

THE PENTATEUCH

THE PENTATEUCH 1: BEGINNINGS

I hope you are all feeling refreshed after your break from Bible studies. I've been a bit sneaky here, because if you are going to do something a bit more challenging, the best time to do it is when folk are geared up to start a new session and I had an introduction written with that in mind. But, you know the way I've remarked before that what has been said from the pulpit or by David or Stephen at these talks, that their thoughts dovetail with what the talks have been about. Well, David did it again. Two weeks ago, at the very start of the morning service, he told you the words that I will be ending these talks with. If you can't remember what they were, come back in six weeks and I'll tell you then. And my only complaint about the sermon on Sunday past, is that as a result of it, I had to go home and rewrite the introduction to these talks. You see, what David preached about on Sunday, although taken from Romans 12, sums up the main theological points of the Pentateuch. My title tonight is 'Beginnings'. The Pentateuch is the beginning of our knowledge that God is to be worshipped, how He is to be worshipped and why He is deserving of that worship – we'll see that more clearly when we talk about the covenant God. The world is the arena where all this has to be worked out, and like the Israelites of old, we are faced with lifestyles incompatible with worship of God and have to deal with issues that arise from that fact. And all of this boils down to a matter of the will. God's will for humanity is spelled out in the Pentateuch. We also find out how fickle the human will is to respond in kind. So although I will be taking a more practical approach, three words are worth remembering as we start to see what these Books are all about.

To start off with. There are 66 books in the Bible. How many of you would put Leviticus, Numbers or Deuteronomy in your favourites top five? Top 10? Top 20? What about Genesis and Exodus? Top 5, 10, 20. Well that's about the response I expected. Outside academics and the ministry, I really doubt if many Christians, including me, have really delved into these five books apart from the stories of the creation, Noah, Abraham, Joseph and Moses and Joshua. It's when we get past these to the miraculous deliverance from Egypt and the ups and downs of the journey that things start to get complicated. Suddenly, instead of continuing the journey story, the record tells us that the people end up on a building site and taking a course in law, and by the time we get back to the journey, we are wondering 'what happened there?' and 'what was that about?' and 'where are we now?'

Scholars have said the Pentateuch is like a jigsaw puzzle. All the pieces to complete the picture are there but they need to be sorted out and that is what this Bible study attempting to do. It's only when we "get the picture" of the Pentateuch, that we can appreciate the theological lessons it has for us. So the focus of the Bible study will be about God's dealings with a covenant community at a particular point in history. What we will find is that the issues that arose within that community are issues which have existed from the beginning of time and will exist until the end of time and they are issues which every covenant community of every age have to come to terms with. David mentioned on Sunday that we had to remember that Paul was talking to people inside the Church and the Pentateuch is the same. These words are not for the world at large, but for the people who have entered into a covenant agreement with God. In other words, it's how the covenant community deals with these things if, or when, they become a problem or difficulty within the assembly. And dealing with those issues is dependent on how we see worship of God, the world around us and will – God's and ours.

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And as we go along we will find that we are dealing with the same God, same world, same human nature – so where do we start. Well, when you're doing a jigsaw, you start by sorting out the pieces with the straight edges to make the frame for the picture. I have had six helpers to ask the questions to put the frame together.

**I have six honest serving men, they taught me all I know.
Their names are who and what and why, and when and where and how?**

If we ask ourselves these questions, hopefully by the end of tonight you'll have an idea of how the picture is going to turn out.

WHY?

Everybody likes to have reasons for doing things, so WHY look at the Pentateuch. In Luke 24 we saw that when Jesus was explaining to the disciples the reasons why God planned salvation through death and resurrection of the Messiah, it all started with Moses. This was something Paul confirmed. I had originally thought we could trace the themes into the New Testament until I came across this book. I didn't count them but there are five pages like this on the Pentateuch references alone. If I were to ask who is the most mentioned character from the Pentateuch in the New Testament who would you vote for – Abraham or Moses. The answer is Moses – 79 times. Abraham is mentioned 74 times and Jacob, 25 times. (David 58 times) It wouldn't be hard to guess that Isaiah and the Psalms are the most quoted books in the New Testament but they are followed by Genesis and Exodus 240 and 238 times respectively. A rough count from the references given in the margin of the NIV gives at least 770 references to verses in the Pentateuch. So, in many ways, unless you know what these five books are about overall, their references in the New Testament won't make much sense either.

Why did Jesus start with Moses – because God entrusted the record of His **worldview** to Moses and instructed that it be passed on to future generations. The Pentateuch is God's revelation of Himself to and communication with the humanity He had brought into being. When we study these five books, we are getting to know a Creator God and how He views His creation and what He expects from it. God's worldview has not changed since the days of Moses – what we have in the Pentateuch are the origins of that worldview.

WHAT DOES THAT WORLDVIEW CONSIST OF?

Consider these two statements.

*Jewish tradition maintains that the Five Books of Moses contains everything. Yes, **everything**.The Torah deals with all aspects of life, from business, agriculture and industry to family life, sexuality and ritual. The Torah directs human conduct in all its aspects. It urges followers to see the whole world as a Holy Temple in which each student functions as a priest whose job it is to constantly purify and sanctify the entirety of life.*

A Christian writer: Genesis is the beginning of creation, the human race, marriage, the family, the state, nations, civilization; the history of law, government, penalty; of worship, covenant, **the call to God, the elect people**; promise and prophecy; language and literature, mechanic arts, fine arts, science and poetry.

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I joke that the impossible I can do, but miracles take a little while longer, but to cover EVERYTHING in six weeks or so, I'm afraid would take a lot more miracles and a lot more time. But as we go along, I think we will begin to see just how accurate these statements are.

The WHO questions?

Who do we meet in the books?

In the beginning God.... We assume that the Jewish people from the time of Genesis always believed in Yahweh. It is true that they believed in God – but what kind of God did they believe in? Even today, human nature wants a god made in its image – Moses took pains to show the Israelites, that they were made in God's image and therefore were required to live up to His image of them, not the other way round. God's worldview is paramount in these books. “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell the Israelites.....’” occurs time after time in all these books.

Then we meet the very first people who existed in the world – the generations between Adam and Eve and Noah. Noah comes from the line of Seth, Adam and Eve's third son. After the world is recreated, generations pass until Abraham arrives on the scene as a descendant of Noah's first son, Shem. Moses' account then concentrates on one family and we are all familiar with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and what happened to Joseph, which landed the whole of Jacob's twelve sons and their families settling in Egypt. Four centuries were to pass before Moses comes on the scene. In terms of individuals, Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and especially Joshua, who becomes the designated leader of the Israelites after Moses' death are the main characters. But the major shift that takes place in the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy is that God uses the individuals to bring together a chosen people. Not just individuals, but a whole community is made responsible for taking God's revelation of His worldview on to the next level.

Who wrote the Pentateuch?

Controversy reigns over Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, but to the present day, Jews, Christians and Muslims continue to believe that even if these books were put together at a later date, that the original information was provided by Moses. Modern scholars who assert that these five books are a 'set' reckon the form that we have them in today was not completed until about 400BC, but that still means that even after 2500 years, Mosaic authorship cannot be disproved.

Who were the books written for?

The first and second generation Israelites who were delivered from slavery in Egypt. These were the people to whom God revealed His worldview. When we understand that Moses is speaking directly to these people, then we can start to get a better perspective of what is happening.

WHERE

Where did all the activity of these people take place. I think we are all pretty familiar with this map of the Bible lands. Tradition holds that the Garden of Eden was situated somewhere around the Euphrates-Tigris river systems. We are told that by the time of Noah, people had spread out over the whole area. By the time of Abraham, Ur was one of the greatest cities during the Sumerian period and we know that he was able to journey to Egypt. And by the time of Moses we know that the all the great Egyptian cities were being built by slave labour – including that of the Israelites. Genesis covers the whole of what we would term the

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Ancient Near East. But Exodus to Deuteronomy only covers from the eastern borders of Egypt, through the Sinai peninsula to the plains of Moab which lay east of the Jordan river.

Deuteronomy ends with the death of Moses while the Israelites are encamped on the plains of Moab.

A useful 'where' question is setting the five books in their place on the map. All the narrative from Exodus 13, Leviticus and the first 10 chapters of Numbers take place between leaving Egypt and camping at Mount Sinai. The rest of Numbers takes place during the 40 years wanderings and Deuteronomy is the final address given by Moses to the Israelites on the Plains of Moab.

WHEN?

This is perhaps one of the most vexed questions of the whole Pentateuch. When did the first humans' appear on the earth? That is a question we will never have a definite answer to. What scholars are reasonably certain about, however, is that events of the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy occurred around 1200 to 1400 years BC in other words about 3500 years ago.

More precisely, when did Moses write the books?

It is possible that Moses began writing Genesis anytime after God called him from the burning bush. To help the Israelites know and understand their role in God's plans, they had to know who they were, where they had come from and how they had arrived in their present situation. Genesis is in effect the ancestry or the family tree of the first and second generation Israelites. Exodus, Leviticus and the first ten chapters of Numbers are more likely to be the records kept by Moses, starting when he wrote the terms of the covenant down after the people had agreed to enter into it at Sinai. This account was possibly given to the second generation nearing the end of their 40 year wandering and preparing to enter the Promised Land.

The last chapters of Numbers and Deuteronomy, are most probably given to the second generation within a short period of Moses' death when the Israelites had once again been formed into an army to enter the Promised Land. (Numbers 26). But while Deuteronomy gives Moses' final address to the people, it is likely that they did not become available in written form until after his death, because – lets face it – Moses could not have described his death as we find it in the final chapter of Deuteronomy.

When does this happen in terms of God's plan of salvation.

Creation to the point where God has chosen a people through whom He plans the redemption of His fallen creation. That is, to the point where God has chosen a people through whom the Messiah would be born.

HOW was God going to achieve this through this chosen community?

1. By revealing Himself as the Creator God who brought everything and everyone into existence.
2. By direct and indirect communication with specific individuals like Noah and Abraham, then through continuing guidance and protection through Abraham's family and then through a chosen community.
3. By communicating to that community the terms of what He had intended His relationship with human beings to be. In return for His continued presence, protection, guidance, blessing with everything they would ever need, He expected

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them to abide by a covenant, which we know as the Ten Commandments and other laws contained in the Book of the Law, and through a tangible system of communication consisting of the tabernacle, priesthood, sacrifices, festivals and lifestyle. Exodus gives the details of the construction of the tabernacle and priestly paraphernalia. 90% of Leviticus consists of God's direct instructions regarding the practice of the behaviour expected of God's covenant community. Remember the instructions had to be so detailed, because this was something that had never been done before – and it had to be done God's way.

4. By establishing His stamp on how things had to be done, God left no room for dispute. Moses' and Aaron's leadership and roles were challenged. God's harsh judgement on the rebels left no one in any doubt, that Moses was following God's way, not his own.
5. By remaining a God of promise and by remaining faithful to His part of the bargain in spite of the unfaithfulness, unbelief, disobedience and rebellion.

Okay, how do we put together these pieces into a frame.

Moses wrote these books specifically for the 1st and 2nd generation of Israelites whom God delivered from slavery in Egypt. Genesis focuses on God's creation and His interaction with humanity, especially concentrating on covenants made with individuals like Noah and Abraham. The Israelites thus have learned about God, their history and ancestry through individuals like Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and his descendants Isaac and Jacob. Genesis ends with the account of Joseph being sold as a slave by his brothers and eventually how Jacob and his other 11 sons came and settled in Egypt. Over four centuries pass until we learn about the birth of Moses at the beginning of Exodus, God's call to him from the burning bush many, many years later and his role in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. Exodus chapter 13, through Leviticus to Numbers chapter 10 covers the journey from leaving Egypt to their departure from Sinai, bound for the Promised Land. The journey from Egypt to Sinai took 3 months and they stayed there for a further 11 months or so because we are told in Numbers 10: 11 that "on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from about the tabernacle. Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai.

It was what took place during these 11 months that turned these homeless and stateless refugees into the chosen people of God. The giving of the 10 Commandments and the Book of the Law, the building of the tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant with their associated priesthood and rituals, the organisation of the people into an army, with a specific tribal, clan and family structure, the specifics of how their camp was to be set up and the order of march from Sinai, all were put in place during these 11 months. Once all this was in place the Israelites were ready to move into Canaan – but as we know they refused because 10 of the spies gave a report which terrified them. The rest of Numbers and Deuteronomy are about the 39 years spent in the wilderness until the first generation died out – apart from Joshua and Caleb. Deuteronomy, for the want of a better term, is Moses' state of the nation address before his death. It brings together the past, present and future. He reminds the generation poised for conquest of the failures of the past, the present necessity of adhering to all the covenant requirements, and looking forward to the inheritance the people can expect when they enter the Promised Land.

From all of this, we can say that the whole of the Pentateuch is about beginnings – not just the beginning of natural and human creation, but the beginning of God's revelation of Himself to humanity and interaction with us and the foundation of that is worship; and the beginning of the working out of His plan of salvation for the world. In these five books the

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beginning of salvation's plan was putting in place the first means by which the effects of the Fall could be reversed – the means by which sinful humanity could begin to be reconciled to a Holy God.

THE PENTATEUCH 2: The Natural World

I mentioned last week that while the aim of this Bible study was to discover and see the picture that the first five books of the Bible give us, but that it raised issues which have caused problems for every generation since. And Genesis 1 hits us with the very first one.

What is your reaction to this image. I'm guessing it's one of acceptance, contentment maybe that God is in control and all is going to work out right in the end. Maybe even a bit smug, because we know the truth of things. What about this one? I'm going to suggest that the blood is already starting to boil and this is what you will end up looking like on the inside.

If it is, then you will realise that what we find in the first two chapters of Genesis raise very emotive and controversial issues. That is why we need to look at what Moses is actually telling us before we make judgements that are contrary to what is actually being said in these books.

Before we look at the whole creation v evolution we need to realise that the first two chapters of Genesis are the very bedrock of human life. David mentioned the state of the world we live in several times on Sunday morning and that state is the result of the rejection of what we sang in one of the songs – He is the Author of creation, the Lord of every man. These first chapters of Genesis are written to show the Israelites that the God who delivered them from Egypt is the Creator God of the universe and that, unlike all the other nations around them, the Israelites were to worship the Creator, not the creation. This issue is at the very heart of the Pentateuch for it is embodied in the first two commandments. By rejecting God's view of creation of the natural world and humanity, the world is now at the mercy of man's views of both. What Moses presented to the Israelites was a choice between the version revealed to him by God, the oral traditions that they had been used too and the other versions which they may have had knowledge of. Today we are faced with the same choice between the versions we are aware of – and that means facing the scientific view of creation.

GENESIS 1:1-2

Let's take the scientists' view that the earth has existed for millions of years. Verse 1 says God created the heavens and the earth. Stop right there. That means that two different environments have existed back to an eternal beginning. We are so earthbound that we forget God created the heavens as well. This suggests that God's dwelling place, together with the angels and other heavenly beings or environments existed together with a formless and empty earth. From other clues in the Bible we also have to recognise that there were things going on in heaven before God turned His attention to the earth. Revelation 12:7-9 and 12 tells the story. "And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth and his angels with him." Verse 12 ".....But woe to the earth and the sea because the devil has gone down to

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you. He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.” Jesus, Himself confirms this because in Luke 10:18 He tells the disciples, “I saw Satan fall like lightening from heaven.” The logical conclusion we have to draw from this is that things were happening in God’s domain which resulted in Satan being expelled from that realm and arriving on earth before humanity was made.

What about the earth at this time? Verse 2 says the earth was without form and was empty. It is only in verse 3 that we see God beginning the process of shaping the earth and giving it occupants. In other words, we do not know how long the creation of Genesis 1:1-2 lasted before God started His building work – because the rest of Genesis 1 is about putting into place the building blocks that shaped this planet and made it habitable for plant, animal and human life. Genesis 1:3 is the stage of earth’s development that scientists call ‘The Big Bang’ - when the building blocks of earth as we know it came into being. Scientists can cope with Genesis 1:3 – it’s the first two verses they can’t explain.

What we also see here is that Genesis is not telling us that God created the earth in six days, but that what God actually did was shape and fill the earth that already existed in six days. And what came into being constitute what we now term ‘natural laws’. God first separated light from darkness. Genesis 1:2 tells us that all was darkness. In fact, the very first building block that God put into place enabled the rest of God’s work to become visible. It is, unfortunately, one example of the major threads in the Pentateuch that we don’t have time to follow into the New for there we are told that “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” And Christians believe Jesus is the Light of the World. In other words, the natural light that we enjoy is part of the very nature of God.

Next came the separation of the waters. Here is just one example of what the Israelites could choose to believe about this. We know that life cannot exist without water and that is what gets the scientists so excited if they discover there may be water on other planets. Incidentally, I read an article about a month ago about physicists who claim that the world’ did not start as a result of the ‘Big Bang’ but as a result of the ‘Big Freeze’ - water coming together as ice! For the biologists, the basis of their theory of human life is the formation of some form of watery microscopic amoeba. There is nothing in Genesis to suggest that anything existed in water when it was first formed. So as far as Genesis is concerned – human life did not start in water. Other things were put in place before water became inhabited – verse 20.

Perhaps the one area where we have to give the scientists the benefit of the doubt is regarding Genesis 1:9-10 because Genesis tells us only that God separated the sea from the dry land. We are not told that God created the separate continents and islands that exist on planet earth today. Natural and man-made phenomena have shaped the land and sea over long periods of time. These are some examples. Even 10 years into the future can we say that our coastlines will be exactly the same given that cliff erosion on parts of the English coast have meant that houses that have stood on the same site for maybe hundreds of years have now fallen into the sea. What will happen even to parts of Llanelli if the ice caps melt and the sea around the town rises? So while I would be very dogmatic in saying that God created the earth and has made and put into place everything that makes this earth what it is, I cannot in all honesty be dogmatic about saying He make it exactly as it is today.

What we can assert is that light and dark, day and night, dry land and sea, the existence of the sun, moon and stars, plants, animals and humans have been unchanging **NATURAL** laws

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which have existed from the beginning of time. Whether they like it or not, science has to admit that all its theories about the origins of the universe depend upon these natural laws, for, in general, they agree with the sequence of creation mentioned in Genesis.

Does giving the scientists the benefit of the doubt contradict the Genesis account of a 6 day creation period? We have seen from the first two verses of Genesis that we do not know how much time elapsed before God started shaping and filling the earth. The rest of the chapter tells us that it was the forming and filling that took 6 days. Are we meant to take that literally? Personally, and by faith I can believe that God did all of this in six x 24 hour days. Personally and by faith I can believe He did it in 6 nanoseconds because with God, nothing is impossible.

Three things may help us to understand why Genesis mentions 'days'. Firstly, Moses wrote these words over 3000 years ago. He was writing for Israelites, who were wandering in the desert and their only concept of time was sunrise and sunset – Genesis 1:3-5 - day and night – the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Moses was explaining the order of creation in terms that they could understand. So when we read that God laboured on six days and rested on the seventh day, we are reading it the way it was written for the Israelites who had no other concept of time.

It is true that we still measure time by sunrise and sunset, but according to the Genesis account, these means of measuring time did not exist until the 4th day – “let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years.” (verse 14). Verse 17 “God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth to govern the day and the night and to separate light from darkness. It may seem illogical to put the sun, moon and stars in place after the making of vegetation and trees, but not when you realise, as modern scientists have done, that green plants need photosynthesis – sunlight – in order to grow and expand.

The upshot of this is that we do not know how long a day lasted before the boundaries were set by sunrise and sunset. So, we cannot be dogmatic that when Moses wrote as he did, that he intended his use of the word 'day' to always mean a 24 hour period. We can believe it if we wish to do so, but we cannot make it a test of how Biblically Christian we are. And that becomes even more apparent when we read Psalm 90:4 *'For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.'* Obviously the Psalmist did not perceive a day always to have been or always to be a 24 hour period of time. He made the point that God is not bound by time as we are. He is eternal, He is outside time. The Psalmist is saying that to God, a day could be a thousand years – which to people of that time was the greatest number that could be envisaged. Today, because we have more concepts of great numbers, we could substitute our greatest number for the Israelite one. For example, a trillion years in His sight are like a day, and it would be just as true for God is God. A day could also be even as short as a watch in the night – nowadays often just 4 hour period, so even if God did inspire Moses to use the word 'day', God's was seeing a day from a divine perspective, not a human one. 2 Peter 3:8-10 puts this into perspective:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

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Will the Day of the Lord happen over a 24 hour period or will it happen as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15:52. Paul makes this statement in the context of the time – verse 24 – when *“the end will come, when he (Jesus) hands over the Kingdom to God the Father.”**but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*

Just from looking at the first chapter of Genesis, we can see that we do not have to be dogmatic about the issue of time or the shape of the earth when God started His work. On the one hand, to believe that God created the universe in 6 x 24 hour days has been a traditional Christian belief, which a faith perspective can hold to. On the other hand, a Biblical perspective of what a ‘day’ actually means, shows that God sees time differently to what we do. If we believe all Scripture is inspired by God, then God’s mention of day, in the first instance, came from His perspective and it was not tied to the human perspective until He put the sun and the moon into place and designated this as the means for measuring time for humanity. The bottom line for me is that beliefs about what a day means is optional for Christians, believing in a Creator God, regardless of the time He took to do things, is non-negotiable.

The age of the earth is one thing. Using time to support a theory of evolution is something else. Here, there is little room for manoeuvre between Christians and scientists, particularly biologists. I am very prepared to be dogmatic and say we did not evolve from monkeys or any other form of life, because Genesis 1 is perfectly clear on this. Plants and trees produced seed ‘ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND’ – verses 11 and 12. Fish and birds were formed ‘ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND’ – verse 21 and were made to be fruitful and multiply in the form they were made. A similar thing is said of all animal life – ‘ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND’ - verses 24 and 25. Writing nearly 2000 years after Moses, Jeremiah 13:23 writes - Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots? Nearly 2500 years later, we can still give exactly the same answer to that question – Of course not. With all their gene technology and experiments on animals, no scientist has been able to demonstrate even the first stage of a monkey evolving into a human being – although it has probably been tried behind closed doors. Geneticists are showing that while mutation can take place up to a certain limit within species – we see this with dog breeding – mutation cannot take place across different species. And we never hear of any kind of animal, bird or fish naturally cross-breeding with another species. This is exactly what is said in Genesis 1.

Physicists also question evolution which, according to physical laws, is regarded as impossible. Thermodynamics is a complicated theory but the simplest explanation of the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics

“describes basic principles familiar in everyday life. It is partially a universal law of decay; the ultimate cause of why everything ultimately falls apart and disintegrates over time. Material things are not eternal. Everything appears to change eventually, and chaos increases. Nothing stays as fresh as the day one buys it; clothing becomes faded, threadbare, and ultimately returns to dust. Everything ages and wears out. Even death is a manifestation of this law. The effects of the 2nd Law are all around, touching everything in the universe.”

Try it yourself – leave some fruit in a bowl for a month or two.

So where does that leave us regarding a Divine Worldview of creation? Regarding the time element, it seems it would not be blasphemous or sacrilege to admit that there are both

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Biblical and scientific reasons for the belief that we are living on a planet that may be millions of years old. Also I can admit that natural and man-made phenomena have shaped the dry land and seas over a period of time – whether the earth is young or old. Time, however, does not in any way prove evolution of living creatures or humanity. We have seen that Genesis is very clear about the separate elements that shaped and filled this earth. I freely admit I have no scientific knowledge, but I do know that physicists can analyse and harness the power of light, but they cannot explain how it came into being. And it is exactly the same with all that we term natural laws. Light and dark, cold and heat, the tidal effect on the phases of the moon, the movement of other heavenly bodies etc. We saw with our study of trees the intricate structure and infinite variety that exists in our world and while cross-fertilisation may have brought some species into being, the same trees that existed in ancient times still exist in the same form today. The same can be said for sea creatures, birds and animals. So, on balance, the Genesis account still takes us back to an intelligence behind the creation, shaping and filling of this world for, in spite of all the scientific knowledge available to us in the twenty-first century, the simplest and the best explanation of the origin of our universe is the existence of an almighty and powerful God who laid the foundational building blocks of what has become the world as we know it today.

And that is also the most likely reason why Moses went into so much detail for the Israelites. Here was a people who had to decide whether or not they believed Moses' account of one, almighty, eternal Being who was responsible for the existence of everything in their experience, or other versions they may have known about. Was it easy for them to believe Moses' version? We just have to remember the incident of the worship of the golden calf to see that differences of opinion and unbelief did exist in that community. In the face of their competing beliefs and practices, at the end of the day the Israelites had to make a choice. It's the same choice every generation since has had to confront and come to terms with, based on information that is available at any given time. I think 20th and 21st century generations have had the toughest job in making that choice – the Israelites didn't have to take on Darwin or Dawkins. And our choice of what we believe is a matter of the will. The worldview of God or the worldview of humanity. Today, we can thank God that, in spite of the enormous pressures to believe otherwise, there are still millions in this world who will say with conviction – In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.

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THE PENTATEUCH 3: HUMANITY

Where do you start when you start to talk about people? At least with the natural world there is some semblance of order and balance and stability – but with people – well we don't know what we are going to hear on the news or read in our newspapers from one day's end to the next. And most of it is bad news usually highlighting what was mentioned last week as “man's inhumanity to man.” And that has happened because God's worldview of humanity is being opposed by a worldview that sees humanity as a self-made product of evolution, hence it alone can decide how life is to be lived – or not as the case may be - and that means ignoring the Genesis account of human origins and the obligations this view lays on a covenant community.

For a covenant community the Genesis account of human origin is the bedrock that will determine the nature of the faith and practice of the community and that is why it is so necessary to see these things from God's perspective rather than a human one. When we do see things this way, then, for a change, we are going to get good news for everyone – and I mean everyone who accepts God's way is the best antidote to everything that is wrong our world.

Genesis gives us five indications that distinguish humanity from all other forms of creation. Firstly, Man was made from something that already existed – the dust of the ground. That alone distinguishes humanity from everything else that was made. Genesis 2:18 backs this up for a woman could not be formed from any other species of creature. She had to come from the human being God had made. Gentlemen, I hate to rub it in – but according to God, you need us. You couldn't manage in the long term on your own and you really needed someone to help you.

The **second** thing that distinguishes man from everything else is that he was made in God's image. What does that mean? It means we were made with the power to think beyond basic animal needs of food, drink, shelter, company and procreation. It means we were made with a conscious moral dimension to our beings. All human beings have a conscience whether they heed it or not. It means we are made with a spiritual dimension that enables us to recognise the existence of a Higher Being and realise there is a possibility of a spiritual, and eventually, a physical relationship to that Being on an extra-terrestrial basis. It also means we have free will as to whether or not we choose that path in our lives. I have to question science when it claims that this inner dimension at the core of our beings is a process of evolution. The Bible and other ancient texts show these dimensions have existed from the very beginning of life on earth. Anthropologists have shown that all civilizations have had a concept of a god from the beginning of their conscious existence. If God did not exist and had never existed, how did humanity evolve a concept of spirituality which has persisted to the present day?

The answer to this question may lie in what we are told in Genesis 2:7. – **the third thing** that distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation - man's existence was the result of God giving His own breath to give him life - Genesis 2:7. Humanity recognises God because it was God who gave it life. Moses is emphasising to the Israelites that they owe their very existence to God and from the beginning were intended to be involved in a special kind of relationship with him and were designed to function in a specific way. The Jewish tradition I mentioned in the first week spells this out.

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The Torah directs human conduct in all its aspects. It urges **FOLLOWERS** to see the whole world as a Holy Temple in which each student functions as a priest whose job it is to constantly purify and sanctify the entirety of life.

Modern scholars agree and we have direct evidence of this from

EXODUS 19:3-6

³Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

So where did it all go wrong? You know the answer – Garden of Eden disobedience. Literally everything that God created was tainted by this event, and as far as humanity was concerned, this included human gender for the **fourth thing** that distinguished humanity from all other forms of life is the fact that genders of humanity are specifically defined. Genesis is very specific about a male/female creation and the relationship which is to exist between them. Chapter 2 is a commentary on the male/female creation of 1:27. Genesis 2 depicts a partnership of two people working together in their environment and in fellowship with God, their Creator. It also depicts that the physical relationship to enable the populating of the earth was one formed by a man and a woman. And that is why we cannot ignore what has become such a highly emotive debate on same-sex marriage in both political and religious circles.

Had covenant communities been united and rested their opposition to same-sex marriage solely on Genesis 2:24 and maintained that this was a non-negotiable tenet of faith, the present inflammatory and highly prejudicial views would not have reached such a pitch of animosity between the Church and homosexual sections of our society. The failure of some sections of today’s church to uphold the honour of God by adhering to His worldview has led to the situation where the issue is at the mercy of, sometimes vitriolic, human attitudes, opinions and prejudices on both sides. We have a situation where humanity’s worldviews have drowned out God’s worldview and that is what we need to get back to.

Genesis tells us that we are now living in a fallen world where all deviations from God’s worldview are a natural condition of human society – and human gender is no exception. Homosexuality has existed from the beginning of time – it will exist till the end of time. That is a fact of life in a fallen world. And, we need to emphasise again that God’s word is for members of covenant communities, not the world at large. God is the judge of the world, not us. But within the covenant community we do have obligations to God. For this reason, same-sex marriage is not permissible within the covenant community and we cannot ignore the fact that God explicitly forbids homosexual activity within the community. We need to bear in mind that He also forbids heterosexual activity outside marriage, blasphemy and other activity carrying the same penalties. In fact, the only sentence of death for unacceptable sexual behaviour within the Israelite community was passed on a heterosexual couple – the Israelite man who brought a Midianite woman into the camp. God’s commands were directed at behaviour, not people. That is something that has to be emphasised for everyone within the community, as the text stated, were among the people whom God regarded as a

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“treasured possession” and upon whom He had placed the responsibility of becoming a “priestly kingdom” and a “holy nation.” This points us to the fact that the acceptance of homosexual people within God’s chosen people means that the Church, which is the present day covenant community, has no divine mandate and no Biblical basis for excluding them. There is even greater emphasis on this today for Christians, since Jesus came to seek and save the lost and stated that whosoever came to him in faith He would not reject.

The Church’s responsibility is exactly the same as that of the Israelites – to be a witness to the glory of God and to show it by a holy lifestyle. Today, clubs, organisations, games etc., all have their rules and regulations which members are expected to abide by. All who become members of God’s people need to be graciously reminded that a commitment to Christ entails responsibilities to God in terms of lifestyle. They have to be reminded that the Church’s stance on issues like homosexuality don’t come from the diktats of writers like Moses and Paul or Christian fundamentalists, but are patterns that God established at the very beginning of human existence and should be followed from the motivation of love for God. That translates into love and gratitude for the Christ who delivered us from the slavery to sin and the salvation that we have been given.

The Israelites were expected to follow God’s pattern for humanity for the same reason – love and gratitude for deliverance from slavery in Egypt and for the fulfilment of covenant promises. Censure and penalty were only directed towards those within the community whose conscious and deliberate choice of behaviour challenged God’s honour and authority and was a serious threat to the relationship between God and people which, in turn, would seriously compromise the integrity of the nation God had chosen to be a witness for Him to the nations of the territory.

The Pentateuch shows that all of human nature was represented in God’s chosen people. The same should be true today. Once people are aware of what is and is not acceptable to God, then it has to be accepted that it is a work of the Holy Spirit in the process of sanctification that leads every true believer into conformity with God’s expressed will. At the end of the day, it is only the convicting and convincing strength and power of the Holy Spirit that enables any of us to live according to God’s will. *Philippians 2:13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.* God intended that everyone within the Israelite community should have the opportunity to come into His presence and receive the blessings He had for them. The Church today is failing in its mission if it refuses homosexual people those same opportunities.

The most important opportunity is the ability to know God as He wants to be known and to have a personal relationship with Him. The fifth and final thing that distinguished humanity from every other living thing is divine-human interaction and communication. Only the Israelites of all the peoples that existed in the Ancient Near East worshipped a living God who chose to be present with them and to provide tangible evidences of His presence. A major theme of the Pentateuch is the many different ways God made Himself known to individuals and then to the Israelites as a nation. It is true to say that communication was very intermittent in the generations between Adam and Moses which lasted for a few thousand years. Very few individuals had the experience of encounters with God. That is why characters like Noah, Enoch, Abraham and Jacob are so noteworthy. We do not have any indication of communication with Isaac and Joseph, but we know from the accounts that God was watching over all the circumstances of their lives. The radical change that takes

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place between Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch is the means by which God chooses to communicate, not just with an individual like Moses, but with a whole people.

Human beings were made from the moment of their existence to have a direct line of communication to and with God. And it was God who initiated the process for every instance of communication was a revelation about God Himself.

So how did God communicate His existence, His Being and His character to the Israelites? Genesis starts the revelation. Last week we saw that the details Moses provided showed the Israelites the power, presence and character of God in the world they saw around them. And verses from Deuteronomy 8 summed up the benefits the Israelites would enjoy from that creation when they entered the Promised Land.

7For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, 8a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, 9a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. 10You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

More important than the creation itself however, was the name of the Creator which Moses was given. Our name 'God' in many ways is so inadequate when we remember that a name in ancient times described the person. The very first name the Israelites learned from Genesis 1:1 was Elohim – a name which conveyed to them that their God possessed all the divine powers in the universe. Other gods were the gods of parts of creation, but the God of the Israelites possessed the power of creation itself. Scholars point out that the names God reveals, come at turning points in His dealings with His creation. The next example comes in Genesis 2:7, when the creation of humanity is about to happen, we find the name 'Lord God' = Jehovah Elohim. And the words of Selwyn Hughes are worth quoting here.

“Here God’s personal name is added to the august and majestic name of Elohim as if He wants to soften its solemn title and show Himself not only as a God who can build mountains and create vast seas, but One also who is tender enough a loving enough to enter into a personal relationship with His human creation. ‘Jehovah’ is also translated Yahweh meaning ‘Lord’. The name Jehovah means to “be actively present” and contains the thought of faithfulness and unchangeableness. Is it not significant that the first time God is seen in His capacity as the Creator of a human being He is seen as a God who is faithful and who keeps His promises? When God introduced Himself by His personal name He did more than expand His titles: He also revealed to the whole world His deep desire to create beings who could and would reciprocate His love. This is not evolution but involution – God involving Himself in His creation in a distinctively personal way.”

You can see just from this quote that there are profound and powerful lessons to be learned just from the names of God and how personal He has made this for us. “As Elohim, God is a mighty Creator but, as Jehovah Elohim, He is also the tender and loving Lord.” The other names that are revealed to the Israelites bear this out time and time again. In Genesis 17:1 God communicates to Abraham that he will have a son in spite of his and Sarah’s advanced years. If Abraham wondered how that could be, God told him in a name – El Shaddai = God Almighty. In the face of human frailty, God’s strength and power could be revealed and also the fact that God could bring life where all hope of it was gone. Here too, is the reaffirmation

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of His faithfulness as Jehovah Elohim to His promises for humanity. Here too, Abram and Sarai's names were changed and an 'H' added. I'm told that in Hebrew that adds a breath sound to a name. If this is so then God, in one sense, was breathing new life into His plans for humanity.

Abraham was so privileged because he was given yet another name of God when he was called upon to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham called the place Jehovah Jireh meaning the 'Lord will provide.'

Centuries were to pass before another name occurs, this time to Moses at the burning bush when he wants to know what to tell the Israelites if they ask who sent him to deliver them from slavery. God says 'I am who I am' – Exodus 3:14. I've got to admit, I find this name a difficult one to explain, but some scholars believe it is deliberately obscure because the Israelites would have been aware of the names of the Egyptian gods and it was to prevent them equating Jehovah with any of these. Verses 15 and 16 seem to support the view because God connects this name to the names revealed to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and declares this is the name by which He will always be known by in the future – an indication again of His eternal, unchanging faithfulness to His people and His promises. This is what the name Yahweh came to mean to the Jews since that time.

Only three further names are revealed in the rest of the Pentateuch all having great significance for what would happen on the Israelites journey. Exodus 15:26 tells of how the desperately thirsty Israelites came to the water at Marah only to find the water bitter. God performed the miracle of making the water drinkable and then led them to the oasis of Elim. There He promised that if they obeyed Him they would not suffer any of the diseases that afflicted other people of the time. There to the Israelites He became Jehovah Rophe = the Lord who heals.

After the defeat of the Amalekites when Aaron and Hur had to hold up Moses' hands, an altar was built and called Jehovah Nissi = 'The Lord is my Banner. In other words, as long as the Israelites were relying on God for protection, victory would be theirs. Exodus 17:8-16

The final name is to be found in Leviticus 20:8, 21:7, 13 & 23 , 22:9, 16, 32

Jehovah Qadesh = the Lord who sanctifies – the One who makes you holy. The repetition of this name in these chapters are for emphasis, for as we said at the very start of tonight, humanity was created for a very special purpose – to be a treasured possession, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. By revealing Himself through His names, God was leaving the Israelites in no doubt that they served a Supreme God and that they were a chosen people to whom He was prepared to commit His power, strength, provision, healing, protection and sanctification. On their journey to the Promised Land, all these qualities would come to the fore. Not only in the use of names but by the construction of the tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant, the establishment of the priesthood, the entering into a covenant and the designation of particular sacrifices and festivals, would God lay the foundations of making them what they had been created for – a sanctified relationship with Him that would enable the perfect world He had created to be restored and reserved for His people.

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WEEK 4: COVENANT GOD.

How many times have you found yourself saying “How many times do I have to tell you....don’t squeeze the toothpaste from the middle of the tube.....leave everything on the floor.....to put away whatever you’ve brought out etc. And if you don’t believe how many times people need to tell us things, just count how many time that advert that really gets on your nerves comes on TV. My really annoying one at the moment is the ‘money supermarket’ one – it seems to be everywhere. If repetition plays such a major role in our technological, modern world when we can get all sorts of information very quickly through a computer, how much more did people who had only their memories to rely on, need to have things repeated to them. Yet if you look at all the repetition from Exodus 20 on you will see that none of it was unnecessary and in all cases, had a very serious purpose behind it.

There is a logical explanation. One of the most repeated expressions is “God said to Moses, ‘Tell the Israelites.....’” Why, for example, did God not just by-pass Moses as the middle man, and speak directly to the Israelites? That would have cut out one repetition. The answer lies in Exodus 20:18-19. When the people saw the thunder and lightning and sound of trumpets that accompanied the voice of God at Sinai when the Ten Commandments were given, they said to Moses “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.” God honoured that request. The words that God spoke directly to Moses then had to be relayed to both the first and second generation of Israelites. Why, then, couldn’t Moses have just given a summary of what God said? Again, it was crucial that Moses reported accurately and in detail what God instructed and commanded. Moses’ leadership was challenged several times during this journey and had he just given his own version of God’s words, his position could have become untenable. By faithfully repeating God’s words, he was able to say with total confidence that when people grumbled against him or challenged his authority the “You are not grumbling against us (Moses and Aaron) but against the Lord.” (Exodus 16:8)

Another often repeated expression relates to ‘lasting ordinances’ – in other words the terms God was setting out were not to be temporary arrangement. They were to be continued as long as the covenant lasted and only God had the power to bring that covenant to an end. We see a modern example for to this very day two of the main events in the Jewish calendar are the Passover (Feast of Unleavened Bread) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Yom Kippur is the holiest and most solemn day in Jewish life. The fact that these terms of the covenant are still adhered to today, indicates the utmost seriousness of all that is contained in this covenant. The Pentateuch sets out the fundamental principles by which God intends to restore humanity to His original plan for it. Scholars have compared the Sinai Covenant to other law codes and treaties that existed in the Ancient Near East and when we realise that breaking covenants or treaties in the Ancient Near East could be compared to committing treason, we can begin to understand why certain breaches of the Sinai Covenant incurred the death penalty or being ‘cut off’ from the people.

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The last point regarding the necessity of repetition, is to be found in Exodus 18:20 and Leviticus 10:11. Both verses show that Moses was not just to report back to the Israelites. It was the job of Moses to “teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform.” In Leviticus, it is Aaron who is also commanded to teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses. It was essential for the people to know and remember these things, for Deuteronomy (4:9; 6:7, 20; 11:19;) passes on the responsibility to the Israelites who are told “Impress them upon your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” In other words, the terms of the covenant were to be on peoples’ minds at all times. Deuteronomy 31:12 even gives instructions that children were to be included in the assemblies held in the towns of the Promised Land when the law was being read so that they too would learn to fear the Lord for as long as they lived. This is emphasised in Deuteronomy 32:47 which follows the command to teach children “to obey carefully all the words of this law” – These are not just idle words for you – they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.” In other words, what God was giving at Sinai was a lifestyle and His worldview of what that lifestyle should consist of.

So, what is so special about the Sinai covenant? First of all, the motivation behind it. God could have absolved Himself of all responsibility when Adam and Eve failed Him, but, even knowing how humanity would turn out as populations expanded, God did not cease His efforts to bring humanity back to what it was intended to be. Instead, He inaugurated means by which humanity could be drawn back into relationship with Him. The Sinai covenant comes as the means by which a gracious and loving God seeks to restore humanity to its original perfect state. Moses makes this clear in Deuteronomy 7:7-9. “The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers.....He is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.” Israel was not special because of what was in them, but because of what was in God – eternal, boundless love for humanity.

But how was this relationship to be restored given that God’s holiness was so far removed from the sinfulness of fallen humanity. It was God’s holiness that led to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and the scattering of the nations and the confusion of language because of the arrogance and self-sufficiency of the Tower of Babel builders. It was the holiness of God which led to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah whose immorality has become proverbial and by the time of the Israelites, the people of the known world were far removed from what God had designed them to be. In fact, verses within the Pentateuch emphasise that what is forbidden for the Israelites was exactly what was being practiced in other cultures in that territory. The time had come to spell out exactly the standards God required to enable humanity to reflect His glory, and by doing so, could bring about the reversal of the curse of Eden and bring into being a ‘royal priesthood’, a ‘holy nation,’ and a ‘treasured possession’. Bear in mind that although law codes did exist in the

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ancient world, none had the worship, witness and service to God as its motivation. None had the redemption of fallen humanity as its ultimate purpose.

The Sinai covenant spells out what a covenant God is prepared to do to gather together a people bound together by a distinctive lifestyle. In order to know what that lifestyle entailed, God had to reveal Himself to the Israelites in a very distinctive way. Everything that comes from God in these books is connected in one way or another to His Presence, Personality and Promises.

Presence

God's desire to have a dwelling place among His people meant that they had to know His presence with them and have a means of responding to it. Firstly, the specifics of the building of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant were to be the tangible signs of God's presence. Almost one-quarter of Exodus is taken up with instructions for the building of the tabernacle. The instructions come in chapters 26 to 37 and the materials indicate that this was no ordinary place of worship – it was designed like a royal dwelling. The provision for a Holy of Holies containing the Ark of the Covenant would have suggested a throne room, only to be accessed by those whom a king deemed acceptable in His presence. The fulfilment of those instructions is given in chapters 37 to 39. That everything was done as God had commanded was shown by God's glory filling the tabernacle on the "first day of the first month in the second year". In other words in time for the people to celebrate the first anniversary of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

The tabernacle was not only a place of worship, it was also the Tent of Meeting. Exodus 29:43 states, "There....I will meet with the Israelites and the place will be consecrated to my glory." Like the Garden of Eden, the tabernacle became the place where communication could take place between divinity and humanity. By the end of Exodus, the Israelites were left in no doubt that God was present among them just by observing the unique detail in the construction of the tabernacle and the cloud and pillar of fire that had settled upon it.

The second thing that needed to be done was to provide a means by which the Israelites could enter into that presence. The means by which a sinful people could come into contact with a Holy God and live was achieved by the establishment of a priesthood which would act as an intermediary and represent the people to God. Thirdly, the means to enable the people to respond collectively and individually to God was achieved through the various festivals, rituals and through the offerings which had to be made for different aspects of the covenant obligations or for breaches of those obligations. The obligations themselves were clearly set out in the giving of the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Law. By these means God became the focus of the daily corporate life of the Israelites. While they adhered to the protocols and procedures God had ordained, they could never have been unaware that God was amongst them.

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Personality

Last week we mentioned the names by which God revealed aspects of His personality. And the most important one is Jehovah Qadesh

God's words in LEVITICUS 20:8 states, "Consecrate yourselves and be holy because I am the Lord your God. Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the Lord who makes you holy."

Don Francisco puts it like this:

Holiness, holiness - It's the only life that the Lord can bless

Holiness, holiness It's the Lord's command Not the Lord's request

I think I've mentioned before that ninety per cent of Leviticus is comprised of God's words and we find that every decree or command laid down by God, here is connected to holiness – this is the prominent aspect of God's personality contained in this book and scholars have worked out that the words, holy, holiness and sanctify occur 152 times in Leviticus – 1/5 of the use of words in the Old Testament. Yes, these these words were being spoken to the Israelites we also need to focus on them for what they tell us about the personality of God. Every term speaks of what God likes and dislikes; what God approves of and what He doesn't approve of; what He sees as good and right and just and what He sees as bad and wrong and unjust. If we see all these laws and decrees as revealing the personality of God, we can begin to understand just how wide the gulf is between fallen humanity and a Holy God. As if to emphasise this, holiness is closely connected to cleanliness and purity. If you want to know the origin of the expression 'Cleanliness is next to godliness', just read Leviticus.

Why the emphasis on holiness. Because it is the very essence of God's personality. He manifests perfect holiness and to be holy is to be God-like. And because of this, God is the source of holiness and the Holy of Holies is so-called because God's presence there makes it the holiest location on the entire earth. Holiness also encompasses the moral perfection and purity of God's nature. In other words God's personality is such that not only is His very nature holy, but that as a consequence all His actions, attitudes and words are holy too. God's holiness extends to people, places, objects and even periods of time. All of these are shown in Leviticus to have varying degrees sanctification by God. For example the High Priest, his garments and his role is the most holy office in the Israelite community. The Ark of the Covenant is the most sanctified object and the Sabbath day is the holiest day of the week. All the laws point to this essential aspect of God's personality. His is a moral perfection marked by love, purity and righteousness which are the hallmarks of perfect behaviour.

But holiness is also an indication of what is not holy and Leviticus leaves the Israelites in no doubt as to what is usually referred to as unclean. God distinguishes between the types of uncleanness that can be rectified, for example, by washing and the passage of a certain amount of time; and those which cannot be rectified and incur the death penalty or cutting off from the people. In these cases, however, people have the power to control the forms the

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uncleanness takes – for example, murder, blasphemy, forbidden sexual activity etc., so to a large extent their fate is in their own hands.

A diagram of the organisation God designated for the Israelites camp helps to explain the God's revelation of His holiness and its opposite. The tabernacle is placed in the middle. It is the holiest place in the camp. Around it are placed the locations of the 12 tribes. Because these are the people God is prepared to sanctify by revealing His standard of holiness, they are considered clean. Anything and anyone outside that perimeter is regarded as unclean or unholy. Hence, the removal from the camp, either temporarily or permanently, of those with various degrees of uncleanness, for only those considered clean could remain where a holy God dwelt with His people. There was no point in the people being told twice that they were "a people holy to the Lord your God..... chosen ... out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession (Deuteronomy 7:6 c/f 14:2) if they had no idea of what it meant to be holy. Had God not revealed these aspects of His holy personality, people would never have known the standards God expected from them. It was God's love for the people which led Him not to leave them in doubt about Him or His intentions towards them.

And it was God's love too that recognised that the leaders, priests and people would be engaged in a constant struggle to remain holy and clean and this explains the necessity of a complicated sacrificial system outlined in chapters 1-7. These enabled those who were unclean to become pure and holy for, without them, it would have been impossible for the Israelites to live in close contact with the Lord their God. The repetition of the do's and don'ts and the religious activities associated with them, revealed to the Israelites aspects of God's personality that could not be understood by other means. The revelation of His personality was the means by which a relationship could be established and communication maintained. God was inviting people into partnership with Him to reverse the curse of Eden.

And that partnership was and still is to be achieved through a covenant community. David has expressed sadness about how today Christendom is divided and perhaps we need to ask to what extent is this due to ignoring the holiness of God and tolerating a lack of or a lower standard of holiness in Church affairs? If holiness is the essence of God and we are meant to reflect that in corporate and individual life, then it may be that it is an issue that needs to be addressed in our day and age.

And one important reason for doing so is that holiness is the foundation upon which the promises of God stand. God did not leave the Israelites simply with strict rule book. The Pentateuch shows that God made promises that would bless the Israelites to the extent that they would be protected from all enemies and would be provided with every necessity for a prosperous and well-ordered lifestyle that would be the envy of surrounding nations. The general blessing for the people is familiar and even more specific promises are made in in Leviticus 26:3-10 This is how much God was prepared to do to ensure every aspect of the well-being of the people would be catered for.

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LEVITICUS 26:3-10

If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land.

I will grant peace in the land and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid. I will remove savage beasts from the land, and the sword will not pass through your country. You will pursue your enemies and they will fall by the sword before you. Five of you will chase a hundred and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you.

I will look on you with favour and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you.

You will still be eating last year's harvest when you will have to move it out to make room for the new.

I will put my dwelling place among you and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God and you will be my people.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high.

They add up to peace, protection and provision – and all God asked in return was obedience regarding His laws – laws which can be summed up in, firstly, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” – Deuteronomy 6:6 and secondly, if people followed the rules governing their personal habits and behaviour towards others, then they would be loving their neighbours as themselves. If holiness is the issue and this is the result, then the place to start getting back to these foundations is within the Church itself, for as we'll see next week, covenant communities are far from perfect!

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WEEK 5: COVENANT COMMUNITY

Wouldn't it be lovely to live on a desert island? No council tax or utility bills and no annoying people to spoil your serenity and peace of mind. But would we really choose that long term? Yorkshire people have a saying that there is "nought as queer as folk" and I think we've all got to admit that people range from the loveliest, kindest folk you could ever meet, through the bizarre and eccentric and fanatical, to the most brutal and violent criminals and tyrants. One way or another, we all have to live with people. But could you ever imagine taking on responsibility for everybody in the world? The very thought of having to do that I think would have most of us rushing to find the nearest desert island. Yet taking on responsibility for all the people of this world, past, present and future, is exactly what God did, starting with a small section of human society. The Pentateuch is the start of the account by which God intends to accomplish the goals He has set for humanity. In the past 4 weeks we have seen how God created the world and its occupants and we have seen the ways in which He revealed Himself through that creation, His Names, His rules for a holy lifestyle and the fulfilment of covenant promises. In fact, God did everything appropriate to that time and place to make Himself known to the people He had chosen as agents to further those plans. Last week, in particular, we saw how God had literally put everything in place to ensure that the Israelites were organised in such a way that they could participate in the terms of the Sinai covenant completely free from any internal crises or external threats – providing they fulfilled their obligations under the terms of that covenant. The choice of a nation as an agent, however, was what would be termed nowadays, a very risky 'quantum leap' in the furtherance of His plans.

The first thing that has to be said is that the Israelites were given a choice. They were not forced to agree to anything that God presented to them through Moses. When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the Lord has said we will do." Exodus 24:3-4. Only then did Moses write "down everything the Lord had said."

This answer was affirmed by the completion of the building of the tabernacle, its layout and furniture, the precise procedures for the consecration and ordination of the priesthood, roles and arrangement for the Levites and even the physical organisation of the camp and the two census' that were taken. When you read through Exodus 39 and 40 there are several repetitions of the statement that everything was done as the Lord commanded. For example, Exodus 39:32,

³²In this way all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished; the Israelites had done everything just as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Yet it is not in the completion of these practical tasks that are the key to the commitment of the Israelites. What was much more important was the motivation behind the work. **Exodus 35:5 and 22 contain the key to what should have been the dynamic driving obedient commitment to the whole covenant.** These verses emphasise that the offerings for the material construction of the tabernacle, its furniture and implements came from a "generous"

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and “willing” heart. The same can be said about Exodus 36:2 for it was only those whose hearts had been “moved” to help in the building of the tabernacle were involved in its construction. Such was the response to what was needed that the people had to be restrained from bringing anything more (Exodus 36:6-7). In everything connected with the tabernacle, the Israelite response could not be faulted. It could therefore be said that in doing everything that the Lord had commanded, that they had shown their love for Him for their obedience had come from the heart.

When we come to the obligations about conduct, however, a different picture emerges. It is true that the obligations laid upon the Israelites add up to a very strict standard of behaviour. But we saw last week that God did not expect perfection – He made more than adequate provision to atone for breaches of the laws and decrees. From God’s perspective, the only way people could really keep His commandments was from the right motivation. Deuteronomy 6:4-6 gives it in a nutshell.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. 5You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Service from the heart for the Israelites can be seen from three overlapping perspectives. **Firstly, gratitude for deliverance from slavery in Egypt, for God’s faithfulness** to the covenant promises He had made to their ancestors and for **His protection and provision** for them on the journey they had undertaken. **Secondly, returning the love** He had shown them in choosing them from all the other peoples of the world and His desire to bless them above and beyond what any people of the ancient world could even dream about. **Thirdly, being loyal for what God had already done for them and had promised to do in the future for them.** The ability to obey the decrees and laws depended on **inner attitudes of gratitude and trust, love and loyalty.** From the moment the Israelites left Egypt these attitudes were tested and the first to fail the test was that of gratitude. No sooner had the Israelites got to the Red Sea than the challenges to Moses began demanding why he had brought them out of Egypt. Was there any greater words of ingratitude or example of lack of trust for the deliverance from slavery than those of Exodus 14:12 “Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?’ It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert.”

This example was to set the pattern for a catalogue of incidents that revealed the true nature of the covenant community. And Moses bore the brunt of that nature. Leadership is not easy, but in Moses the Israelites had been provided with a unique leader. Unlike the rise of worldly leaders, the leadership of Moses came not through his own personal ambition, natural talent or the influence of great wealth or powerful connections, but through the call and commissioning of God. In fact when we read of the encounter at the burning bush, we see Moses extremely reluctant to take on the role assigned to him, even using his own shortcomings as an excuse. Some time later we read that in spite of his mastery over the Egyptians and the deliverance of the people, including the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, Moses is still said to be “a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face

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of the earth” (Exodus 12:3). And Moses did not use his closeness to God to lord it over the people in spite of having an extraordinarily intimate relationship with God – to the extent that God was willing to let Moses see His person – albeit if only His back. Exodus 33:11 tells us that “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.” Yet the record of the Pentateuch shows he had no aversion to the elevating of others to positions of great authority over the people. Ultimately, the High Priest would have equal or greater authority than the leader, for he was the intermediary between all the people and God especially in regard to atonement for sin. Moses was prepared to listen to advice and that of his father-in-law led him delegate control over the everyday issues that arose among the people (Exodus 18:19:23). Delegation of his authority, with the consent of the Lord, led to the system of judges who ruled over the people until the time of Samuel. Above all, he was prepared to sacrifice his own life and the opportunity to become the father of a great nation, for the sake of the people he led.

Yet in spite of being willing to sacrifice himself for the good of the people; in spite of being the man God had put in charge and had made it obvious that Moses was His chosen spokesman; in spite of fulfilling everything God had asked of him, Moses still found himself subjected to immense pressure. But, throughout all this turmoil, Moses was sure of one thing. While the attacks may have affected him personally, he had the insight to realise that ultimately the incidents were testing and opposing God. And that is why, in the case of the Israelites, their behaviour brought swift and terrible punishments on those involved.

The ways in which the Israelites showed their lack of gratitude and trust, love and loyalty came in the form of **murmurings against the Lord, challenges to authority and rebellion and religious apostasy**. Exodus chapters 15-17 and Numbers 11-25 contain the record of these incidents.

In terms of lack of gratitude and trust, every murmuring against God regarding the lack of food and water showed that they did not trust Him to provide for them in the present or in His promise to bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey. Manna, quail and water did not stop them wanting the “cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic” they had in Egypt (Exodus 11:4-5). They had conveniently forgotten the conditions that accompanied the availability of these foods. And when they are presented with the evidence of the fertility and abundance of Canaan when the spies brought back the cluster of grapes, they rebel and refuse to enter the land. In this case they showed a lack of trust in the Lord’s ability and willingness to give them victory in spite of the strength of the people who occupied the land. Belatedly, they agree to make the effort, but their disobedience and failure to commit themselves to God’s providence only brought about their defeat.

It would have been thought that the first generation would have learned from the Golden calf incident and the consequence of their failure to enter the Promised Land. Numbers 11-25 shows that not only did they repeat the murmurings about food and water, but their behaviour became even more threatening as time went on. In fact, the people made Moses and Aaron so angry with their complaints about lack of water at Kadesh that instead of just speaking to the rock to access the water, Moses struck the rock twice with his staff. (Numbers 20:1-13).

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This was the incident that kept even Moses and Aaron out of the Promised Land. In the whole record this is the only place where Moses has put a foot wrong, yet it had such serious consequences for him. But it also shows why God expects His commands not to be treated lightly. Verse 12 says – “Because you did not TRUST in me enough to honour me **as holy in the sight of the Israelites**, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.”

Trust showed not just gratitude but pointed to the holiness of God. Moses as God’s spokesman, Aaron as His High Priest and the community as witness to His character were all bound by covenant to obey the laws and decrees of God. Each for them had ample evidence that failure to do so would incur God’s retribution.

Even greater retribution came for those who challenged the God-appointed leadership. The death of the first generation came about not just because they believed the reports of the 10 spies and refused to enter the land, but also because they threatened to choose a new leader and go back to Egypt. On that occasion Moses and Aaron’s very lives were in danger for the people threatened to stone them - Numbers 14:1-10. Only Moses’ intercession prevented the destruction of the whole community, but it resulted in God declaring that none of the first generation would enter the land, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb. After that, the most serious case for Moses was the challenge from his own brother and sister who challenged him on the grounds of whether or not he was the only one who could claim to speak on the Lord’s behalf (Numbers 12:1-2). God’s anger is said to have burned against Aaron and Miriam was afflicted with a skin disease, only reduced because of the intercession of Moses, but still requiring her to remain outside the camp for 7 days. The challenge from Korah, one of the Levite clans entrusted with duties connected to the tabernacle was catastrophic for those involved. Korah demanded priestly status claiming that everyone in the camp was holy (Numbers 16) thus challenging the hierarchical structure ordained by God of priest, levites and people. Korah was aided and abetted by Dathan and Abiram who were Reubenites. Dathan and Abiram accused Moses of ‘lording’ it over the people and bringing them into a worse situation than what they had been in in Egypt. When they were summoned to the assembly of the people, they refused to come. As a consequence of this challenge, the earth opened and swallowed up all who were involved. And to add insult to injury, the next day the whole community blamed Moses and Aaron for what had happened to Korah, Dathan, Abiram and those who supported them.

Numbers 25 gives the third way in which the Israelites failed to keep covenant commitments – this time through the worship of Baal and its associated sexual immorality while they were camped on the Plains of Moab, on the very border of Canaan. The worship of the Golden calf and now the worship of Baal were the most blatant examples of disloyalty to God and a clear breach of the very first commandment. The sexual immorality was especially heinous for an Israelite man brought a Midianite woman into the camp, thereby defiling a location God had made holy. The execution of the guilty party is accepted as atonement, but a further 24,000 were killed by plague. As the record stands, this incident marks the deaths of the last of the Exodus generation.

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This incident marks a transition. Moses is coming to the end of his life. The second generation are poised to enter Canaan. It is the appropriate moment to bring together the experience of the Israelites since the deliverance from Egypt. Deuteronomy is an address to the second generation. It starts with a review of the past but from chapter 4 onwards it is about their future when they actually settle in the land. Words like ‘watch’, ‘be careful’, ‘hear’, ‘listen’, ‘proclaim’, ‘pay attention’ and ‘obey’ all occur time and time again for Moses is summing up for them what they are to do when they enter the land and all the statutes and judgements they are to observe. In chapters 27-30, he leaves them in no doubt that there are great rewards for obedience and faithfulness to the covenant, but they can expect dire consequences if they fail to do so. They have had plenty of evidence of this from the experience of their parents, but they are entering a new situation and that is why Moses gives a most solemn and serious warning.

“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. 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.(30:19-20)”.

The Israelites were being given a choice between life and prosperity and death and destruction (30:15). That Moses truly believed that this was the case is shown in 32:47 where he tells the people that his words “are not just idle words for you – they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.”

And Moses also addresses the essential and critical factors that will determine whether the Israelites will experience the blessings or the curses - love and loyalty. Throughout Deuteronomy there are many references to a ‘heartfelt’ response to God. (4:29; 10:12; 11:13;) It is in Deuteronomy that we first read that “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.” As far as the covenant terms are concerned Moses insists that they are “not too difficult for you or beyond your reach” (30:11) for “the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your hearts so you may obey it.” (30:14). The future of the special relationship between God and His chosen people is dependent upon each party making a wholehearted commitment to love the other. God’s love for and loyalty to the people are not in doubt. Exhorting the people to enter the land with courage Moses declares that “the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. That is why throughout the book Moses also emphasises the necessity of loyalty. The experience of the Moabite apostasy would have given a stark warning to this generation but Moses found it necessary to state over 20 times that the Israelites were not to follow, serve, worship or bow down to other gods.

Deuteronomy ends with a people given a future full of positive potential and promise. The past history of the community that had left Egypt had manifested all the characteristics of the kinds of human nature that not only exist in the world at large, but as church history also shows, happens within the covenant communities themselves. And the conduct of those

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within the covenant community is still a matter of concern today. How many schisms have been caused by unjustified challenges to authority. As the Israelite examples show, unjustified challenges were those which directly opposed the explicit commands of God. Disobedience, unfaithfulness, lack of trust, disloyalty have all been found within the church. But the other side of the coin is the question of the extent to which the existence of unity within a covenant community today is result of the faithful intercession of dedicated, godly leaders? We do not know if these situations will get better or worse in the future and what the outcome will be. We do know how things ended for the Israelites – it is the story of the rest of the Old Testament. Next week we will see how Moses' final words became prophetic in this respect.

WEEK 6: ENDINGS

“And they all lived happily ever after....” I don't know about you but I like happy endings or at least endings that don't make you feel that the 'baddie' has got away with it or that justice has not been done. Whether we realise it or not, we do get caught up in the lives of fictional characters and situations, whether it is in a book or in Coronation Street, Emmerdale or Eastenders. I stopped watching Neighbours because, at my age, I just couldn't identify with all the teenage angst that was developing.

Most of the time, though, I get my fiction from books and I've found that very often you can pick one up, read it, set it aside and never think of it again. But some books are meant to affect you and the Bible is the supreme example of this. I hope nobody thinks I'm being blasphemous when I say that we need sometimes to set aside our concept of the Bible as a 'Holy' Book and the infallible Word of God – which it is. But I say that because sometimes the Bible is no more than a comfort to us when we need that, a devotional so that we can get close to God for a certain amount of time a day or a 'special' interest unlike, and separated from, all other kinds of interest. Sometimes it's a book we pick up for certain purposes and when the purpose is no longer in focus, the Bible is set aside and not thought of again until the next purpose arises.

The Bible gives a plan of salvation that we really have to get involved with and feel we are living the lives of the characters because, as I said at the very beginning, we are dealing with the same God, the same world and we are the same kind of people. The difference between fiction and the Bible, however, is that the Bible life experience is real.

I quoted the Jewish assertion that the Pentateuch contains EVERYTHING and that includes the past, present and future direction of covenant communities. That is why maybe we need at times to take the Bible out of its 'glass case' and see it as life as it is meant to be lived. What is in the Bible should be as much a part of our pockets or handbags as our mobile phone or keys. In other words, make God's worldview and integral part of our everyday, ordinary lives. Oswald Chambers says that Christians should not have to seek the will of God – they are the will of God. He means that Bible teaching is not something outside of us, but should actually be the internal spring that feeds all that we are and all that we do and say.

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And we saw that when we looked at the covenant community last week. The Sinai covenant and the Book of the Law were not an external set of rules to be obeyed, literally at the peril of death, but were to be at the heart of the relationship between God and His chosen people. I said last week too that the Pentateuch was an unfinished story. Tonight we take a look at how that story ended for the Israelites and it may be a very simplistic way of putting it, but things ended as they did, because in the final analysis, the Israelites' had not taken it to heart. Their hearts were not in it.

On the Plains of Moab, poised to enter Canaan, the war already won because God had promised them victory; the assurance of peace, protection and prosperity for the foreseeable future and beyond, what could have been a more inspiring prospect to motivate the covenant community to fulfil its obligations. No nation before or since ever had the potential to become the very life of God on planet earth. But as their story unfolds in the rest of the Old Testament we start to anticipate what the end is going to be.

The Book of Joshua tells of the conquest of Canaan and while under the leadership of Joshua, the Israelites conducted the wars according to what God had commanded – the total destruction of every man, woman and child in the territories the Israelites were to possess – Jericho is the first example, all perished, with the exception of Rahab and her family. This is an issue staring us in the face today and one of the most difficult commands for people today to come to terms with. Whatever its causes, we live in times when the terms 'jihad', or 'holy war' are familiar concepts. In the mindset of fanatical Muslims, all infidels, or, in our term, pagans, must be exterminated and whether we like it or not, this is the pattern of God's commands to the Israelites. Given the accounts of total slaughter in Joshua, can we condemn Muslims, while condoning or making excuses for the Israelites? That is the dilemma facing both Christians and non-Christians today. We can accept that God is a God of love; it is more difficult to accept Him as a Warrior in the way the Israelites did (Exodus 15:3). Why did a God of love order such a thing? Was there any justification for it? Does this mean God encourages the covenant community to wage war this kind of war today or that He approves of the Islamic jihad? It's only as we look towards the ending of the Israelite story that we begin to get the answers to these questions. But we have to look first in the Pentateuch. Here we find not only what God says about the conduct of the war for the Canaanite territories, but also the reasons for it.

Chapter 20 of Deuteronomy clearly states that the Israelites are to give non-Canaanite cities an opportunity to come to a peaceful arrangement and only if the cities remain hostile are they to be besieged and conquered. In chapter 21:10-14, there are even commands to ensure the honourable treatment of female captives. In spite of their treatment by both Edom and Egypt, the people are forbidden to hate either nation (23:7:8). God's commands regarding the slaughter of other peoples only applied to the Midianites and those occupying Canaan – particularly the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Treaties with these peoples were forbidden as was intermarriage. The reason given was that they "prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices and they will lead your sons to do the same" (Exodus 34:11:16 & Deuteronomy 7:1:6). Further reasons appear in Numbers 33:55-56. "But if you do not drive

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out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them.” Deuteronomy 7:16 and 2 speak of these nations ‘ensnaring ‘ the Israelites into the worship of other gods. That is why there are several commands to “destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places.” Deuteronomy 12:1-3. The Israelites are even forbidden to seek knowledge about how other peoples worship or try to worship God in the same way for they did all “the detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.” (Deuteronomy 14:30-31). In summary, failure to destroy the Canaanite peoples would lead to them teaching the Israelites “to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.” (Deuteronomy 20:18).

The order to destroy the peoples of Canaan boil down to a choice - between true and false gods, true and false worship, God’s worldview and humanity’s worldview. The Israelites were to be God’s agents of judgement on pagan worship and the behaviour that was so obnoxious to God that destruction was the only option – just like Sodom and Gomorrah. Without really knowing the true extent of the abhorrence God felt for the practices of the Canaanites, we are not entitled to judge whether or not God was justified in giving these commands, or whether or not He could have found other means to mitigate their wrongs and still preserve the integrity of His covenant community.

What we can do is look at the rest of the Old Testament record and draw from that whether or not God was right in His appraisal of the situation. We get the first hint from Numbers 31 where we are told that the Lord’s orders to take vengeance on the Midianites was not carried out as ordered. Why the Midianites? The history between them and the Israelites went back a long way – back, in fact to Genesis 37:36, for it was the Midianites who sold Joseph to Potiphar in Egypt. It was the elders of Midian who aided Balak the Moabite to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites; and it was a Midianite woman who was involved in the apostasy at Peor and the defilement of the Israelite camp on the Plains of Moab (Numbers 25:16:18). The result of the failure to deal with the Midianites for once and for all had consequences. Read the story of Gideon in the Book of Judges, to see just how true God’s prediction of how much trouble the Israelites would bring upon themselves by the failure to carry out God’s orders to the letter.

And as we read through Joshua, we see that as the tribes took over the land that they did not drive out and destroy the inhabitants (Joshua 13:13) For example, Judah did not destroy the Jebusites (15:63). Manasseh and Ephraim, the descendants of Joseph did not destroy the Canaanites. By Judges 3:5-6 we learn that. ⁵So the Israelites lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; ⁶and they took their daughters as wives for themselves, and their own daughters they gave to their sons; and they worshipped their gods.

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By breaking the very first commandment and ignoring the rest, the Israelites lost all the blessings of covenant promises. The Book of Judges is a sorry tale of apostasy, followed by repentance and deliverance, only to be followed again by more apostasy.

By the time towards the end of Samuel's life, the Israelites are so immersed in the cultures around them that they demand the appointment of a king "to lead us, such as all the other nations have." Samuel refused but they would not accept his decision, stating that they wanted to be "like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles." Samuel's distress and prayer to God showed the extent to which the Sinai covenant had become irrelevant in the lives of the Israelites. God had chosen a people to be unlike other nations. God's words to Samuel, showed how the opposite was true "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king." Ingratitude, lack of trust, disobedience and disloyalty culminated in the demand for a king.

Samuel's prediction of the behaviour of future kings, also lies in sharp contrast to Moses' instructions regarding the choice of a king and what should characterise his kingship. Samuel's predictions all came true, for apart from notably the reign of David, the early years of the reign of Solomon and those of Asa, Hezekiah of Josiah, none of the kings of Israel or Judah lived up to Moses' description of what a king should be like. In particular, Moses had emphasised necessity of the king having a personal copy of the book of the law which he was to follow. This was the only way in which he could be assured of a long and trouble-free reign.

One of the main problems with the books of Kings and Chronicles is that there is a very rapid turnover of regal candidates and all too often, it is recorded that the king "did evil in the sight of the Lord." Of all the kings mentioned Ahab and Jezebel are the most notorious, Jezebel becoming a by-word among the Jews for all that was corrupt and evil in pagan worship and practice. Both Ahab and Jezebel promoted Baal worship and we find that it is so rampant in the land that a showdown becomes inevitable. The story of Elijah confronting the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel and the subsequent persecution of Elijah by Jezebel is a graphic picture of how far the Israelites had departed from the Sinai covenant.

And the conduct of kings had its impact on the people they ruled over. Instead of the peace, protection and prosperity promised for obedience to the Sinai covenant, the tribes lost their ancestral territorial inheritances, war became a constant feature of life, oppression, injustice and famine were never far away. You just have to read the words of the prophets of both Israel and Judah to see the awful consequences of the failure to obey the first instruction on entering the land of Canaan - to destroy everyone and everything that would corrupt the covenant community and lead it astray.

Worse was to come. With the benefit of hindsight we can see how true was Moses' predictions in Deuteronomy 28 of "a nation ...from far away" which would bring about the destruction of the covenant community. Israel fell to the Assyrians, Judah to the Babylonians and from that time until 1948, the Jewish people were never masters of their own fate or

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possessors of the land God had given them. The Greeks followed first by Alexander the Great and then his successors. The 'abomination of desolation' mentioned in the Book of Daniel is believed to refer to one of them – Antiochus IV. Then came the Romans, but by this time, the Temple, which had replaced the tabernacle as the focus of worship had reached a stage of degeneration run by a politicised and worldly priesthood and the sacrificial system had encouraged a worldly business culture that was later described as a 'den of thieves.' When the Romans destroyed the Temple in AD70 they destroyed the last tangible vestige of the presence of God with His people and their means of responding to Him.

But that did not mean that the Pentateuch had become irrelevant for the future of the Jews, as the Israelite community had become. Nor is it irrelevant for the covenant communities that have existed from that time and will do into the future, for over these past weeks we have seen that the issues it raises are the window through which we see the perennial difficulties facing covenant communities. Acceptance of God's worldview or suffer the consequences of its rejection.

- The Pentateuch is the window through which we see God's worldview that has existed from the beginning of time.
- It is the window through which we see the creative power of God and His ability to sustain the universe He created and all that is in it.
- The covenant promises are the window through which we see that God's plan for humanity has existed from the beginning of time and that He will not fail to deliver on the promises associated with those plans.
- The Sinai covenant is the window through which we learn about the nature of God and His desire to bless humanity by His presence which guarantees their peace, protection and prosperity.
- The story of the covenant community's response to such blessing is the window through which we see that the rejection of God and His worldview only leads to forfeiting all the benefits of the present, and ultimately end in the ruin of the ideal community the covenant could have created.

A sad and sorry ending to something that had started out with such promise for the Israelite covenant community.

Thankfully, though, the story of the Pentateuch does not end there. In fact, it still hasn't ended, it has just taken a different direction. AD70 was only the ending of a chapter.

Think of a story where the hero/heroine makes a complete mess of their lives, repents and tries to make amends for the wrongs committed, but to do so has to go back to where the wrongs started. This is a plot of many fictional stories and it is encapsulated in the story of the Prodigal Son. From these kinds of stories we get a sense of hope because there is the possibility of a 'second chance' to make things right. Yes there will be difficulties and setbacks and obstacles to overcome, but somehow we want things to turn out right in the end. That is the position covenant communities are in today. And a prerequisite for their continued existence and survival leading to a happy ending, depends on the extent to which they give attention to what begins in the Pentateuch. Although the tabernacle and its

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sacrificial rituals, which were the visible symbols of God's presence and the means of responding to Him, have gone, everything else remains in place. God is still the God of creation. God is still faithful to the covenants He made with Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is still a God whose very essence is holiness and who expects holy behaviour from His people. Those laws and decrees about human behaviour towards God and towards each other have not been nullified or cancelled. Those blessings which God promised the Israelites are still on the table, although their fulfilment must await the New Jerusalem. The warnings of destruction remain for those who are not prepared to accept God's worldview and His way of doing things. Going back to our roots and taking all these things on board is the first step towards a happier ending of our stories. It's the only way - for the Israelites found out to their cost that God is not to be mocked or ignored.

So, where do we go from here? By going back the foundational principle Moses gave us around 3500 years ago in Deuteronomy 6:4-6 which so concisely combines the first commandment and the motivation that underlies it.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Words which God confirmed to us – the second chance, covenant communities – through the words of Jesus in Mark 12:28-31. All God asked of the Israelites three millennia ago is the same as what He is asking of us today – Trust Me and obey Me.

“Which commandment is the first of all?” JESUS answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”