Renewing the covenant

Text: Deuteronomy 4:44-5:33

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 4:45-5:21; 22-33, Matthew 5:17-20

**Songs Chosen:** Behold our God, [SttL] 476, 106, PH480, 184

Series: Deuteronomy

Theme: Moses calls all Israel to listen and carefully live out the terms of the perpetual covenant which the Lord made with his people after he had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, reminding them of the 10 commandments and of their variable hearts and minds.

Proposition: Remember that whilst Jesus has perfectly fulfilled the covenant law of God, He calls each one of His people to faithful and complete obedience to all His commandments.

**Introduction**

How many of the married couples here today have renewed their wedding vows at some time in the past? It’s not a practice that is very common, but some husbands and wives do decide to have a celebration to reaffirm their commitment to one another. This may occur after they have overcome a period of illness, infidelity or separation or as part of a milestone anniversary such as 10, 25 or 50 years of married life together.

In our text today we do not find the renewal of marriage vows between a husband and his wife, but an event which is somewhat similar: the renewal of the covenant between God and His people Israel. A covenant can be defined as a “*chosen relationship or partnership in which two parties make binding promises to each other and work together to reach a common goal. They’re often accompanied by oaths, signs, and ceremonies. Covenants contain defined obligations and commitments, but differ from a contract in that they are relational and personal*”.

Whilst the Hebrew word for covenant is not found in the creation account in the book of Genesis, we do see a close relationship between God and our common ancestor Adam. He was required to obey God in order to secure the Lord’s blessing. This is sometimes referred to as the ‘covenant of works’, ‘the covenant of creation’, ‘the Edenic covenant’ or the ‘Adamic covenant’. When Adam failed to uphold his obligations under this covenant, sin and it’s destructive consequences entered this world and spread to all his descendants (Rom 5:12).

God’s grace is revealed directly following Adam’s fall in His promise to deliver His people from sin and death through a human being who would faithfully keep the covenant of works (Gen 3:15; Rom 5:16-17). As this world became increasingly corrupt with the multiplication of the descendants of Adam, God’s grace was again revealed when He preserved Noah and his family together with representatives of the animal kingdom from a global flood of (6:8-8:19).

God then made a covenant with all of humanity promising never again to use a flood to destroy all life (Gen 8:20-9:17). This is called the ‘Noahic covenant’ in which God pledges that seasonal cycles will continue as long as this earth remains (Gen 8:22). He would preserve the stability of nature so that His plan of redemption could be completed through the progressive unfolding of a series of further covenants of grace.

The covenant with Abraham in which he is promised a good land, a great nation, a great name and a great blessing that will extend firstly to him and then to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3) is referred to as the ‘Abrahamic covenant’. As a result of the fulfilment of God’s gracious promises to Abraham, his descendants multiplied and were rescued from their slavery in the land of Egypt.

In an extended introduction to his last sermon, Moses spoke to the whole people of Israel and reviewed their journey together through the wilderness for a period of 40 years after the Lord had made what is termed the ‘Mosaic covenant’ with His people at Mount Sinai. Moses reminded the people of how wonderfully unique their God is, saying that ‘*there is no other beside him*’ (Deut 4:35). He also reminded them that the Lord their God blesses those who obey Him. The next part of his sermon is recorded in Deuteronomy 4:45-5:33 which we’ll look at under three points:

1. Remembering the Lord’s enduring covenant
2. Remembering the Lord’s covenant law
3. Remembering our changeable minds and hearts
4. **Remembering the Lord’s enduring covenant (4:44-5:5)**

Place names can be powerful reminders of key events in the past. How many of us thought much about the CTV building in Christchurch before the earthquake on 22nd February 2011 in which 115 people died there? Did you know the name of the Muslim place of worship on Deans Ave before 44 people were fatally shot and another 35 injured at the Al Noor Mosque by a lone gunman on 15th March 2019? For those of us who are, or have been, married, we will have vivid memories of the place where we proposed or received the marriage proposal and of where the wedding ceremony took place.

We’ve already seen the importance of place names in this last sermon of Moses as He has recalled the journey of the Israelites in the wilderness. Significant geographical locations set the scene in the first part of our text. ‘*Beyond the Jordan in the valley opposite Beth-peor*’ (4:46) – the Israelites are camping to the east of the Promised Land. It’s an area where the Amorites lived. They were descendants of Canaan (Gen 10:16), who was in the line of Ham (Gen 10:6). It was at this place that Moses ‘*summoned all Israel*’ with these words: "*Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them*” (Deut 5:1).

You may well know the Hebrew word which is translated ‘hear’ is also the first word in the prayer which is still recited by orthodox Jews today: “*She-ma yisrael, Adonai, eloheinu, Adonai echad*” "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one*” (Deut 6:4). In Judaism, this prayer is called the Shema, after that first word. Shema means much more than simply listen with your ears open. Shema means listen so that having heard you obey. Moses drives this fundamental principle home in these ways:

* He begins with the word ‘Shema’ – Hear!
* He then repeats the word by saying ‘*in your* ***hearing*** *today*’
* He then explains what this hearing process involves: learning and then being careful to do what has been heard and learnt

What are they to hear, learn and diligently do? Moses explains ‘*the statutes and rules that I speak in your hearing today*’ (5:1). Why should Israel hear the Word of God so that they can learn that Word and then live according to that Word? Moses answers that question this way: “*The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today*” (Deut 5:2-3). The covenant which Moses refers is often termed the “Mosaic covenant” or the “Sinaitic covenant’. ‘Mosaic’ from Moses, the man to whom God gave the law which He wrote down on two tablets of stone. ‘Sinaitic’ from ‘Sinai’ the name of the mountain and the region where the law was given.

Moses refers to ‘Horeb’ – another name for the area where Mount Sinai is located. It was at this significant place that God made a covenant with the previous generation of Israelites. Those to whom He was speaking 40 years later were either children at that time or not yet born. Why then does Moses say that the Lord did not make a covenant with ‘our fathers, but with us’? He is not trying to ‘rewrite history’ but to emphasise a key truth. The covenant that God made was not a past relic, but an ongoing present reality. The relationship which God entered into was not just with the previous generation, not even just with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but with the present generation.

With the passing away of the first generation, the covenant which defines the obligations and commitments of a living relationship with their God ceased for them. This is somewhat parallel to vows which a husband and wife make when they marry. These cease to have active meaning when one or both parties dies. A marriage covenant defines a living relationship, so does the Lord’s covenant with His people. But unlike a human marriage covenant, the Lord’s covenant endures through successive generations of His people.

Moses also makes clear that whilst the covenant relationship is with the living generation present in the valley opposite Beth-peor, it is no different from the living relationship between the Lord and their ancestors. That is why he says in v4-5: “*The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, while I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain*”. The phrase ‘face to face’ translates a Hebrew expression which does not mean that all the Israelites saw God, but rather that He communicated with them ‘person to person’.

Moses is calling Israel to remember their covenant God, with whom they have a living relationship, just as their forefathers did 40 years before. Despite their repeated rebellion in disobedience to His Word, He has not broken off His covenant promise: “*I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians*” (Exo 6:7).

There is comfort for us in the enduring covenant of God. We pray in hope for the children of believers who are not walking with the Lord. We pray, not presuming that each one will be saved, but expecting the Lord to be faithful to his enduing covenant by blessing successive generations with a living relationship with Him. Egypt is another highly significant place name, as we’ll see at the start of our second point:

1. **Remembering the Lord’s covenant law (5:7-22)**

Biblical preachers frequently quote from God’s Word in their sermons. The reason is that the Lord God is the One whose voice has supreme authority and power. In this last sermon of Moses - in which he explains God’s law, He begins his exposition with these words which God had spoken 40 years previously at Mount Sinai: "*'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*” (Deut 5:6).

Egypt was the place where the descendants of Abraham had become enslaved. There they were subject to the law of Pharaoh which was motivated by his fear of the Israelites. This motive for Pharaoh’s statutes and rules to be laid on the ‘guest workers’ in his land is clear from Exodus 1:10 “*Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land*". The character of Egypt’s ruler was reflected in his oppressive law. He ‘*ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in all kinds of work in the field*’ (Ex 1:3-14). His commandments were evil, mirroring his own heart. He decreed “*Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile*” (Ex 1:22).

For Israel, the land of Egypt was a place of oppression, exploitation, abuse, violence, cruelty, suffering and injustice. In their desperate situation ‘*the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel- and God knew.*’ (Ex 2:23-24).

The character of God is revealed in his four-fold response to the plight of Israel. He heard, he remembered, He saw, and He knew. His remembrance of His covenant does **not** mean that He had forgotten His previous promises, first made to Abraham, of a good land, a great nation, a great name and a great blessing. The Hebrew word translated ‘remembered’ means ‘to bring to mind and then act’. It is the powerful initiative of God in rescuing His helpless covenant people from the oppressive rule of Pharaoh that forms the basis for His loving, just and wise law. The ‘decalogue’ (‘ten words’ in Greek) is a central part of the book of Deuteronomy. The ten commandments are at the heart of this last sermon of Moses as the Lord renews His covenant with His people Israel.

Just as Pharaoh’s damaging and deadly laws revealed his character, so the restorative and life-giving law of God reveals His perfect nature. God’s statutes and rules flow out from His grace. His law is not designed to rescue, to redeem, to deliver, to save, His people, but to specify their **right response** to His love; willing heartfelt obedience to the One who has set His love upon them. We will not go through the ten commandments individually in this sermon (we did look at these in detail from HCLD34-44 from Nov 2019 through to May 2020 in our afternoon services), but I will highlight one significant difference between the first presentation of these commands to Israel at Mount Sinai and this covenant renewal in the land of Moab 40 years later.

This difference is in the reason given for the fourth commandment; “*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy*” (Ex 20:8; Deut 5:12). In Exodus 20, the Sabbath rest is connected to the six days in which the Lord made heaven and earth, resting on the seventh day. Whereas in Deuteronomy 5:15 the Lord says: “*You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day*”.

**Just as** God had created the universe, **so** in His mighty act of deliverance from slavery in Egypt, He had created a new sovereign state: Israel, who were to be ‘*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*’ (Ex 19:6). The identity of Israel was entirely bound together with their history as a delivered people who had been rescued from a reign of terror in Egypt into the loving rule of their God. The law of the Lord defines his divine loving rule in practical terms. Beyond the Jordan, to the east of the Promised Land, the people of Israel needed to be reminded of their covenant obligations to their Lord who had rescued them before they came into contact with people in Canaan who did not know the Lord God.

Just as we, brothers and sisters in Christ, need to be reminded of God’s Law before we go back out into contact with the people of the unbelieving world who do not know the Lord God. We need to remember how to rightly respond to the love of God. We need to remember the Lord’s covenant law because our minds and hearts are changeable, which brings us to our last point.

1. **Remembering our changeable minds and hearts (5:23-33)**

Did you know that as a consumer you automatically get a 14-day**‘cooling-off period’** when you buy something you haven’t seen in person - unless it’s bespoke or made to measure? (There are some exceptions to this law, so please research this before committing to any purchases based on this sermon!). This ‘cooling-off period’ allows you to change your mind about the previous commitment you made. It is a handy piece of legislation, because we all have a natural tendency to change our minds about obligations we have entered into; both big and small. How long ago was it that you last changed your mind? Not long?

After reminding the people of the 10 commandments which the Lord spoke at Mount Sinai out of the midst of fire, writing them on two tablets of stone, Moses remembers the commitment which the people made in response to the covenant law; ‘*We will hear and do it*’ (5:29).

Have you ever asked somebody who attended a wedding ceremony of people you know, but one to which you couldn’t go yourself? When I’ve been asked this myself, I often say, “Well they both said ‘I do’!” That’s what we expect from a Christian groom and bride in response to the question “*Do you believe it is God’s purpose for you to enter into this marriage and do you commit yourselves to your obligations to each other?*” “I do” is the right answer because it demonstrates that bride and groom really love one another.

Likewise, “*We will hear and do it*” is the right response to the Word of God – to His commandments which are especially for those upon whom He has set His love. The Lord Himself confirmed this when He said at Mount Sinai, “*They are right in all that they have spoken*” (Deut 5:28).

So far, so good, but in the ‘cooling off’ period which followed, the changeable minds and hearts of the people of Israel were revealed. Because of the great love with which He loves His people (Deut 7:7; Eph 2:4), the Lord expresses His heartfelt desire that Israel would keep their covenant obligations so that they would receive the blessings He had promised to them. He said “*Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!* (Deut 5:29)”

The Lord does not alter His mind. He is unchanging and unchangeable (e.g. Mal 3:6; James 1:17; Num 23:19. Yet Scripture does describe God being ‘*grieved that He had made man*’ (Gen 6:6), relenting and not bringing the disaster He had threatened (e.g. Ex 32:14; Jonah 3:4). How can we understand these revealed truths? Firstly, that these verses are figures of speech which help us to understand the infinite God from a finite human perspective (anthropopathism). Secondly, God makes both conditional and unconditional declarations. When God said through the prophet Jonah that he would overthrow Nineveh in 40 days, He was speaking **conditionally** upon the Assyrians’ response to His Word. However, when God promised to David, in what is often termed the ‘Davidic covenant’, saying “*your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever*. (2 Sam 7:16)'", the Lord was speaking **unconditionally**.

This covenant promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the eternal King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev 17:14; 19:16). He is the Law-keeper who did not abolish the covenant obligations for God’s people, but fulfilled the Law by obeying all the commandments perfectly (Matt 5:17). For all who truly love Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour, He has secured their entry into the Promised Land of the Paradise yet to come when this earth passes away. He has in no way lowered the high standard of God’s law, but rather emphasises the obligation for all God’s people to live totally and radically holy lives according to the covenant law (Matt 5:19-20). He has fulfilled the Adamic, Mosaic, Davidic and New covenants which are threaded through Scripture. In the New covenant, God promises unconditionally to put His law within His people and to write it on their hearts, saying “I *will be their God, and they shall be my people*” (Jer 31:33).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, born-again believers (John 3:3,8); the Lord has changed our hearts **so that** we can become less changeable and more faithful in our willing obedience to His good law. For Israel gathered at Mount Sinai, the fourth commandment was anchored in God’s creation of the Universe, reflecting His creation of His new people Israel. For Israel gathered to the east side of the Jordan, the fourth commandment was anchored in the Lord’s merciful deliverance of His people from the oppressive statutes and rules of Pharaoh in Egypt. For us, gathered here today, this ‘side’ of the cross at Calvary, the fourth commandment, to remember this day and set it apart from the other six in the week is anchored in the resurrection of Christ Jesus our Lord in whom we have both the ability to begin to obey the good law of our God and His forgiveness when we fail. There is no better news than this.

The last sermon of Moses on this earth was a gospel message, pointing forward to the renewal of the covenant of our God every Lord’s Day as we come again to His holy Word. Many married couples never have a formal celebration in which they renew their vows to one another…and that’s fine. However, it is wise and good from time to time for husbands and wives to re-read their solemn vows and to acknowledge to one another where they have not upheld their obligations, to seek forgiveness, to reaffirm their love for one another and then to continue to strive for radical and complete faithfulness.

How is your relationship with Jesus Christ today? If you are a Christian, this is a very good time to renew your vow to your Lord and Saviour, to seek forgiveness for the occasions when you have not been faithful to your obligations to obey His commands because you love Him (John 14:15) and to recommit your heart and mind to striving for complete obedience.

If you are not a Christian, then know that you cannot be acceptable to God by striving to obey His commandments. This was never their purpose. They flow out from God’s amazing grace in which He first delivers a person from his or her slavery to the oppression, exploitation, abuse, violence, cruelty, suffering and injustice of Satan’s rule. Then, He enables His rescued child to respond to His love by fixing their mind on a heartfelt desire to obey the terms of His covenant of grace because they love Him.

Will you come to Jesus today and renew, or for the first time make, a commitment to live for Him as you continue to journey through this life waiting for the day when you will enter into the good land which the Lord God has Promised Land? In Christ alone, you are unconditionally guaranteed all the blessings of His good and gracious covenants.

AMEN.