



## The Nightmare, The Knife, & The Morning Light

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

Do you ever have bad dreams, nightmares? Do you have recurring nightmares, bad dreams that keep coming back to haunt you in the middle of the night?

I have a nightmare, a bad dream that I've been dreaming for maybe 10, 15 years now. I've talked to a lot of people that have this same dream, so many of you will identify with this. I show up to the last week of high school and I forgot about a final I was supposed to take. I missed the final, I failed the final, I don't graduate from high school and my life follows a totally different trajectory all because I didn't take the final. How many of you have this same nightmare?

If that's not your bad dream, what is? What keeps you up at night? What requirements weigh heavy on you, so heavy that they affect your sleep... deep dread comes over you in the middle of the night...your heart beats fast while lying in your bed? What is it for you? Is it your financial requirements in this economy? Is it the never-ending requirements of your work? Your family requirements? Requirements can be stressful, heavy, the source of nightmares.

What about God's requirements? What about the requirements God makes of us, that God puts on us? There's a lot of them. And God's requirements are heavier. The consequences of not meeting his requirements are a thousand times more frightening than the requirements that spark our little nightmares.

We're in the book of Deuteronomy and here's where we're at in this ninth week. Moses is coaching Israel, coaching God's people, as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. For the last few chapters Moses has been giving Israel a history lesson, reminding them of who they are and where they've come from. But now, in Deuteronomy chapter 10:12-22, Moses changes direction. Now Moses directs Israel to look towards the future.

Coach Moses re-tells the people God's requirements as they prepare to enter the Promised Land—a beautiful land with water, hills, and valleys; a land with great weather; a land of opportunity and innovation; but a land with influences and temptations that could slowly seduce Israel away from God. Basically, in Deuteronomy 10 Moses prepares the people to enter a land just like the Peninsula. Here, Moses is re-telling Israel and re-telling us what God fundamentally requires of us as we do life in a good, yet tempting land.

Today's text is pretty incredible. Commentator Chris Wright says, "Deuteronomy 10:12-22 is unquestionably one of the richest texts in the Hebrew Bible, exalted and poetic in its language, comprehensive and challenging in its message. It purposely tries to 'boil down' the whole theological and ethical content of the book into

memorable phraseology, packed and pregnant, rich and resonant of all the surrounding preaching. Indeed, there are not many dimensions of '...theology,' that are not directly expressed or indirectly echoed in this mini-symphony of faith and life."

Sounds good doesn't it? Are you ready for a symphony this morning? Before this symphony sounds sweet, it sounds hard. Today's text is a symphony, but at first—its sound, its summons, the weight of it all—it keeps you up at night. Deuteronomy 10 throws on us the weight of God's requirements. Only later does it reveal the wonder of his requirements.

**"And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen. Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven"** (Deut. 10:12-22).

We're going to ask this passage a few questions this morning. Actually, this passage begins with a question, a rhetorical question. In verse 12 Moses asks the people, "what does the Lord your God require of you...?" And that's our first question this morning.

### I. What God Requires

What? What does God require of us? You. What does God require of you? Verses 12 and 13 give us the answer. It's pretty simple. Moses lays out five requirements God makes of us.

Let's look at these 5 requirements and here's what I want us to do. As we move through these, evaluate yourself.

Grade yourself. Give yourself a grade for how you're doing at fulfilling each of these requirements. What would God's report card say about your performance in each of these 5 requirements?

First, God requires that you "fear" him. That's the very first thing verse 12 says, "fear the Lord your God." What does this mean? Here's what it means. You were made to center your life on something great. You were created to live for something great—the greatest thing, the greatest being of all: God. You are not designed to live for something small. You are not designed to center your life on yourself, to spend your life looking inside yourself, self-conscious, fearing what other people think about you, always looking in the mirror, always introspective rather than God-spective, always self-aware rather than God-aware.

You were made to live for something great, to fear something great, and that's God. The idea here, this first requirement, is to live like a child. To live a life full of curious fear, holy wonder, upward awe of what's outside of you, of the God who made you and made this planet that right now is spinning around the sun at 68,000 miles per hour.

Self-consciousness is an adult sin. Children are born with a sinful nature, children are terribly selfish for example, but they don't learn to be self-conscious until they get older. The toddlers in our nursery right now, they need some work. They're stealing toys from each other and pushing each other, but they're not self-conscious. They're not thinking about how they look or how they sound or how they're feeling inside. Those toddlers are busy engaging with all the great and interesting things outside of them.

Think about your life. You've experienced the greatest joy when for a moment or a season of your life you got outside of yourself, you feared God, you lived in reverent, wondrous awe of God and what he's made, and you let the self-conscious fears that normally own you and bend you inward fade into background noise.

How are you doing with this first requirement? Grade yourself. Do you fear God? Are you living outside of yourself, living for something great, for God? Is there a child-like, wondrous fear of God that shows in your complexion as you do life on the Peninsula? Survival in the Promised Land, survival on the Peninsula, requires fear of God.

Second, God requires you "to walk in all his ways" (v.12). This requirement means, walk in line with biblical ethics. Biblical ethics, God's ways, they're very practical. This isn't theoretical, mysteriously spiritual stuff. No, practical, practical ways, practical ethics. This is a practical requirement.

This passage commands us to walk in all of God's ways, but it also tells us one specific way of God's practical ethics. Verses 18 and 19, "He [God] executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt."

The fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner were the three members of the Israelite community who didn't have land and whose social and economic status was not secure. God required Israel to very practically care for these

types of people. Verse 18 says to give them "food and clothing." Verse 19 says to "love" them.

Reading this a few thousand years later, Mother Teresa summed up what this requirement means for us. She said, "Find somebody no one loves and love them." Find the fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner in your community and love them. And doing that, Mother Teresa and Moses says, involves practical, concrete changes in what you do with your possessions, your schedule, and your wallet.

What grade do you give yourself on this requirement? What grade would God give you? It's this unmet requirement that gave nightmares to Scrooge. Scrooge couldn't sleep at night because he ignored Tiny Tim.

Third, God requires you "to love him" (v.12). It's significant that love is the central requirement of these five big requirements. This is what the Bible says: you are required to love God, commanded to love God. Love is a commandment! Scripture requires, commands, a husband to love his wife. And more significantly, Scripture commands you and me and everybody to love God. You are required to love God more than you love anyone or anything else.

How's this one going for you? Do you love him? I don't mean: do you love God? I mean: do you LOVE God? This passage says you're required to LOVE God...do you?

Fourth, God requires you "to serve" him (v.12), to serve him with all your heart and all your soul. This requirement says work for God. Whatever you do each day, whether you're a banker or a homemaker, whether you're in high-tech or in construction, whether you're changing diapers or studying for a test—you're to do your work in service to God.

God is to be served by your work. Ultimately, we do all our work before God, in service to God. The attitude with which we do our work, the excellence with which we do our work, those are channels for serving God.

Pull out that report card again. What's your grade? Does what you do and how you do it serve God?

The fifth and final requirement God requires you "to keep" his "commandments" (v.13). This is the junk drawer requirement! Moses throws this requirement in there just in case he's forgotten anything: "and finally, Israel, make sure you keep all of God's commandments."

Keep God's commandments! Do you know how many commandments there are to keep? A lot. Do you keep them? This past week, did you lie or lust or gossip or grumble? What grade do you get on this one?

Now, we're not done yet. God requires even more from you. Moses has more to throw at us. In verse 17 Moses says something big. He says that God "takes no bribe." You can't bribe God. You can't bribe God with your pretend obedience. On the outside you can make it look like you fear God, like you're walking in all his ways, like you love God and love the Tiny Tims. You can do all the right things on the outside, but if it's just a bribe, if it's not true on the inside, God will spot it. Nothing gets past him.

Is your obedience just a bribe? God requires true obedience that comes from the heart. What does God require of you? He requires a lot. You might say he requires everything.

Your greatest nightmare isn't forgetting a class or

failing a final and not graduating from school, it's forgetting and failing God, not graduating from this life, and suffering the eternal consequences.

## II. Why God Requires

Now let's ask this passage a different question. We asked this passage what does God require? Now let's ask why? Why does God require such total obedience from all of us in this room, from all 30,000 people who live in Foster City, from all 5 million people in the Bay Area, from every single one of the nearly 7 billion people who live on planet earth?

Why? Three reasons. First, God requires all this of you because he is God. That's what verse 17 says. Listen to the poetry and the power of verse 17: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribes." God of gods! Lord of lords!

Right now we're seeing a lot of names everywhere. On your way home from this service you're going to see signs and banners and bumper stickers with the names of people who want to be elected into positions of power. But no matter who's elected, God remains in office. God doesn't have to campaign for our vote, he is always "God of gods, Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God."

Fundamental to life on this planet is the reality that God is God and you and I are not. God is God and he makes the requirements, he makes requirements of us, and we must deal with it.

The second reason why God makes requirements of us is because everything belongs to God. "Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it" (v.14). What this verse says is that God owns everything. Everything. You don't own your money, God does. You don't own your house or your car, God does. You don't own your toothbrush, God does. Everything belongs to God!

Abraham Kuyper says, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'" Not a square inch. When God looks at the galaxy, when God looks at your stuff, when God looks at you...he shouts: "Mine!"

There's also a third reason. These first two reasons are meant to drive you towards God, this third reason is here to woo you towards God. The third reason God makes such massive requirements of you is because he wants your highest good. He wants you to live the good life. Did you notice the last three words of verse 13? Moses says God requires all this of you, three words, "for your good."

For your good! For your good! Deuteronomy keeps repeating this point. Why does Moses repeat, repeat, repeat this point? You repeat what people are likely to forget. Lately I keep repeating to my 2-year-old son to not stand on top of his 3-week-old brother because he forgets...he needs the repetition. Deuteronomy keeps repeating the point that God makes claims upon our lives for our own good, for our best, because you and I are people who forget this truth every single week of our lives.

We forget that God's commands are there for our good. Obedience is good for you! We forget that. God says

"fear me" because he wants to pull your face out of the mirror and into his majesty. God says "fear me" because he wants to shatter your self-consciousness and fill you with the wonder and awe that you used to have as a child.

Obedience is good for you. God's requirements are good for you. Because God is God, because God owns everything, and because God wants our good, he makes such lofty requirements of us.

## III. How to Meet God's Requirements

Okay. We've asked, what? We've asked, why? Now, how? Let's ask this passage this question—how do we do all this, how do we fulfill these requirements...how do we ward off the nightmare? This all feels very heavy. How do we carry this load?

Well, it gets heavier. Standing at the center of this passage is the heaviest requirement of them all. Verse 16, "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn."

Circumcise. Foreskin. Heart. Stubborn. The central requirement of this passage for the people of Israel and for us is a command to circumcise: for you to circumcise the foreskin of your heart so that you might be no longer stubborn. Did you know your heart has foreskin?

As often as Moses has been talking to the people about keeping God's requirements, he's been talking to the people about their failure. Moses repeats the point that Israel keeps failing to keep God's requirements because of their heart...because they have stubborn hearts, hearts caked over with a cholesterol of sin, a foreskin of stubbornness.

According to Moses, the reason why you have such bad grades, the reason why you and I sit here this morning with a report card of failure to meet God's requirements, is because we have hearts encrusted with a stubborn foreskin of sin. Moses says your requirement problem, your problem with God, it's a circumcision problem.

Why does Moses use this language of circumcision? For the ancient Israelites, circumcision was a symbol of being chosen and loved by God, of belonging to God. Circumcision was a permanent mark of having something that was once a part of you cut away. Circumcision was a permanent marker of removal and renewal. And what this passage tells us, what it requires of us, is to cut away at our heart. Surgery. The requirement is for a surgery of removal and renewal to happen in your heart.

So, how do you do that? How do you circumcise your stubborn heart? How do you meet this requirement?

In Moses' day, Hebrew boys were circumcised on the 8th day, on their 8th day outside of the womb. On the 8th day of his life a Jewish boy was brought before family members and friends. Some of them would help pin down the boy's arms and legs, and then someone with a steady hand would take a sharp knife and cut off the foreskin of the boy's penis.

Do you hear what Moses is telling us? An infant boy can't circumcise himself...it's impossible...somebody else must do it to him. And you can't circumcise your stubborn heart...it's impossible...somebody else must do it for you. God required Israel, God requires you, to fear him, to serve

him, to love him, to obey all his commandments. At the root of it all he requires you to circumcise your heart...but you can't do it. It's impossible. The stubborn foreskin of your heart, the tentacles of stubbornness that rule your heart, you're not strong enough to cut through. You're required to do it, but you can't.

Are you ready for some good news? There is someone who can do it for you, there is someone strong enough. "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deut. 30:6).

Hear the good news of this passage: God gives what he requires! God gives what he requires! God requires of you a transformed heart and a transformed life, and he gives it to you. This good news is what separates Christianity from all other religions. All other religions are a nightmare of unmet requirements...you're required to do this and not do that...it's all up to you and you can't do it and you're stuck with a lifetime of failure. It's a nightmare.

Only Christianity, only the God of gods and Lord of lords says: *"My child, the nightmare isn't true. Yes, you've failed to obey me, but I sent my Son into your nightmare to pass the test for you. My Son feared me. He walked in all of my ways, all of them, he loved the fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner. He loved me. He served me. My Son Jesus kept all of my commandments. He fulfilled all of my requirements, for you.*

*And my son's enemies, they gathered around him and pinned down his arms and legs...the sharp knife of the cross cut him and there he bled, for you. The darkness lasted 3 days, then morning light burst from his tomb—my Son standing victorious over your sin, over your failures, over death.*

*My child, I have given you what I required of you. The nightmare is over, the nightmare isn't true. Jesus paid it all."*

So, how do you do it? How do you circumcise the foreskin of your heart? The same way Jewish boys were circumcised in Moses' day, the same way my son was circumcised earlier this month: you yield to the knife. You surrender. You say, "God, pin me down and do your work, I need it...I'm desperate for it, I can't do it myself. You are strong. Cut!" This is how you come to know God, this is how you first become a Christian—you yield to the knife. You see your stubborn heart and you lie down on your back in the presence of God and you ask God to fix it, to circumcise it—to perform a permanent miracle of removal and renewal in your life.

This is also a process throughout your whole Christian life. You keep on saying to God, "I am stubborn, so you must pin me down and do your work...take out your knife...cut me, heal me, change me...I can't do it."

Preparing this sermon has shown me two things: I am more stubborn than I thought and God is more stubborn than I thought.

What needs to be cut away? The point of this sermon is to get you to ask this question. What needs to be cut away from your heart?

There's some area of crusty stubbornness in your heart that you've either never surrendered to God or that you've been trying to change yourself because you haven't had the faith that God is strong enough and good enough to truly cut and free and heal and change you. You haven't had faith that God is stubborn enough to really do it, to really circumcise change in your life.

Faith is THE requirement.

What needs to be cut away? Be no longer stubborn. Surrender it, repent of it. Have faith and say to God: Pin me down and do your work, because you are "the God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God."