

Looking Back, Looking Forward

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[0 : 00] Good morning, my name is Chris, for those of you who are here for the first time. It's exciting to start a new year together.

Well done if you've made it this morning. Some of you may be bleary-eyed this morning, but I love New Year in Hong Kong because you actually get two New Years, which is great because if you've made all your New Year's resolutions and then broken them, by the end of January, it's okay, you've still got another chance, right?

Because you can start it in. And for some of us, we're going to be going to a wedding. The New Year's going to start with a wedding of Dan and Soda, Soda who work with the youth here. Tomorrow's their wedding day. It's an amazing way to start the New Year. And I've been thinking quite a lot about this idea of the difference between New Year's resolutions and wedding vows because I'll be doing the ceremony tomorrow.

And it's very interesting because you see, wedding vows are what we call covenantal, okay? They're relational. They're relational expression of unbreakable promises and commitment to one another, which if you do break them, has relational consequences.

[1 : 19] Whereas resolutions, they're just kind of personal. They're just goals that you want to meet for yourself, things that you want to achieve. And if you don't achieve them, then you just feel a little bit guilty, a little bit regretful that you only went to the gym three times in the last year.

And then you hope, maybe this year, it will be the year where I go five times. But covenantal wedding vows, you've got to kind of live them out day by day.

You can't just kind of put them on the shelf for another year. Otherwise, what happens is what I call relationship creep comes in. You don't mean to, but little bit over little bit, time after time, you just kind of stop pedaling on the marriage bike.

You freewheel. You coast. You kind of hope that your bike will continue while I focus on other things, like work, like kids. And every so often, I ask Fiona, my wife, how am I doing as a husband? How am I doing? How can I love you better in this relationship that we're in? Because my tendency is to get relationship creep. But I wonder, are you ever like that with God?

[2 : 34] Are you ever like that with God? And we're going to be looking at the book of Deuteronomy over the next eight weeks. And it's appropriate for us to start this new year looking at this book, because this book is really all about covenant vows, not marriage covenant vows, but vows between God and his people.

Between God and us, and what he wants us to be. And Deuteronomy, have your passage in front of you. Keep it open, because we'll be just looking through it a little bit. Deuteronomy is basically Moses preaching his last sermon.

Okay? It's a sermon. It's a long sermon. You'll be glad Moses isn't preaching to you today, because it's 34 chapters long, this sermon. Okay? But it is a sermon. And these are his final words to the people.

It's generation 2.0, who are Israel standing on the edge of the promised land. Okay? Just picture it. They've taken 40 years to get from Egypt to this place.

Their parents, who God had called to enter in the land, failed to do so. And basically, in the passage, in verse 2, it says, it's only an 11 days journey, but it took them 40 years to get where they were, because they failed, the parents had failed to trust God.

[4 : 00] And now, it's the kids' turn. And they're on the land. They're standing there, and Moses is going to say, your future is dependent, not on how great you guys are, but whether you remember the covenant vows that you have made as a people.

Whether you forget or remember who God is. And maybe, let me just frame what we mean by these covenant vows in words similar to what Dan and Soda are going to say tomorrow.

Something like this. The covenant would go, I, God, who rescued you out of Egypt, take you, Israel, to be my people.

I will love you, bless you, protect and provide for you, and be faithful to you as long as you shall live. That's my promise to you. And then, the flip side is, now Israel, and you can imagine them kind of standing there.

Now, Israel, now my people, now Watermark, do you take God to be your God? Do you promise to love him, honor him, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, be faithful only to him for as long as you shall live?

[5 : 17] That's the covenant. That's the covenant. And so, Deuteronomy begins with four words. These are the words. And that's the title of the book in Hebrew, of this book of Deuteronomy.

These are the words. This book, this sermon was to be placed every time when Israel came to worship to be reminded of what they committed to, this covenant.

So, we're going to have a little look into this book, and I want to talk about three things today. Even as we start this new year, and we think, where am I in my relationship with God? And where do I want to go this year?

Three things. Move on, look back, look forward. Okay? Move on, look back, look forward. The first thing. Move on. Moses, the first thing he does to prepare people for going into their future, for going into the promised land, is remind them God is always taking his people on a journey.

Okay? He's always taking his people on a journey. Verse 6, he says, the Lord our God said to us at Horeb. Now, Horeb is a name for Mount Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were given.

[6 : 25] Where this covenant, this marriage ceremony was given. He says, you've stayed long enough at this mountain. They'd been 14 months there. They'd grown comfortable.

They'd settled down in their nice luxury tents. And now, God says, it's time to move on. You've got to move on. See, I've promised you a land. I'm going to bring you into a new place, into a new future.

And Moses is basically recalling this, because he knows from the past 40 years, the tendency for people, the people, is when change comes, when God says, I want you to move on, is they start getting afraid.

They start wanting to stay back where they're comfortable by themselves. They wanted to retreat. They wanted to return back to Egypt. And because of that, they'd spent 40 years just wandering aimlessly round and round and round, a journey which should have taken 11 days, took 40 years. You know, in London, there's, I remember a few years ago, there's this ring road around London called the M25, okay? It's, on the news one day, there was an 82-year-old driver who had, who was found six miles away from where he started, still behind the wheel of a car.

[7 : 43] Police were called, because 30 hours traveling on this road, he was still traveling after 30 hours, one journey which should have taken him one hour.

And the police were called, and when they finally found him, he said, I just got a little bit lost. 30 hours. That's what happened to Israel, but that's so often what can happen to us in our own spiritual life.

We can go round and round in circles, wandering aimlessly. Maybe we want to retreat and stay comfortable when God is saying, I want to move you on. And for Christians, we don't stand between a physical wilderness and a promised land, but there's a wilderness of the world in which we live in, and a promised land of a new creation, of a heaven that God is taking us to.

And in between, God is saying, I'm taking you on a journey to be more like me, to love me, to reflect me, to grow, to honor me, to be more patient, loving, gracious, self-controlled in this relationship.

And you're only going to become more like that if you move on. Now, if you want to move towards a goal of being more like Jesus, and that is the goal for every Christian, that's part of the covenant.

[9 : 02] Change is necessary. You can't stay at the mountain you're at. To grow, change must happen. You know, Hong Kong used to be a fishing village.

Look at it now. Now, change happens. The forest you see outside used to just be a seed. The baby, the teenager you had was once a baby. For some of you, it's going to go in teenager.

Change equals growth if you trust God. But often, we want to stay where we are because change also means we lose something.

It's painful. It reviles effort. If you think of ever having to move a flat, there's a cost of time and money and effort. But it's always worth moving on to the place God is wanting to take you on. So let me ask you a question. What is the mountain that you need to move on from this year to be more like Jesus, to move into the future that God has for you?

[10:02] Some of us, our faith is stagnant. It's like a stagnant pond, you know. And that stagnant pond is a breeding ground for disease and death.

A moving river is a breeding ground for life and vitality. But many of us, we come to church on Sundays, we listen to sermons, we even read our Bible and pray. But our faith has become mechanical.

It's just routine. It's religion without passion. You know, I don't know if you've ever watched a child taking one of the trams down on Hong Kong Island and looking out of the window.

I don't know if you've seen this. But I've seen it where you look on the child's face and they're kind of like this awestruck excitement. They're like, billboard, bus, bus, like car, car.

And I'm on there looking at it thinking, that's a car. I've seen cars before, right? That's, you know, I'm so adult that I look at these things and I think, why are you so excited about that?

[11:09] You know, I'm bored. There's a much greater tram ride on somewhere else. And, you know, some of us have been so long in church that we're very adult in our faith.

That honestly, deep down, we kind of know the answer is Jesus, right? You know, what's the question? Answer Jesus. You know, you pray, you're nice, you don't murder anybody. Yes.

But we know the tram ride of how it works, right? Yes, you know. She knows. She's excited. See? There you go.

You know the tram ride. But actually, you don't have that childlike wonder and excitement and that enjoyment and delight of the promises of God, a sweetness of his presence any longer.

Yeah, you may have had it in the past. You may have stepped out in boldness in the past to trust Christ. But now, things have just gone a little bit stagnant. You'd be more excited by meeting the CEO of a Fortune 500 company than meeting the CEO of the universe.

[12:11] I wonder if that's you. Because if that's you this year, God is saying, I want to move you on. I don't want you to stay at this mountain any longer.

You've stayed long enough there. And the place that we start, if that's, you know honestly that that's where you're at. The place where you start is by coming down on your knees and saying, God, Father, I need you to warm up my cold heart.

To warm up this heart until it's blazing hot for you. Every day to be praying that until that spark lights. Some of us need that fire warmed up by getting up and getting baptized this year.

Because you've said, I'm a Christian, but you've never made that public commitment. And God will say, this year is a time to move on and to change. Some of us need to move on because we've kept holding on to this overriding sense that God is out there to punish us.

Times have been hard. Things have been difficult. On the outside, we're a nice Christian. But on the inside, we feel guilty for every failure we've made. We wallow in that guilt. And we've just been stuck there for a long time.

[13:23] You know, you've got shame on your back like a rock-filled backpack. And it crushes you. Some of you, that's you.

And the thing is, no one who ever lives under condemnation and guilt ever lives obediently to Christ. Did you know that? Because Christ is looking for that relationship of love and longing.

And if you think that God is there, always about to hit you over the head for what you've done wrong, that's not going to incite love and desire and longing for him.

And Christ says, you've stayed long enough at this mountain. Come to the fountain of my grace and receive the forgiveness that my grace brings. There is cleansing for you.

If that's you, there is cleansing for you today. Bought by Christ on the cross. And he says, lay down that backpack at my cross and go free this year.

[14:23] It's time to move on. You've stayed long enough for this mountain. I don't know what your mountain is. But God says, I want to move you on. C.S. Lewis said this.

It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird. It would be a jolly sight harder for a bird to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present.

And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad. We must be hatched or go bad. What he's saying is a church, God, like a good father, wants to

hatch us to be more and more like himself.

And he doesn't want us just to be nice, ordinary Christians who go about doing the routine. He wants us to get serious about the relationship with him and to chase after him and say, I'm not just interested in making resolutions about reading my Bible more, praying more, and then feeling guilty that I haven't done it enough.

He wants a covenant relationship where you look back at your vows and you say, I want to move on with you this year, God. I want to move on with you this year.

[15 : 32] So he's going to bring circumstances in your life. What's the mountain in your life that you've got to move on from? Because he wants to do that.

So that's the first thing, move on. Second thing, look back. You see, moving on with God is not a resolution.

Because it depends not on your personal willpower and effort. It depends more on his faithfulness to get you through than on your ability to be faithful to him.

You see, what Moses does at the moment of decision, he tells the people to look back at the past performance of God. He rehearses the promise he gave them. Verse 21. He says, See, the Lord your God has set the land before you.

Go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has told you. Do not fear or be dismayed. God's the one who initiated this. God's the one who's promised it.

[16 : 33] He's promised to give them a good land. And God has promised, and he's kept his word. Because you see verse 25, the spies go in and they say, Wow, it's a good land. It's amazing. God wasn't lying.

God wasn't lying. But they rebel. Okay? They rebel. Verse 26. They would not go up. Verse 27.

They say, Because God hated us. He brought us out of the land of Egypt to destroy us.

Verse 28. They say, The people are taller and greater than we. And then Moses says to them, Listen, God goes before you. He fights for you. You've seen what he did in Egypt.

He's going to fight. You've seen how God carried you. And yet, in spite of all of this, they didn't believe God. How is it that you can experience God's goodness and faithfulness and still be reluctant to obey him?

Because if you're like me, that is actually just what I'm like so often. You see, they'd forgotten who God was. They'd forgotten what he'd done for them.

[17 : 35] They'd forgotten that he'd been like this father who, from the beginning, he'd carried them. You know, like a father carrying a lost child on their back and walking with them, carrying them back home.

That's what he'd done for them, moving them all the way to where they were today. But they'd forgotten that. And then suddenly, there's some big people, bigger than Eric, here in front of them. Just imagine a room full of Eric's, standing in front of you, and you're looking up at them.

That's what they got to. And they'd forgotten who was behind them, beside them, before them, which was a God who was far bigger than even Eric is. And one commentator says this, he says, to experience God in their history was not sufficient for the people.

You know, it's not enough to just have experienced God two years ago, three years ago, four years ago. That's not enough. They had to be constantly reminded of that experience in order to overcome their anxieties, which tended to blot out their memory.

Okay? Do you ever get that memory block? Look, I constantly, I have this delete button in my mind. Every day, God does something. He provides for me. You know, Fiona and I, we look back at the year yesterday.

[18 : 48] So every New Year's Eve, we look back, we remember the faithfulness of God to us over the whole year. We write it down. We put it down. You know what happens? A week later, I remember back the conversations that I was worried about and God brought me through, the situations that I've struggled with and he brought me through.

And then I come straight to a new situation and delete button, forgotten everything about who's with me and God being with me. And I'm panicking and I'm stressed. But imagine if your six-year-old child, every day, you provide food on the table for them, every single day, every single day, every single day, every single day.

One day, you come home, you're just five minutes late and you see them and they're at the door, they're putting on their coat, they're stressed out. They're saying, I've got to go to park and shop.

I've got to buy my own food.

God, because you were five minutes late and I don't know whether you're going to provide for me. If you were that parent, how would you feel? Would that be hurtful that they didn't trust you knowing that you were good and that you would provide?

And don't you think God is grieved when so many times I come across the obstacles and face those things in my way and I forget to look back and see what he's done for all of these years, all of this time and I forget who is with me and I get stressed and I panic and I say, I've got to deal with it by myself.

[20 : 17] You see, if you're going to move on this year, you have to look back and remember because you're going to face giants, you're going to face things which come in front of you and if you're relying on yourself to face the giant, you know, people who think they can do it solo, there will come a time where there's a giant too big for you and then you'll stress.

Do you know, people, I don't know if you've done this, if you've done teamwork with somebody and there's somebody who just relies on themselves, think they can do it by themselves. You know, when somebody's part of a team, when somebody's part of a relationship and they think they can go solo, they may get a project done, they may even get and achieve what they want to but in their stress and self-reliance, they sabotage the relationship.

Have you ever seen that? I've seen that all the time but that's what we do with our covenant relationship with God. This year, you may have projects, you may have plans, you may have things that you want to achieve but you could achieve them and sabotage your relationship with God if you're not looking back to Him and trusting Him.

There was a situation in the New Testament giants of persecution were causing some Christians to wonder whether they could really trust God and they would begin to drift away, relationship creep had come in and in Hebrews chapter 12, the writer tells Christians this, he says, let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him. You see, when you're going to face those things this year, like your resolutions, you know 92% of resolutions people never keep them because what happens is you come across a giant and you kind of give up.

[22 : 23] Something happens. But your resolve to walk with God this year is primarily dependent not on your resolution and your will because that's going to flag.

Your willpower at some point is going to wane but it's more dependent on the one who has already run the race for you. It says, let us run with endurance. You're going to have to endurance in this 2017.

There's all kinds of stuff that's going to happen. Great stuff, challenging stuff. But there'll be times when you feel like giving up and it's only as you look back and you see that Jesus had more resolve in His relationship with you than you have ever had with Him.

He is more committed to you than you have ever been committed to Him. You see, He went through the greatest giant. Moses passed through the Red Sea.

Jesus passed through sin and death. He overcame the greatest giant. Nobody in history has ever overcome death.

[23 : 32] You might have overcome your rental payments. You might have overcome your finding a job but you've never overcome death. You've never overcome sin by yourself. Jesus did that.

He initiated your relationship with Him. He's going to carry on doing it. He's brought you to this point and that's the point where you have to keep looking at Him if you want to move on with Him.

Preacher Charles Spurgeon said this, We shall never find happiness by looking at our prayers, our doings, our feelings. It is what Jesus is, not what we are, that gives rest to the soul.

If we would at once overcome Satan and have peace with God, it must be by looking unto Jesus. If you've been in the church, you know that here but God is saying, have you seen, do you ponder, do you regularly come back when you're lying on your bed at night?

Do you recall and consider His mercy, His grace, His endurance for you? Because He's committed to this relationship with you. And you may have giants this year of death, of cancer, of sickness, of things in life but He is bigger than all of them.

[24 : 41] But there's a warning in this. There's a warning. The people of Israel were very religious but they didn't trust in God.

Some of us think because we've been in church a long time, we're Christians but being in McDonald's doesn't make you a hamburger even if you stay there a long time. and you know, some of you have never said, God, I'm in for this covenant wedding relationship with you.

Some of you have never said that because you don't want to commit. You want the religion but you don't want the commitment and God is challenging you in 2017. You know, when you come to death, the biggest giant you'll have to face, death.

If you don't go all in for him, you may have to face that giant by yourself because there's no one else to rely on if you don't rely on him.

And the promised land of heaven and new creation, God will say you cannot enter because you cannot overcome that giant of death by yourself. And if you know you've only just been a religious Christian, God will say to you, this year is a year you ought to move on and trust him.

[26 : 03] Ask forgiveness for your self-reliance and turn to him because he's there running after you and he will give you the strength to move forward.

Move on, look back, last thing, look forward. God's not just wanting you to look back to where you've come from, he's wanting to look forward to where he's taking you.

Because Moses does that, he speaks, Moses says, the Lord goes before you, the first generation didn't listen. Verse 38, he says, I'm going to raise up someone else. I'm going to raise up someone else who's going to lead you, who's going to cause you to inherit the land.

His name's Joshua. He's faithful when no one else is faithful. He's going to move you in to being the people that you always wanted to be. But you see, the people were unfaithful.

The people were unfaithful. Even in chapter 31, Moses predicts it. But where the people are unfaithful, there's another leader who comes who is totally faithful.

[27 : 12] That's Jesus we've been talking about. And that verse in Hebrews says, he's not just the founder of your faith. He's not just the one who blazes a trail to make you come through to where you are today.

He's the one who's going to perfect your faith. He's going to move you on. He's going to change you into the person you want to be. You just have to keep your eyes on him. Because this year, God is going to move you into situations which are going to be too big for you to handle.

As a church, he'll call us out on a mission which we feel inadequate and ill-equipped. He's going to call you to people in your family, to people in your offices, to people around us and we will feel like, I don't know what to do.

I don't know how to do it. There'll be opportunities. There'll be challenges and God's challenge to us is don't fear. Don't let fear prevent you from moving on into the gifts that I've given you.

Don't let past failure prevent you from moving on. Look forward and see that he's not just behind you but he's going before you. He's already made the way. He's going to bring you through 2017.

[28 : 23] More than the world economy, whatever happens in the world economy, whatever happens in your job, he's going to bring you through and he wants to use every situation to grow your faith to be more like him.

I don't know if you've ever been rock climbing. Anyone been rock climbing? Anyone been rock climbing not on a climbing wall but actually on a real rock? Two people.

Three people. Okay. Yeah, the rock climbing in Hong Kong is so-so but my best friend is a rock climbing instructor and when you're, he tells me, when you're on a rock face, you always have a lead climber who goes up in front of you.

He basically takes the route and what he does every so often, he puts an anchor into the rock and then he attaches a rope to it and then he carries on climbing up and he basically paves the way for you to move up the rock face and what you have to do then is you attach your rope to the anchors that he's put on there and then you climb up and you just keep attaching your rope to what he's already made and you'll be fine because it's the one who goes first who takes the risk.

Well, when Moses says, Joshua's going to lead you in, when in Hebrews it says, Jesus is the founder, the trailblazer, that's what the word means, the pioneer of your faith, it's he's the one who has already made the way through 2017.

[29 : 58] He already knows where he's taking you. He's already been up and down 2017 quite a number of times so he knows this pretty well and I don't know what your fears are, there's so much uncertainty, there's so many things where I don't know what's going on in your world but there's something I do know.

When you get to the end of 2017, he's going to be there and his anchors of his promises are still going to be as sure as they ever were and as long as you're holding on to those anchors, you're going to walk through 2017 and you're going to be growing and you're going to be moving more and more like himself and you're going to look back and you're going to think, how on earth did I do that?

And you'll look back at the end of 2017, you'll see, it was only because of the faithfulness of God and I just keep holding my anchor on to him, I keep trusting him with whatever situation he brings me this year and you'll be fine because he's already got there.

He's already into 2020 and beyond. He's already into eternity actually. So let me leave us just with a couple of thoughts.

This year, are you all in for this covenant relationship with God? will you stay as an unhatched egg or will you say, I want to move on?

[31 : 29] Some people say to me, I wish I had your faith. The Bible says, you do have faith. There is nobody in this room who doesn't have faith.

In fact, you do not need to grow in faith this year because you always have the same amount of faith. The issue is not the amount of faith you have, it's where you put your faith.

That's the issue this year. So will you put it in the lead climber who's already gone ahead because otherwise you're climbing solo and if you climb solo, there's going to be a point where you just get stuck on the rock and if some of you are stuck on the rock right now, you know the way back?

It's just saying, Jesus, I want to hook back onto your rope. I want to come back to you. Forgive me that I've been away. If Apple or Microsoft or Alibaba this year was to say, I think we've grown enough, we're happy as we are, you'd say, you're fools.

You'll die if you stay where you are. Why as Christians are we so often happy to say, I'm okay as I am. This year, consider Jesus.

[32 : 44] This year, look at Him, His promises, His faithfulness and we need to be a community which is constantly reminding each other of Him throughout whatever's going to come and you know what?

It's going to be an amazing year with Jesus. Let me pray. Father, I just, even as I look back over 2016 and think of Your faithfulness and look forward into 2017 and there's so many things that I just don't know, don't know what's going to happen.

and yet, Father, You are faithful. I pray that as a church we would get serious about our relationship with You and we'd realize that that doesn't mean living off a past experience.

That means running day by day, remembering who You are, remembering Your promises to us and stepping out in what You are calling us to do this year.

I pray, Lord, we'd not stay stagnant, whether it's with the people around us, whether there are relationships we need to get right, whether there are just our relationship with You we need to just pursue more.

[34 : 06] I just pray that You'd help us to see Your goodness, Your love, that You go behind us and before us and we would look back at the grace that You show us and look forward to the place You're taking us, which is to be more and more like You.

In Jesus' name, Amen.