

Identity, Destiny, and Rebellion

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. The Lord our God said to us at Horeb, You have stayed long enough at this mountain.

Break camp and advance into the hill country of the Amorites. Go to all the neighboring peoples in the Arabah, in the mountains, in the western foothills, in the Negev, and along the coast, to the land of the Canaanites and to Lebanon, as far as the great river, the Euphrates.

See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land the Lord swore he would give to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to their descendants after them.

Then all of you came to me and said, Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us, and bring back a report about the route we are to take and the towns we will come to.

[1 : 18] The idea seemed good to me, so I selected twelve of you, one man from each tribe. They left and went up into the hill country and came to the valley of Eshkol and explored it.

Taking with them some of the fruit of the land, they brought it down to us and reported, It is a good land that the Lord your God, our God, is giving us. But you were unwilling to go up.

You rebelled against this command of the Lord your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, The Lord hates us. He brought us out of Egypt to deliver us to the hands of the Amorites to destroy us.

Where can we go? Our brothers have made our hearts melt in fear. They say, The people are stronger and taller than we are. The cities are large with walls up to the sky.

We even saw the Anakites there. Then I said to you, Do not be terrified. Do not be afraid of them. The Lord your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes, and in the wilderness.

[2 : 34] There, you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place. In spite of this, you did not trust the Lord your God, who went ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and a cloud by day, to search out for places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go.

When the Lord heard what you said, he was angry and solemnly swore, No one from this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your ancestors, except Caleb, son of Jephunneh.

He will see it, and I will give him and his descendants the land he will set his feet on, because he followed the Lord wholeheartedly. Then you replied, We have sinned against the Lord.

We will go up and fight, as the Lord our God commanded us. So every one of you put on his weapons, thinking it easy to go up into the hill country. But the Lord said to me, Tell them, Do not go up and fight, because I will not be with you.

You will be defeated by your enemies. So I told you, but you would not listen. You rebelled against the Lord's command, and in your arrogance, you marched up into the hill country.

[3 : 57] The Amorites, who lived in those hills, came out against you. They chased you like a swarm of bees, and beat you down from Seir all the way to Horma. You came back and wept before the Lord, but he paid no attention to your weeping, and turned a deaf ear to you.

And so you stayed in Kadesh, many days, all the time you spent there. The grass withers and the flowers fade. The Lord our God is to you.

Good morning, Christ Church. Happy Labor Day to you all. I have to admit, I have a complicated relationship with this holiday, because my dad approached this weekend as a time to do yard work and deferred maintenance on our house.

And, you know, after a few years of this, I decided, well, I'll just start inviting my friends over and get out of the work, which my dad, of course, saw as free labor. More laborers to send out into the yard.

And so, no one ever wanted to spend the night with me, ever. And I'm still kind of getting over it. Dad, love you, if you're out there listening to this. But I hope this is a good weekend for us to kind of catch our breath.

[5 : 19] If you're a student and have just started school, I hope you're off to a good school year. We have kindergarteners to seniors. We have first years. As undergrads, we have PhD candidates.

And it's great to start a new school year in person. And it's great to start a new ministry year. As Andrew said, we had a fantastic retreat last weekend. Today is Cow Sunday.

This week, we're starting our wonderful Wednesdays for our youth and kids. We have a wonderful event. At the end of this week, on Friday, you'll hear more about our faith and work event. And our community groups are starting.

So a lot of wonderful things going on. We hope that you'll lean in to Christ Church. And we hope that all these opportunities will be just catalysts for you to grow in your relationship with Christ.

That's our mission, is to help you grow in your relationship with Christ. And that's our hope in this new sermon series, which we're calling Renewing Love. Renewing Love.

[6 : 15] If there's a single word that's characteristic and definitive for the book of Deuteronomy, it's the word love. And if you've ever fallen in love with someone, you know that you just wanna learn all you can about your beloved.

What do they love? Why do they love what they love? What are they thinking? What makes them tick? And of course, we know that it's one thing to fall in love. It's another thing to stay in love.

There's a big difference between infatuated love and loyal love, long committed love. And that's what a Christian is. A Christian is someone who's fallen in love with Jesus.

And we've pledged ourselves to him as our beloved in a covenant love, a committed, loyal love. And of course, if you're a Christian, you wanna know what makes my beloved tick?

What is he thinking? What's in his mind? And what's in his heart? And how do we answer that question? Well, one way to go about that is to read the books that are written about our beloved, right?

[7 : 17] The gospels, the epistles in the New Testament. But another way to learn what our beloved loves is to read his favorite books, one of which is the Psalms, these great love songs for God.

Another of his favorite books is Isaiah, these great visions of the recreative power of the love of God. But then of course, there's Deuteronomy. And some of you are like, okay, what's up with that?

You know, what is up with Deuteronomy? Isn't this a book? Like several other books of the New Testament, it's about a God of wrath and anger. Isn't this a book full of irrelevant and primitive, sort of old, dusty, ancient Near Eastern law codes?

Why the book of Deuteronomy? And I guess our invitation to you over these coming weeks and months is come and see. Come and find out for yourself.

Why did Jesus love this book so much that he memorized probably the whole thing, at least great portions of it? Why does Jesus quote this book more than any other book?

[8 : 22] Why do his disciples quote this book so much? And it's important as we dive in to ask ourselves, what kind of book is this book? As Andrew said, you know, this is Moses at the end of his life.

And he is recapitulating and reinforcing the teachings of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

And he's giving us a copy of the teaching. That's what Deuteronomy means. Second law. Copy of the teaching for the next generation that's gonna go in and enter into the promised land. Or if you follow the Hebrew title of this book, it just means the words, Devarim, the words, meaning the word of God given at Mount Sinai rendered in Moses' words as he's preaching these final sermons on the eve of his death.

This is everything you, the people of God, need to know about what is essential for life. And Jesus loved this stuff. He loved this copy of the teaching.

He loved the preaching of Moses on the word of God which is all about the renewing love of God. That's what this is all about. And our prayer is that as we get into this, as we explore it together, that you would discover for yourselves, maybe experience for the first time or the first time in a long time, the renewing love of God for you.

[9 : 49] And that we individually and we collectively would renew our love for him who loves us so much. So with that, I wanna dive into Deuteronomy chapter one and Moses' first sermon here to us is that our journey requires active trust in the living God.

Our journey requires active trust in the living God. And I wanna say a little bit about our journey because in verse six, we read that the Lord, our God said to us at Horeb, that is Mount Sinai, he said, you stayed long enough at this mountain, break camp and advance.

So the first command of God in this book, they're verbs of motion. You can't stay where you are. You've got to move and set out and go and advance. Because to be the people of God is to be on a journey with the Lord who is not static, but is dynamic.

It's to be on the move with Yahweh, to walk with him from one place to another, from point A to point B to point C, to move with our creator and redeemer God.

And the landscape of our journey with God moves us in three distinct places on the map, these three archetypal stages of development.

[11 : 15] If you were to ask these people of God, hey, where have you been? Where did you come from? They would say, well, Egypt.

And if you said, well, where are you now? They would say, we're in the wilderness. And if you said, well, where are you going next? They would say, we're going to the promised land.

And these are the three distinct places, the three distinct stages of our own journey as Christians and as a Christian community. Where did you come from?

I came from Egypt. That iron smelting furnace, that land of slavery, that house of bondage that's marked by tyranny and genocide and oppression.

There in Egypt, we had harsh taskmasters and experienced bitter misery. But within that context, we, the people of God, were saved by his grace.

[12 : 14] We were delivered by his mercy. We were rescued by his goodness. We were liberated by his power. And this is a picture of what it means to become a Christian, that God sends his deliverer, not Moses, but one who's greater than Moses.

He sends Jesus. And Jesus enters in to this iron smelting furnace of our cursed and oppressive and miserable world. And there Jesus becomes the Passover lamb of God.

He sheds his blood on the cross. And by his grace, he saves us from our slavery to sin. And by his mercy, he delivers us from our bondage to death.

And when Jesus rises from the dead, he parts the Red Sea, as it were. And he moves us through and he leads us into new life on the other side.

And many of us are here today because we've experienced this first stage of the journey. Some of us are here because we're exploring what it might mean for us to leave Egypt behind.

[13 : 19] Where did you come from? We came from Egypt. Well, where are you now? We are in the wilderness. We are in the wilderness. And the wilderness is this vast, life-threatening place that's parched by the sun.

The wilderness is full of thirst and hunger. The wilderness is full of serpents and scorpions. And within this context, the people of God experience his faithful protection and his generous provision and his covenant commitment to us.

Notice in verse six, Moses says, the Lord, our God. He doesn't say the Lord, a God, or the Lord, the God. He says the Lord, our God.

We know his name and he knows us. And the wilderness is this place where we found that our identity was not built on the sand of our situation, but our identity was built on the rock of our relationship with the Lord, who's our God.

And frankly, the wilderness is this place where many people opt out of the Christian life. We begin with this great Egypt liberation. We begin with this great explosion of joy, but we're not ready.

[14 : 39] And maybe people haven't told us to be ready for the testing ground that is the desert, this dry and barren place where our life is desperately dependent on God.

Some of you might know the great work, The Pilgrim's Progress. Anyone read this book, The Pilgrim's Progress? It maps out for us the dangers that are typical to a Christian in the wilderness.

Places like the Slough of Despond, Vanity Fair, Doubting Castle, The Giant Despair, The Mountain of Error.

These are all the markers on the landscape of our journey through the wilderness, this great second stage of the journey. Where did you come from? I came from Egypt, but I left that behind.

Well, where are you now? I'm in the wilderness where I'm being seriously tested. Well, where are you going next? We're going to the promised land. We're going to the promised land.

[15 : 40] We stand on this borderland of the destiny for which we were designed, but we need to press into it. We need to take hold of it. And that's what Moses is saying in verse eight.

Rather, the Lord is saying in verse eight, See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land that the Lord swore he would give to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to their descendants after them.

You see, the whole first book of the Torah, the book of Genesis, is about how the God of grace makes a promise to Abraham to give him seed and land, to give him a people and a place, to give him kids and to give him a home where those kids can live.

And here, now, the people of God are on the edge of that promised land, but they've got to claim that promise by faith. They've got to put their faith into action. And what that means for us is this risky mission to move into hostile enemy territory, to engage in dangerous warfare, and to go and build the kingdom of God together in the promised land.

Now, as a quick aside, some of us, we read, and we're gonna read a lot in Deuteronomy about the conquest of Canaan, and that is a major doubt generator for us, a major barrier of belief for some of us.

[17 : 06] I have wrestled long and hard on this question that's given me great cognitive and emotional unrest. And if that's you, and you're here today, sort of tempted to set your Bible aside because of that, or set your faith aside because of that, I've written a six-page paper for you called The Scandal of Divine Violence in the Bible.

You can email me. I would love to point you in the right direction, help you engage with some of the great thinkers on this question. There are good answers to this very important question, and I'd love to dialogue with you about that.

We don't have time to talk about it today. But my main point is that to be a Christian is to experience the liberating grace of God that pulls you out of Egypt.

To be a Christian is to have your identity, your covenant identity tested and proven in the wilderness. And to be a Christian is to be someone who's pressing in to the promised land, someone who's taking possession of all that God has given us in Jesus and by the Spirit.

It's to be someone who's living out your missional purpose to pray, God, may your kingdom come on the earth as it is in heaven. God, may you enable us to make more and more disciples of Jesus so we can fill this place with his people.

[18 : 30] And God is very eager for us, Christ Church, to move in this direction, to move into this stage of the journey. Where did you come from?

Egypt, but I left that behind. Where are you now? I'm in the wilderness, but I'm moving through. Well, where are you going? We're pressing in to the promised land. That is the journey.

It's been the journey of God's people for millennia, and it's our journey as well. And Moses tells us that our journey requires active trust.

Our journey requires active trust. God swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give them a home. He made a promise.

He made an oath. He made an irreversible commitment to do that, but they and we have to receive that promise by trust. And Deuteronomy 1 is a window into the human heart that tells us we have trust issues.

[19 : 32] Everybody sitting here, including myself, has trust issues. You see, the story goes that the people of God were slaves for 400 years. They're coming back to their homeland.

They have no other place to go. They can't be in Egypt. They can't be in the wilderness. They have to be somewhere. So they're coming back to this land that was theirs before they had to move out.

And tribes have moved into their homeland, and they're going to be attacked when they're returning home. And God says to them, don't be afraid. Go up. Possess the land.

Yes, there's going to be spears and arrows and enemies. But God says, I provided a place for you. And of course, they send spies out.

The spies bring back the scouting report, and they say, indeed, the Lord is giving us a land that is very good, just like the original creation, just like the Garden of Eden that was very good.

[20 : 30] This land is flowing with milk and honey. This land is so fruitful and full of grapes and wine. All we need to do as the people of God is to carry out the mission of God.

But we see that the people of God rebel against God. In verse 26, Moses says, but you were unwilling to go up. You rebelled against the command of the Lord your God.

You grumbled in your tents and said, the Lord hates us. So he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us. I mean, you almost have to laugh.

Here we are, the people of God, and we declare that the greatest blessing from God, the surest proof of God's love for us, our deliverance from slavery, proves the real motives of your heart.

You don't wanna give us this land. You wanna give us to our enemies. You don't wanna bless us. You want to destroy us. All that stuff about dismantling the empire of Egypt and all this stuff about making the impossible journey through the sea and through the wilderness possible for us, you didn't do that because you love us.

[21 : 46] You did that because you hate us. And we may not say that out loud, but we live our lives, and I think we think like this in a thousand different ways because it's the condition of the human heart.

Back at the very beginning, in Genesis 3, there was a voice that was speaking to the heart of Adam and Eve that said, God doesn't love you. You can't trust God.

God's holding out on you. He wants to keep you down. And that was in paradise. That was in the best of all possible places. And yet here we are in the wilderness, and we second-guess God.

We assume the worst about God. Things aren't going totally right for us, and we say, God must hate me. And we just kind of ignore God. Anybody do that besides me?

The people of God rebel against God. You were unwilling. You rebelled. You grumbled. And then it says, the people of God melted in fear before their circumstances. Verse 28.

[22 : 49] Where can we go? Our brothers have made our hearts melt in fear. They say the people are stronger and taller than we are. The cities are large, with walls up to the sky.

We even saw the Anakites there. See, we not only pervasively misconstrue God, but we consistently catastrophize our situations, don't we?

We say, God, the mission you've given us is too big. It's too overwhelming. It's too difficult. The obedience you're calling me to offer you is too scary and too hard.

They say the people are stronger and taller. This place is full of Goliath-like warriors. These cities are so huge. Their walls are 40 feet high.

In the book of Numbers, when this story is recounted, the people say, we seem like grasshoppers in our own eyes. We are like this big.

[23 : 48] And why do our hearts melt in fear? Well, what are our eyes fixed upon? They're fixed upon all the wrong things. When we look out there at the world, everything is so big that we're afraid.

And we look in here at ourselves, we're afraid because we're so small. But where should our eyes be fixed? Our eyes should be fixed on I am who I am.

Our eyes should be fixed on his mighty hand and his outstretched arm. Our eyes should be fixed on the wonderful works of God. Our eyes should be fixed on the fact that over and over and over, he exercises his power and service of his love for us.

And this is what Moses tells the people in verse 29. He says, This is a leader of the congregation who absorbs their anxiety, he calms their fears, and he redirects their attention.

And he says, Fix your eyes on the Lord of the Passover, the Lord of the Red Sea, the Lord of the water in the desert, the Lord of the manna when there was no bread.

[25 : 27] Fix your eyes on the glorious God of Sinai. But Moses says in verse 32, In spite of this, you did not trust in the Lord your God who went ahead of you on your journey.

And this, of course, is the taproot of all of our pathologies. This is the poisonous spring from which flows all of our spiritual, relational, psychological, and social problems that we have trust issues.

We don't want to trust the most trustworthy being in the universe. And it's sobering to me that none of this generation was willing to continue the venture of faith that they started out upon so strong.

Well, all except for one. In verse 36, it says that except for Caleb, son of Jephunneh, he will see the land and I will give him and his descendants the land he set his foot on.

Why? Because he followed the Lord wholeheartedly. Caleb is looking at all of the same facts that the whole congregation of Israel is seeing, but he sees them through the eyes of faith.

[26 : 43] Caleb is looking at everybody around him, the people of God who are abandoning God and refusing to trust in God and losing their confidence in God. And Caleb says, I'm not going to go with the flow.

I'm going to swim upstream, not just upstream from the broader culture. I'm going to swim upstream from what all God's people are doing. And I'm going to remain loyal. And in fact, the Hebrew says, he completely filled himself with the Lord.

And this book of Deuteronomy is here for us to learn how to be a church community that's full of Caleb-like men and women and children who are full of trust and full of a wholehearted willingness to follow our God wherever he's leading us to go.

Amen? So our journey requires active trust and it requires active trust in the living God. And I think I can do this last part really quick. Sociologist Christian Smith, he researches the common beliefs among American youth and he summarizes those beliefs by calling it moral therapeutic deism.

Moral therapeutic deism says that God exists, but he's not particularly involved in our lives. He's kind of remote and distant. He's this divine butler, this cosmic therapist that is helping us out from time to time, but it's not really personally connected to us.

[28 : 20] And what I want us to see is that Moses deconstructs, radically deconstructs, this vision of God. He says in verse 30, the Lord your God who is going before you will fight for you as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes.

This is not a remote and a weak God, but he's a present and strong fighter who wars against all that would enslave us and oppress us.

And Moses goes on in verse 31. He says, in the wilderness you saw how the Lord your God carried you as a father carries his son all the way you went until you reached this place.

This is not a distant and uncaring God. This is an involved and compassionate father who carries us when we cannot carry ourselves. The living God is a fighter and a father.

And he's proven that he can be relied upon to meet all of our needs. And this living God reveals himself to us most fully in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 27] In Jesus, this God takes on flesh to live the one true human life. After his baptism, he goes out into the wilderness for 40 days, just like Israel was in the wilderness for 40 years.

And there, he too is tempted. Will he journey with the living God by exercising active trust? Or will he too rebel against God and melt in fear and refuse to trust?

And guess which book of the Bible Jesus is meditating on out here in his wilderness temptation? And guess which book of the Bible Jesus is quoting in his great wilderness struggle?

It's the book of Deuteronomy. And here, the Son of God succeeds at every point where we, the people of God, fail. Right?

We are unwilling, but he proves himself willing. We are afraid, but Jesus is courageous. We refuse to trust, but Jesus follows the Lord wholeheartedly and we're told he goes out from the wilderness and he begins to proclaim everywhere the gracious rule and the liberating reign of God and the core of that message is what?

[30 : 43] I want all of you to begin calling God Abba, Father. Jesus says, I am the way to the Father and my Father is anything but distant and uncaring.

He is an involved and compassionate Father and he wants to carry you like a father carries his daughter. He wants to carry you like a father carries his son.

Won't you let God carry you through all the ups and the downs, through all the twists and turns of your life? Jesus says, won't you let my Father carry you all the way home to the promised land, all the way to where the heavens come down on the earth.

Let my Father carry you all the way to that place where he has many, many rooms for us to dwell. See, Jesus had so saturated himself in this vision that God is our Father who wants to carry us.

And in Jesus, we not only meet God our Father, but in Jesus, we meet God our fighter, the God who fights for us. When we meditate on Christ hanging on his cross, what do we see?

[32 : 04] Do we see a weakling? Or do we see someone who's warring on our behalf against all that sin which was enslaving us?

When we look at Christ crucified, do we see a loser? Or do we see a victor who's gone before us on our journey to fight our enemies? When we look at Christ crucified on his bloody cross, do we see a man who's being trampled upon?

Or do we see our God who's trampling down death by death? Because my friends, Jesus has gone ahead of us on our journey.

And he has taken on all those things that are too big for us and too scary for us. All those things that really should cause our hearts to melt in fear.

And all that stuff that could really destroy us, Jesus goes ahead of us and destroys it for us. This crucified yet risen one, he's the beloved son of our Father God.

[33 : 20] And he's the living God who fights for us and indeed has already won the battle for us. And Jesus, the living God, invites us and I hope you'll hear him in this sermon series inviting you, come follow me.

Come follow me wholeheartedly into the promised land. Come follow me into new and abundant life with God. Come follow me as I fight the battle to turn this sad, old, miserable world into the joyous kingdom of my Father.

Come follow me and let my Father carry you all the way home to the place you were meant to dwell.

Our journey requires active trust in the living God and may he fill us with trust even today.
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.