

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Have you ever wondered what the scriptures teach about the origin of the universe? What about the patriarchs, who were they, and why are they important? What relevance does the account of the exodus of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt have for Christian growth? What can the seemingly tedious ceremonial laws of Leviticus as well as the long list of names in Numbers teach us about godly living? How should a believer read and reflect on the five books of Moses collectively called the Pentateuch (or Torah)? How do these five books “fit in” to the over-arching story of scripture? These questions and more will be explored as we seek to understand this section of God’s Word.

The objective of this class is: to gain an overview of the first five books of the Bible (otherwise known as the Pentateuch), and understand the relation between these foundational books to Christ and Christian living.

The Commissioning of the Covenant Community (Deuteronomy 4-12): Last week we saw that Moses re-told the story of God’s redemption to the children of the exodus on the eve of entering the land of promise. He summarized the forty-year experience by focusing more on the faithfulness of God in bringing Israel to this point than on the actual events of the wilderness wanderings. This week we witness the event which is the name sake of the book (second law) as Moses begins his commissioning of the covenant community with a re-telling of the terms of the covenant: the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. The section begins in chapter four with a summary of the value of the law of God to his people. According to verse one, *“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, the God of your fathers is giving you (4:1).* The preamble of the commission to be delivered in the current pericope establishes God’s purposes for the delivery of his divine law. The two key phrases referenced in the verse above are “live” and “possess the land”. It is these two expressions that are most indicative of how the exodus community saw their relationship with God at this point in redemptive history. After all, God (I am) is seen as the epitome of life and living. Israel has been reminded ceaselessly that they will only take possession of the land if they stand in right relation with this God whose existence is independent and on whom the existence all living things is dependent.

We will explore the nature of the prophet’s commission by looking at: 1) the restating of the terms of the covenant; 2) the credal confession of God’s exclusive right to be worshipped; 3) God’s ultimate desire for God’s covenant people to become regenerate (born anew).

Part One: Restating the Terms of the Covenant – The Mosaic covenant is first mentioned in Exodus chapter twenty when God, from atop Mt. Sinai, reveals himself to his people and issues Ten Commandments that are foundational to the nature of the covenant. We have seen in earlier weeks the moral element that the Ten Commandments contain and the expressed value of the law-giver exemplified thereby. Moses reminds his audience, *“The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today”* (Deut. 5:2-3). The truth is that the covenant was made exactly with the fathers of those standing alive at the time of Moses’s address because all who were adults at the time the covenant was given had died in the wilderness (all but Caleb and Joshua). However, the prophet makes this statement because the relevance of the covenant was for the children present at the time of the giving of the covenant as well as all not present in perpetuity. Those present were not to understand the covenant as a temporal commitment on the part of God made to their fathers or forefathers, but as a promise made to them

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and their children with on-going relevance for each succeeding generation. After restating the ten words (Ten Commandments), Moses informs the people of a conversation between he and God in which God stated, “...*Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever*”(5:29)! Unfortunately, the story of God’s people both then and now is filled with apostasy and idolatry; a continual recasting of oneself on the mercy of God because of the deceptiveness of the human heart.

By reminding the children of the exodus community of the terms of the Covenant, Moses was in essence reminding them of two things: God’s grace, and the people’s role in assenting to the covenant. The fact that Israel had been chosen by God and redeemed from Egyptian slavery, brought to Mt. Horeb and heard the voice of the Lord God addressing them as his people is stated by Moses to be a distinctive of the covenant community. In **4:32-35** we read, “*For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the 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 the 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 great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?*” This unique relationship between God and his people serves to emphasize the importance of the covenant and what God is seeking to accomplish through his covenant community and throughout the entire earth. The grace of God is hereby revealed in his election of a people on whose behalf he revealed and associated his name.

Another way in which the election of Israel and God’s relationship with his people exemplifies the grace of God is by placing the gracious (and unmerited) act of redemption prior to the giving of the law. God did not choose Israel because they were stronger or better than any other nation, but “...*because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers...*” (7:8). Thus the election of God’s people is, was and always has been, within the context of a covenant relationship which is itself driven by love between the Creator and his creation. Again, we see the prophet instructing Israel to tell their inquisitive children, “*We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out with a mighty hand...And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes...that he might preserve us alive*” (**6:21a, 24a**). Redemption precedes command in the economy of God.

Secondly, a retelling of the terms of the covenant reminded Israel of their consensual assumption of the yoke of God’s kingdom. Their redemption served as the foundation for their obedience and was not conditioned upon it. However, their election (which preceded their redemption) had implications for their behavior. Because God had covenantally chosen them, obedience to the covenant was a condition for possessing the land (which was itself an object of the Abrahamic covenant). So, the terms of the covenant to which the people of Israel (and their children) consented became the response of a redeemed people to their gracious redeemer.

Part Two: Of Creeds and Confessions – In the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy we have a creedal summation of the law of God as delivered to his people. The importance of this creedal statement is evidenced in the requirement to “bind it between your eyes...and write it on the door posts of your house”. For Jews as early as the return from Babylonian captivity, the liturgical use of Deuteronomy 6:4 was part of their every-day religious devotion. It should be no surprise that Christ himself when questioned by the scribes and rulers of his day as to the greatest commandment in scripture would have replied correctly with the words of the Shema, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and* Baney, Lesson 14 Fall, 2015

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with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40). Although the command to love your neighbor as yourself (found in Leviticus 19:17) is not part of the Shema, even a passing reference to Deuteronomy 6:4 would have immediately evoked the Shema in the minds of devout Jews living in the time of Christ.

So, what exactly is the *Shema*, and what makes up the creedal statement in our text upon which, according to Christ, depends all the law and the prophets? The Shema is a Hebrew word meaning hear or listen and is the introductory word found in **Deuteronomy 6:4**, “*Hear (Shema) O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*” The full extent of the creed continues with verses six through nine as well as chapter eleven verses thirteen through twenty-one. This statement of faith did two things for the faithful among the covenant community. First, it summarized the essence of the terms of the covenant. The declaration of the singularity of God among all the gods of the earth was a distinguishing characteristic of the Israelite faith. Another way of translating the Hebrew word *echad* (one) is, alone. Therefore, the faithful member of the covenant community was announcing that he served the one true God of his redemption and God alone. Considering the fact that for the first six centuries of inhabiting the land of promise Israel struggled with syncretism, the confession in the one true God and worship of him alone is significant.

Secondly, anyone who meaningfully confessed the Shema, took upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of God. For this reason, the words commanded by the prophet were to, 1) be upon the hearts of the people of God; 2) be taught to their children; 3) be the constant companion of the believer; 4) be bound as a sign upon the hand and between the eyes; 5) be written upon the door posts of their houses. In a representative way, the meaningful confession of this statement of faith was a pronouncement that one lived beneath the dominion of the kingship of God.

Part Three: People with a New Heart – The fact that the longevity of the covenant community in the land of promise was contingent upon obedience to the terms of the covenant (the commandments of God) might seem hopeless given one’s awareness of the depravity of the human condition. However, Moses concludes his commission to the people of God by encouraging them to, “...*circumcise the foreskin of your hearts...*” (**10:16**). From beginning to end the commission set forth by the prophet to God’s people is to remember the God of the Covenant who elected them covenantally and redeemed them from the bondage of Egypt (the iron furnace – **4:20**). God preserved them in the wilderness, established his covenant of life with them and commanded their obedience to his laws. Moses charged them to remember the God of their redemption even when the promise of inhabiting the land is fulfilled and they are resting comfortably from their enemies. His commission concludes by stating, “*And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul...Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day*” (**10:12, 15**).

God’s love for his people was adamantly declared and would be the only means by which the heart could be sealed with the sign and seal of the covenant. Circumcision, you will recall, was the sign of the covenant given to Abraham in Genesis 17. It was a physical seal that identified the one on whom it was placed as being part of the covenant community. There is an understanding here in the Pentateuch of the need for a regeneration of the heart prior to the successful adherence to the terms of the covenant. It is interesting that the command to “circumcise the foreskin of you heart” is accompanied by the

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admonishment to, “...*be no longer stubborn...*” This language suggests the essence of regeneration (a circumcised heart) is a willful subjection of one’s life to the dominion of God’s rule and seeking to make his name holy instead of seeking to make a name for one’s self. For the OT church as well as the NT believer, the only way this can happen is if the divine work of grace through the Holy Spirit enables the dead heart of a sinner to be revived to newness of life in Christ. This circumcision of the heart becomes a constant theme during the ministry of Jeremiah (4:4) as well as other prophets.

In a very real sense, there is here expressed a need for divine intervention in the ability to be faithful to the covenant. There is also an element of human responsibility, the imperative is directed to the people of God. We know that the OT church failed in their ability to be faithful to the covenant, as do we. However, the prophet Jeremiah foretold a time coming in which God himself would make a new covenant. In **Jeremiah 31:31-33** we read, “*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband declares the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*” A circumcised heart (humiliated by grace and bearing the seal of the covenant of God) has always been the desire of God for his people. The fullness of such a regenerative process anticipates a new day and a new covenant, one to which all the OT covenants and their administrations point with certainty - the coming of Christ and his restorative, regenerative work on behalf of all his elect.