



We Had a Deal

Deuteronomy 4:23-31

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I have been waiting for spring since last fall. Last fall I bought a new motorcycle—a dual purpose motorcycle that can be driven on the road and off the road in the dirt and mud, and through the woods and over logs and so forth. I have very little experience riding off-road. Other people, like fellow church member Dave Shively, have lots of off road experience and maybe not so much on-road experience. So we decided that if he bought a dual purpose bike he could teach me the tricks of the trade for off road riding, and I could polish him up on the finer points of on-road riding.

Spring has finally sprung, and Dave and I ventured forth on our new dual purpose motorcycles. I led the way along sparsely traveled backroads—from Aurora to Mantua and on to Garrettsville and around to Hiram and up north to the LaDue Reservoir and back to Aurora and my home. Heading down my driveway I decided maybe we could just continue off-road across the backyard and into the woods and down past the pond by the creek and up the hill and back into the woods.

I was standing on my pegs in true motocross champion style. As a result I could not look in my rearview mirrors to see Dave, but I assumed he was impressed that what I lacked in skill I more than made up in awesome bravado. At the top of a hill I stopped and looked back for a dose of affirmation. No Dave. That dirty dog had probably stopped back in my driveway to talk with Nancy. So I turned around and headed back to get him for a repeat performance.

I found Dave on the way back, lying in the middle of the creek with his bike on top of him. From this dubious position he said, “I was wondering if you were coming back.” To which I responded, “Dave, we had a deal. I was going to help you with on-road and you were going to help me with off-road. I kept my end of the deal. This was your turn.” Dave looked up from the muck and water and said, “I’d be happy to talk with you about that if you could help get this motorcycle off me.”

The title of our message today is, “We Had a Deal.” Donald Trump wrote a book entitled “The Art of the Deal,” which he claims is “the No. 1 selling business book of all time.” I don’t know about that, but deals are made in business all the time. They are called contracts and they contain binding terms on two or more parties. Suppose I

contract with you. You are obligated to produce and deliver 1,000 widgets within a certain timeframe, etc., and I am obligated to pay you \$20 per widget within a certain timeframe, etc. If you produce the widgets and I don't pay, or if I pay and you don't produce, the contract is broken. We had a deal and somebody broke it.

Contracts are worldly agreements. There are also spiritual agreements and they are called covenants. Marriage is called a covenant in the Bible, although today it has some contractual elements. There can be, for example, a pre-nuptial agreement to protect assets in cases of divorce. But in many ways marriage remains a spiritual agreement with terms binding upon both parties. Both parties promise to love, honor and cherish each other for better or worse, in sickness and in health, in poverty and in wealth, so long as they both shall live. If one forsakes the other, the deal is broken.

Besides our covenants with one another, we have a covenant with God. God entered into a covenant with many heroes of faith: Noah, Abraham, Moses and so forth. Beyond that he reaffirmed his covenant many times over, because his covenant with us is always the same. He promises to be our God if we will be his people. Indeed, our covenant with God is often depicted in the Bible as a marriage. As mentioned in our Call to Worship, God is a husband to us and we are a bride to him.

Reed Fuller and I attended a prayer workshop this past Monday where the facilitator made an interesting observation. In the Bible God says he is a jealous God. He says that as he is establishing a covenant with his people through their representative Moses. If you think about it, we cannot be jealous of someone unless we are in a relationship with them. I can be jealous of Nancy, but I cannot be jealous of any other woman because I am only in a relationship with Nancy. As soon as God entered into a relationship with his people he intended for it to be an exclusive relationship—no horsing around with other gods.

If we are faithful to God, God will be faithful to us—faithful to direct and guide, to protect and provide, to save and redeem, to lead us to the Promised Land in both this life and the life to come. So, again, there are binding terms upon both parties. If we remain faithful to God and God forsakes us, or if God remains faithful to us and we forsake him, the covenant is broken. We had a deal and somebody broke it. When one party breaks a deal, the other party is released from their obligation. If you don't deliver the widgets, I don't pay. If you start horsing around, the marriage is over. We had a deal, and the deal is over thanks to one of us.

Often deals are made that lay out the consequences for default ahead of time. God is doing that in our text through Moses. Moses is now old and about to go the way of all flesh. He is turning the reigns of leadership over to Joshua and offering some advice before he passes on. He reminds the people of their deal with the Almighty. *Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God (Verses 23-24).*

No gods like Mammon (aka, money), no influences that compete with God for our devotion, no fooling around with other gods. We have a deal. If you mess around with other gods the deal is over. God is released from his obligation to deliver you to the Promised Land. Moses continues: *After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land for a long time—if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and provoking him to anger, I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. The Lord will scatter you among the peoples...* (Verses 25-27).

And that is what happened many generations later, after God had settled his people in the Promised Land and acquiesced to their demand for a king and made them prosperous among the nations. They became prideful and turned away from God. Even the Almighty is not mighty enough to protect people who won't follow his lead or let him. As a result, hostile neighboring countries like Assyria attacked and defeated the northern Kingdom of Israel, exiling the survivors as a slave race in an act of ethnic cleansing. And Babylon did the same in the case of the southern kingdom of Judah. In short they had a deal with God, they broke the deal and now they must suffer the consequences.

But even God's wrath and judgment serve a redeeming purpose in people's lives, for it is intended to turn the hearts of his people back to him and his saving power. Moses continues in our text a prophetic word that would be a comfort for God's people in their exile from the Promised Land. *But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath* (Verses 29-31).

That's the kind of God we serve. Even though we break the covenant and he is under no obligation to remain in relationship with us, he always holds open the possibility that we will return to him. Yes, he will discipline us, but only for our own good. In the depths of his heart he always loves us and always hopes for reconciliation. That is covenant love as described by the quote on the front of our bulletins: "I do, even when you don't. My promise doesn't depend on your actions. I will, even when you won't."

Yes, I fished Dave out of the creek because I want to preserve that relationship. Dave is a genius (and I use that term literally) when it comes to fixing things and inventing things and building things. I am going to find a way to download his brain into a program like Siri so that whenever people have an issue they can just push a button and Dave's voice will ask, "How can I help you?" When I say, "I have stripped a screw on my motorcycle," his voice will respond, "Try a manual impact driver and see if that works"--which is what he advised when I called him the other day distraught over what I had wrought.

Obviously Dave is not God or else he wouldn't have ended up in the drink under a motorcycle. But I value the relationship I have with Dave, and for some reason God values the relationship he has with us. He has entered into a covenant with us, and you can be sure that we are going to break it from time to time. That is our nature. But you can also be sure that he is always going to hold open the possibility of reconciliation. That is his nature.

Maybe some of us feel exiled from the good life in the Promised Land. Maybe we have made a big mess of things. Maybe we have it coming. Maybe God is using this tough time to tell us "We had a deal." Well, he is telling us in our text for today that we can have the same deal again. He will be our God if we will be his people. And the first step back to that restored relationship is to confess our sins in true repentance, and to seek his mercy which is promised in his Holy Word. That requires the opposite of pride. That requires hearts that have been sufficiently humbled. Let us discover what the humbled can expect from God as we rise and sing, "If My People's Hearts Are Humbled."