

**“In a Relationship with God”**  
**Deuteronomy 1:19-46**  
**January 12, 2014**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

People talk a great deal today about relationships. Relationship status is a prominent part of one’s Facebook page. Many books and sermons are devoted to this topic, as well as much personal conversation. The Bible teaches that our most important relationship is with God. It is a foundational relationship. During our first year in Birmingham, a tornado came through our neighborhood, and one of the houses was knocked off its foundation. It wasn’t dislodged very much, just a few inches. And despite the fact that the part of the house above the foundation was largely undamaged, there was no option other than to demolish the house and rebuild. When a house’s foundation is lost, everything else will soon crumble. When our relationship with the Lord crumbles, it’s only a matter of time before everything else collapses.

We are beginning a study today in a book of the Bible that is all about our relationship with God. The word the Bible uses for God’s relationship with his people is the word “covenant.” God enters into a covenant with his people. The book of Deuteronomy is one of the more important books of the Old Testament, and it is all about God’s covenant relationship with his people. God initiates this relationship and promises to love, guide and protect his people. On their part, God’s people are to trust God, listen obediently to him and follow him wholeheartedly. In this respect, nothing has changed since Moses wrote these words 3500 years ago. God continues to enter into a relationship with his people, to be their covenantal God and love, guide and protect them, and asks of those who want to be in a relationship with him to trust him, obey him and follow him wholeheartedly.

In this book that is all about our relationship with God, Moses begins with a long story of how Israel failed in their relationship with God. They didn’t trust him, obey him or follow him. It’s the well-known story of Israel coming to the border of the Promised Land after God delivered them from Egypt. They send spies to the land to scout it out in preparation for taking possession of the land. The spies report back that the land is indeed a good land, but also well-fortified. At that news, the people lose their nerve and melt in fear. Instead of trusting God and obeying him to take possession of the land, they refuse to move forward. As a result, God brings judgment upon them and says that every adult over forty years of age will perish in the wilderness before they will be able to enter the land. So they turn around and wander the wilderness for another 38 years. There are three phrases in this story that capture the way we are to have a relationship with God. Let’s look at them now.

## I. The Land Is Before You (v. 21)

Through Moses, God told the people, **“See, the Lord your God has set the land before you. Go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has told you. Do not fear or be dismayed”** (v. 21). God had set before them a good future and asked them to walk into this future with trust in him rather than fear. To be in a covenant relationship with God is to face the future with an attitude of expectant adventure rather than an attitude of fear and anxiety.

Their fear is not hard to understand. They have just completed a 100 mile march through the wilderness, which Moses describes as “great and terrifying.” They would have been quite weary, and when we’re weary it is easy for our hearts to become fearful and anxious. Not only that, but it becomes clear that they were going to be expected to fight. There are two problems with that. First, as the spies point out, **“we have seen the sons of the Anakim there”** (v. 28). These Anakim were known as giants, and who wants to face an army of giants? Further, Israelite men had most recently been slaves in Egypt. They had learned a great deal about brickmaking, but not so much about warfare. So their fears were not irrational. When you live in a fallen, broken world, frightening and anxiety producing things are going to happen. Sickness, job losses, economic setbacks and many other frightening things do happen to people all the time. The issue is not whether we become fearful, but what we do with our fears. God asks them here to trust him and move forward in confidence that the future God had for them was a good one.

When you think about the future, does everything become a black cloud of anxiety, or is there a quiet confidence in the Lord? The Bible warns us about anxiety over and over again because it is so damaging to our relationship with God. Spurgeon said that anxiety does nothing to rob tomorrow of its problems; it only robs today of its strength. Fears and anxieties that are not taken to the Lord only grow bigger. Did you notice how Israel exaggerated the strength of their enemy here, saying that their **“cities are great and fortified up to heaven”** (v. 28)?

I was going somewhere in my car this week, and I heard on the radio an interview with a journalist who had written in his memoir about his battles with a severe anxiety disorder. When the interviewer asked him to list some of his anxieties, he replied with some of the normal ones, but also some that I had never before heard mentioned as phobias. He said he had a fear of cheese and a fear of vomiting. When asked if he had a root fear that seemed to fuel all the others, he replied that it was his fear of vomiting. He went on to say that the last time he had vomited was March 18, 1977. His life was dominated by a fear of something that hadn’t happened in 37 years. That is the nature of fear and anxiety. Israel gave way to fear here instead of trusting God, and suffered the consequences of that fear for the next 38 years. That brings us to our next phrase in this story.

## II. The Lord Goes Before You (v. 30)

Fear and anxiety bring great harm in our covenant relationship with God, and they must be fought. How do we do so? Moses knows something about fighting fear and anxiety that we need to know. The best weapon against them is good theology. What you truly believe about God deep in your heart has practical implications in life itself. So when Moses was attempting to get Israel to be faithful in obeying God and taking possession of the Promised Land, he taught them theology.

They were in need of some good theology. Note what they believed about God, which led to an increase of fear. **“And you murmured in your tents and said, ‘Because the Lord hated us he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to give us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us”** (v. 27). This is staggering. The event that most clearly demonstrated God’s care for his people and his mighty power at work in their lives, the exodus from Egypt, gets reinterpreted to assign malevolent motives to God. Their view was that God was playing a big trick on them. Everything he had done for them in delivering them from their bitter slavery to the most powerful nation of the world was only for the purpose of laughing at them when he would betray them and abandon them in their hour of need. God didn’t love them. He hated them.

I think it’s significant that they gave voice to this bad theology in their tents. Would they have spoken these words out in the open? This points up the difference between our formal theology and our working theology. Our working theology is the kind that we speak in the privacy of our bedrooms, while our formal theology is what we say we believe in public. Our working theology is far more important than our formal theology. What is your working theology when you face challenges? Do you believe that God cares for you, ignores you or is against you? Nothing will do more for you in battling fear and anxiety than having a working theology that believes God is for you, that he hasn’t forgotten you and that he is actively involved in your life as one who is in absolute control of every detail.

Moses attempts here to correct their bad theology by giving them good theology. He portrays God as a warrior, a father and a guide. First, God is a mighty warrior who will fight for his people, not from the rear but from the front. **“The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you”** (v. 30). Israel’s weariness and the inexperience of their men in warfare was irrelevant because God would lead them into battle and fight for them. How much more do those of us living after Jesus know this to be true! Jesus has fought our enemies for us, the enemies of sin, death and Satan. And he has routed them all on our behalf.

Not only is God a warrior, but he's also a caring parent, who carries his children when necessary. It was when Israel was in the wilderness, out of both food and water, that they saw **“how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son”** (v. 31). He carried them not just occasionally, but **“all the way that you went until you came to this place.”** When you carry someone, you are close to them. God comes to us in our weakness and carries us. We are called to surrender to him in our weakness and to feel his strong arms.

God was also a guide to them in the wilderness. He **“went before you in the way to seek you out a place to pitch your tents, in fire by night and in the cloud by day, to show you by what way you should go”** (v. 33). His fire would warm them in the night, and his cloud would shade them in the day. God had cared for them in every way.

To be in a relationship with God will often have us exactly where Israel was here. We face challenges far too great for us and are told to move forward rather than retreat in fear. The challenges might be financial or related to health or just some major fears we face. And they are not always rational, which doesn't make them any less real. God calls us to face these challenges by trusting him rather than going anywhere else. Christopher Wren was a famous 17<sup>th</sup> century British architect who built many of England's churches and most famous public buildings. He was once asked to draw plans for a city hall, and he designed it so that the weight of the roof was distributed in such a way that there was no need of a supporting pillar in the middle of the large hall. The city councilmen were nervous about the lack of a pillar and asked him to include one in his plans. When he refused, they decided to put the matter before the people for a vote, and the vote directed Wren to include the pillar. So he reluctantly did so and the building was completed with the pillar in the middle of the building's great hall. Years later, some refurbishing was being done near the top of the pillar, and one of the workmen discovered that the column stopped about two inches short of the roof, a shortfall that was invisible from the ground. Such are all the places where we tend to put our trust, from our money to our physical strength to our mental capacities. Ultimately, none are adequate to meet the challenges we face. But God is. His design of our lives is all that is necessary for our support.

### **III. The Lord Is Followed Whole-Heartedly (v. 36)**

Moses doesn't conclude this story before giving a positive example of what a true Israelite should be, and what is required to be in a covenant relationship with God. He finds his example in one of the 12 spies, Caleb, who followed the Lord whole-heartedly. One commentator translates this phrase in verse 36 as “he completely filled himself after the Lord.” Caleb saw the same things the other spies saw, and he knew that the armies they would face were strong and that Israel was ill-equipped to fight a war. But bigger than any of that was what God had said, and Caleb listened to that word and obeyed it. To the others who

didn't listen, the obstacles were big and God was little. To Caleb, the obstacles were big, but God was far bigger. So he listened and obeyed God.

In contrast to Caleb, the rest of Israel offered excuses for not obeying. They said they couldn't obey God and take possession of the land because it would be too dangerous for their children. They said their children would become a prey to the residents of the land (v. 39). They were not the last ones to use their children as an excuse not to obey the Lord. I have come across more than a few parents who can't give of themselves to serve the Lord because they're too involved with their children. I have encountered others who have said they can't give financially to the Lord's work because their priority is to meet their children's needs. What's really going on with Israel here is that they just don't want to obey God, and they use their children as a convenient excuse. God does assign to parents the duty of caring for and protecting their children, and the chief way we are to do that is to trust God for them. He is worthy of our trust as we entrust to him this most precious gift of our children, and to demonstrate that, the judgment he brings upon Israel here is to bring these children into the Promised Land without the aid of their parents. All these unbelieving parents will be judged by God and die in the wilderness over the next 38 years.

Even in this judgment they don't listen to God. They seem to be repentant when they say, **"We have sinned against the Lord"** (v. 41). But it quickly becomes evident that this is a superficial repentance, as they undertake to do what God told them not to do. After their unbelief and disobedience in refusing to take possession of the land and then God's ensuing judgment, they determine to make an attempt at taking the land. But God tells them not to do so. He will not be in this effort. They do not listen and do it anyway. Someone captured this situation well by saying, "When it was promised territory they would not enter it. Now it is forbidden territory, they will not stay away." The result of their presumptuous effort was a complete defeat at the hands of the Amorites, who chased them like bees out of the Promised Land. And when they wept before the Lord, the Lord did not listen to them.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Here's what we ought to conclude from this. If you want to have a relationship with God, you will need to be prepared to trust him and listen to him fully and whole-heartedly. You will need to listen to him about judgment, something that is commonly dismissed today. But it is only as we listen to God about judgment that we can have a relationship with him. We accept his judgment only to discover that Jesus has taken the judgment. But we can't skip to Jesus without first confessing the righteousness of God in bringing judgment. Here's a specific application. If you want to grow in your relationship with God, accept everything he says. If there is something God has spoken to you today, accept it and act upon it.