

The Most Important Word in the Bible

Deuteronomy 5:6

I will often say that the most important word in the Bible is the word “therefore.” I say that because that word “therefore” rightly defines the balance so often missed in the ministry of the church, the balance between the foundation of the gospel and the application of the promise of that gospel in the lives of God’s people. In other words, the most important word in the Bible is the word that rightly joins those two subjects together, joining together the law and the gospel.

We see this word “therefore” used frequently by Paul in that very context. For example, in Romans 12, after 11 chapters of clearly proclaiming the promises of the gospel, we read,

Rom. 12:1 “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

Similarly, in a very similar transition from the promises of the gospels to the applications of that gospel to daily life, we read,

Eph. 4:1 “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

In our study of the book of Deuteronomy, I have repeatedly emphasized that transition. Never one without the other. Never the law, with the foundation of the gospel promise. Never the gospel without the application of the law to daily life. And that transition finds its climax here in verse 6.

As a nation, the people of Israel are about to enter the promised land, their promised inheritance. They are assembled together on the plains of Road as God’s people. And God is about to give them his law. But he begins that law with a clear proclamation of the promise of the gospel. What we often call the

preface to the ten commandments.

v.6

So as we begin our study of the law of God in terms of the ten commandments this morning, please hear those words of Paul in your mind to put your mind in the right context. “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Or, in the exact words of Moses, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” And what does this preface to the ten commandments teach us, to use the language of our Shorter Catechism? And the answer, succinctly summarizing what I have just spent over five minutes trying to explain, “The preface to the ten commandments teaches us, that because God is the Lord, and our God, and Redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments.”

In Deuteronomy 5, verse 6, we learn who God is, and what he has done to redeem us. And on that basis, because of that identity, we are given the obligation to offer to him our bodies as living sacrifices, obeying his law because he has redeemed us by the precious blood of Christ.

So let’s lay that foundation this morning, the foundation of the gospel upon which the applications of the law will be built. First, and, therefore, foremost,

I. GOD DECLARES HIS IDENTITY AND RELATIONSHIP TO HIS COVENANT PEOPLE.

So what is the meaning of these words? “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” To answer that simply, it is,

A. The definition of a covenant relationship.

The definition of that biblical covenant between God and his people is well put: “I will be your God.” “I am your God.” The corresponding words are necessarily included in that thought, “You will be my people.” That’s the covenant relationship. I will be your God and you will be my people.

The definition of a marriage relationship, too, isn’t it? Just think of those ordinary vows, “Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?” “I do.” That’s a marriage, “I, take you, to be my lawfully wedded husband, for better for worse, ‘till death do us part.” That’s a covenant, words to define the relationship.

And that is what God does here. “I am your God.” Again, implied, “You are my people.” We are joined together.

Now, let me emphasize the obvious, as I have so frequently done in this study of Deuteronomy. This covenant relationship is established before the law is given. The covenant relationship between God and his people is established first. Then, on that basis, the law is given to a covenant people already redeemed. So this event at Mt. Sinai in Deuteronomy is not a covenant of works. This is not a renewal of the covenant of works God established with Adam and Eve before the fall. This is not a rejection of the covenant of grace as it had been established and proclaimed under Abraham. Rather, this is an outworking of the one great, overarching covenant of grace which God established immediately after the fall. “I am your God.” That’s a declaration of God’s grace, God’s saving grace. That’s a definition of his identity, and it is given in relationship to a specific, particular group of people, “I am YOUR God.” They are people whom he has chosen to be his people.

And the people knew it! Remember the song of Moses?

Ex. 15:1 “Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. 2 The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.”

They understood. They got it! And they knew the greatness of this God.

Ex. 15:11 “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? 12 You stretched out your right hand; the earth swallowed them. 13 “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.”

These people assembled at Mt. Sinai were believers! They were the redeemed people of God, the objects of God’s steadfast love and saving grace. And how does that apply to us? That defines our relationship with God today as well. It is one the same covenant of grace in the Old and New Testaments. And God says to us,

1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

So when you read Deuteronomy 5, God is speaking to you as well. “I am your God.” Look further at that verse. Notice a further revelation of God’s identity. It is not just any god. Not just some unknown god or imagined god. God says, “I am the LORD your God.”

I am the LORD. All capital letters. You might well understand what that means. It is the Hebrew word sometimes translated Jehovah, or more accurately, Yahweh. It is the covenant name of God. The personal name of God.

Go back to the burning bush.

Ex. 3:13 “Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” 14 God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” 15 God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.”

Also,

Ex. 6:2 “God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the Lord. 3I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. 4 I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. 5 Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. 6 Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. 7 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. 8 I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.’”

This is God’s name, Yahweh. More literally, “I am.” That’s what Yahweh means in verb form. “I am.” And that is,

B. The identity of our covenant God.

I am the LORD. I am Yahweh. I am Jehovah. I am the one and only true and eternal God.

Again, that persistent question, what does all of this have to do with us today? Turn with me, please, to John 8. Speaking to unbelieving Jews, Jesus says this:

John 8:56 “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” 57 So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” 58 Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

The Jews understood that as a claim to be the eternal God, and we read that “they picked up stones to throw at him.” They knew he was claiming to be God, and to them, it was blasphemy.

This is the name of our covenant God, “I am...” Or, more fully, “I am who I am.” That is God’s identity. And it is he whom we are to worship, the one and only true and eternal God.

But there is more. You see, before God gives his people the law,

II. GOD DECLARES HIS WORK OF REDEMPTION TO HIS PEOPLE.

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I redeemed you. I saved you. That’s who God is. Not just God. Not just the LORD God or Jehovah God. But the LORD God who has already redeemed you. He is the LORD God who loves you, who has called you to be his own special people.

You see, as God gives us people his law,

A. God relates to his covenant people as their redeemer.

This is so important, and likely I will stress it every week that we study these ten commandments. Because as we study them diligently, looking to understand all of the implications that they will have for our lives today, you will be tempted to think, “that’s legalism.” You will be tempted to think, I am not obligated to do that. I am not forbidden to do that. You will be tempted to think that these are ten pretty good suggestions that you ought to follow as long as we don’t take them too seriously. You will be tempted to think that any exposition of the law and any exhortation to obey the law must mean that I am denying the grace of God in the gospel.

You will be tempted to think that, I fear. Because that’s how Satan works. And so, with Adam and Eve, you will be tempted to think that the law doesn’t really matter, that it isn’t really that important. “Did God really say that?”

For an unbeliever, the law convicts. The law kills. The law, therefore, drives you to Christ. And, according to,

Gal. 3:23 “Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. 24 So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.”

The law is our schoolmaster, leading us to Christ. And now we are no longer under a schoolmaster. No longer under the law. Right? In that context, yes. No longer under the law which, in its condemnation, drives you to Jesus that you might be saved from that justice and wrath your sins deserved.

But now, with God as your redeemer, how does the law function? What is the use of the law for those who are redeemed? The answer to that question is the same for us today as it was for the people of God at Mt. Sinai. Obedience to the law becomes the definition of love.

1 John 5:3 “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”

Gone is the burden of condemnation. Gone is the burden of the guilt of our failure. And now, we keep his commandments because we love him. And we love him because he has redeemed us.

Never forget, in your study of God’s law, that when God gives his law to his people, they are already redeemed. He is already their redeemer. “I brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

Therefore, there is that most important word in the Bible, therefore, “You shall have no other gods before me. [Therefore] You shall not make for yourself a carved image. [Therefore] you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. [Therefore] remember the sabbath day. [Therefore] honor your father and your mother. [Therefore] you shall not murder. [Therefore] you shall not commit adultery. [Therefore] you shall not steal. [Therefore] you shall not bear false witness. [Therefore] you shall not covet.”

Because the Lord is your redeemer, therefore you shall obey his law and a testimony of your gratitude for that salvation. Because the Lord loved you, therefore you shall obey his law as a demonstration of your love to him.

With one more final thought. Freedom.

B. God's work of redemption brings freedom to his covenant people.

"I brought you out of the house of slavery."

Now, some professed Christians today act as if God says this: I am the God who delivered you out of slavery and gave you freedom, therefore you are free from the duties and obligations of the law.

Do you know how that usually comes out? With an application of one of the commandments, the response is, that's legalism. And, therefore, I am free. And freedom means, freedom from the having the duty and obligation to obey.

Let me use an illustration. Children, you who live with your parents. Let me address especially the older children. Freedom means you don't have to obey your parents, right? Freedom means you don't have to honor their authority, right? God has delivered you out of bondage, out of slavery, so that means that you are free to do whatever you want.

You can't wait to get your freedom, can you? Freedom from the authority of your parents.

Let me challenge that perspective. Let me challenge that definition of freedom. Freedom is not the right to be your own authority, to do what you want. Freedom is not what happens when you are no longer under the immediate authority of your parents. No, freedom is when God enables you to do what is right. Freedom is not the right to do whatever you want. Freedom is the ability to do what you know is right.

That's the freedom God gives to his people. And you are the most free when you are the most fully obeying the law of God. And you are the most enslaved when you are the most fully living

in disobedience. You see, sin is slavery. And obedience is freedom.

To use an imperfect analogy, God's law is like the train tracks upon which a train rides. And you are the train. The train tracks do restrain the train, don't they? But I submit to you, that a train riding down the tracks is the very essence of freedom. And a train that leaves the tracks is anything but freedom.

You see, the effect of God's declaration in Deuteronomy 5:6 is the experience of freedom. Real freedom. Freedom is not defined by indulgence. Rather, freedom is defined by living in conformity to God's law.

Free from the condemnation of the law. Praise the Lord. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Praise the Lord.

Now, in Christ, you are free.

Rom. 6:15 "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 16 Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness."

That's the freedom that you and I have, the ability in Christ to do what is right. The ability, as those who are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, the ability to

Eph. 5:3 "...walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

And what does it mean to walk in love, as Paul writes in Ephesians 5. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.” That is the freedom we have as those who are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ.

Beginning next week, we will look at what comes after the word “therefore...” Beginning next week, we will look at all the implications of the duties and obligations of the law of God, so that you can learn how to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. And if you are, indeed, free in Jesus, if you are a Christian, freed from the curse of the law and from the dominion and slavery of sin in your own heart, then you are able to understand the sweetness and goodness of God’s law, even as David puts it,

Ps. 19:7 “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; 8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; 9 the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. 11 Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

Thus we sing with the Psalmist,

Psalms 119:97 “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.”