

Deuteronomy 4:1-8

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[0:00] Well, searching through my wallet this week, I put together a compartment of coffee loyalty cards. And tell me what it tells you about me, what I have here, Costa, Cafe Quartier from Harrisworth Hospital, Poole from Richmond, and yesterday I also picked up one from Kew Gardens.

So, six loyalty cards altogether. What does that tell you about me? Well, I guess it tells you I like coffee. I guess it also says something about the coffee industry, that there is lots of competition, everyone's competing for our loyalty out there.

I suppose it also tells you that while I like coffee, I'm not that fussed, in truth, where my cappuccino comes from. And I guess it's coming from Scotland, if there's any chance of getting anything for free, even if I have to buy one of the coffees earlier, I'll still hold on for that tenth coffee.

Now, we live in a world where many things compete for our loyalties, don't we? Many things. Now, actually, we live in a culture that is pretty sceptical and cynical about loyalty.

It seems to me there are two things where it's acceptable to be loyal. It's acceptable to be loyal to your football team, and it's acceptable to be loyal to yourself. You know, people talk about being true to themselves, don't they?

[1:17] Which I guess is a way of expressing being loyal to myself. But what does that actually mean? If you're being true to yourself, what are you being true to? The self you were yesterday, or the self you'll be tomorrow, or the self you'll be in five minutes?

It's really why I'm saying, I'm just going to do what I want to do. Just going to look for comfort and ease and popularity and whatever else it is that will make me feel good. You know, it's kind of a matter of our time.

To be true to yourself. Now, as we turn to Deuteronomy chapter 4, Moses is calling God's people to be true, not to themselves, but to their God who has rescued them.

True to their covenant Lord. He's calling them to loyalty. The first three chapters, he's been looking back at how the Lord has been so gracious, how he's acted in their past.

Now, as we reach chapter 4, he's continuing to review the past, but even more with an eye to the future. And how they're to respond as they move into this land, God has promised them. And in these four, eight verses, we're slowing right down, because these are very important verses in the whole of Scripture.

[2:23] Important chapter in the whole Old Testament. And in these verses, Moses is giving them two reasons to be loyal to their God. Two reasons to be loyal to this God who has rescued them.

Firstly, verses 1-4, his great promises. And secondly, verses 5-8, the great privileges he's given them. So, the great promises he's made them, the great privileges he's given them.

You see the great promise in verse 1. What does he say there? Now, in Israel, listen to the statutes and rules that I'm teaching you, and do them. Why? That you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the God of your fathers is giving you.

And yes, the Lord had promised them this land. But in a sense, the land was a means to an end.

The ultimate promise was the promise of life. Remember, they'd been rescued from slavery.

From slavery in Egypt. The land, then, was a place where they could serve God, rather than serving Pharaoh. And so, live. Live as they were supposed to. Live as we were all created to. Live in obedience to the living God, who'd left them and rescued them.

[3:31] And the land is always a, as you read through the Old Testament, the state of the land, where Israel's grasp on the land, is, if you like, a barometer, a measure of Israel's grasp and loyalty and calling to the true God.

So, when Israel was faithful, the land was fruitful and they had peace. When Israel was no longer faithful and loyal to God, the land was no longer fruitful and they faced enemy invasions.

So, the big promise here is the promise of life. And if you're in one of the home groups in this church, you're now studying James Gospel. You know why James Gospel is written? James chapter 20, verses 30 and 31. These things are written so you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and may have life in his name. So, it's the same great promise that God holds out to us. The promise of life. The kindness through faithfulness to him. Faith in the Lord Jesus. Faith in the one who has kept the Lord for us. Who has taken the curse we deserve for us.
[4 : 36] He sets us free from death to life. If we believe in him. So, this is the great promise that is held out to us. Will we be loyal to the one who has saved us?

Here's a good reason. The great promise God has given us. Not just a promise of land. But a promise of being part of his kingdom. So, what tempts us to not be loyal? What would tempt Israel in Moses' day? To cease to be loyal. To cease to cling to this God who has done so much for them. There are two particular temptations Moses deals with. Here in verses 1-4. Firstly, a temptation to temper with God's word. And secondly, a temptation to blend in with the world. And you see a temptation to temper with God's word. There in verse 2. You shall not add to the word that I command you. Nor take from it. That you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God. That I command you. Now, you might wonder. How would anyone be tempted to add to God's law?
[5 : 40] To God's word? To God's instruction? That perhaps seems counterintuitive to us. In a culture that hates rules. And doesn't like the idea of authority at all. And yet, actually, we can very easily do this.

The Pharisees in the New Testament have done it. They've added to God's law. Why is it a temptation for us? It's a temptation where we're desperate to be faithful. It actually arises out of a good motive. That's what happened with Pharisees. They wanted to make sure they were bearing God's law. And so they kind of made it even harder. To give themselves... It's like having a speed limit of 30 miles an hour. They kind of made a rule that they've never dragged many more than 20. To make sure they never got near the speed limit. That's sort of what the Pharisees were doing. And we can do that kind of thing individually. Or even corporately as a church. For example, a person could do it individually. When with a right intention. They think, if I go and see a film that's an 18 certificate. That I will be tempted towards all sorts of lustful thoughts.
[6 : 42] Because of their sexual images. Or all sorts of anger because of the violence portrayed. So I'm not going to go into an 18 movie. Now that's a good principle for an individual. But that can easily become a rule.

And that individual then looks out and sees other people in the church. Have gone to see the latest 18 movie. And they can start to feel proud that they haven't done that. And look down on the others. Or similarly, some might think it's a... No, it's a good thing to read God's word and pray every day. And so they set their alarm for very early in the morning to get up to do that. But then they fail to do that. When they've broken their own rule. They start to feel miserable and despairing. So there's one of the good things that we can turn into rules. When we either judge ourselves by them. Or judge other people by them. And actually, even though it starts with a good intention. And easily end up being added to God's meal. And that happens in all sorts of areas, doesn't it? How people educate their children.
[7 : 44] I had someone send me a book once on why homeschooling is the way Christians must do it. Now there are beautiful and good things about homeschooling. It would kill our family. And I say that with a wife who's a teacher or an educational psychologist.

So she'd do a marvellous job of it. But, it's not what's required. It's not what God commands. It's adding to God's meals. We do it in so many ways, don't we? But as I was studying this this week. It's starting to see what we can do corporately as well as a better, as a church. I don't know what most of you were doing when Paul was reading from the book of Church Order. The introduction to baptism. Some of you were probably suzing. My heart was singing. I'm probably a bit of a sad man, you know, I think. Before all of Zara's life, we've longed to have her baptised and receive the sign of the covenant. Ever since we firmly reached these convictions six years ago in living in America.

We've longed to be in a church which practices the Presbyterian way. That it belongs to one another. That the congregations join together. We're not little islands, as Paul put it. We've longed to be in a church that has this theology.

[8 : 49] It has this theology of worship. What we're doing is we gather together. Of baptising covenant children. But what's the danger for me? What's the danger for our family? It's to look back on where we've been.

And think that actually, we're now better. We're in a better church. We're somehow more righteous. Because of our theology and our practice. Now I believe these things to be true passionately. But that does not make us more holy, more favoured with God, more right than churches that do things differently. And if I start to be proud about being part of a Presbyterian church, then what am I doing?

I'm in danger of adding to God's word. Do not add, says Moses. And do not take away. Do not take away, verse 2.

How do we take away from God's word? Well, that's easy to see, isn't it? There are things that we just don't like to talk about. There are things that aren't popular these days. I remember being at lunch a few years ago, a friend of mine.

[9 : 56] And I think there'd be some debate in the Church of England about ordaining openly homosexual clergy. And so my friend said to me, well, I hope you're not a bigot like that, or worse to that effect.

And what's the temptation at that point? The temptation, of course, is to stay quiet. But if I did, my silence would be taking away from God's word.

So hard as it was, I had to try and give a brief explanation that didn't bore a living day outside of him. But I helped them to see the truth and beauty of God's law and God's ways.

There are so many issues today, aren't there, where it's easier to stay silent. It's easier to take away from God's word. The exclusivity of Christ. The total depravity of human nature.

That's a great one. The modern world hates the idea that as human beings we can't be good. And we can't sort out our own destiny or control our own future. People hate that idea.

[10 : 57] And it's absolutely clear in Scripture. And it's actually absolutely clear in the news as well, isn't it? But we mustn't take away from God's word by, through our silence or through denying, the truth of what God says.

However uncomfortable it is. That's why we need to be true to our Lord. Not just true to ourselves. So do not add, do not take away, do not tamper with God's word.

The second temptation Moses deals with in verses 3 and 4 is the temptation of blending in with the world. It follows unnaturally, I suppose. Look what he says there, verse 3.

Your eyes have seen what the Lord did at Baal Peor. For the Lord your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed Baal of Peor. Now if you look back later to Numbers chapter 25, you'll see the story.

You'll see what happened there. And what happened was, essentially, the local women, the Moabite women, had shown up in the Israelite camp and said, look, guys, we're having a meal.

[11 : 58] We're having a party. Come and join us. And at that point, what did the Israelites think? Well, I guess if they'd have been alive today, they would have thought, well, it'd be really rude not to accept a kind invitation.

They might have thought, well, it's really nice to have people being friendly instead of being fighty, having just had battles with two Amalite kings. Perhaps they thought, it'd be good to let us know the local customs, to show we value people and we're friendly.

They might have thought, we don't want to appear standoffish or intolerant. And so they joined in. But actually, what happened? Well, it was an idolatrous feast, and it ended up in an orgy.

Here's how Numbers 25 puts it. 25 verse 1. While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab, commit adultery with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and Israel ate and bowed down to the Moabite gods.

So they were just tempted to blend in with the world, to do what the neighbors around them were doing, to not be distinctive, to go the easy route rather than the hard route. And what happened?

[13 : 08] Well, Moses reminds them, doesn't he? Verse 3 of 2.4. Your eyes have seen what the Lord did at Baal of Peor, for the Lord your God destroyed for the menu. All the men who followed the Baal of Peor, we read in Numbers 25, that 24,000 people died, and the plague the Lord sent

them.

So Moses is saying, guys, remember, do you remember the kid you used to play with, who grew up in the tent next door? He died that day because of his unfaithfulness. Remember your cousins over the way?

Two of them died that day, because they didn't cling to the Lord, but they blended in with the world. Whereas you, verse 4, you who held fast to the Lord your God are alive today.

Moses is saying, the fact you can hear my voice proves that you held on to God. And that language there, that word, that phrase, held fast, that's covenant language. It's the language of Genesis 2, verse 24, when Adam and Eve get married, and the Lord declares, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife.

The two shall become one flesh. It's the language of marriage, of covenant, of clinging to each other, of loyalty. So don't, don't tamper with God's word.

[14:30] Don't blend in with the world, but be loyal to this God who has brought us, and saved us, according to his own love, and own power, and own goodness. That temptation to blend in with the world is ever so real to us today, isn't it?

And what's the New Testament meaning? Here's how James puts it. James, chapter 4, verse 4, You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world, as in, the world aligned against God, is enmity with God.

Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world, whoever wishes to blend in with the world around, makes himself an enemy of God. So in contrast, the Lord promises us life.

He promises us life. So don't tamper with his word, don't blend in with the world, but cling to him, hold fast to him. So that's the first great motivation, God's great promise.

The second one, verses 5-8, we see the great privilege he bestows on us. I'm sure you can all remember the London Olympics, it was only two years ago, I think it seems like a hundred years ago, to say this.

[15:40] And, there was actually a vote at the time, to see which athlete should carry the British flag out at the opening ceremony. And it was Sir Chris Hall, the cyclist, who got that privilege. He said at the time, I am absolutely delighted and honoured to have been voted as flag bearer of Team GB.

To lead out your team at the Home Olympics is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He felt that an honour, a privilege had been bestowed on him to lead out the nation, to wave the flag, as we in the world watched on.

And yet that is analogous to the privilege God has given his people. We are his flag bearers in the world. A world is watching on, looking at God's covenant people, seeing what they're like.

Now it's true right back from the dawn of Israel as a nation, when the Lord called Abraham, back in Genesis 12, he promised Abraham to give him a land and a people, and that all the nations on the earth were blessed through him.

The whole world was going to be affected by what God was going to do for Abraham's family. We see that unfolding further in Exodus chapter 19, as God had rescued the people from Egypt, as he brought them to Mount Sinai.

[16:49] He says this, Exodus 19 verses 5 and 6, Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

You will be my flag bearers. You will show the world what I'm like. As everyone is around in the stadium and watching our television sets in the world, you're going to be my chosen people.

This is your privilege to bear my flag to the world. Peter uses those same words to the church in the New Testament. This is the privilege that God has bestowed on us to be furthering his purposes, to be part of his purposes on this earth.

Now of course, if someone phoned you tomorrow and said, you're a great privilege, you're going to play football for your country next week or play rugby for your country next week, you might think that's a great privilege, but how well are we going to do that?

That's impossible. That's why we see the second aspect of this privilege in verse 7, and it's a very important privilege. What great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call upon him?

[18:07] Now of course, for those Israelites, hearing those words, they could look over to the tabernacle and see the cloud of God's presence that have travelled with them all those years from Egypt. They are with them amongst them.

They have the privilege of God's presence with them. Now we today don't see clouds among us, but every believer has the privilege of God's presence by his spirit in our hearts.

We have the privilege of God's spirit with us as we gather together. Our God is near to us whenever we call upon him. We have the privilege of furthering God's purposes, representing him in the world.

We have the privilege of God's presence, his spirit in us, empowering us and enabling us for service. And finally, we have the privilege of God's gracious instruction. Look down at verse 8. What great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? See, Israel is privileged to have God's instruction, God's law.

[19:11] Now that word law, translated law in English, which is the word Torah in Hebrew. Now, law is a good translation, but in some ways it's an inadequate translation.

And this law for us makes us think of sets of rules. When you go to a car park, you look for the law, don't you? Now, how long are you going to park? How much do I have to pay?

When do I get away with not paying? They're the kind of laws we look for, aren't they? But God's law is not so much like that. It's instruction. The whole first five books of the Bible are described as law, called the Torah.

They include story, they include narrative, they're described in God's character. So what we possess is not just a set of rules, but a father's instruction, the maker's instructions for how to live, the maker's instructions for what it is to be truly human.

And that is a beautiful and good thing. We live in a world where there is moral chaos, isn't there? Atheism at the moment is struggling to come up with some sort of moral basis and moral foundation.

[20:21] And the British Humanist Association has claimed that morality can be derived from human nature. Now that boggles my mind. But anyway, it's not even my mind, it boggles, but back in January in the Guardian, an atheist named Julian Baggini wrote in an editorial this, responding to British Humanist Association, he said, anyone who thinks it's easy to ground ethics either hasn't done much moral philosophy or wasn't concentrating when they did.

The existence of God, I paraphrase there, is, I quote again, a bedrock belief that gives a reason to believe that morality is real and will prevail. In an atheist universe, morality can be rejected without any external sanction at any point and without a clear compelling reason to believe in the reality of morality.

And that's exactly what will sometimes happen. He means it's the moralism of atheism. In contrast, what is the privilege we have? We have the maker's instructions.

We have God's word. the beauty of morality that we can live out. And what's the effect going to be on the world as the world sees? Or verse 8, what great nation is there that has statutes and rules as righteous as this Lord I set before you today?

Or verse 6, what does Moses say the world will say as they look on and see Israel living faithfully, holding on to the Lord's word? Keep them and do them for this will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples.

[21:59] who in the whole of these statutes will say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. As the world watches on and sees God's covenant people taking his word seriously, living it out in their relationships with one another, there is a compelling beauty there.

Now it's a beauty that some will harden their hearts against and turn away from, but it's a beauty that will bring others to ask questions and believe. What did our Lord Jesus say to his people? You are the source of the earth, you are the light of the world. As we read on through the New Testament epistles, we see the same truth echo time and time again. So for example, in the book of Colossians, Colossians 1 verse 9, Paul prays, interestingly, where Colossians will be filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding, same thing the law is going to give here to Israel.

And in chapter 4, having explained how being united to Christ brings new life and transforms us individually and as a community, he says to the Colossians, be wise in the way you act towards outsiders and make the most of every opportunity.

Let your conversation be full of grace and season with salt so that you may know how to answer each one. Do you see the dynamic that's at work? The outside world will look on.

[23 : 20] They'll see your spiritual wisdom and understanding as you live out your life through grace, through faith in Christ. And they'll ask questions. They'll say, surely this is a wise and understanding people.

That's especially true for that's when there are tensions and divisions and frustrations. When you learn by God's grace to bow with each other and love, they'll work out those differences in accordance with God's word and show the beauty of it to a lost world that's trying too hard to escape from the moral nihilism of atheism.

See these reasons why we should hold fast to God's word? The great promise he gives us, the promise of life as we trust in Jesus and cling to him.

The great privileges we have representing him in the world to further his purposes. Having his presence with us when we can call upon him as he impels us by his spirit and the very great privilege of his beautiful instruction, his beautiful word that by his grace we can live out in a nearly hostile world where others true can come and see the freedom that is only there in Jesus.

Let's pray.