

# Our Law-giving, Life-giving God

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. My name is Vaughn Woodson and I am a part of the Oakland Little Faith Group.

Today's scripture reading is from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 5, verses 1-7 and 22-33, as printed in the liturgy. And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, 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.

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. 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. He said, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.

[ 1 : 3 0 ] These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness with a loud voice. And he added, No more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me.

And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders. And you said, Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire.

This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live. Now, therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the Lord our God anymore, we shall die.

For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire, as we have, and has still lived? But go near and hear all that the Lord our God will say, and speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you, and we will hear, and we will do it.

And the Lord heard your words when you spoke to me. And the Lord said to me, I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. Oh, that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever.

[ 2 : 5 2 ] Go and say to them, return to your tents. But you stand here by me, and I will tell you the whole commandment and the statutes and the rules that you shall teach them, that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess.

You shall be careful, therefore, to do as the Lord your God has commanded you. You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess.

The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever. Well, thank you, Vaughn, for that scripture reading.

Good morning. My name is Andrew. I'm one of the pastors here, and it's good to be with you. Will you join me in prayer as we come to hear what God has to say to us? Lord God, it was good when they said to me, when they said to us, let us go to the house of the Lord.

Father, I thank you personally this morning for the praises sung here by my brothers and sisters in Christ, exclaiming your holiness and your character and your awesomeness.

[ 4 : 13 ] And I pray that we would encounter you as such today, the God who reigns, the holy and awesome God, who in many ways is terrifying, but in Christ is also more tender than we could ever imagine.

Help us to know you as this kind of God. Help us to know you not just as lawgiver, but lifegiver, and to understand how those things are not opposed to one another because of the gospel, because of the good news of what you've done for us in Christ.

Would you bless and honor the preaching of your word and fill us all with your spirit as we listen to what you have to say to us. And we pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Well, Christ Church, we're continuing our series in the book of Deuteronomy and these Hebrew scriptures, this last book of the Torah. And to get what Deuteronomy is about, I know we've talked about it, but I just want to refresh us.

I want you to picture Moses. Picture Moses and the people of Israel on the other side of the Jordan River, outside of the Promised Land. And 40 years have now gone by.

[ 5 : 27 ] 40 years have now gone by since their people, mostly their parents, mostly their grandparents, were delivered from slavery in Egypt, but then refused to enter the land that God had promised them.

And so here in Deuteronomy, you have this next generation of Israel. Pretty much all their parents, pretty much all their grandparents have not survived long enough to get to this moment where they're about to cross the Jordan River and enter into the Promised Land.

But they're still led by their faithful leader, their faithful prophet and shepherd, Moses, who is now 120 years old, and he's about to die knowing that he is not gonna enter the Promised Land with this people.

So here in Deuteronomy, you have Moses, this great prophet and shepherd over Israel, contemplating his death, wishing better things for this next generation of Israel, better things than for the previous generation, and looking to speak a final and fruitful word to them as they begin their next season of being the people of God without him.

And so what Deuteronomy is, is it's the record of this prophet Moses, his final and most important parting words to an Israelite generation about to embark on a new chapter in the story of God's people.

[ 6 : 45 ] And so in the first chapters, which we covered in the last couple weeks, he pretty much, he retells the history. He retells Israel what God has done for them, how he brought them out of Egypt, how he sustained them through the wilderness, how he forgave them with all their whining and all their rebellion and all the ways that they failed to trust him.

But as we come here to Deuteronomy chapter five today, Moses has moved on from retelling what God has done, and he moves on to tell us what God has spoken, namely his law.

Verse one says, Now next week, Jonathan is gonna talk about those 10 commandments, specifically given at Horeb.

But what I wanna point out to us today from Deuteronomy chapter five is not the laws themselves. Today, I want us to see the way that these laws are actually framed as they're spoken to Israel.

And this is so important to see because if we just go straight to the laws themselves, and if we fail to see who communicates these laws and why and how, we'll completely misunderstand God's law, we'll completely misunderstand God himself.

[ 7 : 59 ] But if we pay close attention, we'll notice that it's not just the law that Moses wants to remind us about. Here in Deuteronomy chapter five, Moses also wants to remind us, he wants to impress upon us of who this God is who spoke to us, and why he spoke to us, and how he spoke to us.

Who, why, and how. See, because Moses understands, and we all need to understand that unless we've been struck by the reality of who God is, and why he gave us his law, and how he spoke it, we'll never rightly relate to God, we'll never rightly know him, we'll only know him as just some authoritarian law-giving God, we'll never know him as the affectionate, life-giving God that he truly is.

And that's what Moses is up to this morning, that's what he wants his people to see here in Deuteronomy chapter five, and that's what I hope we'll all see in the preaching of God's word this morning. So let's dig in and look at how, before Moses even got to the what, before he even got to the law, he insisted on reminding them of who it was who spoke to them.

Notice, he doesn't start with the what of the law, he starts with the who of the lawgiver. See, Moses had a bigger understanding, a bigger view of the faith and simply, here you go, Israel. These are some Jewish rules and regulations for you to obey and follow.

Moses' retelling of the law is about so much more than helping them brush up on this religious manual for the sake of good Jewish behavior. In verse two, Moses roots the statutes and the rules.

[ 9 : 26 ] He's calling Israel to hear and learn and do them. He's rooting them in the covenant. That's what it says in verse two. Hear, O Israel, the statutes and rules. Learn them and be careful to do them.

Four, verse two. The Lord, our God, made a covenant with us in Horeb. See, by invoking this covenant that God made, by invoking this life and death binding commitment of the sovereign God to his people, Moses is saying, this is not primarily about rules.

This is primarily about relationship. And that's the key thing about covenant. Covenant is about relationship, a personal, intimate, communicative, and faithful relationship.

And so what Moses is doing here is he's reminding these people in verses four to six of just how personal, just how intimate, just how faithful this God has been in this covenant relationship to them.

He reminds them, the Lord, Yahweh, the God who appeared and spoke to Abraham and your forefathers, he also, verse four, spoke to you. He spoke to you. Face to face at the mountain, he says.

[ 10 : 28 ] And not only did he speak intimately with his covenant people face to face, but Moses reminds them of Yahweh's covenant credentials. Look at verse six.

Before God even tells them what they shall and shall not do in the Ten Commandments, God grounds his commandments in who he is and what he's already done as their covenant God.

In verse six, before giving out any commands, God says, I am Yahweh, I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Moses wants them to see that the law they've received didn't just come from anyone, not simply from him, a mere man, just another Israelite, and certainly not from your typical ancient Near Eastern pagan God.

No, it came from their covenant God, Yahweh, the God who had fulfilled his promises to Abraham, the God who rescued them from Egypt, and the God who was about to bring them into the promised land, the I am.

[ 11 : 27 ] The I am who said, I am yours. I am your God, O Israel. See, Moses reminds them that these laws are so much more than rules. They're a way of life.

They're a way of life meant to reflect and cultivate a sacred relationship between God and his people. Think of it this way. If you're about to enter into a relationship with someone and you want to nurture that relationship, what do you do?

Do you just kind of plop a manual into their lap with all your likes and dislikes, all your preferences and pet peeves and say, hey, memorize this, live by this. If you want a relationship with me that's going to work out, just follow these rules.

Go try that out and see how it works, right? No, you unfold to them who you are if you want a deep relationship with them. You unfold to them who you are. You show them your character and you connect with them in the deepest ways possible.

You knit your hearts together around the things that unite you and that's what God's doing in the giving of his law. It's not a list of God's pet peeves. It's a reflection of who he is.

[ 12 : 30 ] It's a reflection of his character. So when God says, thou shalt not kill, it's a reflection of him as the giver of life, as a God who values life.

Or when he says, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not lie, he's reflecting himself as a God of truth, a God of integrity. And see, just as these laws reflect his character, they also reflect the intended character, the intended way of life for all those who are made in his image.

Image bearers of God meant to enjoy a harmonious relationship with him. See, God's law is not an oppressive straitjacket. No, it's actually the truest, most original, most authentic way, the best way, God's intended way for human beings to live.

So don't you see that this book, this book, the scriptures, this law, even with all the laws and rules and statutes and demands upon our lives, it's not just any other book, it's the word of God.

It's the word of God, the God who loves us and gives himself to us and desires a personal and intimate relationship with us. And the who, and who these laws, who these laws come from, this makes all the difference.

[ 13 : 44 ] It makes all the difference in how we should understand and receive this book and all the rules and statutes that are in it. You know, the history of the world, the history of world religions is fraught with a bunch of magic, impersonal formulas for how to get what you want, how to attain that blessed life, which hoops you have to jump through, which obstacles you have to overcome, which sacrifices you have to make.

But this is not so with the Christian faith. Christianity is different. It's not about doing all the right things and following a list of rules from an impersonal, distant God who only exists to place impossible demands upon our creaturely existence.

The faith of Moses, the faith of all God's people is grounded, not in rules, but in a relationship with the one true and living God who graciously covenants himself to belong to an undeserving people like us.

Do we know this God? Do we know this God? This is the God who rescues his people from all kinds of slaveries, from slavery in Egypt, from slavery to our own sin, our addictions and our sinful habits, from our enslavement to the regret and the shame and the depression that plague us over all our inadequacies and our imperfections and our failures.

leaders, if you are down this morning, if you are depressed this morning, overwhelmed by the weight of your flaws and your failures, and if your understanding of the Christian faith is simply that of a legal code that you have shamefully broken, Moses has good news for you.

[ 15 : 24 ] The Spirit of God speaking through him and maybe even through me preaching to you today, we have better news for you. Good news of the covenantal, relational God who before even uttering his Ten Commandments broke the chains of his beloved people.

And if we only ever have eyes to view the Christian faith as but one among many other religious systems filled with pious rules and rituals, then we will only ever find God's law.

We will only ever find God himself as burdensome and oppressive and ancient and irrelevant. But if we are struck with the larger, truer reality of this covenant God that the Lord Almighty so desired to bind himself in a life and death relationship with his people, including people like us, this changes everything.

This changes everything about how we are to understand the law of God and it opens our eyes to see him not just as the law giver but as the life giver. Our covenant God, he breaks the chains of all those who belong to him.

His law is, it's a picture, not merely of the limitations that are placed upon us. Actually what it is, is it's a way to live out our liberation. That's what the law is.

[ 16 : 47 ] It's a way to live out our liberation. And this brings me to the why question. Why did God speak to them and give them his law? Well, Moses wants them to know that the reason why was out of their covenant God's loving kindness, out of his desire for his children to flourish.

See, when we understand who this God is, the why question actually becomes quite clear. Look with me at the last two verses, 32 and 33. You shall be careful, therefore, to do as the Lord your God has commanded you.

You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you that you may live and that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land you shall possess.

Every good parent makes laws. Every good parent makes rules for their children, not for their harm, not for their frustration, but for their good. Like when I say, Kami and Leah, thou shalt not come near to the oven when we're baking cookies for you because you will harm yourself.

You will get burned and we don't want you to get burned. I mean, think about it. No one actually wants to live in a world without laws. No one actually wants to live in a world without laws, right?

[ 18 : 01 ] No sane person who's honest about their finitude and their fallibility even wants to live in a world where they themselves get to make up their own laws. Our aversion is not to laws if we think about it.

It's not actually to laws in and of themselves. You know what it is? Our aversion is to imperfect laws given by imperfect lawgivers. But what if there was a perfect lawgiver?

What if there was a perfect lawgiver whose laws worked for the good of all people truly without fail? Might it be that the one true God is a good father who wants our good and who is for us?

Can you hear his fatherly longing here in verse 29? His fatherly longing for his children's good when he says to Moses, oh, verse 29, oh, that they had such a heart as this always to fear me and to keep my commandments that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever.

What if, what if we didn't simply see the law of God as a list of limitations but as a liturgy of life? A good way, a good pattern to commit ourselves to, a way to give ourselves to, a law that's been given to us by an infinitely wise, an infinitely good, an infinitely loving father in heaven?

[ 19 : 22 ] What if we saw the law of God in that way? But maybe you question that. Is God really good? Can I really trust this law that he's given us?

Is the God of Moses, the God of the scriptures, is he truly good? Is he truly for us? Well, having considered the who and the why, I think it's really when we understand how he spoke that we begin to see just how much God is actually for his people, just how much he desires our good when he gives us his law.

I want you to notice how Moses, he details the dramatic experience of Israel's encounter with God and he details it with a lot of like darkness and terror when God spoke to them at the Mount Horeb, right?

In verse 22, these words, the Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain, out of the mist of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness with a loud voice.

This wasn't just some casual encounter, this is what theologians call a theophany, a visible, sensible manifestation of God in creation to humans.

[ 20 : 31 ] Of all the ways that God could have communicated his law to them, he didn't drop a scroll down from the sky, he didn't send just an angel and a prophet as his messenger, he didn't just speak with a loud voice from heaven, he revealed to them his glory and his power and his presence palpably with the nearest exposure that anyone had had with God since the first humans originally walked with him in the Garden of Eden before the fall.

And it was an absolutely overwhelming encounter to hear this law from God because things were different now than in the garden. They were different now compared to when God's people once strolled with him through the Garden Paradise.

Moses reminds Israel of not just how awesome this encounter was, but also of how absolutely terrifying it was. It was terrifying.

Verse 23, Moses says, And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, a whole mountain on fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and all your elders, and you said, Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire.

This day we have seen God speak with man and man still live. They're surprised. They continue in verse 25, Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us.

[ 21 : 54 ] If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have and has still lived.

The people were amazed, yes, to encounter and to hear directly the voice of God, but gone were the days when sinless humanity could encounter the Almighty God in all his glory and all his holiness without dread, without terror, without the fear of getting consumed by his overwhelmingly holy presence.

A holiness that cannot, a holiness that will not tolerate sin and evil and injustice and unrighteousness. Moses reminds them of the terror that they felt when they heard the voice of God and met him at the burning mountain and received his holy law.

He reminds them of this in order to impress upon them the seriousness of coming before God, the seriousness of an encounter with God, the weightiness of what was spoken to them, given to them, the law.

The law is not something to be received nonchalantly. It's not a mere suggestion, something to flippantly try out. Like, hey, I'm gonna try keto this week.

[ 23 : 09 ] I'm gonna try intermittent fasting for months. See how it works out for me. No. When God told Israel at Mount Horeb to consecrate themselves for two days and to wash all their garments and then on the third day to come near to the mountain but not to touch the mountain, not even their animals, lest they surely die.

And when God came near and revealed himself to them and spoke to them from this burning mountain of fire with flashes of lightning and thunder and darkness and a deep, dark cloud of smoke, this was all meant to indicate to them that the words spoken to them were not a mere suggestion but the words of the holy, almighty, creator God, words that were a matter of life and death and in fact, too hot to even handle.

Moses reminds them that they were surprised. They were surprised to even have encountered God and hear him speak directly to them and still have survived. And by reminding them of how God so dramatically spoke to them, by reminding them of how terrifying God's voice was when he met them and spoke his law to them, Moses was also reminding them of really the great conundrum they faced as recipients of God's law and this was the conundrum.

On the one hand, Israel recognized that it was only by God's word and law that they could live. They needed him to speak to them. They recognized that God's voice was absolutely necessary for life and yet on the other hand, they also recognized that they could neither handle nor survive God's holy word and law.

That it was impossible for them to remain in God's presence and continue listening to his voice much less live up to this law he was giving them. On the one hand, to hear God's voice and receive his law was wonderful and absolutely necessary for life and well-being but on the other hand, it was absolutely terrible and impossible to survive and this is really the whole conundrum of the Christian faith.

[ 25 : 09 ] This is the whole conundrum of all of life that we human beings made in God's image are absolutely dependent on the word and the presence of God, his word and his voice of the very thing that created us, the very thing that sustains us and yet, his holy word and his presence present a deep, dark threat to all of us because we've all violated his holy standards.

We have not loved him with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength nor loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not put God first nor trusted in him. We've lived first for ourselves and then only occasionally, right, only opportunistically for the good of our neighbors, our image of God bearing neighbors.

This conundrum is at the heart of the Christian faith and if we don't understand this dire conundrum, we have not understood what Christianity is about. If we only know God as a tender teddy bear and not as a terrifyingly transcendent God, we have not understood him or his law or how far we've gone astray from him and how far and how much we need him.

I mean, do we, do any of us, do any of us realize what a wonder it is that we are all still breathing today as we've come into the house of God before the presence of God to worship him and to hear his word this morning.

Most of us probably came far more casually than any Israelite would have dared approach the living God at Mount Horeb or in his temple. Myself included, we come half-hearted, we come half-awake on our own time, on our own terms, coming to consume more than to bow down.

[ 26 : 58 ] When reminding Israel of what God spoke, Moses wanted to remind them of how God spoke, reminding them of the conundrum inherent in any encounter between the holy God and wayward humanity.

But see, the beauty of this is Moses didn't just remind them of the problem they face in verse 26. For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the mist of the fire as we have and has still lived?

But he also reminds them, he also reminds them of how they still happen to live while encountering this holy God. Go back down to verse 4. The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the mist of the fire, verse 5, while I stood between the Lord and you at that time.

See, the way that Israel survived this conundrum was by a mediator. They had someone to stand between them and God, someone to stand between sinful them and their holy God, a substitute, someone to face and encounter their fiery God even more intimately than they ever dared.

The people of Israel knew that this was a holy God when they saw the fire, when they heard the voice, and so they pleaded with Moses in verse 27. You, go near and hear all that the Lord our God will say and then speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you and we will hear it and do it.

[ 28 : 23 ] We cannot handle his voice anymore, Moses, but we desperately need it, so you go, please, go and try in our place. You go, expose yourself to the fiery God.

You go meet him on the mountain in the dark cloud for us. And God says in verses 28 to 31, they are right. It is good that they said this.

Tell them to return to their tents, but you, Moses, stand here by me and I will speak with you so that you may teach them. See, Moses rehashes all of this because he wants them to remember not only the terror they felt in the presence of God, in the presence of his law, but also he wants to remind them of the sacrificial mediator that they needed who made it possible for them to hear from this terrifyingly holy God who made it possible for them to enter into a relationship with this awesome God.

See, no one just encounters God on their own without a mediator. We all need someone to stand between us and God. He is far too holy. We are far too sinful.

We all need someone like Moses, someone who will go into the fire and the darkness in our place and restore our relationship with God. Really though, we need someone greater than Moses.

[ 29 : 44 ] God allowed Moses to serve as a mediator but in one sense it was a burden too great for him to bear and he died without entering the promised land with his people a consequence of his own sins and the sins of his people.

But thanks be to God. You know why? Thanks be to God that he has not left us without a better mediator. The Apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy chapter 2 for there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men.

The man Jesus Christ who gave himself as a ransom for us all. And this is the gospel. This is the gospel that the conundrum of the Christian faith is solved by the ultimate mediator Jesus Christ.

The one who faced the fiery judgment of God and went into the darkness in our place. And came out alive dying and yet rising again to bring us into the promised land of new creation.

The gospel the good news of Jesus Christ is that though God is far holier than we could ever comprehend and though we are more sinful than we could ever dare to imagine the terrifying law-giving God of Mount Horeb has still chosen to pour out his sacrificial love upon us.



[ 31 : 07 ] A love greater than we would ever dare hope because he is the life-giving God not just of Mount Horeb but he's the life-giving God of Mount Zion in Christ the mediator of a new covenant initiated by his blood.

So Christ Church my prayer is as we continue in this series in Deuteronomy as we continue to examine God's law together in the weeks ahead we'll do it with this proper framework remembering our covenant God who broke our chains even before giving us commands to live out our liberation remembering his tender heart and his good intentions for us his desire that we experience his abundant life and remembering how he sacrificially sent forth his one and only son as a mediator to solve the ultimate conundrum presented by the heights of his holiness and the depths of our sin this is the gospel will you pray with me Lord what will we do without the gospel the good news that you have sent a mediator for us help us never to presume that we could have a relationship with you on our own show us the wickedness of our hearts show us the holiness of your character and make us tremble before you and help us to hear your tender voice your desire to be with us give us eyes to see how far you've gone to pursue us to bring us into your family to allow us into your presence to commune with you at this table

Lord let us not take this lightly show us the heights of your holiness the depths of our sin and the overwhelming abundance of your grace toward us in Christ our perfect mediator we pray these things in his name amen and so we never let's go Oh oh Oh oh