

A heart reset

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[0 : 00] Father, I just pray, Lord, that you would indeed concentrate our minds today. We've got a long passage before us, Lord, and in some ways a complicated passage. But Father, I just pray, Lord, that you would enlighten us, enlighten our hearts, enlighten our minds, so that we would really be hearing your voice today, that you would indeed invigorate us, you would warm us with your word, you would strengthen us and cause us to live in accordance with you, in accordance with your gospel.

So be at work this morning, Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now this past week, I saw this meme, which is also on the screen.

The moment you realise 2022 is pronounced 2022. Well, some of you are laughing, and I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

It's a joke, of course, but at the same time, the grim truth is that 2022 probably will look a lot more like 2020 than we like. For the last two years, we've been given a crash course in the Greek alphabet.

We are now all familiar with Alpha, Beta, Delta, and now Omicron. And it's 50-50 where the Sigma and Upsilon will appear in our future. Our lives have pretty much been tested to the limit, leaving us jaded and fatigued.

[1 : 21] And I would imagine that our relationship with God has undergone a pretty similar stress test as well. As 2021 went on for many of us, it's quite possible that our relationship with him got increasingly bent out of shape.

As we pondered a future shaped by Delta and Omicron, we lost touch with the true Alpha and Omega. Our hearts have become jaded and fatigued.

And so today on the last Sunday of 2021, I figured that it would be helpful to have a reset. As I mentioned earlier in the service, we'll talk about a church reset in our upcoming sermon series. But before that, we might need an even more fundamental reset, one that involves our relationship with God. I find that I personally would benefit from one, and I think we all would too. And so that's why today I've gone to the Book of Deuteronomy to help you and I reset.

For in Deuteronomy 29 to 30, we'll find a passage that really gets at our heart. Now, if any of you have skimmed Deuteronomy before, you might be thinking, Really?

[2 : 28] It just seems like a really boring legal document, full of laws and bylaws and nothing else. I mean, if you did the E100 Bible reading plan this year, you will have noticed that it skipped Deuteronomy entirely, and you're probably glad it did.

But pay closer attention, and this is what you discover. Deuteronomy is a sermon, not a lecture. And it's filled with fire, not with rules that are obscure.

These are the final words of Moses, spoken to Israel, recorded for us. And it's all about God. Listen to it, and you'll find that it's full of language to love God, fear God, serve God, obey God, walk with God, hold fast to God.

Moses isn't merely giving bare propositions, but stirring our hearts to faith and obedience. And so Deuteronomy is really about your heart, and my heart, and above all, God's heart.

And so this morning, we're going to explore the heart of our relationship with him through this passage that will help reorient us as we head into 2022. And so firstly, let's consider God's heart for covenant relationship.

[3 : 48] God's heart for covenant relationship. In chapters 29 to 30, we basically come to the climax of Moses' sermon. Moses has spoken.

And so far, he's reminded them that it's been 40 years since they left Egypt, bound for the land that God has promised them. And in chapters 5 to 26 in particular, Moses has been showing them how

to love God by living out the law of God.

And so it's not just laying out the particulars of a judicial code. He's pleading with God's people all throughout Deuteronomy. In the words of Deuteronomy 6 verse 4 to 5, Will you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength?

And so when we get to chapter 29, the question is, Are Israel ready to receive God's word? Will they embrace God's desire to have a covenant relationship with them?

For that is what Deuteronomy is really all about. Look at verse 1. These are the terms of the covenant the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab.

[5 : 00] And then that's confirmed for us down in verse 12, where Moses says, You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God.

So then, what is a covenant? It's not exactly a concept that pops up in everyday conversation. I did a Google search of the word in the news to see where it might pop up today, and most of it appeared in legal settings, like when a UN representative urged the government to ratify covenants that guaranteed gender equality.

And so today we use the word to talk about legal agreements. And that's certainly true back then as well. Just look right at the end of verse 12, where Moses talks about sealing this covenant with an oath.

That's legal language. So at first glance, covenant sounds like it's just about legal technicalities. So a covenant relationship doesn't sound particularly warm.

After all, do you have a warm relationship with the mobile phone provider whom you sign a contract with? More likely it's a frustrating one. But that's not what biblical covenants are all about.

[6 : 24] It is not less than law, but it is more than law. For come again with me to verses 12 and 13 and take a closer look at the language.

You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God. And then verse 13, to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God.

Now I don't think DG or Cellcom talks to you in that way. Notice how the language is also personal and relational. You know, this is not just a covenant between some random God and some random people.

No, this is the Lord, Yahweh, who is your God. And he is taking not just on people in the abstract, but his people.

And so covenants are not just legal contracts, although it has that dimension. It is fundamentally about personal relationship. Indeed, it is a chosen relationship.

[7 : 34] Now you might ask, why not just say relationships then? Why talk about covenant in particular? Why place relationships within a legal frame?

After all, are not law and love opposites? That's what we often say. Doesn't one cancel out the other? But as the writer G.K. Chesterton once pointed out, when we fall in love, we have a natural inclination, not just to express affection, but to make promises to one another.

When a lover says to another, I will always love you. That's the language of promise. For when a person truly loves another, they desire to bind themselves to one another permanently.

But how do you demonstrate that those words, I will always love you, are not just words? Well, you'll get married. You'll enter into a covenant.

And when you're signing that dotted paper in the presence of witnesses, you don't think, oh, this legal activity is so restrictive, so oppressive, it's so uncondusive to love.

[8 : 57] No. What you are in effect doing is deepening your bond of love. For you are publicly binding yourself together by promising to fulfill the obligations that come with the covenant.

For better, for worse, till death do us part. And so, in a covenant, you are really saying, I choose you.

I prioritize the needs of the relationship. This is my pledge. And when you do that, you create the best possible environment for love to flourish.

The legal dimension enhances the love relationship rather than become a barrier to it. That's what covenant is about.

And that's why God's heart is for covenant relationship for you and I. He wants a relationship marked by mutual love, fulfilled promises, lifelong loyalty.

[10 : 07] He wants us to know He's chosen us. He wants to bind Himself to us. He wants to commit Himself to our well-being.

And just as lovers often reminisce together about happy memories, God does the same in verses 2 and 3. He asks Israel, Remember what you saw in Egypt? Remember how I set you free from your slave masters? How I defeated Pharaoh's pursuing army? How I spared your firstborn sons? Or cast your eyes down to verses 5 to 8? Remember those days in the wilderness, God asks? Those were the days when I led you, clothed you, sustained you. Those were the days I have given you victory over various kings that opposed you.

All this I did and of verse 6 so that you might know that I am the Lord your God. And so God says, Do you need evidence of my heart for you?

[11 : 21] Then look at our history together. These things really happen. There is no denying them. Our relationship is not just some wild fantasy.

You are not being invited to pretend to know some imaginary friend up in the sky just to give yourself a little comfort. Neither are you being invited to know someone who knows how to sweet talk but never backs up his words.

No. You are being invited to respond to a God who has acted in real time, in real events, time and time again to demonstrate his love for you.

He took the first step as verses 12 and 13 once again make clear. He is the one initiating, making, and confirming this covenant.

And just in case we need more evidence of the full breath of God's heart, Moses gives us verses 10 and 11.

[12 : 31] Now, who does God want standing in his presence? Verse 10 says, it's all of you. It's not just leaders and elders.

It's all the men of Israel. It's not just the men of Israel. It's the men and women of Israel. It's not just the adult men and women of Israel.

It's the adults and children of Israel. It's not just the native-born adults and children of Israel. It's the natives and the foreigners living in their midst.

Even those who perform the lowest of tasks. That's what the reference to chopping your wood and carrying your water is all about. God wants a covenant relationship not just with the elites or the religious or the knowledgeable but all kinds of people.

And it's not just people back then. Look at verses 14 to 15. I am making this covenant with its oath not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God but also with those who are not here today.

[13 : 47] This covenant relationship God declares is for generation after generation. These words are meant for us today and not just Moses' original audience.

God intends an exclusive relationship with the widest inclusivity. inclusivity. And that's how God is always related to his people.

Whether it's with Abraham or Moses or David he makes covenant. He takes the first step. And that's true even outside the Old Testament.

One event in particular showcases that. We just celebrated it. For on God's initiative he sent his son Jesus into our world to bring us into a new covenant relationship with him.

That's a historical fact as I stressed last night. It's real it's concrete it's tangible. God came to live where we live where things break life expires and beauty gets corrupted to unbreak things breathe new life restore beauty.

[15 : 15] That's what's happening in a new covenant relationship. So the question is if we know this what will we do?

As one commentator puts it God's love already is demonstrated ours is awaited and Moses says in verse nine here's how a beloved responds to their lover by reciprocating verse nine carefully follow the terms of this covenant so that you may prosper in everything you do.

In other words Moses says come be part of this covenant relationship. It's where goodness and gladness and abundance is to be found. Don't you want that?

It's what God wants. Hear what God said earlier in Deuteronomy 5 verse 29 on the screen. Oh that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always so that it might go well with them and their children forever.

That's the heart of God. The blessing of God is found in being with God. And so Moses exhorts us take to heart the core of the ten commandments and love God and love neighbor with your

everything.

[16:55] Pledge yourselves back to God. Build yourselves, bind yourselves to Him. Commit your ways to Him. Simple, right?

Except we know it's anything but simple. For Deuteronomy 29 to 30 now confronts us with a second truth about our condition.

secondly, let's recognize the catastrophe of our cold hearts. The catastrophe of our cold hearts. Now we just spent the last ten minutes or so studying God's heart but the question is have we really understood? Because Israel hasn't.

Look at verse 4. But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.

[17:56] And by the way the word translated mind in verse 4 is literally the heart which is the control center of the human being. You see here's the paradox. In verses 2 and 3 Israel's eyes have seen God at work with their own eyes they saw but they don't get it.

Verse 4 They might have witnessed the very works of God but they don't get the very heart of God. They don't grasp its life-changing significance.

They are as dull as ever. And you and I know that experience don't we? We can hear the Christmas and the Easter story a thousand times.

We know the details. But if we don't get the heart of the story and if we forget the heart behind the story then our hearts will stay cold or grow cold.

We will be as the prophet Isaiah puts it ever hearing but never understanding ever seeing but never perceiving. We can't reciprocate love when we don't grasp that love in the first place.

[19:20] You know I hate it when I'm in that place and yet so often I find myself there forgetting how much God's heart burns for you and I.

is a place that we might have found ourselves in 2021. And when our hearts are not captured by God's fiery love they inevitably get captured by other things.

And if that happens that's a catastrophe. Why? Well look at verse 18. There Israel is warned to ensure that there is none amongst them whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of these nations.

And then notice in the rest of verse 18 what happens when the heart does not grow roots in God? It becomes poisonous.

It reaps bitterness. Imagine being called poisonous or bitter. I don't want to be known for those things.

[20:35] And yet when you and I cut ourselves off from resting in God what happens? Well for one thing we find ourselves unable to forgive others because we cannot draw upon knowing how deeply we've been forgiven by God.

We find ourselves more ready to act unkindly towards others because we forget God's kindness to us. We become ugly plants if I can put it that way.

And it's a catastrophe because ultimately it will bring about the very curse of God himself. And that's the solemn warning of verses 20 and 21. When our hearts persistently turn away from God the Lord has to uproot us and turn away from us.

But why does he have to? You know when some of you read verse 20 you probably found it very jarring. the Lord will never be willing to forgive them.

Wait a minute wait a minute you say. I thought God is good? I thought Christianity preaches forgiveness? So what is up with verse 20? Well let's think about covenants again.

[21:58] What do covenants have both then and today? they have stipulations and sanctions. That is they have stuff that says okay this is what you should do, what is required for you to meet your obligations.

And then they have stuff that says right what happens when you violate those terms and conditions? Perhaps you get fined, perhaps you face criminal prosecution.

And the reason the sanctions are necessary is because without them the agreement becomes meaningless. If people can violate agreements with zero penalties incurred at no cost to them, there is no substantial basis to that relationship.

Now we know this subconsciously don't we? For example, we know that when we elect our leaders, ideally, the tacit understanding is that they should govern the best they can in the most responsible way they can for the betterment of our country.

But should they violate this implicit agreement, for example, if hypothetically they stole billions of ringgit from the rakyat and even claim that it was all a misunderstanding involving foreign donors, well, we understand that a fundamental violation of the relationship has occurred.

[23 : 37] And we would be mad if there were absolutely zero penalties and the person got away with it. We know a good judge would never let that happen.

And so though the language might sound harsh, verse 20 actually reflects the goodness of God. As the good judge, when fundamental violations occur, he must enforce the sanction. And that's what lies behind all those words in verses 22 to 28.

In verse 24, when the nations ask, why has this happened? Why the anger? The answer will be simple, verse 25.

The people have abandoned the covenant. They have violated it. And because God is a God who will never live, sin, unpunish, he will act.

[24 : 41] He will, verse 27, bring about the curses written in this book, as mentioned in detail in Deuteronomy 28. And the fact that God does that is actually good news, even in 2021, when we still live in a world marked by shifty politicians and people propagating misinformation.

Because it means that he cares a great deal about justice. But this introduces a profound dilemma. In fact, the central dilemma of the entire Bible. For now, we have a double tension. Here's the first tension.

How can God commit himself to an unfaithful people? God's heart is not for punishment. But if we rebel against him, he cannot let the guilty go free.

So, how can he still bind himself to us? That's the tension running throughout the Old Testament, isn't it?

[25 : 55] It is a tension we still feel today. God is good, the Old Testament insists, because he wants to do good to us. And yet, God is also good because he judges wrongdoing.

but how can he be good on both accounts? Can he only be good in one sense or the other, but not in both senses?

That's the tension. But there's also a second tension. How can God's people commit themselves to God when they can't warm their own hearts?

That's the dilemma of 29 verse 4. Verse 4 doesn't just show us that our hearts are cold. It shows us that we can't do anything about it ourselves.

Notice the way verse 4 is worded. To this day, the Lord has not given you. In other words, until God intervenes, until God himself gives us eyes that see or ears that hear, our hearts naturally wander from God.

[27 : 15] We know we should obey God. We know we should hold dear what he holds dear. But as someone once said, I forget who, what our hearts love and our will chooses, our mind justifies.

What our hearts love and our will chooses, our mind justifies. We want what we treasure and what we treasure is not God.

That's the problem for Israel. That's the problem for humanity. And so this is the central dilemma of our relationship with God.

God wants a covenant relationship with us, but we keep wandering away. You know the shocking thing about the second half of Deuteronomy chapter 29 is that it isn't just a warning, but a preview. As 30 verse 1 makes clear, Moses fully expects Israel to wander away even after his lifetime. They will turn from God, they will be exiled, they will be cut off from covenant relationship.

[28 : 30] The nations will see that the surrounding nations will know. And so how can God resolve the dilemma of a people who keep wandering away from him?

That brings us to our third truth for today. Thirdly, let's rejoice in the circumcision of our hearts, the circumcision of our hearts. You see, if our hearts are so cold, then what can be done?

Is the answer to try to stir us up with the best possible motivational speech that we can possibly come up with? If so, then Moses clearly does a terrible job.

After all, who tries to motivate people by telling them, oh, by the way, you're going to fail in the future? But Moses knows that's not the answer. Because trying to give a motivational speech, the best motivational speech you could ever give to a stone, will a stone get up and do anything?

No, because it's not alive. And our hearts are hearts of stone. And so the motivational speech of man is not what we need.

[29 : 55] What we need is the life-giving breath of God. And that's what God gives us. Look at 30 verse 6.

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.

Do you see how our cold hearts are no deterrent to God? Rather than give up on us, he says, alright, let's perform some radical heart surgery.

This is his very promise. And everything, absolutely everything in this chapter flows out from this promise.

God is saying, resolve with all your might to come back to God, rededicate yourselves, and then he will fix your heart.

[30 : 59] I mean, that's what we should do, right? Make a New Year's resolution, vow to be better. But that's not exactly what God is saying here. Look carefully at verses 2 and 10.

And notice in those verses what this return to God looks like. To return to God, according to these verses, is to turn and love and obey God with your very heart and soul.

Return to God, love the Lord with your heart and soul. But then look once again at verse 6. and notice that this ability to obey, to love God with all their heart and soul, is in itself a result of God's circumcision of our hearts.

In other words, God must circumcise our hearts prior to us being able to love him. And so even our return to God can only be brought about by God himself.

Israel cannot do it simply by willing themselves to be more faithful. And this understanding also fits with 29 verse 4 where Moses understands that eyes that see and ears that hear can only be given by God himself.

[32 : 32] And so I'm hoping that you see just how desperate our condition really is. If today your hearts have become cold towards God, if your hearts are desensitized to him, if you are down to his word, if there is no zeal in you to walk in his ways, if God feels like nothing more than pie in the sky to you, you know what?

There is nothing you and I can do about it on our own. I could spend another five hours simply trying to ask you to live for God, obey God, seek God and that will not move you at all.

I could pile on the guilt, I could show you examples from the giants of the faith, I could ask you to read the entire Bible in one day, but without the circumcision of the heart, nothing is going to change in 2022.

For remember, what our hearts love and our will chooses, our mind justifies. So how will God circumcise our hearts?

How will God give us a heart that truly loves and obeys God? Now at this point in Deuteronomy, we don't know the details, it's something that lies in the future for Israel.

[33 : 52] But as we go along the Bible story, we begin to see things flesh out. For one thing, we discover that everything Moses said came true. Israel was exiled and then Israel got restored just as Moses said in 30 verses 1 and 3 to 5.

They were brought back to the land. But where is this heart that loves and obeys God? At the end of the book of Nehemiah, which details the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the exile, we discover that people are still not following God.

Covenant violations are still happening. Now all that sounds pretty pessimistic, but here is the good news.

30 verses 1 to 5 didn't just come through. 30 verse 6 came true as well. You see, God personally came to circumcise our hearts.

Here's how he did it. First of all, God put himself on the other side of the covenant. Colossians 2 verse 9 tells us that in Christ, all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form.

[35 : 13] In other words, Jesus is fully man even as he's fully God. But here is someone whose heart does not turn away from God. Here is someone who meets all the terms of the covenant with utter faithfulness.

He fulfills the human side of the bargain. And then Jesus lays down his life. He takes on the very curse of the covenant.

He is afflicted, he suffers calamity, and he is cut off at the very point we should have been cut off from God. He takes on our sanction.

And as Colossians 2 verse 12 tells us, when that was happening, what God was really doing was burying our old selves and raising us to be new selves in him.

In other words, Jesus is circumcising our hearts, taking off the old dead skin of the heart of stone, and replacing it with something new, a heart filled with God's spirit.

[36 : 29] He is fulfilling the God side of the bargain. God is the magnitude of God's heart for us.

His grace is so big that it encompasses even our repentance. We have cold hearts, we can't warm them on our own, and so he resets our hearts.

He knows the fix is not the law, but the gospel. And that's what he gives us right at the climax of Deuteronomy.

Just have a quick look at verse 11. I just want you to look at this verse. Now, what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.

Now, why does Moses say that? Look down to verse 14. Because the word is very near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart, so you may obey it.

[37 : 37] Now, what does that mean? At first glance, this sounds like the word of command. He says the word of command is very near you. God seems to be saying, all these many rules that you just heard in the book of Deuteronomy, it's near you, you can memorize it, you can obey it.

But here in chapters 29 and 30, we just learn that we can't. Israel will fail. But Deuteronomy 29 to 30 actually contains another word, and it is that word of promise we've just heard, that God will circumcise our hearts.

It is the gospel in seed form. And so it's no surprise that when Paul quotes this exact verse in Romans chapter 10, he uses it to refer to the word of the gospel that he preaches.

For in Christ, God's word is literally near us in a way it has never been before. When Christ is not only near you, but in you, united with you, such that you can be said to be in Christ and not in your old self, you can obey.

You can love him. And that's how astonishing the gospel is. You know, we talk about turning over a new leaf whenever we come to a new year, but the gospel alone truly makes you into a brand new you.

[39 : 18] God's grace is. God doesn't just come to give us a legal pardon. He comes to give us an entirely new heart.

One that can love him, obey him, enter into a new covenant relationship with him. One more like a husband and wife than a random shopper, a seller on Shopee and a customer.

So this morning, here's what you and I need to remember. In Jesus, we have circumcised hearts. In Jesus, we have hearts that can be reset. Now, the effects of a circumcised heart, of course, are more often gradual than instantaneous.

Our hearts, although circumcised, are not yet perfected. And that only happens when Jesus returns. But we truly do have a new operating system within us.

[40 : 37] Really, this morning, you and I, if we put our trust in Jesus, we have new hearts that can turn towards him.

And so this brings us to our final truth for today. But fourthly, let's answer the call to set our hearts on Jesus, to set our hearts on Jesus.

this is a word that calls for faith. God has circumcised our hearts, but God, it is also a word that calls us to choose.

And so Moses finishes up by urging us to choose life. You see, in verses 15 to 20, there are really only two choices before us. there is loving God, life, and prosperity.

Or there is turning away from God, death, and destruction. There is no third option. Now what does it mean to choose life? Again, to make it really clear, if I haven't already, it's not about choosing willpower.

[41 : 48] It's not about choosing raw determination. Deuteronomy 30 verse 6 tells us it can't be about that. No, it's about choosing to acknowledge that we can't do anything about our hearts, we can't help ourselves, we have to humbly depend on God alone.

It's about choosing to accept that salvation is by grace alone, that God alone can turn the heart, that he does it by turning our hearts to Jesus, made possible by the death of Jesus and the inner circumcision of the spirit.

And so in the end, to choose life is not just about choosing to be a better person, it's actually to choose Jesus. And so that is the choice before us today.

All throughout chapters 29 to 30, the word today and this day is repeated numerous times. And here at the end of 2021, right at the threshold of 2022, here is a good day to choose.

So today as we face 2022, will you choose Jesus? Will we choose to give our whole lives and hearts in service to him?

[43 : 07] Let me read verse 19 again. Now choose life so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice and hold fast to him.

For the Lord is your life and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. let's pray.

Let's pray. Father, as we listen to your word today, we know that it is a word that requires us to think about it, to mow over it.

But Father, as we receive your word, we pray that we will receive it with great joy because this is not just the word of law, it is the word of the gospel. And so I pray, Lord, that you would indeed help us to turn to Jesus again, to know that he is the one who has circumcised our hearts, who has buried our old lives and raised us to new life in him.

And I pray, Lord, that as we get ready to enter the new year, will you help us to choose Jesus again, to choose life, to choose his path.

[44 : 36] All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.