

## A Covenant Community

A couple of boys were once discovered throwing stones at a church. The pastor caught one of them and frog marched him into his office. He sat him down and said “Where is God?”

The boy was silent. The pastor asked again “Where is God?”

No answer. He asked again a third time and at this the boy got up and bolted. He ran all the way to his friend’s house and up to his bedroom.

“We are in big trouble” he said “God’s missing and they think we did it.”

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What we are going to see this morning is that that boy came to the right conclusion for the wrong reason. He was actually more right than he knew when he said “we are in big trouble” but not because God was missing – rather because he is here!

We have been looking at the message of the whole bible – and particularly what it says about the church. This week I have tried to make it a little more pictorial to help you.

### ☞ *Church-new creation*

The big thing that I want us to see is that a church – that is a regular gathering of God’s people – is a community on the brink of eternity. We together are awaiting the return of Christ, and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth and in the meantime the place where God focuses his blessing is churches.

### ☞ *Adam and Eve*

In our first study we went right back to creation and we saw that God is relational, so that when he created us in his image he created us as relational beings – male and female.

### ☞ *Gen 1:27*

Our collective tragedy as human beings is that we sinned and damaged all our relationships. But God set out to restore his image in us, to remake us as we were meant to be.

☞ *Eph 2:15*

This [church] is the crucible in which renewed human beings are forged.

Last week we followed the Bible story to Abraham.

☞ *Abraham*

God's purposes for humanity become focused on Abraham and his descendants, and God gives him a series of promises for the future.

☞ *Promises to Abraham*

We summarised those under four headings – land, innumerable offspring and enjoying God's presence, for all nations.

And we saw how, in a surprising way all of those promises become focused on the church.

☞ *Abraham – Church*

Instead of the promised land, we find a home in the church. As people are added to our number Abraham's promise of innumerable offspring gets a step closer. Here we enjoy God's presence and here barriers of race, class and gender are broken down.

After Abraham, however all did not go smoothly

☞ *Exile in Egypt*

The book of Genesis ends with exile in Egypt

☞ *Deliverance*

Under Moses the nation of Israel is delivered.

☞ *Wandering in the desert*

At mount Sinai in the Arabian peninsula received the law but then wandered for 40 years in the wilderness.

Finally at the point of entering the promised land Moses gives them the law again.

### ☞ *The law again*

So that is what we are going to look at this morning.

### ☞ *Law (Deuteronomy)*

What contribution does the book of Deuteronomy make to the unfolding story of the bible, and what relevance does it have to the church today?

Deuteronomy echoes that small boy, but this time for better reasons. Deuteronomy says essentially “we are in big trouble.”

### ☞ *Hand stop*

There is a big barrier to the fulfilment of God’s promises to Abraham – our sin.

Deuteronomy makes it plain obedience is essential

### ☞ *Obedience is essential*

At the beginning in Deuteronomy 4, for instance, Moses promises that if they are obedient then they will live happily in the land, and the promises to Abraham will be fulfilled. Indeed the whole world will be blessed, just as Abraham was promised.

### ☞ *Deut 4:5-6*

Deuteronomy 4:5–6 (NIV - Anglicised)

<sup>5</sup> See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. <sup>6</sup> Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.”

But there is a big “if” hovering in the background. This will happen IF they are obedient.

And as the book of Deuteronomy goes on it becomes progressively more clear that every area of life is to be lived in obedience to God. More disconcertingly, for some

sins at least there is the death penalty. There is an ominous phrase that appears again and again and again in Deuteronomy.

“purge the evil from among you”

☞ *Purge the evil*

Which means the death penalty.

Immediately, and rightly in some senses, we think to ourselves that this is typical of the relatively primitive laws found in the Old Testament. Of course they do not apply to us.

But before we airbrush out that phrase we need to notice that it appears in an important passage in the New Testament.

☞ *1 Cor 5*

Notice at the end there “expel the wicked man from among you”

The context is this. In Corinth a man was sleeping with his father’s wife – presumably not his mother but his step-mother. And he was even boasting about it, as a mark of his freedom from repressive Old Testament morality.

The apostle Paul is saying “actually in certain respects Old Testament morality still applies.” Notice a few things though.

Paul is not talking about execution but excommunication – refusing to accept them as a bona fide church member. In the New Testament the church has no “power of the sword” as some have put it. That belongs to the state. But she does have the duty to ensure that the church is a community which follows Christ. And that sometimes may mean saying to someone “your behaviour is not compatible with your claim that you are a Christian. While you behave like that we cannot honour you here as follower of Jesus Christ.”

Notice this is not any sin, this is a gross sin. All of us sin in various ways every day, and our main duty to one another is to forgive one another from the heart and accept one another. But the more serious a sin, the more serious is our duty to confront it.

Notice too that this sin is not repented of. Jesus taught that we must forgive sin “seventy times seven” if a person repents. There is a massive difference between a young woman who is a sex addict - who repeatedly ends up in bed with strangers but who sincerely weeps over her sin - and an unrepentant adulterer. The former is to be welcomed and embraced, even if she is not confident that she won’t fall again the next day. But the unrepentant adulterer is to be warned, and if he or she will not repent, then they have no right to be welcomed as a believer in a church. That doesn’t mean being rude, or vicious to them, or even necessarily refusing to allow them to come to church, but it does mean that they cannot be allowed to pretend that this is acceptable Christian behaviour.

Notice also that this sin is very public. There is a general pattern in scripture that you deal with a problem with the same degree of openness as the original problem. Private sins are to be dealt with privately. Public sins, publicly.

And notice that this process is actually to induce repentance. As Paul puts it rather graphically

So that his sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord  
In other words it is so that they may come to their senses and be saved. We do not do any favour to someone by suggesting that their unrepentant and serious sin doesn’t matter. It does!

Now I know that this sort of stuff absolutely horrifies many people today, even Christians. It is exactly what they don’t like about church. It is what makes many people hover on the edge of church. They like to be part of the worship. They like to be encouraged by sermons. They enjoy the relationships. But this aspect of church feels oppressive. So they position themselves on the edge. If it gets sticky they can always bale out with minimal hassle.

But let me turn that on its head for a minute. Don’t we need one another? Not just for encouragement and friendship, but don’t we need faithful, wise and godly Christians who will hold us accountable?

I know that it is possible for a church to be oppressive and authoritarian but frankly it is more common today for Christians to drift through life, semi-detached from any

real Christian community, and to get themselves into all sorts of trouble, because no faithful friend said “stop”! No faithful community held them accountable.

Let me tell you a true story about how it is supposed to work. A pastor whom I know a little became secretly addicted to pain killers. He would even steal from church members to feed his addiction. He was discovered, and had to resign as pastor. He confessed his sin to the church and prepared to leave. But the church said “no”. He needed to stop being their pastor, but would he please stay? This was his home and his family and they loved him. Three years later he is still recovering but he is held by that community.

I could tell you other stories of Christians who got themselves into trouble, and did need to leave their church to allow others to heal, but who were lovingly settled in another church who gathered around them. And sadly I could also tell you of people who went off in a huff when held to account and who are now nowhere spiritually.

I praise God that this church is a faithful community – to use a biblical word – a covenant community. We need one another. If you are a Christian be fully integrated into this community – it is the only safe place to be.

But back to Deuteronomy.

### ☞ *Deuteronomy*

This message given to the Israelites just before they entered the promised land. As Deuteronomy unfolds it becomes clearer and clearer that beyond obedience grace is essential.

### ☞ *Grace is essential*

Let me explain. Deuteronomy actually gets darker and darker as law after law is given, and dire warnings are given about disobedience. The low point is Deuteronomy 27:26

Deuteronomy 27:26

“Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.”  
Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

In other words any disobedience will result in the person being cursed. How then can anyone be saved?

Deuteronomy has no answer. But the New Testament has.

☞ *Galatians*

Galatians 3:10, 13-14

<sup>10</sup> All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." ...

<sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." <sup>14</sup> He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

The apostle Paul quotes this text in Deuteronomy, pointing out that if we simply rely on "observing the law" we are in trouble – we are "under a curse". But then he reminds us of Christ. Jesus Christ took our curse on the cross. We deserved to be punished but he took the punishment. We deserved to be separated from God but he endured it crying out "my God my God why have you forsaken me?"

So for us who turn to Christ, and who seek forgiveness through trusting in his death on the cross, there is full forgiveness.

☞ *Animation of cross etc*

This is a community of the cross.

"Take it lassie it's for sinners like us."