

Living as God's Covenant People  
Studies in Deut. 1-11, #2

## "The God of the Covenant"

Dt. 4:1-40

--CEFC 6/4/17; 7/24/88

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I've found that to study moral philosophy in its purest form,  
there's nothing like a playground--  
"Hey Johnny, you can't do that. It's against the rules."  
"Oh yeah," Johnny replies. "Who said so?"

"Who said so?"--Or, in the proper language of ethical analysis,  
Johnny would ask--  
"What is the extrinsic moral sanction of such a stipulation?"

Who makes the rules?  
What authority do they possess?  
Why should I obey them?

These are the sorts of questions that arise everyday in the playground,  
and they are the questions addressed also in the Bible.

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Deuteronomy, as we saw last week, is a book of law,  
but it is far more than that.  
Moses is not a lawyer, but a preacher--  
Deuteronomy is not the statute book, but a sermon.  
Its message is directed toward moving  
the minds and wills of its listeners--  
v.1--"**Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you.**  
**Follow them so that you may live.**"

This could be translated--  
"Hear, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you to follow. . ."

The purpose of Moses' preaching is to foster obedience,  
not just to impart knowledge.

But he is seeking an obedience based on understanding.  
And in chap. 4 he does this by anticipating Johnny's question.  
He is giving them a book of law,  
but before he does, he wants to answer the question,  
"Who said so?"

His answer?--God does.  
Yahweh, the Lord, the God of the Covenant--  
the God who entered into a relationship with Israel as his people--  
who brought them out of Egypt  
and who promised to bless the posterity of  
Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,

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and through them, to bring blessing to all nations.  
This is the God who "says so."

Moses is calling the people to remember the day  
when the Lord had commanded him  
to "**Assemble the people before me**  
**to hear my words**  
**so that they may learn to revere me [to fear me]**  
**as long as they live in the land . . ."** -v. 10

This was to be the basis of their obedience.  
Respect for the law  
begins with reverence for the Law-Giver.

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"Reverence for God"--"**the fear of God**" as it is often translated.  
Reverence can be defined as a deep respect for something or someone,  
often tinged with a sense of awe,  
resulting in a feeling of personal humility and submission.

Reverence seems to be a foreign concept in our society,  
where often there is no higher authority than the individual human will.

Occasionally I'll encounter an odd, almost silly vestige of reverence.  
As a pastor, as a "reverend," I have people sometimes apologize to me  
for their profane or irreverent language--  
as if I were the one they should be concerned about offending!

But reverence, and especially the "fear of God," is rare today,  
partly because our common conception of God  
in mainstream American religious faith is so feeble and anemic.

In our post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer, capitalist society,  
it is no surprise that God seems to exist mainly to meet our needs.

The god of our age isn't one who makes demands,  
but who is available on demand.  
God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist—  
he is always on call,  
he takes care of any problems that arise,  
he professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves,  
and he does not become too personally involved in the process.<sup>1</sup>

In our secular society, there's little place for reverence.

But unfortunately, the fear of God, reverence toward God,

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Smith calls this "moralistic therapeutic deism" (see his 2005 book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford Press).

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is something you don't hear much about even in many evangelical circles.

Many Christians address God with no more respect than we would Jeeves the butler,  
 captured in the attitude of the young boy, ready for bed,  
 who interrupted a family gathering in the living room, and said,  
 "I'm going up to say my prayers now. Anybody want anything?"  
 God is always at our beck and call.

But "the fear of the Lord"--that reverent awe of God--  
 is one of the dominating themes of the OT.

It is the beginning of wisdom according to Prov. 1:7;  
 It is the secret of righteousness according to Prov. 8:13;  
 And it is the whole duty of all mankind  
 according to the Preacher of Ecclesiastes (12:13).

But this is not just a OT theme—

Paul sums up his description of the sinfulness of human beings,  
 declaring, "**There is no fear of God before their eyes**" (Rom. 3:18).

In 2 Cor. 7:1--Paul encourages us to "**purify ourselves  
 from everything that contaminates body and spirit,  
 perfecting holiness out of reverence [fear] for God.**"

Peter writes, "**Show proper respect to everyone:  
 Love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor**" (1Pet. 2:17).

And in the Book of Revelation, we read,  
 "**Who will not fear you, O Lord,  
 and bring glory to your name?  
 For you alone are holy.**" (Rev. 15:4).<sup>2</sup>

The fear of God--  
 it is one of the constant themes of the book of Deuteronomy--

"**Assemble the people before me to hear my words  
 so that they may learn  
 to fear me [to revere me] as long as they live in the land . . ."**

"**Revere the Lord**," Moses says--  
 And we'll consider this theme in Moses' address under three headings,  
 looking at the three direct statements Moses makes  
 about the nature of the God who commands us--

I. (the point that will demand most of our time)  
 Revere the Lord who is always beyond our vision--

<sup>2</sup> cf. also Phil 2:12; Eph. 5:21; 1Pet. 1:17; Rev. 14:7; 19:5.

He is, in v. 31, **a consuming fire; a jealous God.**

II. Revere the Lord who is always *within our reach*--

He is, in v. 35, **a merciful God.**

III. And in v. 35, **revere the Lord who alone is God--**

**Besides Him there is no other.**

This is the God of the Covenant--

this is the God who "says so."

May we hear his voice, and revere him,

as we consider his word this morning.

In setting before the people the God who had revealed himself to the Israelites on Mt. Sinai  
(or Mt. Horeb as Moses refers to it in this book),

Moses takes his listeners back in v.11 to that glorious scene forty years before—

**"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."**

"You heard a voice, you hear the sound of words,

but you didn't see anything—

you saw no form."

Clearly, the absence of any visible presence of God was very significant,

because that idea is picked up again in v.15

and it determines the way God is to be worshipped--

4:15 --"You saw no form of any kind

**the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire.**

**Therefore watch yourselves very carefully,**

**so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol,**

**an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman,**

**or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air,**

**or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.**

**And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—**

**all the heavenly array—**

**do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things**

**the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.**

**But as for you, the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace,**

**out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are."**

You are not to be like all the other nations around you.

You are not to worship the Lord through an idol-- an image of any kind--

for when he took you to be his own on Mt. Horeb,

he spoke to you out of the fire, but you saw no form.

Idolatry--it reflects the deeply rooted human desire to capture God--

to reduce him to our level.  
 to make him manageable,  
 to recreate God out of the material of our experience,  
 so that we can hold him in our hands  
 and manipulate him.

This brings us security, no doubt.  
 We find this kind of God less threatening.

But the God of the Bible will not allow it--  
 He is the Creator of heaven and earth--  
 He stands outside of his creation, over it, beyond it.  
 As the theologians say, he is transcendent.

He is always beyond our vision--  
 for nothing that we can see,  
 nothing we can create,  
 nothing in all of creation,  
 and not even the sun, the moon, and the stars,  
 which he has created  
 is able to represent, or to capture, who he is.

It's like trying to visualize infinity--it can't be done.  
 And the infinite God demands that we not try.

The God of Israel,  
 in contrast to all of the other so-called gods of the ancient world,  
 would not be worshipped in images. //

Why is this so important?  
 It is important because idolatry destroys the fundamental distinction  
 between the Creator and his creation,  
 between God and nature--  
 It ignores the fact that the Israelites "**saw no form.**"

It is to exchange the glory of the immortal God for images  
 made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles.  
 As Paul says in Romans 1,  
 it is to "**exchange the truth of God for a lie,**  
**and worship and serve created things rather than the Creator.**"

Images of God are a lie--  
 they dishonor God—they necessarily domesticate the infinite and transcendent God.  
 They bring him down to our level,  
 either diminishing his majesty  
 or obscuring his personal nature,  
 or both.

Images dishonor God,  
 and images also deceive us.  
 So much so, that the worship of the true God falsely (through images)

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inevitably leads to the worship of false gods.

So closely are these two steps linked  
that the single term 'idolatry' covers both worshipping the right God wrongly  
and worshipping the wrongs gods.

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The Israelites had just left a land were filled with idolatrous worship,  
and they were about to enter a land filled with idolatrous worship,  
The Canaanite pantheon was simply a deification of the natural world--  
Baal was the god of the rain and storm;  
Yam was the god of the sea;  
Mot was the god of drought, and so it went.

To the Canaanites, nature was personified;  
it had a life of its own.  
Nature was a "Thou" instead of being an "It."  
The earth was their Mother.

When they mixed with the Canaanites,  
the Israelites would be constantly tempted  
to bring the Lord down off his lofty throne in heaven,  
and to make him a part of creation.

But remember, Moses says, when he spoke to you from the fire you saw no form.

You must be careful how you worship the Lord--  
He is always beyond our vision--he is the transcendent Lord--  
who is always above the world he has created.

v. 23--"**Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you;  
do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything  
the Lord your God has forbidden.  
For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.**"

If you doubt it, remember what he did at Baal Peor, he says--vv.3,4--  
"You saw with your own eyes what he did there.  
The Lord your God destroyed from among you  
everyone who followed the Baal of Peor,  
but all of you who held fast to the Lord your God are still alive today."

The account of that incident can be found in Num. 25--  
"While Israel was staying in Shittim,  
the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women,  
who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods.  
The people ate and bowed down before these gods.  
So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor.  
And the Lord's anger burned against them" (vv.1-3).  
And 24,000 Israelites died in a plague.

This is serious stuff,  
for the Lord your God is "a consuming fire, a jealous God."

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But "jealousy"? you may say--isn't that a bit unbecoming of a holy God?  
Isn't jealousy a vice, rather than a virtue--  
isn't it a lot like covetousness--  
a resentful envy, a troubled suspicion, a fear of rivalry.  
Shouldn't God be above that sort of thing?

Of course he is.  
But as J. I. Packer points out,  
there is another kind of jealousy--  
a zeal to protect and guard a love-relationship,  
or to avenge it when it is broken.<sup>3</sup>

Shouldn't a wife be jealous to maintain the love of her husband?  
Doesn't the exclusiveness of the marriage relationship demand  
that a husband be jealous  
when an adulterer threatens the integrity of his marriage.

God's jealousy is like that--  
it is a consequence of his covenant love for his people--  
they belong to him, as a wife to her husband,  
and he is zealous to protect that relationship.

Idolatry comes in as a pernicious intruder--  
seducing his beloved bride,  
wooing his people away from their rightful love.

That's why idolatry makes him angry--and he should be.

Idolatry is a denial of who God is;  
and it is a denial of who God is to us.

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But this is not something we have to worry about, you may say to yourself.  
There are not statues in our church.  
We don't bow before the sun or the stars.

Maybe that's true,  
but the principles we've outlined here  
suggest two more subtle applications of this text.

1. First, we are guilty of idolatry whenever we bring the transcendent God  
down to our level--the level of the creature.

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<sup>3</sup> See his book, *Knowing God*, chap. 17.

We can seek to understand God;

We can say things about him, as they reflect the truth of Scripture.

But we must never think that we can figure him out--

He will always remain beyond our vision.

We cannot put him in a nice, neat little box—

as when people say, "I like to think of God like this or that"—

and usually people like to think of God

as one who is just as tolerant and indulgent and permissive as they are.

That's just a god of their own creation.

It doesn't matter how you like to think of God—

we must think of him as he is—

as he has revealed himself to be.

and he has revealed himself to be **a consuming fire, a jealous God.**

We must realize that even our highest theology can never contain him.

He will always be too great for that.

We must revere him in all his infinite glory,

and never think that we can bring him down to our level.

2. Second, we are guilty of idolatry whenever we try to raise objects of creation,  
or even creation itself, up to the level of God.

We see this so obviously in the nature worship of the New Age pantheists,

who say that god is all and all is god.

But more subtly it is true of the romantic naturalists

who spell nature with a capital 'N' and describe it as a "she"--

"Mother Nature"--nature personified, nature glorified and deified.

What some people call 'worship' is no more than an enjoyment and appreciation of nature--  
of the kind that Ralph Waldo Emerson so often spoke of--

the feeling of exhilaration and wonder

when walking in a moonlit meadow

in the shadow of a majestic mountain--

appreciating nature, apart from nature's God.

worshiping creation apart from the Creator.

But what of other aspects of this world that demand our devotion—

things that we look to for our fulfillment,

things we think we cannot live without--

the idol of our technology,

the idol of our work,

the idol of our health.

Nothing in this world must be allowed to divert our minds

from glory of the invisible God.

And how often worship what we see--

the visible, tangible aspects of our lives.



But the Lord is always beyond our vision—  
 he speaks, but we do not see any form.

Revere this God--the majestic, transcendent God,  
 this mysterious, wonderful God--  
 the God who spoke out of the fire, but who had no form.

Revere the Lord who is beyond our vision--  
 that's the first thing this passage impresses upon us.

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That's our first point, but that's only half the story.  
 If you were to walk out now you would be tragically misinformed  
 and probably mised—  
 thinking that God was about as accessible as the man in the moon.

The Lord cannot be seen, that's true--  
 but this does not mean that he is hard to find.

Moses tells us otherwise in this chapter.

If you turn from the Lord, and make for yourselves idols, he tells the Israelites,  
 then he will scatter you among the nations--  
 but in v. 29 he says--"if from there you seek the Lord your God,  
 you will find him  
 if you look for him with all your heart  
 and with all your soul."

"You will find him"--The God who is beyond our vision,  
 is also within our reach.  
 The God who is transcendent  
 is also imminent;  
 The God who is out there,  
 is also right here, near at hand.

This, too, is remarkable about the God of Israel--  
 v.7--"What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them  
 the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?"

We can find him--  
 but only because he allows us to--  
 v. 30--"When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you,  
 then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him.  
 For the Lord your God is a merciful God;  
 he will not abandon or destroy you  
 or forget the covenant with your forefathers,  
 which he confirmed to them by oath."

"the Lord your God is a merciful God"

He is great,  
but he is also gracious.

We must see that both his jealous judgment and his gracious mercy  
flow from the same covenant love for his people.

I think of the story Jesus told of the gracious father,  
otherwise known as the parable of the prodigal son.  
The boy grabbed for his inheritance and left home;  
He wasted it all on loose living--he reached the end of his rope,  
wallowing in the pig pen to which his sin had led him,  
but coming to himself,  
he returned home in humility to his father.  
How did the father respond to this wayward son?--  
with open arms, rejoicing that his son who was dead  
had come back to life.

The gracious and merciful Father--  
That's the God of the covenant, too.  
The Lord who, by his mercy, is always within our reach.

We may be repelled by God's holiness,  
but we must also be attracted and drawn by his mercy.

It is this God that we are to fear, to revere, to worship, and obey./

Have you discovered God near to you?  
Have you sought him with all your heart and with all your soul?

He is there,--  
you will find him, if you look for him.  
and when you seek him,  
know that he will not abandon you or destroy you--  
for he has made a promise--  
a covenant promise through Jesus his Son--  
"I will never leave you or forsake you."  
"Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

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- I. Revere the Lord who is always beyond our vision--  
He is a consuming fire, a jealous God.
  - II. Revere the Lord who is always within our reach--  
He is a merciful God.
  - III. And third, Moses says, **Revere the Lord who is alone God--  
Besides Him there is no other.**

vv. 32—

"Ask now about the former days, long before your time,  
from the day God created human beings on the earth;

ask from one end of the heavens to the other.

Has anything so great as this ever happened,  
   or has anything like it ever been heard of?  
 Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire,  
   as you have, and lived?  
 Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation,  
           by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war,  
           by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds,  
 like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

In the entire length of human history--

                                  "**From the day God created human beings on the earth;**"

In the entire breadth of all creation--

                                  "**from one end of the heavens to the other,**"

  nothing like this has ever occurred, Moses proclaims.

No other god has ever done what our God has done for you--

          In creating a people for himself,

                                  in delivering you with his mighty hand;

  and in revealing his gracious law.

**"What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws  
   as this body of laws I am setting before you today?"** (v. 8)

v. 35--"**You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God;  
   besides him there is no other.**"

Yahweh, the LORD, the God of Israel—

                                  he is incomparable.

  He is unique.

  He alone is God.

And for that very reason, the nation of Israel had a responsibility

  to make this God of the covenant known.

Remember—Gen. 12—the promise to Abraham—

          The Lord would bless him, so that through him all nations could be blessed.

We see that in v. 6 of our passage—

Moses says to the people, "**Observe [these laws] carefully,**

**for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations,**

**who will hear about all these decrees and say,**

**"Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."**

Israel's life as God's people—

          living in righteousness and justice--

  was to point to the glory of their God,

  who is the one true God—

  besides him there is no other.

The God who is invisible

                                  in a sense, makes himself visible through the lives of his people,

  Their righteous lives are to be his image in the world.//

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The miracle and mighty power of the Exodus from Egypt--  
 the majesty of the revelation of the Law at Sinai--  
 Has anything so great as this ever happened,  
 or has anything like it ever been heard of?

Moses and his audience had to say No.  
 Nothing so great as that had ever happened.

They had to say No to that question;  
 But you know, . . . we don't.  
 For since that time something even greater has happened--  
 For we know that this same God has not only revealed himself out of fire,  
 but in a human face;  
 this God has made a people for himself  
 not only by an outstretched arm of power in a battlefield,  
 but by his outstretched arms of weakness and suffering on a cross.

His awesome deeds now include setting aside his glory  
 to wash his disciples' feet;  
 and setting aside his holiness  
 to bear the burden of our sin.

If the events that Moses knew of could inspire a humbled awe  
 in the presence of this incomparable God;  
 how much more should the events that we now know of--  
 the incarnation of this invisible God.  
 The God who is beyond our vision  
 has become visible as a baby in a manger—  
 the image of God is now found in the person of Jesus Christ.

That God is within our reach, calling us to come  
 and follow him to the cross,  
 and to join him at his throne.

**"Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above  
 and on the earth below. There is no other."**

This God has now revealed his glory is His Son Jesus Christ—  
 and because he is the only God,  
**"Salvation is found in no one else,  
 for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind  
 by which we must be saved"** (Acts 4:12).

Besides him, there is no other.

We, too, have a responsibility to make him known among all nations.  
 Our lives as his people in the church  
 are to make him visible to the world.

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This is the God of the Covenant--the God of the New Covenant--  
He is the One who rightly "says so" in our lives.

How will you respond to this God?

I ask that because, like Moses, I'm not teaching you about God  
so that you can pass an exam in systematic theology--  
but so that you will learn worship him and to follow him.

Think about your worship--

A. W. Tozer said, "Worship is pure or base  
as the worshipper entertains high or low thoughts of God."

Is your God big enough to inspire your worship?

Do you draw near to him with a certain sense of fascination and wonder--  
Or is your God locked up in a neat little box--  
a God you can understand and control and manipulate?  
a mere idol?

We must come to worship, again as Tozer says,

"To be filled with moral excitement.

To be captivated and charmed and entranced.

Excited, not with how big you're getting or how big the offering was.

Not with how many people came out to church.

But entranced with who God is, and struck with astonished wonder

at the inconceivable elevation and magnitude and splendor of Almighty God."<sup>4</sup>

We must revere God in our worship,

and so trust God and obey God in our lives.

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Let's pray—

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<sup>4</sup>Best of Tozer, p.220.

Communion--

And as we prepare to share in the Lord's Supper,  
I invite our servers to come forward.

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God—  
and Jesus has given us these visible elements  
for us to remember him by—  
the bread and the cup  
which point us to his body broken for us  
and his blood shed for us—  
his atoning death, which takes away our sin.

And the bread and the cup points us forward to that time  
when he comes again in glory  
and we will eat and drink with him  
in his presence, face-to-face.

The God who is a consuming fire, a jealous God—  
is also a gracious and merciful God—  
and on the cross we see his hatred of sin  
and his love for us sinners.

The Lord is God and there is no other.

If Jesus is your one and only Lord and Savior--  
take, eat and drink—  
for he died and rose again for you

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Close—a stanza of *O Fount of Love*

Living as God's Covenant People  
Studies in Deuteronomy 1-11, #2  
June 4, 2017

## "The God of the Covenant"

Dt. 4:1-40

*"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."*

-- Deut. 4:10

I. Revere the LORD your God,  
    who is always beyond our vision--  
He is "a consuming fire,  
    a jealous God" (v. 24).

II. Revere the LORD your God,  
    who is always within our reach--  
He is "a merciful God" (v. 31).

III. Revere the LORD your God,  
    who alone is God--  
"Besides Him there is no other" (v. 35).

The law and God's mission to the world,  
    now revealed in Jesus Christ.

Sermon Discussion:

## "The God of the Covenant"

Dt. 4:1-40

- Where in our culture do you see evidence of "reverence" for something or someone?
- How does our consumer culture influence the way we think about God?
- What is the proper way that we are to "fear" God? Why is this hard? What can we do to grow in this reverence?
- How does idolatry demean God? How does it deceive human beings?
- How do you know that God is merciful? How have you experienced the mercy of God?
- Why does the Bible give such emphasis to the idea that Yahweh, **the LORD**, the God of Israel alone is God and besides him there is no other?  
How does that affect the way we think of the uniqueness of Jesus?
- How do you see the theme of mission in this passage? How does it relate to our mission? Spend some time praying in your group for our mission to the world.
- How is God made visible in the world today?