

## God's Faithfulness and Ours

Deuteronomy 31:1-29

"This is a faithful saying..." Five times Paul uses that meaningful introduction, writing to Timothy and Titus, with obvious reference to something well worth our paying attention to, above and beyond all the other "ordinary" things Paul wrote in Scripture. The first "faithful saying" is this great personal testimony of the gospel itself,

1 Tim. 1:15 "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."

Then, in his second letter to Timothy, we read these words,

2 Tim. 2:11 "This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him. 12 If we endure, We shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. 13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself."

It is that last phrase that doesn't seem to fit. We are given great encouragements in this faithful saying, "if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him." And even a consistent warning against denying him. But then the surprising and seemingly inconsistent ending, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself." That's our subject this morning in Deuteronomy. God's faithfulness, promised to us as his covenant people despite our unfaithfulness.

None of this, of course, gives us any license to sin. There is no excuse for our unfaithfulness, nor any reason to think lightly about our sinfulness in relationship to God, nor to presume upon God's faithfulness. But there is still a great promise. An astounding declaration. "If we are faithless, He remains faithful." Paul, of course, explains why that is so, adding the words, "He

cannot deny Himself."

So let's look at Deuteronomy 31 with all of that in mind. We find here a declaration of God's covenant faithfulness, in the face of a rather distressing description of the unfaithfulness of his covenant people. But, of course, there is no contradiction. There is no discrepancy. After all, "This is a faithful saying...If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself."

For our better understanding of this chapter, I'm going to study it backward. That is to say, we'll look at the last section first. And the first section last. I do that mainly because I want to begin our focus upon our unfaithfulness, and then, by contrast, end with the contrasting emphasis of God's unchanging faithfulness nevertheless.

So let's begin with a focus on us, we the covenant people of God. In many ways, we are no different than the people of Israel of the Old Testament. Different age of history, different perspective on the coming of Christ, since we now look back upon Christ's first coming while they looked forward to it. But in terms of the essence of our covenant relationship with God, we are in the same position. Namely, our sinfulness. The characteristics of our fallen nature.

### **I. WE NEED A PROPER SELF-AWARENESS OF OUR FALLEN NATURE.**

Self-awareness is a very important element of maturity. Some people are terribly lacking in this, terribly unaware of how they appear to others, seemingly unaware of their own hearts. That is, of course, one of the great dangers of pride. And there is no room for such pride when we read these verses, set in the context of the transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua.

v.14-16

The Lord doesn't mince any words. His people will "play the harlot." They will act like the prostitute, emphasizing that our spiritual unfaithfulness as God's covenant people is comparable to the characteristic unfaithfulness of the prostitute. Our spiritual idolatry is aptly represented as sexual immorality. We go after other gods to worship and serve them like an immoral woman seeks after multiple men. It is, of course, a familiar theme in Scripture, and the explicit language used in the Bible can actually become quite uncomfortable. We play the harlot. In other words,

### **A. We are prone to sin.**

That's a healthy self-awareness. We are prone to sin. We are often tempted to sin. We are beset by sin. And we can never claim to escape that inescapable consequence of our descent from Adam. We are children of Adam, and by nature, we inherit his propensity to sin.

Our text continues with that emphasis in,  
v.24-27

"I know your rebellion and your stiff neck." That's us! God's covenant people. Those who have been redeemed by grace, through faith. We still have a rebel nature in us, what the New Testament calls our flesh, the flesh that wages war with our soul. We have a rebelliousness in us, and every time we sin, we express that very rebellion. And stubbornness...we have a stiff neck. That is a familiar and repeated refrain, rebuke from God to his people. "You are a stiff-necked people."

Moses' prayer, therefore, is so appropriate, and so applicable to us as well,

Ex. 34:8 "So Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. 9 Then he said, "If now I have found grace in Your sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray, go among us,

even though we are a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your inheritance."

This is where we need to start this morning, with this self-awareness. We are often stiff-necked. Stubborn and rebellious, prone to sin. And therefore, always in need of the refreshing grace of the reminder of God's forgiveness.

And we should never lose the awareness that Paul emphasized in that first faithful saying I mentioned earlier, "... Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." We ought, each one, to be willing and able to say that of ourselves. With a proper, and accurate, self-awareness.

Along with the realization that our sin provokes God's anger.

### **B. We are prone to provoke God's displeasure.**

I use the word "displeasure" to reflect the phrase in our confession of faith that refers to God's "fatherly displeasure," which is to emphasize something very different from his condemning wrath and justice. In other words, while we, as God's people, are not threatened with eternal condemnation, nonetheless we do invoke his wrath. His anger. Any parent of any child understands what that means. Fatherly displeasure can be serious, and severe. It is the chastening we read about in,

Heb. 12:7 "If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?...11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

So our sin and rebellion does incur true, righteous anger. But still, not the condemnation which is reserved for those who are

not the covenant people of God. And so we read,

v.17-18

Again, v.28-29

Strong words, and strong were the warnings, and the discipline, of God in the Old Covenant. But the severity of the warning is not the focus, rather the emphasis is upon the effect of the warning. The good effect! And that is clearly the focus of Deuteronomy 31, a call to the people of God to return to their God! So it is that,

**C. We will always benefit from a gracious warning and reminder of God's faithfulness.**

That is what we have. A gracious warning, because it is an invitation to repent rather than a declaration of an unchangeable judgment of condemnation.

v.19-23

Again, my point is that in context, this warning is gracious! The awareness of sin is intended to bring about repentance. The self-awareness of your own sinful rebellion against God should always serve to remind you his grace and mercy, that you might sin no more!

This chapter is written as a witness against the people of God, a witness intended to humble them. To bring them to repentance. That they might be restored to the fullness of fellowship which God has provided in his covenant. So it is for us, a healthy self-awareness of our propensity to sin. And with that self-awareness is the obvious need to understand exactly what sin is, by reference to God's law. Thus we read,

v.9-11

As God's people,

**II. WE NEED A PROPER AWARENESS OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF GOD'S LAW.**

Again, true today as it was in Moses' day. Note the emphasis in those verses on our accountability to God, his awareness of our lives. We live before him! He sees everything.

**A. God calls us to live our lives in his presence.**

That's the significance of the assembly of the people. We are a people who live before God, in the sight of God. Nothing was hidden from God. Nothing was secret.

v.10-12

Similarly,

Heb. 4:13 "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."

That is a healthy and necessary realization for all of us. An inescapable reality. God sees everything, and thus we need to be conscious and aware of what it is he requires of us. More accurately, how it is that we are to honor him. And that is what the law is all about, in the lives of believers.

**B. God teaches us how to honor him.**

How to love him. And how to fear him, to use that word properly and appropriately.

v.12-13

For unbelievers, the law is used to condemn. And to lead you to Christ in order to escape that condemnation. But for the people of God, it has a very positive role and function. And the goal is not merely obedience, it is not simply obedience for obedience sake. But rather, as those verses describe, the law defines and describes the content of the fear we owe God, the

deep and abiding reverence with which we are called to honor him. And because of sin, we do need to learn how to do that! It is something we have to learn. And that is why we need to be careful to study the law, to “carefully observe all the words of this law.”

This sense of honor and fear is very closely related to what it means to love God as well. Fear in this context does not mean slavish fear and dread, it is not the fear of the terror of judgment or condemnation. It is the fear of those who offer to God their whole lives in honor and service to him. It is for those who truly love God, the very definition of love. It is the definition of the practice of love.

1 John 5:3 “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. 4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”

So we need to hear the word of the law as well! We need to listen, to pay attention, and to study it diligently. Because that is how you learn how to love God, how to honor him with godly fear and devotion. And remember where we started this morning, with an ongoing awareness of our propensity to sin. That’s what keeps you humble. And that is how your relationship with the Lord grows and matures, by giving careful attention to all the ways which God defines for us how we are to love and serve him.

And so we read,

Ps. 19:7 “The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; 8 The statutes 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 judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired

are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. 11 Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.”

Ps. 119:97 “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. 98 You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies...101 I have restrained my feet from every evil way, That I may keep Your word. 102 I have not departed from Your judgments, For You Yourself have taught me. 103 How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth! 104 Through Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way. 105 Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.”

So now, looks focus on God’s faithfulness. We need to understand the requirements and obligations of the law, for they are all good. And we need to know the weakness of our own hearts with a proper self-awareness. But most of all,

### **III. WE NEED A PROPER APPRECIATION OF GOD’S COVENANT FAITHFULNESS.**

With this great encouragement and promise of the gospel, that even “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.” That is what this chapter is all about! Let’s go back to the beginning of the chapter, and the historical stage is clearly set.

v.1-2

God would raise up another leader to succeed Moses, but the promised inheritance continues.

v.3-5

The focal point of God’s promise is the inheritance, as we have seen over and over again in this book. The promised land

would be their inheritance.

v.7

Let me stress again the significance of that promise, the significance of the inheritance. It is a symbol and a concept that is clearly carried over into the New Testament, for the inheritance which God promises his people is nothing less than the promise of life. Eternal life. Life beyond this world in this age.

**A. God has promised his people an inheritance of life.**

Listen to how Peter describes the inheritance,

1 Peter 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

So the promise of Deuteronomy is not just about land in the place called Canaan. The promised land represents an eternal inheritance, and they even knew that in the Old Testament times.

Heb. 11:8 “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

So this is the promise of the gospel, the promise of eternal life. Jesus would express it this way,

John 11:25 “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever

lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

That’s the inheritance, eternal life. And that is the hope of the gospel, not merely social justice in the context this world. Not worldly prosperity, not health or wealth. Not even some external measure of happiness. The inheritance is heaven. And it is offered to you as a gift, to be received by faith alone. It is not yours because you earn it. It is not yours because you deserve it.

Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Then there is that one final point to emphasize, which I have stressed since the beginning of the sermon.

**B. God has promised his people that he will be faithful to them.**

Even when we are not faithful to him! “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”

v.6

Again, the context is the transition of leadership, human leadership, from Moses to Joshua. But God’s own faithfulness doesn’t change. God’s promise is kept. “He will not leave you nor forsake you.” And that is our encouragement.

v.8

Lots of people of have observed lots of things about this past year, and to be sure, 2020 has been a very hard year in so many different ways. The new year approaches with much uncertainty. And much frustration. Even anger and exasperation. Often discouragement, and depression. Our lives have been upended in so many different ways. It’s hard to even imagine what lies ahead.

For many people, this past year has meant sickness and even death. It has meant lockdowns and face masks. And everything to do with COVID-19 was thoroughly intertwined with presidential politics. It is unsettling, exasperating, and greatly distressing. Many of you have expressed those very reactions and struggles.

And here is the word of encouragement, here is your only confidence of hope. It is not an empty platitude, but a deeply profound foundation upon which to base your life. Namely, that God is faithful to his covenant promises, and he has promised his people an inheritance that will never fade away. He has promised eternal life in heaven, for all eternity to come in the future. In the meantime, his encouragement is real. And necessary. The promise is that, “He will not leave you nor forsake you.”

And so sure is that promise that even “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”