

## **God's Covenant and the Human Heart**

**The nation of Israel was in the wilderness for 40 long years.** So much happened; the people of Israel witnessed a lot of good things and bad things; they literally witnessed death and life in front of them. They saw numerous miracles; they won over nations; they experienced God's providence; they had food to eat, water to drink, clothes to wear and were safe while wandering in the wilderness. **The book of Deuteronomy talks about the events that happened towards the fag end of the Israel's wandering in the wilderness.** The promised land is just across the river; Moses is getting old; he is about to retire; a new leader, Joshua is going to take up the reins. **What does Moses do?** He talks to his people; The book of Deuteronomy captures the final speeches of Moses. This book is of a high emotional value to the people of Israel. It also holds a high standing in the Jewish religion. There are numerous quotes from the book of Deuteronomy in the New Testament as well. **Last Sunday, Darryl preached to us one of the most important words of scripture** *Shema- Hear O Israel, The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.*

**That sets the tone for the entire book.** As Darryl preached to us, the call is to know God as to who He is and to love God with all our heart. That constitutes the first part of the ten commandments.

**The second part of the ten commandments** is a call to love your neighbour; love one another. The book of Deuteronomy provides a detailed account of how to love one another. Moses presents different scenarios and different aspects of Israel's social life and provide them with the implication of love. **When we go through it, some of them are relevant to us ;** and some are not. The simple reason for its non-relevance is the gap in the cultural and historical context. The understanding of social life for the wandering nation of Israel that didn't even had its own land is is much different

from today's liberty village, downtown Toronto. But there are few things that are constant across the ages; **God's moral standards, God's truth and justice and human heart.**

So, this evening my focus is in **understanding the heart of God and the heart of human beings.** It's all about what the heart wants right! **The understanding of heart as a centre of all human desires** is a key aspect in the whole of scriptures. In fact, the word heart is used 826 times in the Bible. And 29 times in the book of Deuteronomy. **One of the better ways to understand the Old Testament Laws is** to look at the sermon on the mount where Jesus interprets the law to his audience. Jesus was very clear when he said that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. This tells us the importance of the Law in our Christian faith. When Jesus interpreted the law to his audience, he pointed the people to their hearts. He said hatred is equal to murder; lust is equal to adultery. He in fact us taught that even the right things that we do does not qualify as right if our heart is not right. **So, it is not about what we do that matters to God but it is who we are as a person that matters which translates into what we do.** So, the question is **what should we invest in our hearts?** The best way to understand the law is to understand the heart of the lawgiver. So, to start off, let us zoom in to understand God's heart reflected in the book of Deuteronomy.

### **1. God's Heart is Reflected in His Gift of the Covenant**

The Biblical scholars have given different descriptions of the book of Deuteronomy. Some say it is a collection of speeches, some say, it is a collection of laws; some say it is a book of covenant. All of this is true. **But if we try to learn from the point of view of what God is doing in this book, the covenant theme is a helpful one.** In fact many biblical scholars find so many similarities between the covenant literatures that were found during the Biblical times and the book of Deuteronomy.**So, what is a covenant?** This is not a term that we use in our day today life. We don't have a conversation like, hey! What do you think about the covenant? Probably, the most popular social gathering where we use the word covenant are the Christian weddings where we use the

phrase, covenant of marriage. And that's it I guess. I am not sure whether Christian married couples use that word again. I wonder they go- How can you not recollect the covenant of marriage! Well!

**Covenant is a key concept in the Biblical faith.** In fact the Bible we use is the Old Testament and the New Testament which actually derives from the word covenant coz *testamentum* is a Latin word for covenant. It is Old Covenant and New Covenant. **What is a covenant?** It is a formal agreement between two parties. During the Biblical times, it was most common among the kings and the vassal state. In the book of Deuteronomy, God makes the covenant with the people of Israel. Let me read the **thesis of the covenant in ch. 29:12-13.**

*So that you may enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, which he is making with you today, so that you may enter his oath and so that he may establish you today as his people and he may be your God as he swore to your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

**What does this covenant entail?**

- **God cares about his people**

**One of the things that I struggle the most in my life** as a Christian is to comprehend the caring nature of God. I shared this to my Alpha table as well the other week. Does God really care about me as an individual? Do I matter to Him? This question becomes bit more intense during the times when I am struggling. At that time if someone tells me that God cares for you. I may respond saying, I don't feel that. I am struggling to believe that is true. I am not sure if anyone has similar thoughts at times. **The covenant tells us that God cares for His people.** Here is a nation that is in the middle of the wilderness, with unseen future; with no proper political structure, with no stronger military that could have easily disappeared from the face of the earth. But God makes a covenant with them and it is purely God's initiative. God reaches out to them and calls them His people. He makes them His own. He does this in spite of their shortcomings, their rebellious episodes and they choosing other gods over the God of Israel.

**The idea of covenant** is not some verbal promises instead it is a written document with a seal. That's what God does; He writes the ten commandments in the tablets which becomes the sign/symbol of the covenant. It may sound strange to us thinking how can some words inscribed in stones becomes a sign of assurance but that was a popular practice during the Biblical times when a king makes a covenant with a nation.

**God cares and He is very serious about the relationship with his people.** That is why, throughout the scripture, we see God getting angry or charges people with unfaithfulness or adultery when people go after other gods. Because He cares.

He continues to care for us as we are part of his covenant relationship through Christ Jesus.

#### - **God cares about the material world**

God's covenant with the people of Israel indicates to us that **God cares for the material world.**

**When** a king makes a covenant with a nation, there a set of stipulations that are drafted which works as a **mutual understanding between the king and the nation.** God does something similar with the Israelites. He provides them with the Law. The book of Deuteronomy is kind of commentary of the ten commandments. **It gives a detailed explanation of worship and social life.**

**It** talks about inter-personal relationships, sexual relationships, familial relationships, business conduct, criminal laws, land laws, property laws, care for the poor, legal securities, occupational laws and the list is long. **What does this indicate?** It indicates that God cares about our mundane life and the material world that we live in.

Quite often we have the tendency to **separate the secular from the spiritual.** We consider coming to church, doing churchy things, praying, sharing the Gospel, singing Gospel songs as spiritual things. But God of the bible doesn't distinguish that right! He cares about the material world. He cares about our Monday as much as he cares about our Sunday. He cares about the developer as much as he cares about the pastor.

**His covenant covers everything!** His covenant with us implies that we maintain God's standards in all that we do. In our inter-personal relationships, in our families, in our neighbourhoods, in our workplaces. We might be bound by the laws of the land that we live in. Above that, we are bound by the covenant of God. He is our God and we are His people. The way we live, relate and work needs to be in light of God's standards because we are in the covenant relationship with God and the terms and conditions apply to us.

**Now, this may sound conditional and difficult.** It is not conditional because it is God who initiates the covenant and requires us to follow God's commandments. It is difficult but there is a promise of rest. What do I mean? When we look at these lofty standards, there could possibly be two extreme responses. One, **resolutions**. Yes it is definitely like New Year Resolutions. We are in mid March, it will be interesting to hear how our New Year resolutions are going. Most of the times it is difficult. It is a massive burden and a cross to carry because we resolve in our hearts to obey commandments and we find constantly swimming against the tide. We are in a constant race to please God and our guilty conscience. We often find ourselves in deep remorse and guilt when it fails. Or we feel self-righteous when we succeed.

**The other extreme could be "resignation".** And that is my attitude towards New Year's resolution. Oh! Its very difficult. I don't want to waste my time on this. With this response, we settle for our convenience and worldly standards that feed into our appetite. This response is filled with excuses and justification. We find ourselves in a state of rebellion and worshipping idols that keep us happy and satisfied.

**Then, what is the right response?** *Hear O Israel, The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* Love changes everything. Have you been in love? Are you in love with someone? You are ready to travel any number of distance in love! Literally too. The call is to fall in love with God. We start to feel

His commandments lighter. We don't start obeying God not because we are supposed to but because we Love to. Our obedience do not become burden instead, it becomes a delight!

Hear O liberty Grace- The Lord our God, the Lord is one. We shall love the LORD our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might.

**This love enables us to care for what God cares for.** God cares for the material world. So do we!

### - **God provides life**

In Deuteronomy 30:19, **Moses gives an ultimatum** to his people. He says, *I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life that you and your offspring may live.*

The church that I grew up had this **promise verse tradition** that you get to pick up from a bowl on the New Year's eve. I remember me getting this big prosperity Bible verse from Deuteronomy 28:1.

I was excited and I couldn't wait to see the number of blessings that God is going to pour on me that year. Well, I think I had a very normal year. Or I was not able to appreciate the blessings that received from god because I was waiting for a spectacular ones.

**The book of Deuteronomy is filled with blessings and curses.** Naturally, when we read the blessings we have these wishful thinking and when we read the curses, they are terrifying. Or we say these are complete nonsense. Or we are filled with questions, why is God so mean? How can such a good God let something bad happen to people?

**To respond to this**, we sometimes brush it away by saying. Oh! That is the God of Old Testament, He judges the people by Law. The God of the New Testament is good. He is very gracious. But that can't be true because it contradicts the very unchanging nature of God. God is good throughout the scripture; God is gracious throughout the scripture. Then, **how do we reconcile with this massive list of curses.**

This is best understood in the **nature of the covenant**. Every covenant that is made between a king and the state has a list of blessings and curses attached to it. This means that as long as long as you commit to the covenant by following the stipulations, you are protected by the blessings of the covenant, if you are a rebel, or if you disregard, or dishonour the covenant, you are not protected by the covenant anymore. Hence, the curse of not honouring the covenant applies.

**Couple of weeks ago, Blessy and I attended the first aid and CPR training** by the Red Cross. I know some of us did that training here at church as well. The trainer asked the question, while doing the CPR, if you break the victim's ribs, can the victim sue you? The answer is no. Because if you are certified first aid practitioner, you are protected by the Good Samaritan law.

**The blessings of the covenant** is something like that. These blessings protect us from the curse of the covenant. You know law is good thing. It not only gives us rights but it protects us. Same is with God's covenant. We follow God's laws within God's covenant and we are protected from the curse of the law.

**But the question still persists**, I am experiencing suffering. Is that part of the curse? I follow all God's commandments, why am I not that prosperous like the scripture promises?

**Quite often we look at the scriptures in a very individualistic sense**. What is it in for me? How can I please God? How can I gain God's favour? How do I worship God in the right sense? There is definitely some truth to it. But Christian Faith is a community project.

**If you look at the book of Deuteronomy, God** is making this covenant with the people of Israel. And if we **pay close attention to the blessings and curses**, it affects the community and not merely the individuals. Our sinful actions always snowballs into something big. That is one of the reasons suffering is experienced by everyone. Our sins affect our relationships, our families and our

community. That is why in God's covenant, we are summoned to pursue God's blessings. God's blessings are contagious as well.

**Blessing** can be a very misunderstood term. Quite often it is connected to prosperity and there's a lot of truth in that too. However, the **root understanding of the Hebrew word** for blessing, which is *barakah* is fascinating. It means "kneel". It is a description of one's posture towards God. Which defines a posture of dependence towards God. So, blessing is not merely about how wealthy we become but it is about how closer we are to God.

**Another term that Moses uses in parallel to blessing is "life"**. Life in Hebrew understanding is "abundant life", "life to the fullest", or "a fulfilled life". The wealth does promise some kind of fulfilment but is temporary and non-reliable. The true fulfilment lies in God alone.

**Friends, the covenant of God** presents us with blessings and curse; life and death. In God, we have life and we give life. Away from God, life is chaotic, it messes up everything, everyone does what is right in their sight because God's law is not obeyed. It brings absolute chaos.

It can be as simple as following traffic signals. If everyone agrees to the traffic laws, there is life, there is prosperity, if someone decides to rebel against the laws, it can create the chaos which can actually lead to literal death.

Church, that is why following God's command is of the highest order because it brings life, not only to our lives but to our community.

This is the heart of God. The heart of God desires life for us, life in abundance . A life that brings peace, joy and harmony.



How does the human heart respond to that?

## **2. The Rebellious Nature of Human Heart and Promise of Hope**

From the beginning of this year while we **are studying the Bible**, we learn that human beings are not doing very good. We don't respond well to God's goodness. We are short sighted and easily distracted. In fact, the book of Deuteronomy predicts that the people of Israel will rebel against God's covenant and we say later in the scriptures that they did.

**But the good news is that there is hope in God.** Deuteronomy Ch. 30: 1-3, *When all these things happen to you- the blessings and curses I have set before you and you come to your senses while you are in the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and all your soul by doing everything I am commanding you today, then he will restore your fortunes, have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD God has scattered you.*

**The incident that is mentioned here** regarding the Israelites being driven to the nations indicate the later developments where the Israelites were punished by God to be sent into the exile because they broke the covenant. God also promises a hope of restoration to the repented hearts. That is great because we are sinful human beings who are prone to wander, rebel and run away from God's presence. But God promises hope of restoration when we repent and return.

**The best story** that comes to my mind is Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. The younger son rebels against the father, takes what he claims to be his own and runs away from the father; While he is away from the father, he enjoys his life for a while but he is not able to experience the blessings of his covenant relationship with the father. He repents, comes back and father restores him to the covenant relationship. The elder brother was with the father, served him and when he saw the his younger brother being celebrated, his self-righteous nature triggered his anger. He refused to take

part in the father's table and kept himself away from the fellowship. But what does father do in all these situations? He was persuading both brothers in love to be part of him in different ways of course! To the younger son, his persuasion was through waiting in love and to the older son by pleading in love.

**My dear church,** I am not sure where you are in your spiritual journey. God is persuading you with his love to be part of His covenant. Through repentance, we experience life and hope.

Praise God for Jesus through whom we are able to enter into this covenant with God and enjoy life.

While we were still sinners he saved us, he became the curse for us so that we enjoy life and life in abundance.