

Deuteronomy 5:22-27

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These words [i.e., the Ten Commandments] the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain from the midst of the fire [some of the second generation of Israelites would have been at Mount Sinai forty years earlier], of the cloud and of the thick gloom, with a great voice, and He added no more [i.e., no more direct revelation; rather, He revealed the rest of the Law through Moses]. He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me [God made hard copies of His commandments].²³ And when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders [i.e., the leadership].²⁴ You said, “Behold, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; we have seen today that God speaks with man, yet he lives.²⁵ Now then why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, then we will die.²⁶ For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we *have*, and lived? [Some who encountered God believed their lives had been spared; see Gen 32:30; Ex 33:20; Judg 6:22-23; 13:22]²⁷ Go near and hear all that the LORD our God says; then speak to us all that the LORD our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do *it*.”

Summary:

The main point of this pericope is that Moses recalled that God wrote down the Ten Commandments and how the people expressed a healthy fear of the Lord. Moses opens this section, saying, “These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain from the midst of the fire, of the cloud and of the thick gloom, with a great voice, and He added no more. He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me” (Deut 5:22). This confirms the Ten Commandments were spoken directly by God, who then provided Moses two hard copies which were written on tablets of stone. The Ten Commandments, as given by God at Mount Sinai to Israel, should not be separated from the larger body of the Mosaic Law. It must be remembered, “These are the commandments which the LORD commanded Moses for the sons of Israel at Mount Sinai” (Lev 27:34). Moses is also clear the Lord did not provide anything more than the Ten Commandments. Earl Kalland writes;

He “added nothing more” (v.22) refers to these Ten Commandments that were spoken and then written by God on the two stone tablets. They constitute the basic behavioral code that was to determine not only their allegiance and life-style but also that of all succeeding generations as well. No other such short list of

commands begins to compare with the effect that these have had in world history. In spite of being constantly broken, they stand as the moral code par excellence.¹

Moses records the response of the Israelites, saying, “And when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders” (Deut 5:23). Every one of the Israelites at Mount Sinai heard the voice of God, audibly, which came from the direction of the mountain that was burning with fire. Apparently, the audio was quite loud and connected with pyrotechnic effects. After approaching Moses, the elders said, “Behold, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; we have seen today that God speaks with man, yet he lives” (Deut 5:24). Here was a divine encounter with the God of the universe that was so powerful, they were surprised that they were still alive. Then, they spoke out of fear, saying, “Now then why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, then we will die. For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we *have*, and lived?” (Deut 5:25-26). Being close to God meant, to some degree, feeling uncomfortable in His presence, because as they came near to Him, they became painfully aware that He is holy and they were sinful. However, they felt their lives were in danger if they continued to experience God’s presence as He had revealed Himself at the mountain. Healthy fear was a common experience among those who personally encountered God (Isa 6:5; Luke 5:8; Rev 1:17); and others too felt their lives had been spared after encountering the Lord (Gen 32:30; Judg 6:22-23; 13:22-23). Though the Israelites recognized it was God who spoke with them, and that they’d heard His voice and saw His glory, yet they did not want the experience to continue. Instead, they asked Moses to serve as mediator between them and God, saying, “Go near and hear all that the LORD our God says; then speak to us all that the LORD our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do *it*” (Deut 5:27).

As Christians, the more we learn about God, the more we become aware of His holiness and our sinfulness. However, by faith, we also know He accepts us because of the work of Christ, and we can come humbly before His throne of grace, realizing there is no condemnation because we are in Christ.

¹ Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 61.

Excurses on God's Law and Human Conscience

The Ten Commandments are the beginning of the Mosaic Law code that was given specifically to Israel as a redeemed people (Lev 27:34), and they were not given in written form to anyone else. The Ten Commandments not only revealed the holy character of God, but gave the Israelites an objective standard for right living, both before God and others. Though the Law was given specifically to Israel, there is a sense in which God's Laws are written on the hearts of all people, even those who are not saved. Paul wrote, "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom 2:14-15). Warren Wiersbe writes:

God did not give the Law to the Gentiles, so they would not be judged by the Law. Actually, the Gentiles had "the work of the Law written in their hearts" (Rom 2:15). Wherever you go, you find people with an inner sense of right and wrong; and this inner judge, the Bible calls "conscience." You find among all cultures a sense of sin, a fear of judgment, and an attempt to atone for sins and appease whatever gods are feared.²

According to Paul, God has placed His Law within the heart of every person, which Law informs us concerning God's standard of what is right; and, God has given every person a conscience. The word *conscience* translates the Greek word *συνείδησις* *suneidesis*, which refers to "the inward faculty of distinguishing right and wrong."³ Conscience does not instruct us concerning what is good or evil, for that is determined by God; rather, conscience is that inner voice that urges us to do right. However, because of sin's corrupting influence, the human conscience it is not always a reliable gauge of right and wrong. It would seem that conscience functions cognitively in a judicial role, evaluating thoughts and actions and determining guilt or innocence based on moral laws. This would make sense, as Paul describes the conscience as "bearing witness" with regard to some behavior, and the mind serving as the courtroom, "accusing or defending" the action.

Human conscience, when operating properly, serves as God's moral compass placed within each person. People instinctively know that God exists (Rom 1:18-20), and that the Law of God is good (Rom 2:14-15). We don't have to persuade anyone. It's

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 520.

³ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 967.

already written on their hearts. God placed it there. They know God exists, that He is good, and that actions such as murder, lying, stealing, and adultery are wrong.

Those who have a relationship with God and pursue a life of faith will have a healthy conscience that operates as God intends. This starts when “the blood of Christ...cleanses our conscience” so that we may “serve the living God” (Heb 9:14).⁴ In the New Testament Paul spoke of the “good conscience” that was connected with “genuine faith” (1 Tim 1:5, 19; cf. Acts 23:1; Heb 13:18), and he personally served God with a “clear conscience” (1 Tim 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3). Paul also described believers at Corinth whose “conscience is weak” (1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12). These were immature believers whose consciences had been corrupted by years of sinful living before their conversion and who had not fully restored their conscience to normal operation. Learning God’s Word recalibrates our conscience, and advancing spiritually strengthens it. In a negative way, there are some who progressively turn away from God and indulge in sin, and whose “conscience is defiled” (Tit 1:15), or who have “an evil conscience” (Heb 10:22). Paul wrote of some “whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (1 Tim 4:2). The word *seared* translates the Greek word *καυστηριάζω kausteriazō*, which means to burn or cauterize with a hot iron. Just as one’s flesh can be severely burned so that it becomes hard, without sensitivity, so the conscience can become hardened and without feeling. This is obvious in the person who lives in prolonged sin and no longer blushes at their wicked behavior. I once knew a man in prison who bore the moniker “Naughty.” I once heard this man boast, with smile and laughter, of having sexually abused a helpless woman whom he greatly degraded, and he did this without any remorse. I cringed as others laughed at his stories. Here were consciences that had become seared because of sinful behavior.

The believer, though having a conscience damaged by years of sin, can have it cleansed by means of the cross-work of Christ, and then recalibrated by means of God’s Word, which provides an objective standard for righteousness. But this will not happen quickly. Just as we exposed ourselves to many years of worldly thinking, which corrupted our consciences, so it will take time to unseat the human viewpoint and restore the conscience to normal function as God intends.

⁴ The “blood of Christ” refers to Jesus atoning work on the cross, in which He bore our sin and paid the penalty that rightfully belonged to us. This was in contrast to the OT sacrificial system which could never take away sin, only cover it for a short time. When we believe in Christ as Savior (1 Cor 15:3-4), we are forgiven all our sins (Eph 1:7), given new life (John 10:28), and gifted with God’s own righteousness (2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9). At the moment of salvation, there is relational peace between us and God (Rom 5:1), and we have become part of His family (Eph 2:19), will never be condemned (Rom 8:1), and made free to serve Him in righteousness (Rom 6:11-14; Tit 2:11-14). In this way, the “blood of Christ” has cleansed our conscience from any notion that religious.

