

Serving the Lord who Saves the Unrighteous

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[0 : 00] Well, let's pray as we come to God's word this morning. Lord God, you've caused all Holy Scripture to be written to make us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ.

And we pray today that this word of yours through your servant Moses to Israel may indeed make us wise, teach, correct, rebuke and train us in righteousness so that we may live for the glory of Jesus. Amen.

Now, some of you know, I'm not very good with instruction sheets. And you would think that after many years of experience of filling in forms, I'd get it right. But just a few weeks ago, filling in yet again, the Pakistan visa form, which takes up at least seven pages.

Of course, I got it wrong. And they have a little checklist. And I submitted the form, filled in all the details, copied out every country I've been to in the last two years, which they require, put in the itinerary, the letter of invitation, the photographs that they needed, sent it all off. And a few days later, a phone call saying, sir, you forgot to send the money.

Just yesterday, this week, you see, I've been moving back into Melbourne. So I had to buy a computer printer. So I bought a printer. And when I bought it, I asked the man, now, is this easy to sort of install?

[1 : 21] Oh, yes, no problem. Three minute job, he said. Well, after half an hour, I was still trying to work out how to put the paper in the machine.

And I thought, this is not working properly. And I'd looked at the diagram. I read the instructions. I'm trying to, in the end, I realized I was trying to put it in the back of the machine, not the front. I'm not very good with instructions.

And so sometimes it's handy to have this little executive summary. You know, the key basic things, even those I fail at sometimes. And in Deuteronomy, at the end of today's passage, we find an executive summary.

It's in chapter 10, verse 12. Five things.

And that comes at the end of two chapters, which is, in effect, the passage that I'm to preach from today. We heard the reading from the beginning of that passage. And I've just read the sort of executive summary at the end.

[2 : 36] That's what God required of ancient Israel. Those five things. To fear him. Walk in his ways. Love him. Serve him. And keep his commandments.

That's the essence of it, basically, of what religion with God boils down to for ancient Israel. But, of course, like anything, we need to understand it in its context to understand particularly what is being said here.

Moses is addressing Israel and making it clear to them that when they occupy the promised land, which is about to come, they will not do so because they're righteous.

Maybe you heard that in the first reading as it was read for us by John. The repetition of, you are not righteous, or it is not because of your righteousness, three times in those verses.

In fact, the conclusion is, you are a stubborn or a stiff-necked people. You're not going to enter the promised land because you deserve it. That's, in essence, what's being said.

[3 : 40] And then, to give the evidence for that, Moses highlights one particular sin. But in chapter 9, verse 7, he makes it clear that this is not the only one, or it's not the only evidence of their stubbornness or stiff-neckedness.

So, in verse 7, he says, Now, that's 40 years.

Moses is saying, you've been stubborn against God all of 40 years. And if, of course, you read the book of Exodus and Leviticus and especially their numbers, you will see repeatedly their stubbornness and rebellion against God.

Time after time, as soon as they're out of Egypt, as soon as they cross the Red Sea, before they got to Sinai, after they left Sinai, when they came to the border of the promised land. You would have seen that a few weeks ago in Deuteronomy 1.

And then for 38 years in the wilderness, grumbling and mumbling and murmuring and complaining against God. And now they're on the verge of the promised land again. They're about to inherit that great land.

[4 : 56] But it's not because they deserve it. The main sin, the worst sin of all, Moses highlights in chapter 9. So, in chapter 9, verse 8, he says, Even at Horeb, that is Mount Sinai, you, in fact, sinned against God.

We see it in verse 8. I'll read in full. Even at Horeb, you provoked the Lord to wrath, and the Lord was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you.

Now, the account of that sin of making a golden calf is given in Exodus 32-34 in some detail.

Here, Moses summarizes those two chapters. He summarizes it in a way to highlight the sinfulness of what they did. Even at the time when God was speaking to them, and they heard his voice audibly give them the Ten Commandments, within days, they were saying to Moses' brother at the bottom of the mountain, make us some God that we can worship.

Moses was on top of the mountain with God receiving the other laws. Now, this is a frightful sin. The best sort of analogy I can think of is this, and this might be horrifying, I hope not offensive, but at least it suggests to us the seriousness of the sin here.

[6 : 21] You imagine that you've just got married. You've gone through all the wedding ceremony and the reception and everything, and now, finally, it's time to take the person you've just got married to back into your hotel room, wherever you're staying for the night.

And you come into the room, and you realize that you've left your marriage certificate back in some place. And you say, I'll just go and get it, and come back.

So you go and get the marriage certificate, where the ink is not yet quite dry, and then you come back to the room where you're staying with your wife or husband you've just married, and you open the door, ready for the night ahead, and there is the person you've married in bed with someone else.

How awful that would be. I mean, it's unthinkable. But that's really what's going on with this sin of the golden calf. At this very point, as Moses has heard or relayed, and the people have heard God's words to them from God himself on Mount Sinai, it's as if God, and literally he is, making a covenant relationship with the people of Israel.

You are my people. This is how you ought to live as my people. We are beginning this relationship in a formal way today. But of course, no sooner have they heard the words that they turn away and ask Aaron to make a golden calf, a bull like an Egyptian god.

[7 : 46] Something highly offensive to God. Notice how it provoked the Lord to anger, to wrath. He was ready to destroy them, and so he should. As Moses came down the mountain with the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the two stone tablets, which in a way are sort of parallel to, say, a wedding certificate, a relationship expression, when Moses sees what they've done, he smashes those two tablets of stone.

That's how he reminds them in chapter 9 of what that event was like. But that's not all. If that's all, then Israel would be destroyed.

There'd be no more. There'd be nothing more after Exodus 34. But it wasn't all. Because Moses prayed. And Deuteronomy 9 highlights the prayer of Moses by putting it at the end of the chapter.

If you read through the chapter carefully, and we haven't got time to do that, what happens is Moses reminds them that God is angry, he's going to destroy them, and so on.

And he says, I prayed. And I prayed for Aaron at the time. And God heard the prayer. And then there are other sins you did in chapter 9, verse 22 to 24. Different places are mentioned.

[8 : 59] They all refer back into the book of Numbers or Exodus. And then suddenly, at the end of the chapter, in chapter 9, verse 25, we come to the prayer of Moses.

Throughout the 40 days and 40 nights that I lay prostrate before the Lord, when the Lord intended to destroy you, I prayed to the Lord and said. Earlier, he just said, I prayed, and God heard.

But now we get what he prayed, the words that he prayed. And those words are so important. Whenever we get the content of a prayer in the Bible, it's there to instruct us how to pray.

So we hear, we hear, here, we hear, let me put it that way, the words that Moses actually prayed, which God answered. And they're there for our guidance, to help us think about how to pray.

What does he say? God, please have a bit of pity on Israel. They've had a tough time for 38 years. It's not easy living in a wilderness. And they'll be better when they get into the land.

[10 : 01] He doesn't say that. He doesn't make up an excuse. He doesn't say, oh, you know, can't we blame somebody else? It's the Egyptians' fault or somebody. There's no excuse blaming here, which is what we tend to do when we sin and fail.

We blame the government. We blame our parents. We blame our neighbors or our children or the fact that we didn't sleep well last night or something like that. But there's no blame. There's no excuse.

What does Moses pray that changes God's decision and anger? Well, he says in verse 26, I prayed to the Lord and said, Lord God, literally sovereign Lord, do not destroy the people who are your very own possession, whom you redeemed in your greatness, whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

That is God, they're your people and you've rescued them. The implication is God, if you destroy your people, what you've done for them will come to nothing.

Now, actually, Moses is brave here because earlier God said to Moses, go down from the mountain because Moses, the people whom you brought out of Egypt, they've sinned. But now Moses is praying, saying, God, they're not my people.

[11 : 20] They're your people. It's a little bit like, you know, handball. God said, they're your people. I don't want anything to do with them. And Moses in his prayer says, no, God, they're your people.

And he sort of tosses them back to God. And he's saying, God, complete the job that you begin. Complete the rescue, the redemption, the salvation that the Exodus event had begun.

But then secondly, Moses says in verse 27, remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Pay no attention to the stubbornness of this people.

Why does he pray that? Because this people, the land of Israel, the people of Israel, they are the descendants of Abraham. They are evidence of God's faithfulness to the promise to Abraham.

God said to Abraham in Genesis 12, I will make you a great nation. If God destroyed Israel here, he would break his own promise. It sounds a bit odd, but that's what God's like.

[12 : 21] He makes promises that are somehow dependent or anchored in us. And we fail him. And so Moses is saying, God, be faithful.

Keep those promises to Abraham to make a great nation. And beyond that, in fact, to bring blessing to all the nations of the world. That was the original promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. And then thirdly, Moses prays in verse 28, otherwise the land from which you have brought us might say, because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land that he promised, and because he hated them, he's brought them out and let them die in the wilderness.

That is, God, if you destroy Israel, which you could do because they deserve it, if you destroy Israel, the other nation of Egypt, they will say, God, you're not able to take them into the land.

And their God would hate his own people, both of which are untrue, of course. This is the sovereign God who can do everything. He can bring them into the promised land and he doesn't hate them.

He loves them. Now, notice there, in Moses' prayer, he recognizes that God is not simply the God of Israel and to hell with the other nations, but God is choosing Israel and acting for Israel for the sake of the other nations.

[13 : 47] And so Moses' prayer knows that. He knows that what God wants is the other nations to see God at work. So God, if you bring people into the promised land, even though they're sinful, stubborn people, if you bring them into the promised land, then the other nations will see your power at work.

And beyond that, maybe more likely to be blessed and come to God. That's God's strategy for ancient Israel all the way through. It's not just choosing Israel and to the expense of other nations.

It's choosing Israel as the vehicle for winning the blessing of the nations coming to God. And so the righteous destruction of Israel could actually backfire on the promises of God.

So here is a tension for God. I hope you see that. On the one hand, God is faithful and he's made promises that require Israel to exist. But on the other hand, Israel is so stubborn and sinful that they deserve to be destroyed.

But that would actually thwart the promises of God. And that's the tension that runs all the way through the Bible. God being faithful and God being holy and just.

[14 : 57] It's a tension that only finds resolution in the death of Jesus where sin is dealt with and atoned for and God's faithfulness prevails.

So that's the context of chapter 9. The deep sinfulness of Israel. That's why they don't deserve the land. That's why chapter 9, verse 6, at the end of what was read for us by John, said you are a stubborn people.

That's the big piece of evidence, the golden calf. But there were many other pieces of evidence that we read in Exodus and Numbers in particular that Moses just summarizes in verse 7 and 22 to 24.

Well, God hears the prayer of Moses. He answers it. He tells Moses to get two more pieces of stone on which God will write the same commandments. The covenant relationship, the marriage certificate of God and Israel will be rewritten.

and the relationship preserved. And that's how chapter 10 begins. So in the light of all of that, what is the executive summary of what God requires of his people?

[16 : 03] Of a stubborn people, a stiff-necked people, a sinful people? What does God require of a people who cannot and are not willing to obey him fully?

Their history shows that. fear him, walk in his ways, love him, serve him, and keep his commandments.

Oh, that's simple. An executive summary that even somebody like me could fill in on a form. But it's too hard to do. How would you expect this Israel, this Israel who refused to enter the land when they sent spies, this Israel who complained and grumbled at the food and the lack of water or the bad water, this Israel who built a golden calf, this Israel who committed idolatry and immorality with the women of Moab, how do we expect this Israel to fear God, to walk in his ways, to love him, serve him, and keep his commandments?

That's a big ask. Those five verbs all sort of overlap in chapter 10, verses 12 to 13. They're slightly distinct, but there's a sense in which they're almost like synonyms.

We can't say that, Israel, you've loved God but you haven't feared him. You've walked in his ways but you've not served him as though you can say, I've got two right and I've got three to go. You can't sort of say, well, you know, I've done the first and I've got four to go.

[17 : 31] That is, they overlap. They tie together. There's a sense of pulling the punch by listing all five. What does God require? This, this, this, this, this, and this. Wow! Big package. Carries some weight.

It's got the suggestion of a total allegiance to God. An absolute loyalty to God in all of those words together. To fear God is not to be scared, not to run away from God.

But to fear God is to recognize God is God, not to treat him lightly, not to despise him, not to abuse the idea of a relationship with God, not to be too casual about God.

To walk in his ways, it's obviously a metaphor. It's not simply about going for a walk. But the idea is not simply that, oh, I obeyed that then and I obey this today and maybe next week I'll obey another commandment.

That sort of casual, occasional obedience to walk in God's ways is always suggesting a habitual obedience. That is the current direction of life.

[18 : 37] It doesn't mean perfection, but it means that the direction of life and the practice is heading always in the right direction for God. And at the center of the five, maybe deliberately central because it's so important to love him.

Loving God was highlighted back in chapter six with that famous first and great commandment, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength. And here it lies at the middle of these five.

It's distinctive because it's the only command for the people of God to God that is reciprocated by God. In fact, it's not reciprocated.

It's actually God first loved us and we love in response. That is, we serve God. He doesn't serve us. We worship him. He doesn't worship us. We walk in his ways.

He doesn't walk in ours. We love God and he loves us. It's distinctive, unique. In the ancient world, there were commands for other nations to love their gods but almost never do you find another God loving his people but God in the Bible does and they're to love him.

[19 : 44] It's a positive relationship. Fear, walk, love, serve. The idea is worship but it's not limited to a sort of gathering of worship on a Sabbath day or in a temple festival or for us a Sunday.

it's for all of life. A bit like what Paul says to the Romans about offer yourself as a living sacrifice that is as rational worship. The whole of your life is worshipping God.

So we worship when we gather on a Sunday but it's worshipping in everything we do every day of the week and wherever we may be and that's what the idea here is. The whole life is serving God.

To be a servant of the Lord in the Old Testament is a title not of lowly status as we might expect a servant but actually something of high status.

The house I'm living in was originally built as the servant's quarters for bishop's court where the archbishop lives. Well hopefully that doesn't mean I have to clean his house and so on.

[20 : 47] But to be a servant of the Lord is a position of great honor in the Old Testament. And then finally to keep his commandments. It's a bit like walking in his ways.

But worship and obedience they tie together. Worship, love and obedience they all tie together. They're all an integrated package. And it's a reminder to us as we consider them all together that our response to God is not just an outward behavior doing the right thing but it's stemming from the heart.

It's something from within. Love and fear in particular of those five words are internal attitudes to God that are flowing out in service and obedience and walking in God's ways.

There is an integrity of what's within and how that's practiced in the rest of our life. That's what God requires of Israel. But it's not simply about relating to God.

If you go on a little bit further in this last part of chapter 10 when you get to verse 17 we read these words. Sorry, I'm reading the wrong chapter here.

[21 : 53] Let's turn the page back to chapter 10. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords the great God mighty and awesome who is not partial and takes no bribe who executes justice for the orphan and the widow and who loves the strangers providing them with food and clothing.

You shall also love the stranger for you are strangers in the land of Egypt. Some translations instead of stranger use the word alien or in old English sojourner.

It's a very hard word to translate. What this passage is saying is that God is God of everything and yet there is a particular concern by God for those who are weak who are poor who are marginalized and in a society they're likely to be widows and orphans and strangers but a stranger doesn't mean somebody you don't know.

The idea of stranger alien sojourner maybe the closest English word is immigrant. Sometimes it's alien in older English translations but the trouble is for us we think of aliens as coming from Mars or something.

The idea of it is not just a foreigner who might be a tourist or a trades person coming from business meeting. The idea is of somebody who wants to join Israel to be an Israelite to in effect be a child of Abraham.

[23 : 20] That's the alien and they were there right from the beginning of Israel's history. People like Ruth in the book of Ruth is a good example. People like Rahab the prostitute who wanted to become an Israelite in effect and was saved from Jericho.

Again a reminder to us that what God is on about with ancient Israel was the blessing of all the nations to bring them all in and that's why I think the strangers are highlighted because it's so easy to be racially distinguished and to cut off or exclude others but for the sake of in effect the Old Testament gospel of bringing the world to God through faith and God's grace the inclusion of the weak the poor and the alien stranger was crucial.

It's a reminder to us in putting these two bits together verses 12 and 13 with verses 17 onwards that if we are right with God it's not simply a private religion about me and God but it's going to have social and corporate consequences.

That is it's Israel together who are to fear love and serve and keep and it's Israel in community the Israelites in their community who are to welcome aliens and care for widows and orphans not to take bribes to be fair and so on.

So there's no such thing as this sort of privatized religion idea it sort of began in Victorian England but it sort of continued on a little bit over the last century or so. Our faith in God will affect all aspects of our life all times in our life and our social relationships and our reaching out to other people.

[25 : 04] Now in our world today one of the great needs in our world is the welcoming of homeless people not necessarily the ones on the street of the city of Melbourne but those are included but especially those who've been forced out of their homeland by terrorism persecution and threats.

Over the years I've met many of them Bangkok is awash with Pakistani refugees it's tragic it's terrible and I know some Pakistanis whose lives are significantly under threat some of whom choose to stay in Pakistan for the gospel and others who've had to flee.

But of course we hear the story of the Middle Eastern refugees who are flooding Europe and the great tragedy that is and the rising sense of racism maybe behind Brexit to a degree and how terrible that is and how Christians ought not to be so exclusive.

One of my close friends is a minister in England and just down the road from him in the other part of the town is another Anglican church where dozens of Middle Eastern Muslims have converted to Christianity they are genuine there are hundreds of converts out of Islam in Germany because of Angela Merkel's Christian generosity in bringing people into the country the same is happening in Lebanon in the thousands of people we've seen that even here at Doncaster not so much with the refugees out of the Middle East but the welcoming of foreigners especially Chinese into this area and I think when I was here I baptized something like 400 adults from China and what a wonderful ministry of welcoming the alien and the stranger for the gospel's sake sadly Australia has a very harsh policy on that and churches speak out against that but here at the center of what God is saying he requires of his people is an attitude of generous welcome for the gospel's sake to other people well all of this is given to an Israel who is stubborn sinful and stiff-necked it's given in the context of relationship with a God who is generous and provides for all the needs and so on but it's all a bit pointless isn't it this executive summary if Israel cannot keep it you imagine that if I

I was opening up my computer printer and I go through all the instructions and at the end it said now you've set up everything well but you can't operate the machine because you're not able to you don't have the qualification let's say well it'd be pointless wouldn't it a waste of time and almost that's the context here Israel this is what God requires of you it sounds very simple fear him serve him love him keep his commandments walk in his ways treat the alien the stranger the widow the orphan well there it is there's the executive summary but here's the fine print at the bottom you can't do it and you can't do it because you're stubborn your hearts are not right with God and if we understand it in the light of that context from chapter 9 the sinfulness of the golden calf we think well why did God renew this covenant why did he give Moses two more tablets of the covenant relationship nothing's changed this people is unchanged and that's why at the very heart of the closing paragraph chapter 10 verse 16 we find this remarkable command circumcise then the foreskin of your heart and do not be stubborn any longer the way this last part of chapter 10 is structured that's the middle basically and the opening and the closing parts of that block from verse 12 to 22 sort of reflect each other and this is central circumcise the foreskin of your heart what a bizarre commandment if I was to say to you right now here and now we're going to circumcise the foreskin of our heart what would you do would you run to the kitchen for a sharp knife very peculiar command but of course it's a metaphor it's an image back in Genesis

[29 : 22] God said to Abraham circumcise yourself and all the men in your household why because Abraham had just had sexual relations with Hagar wrong thing to do he ought to have trusted God's promise for a child through Sarah which later came of course so Abraham was being rebuked then for taking matters into his own hands it was a physical thing and even in Genesis 17 called a sign the reality the big thing is not the physical circumcision the sign is pointing to the need for the heart to be right metaphorically figuratively circumcised heart not something we can do physically you can't find a cardiologist who can circumcise your heart but rather it's talking about something spiritual something deep within so here embedded in the middle of what does God require of you circumcise your heart but how and when later in

Deuteronomy we get a clue maybe Moses didn't even understand this but in chapter 30 at the end of Moses sermon in the last paragraph or two of Moses sermon in Deuteronomy he says this God will circumcise your heart so that you will love him and obey him but when does God do that he doesn't do it in Moses lifetime Moses dies at the end of this book it doesn't seem to happen in the time of Joshua or the judges or in the time of Samuel or David or Solomon or any of the kings of Israel and it doesn't even happen after the exile at the end of the Old Testament in fact at the end of the Old Testament nothing's changed Israel's still a complete failure it's only when we turn the pages into the New Testament we find astonishingly when God circumcises hearts Paul to the Romans said at the end of Romans 2 the real circumcision is the circumcision done by the spirit not the circumcision of the flesh and then he puts it this way in

Colossians 2 that if you are a believer in Jesus your heart has been circumcised when you had faith in Jesus and identifying his death and burial and resurrection your heart's been circumcised you see it's in the cross of Christ in the centre of the gospel that God changes and circumcises our hearts that is the cross of Christ not only forgives us there's forgiveness in chapter 9 here with Moses prayer but what's needed more even not just forgiveness but the change of heart and if you believe in Jesus then your heart's been circumcised it's not perfect yet but on the day of Jesus return our hearts will be perfect and we will love him as we ought on that day that's the astonishing grace of God who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves it all depends on him and that's what's being said here you're going to enter this promised land not because you deserve it but because of God's grace that's the gospel and we're going to enter a heavenly land not because we deserve it but because of the grace of the gospel and unlike ancient Israel whose hearts were largely unchanged we live after the cross we've received

God's spirit who's been poured into our hearts our hearts have been changed we've embraced the gospel with faith and we're looking forward to receiving that eternal inheritance not because we deserve it but because of grace let's pray our heavenly father we thank you indeed for Jesus we thank you indeed for his glorious and powerful death for us thank you that our hearts are changed by him and we pray that you may strengthen us by your spirit so that we may fear you walk in your ways love you serve you keep your commandments and love the widows the orphans the aliens of our world and be people of justice for Jesus sake amen