

Learn to Fear the Lord your God

Deuteronomy 31:1-18

Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch or the Law of Moses. Many of the words were his that he actually spoke to God's chosen people, the Israelites. They were to have this record so that they would know whom their God truly was from the beginning, the God who created everything, so that they would understand the Fall of Adam and Eve and entry of sin and evil into the world in the Garden of Eden. Further, the Law of Moses introduced the themes of God's redemption, mercy, and judgment through the stories of successive generations of humanity. Then there was their story, specific to the people of God, the Israelites, their Patriarchs and the importance of Moses testimony with regards to the God who revealed himself to his people and delivered them from slavery in Egypt then establishing a covenant with them in the wilderness. With the covenant came the instructions from God at the base of Mount Sinai concerning how to live as God's holy people. But because they were unwilling due to a bad report from 10 spies to enter the land of Canaan their entire generation of those aged 20 years and over is made to wander in the wilderness for nearly 40 years, until that generation has all but passed away.

Contained here in his fifth and last book is a series of Moses farewell messages where he strongly urges with earnest advice, encouraging, insisting and pressing this next generation, this new breed of Israelites to live as God's obedient people in the Promised Land that they were about to enter and possess... or else!

The People of God have been wandering, but not aimlessly in the wilderness of Sinai for nearly 40 years, for they were lead and **provided** for by their loving God with water, manna from heaven, a side order of quail along with clothes and possessions provided by the Egyptians that never wore out. A cloud by day and a fire by night was the provision of God's presence among them resting over the Tabernacle along with many miraculous signs, including the defeat of nations that attacked them along the way. But even with all this, the people still rebel a number of times and go against the will of God acting just like disobedient children, including Moses himself.

And now here in our scripture reading we arrive at a key moment in Israel's history where this period of desert wandering is about to come to an end. The leadership is about to change. The makeup of their people group has already changed over this period with the loss of a whole previous disobedient generation. Their living situation is about to change as they move across the Jordan River to finally, after a 40 year delay, take possession of the Promised land with the order to drive out and/or destroy the evil inhabitants, and settle there. Building homes, planting fields and vineyards, raising stock, beginning businesses and trade, and of course, learning to do this in the fear of the Lord their God.

So we have it. New land, new leadership, new living situation with them now working to provide for themselves as they learn to live and worship in the Fear of the Lord their God.

Moses the last living one of his generation, bar Joshua and Caleb, is about to die. We have heard read some of his famous last words to heed, addressed to the new leader specifically and then also to all the people as a whole. Words that they had better take notice of, but realistically Moses knew they wouldn't because of their previous form and of what the LORD says they would do Deuteronomy 31:16. This being the case, how could successive generations of Israelites ever hope to learn to fear the LORD their God *Yahweh Elohim* and follow carefully all the words of this law?

Yahweh being the one true, self-existent, and eternal God and Elohim the Supreme God, who is plural in intensity, with the trinity inherent, but singular in meaning as the one true God. As such the name 'Lord God' signifies to the Israelites that Yahweh is the God of history, the God of promises, the God who was fulfilling the covenant promises, the God whose people they were, under the covenant-treaty stemming from Abraham. But revealed to, announced and written down by Moses.

From our reading this morning, we too can learn from Moses and Israel how to live in the fear the Lord. Beginning in Deuteronomy 31:12 where we read...

"Assemble the people—men women and children, and foreigners residing in your towns -- so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law."

Listen means to yield yourself and pay attention, coupled with a desire to understand what is said, and further to this, to be obedient to it. Learning involves allowing yourself to be taught and trained. Christian discipleship is just the same where we are to learn Jesus Christ's teaching and commands and then actually go out and live it as his committed followers in obedience.

Each and Every successive generation of Israelites was required to be taught then- to listen and learn. This stipulation covered all non-Israelites who were living among them- that they listened and learned too, as well as the children who would carry this word in their hearts and minds into the next generation. It was important that all living in Israel grasped the Covenant they lived under. And it certainly would dramatize the learning of the Law for the listeners including those hearing it for the first time when it was recited at every seventh year during the Feast of the Tabernacles which took place at the end of the harvest when the whole nation was to build and live in temporary shelters made out of branches, something like a bivy, to remind them of how God had them live during their dessert wanderings after being brought out of Egypt.

The Feast of Tabernacles was appointed as the season for the reading, *no doubt* because *there was a connection* between the ends for which the Law was read and the meaning of this festival. Tabernacles was a festival of rejoicing, a joyous occasion, because of the Israelites deliverance from the uncertainty and unsettledness of their wandering state in the wilderness, and their establishment in a well-ordered state where they could in peace and quietness enjoy the blessings which the bounty of God bestowed.

This was to be very much a renewing of the covenant, especially with the latest members of Israel. Each seven years the latest additions to Israel would 'know and hear and learn to fear' Yahweh their God. And this was to go on for as long as they lived in the land, that which they were going over Jordan to possess. They too must learn that the land was Yahweh's and that they held it from Him. They would, of course, have been taught the instruction of Yahweh from childhood. But hearing it solemnly read out at the feast would be the seal in their hearts and on their minds of it as the word of Yahweh.

Now this seven yearly reading of the Law did not in any way lessen the importance or make unnecessary the teaching and learning ministry in the Israelite household or that of the Levitical Priesthood. It was meant to strengthen these other forms of teaching and learning the Law. Just as we read the bible at home, meet in study groups, and then come to worship and hear God's Word read at church on a Sunday. Together these three ways of learning work together to grow our knowledge of God's Word.

The purpose behind the reading of the Law was to inspire the people to revere the Lord and to follow carefully all the covenant stipulations. So, those who fear the Lord as a result of hearing the Word are those who honour God and order their lives in accordance with his will because of their reverence for him.

The fear of the Lord therefore for you and me is a genuine and sincere loving reverence for God that includes submission to his Lordship and to the commands of his word. This is why it was important to Israel that the process of making known the revelation of God should never cease, so that reverence for the Lord and obedience to his Word would never cease in the Promised Land.

Theoretically, the purpose for the Promised Land was that it would be an everlasting kingdom under Yahweh, a land of purity and light among the nations, a land where Yahweh and His people would be together within the covenant relationship. It was to be like a marriage. In actual practice, it would turn out to be far different simply because of the disobedience of the people.

But in the final analysis it was preparing for a greater purpose which would be revealed in the coming Messiah, resulting in an everlasting kingdom which was beyond man's wildest dreams. That not even Israel's continued disobedience could prevent from being realised.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our living Saviour came and said to his disciples, which includes us today, "If you love me, keep my commands." And as we have learnt this morning from the example of God's people Israel, Love like the fear of the LORD cannot be separated from obedience to God's Word.

Years ago I used to think that learning to live in "the fear of the Lord" is like driving down the road while watching the policeman

behind you in your rearview mirror. But actually there is a better picture for learning to fear of the Lord your God. It's like a teenage driver on their restricted license, having learnt the road rules, passed an initial practical test, and is now out their on the road driving alone who then suddenly spots her father's car in her rearview mirror. Seeing him back there puts her on notice to be on her best behavior—to use her indicators at the right times and stop at the red light, and to keep both hands on the wheel. But it also tells her that her father cares enough to follow her. It tells her that she is safe. Her father is not trying to trap or trick her. He is trying to help her develop good habits; not just to be careful on this trip, but also to obey the laws and stay safe until she gets home. She is driving on her own, but not completely on her own.

So, it is for the people of God. Learning to fear the Lord your God means we live life with our heavenly Father always in our rearview mirror. We glance up and see his brilliant holiness but also his care and love. Our response, the fear of the Lord, is a mix of reverence, trust, and love for God and his Word.

As we have learnt something of what it means to fear the Lord. We will have brief time of silence now for you to respond to the Lord your God in your own reverential way.

Let us do that now...