Love is the Foundation

After reviewing the history of Israel’s relationship with God and all that He has done for them in the past, Moses moves to the next section of the covenant. God has saved the people, and as a result of them giving their hearts to Him, He will cause them to follow in His ways. The Decalogue is a delineation of what that will look like in their lives. Interestingly, the Hebrew of these Ten Words (never called “commandments” in the Old Testament) are grammatically not commands. While they could be construed as categorical moral imperatives, they do not have the imperative form, but instead a form in Hebrew that can imply certain promises for what will happen in the future. So, rather than “you must do this,” the phrasing is more like, “[I promise] you shall do this,” because I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt (v. 6). God saves the people and gains their heart trust, and as a result, they will naturally want to follow Him.

If you love someone, this leads you to naturally change your behavior to bring them joy and pleasure. You did not make these changes because you had to but because you love the person and want to make them happy. They likely have made similar changes in their lives because of their love for you. Deuteronomy 5 portrays a similar picture of love as the foundation, which leads to obedience out of gratitude for salvation. This covenant structure is key to understanding God’s character and desires for us.

The people, however, were afraid to meet with God, because they did not yet understand His love and grace toward them.
Write out Deuteronomy 5:1–15 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Deuteronomy 5:1–5. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
THE TEN WORDS REFLECT GOD’S CHARACTER

One of the fascinating aspects of the reviewing of the Decalogue here in Deuteronomy is the audience to which Moses is speaking, and what that implies about his introduction. This group of people were either born in the wilderness or were small children at the time of the Exodus. None of them were present in any sort of accountable way at Sinai. And yet Moses tells the people that God made a covenant with “us,” not “our fathers, but with us, those who are here today, all of us who are alive” (v. 3). And he continues with the statement that God spoke to them face-to-face on the mountain, but that they were afraid and did not go up on the mountain (vv. 4, 5). These people did not physically experience any of these things, but they are to live and believe as though they did. This is one of the main messages of Deuteronomy, that all God is telling Israel is still for us today. We are to live as if God is also speaking to our hearts and longing for a close relationship with us. Each successive generation is to live as though they experienced the exodus, and to pass this on to their children.

In light of that understanding, the third Word of the Decalogue becomes all the more powerful (v. 11). In Hebrew, this Word has very little to do with swearing, or using God’s name inappropriately, although it probably would include that. Instead, it is about living so that when people see us, they see God’s character and name emblazoned on our lives. “Bearing God’s name with futility or worthlessness” is a more accurate translation. If someone claims to follow God, but does not show it in their life, this would be tantamount to treason and would make God’s name appear worthless. Because we know to whom we belong, we act and live differently, in accordance with the Ten Words.

The Sabbath Word is slightly different between Deuteronomy 5 and Exodus 20, with a different motivation to keep the Sabbath. Here in Deuteronomy it refers specifically back to the Exodus as the reason for not working on the Sabbath (v. 15). Because the people had no ability to save themselves, from slavery or from the Egyptians, but God saved them with great miracles and power, they are to commemorate that salvation on the Sabbath by not working and resting in God’s deliverance. In addition, all those who were likely to be exploited or oppressed are mentioned as participating in Sabbath rest. Even specific animals are delineated, expanding the Sabbath rest in Exodus 20.
It is common to hear some reference to the following erroneous statement in many sermons today: “The Old Testament is legalistic, but Jesus brings grace and salvation by faith.” But actually, this is a horrible mockery of the continuity of God’s grace and the clear presentations of salvation by faith throughout the entire Old Testament. The Torah is about as far from legalism as one can get. Yahweh and Moses are clear: the people have no good in them that commends them to God. Yahweh, in His great love and grace, saved them when they were in abject slavery (v. 6). Furthermore, if the Torah was legalistic, then how did Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants find salvation, with all their sins? The Old Testament makes it clear that they had a heart relationship with God. Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6, Brenton Septuagint Translation). Not only that, but Genesis tells us that Abraham kept all the laws of God (Gen. 26:5)! God had written them on his heart, and that is what God wanted to do with Israel too. But they were not willing. The Israelites said the right words, but their hearts were far from God. The people lived lives of extremes, some turning to legalism (after the exile), and others living in sin, believing that their other external actions would save them (after Moses’ death). But God always wanted their hearts, so the new covenant was not actually new per se; it was a renewal of what God had always planned but what the people had scorned.

First and foremost in this was the Sabbath, which had been instituted at creation but took on new meaning as a sign of the covenant (Exod. 31). While God is not explicit about why this is the case, it seems that there are several reasons that could be part of it. First of all, the Sabbath is the only “arbitrary” Word, since all the others make logical sense if there is only one God, and in order to love others. However, there is no reason to keep the Sabbath, especially over any other day, except that Yahweh chose it. By keeping the Sabbath, we honor our relationship to God and our desire to fellowship with Him. The Sabbath is also the birthday of the world, so it is a time to celebrate together and with God (Exod. 20). And then Deuteronomy 5 indicates that the Sabbath most completely represents righteousness by faith, in that we quit working and rely on God’s finished work of salvation and deliverance on our behalf. The Sabbath is a delight, not a burden. The Sabbath makes clear to our hearts what we think of God.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Exodus 19:1–16  
Exodus 23:10–12  
Deuteronomy 5:23–33  
Joshua 24:11–27  
Isaiah 58:6–14  
Psalm 92

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Deuteronomy 5?
THE HEART OF YAHWEH

The Ten Words come straight from the heart of Yahweh and His desire to be close to us in a heart relationship. God saves us first, and this is ultimately due to the sacrifice of the spotless Lamb of God, who was represented by the many lambs offered at the daily sacrifices. God provided the salvation of the world through the death of His only Son. God is thus “just and the justifier” of those who believe in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

God is also the one who initiates and makes covenants with His people. This is such a binding relationship that it is often compared to a marriage. When Israel breaks the Ten Words, it is much more than disobedience; it breaks Yahweh’s heart in similar ways to a spouse having an affair. God is not ever vindictive, but He longs for His people to return to Him and has righteous jealousy like a true lover.

Yahweh holds people accountable and does not gloss over sin. God exhibits perfect health in all His relationships, and this is a powerful picture of God holding standards and yet being full of compassion. He does not want to give the people up, and the prophets are full of the heart of God crying out in anguish and pain, loathe to bring punishment, yet knowing that it is the only hope in His last-ditch effort to bring the people to repentance after centuries of doing evil and spurning His grace (cf. Hosea 11).

Jesus is also seen clearly in the Sabbath, celebrating His redemption of the people. This continues through the whole Bible, as the incarnate Christ does most of His miracles on Sabbath. In the Gospels, He is also continually seeking to bring the people back to the true meaning of Sabbath, connecting with God and helping other people.

One might wonder how Jesus can be seen in God “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations” (v. 9). However, it is quite simple: there were often that number of generations living together at the same time, and consequences on one affected all the others. In addition, scientists have recently discovered epigenetics, which is the part of science in which the gene expression by the parent is actually passed on, not just the DNA itself. This means that alcoholics express certain genes in certain ways, and this makes their kids more likely to be alcoholics or struggle severely with temptation. But victory over sin also changes gene expression, and this can be passed on as well. The fact that God shows mercy for thousands of generations makes clear that the punishment passed down is not what He really wants, but only allows to make clear the heinousness of sin.
“THE LAW GIVEN TO ISRAEL”

“‘I the Lord thy God am a jealous God.’ The close and sacred relation of God to His people is represented under the figure of marriage. Idolatry being spiritual adultery, the displeasure of God against it is fitly called jealousy.

“‘Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me.’ It is inevitable that children should suffer from the consequences of parental wrongdoing, but they are not punished for the parents’ guilt, except as they participate in their sins. It is usually the case, however, that children walk in the steps of their parents. By inheritance and example the sons become partakers of the father’s sin. Wrong tendencies, perverted appetites, and debased morals, as well as physical disease and degeneracy, are transmitted as a legacy from father to son, to the third and fourth generation. This fearful truth should have a solemn power to restrain men from following a course of sin.

“‘Showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me, and keep My commandments.’ In prohibiting the worship of false gods, the second commandment by implication enjoins the worship of the true God. And to those who are faithful in His service, mercy is promised, not merely to the third and fourth generation as is the wrath threatened against those who hate Him, but to thousands of generations.

“‘Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.’

“This commandment not only prohibits false oaths and common swearing, but it forbids us to use the name of God in a light or careless manner, without regard to its awful significance. By the thoughtless mention of God in common conversation, by appeals to Him in trivial matters, and by the frequent and thoughtless repetition of His name, we dishonor Him. ‘Holy and reverend is His name.’ Psalm 111:9. All should meditate upon His majesty, His purity and holiness, that the heart may be impressed with a sense of His exalted character; and His holy name should be uttered with reverence and solemnity.

“‘Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.’

“The Sabbath is not introduced as a new institution but as having been founded at creation. It is to be remembered and observed as the memorial of the Creator’s work. Pointing to God as the Maker of the heavens and the earth, it distinguishes the true God from all false gods. All who keep the seventh day signify by this act that they are worshipers of Jehovah. Thus the Sabbath is the sign of man’s allegiance to God as long as there are any upon the earth to serve Him. The fourth commandment is the only one of all the ten in which are found both the name and the title of the Lawgiver. It is the only one that shows by whose authority the law is given. Thus it contains the seal of God, affixed to His law as evidence of its authenticity and binding force.”

(White, Patriarchs and Prophets, 306, 307.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How does really understanding Deuteronomy 5:6 change the rest of the Ten Words (Decalogue)?

How can we connect with and “be there” with God in covenant?

How does God’s justice add rich depth to his love and mercy?

How does the heart of the people in Deuteronomy 5:27 indicate why they so quickly disobeyed?

How do the two motivations for Sabbath (creation and redemption) interact and reinforce each other?

How can we make the Sabbath a delight?

How can we bear God’s name more faithfully as individuals and a faith community?

How have you seen your love for someone change how you/they live?