

Each week of 2016 we are making our way through the Bible as a part of a year-long journey that we call Garden to City. We're doing this because we believe that it's within God's story that we find the meaning and the purpose in our own stories. Along the way we've learned that God uses real people, just like you and me (people with faults, and insecurities, and mess), to bring about beauty and restoration and hope in this world.

Today we find God's people, Israel, have been wandering through a foreign land for nearly 40 years, an experience that has been as much a Spiritual journey as a physical one. We learn about all of this in the book of Deuteronomy.

This isn't the most familiar book to most of us. It's easy to find it in the Bible because it's right there in the beginning, but it's a lot more difficult to actually find yourself in the book. But these are the last words of Moses- his final instructions and teachings. It's a document filled with insight on relationships between people and God, and between people and their community. It's the most quoted book by Jesus and the New Testament writers; it grounded their understanding of life. Moses' words in this book were meant to give direction to a group of people who were in desperate need of it, and all these years later it continues to serve as a roadmap to knowing God. If you're looking to know God then this book is worthy of your attention.

I want to begin today by asking a question: Is God who *we* imagine Him to be (a reflection of our needs and desires) or is He actually the Creator who designed *us* (along with our needs and desires)? When we long for God (to know Him; to understand Him), are we hungering for a version of our own design, or is our longing actually for the Creator who made us? Does God leave us to determine who He is on our own, or does He reveal Himself in plain and unmistakable ways through Scripture and then in the person of Jesus?

When we talk about knowing God, it's important to be able to ask some honest questions together. Some of you are exploring who He is and you're here today because you're searching for answers. We're glad you're here. This is the perfect place to seek God. But we need to agree on something- if God exists (and I know there might be those of you in the room for whom that is an unresolved question)- if He *is*- then He has always been and He will always be and we cannot determine who He is to suit our own preferences. He is who He is, and that leaves us with only one option: we can struggle with that fact, wrestle with it and come to terms with God and accept Him, or we can reject Him entirely, but we cannot shape Him.

So when we come to Deuteronomy chapter 5 we have an opportunity to learn about how God reveals Himself in Scripture to His people.

Many of you are familiar with what we find in this chapter. It contains the Ten Commandments. These are God's words. In fact they're the only words in all of Scripture written by God's own hand. But I want to focus on what God has to say just before He delivers the Ten Commandments. Let's look at it together. (Deut. 5:2-7)

2 *"The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Mount Sinai. 3 The Lord did not make this covenant with our ancestors, but with all of us who are alive today. 4 At the mountain the Lord spoke to you face to face from the heart of the fire. 5 I stood as an intermediary between you and the Lord, for you were afraid of the fire and did not want to approach the mountain. He spoke to me, and I passed his words on to you. 6 "I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. 7 "You must not have any other god but me.*

Notice that God doesn't just say, "I am God." He says, "I am the Lord." That's a Hebrew word (Elohim),

and it meant: "Mighty One." When God says this to His people He's saying that He is both their Creator and their deliverer. He was present when they were born, He was there when He called them out of Egypt, and He is with them today.

One Jewish philosopher comments on the significance of this for his people and he writes: "God as first cause is a God reached by intellectual speculation (metaphysics), but a God who acts in history, a God who frees the enslaved, is a God for whom the soul yearns."

God could choose to relate to each of us as impersonal objects. But here, when He says, "I am the Lord your God," Elohim, "Mighty God," He is letting us know that He wants to relate to us personally. He intervenes. He acts. He delivers.

This quality about God goes against the modern notion of how God relates to us. The modern perception of God (the view that is believed by most of my generation and Millennials) is that He exists but that He is uninvolved with us. God put everything into motion, but He doesn't bother with us.

This view has a name. It's called Deism. It's a belief about God that has existed for a very long time, but the modern variation adds morality. So, in practice, this belief says, if you and I will live morally decent, upstanding lives (if we're nice, and fair) then at the end of the day, God will be sure to bless us. That's Moral Deism, and it's the primary view of God among my generation and Millennials. God is distant, but when we really need Him, He shows up to give us what we need to make us happy, so we behave in ways that will please Him, because that's how we can ultimately get what we want.

Clearly this view is very different from what Scriptures says.

Here in Deuteronomy God is telling us that if we're going to relate to Him, it's not going to be Him simply responding to our good behavior by meeting our needs, but nor is it like the ancient view of God (that we must do certain things to avoid punishment), no, it's something else entirely.

What God describes for us here in Deuteronomy is a way of relating to him that is different than these, and yet familiar to us. It's more like a marriage.

Marriage ("is what brings us together today. That blessed arrangement, that dream, within a dream." Princess Bride. Sorry.). God wants to relate to us like a marriage, and that's either incredibly encouraging or discouraging, I don't know which. It probably depends on your experience, but let's talk about this for a moment.

The word that is used in our text is the term, "covenant." What God is saying to the people in our text is that He wants a personal, exclusive, committed relationship with them.

When my wife, Jennifer, and I got married 16 years ago, we made promises to one another. Vows, right? You need to understand the significance of this, because I pursued Jennifer for three and a half years before she agreed to date me. Three and a half years! It's not quite Jacob and Rachael (Jacob worked seven years in order to be able to marry Rachael), but still. I don't know if I'm stubborn or just stupid. I pursued her and she did not want to be pursued for the longest time. So on our wedding day, when we got to the part about promising to love and cherish, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, till death do us part, you better believe that those words held deep meaning. They were a long time coming.

We entered into a covenant with each other that day. Our relationship is different and distinctive from any other relationship we have. Everything of mine is hers and everything of hers is mine. We are one.

Now, Jennifer and I have three kids. We love our kids and being their parents brings us such joy, but our relationships with our kids is different than our relationship with each other. Our kids are going to grow up (they already are in spite of all my attempts to stunt that process), and one day they are going to make their way into this world. College and jobs and marriage await them out there and that means, one day, they will leave our home. But that will never be the case with Jennifer and I. We are in this, together, for as many years as God grants us life. Why? That's the covenant we made with one another.

It's a life-long relationship. It's exclusively ours. That's what a covenant is, and here with Israel we see that God built within us an ability to know and worship Him personally and exclusively in the very same way.

Here's why that's significant. Many people want to relate to God outside of a covenant (outside of a commitment).

They want God to play the role of a loving grandfather instead of a spouse. You know what I mean, right? We prefer the hands-off God who lets us live our own lives, but to whom we can turn when we need to get bailed out of a messy situation- the God who simply looks on from a distance until He is needed.

Some of us want to relate to God in that way, but listen to me on this, if you take the vows out of marriage it will all fall apart very quickly, and in the same way if you take the covenant out of your relationship with God, it will not work. He designed us to live in relationship with Him that is based on a shared commitment- that's where life to the full is found. Around here we say that we want to become people who Live Fully, Love Deeply and Give Freely, and if you want to experience *life to the full* then it means stepping into a relationship of mutual commitment with the God who made you.

Some of us think that love without strings attached is what the heart wants. "The heart wants what the heart wants," right? It wants whatever seems best to it at the moment. The problem is that love, without commitment, is not love. This is why it's so important to note that both here in our text, and even back in the beginning (in the garden) God seeks out relationship with man. He initiates it. From the very start, God was seeking to have a relationship with us and it's on this basis that all of Scripture is built and established.

The rest of what God has to say in chapter five (the Ten Commandments; the most famous set of instructions ever), you have to understand that they come *after* God has already said to His people, "I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt." "I established *you* as my people, so, because we're in relationship with each other, live this way.

The Ten Commandments, God's instructions, were never the condition for a relationship, they were always a confirmation (a marker) that Israel already had a relationship with Him. Do you understand what I'm saying? God didn't set the commandments in stone and then say, "Now keep these or I'm no longer your God!" No. He established Himself as the "Mighty One," Elohim, the God who saves, who delivered them out of Egypt, and *then* He asked for them to reciprocate (to respond) by being committed.

So let's talk about the commitment that God was asking from His people.

Ten Commandments! When you heard them read earlier did they sound ominous? God says, "As my people you are to live this way." These are not considerations. They are not suggestions. They're commands. On the first pass through them you might not realize that each command flows into the next in perfect logical order and spiritual priority.

The first three: no other gods before Him, no idolatry, no misuse of the name of the Lord- are directed

around giving proper honor to God.

The fourth, keeping the Sabbath holy- is transitional, honoring God while providing needful rest to people.

The fifth concerns proper relations in the family, which is the next priority after God, by calling children to honor their parents.

The sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth commandments- against murder, adultery, theft, and false testimony- were given as a guide to proper conduct toward “neighbors” (and Jesus famously defined who they are in his parable of the Good Samaritan).

Finally, the tenth commandment against coveting addresses the state of people’s hearts, teaching the need to internalize Godly thinking so that our thoughts are pure as well as our actions. It’s this thought that Jesus picks up and expands in the Sermon on the Mount when He teaches that, in God’s eyes, our anger and lust are violations of the commands against murder and adultery.

Did you notice that each command reflects a piece of who God is- His character? Honesty. Selflessness. Integrity. Faithfulness. If you’re wondering why God would establish guidelines for living I think it’s because He desperately wants His people to reflect His heart.

These commands deal with the here and now, the day to day. The entire book of Deuteronomy is about living in this world and not in the next, but Then we read verse 29 as God declares these words, *“Oh, that they would always have hearts like this, that they might fear me and obey all my commands! If they did, they and their descendants would prosper forever.”* (Deut. 5:29)

In that verse there is a hint of eternity. Fearing God and obeying His commands will lead to life going well for them *forever. Forever.* But it doesn’t happen that way, does it? Israel doesn’t obey. They go through cycles of obedience and rebellion over and over, and they deal with the consequences over and over. We can relate, can’t we? We’re familiar.

In Scripture we learn about our ability to love and worship and give and surrender, but the nature of sin is to turn away from God and set something else as ultimate in our hearts. That’s what sin is, really. At its center sin is much more than just disobeying a law or a rule- it’s setting something else as ultimate in our hearts. You can obey God without loving Him, but you cannot love God without obeying Him. Last week we learned that God wants us to seek Him with all our heart and soul- that when we do, we will be found by Him- but there is not one of us who seeks after God this way. Not completely. Not perfectly.

Here’s where it’s important for you to know- to really know- the heart and character of God. If you go to John 15 Jesus (God in the flesh) comments on this. In verse nine He’s having this very conversation with His followers. **9** *“I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. 10* *When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. 11* *I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!* Can I make a quick comment about that? God is for your joy, not your begrudging submission.

12 *This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. 13* *There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*

Do you see what Jesus is saying? He said, “I have loved you.” He’s the initiator. He started it. He loves us first. Everything that we do is a response to His affection. And how should we respond? Verse ten, *“When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love.”*

If you want to walk out today and worship God, look at His word and the heart behind it and live it, but

please remember, our obedience is not a method for earning God's favor. We worship Him because He's already shown us that He loves us. Please consider verse 13 again, "*There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.*"

When we look at Jesus we see His complete commitment to us. He has never stepped out on us. He remains true to the covenant He established, so much so that He was willing to lay His life down so that we could be saved. Our God doesn't call us to a heartless obedience to the commandments. He wants us to love Him as He has loved us. So we set our eyes on Jesus- the author and perfecter of our faith- and like a bride and groom we pledge our hearts and lives.