

The Missionary Heart of God

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[0 : 00] Well, brothers and sisters, it's a real joy for me to be with you today to share in your missions focus, your missions Sunday.

So thank you for the invitation to share from God's word with you. I've been following some of the COVID situation in Malaysia over recent weeks and months. I know you guys have been having a very difficult time and I've been praying for you and for Malaysia as a country.

And I want to assure you that I'll continue to be in prayer for you guys as lockdown continues. And I pray that the situation will ease soon.

But thank you so much for the invitation to be able to share with you. It's, I think, one of the few blessings of this terrible COVID time that as Christian brothers and sisters, we've been able to share together online in a way that we didn't often do before.

And so it's a delight to be part of your fellowship in Kuching from this distance. So thank you. Friends, let me start our study of Deuteronomy 4 together by asking you a question.

[1 : 11] Who is the God that we worship? What's his character truly like? Now, I want us to see from the scriptures today that mission is entirely to do with the character of God.

Mission starts with who God is. Now, we don't often think of the Old Testament law as a place to go to learn about mission, do we?

But actually, the Old Testament law is a very appropriate place for us to spend some time because the Old Testament law reveals so much about who God is, about his character.

And mission is entirely to do with the character of God. We don't go into the world to proclaim an idea.

We don't travel to Albania, Australia, India, Malaysia to proclaim a philosophy or to gather adherence to a set of religious beliefs.

[2 : 22] No, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 23, Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified.

In other words, friends, we proclaim a person. Mission is about introducing people to the person of Jesus Christ.

And in particular, Paul says we proclaim Christ crucified. That is, we introduce people to the person and character of God, particularly as he is revealed in the saving work of Jesus on the cross.

We proclaim Christ crucified. Mission is entirely to do with the person of God and his character. Now, that's not the way we usually think, is it?

We often think of mission as activity. The very word mission in English implies action. Just the other day, someone asked me, what are you doing here in Albania?

[3 : 40] And I replied, I'm a missionary. I work with the evangelical church. I work. Mission means action in our minds.

But in biblical understanding, mission starts with the character of God. And so let me ask you again, friends, what is God's character like?

Who is the God that we worship? Now, I don't know how you feel given current world events, but maybe that question of who God is and what his character is really like is a much more difficult question to answer in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We've seen pain and suffering on a global scale, haven't we? And all of us have been affected. Maybe you've had loved ones in hospital.

Maybe you've even lost a loved one. Maybe you've lost work or income. Maybe you've missed out on family reunions, birthdays, weddings, even funerals.

[4 : 48] Maybe you've lost a lot of people in the middle of the day. Maybe you've lost a lot of people in the middle of the day. Maybe you've lost a lot of people in the middle of the day. Certainly, all of us have been much more isolated than we've ever been in our lives before. And perhaps all of that circumstance, friends, has affected your understanding of who God is.

Perhaps given what we've seen and experienced in the last year and a half, God seems a bit more dangerous than he did before. Untrustworthy, even.

Untrustworthy, even. Untrustworthy, even. The passage that we're reflecting on together today, Deuteronomy 4, is spoken to the people of Israel at a point in their lives when they were in real crisis.

And so they doubted God's character. Is he really good? Does he really care? You see, at this point in time, God has saved Israel from Egypt, to be sure.

They have seen his goodness and salvation. But by now, by Deuteronomy 4, Israel have spent 40 years wandering in the desert.

[5 : 54] And now they're encamped on the eastern bank of the River Jordan. They're looking across into the Promised Land. But all they can see are giants in their way. The cities are huge.

The armies are huge. They see nothing but threats ahead of them. And they start to doubt God. In fact, it's probably more accurate to say they lost hope in God entirely.

Because Deuteronomy 1 and verse 27 tells us what the Israelites said to one another. The Lord hates us.

So he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us. That's their vision of who God is. The Lord hates us.

Now, what about us, friends? What's your vision of who God is? I think it's easy for us, like Israel, to base our understanding of who God is on our momentary circumstances.

[7 : 01] And so often, when life is easygoing, when we're filled with the joy of family and pleasant life events, we can joyfully affirm that God is good and loving and kind.

But what about when life turns painful? And all we see is pain and struggle. Perhaps at those points in our lives, God seems like a bit of a bully, a capricious or a severe God, maybe.

But, friends, it's important that we recognize that in both of those circumstances, for good and for bad, we can base our understanding of who God is on our own momentary circumstance, rather than on who God has revealed himself to be in the scriptures.

So it's important for us to come back to the word and consider who God really is. What does he say about himself? So who is the God that Deuteronomy 4 reveals?

Well, firstly, I want to say that Deuteronomy 4 reveals a God who is generous. God is generous. And we see his generosity from the very first verse.

[8 : 19] Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live. God's desire for his people in giving these laws is that they might live.

God longs for us to experience the flourishing life that he created us for. He created us. He knows us.

He knows what behaviors and characteristics in our lives will bring about our flourishing. And he longs for us to experience that.

He wants us to live. Verse 1 continues. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.

God is giving them the land. He's a generous God. The law comes to Israel in the context of God's gracious gift to them.

[9 : 21] But here's the thing, friends. At this point in time, Israel are in crisis. They don't know the end of their story. They don't know what lies ahead of them across the River Jordan.

All they can see are the threats. But we do know the end of their story, don't we? We know that when they cross the River Jordan, the walls of Jericho will miraculously crumble before them.

We know that whole armies will flee before them. Why? Because they're not conquering the land. God is giving them the land.

He's a generous God. They don't see that because they are so overwhelmed and focused on their current circumstances that they can't see God's real goodness.

But God is a generous God towards them. Well, the second thing we see about God's character in Deuteronomy 4 is that God is near.

[10 : 27] God is near. Look with me again at verses 5 to 8. Moses says, See, In these verses, Moses is showing Israel that when they obey God's law, the nations will look on and see that God is near to his people.

Now, there are two wonderful things we can take from this, friends. And the first is the simple, beautiful fact of God's nearness to his people.

God's giving of the law to his people means that he is near to them. Now, how is that so? What do I mean by that?

Well, friends, let me illustrate this by reading you a prayer. This is a prayer that was discovered in the library of Ashurbanipal. It was written in around the 7th century BC.

So in a similar kind of time to when Deuteronomy was written and from a similar part of the world. And this prayer is entitled, A Prayer to Every God.

[12 : 09] May the fury of my Lord's heart be quieted toward me. May the God who is not known be quieted toward me.

May the goddess who is not known be quieted toward me. May the God who I know or do not know be quieted toward me. May the goddess whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me.

This sin that I have done, indeed I do not know. The forbidden thing that I have eaten, indeed I do not know. The prohibited place on which I have set foot, indeed I do not know.

The prayer goes on for a long time in a similar vein. And can you hear the sense of desperation in this prayer? Here is a person who some tragedy has befallen them.

And in desperation they cry out to every possible God. But consider their situation, friends. They do not know the God that they need to pray to.

[13 : 16] They do not know which God they have offended. They do not know what sin they have done to offend this God or goddess. And they do not know how to make it right.

Now, friends, compare that to Israel. They do know the Lord. As Moses goes on to say in this passage in Deuteronomy 4, You have seen with your own eyes how he led us through the desert in the pillar of cloud and fire.

You heard his voice. They do know God. They do know what's right and wrong. They do know what sin is and what right and wrong is.

Because they have the law. And when they inevitably sin and get things wrong because they have the law, God has shown them how to turn back to him in repentance through the sacrificial system and find forgiveness.

What a dramatically different circumstance. The giving of the law to Israel means that God is near to them.

[14 : 26] He's a God who wants his people to know him. He wants to have a relationship with them. And, friends, it's worth us pausing, I think, and reflecting on how wonderful a thing it is for us to have a God who is near us.

This totally transforms daily life, doesn't it? Last year, our family had to make an urgent trip back to Australia. We had planned a home assignment, but then the pandemic struck.

And so we had to decide, do we go to Australia early? All the flights around the world were starting to shut down. And we realized we wouldn't get to Australia to have our home assignment if we didn't leave immediately.

And so we caught one of the last available flights before global travel shut down. And this was the time when none of us really knew much about this virus, but we could see the terrible damage it was doing in China and in Italy.

And, friends, the level of fear amongst our fellow travelers was simply extraordinary. There were people on the plane in full hazmat gear.

[15 : 39] No one spoke to each other for fear of the virus. There were none of those small acts of kindness that you usually see during a journey.

People helping each other with luggage, etc. None of that. Simply out of fear that we might catch the virus off one another. And we weren't immune to that fear either, of course.

We were parents traveling with young children in the middle of a pandemic. Our kids were wandering through the airport, sucking on handrails, sticking everything into their mouths. It was a total nightmare.

But I can honestly tell you that knowing the God who is near transformed that journey for us. At every stage of the journey, we could pray together.

When our children saw something that unsettled them or scared them, we could pray together and remind ourselves that God was right there with us in the journey.

[16 : 41] And, friends, that experience of that journey, although we were facing the same fears as everyone else, was totally transformed for us because we had a God who is near.

During that time of crisis, I had a new appreciation for what Moses says here in verse 8. What other people is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?

Well, friends, the second wonderful thing we see in God's nearness is that he has a concern for the nations. He doesn't only want Israel to be near him, but he longs for the nations to be near him as well.

Moses says in verse 6, Observe the law carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations. You see, friends, every time we imitate God, every time we live in obedience to his word, people are drawn towards God.

As the nations see our character and our way of life, they will also draw near to the God that we worship. And so, friends, here in Deuteronomy 4, as God gives the people of Israel the law, at the center of that law, we see the missionary heart of God.

[18 : 10] Part of the very purpose that he had in giving the law was that the nations might be brought near to him. That God's people might live in such a way that the nations would come in to worship God themselves.

There's a couple that I know in Australia who have made it their daily practice, like many Christians, to pray and thank God before meals.

It's nothing extraordinary. They simply stop and give thanks to God before they eat. But they do this regardless of who they have visiting.

And one night they had a Chinese exchange student staying with them. And as usual, they held hands as a family around the table and prayed and gave thanks to God.

And when they finished, their visitor began to cry. Because in her family context, she had never seen this, never experienced something like this.

[19 : 16] A family who would stop, spend time together, and live with God as a real and near presence in their lives.

And she wanted what they had as a family. And friends, every time someone says that about Christian believers, I want what you've got. Deuteronomy 4.6 is being fulfilled.

God longs for the nations to look in on our character and our way of life and draw near to Him. Now this shouldn't surprise us, friends, because we've already seen that mission starts with the character of God.

And so, of course, mission in our lives also starts with our godliness of character. As we imitate God, as we live in obedience to the Word, the world will watch and they will draw near to God.

Now, friends, this is great news because this is an aspect of mission that never stops. I can't tell you how many people have asked me this year, gosh, is it much harder to do mission work now that there's COVID?

[20 : 33] And I know what people are saying. Of course, there are practical difficulties because of COVID now. There are practical difficulties for ministry and mission. We all know that.

And yet, because mission significantly involves us witnessing to the nations through our godliness of character, this is something we can work on with God at any point, every year, COVID year or not.

In fact, COVID has given us a great many more opportunities to work on our godliness of character, hasn't it? How many of you during lockdown have had to work much harder on your patience?

Patience with your children, patience with your spouse, patience with your flatmate, with your work colleagues, whoever you're in lockdown with? How many of us have had to work harder on practicing gratitude and thankfulness and contentment this year?

How many of us have been driven more to prayer this year because of what's happening in the world? COVID has given us a great many opportunities to practice our godliness.

[21 : 48] This is an aspect of Christian mission and witness that doesn't stop. And so friends, let me challenge you. Keep working with God on your godliness.

Keep working in the power of the Holy Spirit on your obedience to God's word. Don't for a moment think that just because of the pandemic, just because we're in isolation and physical church meetings are no longer easy, that somehow the mission of God is on pause.

Not for a moment. The world is watching us, particularly at this time when life is so uncertain. And Deuteronomy 4 shows us that when we live in obedience to God's word, when we imitate him, the nations will see and they will draw near to God.

They'll see that God is near to his people. So friends, God is generous. God is near. And finally, the final thing that we see in this passage is that God is faithful.

God is faithful. Let's read verses 9 to 14 again. Only be careful and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live.

[23 : 11] Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb when he said to me, Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.

You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire.

You heard the sound of words but saw no form. There was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets.

And the Lord directed me at that time to teach you the decrees and laws you are to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. In these verses, Moses repeats his commands for the people to obey God's law and be faithful to him.

Teach the law to your children, he says, and to your grandchildren. This passage is a call to obedience and faithfulness. But notice this, friends.

[24 : 23] Because the law is about imitating God, the way that Moses calls Israel to be faithful is by reminding them of God's faithfulness to them in the first place.

He says, be careful lest you forget the things that you have seen God do. Remember how you saw the Lord guiding us through the desert and the pillar of cloud and fire.

Remember how he spoke to you. You heard his voice. Moses is reminding the people that their faithfulness to God is merely a response to his faithfulness in the first place.

In the New Testament, the Apostle John puts it this way, we love because he first loved us. That's what Moses is saying here in Deuteronomy 4.

God was faithful to us first and so we love him because he first loved us. So please notice something about the order of what Moses says here, friends.

[25 : 31] He reminds the people of God's faithfulness and he says in verse 9, don't forget the things that your eyes have seen God do. Don't let them fade from your heart.

And then in verse 10, Moses says, teach them to your children. Moses assumes that as the people remember and remind themselves of God's faithfulness, they will speak about it.

They will tell their children and their grandchildren about the great things God has done for them. When the people delight themselves in God, then they will witness to their family and friends.

In Luke 6.45, Jesus puts it this way, he says, the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. The mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

And so Moses tells the people of Israel, fill your heart with God's faithfulness. Remind yourself of who he is and what he's done for you.

[26 : 36] Never let it fade from your heart. And friends, I believe God wants to challenge each one of us with the same message today. Do you feel that your passion for mission, your zeal for evangelism and sharing the good news about Jesus has washed out and faded a bit?

So often in our churches, mission becomes something that I kind of support from afar. You know, I give money to mission occasionally, I pray occasionally for missionaries, but mission is firmly something that other people do.

Friends, not so in Deuteronomy 4. This is a calling on all of God's people, that as we fill our hearts with the faithfulness of God, our mouths will speak of him to our children and our grandchildren and the watching world.

And so, friends, if we've lost our passion to speak of God and testify to his goodness, the sad truth is that in all probability, the reason for our lukewarmness is that we have allowed the faithfulness of God to quietly fade from our hearts.

And so, friends, let me plead with you today. Fill your heart up again with the goodness and faithfulness of God. Come back to his word and remind yourself from Deuteronomy 4 of God's generosity, of God's nearness, of his faithfulness.

[28 : 19] Think back through your own life. Remind yourselves of all the things he has done in your life. And as we do that, friends, our mouths won't be able to keep silent.

We will speak out of the fullness of our hearts. Friends, this really is the heart of what it means to be on mission. It's not about running better programs.

It's not about having more activity as a church. Actually, the secret to a more missional life for God is to delight our hearts more and more in his character.

And as we do that, our mouths will speak what our hearts are full of. And so, friends, that's why Deuteronomy 4 is such a helpful passage for rethinking mission together, because this is a passage that shows us clearly who our God is.

He's generous, he's near to us, and he's faithful. But as we finish, friends, I think it's important that we recognize that even with such a wonderful God by our side, life can and often will be very difficult.

[29 : 39] life has big challenges. Even with God by their side, a generous, near, and faithful God, Israel still had to face the giants across the Jordan River.

And we are not immune to the struggles and anxieties of life, are we? I don't know what it's been for you this week. Maybe you're facing financial difficulties.

Maybe you're facing relationship breakdown. Maybe you're facing a health crisis of some kind. Whatever it is, Christians are not immune to troubles and trials.

And so, friends, I think the question we need to reflect on as we finish is, how do we prevent ourselves from losing hope in God, as Israel did? How do we prevent our hearts from losing hope in God's faithfulness, from letting the faithfulness of God fade from our hearts, like Moses warns us against?

Well, I think Moses gives us a model to follow, because what he does for Israel is he lifts their eyes off their momentary circumstance and points them back to the person and character of God.

[30 : 55] We lift our eyes off our circumstances and we look to the Lord. God is like Jesus. And as we seek to do that, friends, we have two huge advantages over ancient Israel.

The first advantage that we have is that we live after the coming of Jesus. I began by asking the question, what is God like?

And the ultimate answer that the Bible gives, of course, is God is like Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God. God is generous, that God is near to us and that God is faithful.

And in Jesus, we see these characteristics come perfectly together. In Jesus, we see the generosity of God. John 3.16, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

You see, although our momentary situations change, God doesn't change. The same generosity that caused God to give his people the law so that Israel might have flourishing life is the same generosity that caused God to give his one and only son that we might have eternal life.

[32 : 19] In Jesus, we see the God who is near. Matthew 1.23, you shall call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Jesus comes near. And in Jesus, we see the faithfulness of God. 1 John 1.9, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

In Jesus, we see the faithful promises of God finally fulfilled as he conquers death and sin on the cross so that we find forgiveness and new life with God.

What a privilege we have, friends, to live this side of the cross and to see the person of Jesus who's coming into the world and giving of himself as a sacrifice for us is God's concrete demonstration of his generosity his nearness and his faithfulness to us.

But, friends, we have another huge advantage over ancient Israel. I said before that one of the reasons Israel doubted God's character is that they couldn't see the end of the story.

[33 : 38] But, friends, we do know the end of our story because Jesus himself has shown us. Let me read about it from Revelation 21. chapter 1.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new.

This is where our story is heading, friends. And when we see the end of the story, once again we see God's character revealed, don't we? A God who is generous, a God who is near, a God who is faithful.

[34 : 51] How appropriate that in this vision of heaven, in this vision that shows us the end of our mission as a church, the picture is of the church as a bride delighting herself in her husband.

It's a picture of perfect togetherness. We will be his people, and God will be with us, and he will be our God. Our future is endless delight in the God who saves.

So once again, friends, let me encourage you, fill your heart up again with that vision of God's goodness and faithfulness. Fill yourself up with this picture in Revelation 21 of God's faithful promise to God's faithfulness and to God's faithfulness and to fill yourself up with the remembrance of God's saving works in Deuteronomy 4.

Fill yourself up with a remembrance of the wonderful things God has done in your own personal life. Delight yourself in the character of God, and as you do that, your mouth will speak of his goodness and kindness.

And mission will no longer be something that other people do or a marginal side activity of the church, but mission will be a way of life.

[36 : 19] We will join the mission of God in our daily life, simply as we speak out the goodness and faithfulness of God that fills our hearts.

Let me pray that that might be true for each one of us. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who is generous, near to us, and faithful.

We thank you that we see your generosity, your nearness, and your faithfulness most perfectly in your Son. Thank you that you sent your Son as the perfect sacrifice for us.

that we might be forgiven, and that we might be returned back into relationship with you, that we might be able to delight ourselves in you again.

Lord, fill our hearts by your Holy Spirit with your character. Help us to delight ourselves in who you are, in your goodness, your kindness, your mercy, your faithfulness.

[37 : 27] And as you fill our hearts, we pray that you might, by the power of your Holy Spirit, speak through us to a watching world, that the nations might be drawn near to you.

And we pray it all in the name of Jesus. Amen.