

# **The Code of Deuteronomy**

**A sermon by Vincent Frunzi  
Presented on Sunday, September 5, 2010**

## **Sermon Prayer:**

Why don't we just open with a word of prayer. Dear God, I thank you so much that despite our weaknesses you are always in control. And so Lord we thank you that this is your day and that you are worshipped Lord, not just on this day but every day, and even Lord the rocks will cry out to worship you if we do not. So Lord we thank you this Sunday morning; Hosanna to your name. We pray that your Holy Spirit, Lord, will be with us and with me as we bring your word Lord to one another. We pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen.

## **Sermon:**

On March 4, 1865 President Abraham Lincoln gave his second inaugural address to the nation.

The Civil War, the bloodiest conflict the nation has ever experienced before and since, would finally come to a close within a few days. And unknown to all, this tall and lanky President would be assassinated in just little over a month. Throughout the five years of the Civil War both the North and the South engaged in fiery religious rhetoric. Both sides invoked the name of God; both sides passionately believed that God would punish the other side with the most fiercest of judgments. As it became clear that the North in its struggle to preserve the Union was near victory, it was easy for the North to see their victory as coming from the hand of God and that the humiliating defeat of the South was severe punishment for those who would break up the Union, and most of all who had other human beings as slaves.

But Abraham Lincoln saw things differently. In a speech that must of surely enraged the defenders of the Union, Lincoln did not interpret the North's victory as evidence of God's favor towards them, rather he simply remarked that we cannot know the hidden purposes of God. He stated, "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both have not been

answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.”

Now in that same speech, Lincoln did allow for the possibility that God was judging the nation for the crime of slavery. But if so, Lincoln’s addresses that the judgment fell on the nation as a whole and not just on the South. And then, with Christian forgiveness, Lincoln ended his speech with these remarkable words, “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work that we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who has borne the battle, for his widow, and for his orphan; to do all which we may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and all nations.”

Now these words of Lincoln, these very wise words of the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, fly squarely in the face of the Old Testament text we heard this morning. The passage from the 30<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy states that in no uncertain terms that God will judge a nation according to its actions. If a nation of people do not obey the commandments of the Lord, that nation will perish; that nation will die. If a nation of people will obey the commandments of the Lord, that nation will live and be blessed. In the passage that we read, God says to Israel, if you obey the commandments of the Lord, your God that I am commanding you today, the Lord, Your God will bless you and the land. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, I declare to you today that you will perish. It’s that simple, that cut and dry. You obey you will be blessed; you disobey you will be cursed.

This passage conveys a theological idea which biblical scholars have termed fittingly the Deuteronomic Code. Simply put, this code is the idea that if a nation or individual will obey the commandments of God, that is if they do what is right and good, then God will bless that nation or that individual. If a nation or individual who disobey the commandments of God and do what is wrong and evil, then God will curse that nation or that individual. To put it even more simply – the code says that if you do good God will reward you; if you do evil God will punish you. Now let me ask you, does that sound familiar? It should because almost all of us have been raised to believe this very idea.

Now if one was asked which book of the Bible has had the most influence on Western civilization, the book of Deuteronomy would not immediately come to mind. And yet, it

can be argued that this book has had more influence upon Christian thinking in the West than any other book. This concept that God will bless us if we do good or curse us if we do bad is deeply ingrained in us both as a nation and as individuals. And the book of Deuteronomy is in no small way responsible for this. And boy, do we really see this kind of thinking over and over again, don't we? When an evil befalls our nation, whether it is a natural disaster or a heinous crime committed by an enemy, our first instinct is to think on the level of Deuteronomy - that God must be punishing us for disobeying some divine commandment. And so, as we've heard many times when the horrific events of 9/11 unfolded, a chorus of religious leaders chimed in invoking the name of God. The most notorious being the late Rev. Falwell who commented that 9/11 was God's judgment upon homosexuality and abortion. Or when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans killing 1800 people, some Christian fundamentalist groups surmised it was God's punishment on such a carnally sinful city as New Orleans with its gambling, drinking and sexual immorality.

And just recently the conservative talk show host Glenn Beck said these words to a Tea Party organization, "We are a country of God. As I look on the problems of this country quite honestly I feel the hot breath of God on our necks. And to fix it politically [is a figure that] I do not see." But it is not just religious conservatives who are guilty of this thinking, religious liberals are also guilty. During Barack Obama's campaign for President the cable news outlets were abuzz over Rev. Jeremiah Wright's statements that 9/11 was the roosters coming home to hatch for the nation's long history of racism and oppression toward people of color - which it is most certainly guilty of.

And we see how the book of Deuteronomy influences us in our every day life whether in our own life or someone else's. When something really bad happens to us; when great suffering comes to us we often think God must be punishing me for something; I must have done something wrong. So what are we to make of all this? I mean, what are we to do with such passages like Deuteronomy 30? Are these words true or not? Does God bless and prosper us when we obey God's commandments? And does God punish us when we don't? Is this always true? Is it always the case?

Well, I think we can say from the outset that this is not always true. In fact, if we had to really be honest we have to admit that the words of Deuteronomy puzzle us. Why it may be true that some evil acts do get punished, many do not and disobedience and evil goes

unpunished. And making matters worse, not only do those who commit evil go unpunished, but many people who do good who obey God experience evil and suffering. In other words, it seems like those who are good and righteous are the ones who are being punished. You see the whole concept of this Deuteronomic code just doesn't make sense a lot of times because the world is a place that doesn't make sense. It is a place where evil and suffering seem to randomly fall on any body at any time and the reasons elude us and it causes us great anxiety.

But Christians have wrestled with this contradiction for centuries. The great Christian thinker Augustan addressed this very issue in his monumental work, *The City of God*. In his book Augustan challenges the thinking of what many pagans had said who followed the Roman religion with their many gods. The pagans reason that the Roman Empire was experiencing all the invasions by the barbarians because Rome became Christian and thus the gods were punishing Rome for no longer worshiping the many gods. But Augustan argued that this was not true. He rightly said that Rome also experienced tragedies and evils way before Rome became Christian and at the present moment was no different from then. He eloquently explained that here were two cities – the earthly city and the heavenly city. Right now we are all living in the earthly city. We experience pain and suffering. But as Christians we are also members of the heavenly city where one day we will no longer experience evil or suffering. And this is in effect what Abraham Lincoln was saying just as Augustan said that God's purposes are beyond our grasp and that anything can happen at any time to any people.

So, what does this mean for the book of Deuteronomy? What does it mean for this code to have any meaning to us? Is it meaningless? Not at all. You see, we need the book of Deuteronomy; we need this code. We need it because we have to believe in a world where right goes rewarded and wrong and evil gets punished. We have to believe this even when we don't see it happen all the time. We have to believe when it doesn't happen we will work to make it happen. We must live by this code of Deuteronomy even when our daily lives and the world around us contradicts it at every turn.

Now those of you who are parents, you do this with your children, don't you? You teach them what is right and what is wrong. You teach them that if they do good they will be rewarded and if they do bad they will be punished. But sooner or later your children soon figure out that this is not always the case. They begin to notice that mommy or

daddy or whomever didn't punish them that one time when they did wrong and didn't reward them that other time they obeyed and did what was right. They begin to see the contradiction and this begins to frustrate and confuse them. But it doesn't mean that when you taught them what was right or what was wrong - reward or punishment - was the incorrect thing to do. We all know that children and even adults must understand that actions – good or bad – have consequences even if we don't always see those consequences in action. And so it is with God; from Mount Sinai God gave the commandments to us and warned us that if we do not obey we will be punished and so we go on believing in Deuteronomy, believing in its words.

Now last month out of the many tragic stories that came out of Afghanistan, one story in particular was quite poignant. It was reported that ten Christian aid workers were ruthlessly murdered by members of the Taliban. The Taliban claimed that the reason they were killed was due to their attempts to convert the Afghani people to Christianity as if that somehow justified their actions. But everyone who knew the group knew that was a lie anyway. That these men and women were not there to postalize the Christian faith, they were there to live out the Christian faith. Many within that team spent nearly their entire lives in Afghanistan working to bring the most needed medical help to the poorest people in the most remote villages. They tirelessly and heroically braved the most dangerous situations. Some of them were there during the Soviet invasion long ago. They worked with the blind, the disabled, the sick and orphan children, the bruised and battered women. And why were they there? Well, because as Christians in part they believed what Deuteronomy says – that the Lord will bless those who obey the Lord's commandments, he will curse those who disobey the Lord's commandments. Yes they believed these words because in their works of compassion to the people of Afghanistan they were doing what was right and good; obeying their God and believing that God blessed them every time they did their works. They saw the blessing of God in the smiles of the children that they cared for.

And yet at the same time in their tragic end, all of them being shot to death by the hands of fanatics, it belies what Deuteronomy has to say. These Christian workers were not rewarded for their obedience. And the perpetrators of the crime were not punished. And it can be said that numerous occurrences like this happen in Afghanistan. It can say that numerous occurrences like this happen in our world over and over again. But

despite the contradiction these brave Christians continued their work believing in a God that rewards good and punishes evil.

And so, my friends, this morning let me encourage you to bravely continue in your Christian faith. Continue to believe that God will bless you for your obedience and he will punish those who commit acts of evil. Continue in that faith even when your boss at work harasses, you cheats you from your pay and there is nobody there to stop him or her. Continue to believe God rewards and punishes. Continue in that faith even when the judicial system has let someone you know or yourself be injured or even a loved one injured or killed to walk off Scot free. Continue to believe that God rewards and God punishes. Continue in the faith even when you are barely holding your head above water as you struggle to keep up with the mortgage, to keep the children in a decent school, to keep them with decent medical care. You have done everything in your life through honesty and hard work and you see those who cheat, lie, steal, and hurt other people become successful.

I tell you continue to believe that God rewards and God punishes. Continue to believe it because as we do so we are making this world a better place. We make it more of a world where we can see good and evil in clear terms where justice will prevail and evil and injustice will fail. And as we work toward that goal we will begin to see it happen in the world. And even when we don't see it happen, which will be most of the time, let us continue in our belief that if good is not rewarded and evil is not punished in this life, then surely it will be done in the next. Let us believe that one day, the last day, the great day of the Lord as many like to call it, the book of Deuteronomy will be opened and the Lord will both reward and punish. Let us believe it for as our father Abraham has said, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is right." Amen