

## Deuteronomy The Heart of the Problem

Welcome to Eagle Ridge on this Palm Sunday, the beginning of what we call Holy Week. This will be a little different because I will not be preaching on Jesus entering Jerusalem with people waving palm branches. We are reading through the Bible chronologically this year and preaching that same way. We are taking the story as it comes. Other Holy Week activities are a guide to doing a Maundy Thursday or Upper Room experience with your family or bridge group. There is the community Good Friday service at the Methodist church downtown. Then we return here next week for Resurrection Sunday.

Last week, we talked about what is at the **heart of the Old Testament**. If you aren't familiar with that term, it just means the part of God's story that comes for Jesus being born in the manger. In the Old Testament, **God made a promise, or covenant, with a man** named Abraham and the promise was passed down to his son, Isaac, and grandson, Jacob. This group becomes the nation of Israel.

**The Shema Israel is the heart of how Israel can keep their side of this covenant.** It is so important that Moses tells them to keep these words **always in their minds** by repeating them to themselves, their kids, and grandkids. **The word "Shema" means listen**, not just hear, but listen, respond, and obey. If they can follow these commands, they will have **no trouble keeping the laws Moses** has given them from the Lord.

I took the words from the Shema Israel which is from Deuteronomy 6 and combined it with the words of Jesus to make the **Shema Eagle Ridge**. Let's read this together.

"Listen, Eagle Ridge! Jesus is our God, the Lord alone. And you must love the Lord Jesus your God with all your heart and mind, all your desires, and all your resources. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to all his commands. Repeat them again and again to your children and grandchildren. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. And remember that Jesus said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it." (Deuteronomy 6:4-7 & Luke 9:23-24)

Today's passage comes from **Deuteronomy 30**. **Moses continues with his instructions** to the nation of Israel before they **cross the Jordan River** into Canaan, the land God promised to give them. You may remember that **Moses is not allowed to go with him. He will pass the baton of leadership off to**

**Joshua.** That will enter us into another large section of the story, the conquest of Canaan.

Moses, in this section, goes **back and forth** between statements about the future, the NIV uses the word “**tomorrow**” and statements about today. **Here’s what will happen in the future when you are in the land of promise with these people from other cultures that do not follow Yahweh, and here’s what you need to do today, right now.**

Let’s pick up the story at **Deuteronomy 30:1-10**, where **Moses is talking about the future if they disobey Shema and follow the gods** and the practices of the people now living in Canaan. “**In the future, when you experience all these blessings and curses I have listed for you, and when you are living among the nations to which the Lord your God has exiled you, take to heart all these instructions.** <sup>2</sup> **If at that time you and your children return to the Lord your God, and if you obey with all your heart and all your soul all the commands I have given you today,** <sup>3</sup> **then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes. He will have mercy on you and gather you back from all the nations where he has scattered you.** <sup>4</sup> **Even though you are banished to the ends of the earth, the Lord your God will gather you from there and bring you back again.** <sup>5</sup> **The Lord your God will return you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will possess that land again. Then he will make you even more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors!** <sup>6</sup> **“The Lord your God will change your heart and the hearts of all your descendants, so that you will love him with all your heart and soul and so you may live!** <sup>7</sup> **The Lord your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate and persecute you.** <sup>8</sup> **Then you will again obey the Lord and keep all his commands that I am giving you today.** <sup>9</sup> **“The Lord your God will then make you successful in everything you do. He will give you many children and numerous livestock, and he will cause your fields to produce abundant harvests, for the Lord will again delight in being good to you as he was to your ancestors.** <sup>10</sup> **The Lord your God will delight in you if you obey his voice and keep the commands and decrees written in this Book of Instruction, and if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul. And that again harkens back to Shema Israel. Deuteronomy 30:1-10**

**Spoiler alert, what Moses says** about being taken away by another nation **will happen.** **Moses isn’t going out on a limb** predicting this. What my friend, Greg Weins, says **the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.** What they did after leaving Egypt up to this point is get ready to go into the promised land

and you will see a very consistent pattern. What I'm about to share with you is literally, rinse and repeat. So predictable.

Moses is predicting what is **Israel's Pattern of Behavior**

This starts with God choosing them as his own people. He makes this covenant with them.

1. I will be your God and you will be my very own special people.
2. I will make you into a great nation.
3. I will give you the land of Canaan as your homeland.
4. I will use you to bless all nations, all people.

That is usually followed by big cheers from the people and agreement. But when things get tough, here's what happens.

They not only disobey and break his laws, but they do it with enthusiasm and flair. They...**Rebel = Punishment** In this case what Moses is prophesying is that they will lose their identity as a nation and the promised land.

They have not kept Shema Israel.<sup>4</sup> "Listen, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.<sup>5</sup> And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.<sup>6</sup> And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today.<sup>7</sup> Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up.<sup>8</sup> Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders.<sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

God is not their God alone because they are going to mix a little of the local flavor into their beliefs and practices. This is the big sin that follows with a lot of specific laws being broken in how they live. They don't love him with their heart, soul, and strength. They are cheating with other gods, they are no longer monogamous. They haven't passed them on to their kids and they haven't kept this in front of them as a lens through which to see life.

As our passage says, they will come to their senses and return to God. This is what it means to...**Repent and call on God's faithfulness and forgiveness.** They remember that God promised to keep his side of the covenant if they will just fess up to their sin and ask for his forgiveness. He will not hide from them because he loves them.

Then God will give them back what they lost. They will...**Regain identity as God's people.** From God's perspective he restores them to what they were intended to be, but had walked away.

When they become God's very own people, they will...**Receive covenant promises.** Of which the big one is their homeland.

If you are reading through the Bible, **I encourage you to watch this pattern and even mark it in your Bible with these words, (rebel, repent, regain, and receive).** But, after a while, when times get either too good, and they get fat and lazy, or too tough and they get discouraged, they will rebel again, which will set off God's punishment.

How foolish can they be? They've seen God's goodness and faithfulness. They've seen what it's like being outside of his protection. Why continue to rebel? It makes no sense.

Seriously, none of us can relate to that. No need to focus on me and my behavior patterns. It's much more comfortable to focus on those silly Israelites and how weak minded and weak willed they are.

But we must ask this very uncomfortable question. **Is this your pattern?** Have you seen it before, and you feel that you are moving into it again? Things are either too easy, too busy, or too hard and you've started to compromise. And what does compromise lead to if not put in check? Yes, it leads to rebellion.

Whether it's Israel or you... **What's the heart of the problem?** Is it distraction, getting fat and lazy or discouragement from tough times? What is the heart of the problem? We need look no further than the word underlined. The problem is the heart.

Let's not mystify the heart into something like passion, a strong feeling that causes you to act against your common sense. Heart, in this sense, is the seat of your emotions and your thoughts together. I'm going to use the word "desire."

Here's an uncomfortable truth about the Israelites sitting there looking across the Jordan at the land of promise and us today sitting in church or watching in your living room. **They (we) have the ability to obey but not the desire.**

There are no specialized skills needed for them to keep the laws God has given Moses to give to them. **When they enter the promised land, what God has told them to do isn't above their heads or out of their reach.**

Let's look at verse 6 again. **<sup>6</sup> "The Lord your God will change your heart and the hearts of all your descendants, so that you will love him with all your heart and soul and so you may live! Deuteronomy 30:6**

Now let's read it in the NIV translation which is, in this case, closer to literal. **<sup>6</sup> The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. Deuteronomy 30:6 NIV**

**Circumcision** is one of the things God said the males in Israel had to do that would **make them distinct among** the others that are living in Canaan. It is also **an act of obedience that demands some sacrifice**, at least for the men. It was a way that they were **set apart from the other groups** and nations.

This phrase is used earlier **"Circumcise their hearts."** (10:16)

Here's how a scholar and commentator defines the circumcision of the heart. **"The metaphor refers to removing all psychological, moral, and spiritual barriers to true devotion to Yahweh, resulting in undivided love and obedience."** NIV Application Commentary, pg. 697

**The covenant love cannot be legislated or brought about by rituals or sacrifice, nor can devotion.** Those who are brought back to God from exile must have their old heart removed surgically and a new one put in its place. **They need to want to obey because they are devoted to God.** The problem is, they just don't want to.

Later, in Israel's story the prophet Jeremiah describes the new circumcised heart this way. <sup>31</sup> **"The day is coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.** This has not happened yet. <sup>32</sup> **This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife," says the Lord.** <sup>33</sup> **"But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days," says the Lord. "I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.** <sup>34</sup> **And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, 'You should know the Lord.' For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already," says the Lord. "And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins."** Jeremiah 31:31-34

**Those people waiting to cross the Jordan river into the promised land do not have new, circumcised hearts, nor do they have this covenant that is written on their hearts. They are going to rebel against God, and he will punish them.**

**In the culture of the time there was no such thing as a covenant giver who would welcome people back after punishment. If you break your vow to someone, you are dead to them.** This is one more way that the God of Israel, Yahweh, is **wholly different** from any of the false gods the people worship across the river.

Let's take an even **bigger jump forward** because this is picked up in the New Testament. <sup>25</sup> **The Jewish ceremony of circumcision has value only if you obey**

God's law. But if you don't obey God's law, you are no better off than an uncircumcised Gentile. <sup>26</sup> And if the Gentiles obey God's law, won't God declare them to be his own people? <sup>27</sup> In fact, uncircumcised Gentiles who keep God's law will condemn you Jews who are circumcised and possess God's law but don't obey it. <sup>28</sup> For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. <sup>29</sup> No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is **a change of heart produced by the Spirit**. And a person with a changed heart **seeks praise from God, not from people**. Romans 2:25-29

**It is the Holy Spirit, the presence of the risen Jesus that gives us new, circumcised hearts that have God's law written on them. The heart yearns after those things that God loves and approves of. That's how people become like Jesus, it's because of the Holy Spirit changing their hearts which means their desires are changed.**

**Here's a different pattern for us. This pattern reflects what we cannot do and what is our part in having a changed heart. And you guessed it. It begins with Desire...But because of the new heart given to us, we can start to want the right things. Ever catch yourself wanting something you would have never desired before coming to Christ?**

Our part is to **find ways to start acting upon this new godly desire**. We need to **practice what is not natural for us**. It's like learning a new skill in sports or in speaking a new language. This is also called **training**. **Doing what you can do so that later you can do what you aren't capable of doing now**. It's small things that exercise this new desire. **I cannot love God with my everything**, but I can act on my desire to love him by spending time with him. I can practice that.

**Then what did not come naturally becomes second nature**. That's what we call a **habit**. We don't have to think about doing the things that God wants for us because we were practicing it and something changed. **This is where the new heart changes our character**. This desire that I practiced that became a good habit now is a part of who I am. People would **describe me with this new godly expression**.

**Here's how the apostle Paul describes this process in his letter to the church in Philippi. <sup>12</sup> Dear friends, you always followed my instructions when I was with you. And now that I am away, it is even more important. Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. <sup>13</sup> For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him. Philippians 2:12-13**

This is how messed up sinful people, like you and me, start wanting what God wants and have the ability to do it because our hearts have been changed. We get the "want to" and the "ability to."

How do we know our hearts are changed? It's because of who our hearts are changed toward. My **Heart must be changed toward God and people.**

What is the final part or 4<sup>th</sup> part of the covenant God made with Israel. To make them a blessing to all nations, all people. This was happening in this time. Although much of what Moses is telling them sounds harsh, it isn't compared to the nations around them. **It's how to live justly in relation to other people.**

Let's go right to the source, Jesus himself. <sup>30</sup> **And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' What does that sound like?** Shema Israel. But Jesus doesn't stop there. <sup>31</sup> **The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."** Mark 12:30-31

So, we have this pattern that Israel is stuck in. They are always in it or ready to restart it. **They are being blessed by God and his presence.** Then they rebel and want to do it their way, no longer trusting or obeying God's laws. That is when God, who is faithful, allows punishment, the natural consequences of the behavior to land on them. But this is only for a time. **When they call out to God, knowing that is faithful and forgiving,** he takes them back and we start over at the top.

The only answer is that we get new hearts. God gives us the "want to," not just the ability to do it. Our new hearts, our circumcised hearts, now don't obey just because we must, or we will get punished, but because we want to. We start wanting what God wants.

Like I said at the beginning of this section of teaching, Moses is giving to the people before they enter the promised land statements about "tomorrow" or "the future". It also has statements about today. **They are sitting on the ground looking at the river and the land on the other side. What are they going to do right then?**

Later, in chapter 30, there are two parts that begin "today I am giving you a choice." <sup>15</sup> **"Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster..."** <sup>19</sup> **"Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!"** <sup>20</sup> **You can make this choice by loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him. This is the key to your life. And**

if you love and obey the Lord, you will live long in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Deuteronomy 30:15 & 19-20

It all comes back to loving God with all your heart, soul, and strength, loving him with your everything. But that demands a new heart. It's something you can choose or sign up for. You can ask for new desires. And yes, it is a life and death issue.

**Choose today what tomorrow will be.** Do you trust God? Do you really want to start wanting the right things, that will be undoubtedly different from what you have been desiring. Did you notice that the question wasn't do you want to live forever in heaven by allowing Jesus to pay for your sins? No, the question is do you want to be different now and then be completely transformed in eternity.

This morning, I want us to enter a time of prayer and preparation. Yes, some of us are going to Uganda, but this is for everyone. Picture you are sitting by a river, and you are getting ready to experience God's presence and blessing on the other side. What do you need to do before you go across that river?

**Confess:** Anything specific that you know is not what God wants for you. But that isn't really the problem. Confess how your self-focus and self-absorption have caused you to miss the mark and that you want to turn toward God and others as God does. \_

**Repent:** That is to turn away from something and toward something different.

**Ask for a new heart:** Make yourself available to the holy spirit's transforming power.

**First act of obedience:** This means start following, start practicing what you want to be on the other side of the river.

I'm going to guide us through this. Open your hands upward.

Let's read this together to begin our time of moving toward the cross and then the empty tomb.

Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Do not banish me from your presence, and don't take your Holy Spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you. <sup>13</sup> Then I will teach your ways to rebels, and they will return to you. Psalm 51:10-13