

Our Covenant Foundation

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. My name is Wes Selke and this is my daughter Nora. I'm an elder here at Christ Church and we're part of the Oakland community. Today's scripture reading is from the book of Deuteronomy chapter 29 verses 1 to 6, 9 to 19, and 29 as printed in the liturgy.

These are the terms of the covenant that the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab in addition to the covenant that he had made with them in Horeb. Moses summoned all the Israelites and said to them, Your eyes have seen all that the Lord did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials, and to all his land.

With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those signs and great wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands, or eyes that see, or ears that hear.

[1 : 12] Yet the Lord says, It says, You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God, A covenant the Lord is making with you this day and sealing with an oath to confirm you this day as his people, That he may be your God as he promised.

As he promised you and as he swore to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am making this covenant with its oath, not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God, but also with those who are not here today.

You yourselves know how he lived in Egypt and how he passed through the countries on the way here. You saw among them their detestable images and idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold. Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose hearts turn away from the Lord our God and go and worship the gods of those nations. Make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison.

When such a person hears the words of the oath and they invoke a blessing on themselves, thinking, I will be safe even though I persist in going in my own way, they will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry.

[2 : 50] The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law. The grass withers and the flowers fade.

The Lord our God stands forever. Good morning, Christ Church.

If you're new with us, my name is Jonathan. I'm one of the pastors here. It's a delight to have you with us. The question I'm asking myself a lot these days is, where are we right now?

As we look at our own lives as individuals, as families, as a congregation, where are we right now? As we look at our city, our nation, our society, where are we?

It's an important question. It reminds me of the story of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. They decided to go on a camping trip. And after dinner, they enjoyed a bottle of wine.

[4 : 05] And then they laid down for the night. They went to sleep. And some hours later, Holmes awoke. And he nudged his faithful friend and he said, Watson, look up at the sky.

And tell me what you see. And Watson said, I see millions of stars. And Holmes asked, well, what does that tell you? And Watson pondered a minute.

He said, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo.

Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is all-powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow.

What does it tell you, Holmes? And Holmes was silent for a minute and then he spoke, Watson, you idiot. Someone has stolen our tent.

[5 : 08] What do you see? You know, you're probably going to get a different answer based on who it is and their varying understandings and perspectives of things. What do you see? What do you make of all this? Where are we right now?

You know, what I see is that we're coming out of 18 months of a ridiculously disruptive pandemic. Amen? 12 of those months, we were in total lockdown.

The past six months, we've been reopening everything, including Christchurch. We've been looking around for six months going, okay, who's even here? What do we have to work with?

What are we doing now? And I'm asking my question as a pastor, what are we going to do in the next six months? Where are we headed? And I hope that you'll come join us next Sunday for our congregational meeting to get more insight into where we're going.

But what I can see over the next six months is a renewing of Christchurch. A renewing of Christchurch. And I think there's a quantitative renewal of relationships that has to happen.

[6 : 10] All these connections to be formed among people that are regular, people who are new, people who just don't know one another very well. How do we make weak ties into strong ties relationally and quantitatively?

But I think that's actually the easier part. The harder part about renewing Christchurch is this qualitative building up of our life with God.

And I'm so grateful today for Deuteronomy 29 because that's the theme. If you were to open your pew Bibles in front of you, you would see at the top of this chapter, the heading says, Renewal of the Covenant.

Renewal of the Covenant. Another word for renewal is revival. Revival of the Covenant. A revival is a season where the ordinary operations of the Holy Spirit are greatly intensified to renew our spiritual vitality.

And so I want to think together for a minute about the dynamics of covenant renewal, the dynamics of spiritual revival. And what I want to say this morning is that covenant renewal is relational, personal, and sacrificial.

[7 : 26] Covenant renewal is relational, personal, and sacrificial. I'm going to start with covenant renewal being relational. Have you ever had an experience in your life where something was easy to start but hard to sustain?

Anybody experienced this? Maybe you started a company. Maybe you started a marriage. Maybe you started a church. Maybe you started a family and had some kids. And yeah, there were challenges in that launching phase, but you had passion, you had energy, you had sheer grit to kind of get you through those early stages.

But, you know, you get 10 years in, 20 years in, 40 years in, you start facing complexities. You start facing challenges that you just could never anticipate.

And so businesses find it helpful to refresh their vision and their values. Couples find it helpful to renew their vows of marriage.

Churches find it helpful to reaffirm their beliefs and their practices. And that's really the situation here with the people of God. It's been 40 years since they experienced the liberating power of God in being rescued from Egypt.

[8 : 43] It's been 40 years since they were at Horeb or Mount Sinai and experienced God's covenant love. It's been 40 years since they received the Ten Commandments and the Torah.

And 40 years is a long time. I'm 43 years old. And a lot has happened in that span of time. A lot can happen in 40 years. And here the people of God are on the plains of Moab, on the edge of the promised land.

And they're being invited and indeed challenged to renew their covenant with the living God. And what we see here is that that covenant relationship is vertical.

The covenant is a vertical relationship with the Lord. Look at verse 2. It says, Your eyes have seen all that the Lord did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials, and to all his land.

With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those signs, and great wonders. When you were experiencing an oppressive bondage, you then experienced me as your liberating God.

[9 : 48] That's what it says. And this tells us that the gospel is not merely a good idea. The gospel is good news. The gospel is news about historical givens, about the wonderful works of God, about the mighty acts of God's salvation for us.

And it shows us that this covenant relationship is initiated outside of us and above us. That a covenant is created not by us, but by a prior reality of loving kindness that wants us in a relationship.

It goes on in verse 5. And it says, It says, And so that's why when you get to verse 9, it says, This assumes that Yahweh has already acted to save his people by his grace.

That they are a people grasped and held by the strong and caring hands of the Lord. And so these terms of the covenant are not the condition of a relationship.

They're the consequence of a relationship. They are not entering in to obey the Ten Commandments to get God's love. They're entering in to obey those commands because they've already received God's love.

[11 : 47] And they want to show God how grateful they are in their obedience. Does that make sense? You guys tracking with me? This covenant relationship is a vertical relationship with the Lord.

But also the covenant is a horizontal relationship with the people of God. Look at verse 10. It says, This is a detailed list of the members of the people of God.

In fact, it's the most inclusive list in all of the Old Testament. It's got leaders and followers. Men and women. Old people and babies.

Those born in Israel and those who are resident aliens. Those who are rich and those who do the lowliest of jobs. Chopping wood. Carrying water. Everyone is included.

And no matter who stands above whom in daily life. All of them are on level ground because they're in the presence of the Lord himself.

[13 : 03] And it says in verse 14. It says, I am making this covenant with its oath. Not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God. But also with those who are not here today.

This covenant transcends time and space. It includes future generations who are not yet born. Which means that it involves you and me.

We're the ones not yet standing here today that are being addressed. And here is the heart. The essence of the covenant in verse 12. It says, You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God.

A covenant that the Lord is making with you this day. And sealing with an oath to confirm you this day as his people. That he may be your God.

As he promised you. And as he swore to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I will be your God. And you will be my people.

[14 : 08] That is the essence of a covenant relationship. You will be my people of the promise. You will be the children of Abraham. You will be the heirs of that blessing through which all the nations of the world will be blessed.

And all of us are here in this covenant included together. This reminds me of the words of John Donne. That great poet and pastor.

He said, No man is an island of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent. A part of the main.

Everybody is a part of this covenant. It reminds me of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

When he wrote his letter from a Birmingham jail. I think he was thinking in covenantal structures in terms of reality. He said, All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.

Tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all. Indirectly, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.

[15 : 13] And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality. It's a covenant. A covenant relationship.

And there's this organic, collective, holistic relationship that, yes, involves me, but really is about we. Yes, it involves every little thread, but it's really about the whole tapestry.

Yes, it's about the different members of the body, but really it's about the healthy functioning of the whole body. And you can see that here in verse 18.

Where it says, Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations.

Make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison. When such persons hear the words of this oath and invoke a blessing on themselves, thinking, I will be safe even though I persist in going my own way, they will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry.

[16:21] This covenant says, Do not let there be a root of bitter poison that could destroy the whole tree. Jesus and the apostles use the language of watch out for a little yeast that can corrupt the whole batch of dough.

This covenant relationship with the Lord can be negatively influenced by one person, one family, one group of people that thinks to themselves, It's no big deal if I just go my own way.

It's no big deal if I kind of blend the doctrine and ethics of the scriptures with the ideologies and the practices of Canaan. It won't be a big deal. If I just kind of relax my grip on these inconvenient truths that make me a little bit uncomfortable from our faith, all will be well.

And what this actually says in this covenant, that is a complete disaster. Not just for you, but for us. And we need to think this way because the covenant, we're told, is relational.

Covenant renewal is relational. You guys tracking with me? Covenant renewal is not only relational, it's also personal.

[17:38] Covenant renewal is personal. In verse 10, it says, All of you are standing today in the presence of the Lord, your God. This is a sober, serious, solemn moment of being koram deo, before the face of God.

They've been listening to Moses' final sermons in the last days of his life. And in these sermons, Moses has been taking the Ten Commandments and he's been expounding them and illustrating them and applying them and saying, This is the way.

This is the blueprint. This is the guide for abundant life in the promised land. And now it's time, having heard all of this teaching, to covenant together to live by the teaching.

And so every single individual here is going to take responsibility for their own relationship before God. Their own relationship with God in the presence of God.

They're going to make an oath of allegiance. They're going to swear their commitment to keep this covenant. They say, We are ready to be loyal to this gracious God.

[18:45] We are fully aware of all the curses and all the disasters that will come down upon us for being disloyal to this God. And so what do we see that God wants for us in this relationship?

He wants the relationship to be personal. Listen to verse 17. It says, You saw among them, that is the Egyptians and all the nations they've just passed through.

You saw among them their detestable images and idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold. Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations.

See, God wants the heart of each person turned toward him in worship. And he's saying, Look, you're entering into a context of endless distractions. You're going into a land where you're going to be surrounded by attractive alternatives.

Silver and gold, shiny objects that are going to vie for your attention and turn your attention away from me and cause you to worship lesser things that are not worthy of your devotion.

[19:57] Can you imagine living in a society, living in a place where there are these bright, shiny, luminous things wanting to control your attention and giving you a dopamine hit every time you pull it out of your pocket or off the shelf and do like this?

Can you imagine living in a society like that? If you weren't at our August retreat, I said there that the average iPhone user touches his or her phone 2,617 times a day.

In contrast, the psalmist says, I have set the Lord always before me. What would my life be like if God touched my mind as often as I touch my phone?

Multi-billion dollar companies are asking themselves, how do we consume as much of your time and attention as we possibly can? One person said the tech industry is the largest, most standardized, and most centralized form of attentional control in human history.

So that continuous partial attention is now our new normal. And don't get me wrong, our technological devices are not the only idols in our lives that cause our hearts to turn away from the Lord.

[21 : 13] They're just the most obvious. They look around at everybody like this, bowing down, right, to their phones. So Deuteronomy 29 is telling us how easy it is to turn our hearts away from devotion and love and worship to the Lord as our highest good, as our summum bonum.

And this is really a restatement of all the teaching of Deuteronomy. That heart turn in verse 18 restates for us what we heard in Deuteronomy 5. The Ten Commands.

What's the first of those Ten Commands? You shall have no other gods before me. But remember it says, you, second person singular, Jonathan, Barry, St. Clair, you personally should have no other gods before me.

And then the next chapter, and then the next chapter, Deuteronomy 6, is really a restatement of this heart turning away or turning toward the Lord where it says, hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord alone.

You, second person singular, you, Jonathan, Barry, St. Clair, you are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, with all that you are and all that you've got.

[22 : 28] In the midst of this myriad of distractions and all of these attention-grabbing, attractive alternatives that are telling you to put money or sex or power at the center, that are telling you to put your work or your comfort or approval at the center of your life, what we are being called to in this covenant renewal is for each person and each family and each group to turn your heart toward the Lord in worship.

One of the commentators that I read this week, he said, Deuteronomy is deeply aware that Israel's faith is in a context of endless distractions from covenantal faith.

The most likely candidates for such seduction are precisely those who are comfortable and complacent with God. They are the ones most susceptible and most surely to bring disaster upon all of the community.

Seduction from covenant happens among those who turn a little bit at a time away from the Lord because they are not vigilant.

What this is telling us is that your personal spiritual vigilance, your personal habits of the heart, your personal engagement, your personal quality of life with the Lord not only matters to God, it matters to all of us and our quality of life as a church community.

[24 : 02] And so the question I'm asking is how can I, how can we practically keep God as our first love? what are the predictable patterns, what are the healthy habits that will regularly revitalize our relationship with the Lord so that He is my love supreme?

And I want to say you've made a good start today. You've begun the first day of your week here turning your heart toward the Lord in worship which is the fourth commandment, right?

Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy to the Lord and that is a great start. George Herbert, the poet, he says seven whole days not one in seven I will praise thee.

And so my question is how will we worship God seven whole days this week, tomorrow and the next day and the day after that and my simple question is how will you start the day tomorrow when you wake up in the morning?

I love this quote from C.S. Lewis in his book Mere Christianity. He said this in 1941. He said the real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it.

[25 : 16] It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back and listening to that other voice and taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger life come rushing in and so on all day long he says.

Around that same time a man this Lewis was in England a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany wrote these words and he would later be taken and killed by the Nazis but he said the morning prayer determines the day.

squandered time of which we are ashamed temptations to which we succumb weaknesses and lack of courage at work disorganization and lack of discipline in our thoughts and in our conversation with other men all have their origin most often in the neglect of morning prayer.

Decisions demanded by work become easier and simpler where they are made not in the fear of men but only in the sight of God. My goal this week is to move some of you from nothing to something to move you from investing zero minutes in your personal relationship with the Lord to five minutes and then ten minutes and fifteen minutes to investing one day of your week to three

days then four days then five days of your week and if you're a guest with us today we're not normally this practical or this prescriptive but I'm just realizing as a pastor after 18 months of pandemic life that we desperately need to reestablish healthy habits and predictable patterns that are gonna give us a life with God and so I've given you this handout called morning prayer as your insert this morning and I hope it will equip you with a tool to help keep God as your first love in your life which is what

Deuteronomy is all about tomorrow morning you're gonna engage in many habits you're not even gonna be thinking about hopefully you're gonna take a shower we hope hopefully you're gonna put on clothes we hope hopefully you're gonna eat and brush your teeth and I wanna invite you to create some space and time to pray at least a portion of this half of it just the first words of it would be an absolute victory for us I think if we began this practice of morning prayer a revival would break out at Christ Church amen covenant renewal is relational and it's personal for each one of us but the last thing I wanna say is covenant relational covenant renewal is relational personal and it's sacrificial you know the sad and tragic story of the Bible is that God's people fail over and over to be the covenant partners that we swear to be right we persist in going our own way as it says in verse 19 but the sweet and triumphant story of the Bible is that though we fail

[28 : 39] God's covenant love never fails us the Lord would send his own eternal and beloved son Jesus to be this faithful Israelite to be the one true human being to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves Jesus is the only one whose heart does not turn away from the Lord he's the only one who rather had his heart turned toward the Lord every moment of every day of his life and when he came to the end of that beautiful life on the night before he was to be crucified he offered us these gifts of bread and wine and he said this broken bread of my body reveals what I've come to do for you in my incarnate person and this outpoured wine of my blood is showing you what

I've come to do for you in my atoning work work and what is the word that Jesus uses when he gives us this meal he says this is my blood of the new covenant covenant Jesus is completing the covenant renewal that began with Israel on the plains of Moab when he says this blood of the covenant is being poured out for the forgiveness of sins you see the Lord knew when he entered into a covenant with human beings like us that it would cost him dearly that it would be an absolute bloody mess but he did it anyway because he loves us he did it knowing that he would take all of the curses of our breaking of the covenant so that we would get all the blessings of his keeping the covenant as if we ourselves had kept the covenant

Jesus is going to enter in to be torn to pieces the nails the spears the thorns are going to tear him apart why so that we can have what Paul calls the righteousness peace and joy in the Holy Spirit all of our hearts turning away from God all of that root of bitter poison that destroys the whole thing all of that disaster that results when I persist in going my own way all of that will be poured out on Jesus on his cross and this is why the apostle Paul is telling us in Galatians 3 he says Christ redeemed us by becoming a curse for us he redeemed us that blessing that the blessing given to Abraham might come to us through him do you realize what Jesus has done for you in his perfect life he completely fulfilled the terms of the covenant and he earned the covenant blessing so that God could love you absolutely unconditionally and in his sacrificial death he completely satisfied all the curses of this covenant so that he could remove it from anyone who would ask them ask him to take it away from them and friends do you know what Jesus was doing in those final moments on his cross as he was dying for the sins of the world he turned his heart and worshipped toward the Lord as he was writhing in agony he cried out father into your hands I commit my spirit father into your hands I commit my spirit it's a prayer Jesus prayed thousands of times it came straight out of his prayer book from psalm 31 verse five father into your hands I commit my spirit you know we spend most of our time attempting to get our lives out of

God's hands and into our hands and in this dialogue deep in the heart of the trinity with Jesus on his cross he does for us what we cannot do in this one last confident reckless act of faith Jesus willingly exuberantly commends the purpose of his whole life and his whole work into the strong loving hands of his father father into your hands I commit my spirit and that I hope becomes the prayer for all of us who know the depths which Jesus sacrificed himself to renew this covenant for us may it become our prayer tomorrow morning and the day after that father into your hands I commit my spirit in the name of the father son and holy spirit amen he to pour him together to me am in the name