

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 Sermon Outline
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Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson once wrote, “‘We are justified by faith alone,’ said Luther, and liberated four generations. When preachers say these words today, supposing themselves to be following Luther, they bind us to the terrible law of having to save ourselves by the quality of our sincerity, for that is what “faith” has come to mean since the eighteenth century.’”

Perennial doubt. Doubt about anything and everything. Doubt about what we believe about God and this world. Doubt about being in a specific city, job, or school. Doubt about where to go next. Doubt even about the solidity and soundness of my faith.

Is this the life we’ve been saved to? Is this what serious joy is? There has to be something else, yet how does one get it? Can someone who has it show me how to get it? Can someone who is close to God give me his words so that I might know and live?

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 is about doubt and delight. It is a promise that God’s people will love God’s word.

“For this commandment that I command you today *will not be* too hard for you, neither will it be far off. ¹² It *will not be* in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ ¹³ Neither *will* it be beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ ¹⁴ But the word *will be* very near you. It *will be* in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.”

You may notice this translation differs from the ESV. I have two reasons to differ from the ESV and to take these verbs as future tense, thus continuing the future vision. First, Moses already revealed in Deut 29:4 that Israel’s hearts were—to say the least—not working properly even to the day of his speech. Moses would not say Israel lacked hearts to obey in 29:4 and then say the word was in their hearts to obey in 30:14.

Second, the word “today” in 30:11 does not return to the present but rather continues the future vision, just like verses 30:2 and 30:8, which are themselves future and yet also contain the word “today”.

So, Deuteronomy 30:11-14 seeks to answer why, when Israel returns to the land and receives abundance from Yahweh, they will hear and do the commands of the Lord.

First, in verse 12, the word will no longer be in the heavens, suppressing a potential complaint by the people. ‘Who would be holy enough to ascend to the Most High, hear his command, and tell it to the people for their obedience?’ Second, in verse 13, the word will no longer be across the sea, prompting a complaint by the people. ‘Who would be strong enough to pass beyond the waters, receive the word of the Creator, and return to tell it to the people for their obedience?’ In this future picture, the word is no longer in

these places keeping Israel in hard-hearted disobedience. The command will not be too *difficult* nor too *distant*, because the word will be nearer than it has ever been before: in the mouths and in the hearts of Yahweh's people, so that they will speak it and do it.

Let's take a look at this difficulty and distance. First, in verse 11, the difficulty. The word of God will not be beyond their ability to accomplish—It won't be too difficult.

This does not necessarily mean the law was objectively impossible, as if God were asking the people to do something properly illogical. Instead, it means that this people lacked this ability. It's not that the commands were simply too difficult. It was that they were too difficult *for this people*. This is precisely what Job meant when he said, "I have uttered what I did not understand, *things too wonderful for me* which I did not know" (Job 42:3, emphasis mine). Too wonderful for my station and for my existence. There are some things that we ought to press forward and take hold of, to muster the strength to accomplish the goal. And there are some things that simply elude us, and we must look to another for help. The negation, then, in verse 11 indicates that in this future time Israel's inability to accomplish the difficult word and commands of God will be removed.

Second, the word will not be too distant. Look at verse 11 again. Moses tells us that the command of God will not be far off and out of reach—It won't be too distant. Moses then explains what this means in verses 12-13, describing what *will have happened* for this to be so. Here are two future *responses* from the people that will not be. Kind of like the ghost of Christmas future, showing the people what they will not say.

Look at verse 12. The response of this future people will *not* be, "Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?"

The people who find themselves in the land after the exile are a people well acquainted with self-doubt and personal failure. They don't just suffer from depression; they suffer from PTSD. They were dragged away from their houses into foreign prisons and concentration camps because their hearts loved false gods more than the true God.

But verse 12 is saying that when they return to the land, they will *not* cry out for a mediator like Moses, one who will ascend to the heavens like Moses ascended Sinai, who will receive the command of God like Moses received the Ten Commandments from heaven. Israel will no longer need that in this future time.

He continues in verse 13. The second response will *not* be, "Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?"

There are two ways to understand this verse, and these two ways are not mutually exclusive. One can understand the sea to be the Red Sea, which Moses crossed with the help of Yahweh. One can also understand the waters to represent the chaotic realm of the underworld, the place of the dead.

Passing through the waters of the Red Sea could itself typify passing through the waters of the chaotic underworld. When Paul uses this text in the New Testament, he has waters of death on his mind: “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ *up from the dead*)” (Romans 10:7, emphasis mine).

The desire of this future people to pass over the waters of death might come with the intention to bring back the previous mediator—namely, Moses—in order to hear from him and not perish in the land. Moses’s death must be on the minds of the people. The text mentions Moses’s age (120 years young) only eight verses after this section (31:2), and the book of Deuteronomy will end with an extended dirge, benediction, and death narrative of Moses. The text is saying that this covenant mediator will *not* be present with them in the future.

But in this future time, the people will no longer have need for a mediator to cross the waters for temporal salvation (Red Sea) or for eternal salvation (waters of death). In this future vision, Israel *will do* all the commands and not be led away by abundance because the commands will not be too difficult nor will they be left without one to proclaim the heavenly word to them.

Why is this so? Look at verse 14, the commands will instead be in their own mouths and their own hearts, such that the people will really desire to do them and speak them. There is real hope, anchored in the promise of God, that God would remove the heart of stone and give the heart of flesh that loves the way of the Lord. *One does not find difficult what one loves to do.*

The NT associates ascending to heaven with the work of Jesus, who first descended from heaven (Rom 10). Far more than Moses’s ascent to the top of Mount Sinai, Jesus passed through the heavens to be exalted above them into the presence of the Father.

Ascending into heaven is the difficult thing that Jesus does, and the ministry of the kingdom of God is built on top of this wonder. As true representative of Israel, Jesus came down from heaven to give us the word of God, to show us himself as the express image of the Father. He crossed over the waters of death and returned in victory, securing eternal life for his people. And He placed his own Spirit into our hearts so that we love and speak his word.

The barrier of difficulty and the barrier of distance, both coalescing in the barrier of sin, blocked our way to God. But there came one who did the difficult/wondrous thing for us. His Spirit makes our hearts yearn for Yahweh’s commands to love and serve and speak with bond-loosening authority.

However, this does not mean we all feel this way 100% of the time. In Romans 10:7, it appears that the ghost of Christmas future was wrong. It’s all well and good that Christ went up to heaven, but we still need him down here! Why did he leave us here? There’s still work to do. Who will go up to retrieve him? But Paul says no way.

Paul writes in Romans 10:5–9, “For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the *law*, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on *faith* says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Though we may feel like it at times, there is no need for another to go up and get Christ, or to go down to the abyss to retrieve him, because the very *confession* of Jesus as Lord is identified with the word being in the mouth. The very *belief* that God raised Jesus from the dead is identified with the word being in the heart.

Our confession and belief together is the *doing* that Moses commanded. This is because confessing and believing wrap one up into Christ’s own obedience of the law. By faith we have been united to the Person who did the difficult thing.

Kierkegaard, whose 205th birthday was two days ago, once wrote, "And this is one of the most crucial definitions for the whole of Christianity; that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith."

1 John 5:4 says that “everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”

Our faith is the victory over the difficult and distant word of God. And the genuineness of our faith is not measured by the number of acts of charity we *commit but rather by how surprised we are that we commit acts of charity in Christ’s name at all.*

The genuineness of our faith is not measured by the imperviousness of our certainty but by the presence of our gratitude for Jesus Christ.

We in this room have no need for another Christ. He ever lives to intercede for the saints.

We have no need for another indwelling Spirit. He is with us always.

We have no need for another faith.

We have no need to root out all self-doubt.

We have no need to button up all our short-comings and do the difficult thing and cross the great distance.

One has done it for us.

If you confess him and believe him today you will live.

Pray.