

Deuteronomy 4:1-49

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Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0 : 0 0] . In the C.S. Lewis classic, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy, Edmund, Susan, and Peter Pevensy are transported into the world of Narnia, a world full of great wonders like talking animals, but also of great trials like wolves and cold and snow that never ends.

And early on in a scene, these four children hear about another. They hear whispers of something or someone called Aslan, someone who people put their hope in, that he would come and deliver, that he would come and save from their present trials.

And so the conversation picks up between the children and the Beaver family. Is he a man? Asked Lucy. Aslan, a man?

Said Mr. Beaver sternly. Certainly not. I tell you, he is the king of the wood and the son of the great emperor beyond the sea. Don't you know who is the king of beasts? Aslan is a lion.

The lion. The great lion. Ooh, thought Lucy. I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous meeting a lion.

[1 : 4 1] That you will, dearie. Make no mistake, said Mrs. Beaver. If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just plain silly. Then he isn't safe, says Lucy.

Safe, said Mr. Beaver. Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver is saying? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe.

But he's good. He's the king, I tell you. I wonder this morning if the apprehensions and the fears that Lucy and Susan express in this scene are things that we wonder in the depths of our heart about God.

Is he safe? Is a question we often ask, I think. And the reason we ask that is because deep down, in fact, we want him to be.

We want a God who is safe. We want a God that we're going to feel completely secure in. We're not going to be afraid of. In fact, I think if we were honest about it, we would say that we want our relationships, our relationship with God to be clean and neat and tidy.

[3 : 0 4] We want a life that is predictable. And if we were honest, that serves our needs, our goals. And God is there to facilitate that kind of life.

But the Bible presents a much different picture of God. One who is not safe. The God of the Bible refuses to be domesticated.

We've started a series last week in the book of Deuteronomy. And if you want to turn with me in your Bibles to page 148, excuse me, 148, 149, we're going to look at Deuteronomy chapter 4 today.

And as you're turning there, we're going to explore this God of the Bible together. And as you're turning there, I want to remind you a bit about where we've been in the plot line of the Bible.

In fulfillment of a promise way back in Genesis 12 to Abraham to make his descendants as many as the stars in the sky and the sand in the sea, God delivers these descendants out of slavery in Egypt and brings them towards the promised land.

[4 : 29] The book of Genesis is about the creation of that nation and their location in Egypt. The book of Exodus then is about God's deliverance of those people. And God brings them out of Egypt and he takes them towards this promised land.

But in the middle of that, he stops and on a mountain called Sinai or Horeb, he makes a covenant with them. You see this in Exodus 19 where God says, I will be your God and you will be my people if you will keep my covenant, if you will keep the commands that I give you today.

It is an agreement between God and his people. If you will obey me and follow me as God, I will be your God, your protector, your Lord.

And so the covenant people of Israel, the nation of Israel is established. And God says, and now I'm going to take you into this promised land. And if you were here last week, Nick said, and that 11-day journey took them 40 years because they didn't trust God, because they didn't obey God.

And a whole generation passed away. And if you look through the rest of Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers, what God is doing is putting together how this story unfolds of these 40 years.

[5 : 56] And as we get to the book of Deuteronomy, God has again led his people to the brink of entering in to the promised land. And this is where we pick up this morning.

I'm going to read chapter 4, verses 1 through 8, and then I'm going to skip ahead to 32 through 40. And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them that you may live.

And go in and take possession of the land that the Lord your God of your fathers has given you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.

Your eyes have seen what the Lord did at Baal Peor. For the Lord your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor.

But you who held fast to the Lord your God are still all alive today. See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

[7 : 13] Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of all the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

For what great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord? Our God is near to us whenever we call on him. And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

And skip to verse 32. Four. Ask now of the days that are past, which were before you since the days that God created man on earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of.

Did any people ever hear the voice of a God speaking out of the midst of a fire, as you have heard and still live? Or has any God ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by the great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?

To you it was shown that you might know that the Lord is God. There is no other besides him.

[8 : 47] Out of heaven he lets you hear his voice, that he might discipline you. And on earth he lets you hear, lets you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire.

And because he loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them, and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance as it is this day.

Know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. There is no other before you.

Therefore you shall keep his statutes, his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time.

Lord, may you pray with me, please. Lord, we pray this morning for your grace as we hear your word.

[9 : 57] Lord, may your spirit open our eyes, our minds, our hearts, to see and to understand and to cherish the truth of who you are. Lord, I pray for strength this morning, that you would give me ability, Lord, to speak your words.

Lord, that we might see you, that we might worship you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Do you see what Moses is doing?

Do you see what Moses is doing as he's proclaiming this message to the people of Israel? He uses rhetorical questions to say to them in their situation and to us today, this main point.

The Lord, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Moses, the God who revealed himself and said, I am Yahweh.

I am that I am. He alone is God and there is no other. What nation has a God like this who has done all that he has done?

[11 : 16] Ask and see if from the beginning of creation till now, anyone has ever seen a God like this. Moses is saying to us, and I say to you this morning, behold your God.

This message comes in the context of Moses saying, as you people are about to enter into this land, you are called to keep and do the commandments that God has given you.

You're about to enter into this whole new adventure, this whole new life, this whole new world. What are you going to do with it? And he says, as you go in, remember.

Remember these words and these commands. Why? Because he alone is God. There is no other. They have already seen that this God is not a safe God.

They have seen him judge both within his people and without. They have seen him do great and terrible things. And Moses is saying, do not lose sight.

[12 : 29] He alone is God. Why is God given these commands rooted in the person of God? Because as it says in verses six through eight, because when you go in and when you obey my commands, the nations around you, the nations who serve other gods, those nations are going to look at you and say, what a God they serve.

What nation has ever seen such righteous and holy commands as that nation that serves that God of Yahweh? Therefore, Moses says, as you go in, let your obedience, let your allegiance, let your loyalty, let your trust, let your worship be exclusively in this God, this God who alone is God, a God like no other.

And yet, even as Moses is saying this, he is afraid. As Greg read earlier, starting in verse 15, he is afraid.

He's fearful that those people will forsake God and turn to idols. Why would this be? Well, Moses is afraid partly because of history.

Even in verse three of chapter four, he says, you remember what God did to those people who worshiped at Baal Peor. Now, if you went back to Numbers 25, you would see the story.

[14:10] God had just right before this account delivered the nation of Israel from a king who is seeking to curse them and drive them out. Right after that, on the plains of Moab, as they're starting to get within sight of the promised land, they begin to prostitute themselves spiritually.

It says that they joined with the Moabite women, probably in cultic prostitution, and they bowed down and offered sacrifices to the Baal. That's a technical term for a god, the god of Moab.

And they did this right after God had delivered them. So Moses is not unreasonable in being afraid that people will turn to idols again because they just did it.

This incident happened within recent memory, not years ago, but likely months or even weeks before this sermon. As a matter of fact, it's likely that where Moses was giving this sermon, the people could look across the valley and see, that's where we worshipped Baal.

They would know it. Despite all that God had done in delivering them from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna in the wilderness, despite all that God had done in overcoming those who would oppose God's people, the defeat of the kingdoms of Sihon and Og, despite all that they have seen, they turned away.

[15:53] In verses 15 through 25 of our chapter today in Deuteronomy 4, go on and talk more about the broader idolatry of the day. It says, Don't create idols for yourself that are fashioned like the things you can see, animals, birds, trees.

Men, don't make grave and carved images because that's what you know the Egyptians did. They worshipped statues that looked like things that you would see crawling around the earth.

And then he goes on and he says, And so if that's one option, another option is, you can look up into the heavens and look at the stars in the sky and think, Well, might as well worship those.

They seem pretty great and bigger than me. And that makes me feel like, Man, maybe they're worth worshipping. The people of Israel were living surrounded by those who worshipped idols in every culture, in every nation around them.

They would have worshipped a God that had a form or an image, something they could look at. It would be hard to be different in that context.

[17:18] And lest we cast our stones and indignantly think about how terrible those Israelites were for turning away from God after all that God had done for them, let's consider our own lives for a minute.

We're not tempted much to worship statues or stars, astrology aside. But when we face uncertainties and trials the way the people of Israel did, how do we respond when the concern of a diagnosis, the fear of being laid off, a placement exam coming up, or an acceptance letter that is highly anticipated, anticipated.

The fear as your children run off the rails, as your marriage frays at the edges. When we experience hard things in life, how do we respond?

I think if we had our druthers, we would want a God who would just come and fix it all and make our life easy. I think we would want a safe God, God who would just smooth the road, God who would just basically do what we want.

We would make a God in our image. we would make an idol in our hearts. We would want God to be what we want Him to be. And so, idolatry creeps into our hearts because we start to want to worship a God, not the God who is, but the God who we want to make Him to be in our own mind.

[19 : 18] And as an aside for Father's Day, this is why He says you have to teach every generation. You have to teach your children and your children's children to remember the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God and what He's done for you.

It's why the command is in there on Father's Day. You have to remind them because we are so prone to turn to these gods, these idols of our own heart. And because we are so prone because of the pressure around us to make idols out of other things, the things that our culture values instead of ourselves.

And we have to remind them because the God whom Moses proclaims, He is hard to understand. He is much bigger than what we want Him to be.

There are characteristics in God's mind, in God's character, in God's actions that we have a hard time putting together. And so we don't feel secure or safe with the God of the Bible at times.

And so we turn away. But Moses' message to the Israelites and to us this morning is don't do it. don't give in to the pull, the external pull of the culture around us or the internal pull of our own hearts to worship something other than the true God.

[20 : 50] Instead, lift up your eyes to see the unimaginable glory of the Lord who alone is God, who is like, unlike any other.

I want to look this morning at two characteristics, two ways in which God is overwhelmingly complex and wonderful and seemingly unsafe.

I want to look at these this morning and then bring us to a point again of seeing Him clearly. First, look with me in verse, well, the first tension that I see is this and that is that God, Yahweh, is both a consuming fire and a merciful God.

That is, He's a God who both have fierce judgment against disobedience and yet is merciful to the disobedient when they turn to Him. We see this over and over again.

We saw it in the incident in Baalpear where he killed 25,000 with the plague. We see it in chapters 2 and 3 of Deuteronomy where it talks about how God destroyed through Israel these nations that set themselves up against God.

[22 : 15] We see it in the warning in the passage starting in verse 26 where he says, and if in the future you forsake God, if in the future you turn away from Him, the language is incredibly strong.

He will utterly destroy you. He will scatter you from the land. He will reduce you in numbers greatly. The God that Moses is proclaiming is a God who will not overlook sin, rebellion, and disobedience.

let me ask you this. Do you think this is really true of God? And do you think it's good that God would be this way?

This issue has been one of the biggest challenges throughout all of church history to understand who God is. Go all the way back to the second century after Christ.

There's a man named Marcion and he edited his whole Bible. He threw out the whole New Testament or the Old Testament and edited his New Testament partly to get rid of a God of judgment.

[23 : 36] He separated out the creator God from the fatherly God of Jesus who is love and grace and acceptance. So in the second century we see it.

In the 20th century there's a scholar named C.H. Dodd who did pretty much the same thing. He said God can't be this. So he posited that the Old Testament God was a God of wrath and the New Testament of God he was a God of love and mercy and peace.

These men couldn't reconcile the picture of a God who is both judgmental and merciful. The question of whether it's good let me just give you an analogy to help you see how it could be good.

It says that he is a jealous God. Not in the usual sense of being greedy or simply wanting everything for yourself.

That's jealous usually means I want to control everyone around me for my own sake and for my own good. But the sake that I want you to hear it in is in a good sense there can be a proper sense of jealousy that is good.

[24 : 53] For instance I love my wife. What kind of husband would I be if she regularly went to the bars on Friday night hooked up with random men came home the next morning.

If I didn't care if I said hey honey knock yourself out would that be a good thing? Would that be a good husband? Would that be a good marriage?

No. No. A jealous God is one who will not share with another. Now humanly sinfully it's so easy for my jealousy to be mixed up it's hard for me to say if I'm a good husband I don't want to share my wife with another.

But ultimately that is what I'm saying isn't it? That if I have a pure love for my wife I don't want her to do that. It's not good for her.

It's not right. And so God is a jealous God who rightly judges disobedience and rebellion.

[26 : 03] And yet that's hard to swallow on its own. And yet God then he says in verse 25 that he's a consuming fire a jealous God and then six verses later in verse 31 he says for I'm a merciful God.

And this is the part we love isn't it? That he turns that when his people turn to him he forgives them he remembers their covenant he welcomes them back and we have such a hard time bringing these two together.

We can't embrace judgment and mercy in the same person. We can't see it. In our day and age we grasp towards God to be the great Santa Claus and the great grandfather.

The one who just loves us and gives us good things and doesn't ask much. Who overlooks our sin.

Interestingly if you went back a couple of generations in America you probably would have seen that the opposite is true. Their primary paradigm would have been that God is a fierce judgmental God.

[27 : 16] That he is a God that you are to fear. Do you see how our culture has swung how we try to understand both of these?

And so it drives us. When we think God is a permissive God we presume upon his grace. We think sin isn't a big deal. We don't take obedience seriously. We don't see his holiness and his righteousness as great as they are.

And if we see him as a judgmental God we live in fear. We live in fear of him and we can't understand his expressions of love for us.

It makes us want to perform. Yet God declares that he is both. He declares that we may not choose to domesticate him by making him one or the other.

God and if you're feeling the tension hang on we're going to look at another one. One which God's relationship to his people might even be harder.

[28 : 31] Because secondly not only is God both a God of judgment and a God of mercy but he is both a God who deals with his people conditionally and unconditionally. Okay?

So where do we see this? All of the ifs in the covenant you see it from the very beginning. If you will obey my commandments I will be your God and you will be my people.

We see it. If you keep my commands you will go into the land and it will go well with you. And if you don't I'll send a plague and destroy 25,000 of you.

If you don't I will cut you off. If you don't I will not be your God anymore. Do you see how this pattern it's throughout our whole passage this conditionality if you obey if you do not obey.

And yet we see God's unconditional initiative and treatment of his people. I want you to see these clearly.

[29 : 37] Look with me in verse 20. Verse 20 God God God God God just did it because he made a covenant with his people.

Look at verse 31. God for the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.

Look in verse 34. Has any God ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nations by trials by science by wonders by war by mighty hand and outstretched arm and by great deeds of terror all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes.

This was God's initiative not a response to their obedience. And finally and most clearly in verse 36. Out of heaven he let you hear his voice that he might discipline you and on earth he let you see his great fire that you might hear the words out of his mouth and because he loved your fathers because he chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence by his own great power driving out nations greater and mightier than yourselves to bring you in to give you their land as an inheritance as it is this day.

He chose you. He chose you not because you were anything the unconditional initiating the unconditional electing of God's work is unmistakable and it is incredibly powerful.

[31 : 45] It is meant to make us feel like the sophomore girl who gets asked to the senior prom by the football quarterback. He chose me?

Really? Why? I don't get it. I didn't do anything. There could be all sorts of warped parts of that but get the heart of it, right?

There's a good thing there. He says he chose you not because you were righteous, not because you had done it well, but simply because he loves you and he chose you.

God God does God do it. It's really hard to keep these two in tension. Do you tend to think of God as a conditional God that you have to perform for?

If you do it, he will accept. If you don't, he will judge. Do you see God as an unconditional God? I can do anything and God can save me.

[32 : 48] nothing can change that. Again, I tell you, the amazing thing is that Moses does not let us choose or prioritize these things.

God is both. He is both a judge, a God of judgment and a God of mercy. He is both a God of unconditionality and conditionality and that tension is given as a gift.

It was a gift for the people of God at that time because it makes you think, God, how could you be this? It made them think, God, how could you really pull this together?

When we see these seemingly unresolved tensions in scripture, it ought to push us to step back and think, God, what is the big picture that I don't see yet, that I can't understand and to wait.

Scripture says that the people in the time of Moses were still looking ahead to something greater. God wanted this tension to lift up their eyes so they would look ahead, looking for a fuller understanding of God, a fuller understanding that we today are able to see more clearly.

- [34 : 21] A greater deliverance, not just from Egypt, but from sin. A greater election, not just to be among the nations, but to be around the throne of the Savior with people from every tribe and tongue and nation.

a greater promised land, not simply a land of Palestine and peace, but every spiritual blessing in God's kingdom.

kingdom. This tension points ahead for them and back for us to the place where we see God most fully expressed, at the cross of Jesus Christ.

For at the cross we see resolution to the tensions that Moses could only present that he longed to see.

At the cross we see Jesus being both imminent and transcendent, God with us, and yet transcendently judging the sin of the world.

- [35 : 32] At the cross we see God's final word to us, that we have no form to worship him. We see the word made flesh hanging on a cross to deliver his people.

At the cross we see Jesus taking judgment for our sins, the suffering and death that we deserved, the ferocious wrath of God against rebellion.

He did this in our place so that he might both be just in judging sin and merciful and gracious to us.

at the cross. At the cross we see Jesus who satisfied the conditional covenant by his perfect obedience.

obedience. We see him as the true vine of Israel who always obeyed the father. We see Jesus hanging on a cross suffering the covenant curses against those who would disobey God.

- [36 : 37] Not because he had sinned but for us who have sinned. And so Jesus satisfies the conditionality of the covenant of God so that in Jesus God might express to us his unconditional election, his choosing.

By grace it has been saved through faith and this not of yourselves so that no one may boast. he is not safe. His anger burns against sin even to this day but he is good because he has satisfied that wrath at the cross for all who trust in Jesus alone.

And so Moses calls us to respond as he did to those people that day. He says lift up your eyes and see. He alone is God and there is no other.

There is no God like the God of our Bible, like the God of the cross. And he calls you today to complete allegiance, to total loyalty, to abandoning yourself to the work of the cross on your behalf.

That he might be your God and you might be his people. If you're here today and you have not placed your faith in Christ, if you have not trusted that when Jesus died, he died for your sin, if you have not abandoned yourself to this God who is not safe, but in his unsafeness, he is good beyond what you could ever imagine.

- [38 : 36] Believe in him. Put your trust in him today. Repent of your domesticated God. Repent of the God of your own making. Repent of your prioritization and choosing.

I like this part of God and not that part. And see that the God who really is, is so much greater. He alone is God. There is no other.

And similarly for those here today, if you have placed your faith in Christ today, yet see how easy it is for us to turn back, how easy it is for us to lose sight of this Lord who is God like no other.

How easy it is for us to lose sight of that and to start shaving off parts of God, that are hard for us to understand. Let us fix again our gaze on the cross of Christ and be renewed in our worship, in our trust, and in our obedience.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 1, John writes this about Jesus. And the word, that is the word Jesus, the word, the man Jesus, became flesh and dwelt among us.

[40 : 06] We have seen his glory, glorious of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness about him and cried out, this is the one of whom I said, he who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.

And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God, but the only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. I say to you this morning, behold your God, to him be the glory.

Let's pray. God, we praise you this morning that you are so great, that you, your thoughts are not our thoughts, your ways are not our ways, that you are high in the heavens.

Lord, we pray this morning that you would lift our eyes, Lord, in the midst of the fears of our current circumstances, Lord, the tendency of our hearts to lose sight of you, lift our eyes again that we may see your glory and your majesty and worship you.

[41 : 31] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.