

A Deaf, Blind, Heartless Future

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. You may like to have open the Bibles at page 162. We're continuing our sermon series on Deuteronomy and we're up to chapter 29 and let's pray.

Lord our God, we thank you that in your word you have revealed truthful things for us so that we may be able to observe all the words of your law.

Change our hearts so that we can do that and bring you glory and honour through your son. Amen.

Well the great offer of the land has been before Israel.

The promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And in a sense you can imagine the glossy brochure that advertises that to entice Israel to the land. But also Deuteronomy is a bit of the fine print of the deal.

It's not simply just the great land, but there is the detail of the response that Israel is to make to God by way of faithful obedience to the covenant commandments.

[1 : 09] In a sense in Deuteronomy we've got to the stage of signing the contract. They've seen the brochure, they've seen the pictures of the land, the tourist brochure. Now they've got the fine detail from Moses in chapters 12 to 26 of the laws.

And now after that section's finished, especially chapters 29 and 30, is a bit like, now it's time to sign the contract. And that's where we're up to today and we'll look at chapter 30 in a fortnight's time.

Through the book we've seen that God is faithful and powerful to keep his promises. And Moses has emphasised that in the early chapters of the book especially.

And then from 12 to 26 gone through the detail of the laws, the responses that Israel is to make to God's grace and the relationship that God has brought Israel into. So now it's crunch time.

It's crunch time. Will Israel accept this covenant? They've been brought together in the last days of Moses' life on the mountains overlooking across the Jordan River to the land.

[2 : 16] And now is the time for them to, in a sense, decide, will we accept this covenant? Will we, in a sense, metaphorically, sign on the dotted line of this contract?

These chapters 29 and 30 are the climax of Deuteronomy in many ways. Certainly the climax of Moses' preaching, which more or less comes to an end at the end of chapter 30. Will Israel heed the exhortations of this book?

Indeed, not just will they, but there is also the question, can they? Moses never paints a false picture of the future. It's never an idealistic future that will somehow deceive them into signing a contract without knowing all the detail.

Rather, and maybe strangely, oddly in many respects, Deuteronomy actually paints a picture of the future that is, we might say, pessimistic.

We might say, certainly realistic, but it anticipates that the future will not be quite as good as it could be. We see that suggested in some paradoxical verses, verses 2 to 4 at the beginning of this section.

[3 : 33] Verses 2 and 3, Hopefully you've noticed there the emphasis on seeing.

Verse 2, You've seen. Verse 2, Before your eyes. Verse 3, That your eyes saw. Three times in just those two verses, that emphasis on what you've seen with your very eyes.

But then notice verse 4, which throws it into paradox in a way. But to this day, the Lord has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see, or ears to hear.

So at one level, they have seen, but then in verse 4, to this day you have not seen. God has not given you eyes to see. Well, what's going on here?

How do we resolve what could be argued to be a contradiction? Well, they've seen the events, the actions of God. But in a sense, their eyes have lacked the deeper, we might say, spiritual insight

that will change their lives or affect their lives.

[4 : 59] Yes, they've seen the miracles to Pharaoh. They've seen God's rescue of Egypt, Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea. They've seen God's provision during the wilderness years and so on.

But it is yet to actually make that deep spiritual impact in their lives so that they fully understand the significance of what they've seen and apply it into their lives so that they are faithful and obedient in response to God.

That's not yet happened. And notice how verse 4 expresses it. To this day, God has not yet given you eyes to see. So in a sense, the capacity to see properly, deeply, spiritually, lies beyond Israel's reach and is in fact something that God is to give or will give, though he's not yet given that.

Striking statement, but actually it picks up a significant biblical theme. When Isaiah the prophet is called by God to be a prophet, he has that famous vision in the temple in Isaiah chapter 6.

He sees in the temple the Lord on the throne and the train of the Lord's garment filling the temple and the cherubim there and so on. Famous vision. But then in the call to Isaiah that immediately follows from that vision, God says to Isaiah, Go and say to this people, Keep listening, but do not comprehend.

[6 : 30] Keep looking, but do not understand. Make the mind of this people dull, stop their eyes, shut their ears, shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and comprehend with their minds and turn and be healed.

That's a strange call to a prophet where you might expect God to say, Go to this people and tell them this so that they will believe. But here is the same three components.

The heart, the eyes, the ears brought together as it is in Deuteronomy 29. And here what's being said by way of judgment on rebellious Israel is that God will not give them ears, eyes and heart to understand and believe correctly.

Now I think this is just part of the strange Old Testament, but we find the same idea in the New Testament when Jesus explains the purpose of why he teaches in parables in Mark 4, Jesus says this, To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.

That's to the disciples. But for those outside, everything comes in parables. in order that they may indeed look but not perceive, they may indeed listen but not understand, so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.

[7 : 52] Again, the same three organs put together in effect, heart, ears and eyes, heart and mind being the same thing. What this theme is telling us, this verse in Deuteronomy 29, picked up again in Isaiah's call in Jesus' words in Mark, reminds us that unless God actually gives us the right heart, ears and eyes, unless God actually opens our spiritual eyes and unblocks our deaths to spiritual things ears and unless God actually changes our heart, then we will be dull to understanding and appreciating the gospel.

That's in effect what this theme is driving at. And so even though the Israelites have seen and experienced the events of their liberation from Egypt, unless God actually changes their hearts and their ears and their eyes, they will not actually follow with faithful obedience as they ought.

What this theme is telling us is that in the end, salvation is entirely an act of God's grace. Not just what God does out there and then says, now it's your turn, follow this.

But what God does in a sense out there for us and what God does in here for us so that we respond to his liberating acts of salvation with faithful obedience.

So it's utterly a work of grace. Not God's grace in Jesus' death to save us and our contribution in even believing and following.

[9 : 33] But all of it is actually the work of God's grace in us and for us as it was for ancient Israel. John Newton, the great famous ex-slave trader, convert, friend of Wilberforce, who wrote the great hymn Amazing Grace, understood that.

I was blind, but now I see and it is grace, God's grace, that has opened his eyes to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To this day, here in the plains of Moab, before the conquest of the land, to this day, as Moses preaches, God has not done that for ancient Israel as a whole.

It's not just the eyes they lack because verse 4 talks about the ears that are still deaf in effect.

Remember how important the ears are for biblical spirituality. All through Deuteronomy, God has been saying to Israel, Hear, O Israel.

Hear, O Israel. Hear and heed, that is. And they don't. The ears matter. But supreme of all three most likely is the heart.

[10:37] First of the three that are mentioned in verse 4. In our translation, it's a mind, but it's the Hebrew word heart. And in Hebrew thinking, the heart included the capacity to think and reason.

For us, the heart is more emotional and the mind is different. But for ancient Hebrew, it's the one thing, the heart, mind, all together. And remember how important the heart is in Deuteronomy. We've seen that earlier in the year in the earlier chapters of this book. And the famous command, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength in Deuteronomy 6. which goes on then in the next verse to say, put all these words of mine into your heart. But Israel is unable to do that. And in subsequent chapters, chapter 7, their heart is prone to fear.

In chapter 8, their heart is prone to pride. In chapter 9, the heart is prone to self-righteousness. So that in chapter 10, the command is, circumcise your heart, change your heart, make it open to God.

[11:38] Which of course, they cannot do. And as God says here, to this day, God's not yet given you a heart to understand. It's a little wetting of the appetite in a way.

It's not saying that God won't do this, but God has not yet done this. So it's anticipating for us who read it, some future act of God, at least future from the perspective of Moses, as he speaks here. When's God going to do that? Well, you've got to wait a little bit for that. We'll see that in a fortnight in chapter 30. But to this day, as Moses preaches this sermon of Deuteronomy, God has not yet given the heart, the ears, the eyes that Israel needs.

So verse 4 casts a shadow over Deuteronomy 29. As they gather to make this covenant ceremony and in effect to sign the contract of belonging in a relationship with God, in a covenant relationship, the shadow is cast.

Well, what is the capacity of Israel to actually accept the obligations of the covenant? What's their capacity to faithfully obey the commands of the covenant? Poised as they are on the verge of the promised land.

[12:52] Poised as they are to receive the gift of land promised 600 years before to Abram. Well, the actual sense of covenant gathering to sign the document, so to speak, comes to the fore in verse 10.

You stand assembled today, all of you, before the Lord your God, the leaders of your tribes, your elders, your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp.

How inclusive is all of that? That is not just the leaders, they're not the ones who are signing a contract like at a sort of APEC conference where, you know, our Prime Minister signs things in a sense on our behalf, but the leaders are there, the men, the women, and the children, they're not excluded either.

The aliens are included, they're the foreigners who want to take up residence with Israel and belong to Israel. The immigrants or refugees, some of them may be, they're included as well.

In fact, the lowest of the society, those who cut wood and draw water at the end of verse 11, that's the sort of menial tasks in a sense. They're all there.

[14:00] They all belong in the people of God as they gather for this covenant renewal. So verse 12 goes on to say, you've gathered here, assembled here to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, sworn by an oath which the Lord your God is making with you today in order that he may establish you today as his people and that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In essence, through the Old Testament, when the idea of a covenant relationship between God and Israel is there, it's summarized as I will be your God and you will be my people.

Both of those ideas explicitly mentioned there in verse 13 to establish you as his people and he will be your God. That's the essence of the relationship that's being described in this gathering.

As I say, it's inclusive of all those categories of people but notice what verse 14 goes on to say. I'm making this covenant sworn by an oath not only with you who stand here today before the Lord your God but also with those who are not here with us today.

Well, those who are not here today most likely refers not to people who've been too lazy and are sitting in their tents or people who are sick and unable to be there but it seems those are future generations.

[15 : 25] So the covenant relationship is not just for this generation until they die but it's for those who are not yet there. The next generation and the next and the next and the next. In fact, in the early chapters of the Bible in the Old Testament we see that the covenant relationship is celebrated in Exodus at Mount Sinai.

Now, 40 years later it's celebrated here with the next generation before the land and at the end of Joshua it's celebrated again in another ceremony with the next generation of Israelites again. Now, this is no light matter this covenant relationship. It's serious business. It's serious because of the commands of God that are placed upon Israel. We've seen in Deuteronomy many times that recollection of past history is to motivate Israel to a faithful obedience.

We see it encapsulated just here as well. In verse 5 to 8 Moses reminds them yet again of the wilderness years of God's provision in the wilderness the clothes the food that they had their victories over Sion and Og as well and therefore verse 9 says diligently observe the words of this covenant in order that you may be that you may succeed in everything that you do.

Similar idea it comes in verse 16 and 17. You know how we lived in the land of Egypt and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed. You've seen their detestable things the filthy idols of wood and stone of silver and gold that were among them.

[17 : 00] In both cases the idea is that looking back on their past history they will be motivated to faithful obedience in the future. Reminds us that biblical faith is rooted in history.

See biblical faith is not just it's not just a nice idea a fancy theory that we might like to believe to give us some comfort. The whole structure of Christian faith and the Bible is that it's rooted in history it's grounded in real events real actions of God in both Old Testament and New Testament.

In the Old Testament the preeminent salvation act of God was bringing Israel out from Egypt the events of the book of Exodus. That's their salvation story so to speak.

That's in effect their gospel. But we know from the Bible that that is merely a prototype of a greater act of liberation that comes in the New Testament when God liberates his people not from slavery in Egypt but from slavery to sin.

And so what we find in both Old and New Testaments and for us then as Christians that our Christian faith comes out of real acts of God in history that are meant to inspire us and motivate us to faithful obedience.

[18 : 14] It's why so often in the scriptures we read the word remember. Remember what God has done. Remember what God has done. As Jesus said the night before he died in the words on this wooden plank here do this in remembrance of me as indeed later in this service we will.

That is that we keep remembering because remembering God's acts increases our faith and therefore our obedience to flow. And that's what Moses has been preaching all through Deuteronomy itself.

Reminds us that we come from a Christian or our Christian faith comes from historical events that are true and are real and ought to influence the way we live.

But now the shadow of verse 4 becomes more of a dark cloud in the second half of this chapter. In verse 18 it may be that there is among you a man or a woman or a family or a tribe whose heart is already turning away from the Lord our God to serve the gods of those nations.

Notice there how the heart is vulnerable to being turned away because God has not given you a heart to understand yet as verse 4 said. And so whilst it's hypothetical it's a little bit more than that.

[19 : 34] We saw last week in chapter 28 the hypothetical curses become the realized expectation of Israel's future. And so here even though there may be a man or a woman really what it's saying is somebody sometime is going to turn away to idols.

That's what we expect. Now we might think okay well the odd individual the odd family here or there so be it but it's more dangerous more insidious than that.

Verse 18 goes on to say that it may be that there is among you a root sprouting poisonous and bitter growth. See it reminds us that sin is actually powerful and contagious.

Here the idea is that there may be just one person who is turning away to worship idols but the whole of Israel is vulnerable to that person's sin.

Sin is like a poisonous root like a cancerous source that can spread through the body of God's people if it's unchecked and undealt with.

[20 : 45] Verse 19 puts the same sort of idea in these words all who hear the words of this oath and bless themselves that is a statement of pride and self-righteousness thinking in their hearts

notice again the heart that's vulnerable to going astray we are safe even though we go our own stubborn way that is people who think that they've got what they need that they're self-righteous that they don't need God's word well the end of verse 19 warns thus bringing disaster a moist and dry like it's a different analogy but it's saying the same thing as the end of verse 18 that where there are Israelites people of God who might be turning their hearts astray to idolatry or their hearts to self-righteousness thinking we're safe well actually it leads in the end to disaster on all it spreads it's a poison that spreads through and permeates the people of God Moses then goes on to say in verse 20 the Lord the Lord will be unwilling to pardon them for the

Lord's anger and passion will smoke against them all the curses written in this book will descend on them and the Lord will blot out their names from under heaven where God's anger is mentioned in Deuteronomy it's because of gross sin chapter 1 when they declined to enter the land chapter 9 when they worshipped a golden calf and here now in chapter 29 the three places in the book where Israel's sin incurs rightly God's fierce wrath this is the expectation of the future that at some time in the future the nation through their sin will incur the wrath and judgment of God and all the curses written in this book verse 20 says what we saw last week in chapter 28 curses that ultimately lead to exile from the land but before that the curses of being cursed in your progeny in your crops in your animals with diseases and plagues and pestilence with defeat by your enemies and ultimately losing the land and that's of course what happened to

Israel some hundreds of years after these words were spoken when the Babylonians finally destroyed Jerusalem indeed the judgment will be so severe that it is likened to that terrible judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis the archetypal wicked cities full of evil and wickedness and immorality and God judged them fiercely if you remember in Genesis 18 and 19 that becomes the model of the judgment of God here on Israel it's used in the New Testament as well as God's final judgment on various wicked groups and peoples and nations so verse 21 the Lord will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in the book of the law the next generation your children who rise up after you as well as the foreigner who comes from a distant country will see the devastation of that land and the affliction with which the Lord has afflicted it all its soil burned out by sulfur and salt nothing planted nothing sprouting unable to support any vegetation like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and Admah and Zeboim which the Lord destroyed in his fierce anger if you remember last week the model that God is wanting to work towards is to bring Israel together as a holy nation distinct from other nations and therefore attracting other nations to God because of their blessing but of course the reality is or will be that Israel in fact mimics the other nations in their idolatry and immorality they become like the other nations and therefore incur not God's blessing but his curse and judgment and therefore the other nations instead of being attracted to Israel and Israel's God will actually look on and see the judgment in verse 24 they will say why has the Lord done this to this land what caused this great display of anger and the other nations instead of being drawn to God will conclude it is because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord the God of their ancestors which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt they turned and served other gods worshipping them gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them so the anger of the

Lord was kindled against that land bringing on it every curse written in this book the Lord uprooted them from their land in anger fury and great wrath and cast them into another land as is now the case now they're the words of the onlookers the words of the other nations far from being drawn to worship God because of the blessings on holy Israel they actually recognize how Israel is being judged by their God for their sinfulness God's goal is to make a holy people through whom the other nations of the world would be blessed it's still God's goal so that in establishing holy Christians and holy churches he may attract people from all nations to worship him but when we fail God's standards like ancient Israel did time and again we fail in our mission task in effect we fail to be an attractive people of high integrity and character and godliness that will draw other people to our holy God well it's easy for us to sort of dismiss this a bit and think well this is all a bit Old

[26 : 16] Testament and a bit primitive but actually the emphasis on idolatry that we find here so often is still just as serious in the New Testament we may not contemplate putting up on our mantelpiece little statues and bowing down to them or putting our hands together before them although there are plenty in our world who do that sort of thing if you travel you see that but idolatry remains just as insidious and just as common the idolatry of our society is the idolatry of wealth

fame success family comfort security pleasure in a sense they're not little statues we might put on our mantelpiece although sometimes they come in in little forms that we could put up there for in a sense our own praise but whenever we put something on the throne of our heart other than God we're committing idolatry and incurring the wrath of God because God is jealous for us to have him on the throne of our heart and him alone and Israel's heart was weak to turn away to idolatry time and again are our hearts any stronger well yesterday I conducted a wedding here and in fact I think I've got five in five weeks and it was a great event like many weddings are it's easy to be a bit ho-hum at some weddings I must confess but it was a nice wedding Christian couple from another church 320 or so people here jamming the place all very excited about a lifetime of marriage and committed to keeping their promises as I'm sure they genuinely and sincerely are as believers imagine a covenant imagine a wedding ceremony where words along the lines of Deuteronomy 29 were read out you'd think it was a bit strange and a bit gloomy for a wedding you know words along the lines of being faithless and turning away to other husbands or wives instead of gods perhaps we might say and you know the wrath and anger that will come and the desolation and exile you'd never read that sort of reading at a wedding there's a challenge for those of you thinking about getting married read Deuteronomy 29 and

I'll preach it at your wedding I use that analogy because the covenant ceremony of Israel and God is probably best the best analogy on in our terms is a wedding where two people come together in a relationship that is in a sense contractual it's covenantal God actually tells us in both Old and New Testaments in effect that that marriage is a covenant and it's modeled on the relationship between God and Israel many times in fact Israel and the people of God in the New Testament Christians are likened to be like the bride of Christ or the the bride of God in the Old Testament and faithless in their marriage with God in the Old Testament so often so here is Israel comes together in a sense to sign a contract it's a bit like a wedding ceremony it's a bit like them saying yes we accept the relationship with God and we will you know till death do us part we will for richer for poorer sickness and in health we will serve our God and God alone and in the commands of the covenant that Deuteronomy has given us imagine then if in this wedding ceremony you had Deuteronomy 29 that anticipated a bleak future a future of faithlessness from Israel the bride of God that's in effect what's going on here it's a slightly strange chapter in a way because it's full of some sense of we're gathered here today to accept the covenant relationship and to go into the land and conquer it but the shadow of verse 4 casts a long shadow through this chapter God's not yet given you the right heart eyes and ears for the relationship he's called you to do but having said that there are just glimpses of optimism we'll see the full flowering of this in chapter 30 to come there's just a little glimpse in verse 13 in the sense of all gathered here for this covenant we're told this is in order that God may establish you today as his people and that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors to

Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob the glimpse of optimism is because of God's promises to Abraham indeed in chapter 1 when Israel fails by not conquering the land when they send spies into it in Deuteronomy 1 the only reason God continues with Israel is because he made a promise to Abraham and he's going to keep it in chapter 9 which recounts Israel's failure when they built a golden calf at Mount Sinai and worshipped it the only reason God sticks with Israel after that gross sin and idolatry is Moses prays that God will keep his promises to Abraham Isaac and Jacob and here even in a chapter that anticipates yet further failure by Israel and idolatry we've got a sense that God will not give up his people because he's made a promise to Abraham Isaac and Jacob when God made that promise to Abraham in effect he was saying I will do whatever it takes to keep that promise even if it means changing the heart the ears and the eyes of the descendants of Abraham which in effect verse 4 anticipates that one day he would do what this perhaps gloomy chapter though draws us to is our total reliance upon

God Deuteronomy 29 in effect shows us how helpless the people of God are we don't like being told that we're helpless we like the little maxim that says God helps those who help themselves but it's a heresy at least at the point of salvation it is God helps those who are helpless God saves people who are weak God saves those who cannot save themselves God saves those who cannot even contribute to their salvation that's the typical biblical gospel of both old and new testaments and that's in effect what Deuteronomy 29 is forcing Israel to confront their utter helplessness before God there is no place for self-righteousness as Israel kept trying to go to there is no place for pride when it comes to the point of salvation nothing in my hand I bring is in effect this message of utter

helplessness in the

[33 : 09] New Testament we read it in Paul's words it's while we were weak that Christ died for us while we're sinners while we're enemies of God that God saved us that's what grace is and yet so often we fail to appreciate the depths of God's grace because we cling in vain to some sense of contributing to our salvation or some thought or thread of self-righteousness my friends the Bible's message from page one to page end is that we do not deserve we cannot contribute we have nothing to offer God we must rely utterly and entirely on the grace of God and that's in effect the message that's being prepared here in this chapter without God giving us the ears the eyes and the heart we're lost and we're blind we fail to appreciate amazing grace when we cling to the thought that we deserve or we contribute or that we merit the salvation that God offers us it's a message of the Old Testament and it's the message of the New let's pray God our father we know that without your working in our lives we are lost and helpless and bound in our sin we thank you not only that you have worked for us in the death of your son but that you work in us to give us the heart the ears and the eyes to respond with faithful repentance and obedience Lord our God open our eyes to see the depths and height of your grace for us open our ears to respond to your word and open our hearts that we may love you with all our heart for Jesus sake amen