

So That We Would Know Him

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[0:00] Well, it's great that you're able to join us this morning and you'll find it helpful if you don't have a Bible with you to find a Bible and turn to Deuteronomy chapter 4.

This is the fifth book in the Old Testament and very unfamiliar ground to us. So if you go and grab a Bible and come back, and while you're doing that, I wanted to make mention of the fact that there's a great cartoon doing the rounds right now.

It is a family who go to church for the first week after the lockdown. And one member says to the other, isn't it great to be with everyone again? And another member says, yeah, but I really miss the ability to be able to pause and put the preacher on mute.

So I'm sorry, that's a difficult story for you, but here we are in Deuteronomy. Now let's pray and ask God's help as we go through this text.

We thank you, our Heavenly Father, that you are a speaking God, steadfast in love, able in power. And we ask now that you would speak to us and open our hearts so that we would have the wisdom to receive what you say and to learn to love you with all our heart, soul and might.

[1:20] In Christ's name. Amen. Amen. This is a wonderful book in the Old Testament. It grabs all that happens in the first four books of the Bible, grabs them together, sets the agenda for the rest of the Bible.

If the number of times of quotation are anything to go by, it was Jesus' favourite book. He quotes Deuteronomy more than any other book. And chapter 4 establishes the pattern for the ongoing experience of God and connection with God for his people for all time.

I know it's written 1300 years before the coming of Christ. The people of God are on the edge of going into the promised land. And the book of Deuteronomy is about Moses preaching three blockbusting sermons.

And the first sermon is chapters 1 to 4. And then they take a little break and he starts again in chapter 5. In chapter 1, Moses points out how God made them into a nation from one man and how he rescued them from slavery in Egypt.

But when they got to the land, they stopped listening to the voice of God and they disobeyed God. And so God sent them back into the desert for 40 years to learn to live by his word.

[2:37] And now here we are 40 years later and the Lord is with them and he's going to lead them into the land. But here is the problem. How do you get people to listen to your word?

How do you get people interested in the word of God? Particularly people who don't want to listen. He's rescued them, brought them to the edge of the land. What does God do if his own people are not interested in his word?

I mean it could be you. You may have become cynical. You just feel it's words, words, words and you find it hard to trust God. Or you wonder if God could say anything genuinely new and life-changing and fresh to you.

How do you give people that sense of privilege that we sense in this chapter? You see, as Moses finishes this first sermon, you can hear his open-mouthed astonishment in verse 32.

Deuteronomy 4, 32. He says, What's got such a grip on Moses is the wonder of the speaking God.

[3:57] What's got such a grip on Moses is the wonder of the speaking God.

The wonder of the fact that God speaks. And if you want to understand how significant this is, just imagine a world where God does not speak, where God is silent.

What does it mean? Well, it means that we don't know whether there's a God there or not. And if there is a God, is that God good or bad, nasty or nice, fickle like the Roman gods and the Greek

gods?

Is there one God or is there many? And if they are there, why are they not talking to us? What have we done wrong and how can we fix it? Do they care about us or not?

Do they play favourites or not? If God was silent, it would mean that all the big questions in life were up for grabs. Why are we here? What is the problem with the world?

[5:14] What is the solution? Where are we going? Who am I? We would be like children born in a spaceship flying through space. And life inside the spaceship may be happy and they're playing board games and you get three square meals a day.

Every now and again there's a coup to take over the ship. And then you begin to wonder and you start to ask others on the ship, how did we get here? Where are we going? How long have we been going?

What are we supposed to be doing? And nobody has a clue. If God was silent, it also means that morality would be reduced to a matter of statistics.

We could never really say there was such a thing as right or wrong. We could only say what the majority feels should be the way, which is fine unless you're in a minority.

We couldn't say that evil really existed. And if it does, whose fault is it and what should we do with it? Are we getting better? Is the Canadian way the right way?

[6:17] If God has not spoken, it means that everything we do as a church is at best a waste of time. The only reason to get together is, you know, if we like those people or feel good about ourselves or have some vague notion of doing good for others.

But if God has not spoken, there's no real reason for it. And so Moses fixes our heart on that day 40 years before when God came down from heaven and spoke to his people on Mount Sinai in the desert.

If you look down in your Bible at verse 10 of chapter 4, we read, On the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, which is another name for Mount Sinai, the Lord said to me, Gather the people to me that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.

And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud and gloom. It's as though Mount Sinai was transformed into the throne room for God Almighty.

God himself came down from heaven, bringing heaven with him, and the people there had an audience with the living God. They heard the sound of his voice, which means God is very much a speaking God.

[7:46] He's not silent. He hasn't left us to guess who he is or who we are and what that means. And that day at Sinai becomes the Bible pattern for hearing God.

It was his idea. It's his initiative. He gathers his people so that we hear his voice. He did then. He does through the Old Testament. Jesus repeats this, and he does the same thing for us now.

And God's words are very weighty words because he stands behind them. They carry life with them. You remember at the beginning of the Bible, the way that God created things was with his words.

And he does the same as we listen to his words today. He creates life and hope and joy within us. That's why in verse 2 we cannot add to them or subtract to them because God doesn't speak with a forked tongue.

When he reveals, he reveals. And he reveals who we are and who he is. This is a wonderful thing. And when you read the Bible, God doesn't just come down and say, hi, how are you?

[8:58] I'm on your side. I'm here for you. His words are shattering and glorious because God is shattering and glorious. And that's why we need to listen to his words with our whole heart.

And he very much desires that we listen. In chapter 5, if you turn over the page, Moses reminds us that on that day the people of God, they said together that whatever God says, we will believe and we will hear and we will obey.

And in chapter 5, verse 29, God says this. He says, Oh, that they had such a heart as this always to fear me, to keep my commandments, that it may go well with them and their descendants forever. This is what God desires. Now, why? Why does God speak? Why does God desire that we listen to his word? And the answer that Deuteronomy 4 gives to us is this.

It is so that we would know him. That's the point in verse 35 of chapter 4. To you it was shown that you might know that the Lord is God.

[10:10] There is none besides him. In other words, God doesn't just rescue and redeem Israel to get them out of Egypt. He brings them out of Egypt so that they would come to know him as their God.

God does not speak to us so that we would know about him, but so that we would know him personally. And you can't substitute knowing about God for knowing God.

You can know all sorts of things about God without really knowing him. And you can know all sorts of things about God and not have any power to change you. I mean, you can still pretend to be in control.

And I think you can learn a great deal about God by hanging around with people who do know God. You can pick it up secondhand, but you can't know God secondhand.

And this is the highest privilege that we humans have on earth. And it explains why heaven and earth keeps being referred to through this chapter. The way God comes to us, the way God is near us, is through his word.

[11:15] Just look back at verse 7. What great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is to us? Or verse 39. Know therefore today and lay it to heart that the Lord is God in heaven on earth.

I'm sorry, in heaven above and on earth beneath, and there is no other. If he hadn't spoken, we would never be able to know him.

We would be left to guessing what God was like. It would be your opinion versus my opinion. Instead, the God of the Bible puts himself forward in life-giving words.

And he speaks with piercing clarity. And he himself writes the words down to draw us to himself so that we would know him, to embrace us in his saving love, and to bring himself ultimately to be with him.

He makes commitments. He makes covenant with us where he takes the initiative and he takes responsibility, which is why later on Jesus says that to know God is eternal life.

[12:20] And since we are created to know God, when we turn away from knowing God and when we begin to try and run away or disbelieve or build our lives apart from God, we create a great big hole, an abyss, like a vacuum.

We're made to know God. And if we turn away from knowing God, we fill that vacuum with counterfeit gods. That's why in that long reading, verses 15 to 30, is a warning about not making or worshipping idols.

Because one of the things we discover in Deuteronomy is that knowing God is a double knowledge. Knowing God brings a knowledge of our self as well.

Let me put it another way. You cannot know yourself truly unless you know God. And if you want to grow deep in knowing yourself, you have to grow deeper in knowing God and vice versa.

And as we grow deeper in knowing ourselves, it's not always a pretty picture. We keep creating gods that are more shaped like we want rather than the true and living God. I'm of the age where I need reading glasses.

[13:37] And I have about six pairs at home in different rooms. And the pair that is in my shaving kit, which has travelled with me for many years, broke yesterday. And so I got my gloves and mask on and I went to Shopper's Drug Mart and I bought a cheap pair.

And this morning, when I put them on, these are not them. When I put them on, I discovered that they have a rose tint in their lenses, a pinkish tint. And I kind of liked it.

I can see myself shaving through rose-coloured lenses and I thought I look rather good, really. And I thought, that's a wonderful picture of how we think about ourselves.

And that's why we need to hear the voice of God again and again and again. Because when we hear the voice of God, it's not just information. God doesn't just give us a data dump from heaven. He opens our eyes to who he is. And as our eyes become open, we see our own selves more clearly. And in coming to know the person of God, we know who we are and some of the big questions.

[14:45] Why we're here? Where we've come from? What's wrong with the world? What we need to do? And the great danger in this chapter, it comes twice, the great danger for those who heard the voice of the living God is to forget.

Let me remind you in verse 9. Only take care and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen on the mountain, and lest the words depart from your heart all the days of your life.

Make them known to your children and your children's children. This is the basis of children's ministry and youth ministry. Although it's actually written so that the parents will teach the children how to know God well.

And here is the thing. Forgetting is not an intellectual exercise. It's not a loss of memory. It's allowing these words and allowing these truths to depart from our hearts.

It's like a man or a woman who's married going on a business trip and pretending like they're not married. It's not taking into account the unique covenant relation God's made with us.

[15:54] And the only way to diligently keep our souls in this is to continue to hear the voice of God. The faith of the Bible does not come through eyes, but through ears.

Twice Moses says this. Look down in verse 12. When the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire, you heard the sound of words, but saw no form.

There was only a voice. Now, why is that? Why is it when God reveals himself, he does not give us something to look at? Why is it that they saw no form but only heard words?

It's partly to do with who God is. But it's also because human nature being what it is, we want to keep turning God into the form that we want.

We forget his words and we stop worshipping the true God and we begin to replace the true God with a picture or an image or an idol and we bow down and worship it.

[17:05] And an idol can be a thing or a person, an idea or a relationship or a dream. One expert, one commentator says, it's anything more important to you than God.

Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God. And anything that you seek to give you what only God can give. It can be security or approval or health or food or comfort. But since God, the Lord is God alone and he's made us for himself and he's bound himself to us in covenant love. If you take anything else and bind yourself to it as the ultimate thing for you, it doesn't matter how good it is.

It will in the end kill you. Idols are toxic and spiritually fatal. Last weekend in Canada, we experienced the worst shooting rampage in Nova Scotia, where one man killed 22 other people. And what made it so despicable and what made him so dangerous is that he dressed up as an RCMP officer and he detailed his cars to look like a police car.

[18:23] It was the counterfeit uniform and the counterfeit car that enabled him to get so close to others to shoot civilians and police officers alike. And idols of the heart are like that.

They're not cute, cuddly, fat statues or imagination that we make with our own hands. They're not innocent or harmless ideas that we make with our hearts. They can be spiritually fatal.

Any counterfeit of the true and living God cannot give us love, cannot give us life. And we do this all the time. If you imagine a God who cannot forgive you, you've invented a God who's not the God of the Bible.

If you imagine that you can keep on sinning without repentance and God will accept you, you've invented a God who is not the God of the Bible.

If you imagine that you could do things better than God. If you imagine that God has stopped loving you. If you imagine that God can't do what he promised. If you imagine that you have to do things to win his approval or that God cannot save you, you've invented an idol.

[19:34] A God who is not the God of the Bible. That's why we need to keep listening and loving God's words. That's why Satan always attacks the word of God. He tries to make the Bible irrelevant like a museum piece or just put it on the shelf gathering dust.

Or in a more sophisticated way, he wants to make it something plastic and bendable, like the repository of the symbols of our faith or some such thing.

But you know, I don't like it and you don't like it one bit when people take our words and bend them and twist them. And it's a very dangerous game to try and do that with God's words in the Bible.

The true God reveals himself in scriptures. And he is never exactly the God we want, but he's always the God we need. And he holds in himself qualities that we find impossible to hold together. Let me give you one example. In verse 24 we read, The Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. And in verse 31 we read, For the Lord your God is a merciful God.

[20:41] How do you hold those two things together? Well, we can't. It's very difficult for us to experience jealousy that's free from envy and insecurity and the desire to dominate.

I think we get close, perhaps, when someone we love is under threat. God so treasures his people. What fuels his love is not the desire to dominate, but his passion for our well-being.

And the verse about God being merciful, verse 31, comes after God explains that his people will in fact turn away from him in the land.

They will go after other gods. And he will drive them out of the land. And even when they're in exile serving other gods, when they turn back to him and seek him, he will bring them back and restore them because he is a God of compassion.

It's a fantastic word, mercy and compassion. And it's a heart-beating, faster word that a mother has for her child. He will never forget his covenant of love.

[21:47] And I can't leave this chapter without just giving this illustration. It's in verse 3. Moses mentions Baal Peor. It's a place.

It's an event. And it happened just a couple of weeks before the beginning of Deuteronomy. You can read about it in Numbers 25. Israel has come to the edge of the land.

They've been wandering for 40 years. And they come to their very last campsite before they cross over the Jordan River. And we read in Numbers 25, they prostitute themselves both literally and spiritually to the idols and the people of Moab.

And the Lord punishes Israel and sends a plague. And I think 24,000 die. But at the very same time as the people doing this on the ground, the king of Moab has called on a prophet who lives somewhere else called Balaam.

He's called on him to come and curse the people of Israel so that he can beat them. And Balaam prays and God says, don't do it. These people stand under my blessing. You cannot curse these people.

[22:54] So instead of cursing the people of Israel, Balaam blesses the people three times. I think this is just a fantastic picture. Both of the fickleness of our hearts and the grubbiness of sin.

At the same time, the extraordinary grace of God. It's as God's people are disobeying him and going after other gods that God himself is taking care of them and covering them with grace and blessing.

It's just too good to be true. So how does this all apply to us? Well, there are lots of things we could say about this, about listening, about making your heart diligent and attending to God's word.

But Moses gives us two very surprising applications in verses 6 and 7, if you look down to them.

Moses says, keep these words and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples.

Who, when they hear all these statutes, these words, they will say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there that has God so near to it as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call upon him?

[24:13] So two quick applications from Moses. And the first one has to do with mission. If we keep the words of God and do them, people around us, God says, will see the great wisdom of God.

In other words, the measure of our effectiveness in mission is proportional to our keeping and doing the word of God. Our seeking to hear the word of God and obey the word of God is not just for our own sake.

It's for the sake of people around about us, even those who don't know. And I know this is very difficult in a time of COVID. But what God is saying is that when people see and hear when Christians do and obey, they say there is a God living in their midst.

That's the first application mission. And the second application is to prayer. Moses says that God is present with us in his word and that word gives us life so that we know him.

But verse 7 tells us that when we call upon the Lord, when we pray out of his word, he hears us and he draws near. Here is a promise.

[25:27] We all want to experience the presence of God. But Moses says that happens as we hear the word of God and call upon him. And when we keep reading the Bible, we come to the person of Jesus Christ, who John's gospel calls the word of God made flesh, full of all the glory of God the Father.

So now we're going to sing together about the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Glory, glory, glory to him.