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This has been a difficult and painful week virtually everywhere one looks. Learning late yesterday afternoon that Henry Scammell had died unexpectedly was horrible news and it had to be shared with many in our church. It is always very difficult having to call people to tell them that a good friend has died. Friday a memorial service was held to commemorate Cape Cod's first loss of the Iraq war, Army Sergeant Mark Vecchione and the community grieves with the family, something that has touched thousands of families and communities across our nation over the last few years. Meanwhile for almost three weeks, television has bringing us the images of death and destruction from Israel, Lebanon, and Gaza. It is so difficult to watch and seems so immune to a solution because the roots of the conflict in the Middle East literally go back thousands of years even to the early books of the Bible.

As we move through the first five books of the Bible we have seen that Genesis tells stories of Creation, Exodus of the escape from slavery and the establishing of the relationship between God and Israel, Leviticus and Numbers are about the giving of more than 600 laws and the 40 years in the desert wilderness. which pushes people to answer the questions, "*What is in your heart? What do you believe?*"¹ Those questions dominate Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. With each step toward the Promised Land, the Israelites resist putting their faith in God. It is in Deuteronomy that the Israelites begin to become a people as their years in the wilderness purge their past. While Genesis is filled with narratives, Deuteronomy is more about how to behave. It is presented like a sermon by Moses exhorting the people just before they enter the Promised Land. The title of the book means "repeated law" or "copy of the Torah," and it is a retelling of the law in light of new circumstances.

Why was it necessary to retell the story? Based on the Bible's own calendar, the average person listening to Moses was hearing about a story that began with Abraham about 800 years earlier. Ask yourself how much you know

¹ Bruce Feiler, *Walking the Bible – A Journey By Land Through the Five Books of Moses*, p. 279.

of your family or your people's history from 800 years ago and the need for review becomes apparent. Remember also that with the exception of just a few families all the people listening to Moses have been born and raised in the wilderness.

The climax of the sermon is Deuteronomy 10:12-22 which also inspired the prophet Micah's great summary of the Lord's requirements in Micah 6:8. Requirements are a part of life – schools have requirements, jobs have requirements, being a citizen has requirements; we should not be surprised that God has requirements. God's people are reminded that they are to be an obedient people, revering God who is sovereign over heaven and earth and loving the One who first loved them. The basis of ethical responsibility Jews and Christians is not dutiful obedience to laws, but an inward personal response to God's love and kindness. Our response leads us to love and care for others as God does.

¹²“And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you?

He requires you to fear him, to live according to his will, to love and worship him with all your heart and soul, ¹³and to obey the LORD's commands and laws that I am giving you today **for your own good.** ¹⁴**The highest heavens and the earth and everything in it all belong to the LORD your God.** ¹⁵Yet the LORD chose your ancestors as the objects of his love. And he chose you, their descendants, above every other nation, as is evident today. ¹⁶Therefore, cleanse your sinful hearts and stop being stubborn.

¹⁷ “The Lord your God is the **God of gods and Lord of lords.** He is the **great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and takes no bribes.**

¹⁸ **He gives justice** to orphans and widows. **He shows love** to the foreigners living among you and **gives them food and clothing.** ¹⁹ You, too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.

²⁰ You must fear the Lord your God and worship him and cling to him. Your oaths must be in his name alone. ²¹ **He is your God, the one who is worthy of your praise, the one who has done mighty miracles** that you yourselves have seen.

²² When your ancestors went down into Egypt, there were only seventy of them. But now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky!”²

The Book of Deuteronomy is one of the most important in the Old Testament. Along with Psalms and Isaiah it is one of the three most quoted books in the New Testament. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy many times including when he is being tested in the desert himself and his answers were given referring to Deuteronomy 6:13, 16, and 8:3. When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus responds by quoting from Deuteronomy. This passage teaches us a number of important things about God and each has implications for how we live our lives as God’s people.

The first is that God’s requirements are for our own good (verses 12-13). Sometimes when people think about the Ten Commandments or other requirements God establishes they think, “*God doesn’t want me to have any fun.*” On the contrary, God wants us to have a wonderful life, so God tells us there are some things it is wise to do and other things it is best to avoid. Parents have rules for children for their own good – it’s not a good idea to play soccer on Route 6A, don’t play with matches, don’t fool around with fire arms, don’t be foolish around water that’s over your head, the list is endless. Requirements that healthy, moderately well adjusted parents or grandparents have for children are for their own good. In the same way, the requirements that God has for us are for our benefit, they are for our own good and that begins with living according to God’s will and loving and worshiping the Lord. **The God we worship has our own good at heart and that is important to remember.**

The second thing we learn about God is that Everything belongs to God – the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it (verse 14). The Canaanites had a nature cult; the peoples around them had a variety of practices. While some groups worship nature itself, we worship God the artistic creator who stands behind all nature and we believe that everything in it is God’s. If you’ve ever rented a car then you’ve had the experience of the car rental person asking you if

²*Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. 1997 . Tyndale House: Wheaton, Ill.

you want to pay for additional coverage to cover theft, loss, damage, or an accident. Some customer service people handle this with grace, others almost seem to try and scare you into getting it. One time when we were at an airport renting a car the woman was downright frightening, asking me even after I said that my credit card covered me, *“Are you prepared to replace a brand new car if something happens?”* I was even more nervous than usual driving that rental car because I was afraid of having an accident or something going wrong. When I preached out in Michigan last month, we rented a car for the week and there is always a great feeling of relief when you return the car safe and sound. Why is that? I think because when we drive a car that belongs to someone else and not to us, we are especially concerned and careful to take good care of it so that nothing goes wrong.

Well in a somewhat similar way, the Bible teaches us that everything belongs to God and so we don't truly own anything that we happen to have in our possession. We are managing it for God. The earth was here long before we were and it will be here after we are gone. While we are here we are to remember that we are to take good care of God's earth and God's possessions while we happen to be using them.

The third thing we learn in this passage is that God chooses to love us before we choose to love the Lord (verse 15). One person defined love as, *“An irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired.”* It is a wonderful feeling to experience someone loving you passionately, strongly, and faithfully. That is why it is so devastating when someone we love dies. The people we love – our family, our wife or husband, our children, our friends – we love them because of who they are and what they mean to us.

While we may pursue someone because we think she or he is attractive or desirable, the Bible makes the case that God chooses to love us even though we are not that attractive or desirable. In the New Testament, we read in Romans 5:8, that *“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”* Even though we are sinful and stubborn, God still pursues us in love.

God is great, mighty, awesome and just (verse 17). *“The Lord your God is the God of gods and Lord of lords. He is the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and takes no bribes.”* One of the interesting things about reading the Old Testament is the fact that there are a number of verses that imply that there are other lesser gods or false gods. Part of what sets apart the God of Gods and Lord of Lords is that **God is just**. People in or with power are so often corrupt and willing to take money that influences their judgment or decisions. Moses says God exercised justice on behalf of oppressed slaves – that is a defining part of Israel’s history and identity. Every member of the community high or low, rich or poor, slave or free is to be given equality before the law.

God cares for the helpless (verses 18-19) God is the champion of those who are legally weak or helpless: the orphan, the widow, the resident alien and that means God’s people are to imitate this way of dealing with people. Watching the news and the fighting that has been unfolding between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon the last three weeks, my heart breaks at the devastation and suffering taking place as hundreds of civilians are killed and hundreds of thousands are left homeless and struggling to survive. At the same time I feel powerless to do anything about it other than continuing to pray for peace while wondering if it will ever make any difference. How many American Christians even know that Lebanon has had, for much of its history, a sizable number of Christians? Current estimates are 1.5 million Christians, or 40% of the population - which means there are fellow Christians potentially affected as casualties and refugees by the Israeli military attacks. Even in the midst of the violence and upheaval, Christians in Lebanon are caring for the helpless and demonstrating a strong witness. **Dr. Martin Accad**, academic dean of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary of Lebanon was quoted on a web site this week as saying, *“Seven hundred thousand out of a total Lebanese population of 3.5 million, 20 percent of the population, mostly Shiites, are now being cared for and given refuge by*

mostly Christian schools, churches, and other humanitarian organizations. This is the story of the Good Samaritan at a mega scale!"

The final thing we learn in today's scripture is that God is worthy of praise, the worker of miracles, and the fulfiller of promises (verses 20-22). One of the greatest miracles I can imagine right now would be bringing peace to a region of the world that is as conflicted and complicated as the Middle East. Another extensive on-line article *Playing for Peace*, on ESPN.com illustrates how complex and intertwined the situation is in Jerusalem and the region as a group Playing for Peace brings together young people from Israel and Palestine to teach basketball skills and to build relationships. The article describes the dilemma of Jerusalem. "Jerusalem, a holy city, is the most contested piece of real estate in the world. Jews and Muslims have struggled over the land for thousands of years. They're still fighting today. Diplomacy and mediation have failed to bring calm to the region. Hatred and fear have led to segregation and damaging stereotypes.

In Jerusalem, Palestinians and Jews have been living together, in close quarters, for more than a thousand years. Since 1967, when Israeli forces took the old city during the Six-Day War, many Palestinians and Israelis remain wary neighbors. But they are still neighbors. In the city founded by King David on a mountain many believe was the creation point of the world, there's no convenient place to build a wall.

Jerusalem has changed hands hundreds of times in the past 3,000 years. No one really has figured out how to hold it exclusively. The city is in a key position politically and spiritually, and conquerors over the years have used both as excuses to occupy it.

Jerusalem is perhaps the only city in the world with the unique ability to divide and unite simultaneously. Walking through the Jaffa Gate near the Western Wall, Christians head north, down a narrow pathway filled with merchants pawning

Jesus trinkets, in search of the Holy Sepulcher, which Catholics believe was the site of Christ's death and resurrection.

Muslims head north, toward the Dome of the Rock, the most sacred Islamic spot in Jerusalem. Under the dome sits the stone from which Mohammed, their founding prophet, is said to have ascended into heaven. It is widely considered the third holiest site in Islam, after the Kaaba in Mecca and the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina.

Jews head south, toward the Wailing Wall, to offer their daily prayers to God.”³

As we finish the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, it is illuminating to look back to Genesis and be reminded that Lot (Genesis 13:8-18; 19:30-38), Ishmael (Genesis 16:8-15; 21:8-21), and Esau (Genesis 25:19-34; 27:1-45) are all disaffected family members who end up giving rise to nations opposing their ancestor Abraham's descendents. Reading Genesis, Numbers and Deuteronomy in light of today's events in the Middle East, one is struck by how little has changed other than the weaponry of the conflicts and the amount of oil money at stake. The relevance of these ancient texts is that one of the oldest stories ever told still has huge implications today – the division between Abraham's sons still needs to be healed for the children of Isaac to make peace with the children of Ishmael.

This will perhaps only take place by divine intervention and or supreme human efforts.

Moses' sermon in Deuteronomy exhorts us to live in the meantime in obedience to God's requirements that are given for our good; to remember everything belongs to God and that God loves us before we ever love God.

We are to live in ways that reflect our belief that God is just and cares for the helpless. And we hold onto hope that God is worthy of praise, the worker of miracles, and the fulfiller of promises.

³ <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/eticket/story?page=playingforpeace>