

# Sermon given at The Vine, 24 May 2026

## Reflection on Deuteronomy 29 & 30

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*“This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live...”*

This is a critical moment.

After forty years in the wilderness, Israel stands at a crossroads. Moses tells them:

*“Choose life.”*

This text is more than ancient history. In a timeless way, Moses is speaking to every heart divided between fear and faith. The geography may be ancient, but the crossroads are painfully familiar.

We tend to think of life as a straight line. We make a decision, we convert, we find faith, and then we walk happily into the sunset—or upwards to heaven. And perhaps that is true for some, but I think generally not. When you read the books of Exodus and Numbers, and later the stories in Judges and Kings, you quickly realise that God’s chosen people never walked in a straight line, so why would we? The Israelites wavered along the edge, continually facing a choice between life and death, surrender and resistance, blessing and cursing.

I know that edge well. I live on it. Every day, I am faced with choices where I can either embrace God or reject Him. And to be entirely candid with you, there are many days where my baser instincts win. I catch myself being self-righteous. I look at others with judgment in an attempt to raise myself up, I engage in gossip, seeking camaraderie. I find myself chasing security in riches rather than resting in faith. The crossroads that Israel faces is the same one we face. It never goes away.

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To understand the weight of this moment, we need to look at how Israel got here—to this particular riverbank, at this particular time.

The journey began in Exodus, which is the second book of the Old Testament. It began with the dramatic rescue from slavery in Egypt and the receiving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai—only for that first generation to be denied entry to the Promised Land because they lacked trust in God's word.

The narrative then resumes in the book of Numbers, tracking forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Throughout all of this, the scriptures give us story upon story of human frailty. There is constant complaining, disgruntlement, gossip, disobedience, refusal to listen, even outright rebellion, and the explicit worship of false gods. Yet, through every single rebellion, God's love never wavers; He forgives His people, disciplines them, calls them back, and ultimately still leads them toward the promised land.

And that brings us to Deuteronomy, a title that literally means "the second law". The first generation who walked out of Egypt has mostly died out in the desert; these are their children and grandchildren standing before Moses. They are a new generation who didn't witness the parting of the Red Sea or the events at Sinai. Moses knows he won't be crossing the Jordan with them, so this entire book is his passionate, parting sermon—a retelling of the law to set his people up for a faithful relationship with God in their new home. It is right here, on the edge of a new beginning, that God makes a binding covenant not just with those standing there, but with the future generations to come.

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The trouble is, we, the future generations, are often blind and ignorant of that covenant. Wilderness need not be physical desert. In my case it was spiritual. I grew up in an agnostic household, surrounded by a community who paid lip-service to faith, or were outright atheist. Faith and worship were not on our radar, yet nothing replaced them. I experienced great, gaping holes both inside and around me. At times I felt I was in a boat with no rudder, on a dark sea, lost and drifting.

This sense of emptiness is a sickness of our time, gathering momentum. We all need something to worship—it seems to be a fundamental human need, a given. When this need is neglected it creates a vacuum. Nature abhors vacuums, so it must be filled. For many in our world today, that gaping hole becomes filled with a variety of false idols: money, fame, possessions, or even other people. For me, entering into adulthood, my god of choice was chemical.

I turned to alcohol and drugs to give me, I thought, a stronger sense of self. By the time I was twenty-three I was a full-blown alcoholic, and by twenty-five a heroin addict. When you are in that dark place, you don't think you have a choice. You feel completely cut off from anything holy.

When I finally tried to get sober in my mid-thirties, people told me I had to hand my will and my life over to God. That sounded impossible. I spent years reading theology, trying to intellectualise my way into faith, trying to figure out what I believed. I was clean and sober, yes, but I was still holding the reins. I gave church a wide berth. I was terrified of fully letting go. I doubt I am alone in this. Many hold on to self in similar ways, even without an addiction—we hold onto our worries, our bank accounts, our possessions, and our pride, thinking we are the ones keeping it all together.

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It is fitting that we are gathered here on Pentecost Sunday—the day we celebrate the Holy Spirit arriving to bring new life to Jesus' followers. For many years of my sobriety—which I must say wasn't consistent, but had moments of relapse, even collapse—I tried to logic my way into faith. But Pentecost reminds us that faith isn't an intellectual exercise; it's an awakening of the heart. That same Spirit was operating in my life long before I knew it, dragging me out of addiction, and eventually giving me the courage to fully surrender and welcome Jesus into my heart. Pentecost is proof that God is always actively moving to call us back.

And this is the beautiful breakthrough, the mystery of the Gospel. Deuteronomy 30:4 says, *“Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you.”* This exact promise of an ultimate homecoming was echoed by Jesus

in the Gospel of Mark, where he tells us that God will “*send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens*”.

Years into my sobriety, it finally hit me: I hadn't saved myself. I hadn't even found God on my own. The love of Jesus Christ had saved me through those horrific years of addiction and the struggles to stay clean and sober, even though I didn't have a clue it was happening at the time.

I finally stopped fighting the mystery. I welcomed Jesus into my heart—as simple and as corny as that might sound to my atheist friends. I embraced the Christian faith fully, and wholeheartedly. I realised that God wasn't waiting for me to become perfect; He had been tracking me through the wilderness all along.

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What this means for me today, and perhaps for all of us, is that our turning away does not exhaust God's willingness to turn toward us. Moses tells the people that God will circumcise their hearts so that they can love Him. Centuries later, Jesus would name this mystery as being 'born of the Spirit'—a radical, internal rebirth that we cannot manufacture for ourselves, but only receive through grace.

When I learned to pray "Thy will, not mine, be done," it wasn't a limitation, nor a loss of self; it was in fact freedom. When we surrender, we realise that God is not a rigid judge waiting to catch us out. He is a loving presence, waiting, always, and actively calling us back home.

No matter how far we might have strayed this week, we learn from Moses, and later from Jesus, that the road back is exactly one step long—if we choose faith.

And this is the ultimate destination that the prophet Jeremiah saw from afar, standing in Scripture precisely midway between Moses and Jesus. Looking across the centuries to the day when our struggles with willpower, consumerism, addiction, and pride would find their answer, he declared the actual words of God's central promise:

*“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”*

That is the mystery we celebrate today. Not a law written on cold stone tablets for us to break, but a living covenant written directly onto our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

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So where does that leave us this morning? It leaves us with the power of the pause.

This week, you might be tempted to turn away in small ways—through a sharp word, a judgmental thought, or an anxious grip on your resources. When that happens, I invite you to slow down.

Pause.

Discern.

Listen to the voice that has been calling you since before you even knew its name. God is here. The choice is yours.

Choose life.

Amen.