including a second edition of the Laws of God, given to the

people by Moses. There is a revised issue of the Ten Commandments (substantially the same, found in Deuteronomy 5:4-21. The originals, as you know, are in Exodus 20) and a host of other much more specific codes of conduct, many in the area of promiscuous behavior, family life, community celebrations, and legal redress and punishment for individuals who have been aggrieved, or who said they were. What else is new?

The structure of Deuteronomy is simple, personal and touching. Beginning with a recitation of all the things that had happened to the Israelites since their escape from the captivity of Egypt, it ends with a tearful peroration by Moses that he is too old to make it over to the Promised Land. (Actually, the Lord denied him that privilege.) They will have to go on without him. Joshua will take over. At the end of the book, Moses died up on Mt. Nebo on the other side of the Jordan River. From there, he could see into the Promised Land, but he never got to enter it. And, it adds, no one to this day knows where he is buried.

I say that tradition holds that Moses wrote the book. It could be. But it is more likely that a supremely devoted follower collected the stories and speeches of the Prophet and wrote them down, so that the people of God who followed would have a record of who Moses was, and what he said and did; much like I have a 3-volume **Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln**, and a new book I came across not long ago called **Writings** by George Washington. I treasure both of them.

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Whatever, by the time that the Book of Numbers ends and Deuteronomy begins, the 40-year wandering through the desert is over and the Chosen People are ready to enter the land of milk and honey. Moses is concerned that in their new locale they will continue to remember the source of their strength. The times will be difficult. Even though God said he would give them the Promised Land, when they arrived, it was occupied by strong, highly armed and organized nations. He warned them that it would be no cake walk, and it wasn't.

In Chapter 4, just beyond our text and the Scripture I read to you, Moses offers his far-reaching advice: He repeats that he would not get to go over to the Promised Land himself, but, he said when you get there and take possession of that good land, be careful: "Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the Covenant of the Lord 4:23 Your God, which he made with you, and make a graven image in the form of anything which the Lord your God has forbidden you."

What worried Moses most was not the battles nor the hardships nor the struggles they would have to endure to take possession of the land of milk and honey. He believed, as he had observed in the Wilderness, that men and women can and will rise up to meet the obstacles; so long as they have a challenge before them they normally take it on. It is when things get easy that it is more difficult. He was fearful that when they finally won and occupied the land they would drift into danger. It is then that they might forget the laws and ordinances of God. It is then that they could begin to assume that they were responsible for their own peace and prosperity, not having received it as a gift of God.

When Joshua stood up to take over the nation, in his first Inaugural Address as it were, he said how sorry he was that Moses was gone. He thanked Moses and the Lord for the blessing and guidance through the Wilderness. Then he told them that they would have to keep on going. ("Eternal vigilance is the price we pay for freedom.") "As we go into the promised land choose this day who

you will serve. Put away the faithless gods which the people of these lands now serve. Choose whether to serve them or to serve the God your fathers served through all the generations before you.... As for me and my house," he ended, "we will serve the Lord."

The first requirement Moses made on the people was that they should remember the laws and ordinances of the Lord God, remember how they came to be and remember the source of their strength. Chapter 4, verse 9, says "only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children."

The text of Chapter 4 offers several reasons to support the pre-eminence of the Laws of God. These people were special in the sight of God, more than all the nations of the earth. Why? Not because they had military might and power, although from time to time, they did; not because they were skillful and bright; not because of the beauty and resources of their land, but precisely and only because they were the custodians of the Laws of God. Verse 7 is especially to the point "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us."

Other nations of the day darted about after whatever gods of the day were on top. In Ancient Egypt, the universe was believed to be created by Ra, the Sun God. The society was ruled by the Pharaohs, not the gods. In Mesopotamia, there was conflict, eternal conflict between good and evil. There was no creator and man was almost an afterthought, not the crown of creation. The gods were unpredictable and dangerous.

In Isaiah 46, the prophet over in Babylon pokes fun at the nations whose burden it is to carry their gods about: "Bel bows down, Nebo stoops, their gods are carried on the backs of beasts and cattle. The gods are so heavy the beasts are weary. You need a God to carry you," Isaiah shouts. "I have made

and I will bear. I will carry you and save you." "...To whom will you liken me," says the Lord. They go out and hire a goldsmith and he makes them a god. But then they have to carry it. They set it in its place and it stands there, it cannot move. If one cries to it, it does not answer, or save him from his trouble.

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G. Ernest Wright wrote in his Commentary that the main importance of Deuteronomy is to understand that the first great step in man's religious pilgrimage is to learn to know God, that He is and what He is. The second is to know with certainty what His will is, "what He wants, expects and commands us to do." If God is there and He cannot communicate His desires, He is as removed and silent as the Babylonian gods who had to be carried about.

If you want to know the will of God for you, Moses taught, you will find it in the law. "It was here that the Jewish nation found its pride and joy. No code was like their god-given one; to no other nation, and so they were to boast that God so clearly revealed his will to them alone.

He promised them that if they heeded the Laws of God, they would continue to live. If they followed them, it would ward off Yahweh's displeasure. And, other nations would look at them and see the source of their strength. The people will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us."

The first point Deuteronomy makes is that the will of God for nations, as well as for you and me, is revealed clearly in the law. When a nation forgets to follow the Law of God, it inevitably goes into ruin.

George Washington ended his first inaugural address with these words: "Having thus imparted to you my sentiments, as they have been awakened

by the occasion which brings us together, I shall take my present leave; but not without resorting once more to the benign Parent of the human race, in humble supplication that since he has been pleased to favour the American people, with opportunities for deliberating in perfect tranquility, and dispositions for deciding with unparalleled unanimity on a form of Government, for the security of their Union, and the advancement of their happiness; so this divine blessing may be equally *conspicuous* in the enlarged views--the temperate consultations, and the wise measures on which the success of this Government must depend." (Washington First Inaugural, April 30, 1789)

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The first command was to obey the law. The second command was that they should share the law with others. Abraham was promised that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

The United States of America has been blessed indeed. But it is not so in other parts of the earth. One evening not so long ago, I was clicking my way through all 126 TV channels on our set (to the perpetual annoyance of my wife) when I stumbled across some informative station which was covering the Global Health Conference in Washington, D.C. That doesn't sound like much and I almost clicked right by to the next station. But I heard the soft sweet Georgia voice of our former President Jimmy Carter. I don't think there has ever been an ex-President, not in modern times anyway, who has done more for the nation or for humanity in his retirement. He has been on a non-stop, human rights campaign to make the world a better place. All politics aside, President Carter is the embodiment of what we each and all should do or have done in our retirement.

Much of his devotion is widely known on the domestic front, including his consummate concern for the Christian Church, the State of Georgia, Habitat for Humanity, and all the rest. But on the international front, he has also been deeply involved

in human health concerns all around the globe. In his unassuming way that evening, he chatted with the people at the Global Health Conference and the millions listening in to the broadcast about the problems of the world. Mrs. Cromie and I were fascinated and impressed.

He said that while President Clinton and the NATO officials were no doubt correct in intervening with force in Kosovo to try to eliminate the ethnic cleansing by the Serbs, at the same time the problem of man's inhumanity to man (and to women and children) was far, far worse in the underdeveloped parts of the world. All over Africa, and Asia, and Central and South America, human life is wasted in astronomical proportions. Matters as simple as vaccinations and routine health care, to say nothing of hunger and disease, as extreme as they are, still come in second compared to the degradation of human life. He started at the northeastern end of the Continent of Africa and worked his way in and around Egypt, Liberia, Nigeria, the Sudan, etc. almost anywhere you would choose to stop and look, men, women, and worst of all, children are being hopelessly slaughtered by opposing forces within the same so-called nation and from forces outside. "It makes a sham of what human life and health and happiness should be." I got depressed.

I got busy again with my own life and responsibilities later that evening and the hurt I felt when Mr. Carter spoke receded. But often in the past several weeks my thoughts and prayers have returned to the topic of global health and human survival. I know that we have plenty of places to put our time and energy and money to help alleviate human suffering and discrimination here at home: As so many say, charity begins at home. But meanwhile, within a few hours plane flight, hundreds of thousands of little children are dying of hunger, malnutrition and diseases for which preventative vaccinations and medical cures are available.

I know we are celebrating the Fourth of July Holiday today...and there are many reasons to rise

and shout and cheer the grand and glorious freedoms of this nation, but still, lingering around the edges of our celebrations are the continuing concerns with all God's children everywhere.

As we enjoy our plenty, let us pray that God will help us as a Chapel and as a community and as a nation to share our bounty. We are the new chosen nation, but chosen for a purpose. Arnold Toynbee once wrote that in the years to come, "We will be remembered as the first civilization to have shared its bounty and its blessings with all the people of the earth. We will not be remembered for our military prowess, nor the Industrial Revolution, nor the Technological Revolution, nor our wealth and comforts, we will be remembered as those who cared."

I often think that if he is wrong, we will not be remembered at all. President Eisenhower offered this closing prayer as a preface to his Inaugural Address back in 1953:

The President's Prayer

Almighty God

As we stand here at this moment,
my future associates in the executive branch
of the Government join me in beseeching
that Thou will make full and complete
our dedication to the service of the people in
this throng and their fellow citizens everywhere.

Give us, we pray, the power to discern clearly
right from wrong and allow all our words
and actions to be governed thereby and by
the laws of this land.

Especially we pray that our concern shall be
for all the people, regardless of station,
race or calling.

May cooperation be permitted
and be the mutual aim of those who, under the
concept of our Constitution, hold to differing
political beliefs -- so that all may work for the

good of our beloved country and for Thy Glory.
For now and evermore. Amen.

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