

Sunday School Lesson for October 26, 2025
Deuteronomy 4:1-9 and 15-20

Welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this last Sunday of October, we've been tracing the steps of the Israelites as they made their way to the Promised Land after their miraculous deliverance from Egypt, now pausing across the Jordan River from Jericho in the lands held by the Moabites. Last week, we concluded our brief review of significant events recorded for us in the Book of Numbers as Moses explained how the land would be divided among the twelve tribes and heard the Lord's warning to the people if they failed to remove the Canaanites from the land.

Beginning today and continuing through the remainder of this quarter, we'll consider a few of the final messages the Lord delivered through Moses recorded for us in the book of Deuteronomy as the people of Israel prepared to enter the Promised Land--messages that, if heard and obeyed, would allow them to live peacefully in the land the Lord was giving to them and fulfill their destiny as the chosen people of God. Our focal text for today is found in the first nine verses of Deuteronomy, chapter four and also includes verses fifteen through twenty.

The book of Deuteronomy records for us a series of farewell addresses from Moses to the Israelites just before they crossed over the Jordan River and entered the land promised to them by God through Abraham some 700 years previously. Moses began by reminding the people of their recent history, including the sending of the spies into the land, the report they brought, and their refusal to take the land God had given them, with the consequences of their disobedience. Now, almost all of that generation was gone. During their wilderness wanderings, God had given them victories over the Amorites and the Bashanites.

With a retelling of their recent history fresh on their minds, Moses urged them to be faithful to do everything God had called them to do--chapters four through eleven. He gives them some more specific guidelines in chapters twelve through 26, followed by some very grim warnings about the consequences of disobedience in chapters 27 through 33, although not without some very encouraging words, like those we find in chapter 30: "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, 'Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess." But it also includes the prediction of Israel's disobedience and punishment.

In our first focal text for today we're in chapter four, at the end of the first section of Deuteronomy, with a focus on the first nine verses. If you were to outline the passage, you would find an instruction, and illustration, an application, and a concluding summary.

Here's what we find in the first nine verses: "And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you. Your eyes have seen what the Lord did at Baal-peor, for the Lord your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor. But you who held fast to the Lord your God are all alive today. See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God

commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children’s children.”

The chapter begins with the word, “Now” that serves to transition from the retelling of all that the Lord had done for Israel that he’s been speaking about in the first three chapters to an encouragement to keep the Law of the Lord. All the things that God had done for His chosen people placed them under a divine obligation to conscientiously conform their lives to the requirements of the Law so that they might enjoy the blessings of God’s covenant with them.

The first element of these divine obligations begins with the word, “Listen,” “Hear,” or “Hearken.” The word means far more than just recognizing that someone is saying something; it means listening with your heart and responding with action by putting into practice what you’ve heard. So, how do you prove you’re listening in this way? You show that you’ve listened and responded appropriately by the life that you live--that it reflects and models the standard that the Lord has set before us.

So we read, “Be slow to speak; quick to listen” James tells us. Jesus said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” A valuable word study that I would recommend to you is to look through the Bible and consider every verse where you find the word, “listen.”

The Israelites and we must first--listen, because God's instructions apply to every area of our lives / as one commentator notes: "Over the intellect, for it demands attention, investigation, comparison, and discrimination. Authority over the affections, for it demands reverence, esteem, choice, and love. ... Over the active powers, for it requires watchfulness, self-restraint, uninterrupted deference, and uncompromising service." God's instructions apply to every area of our lives.

Moses says, "Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you." The decrees or statutes were the moral commandments and the laws were the covenant laws--those things that God commanded them to do because of the special relationship they had with Him. The two words together refer to the whole law that God had given them and that Moses was about to remind them of. In this case, they were to hearken to "the statutes and the judgments"--two words found throughout the Old Testament that summarize the whole of the Law of Moses.

Moses' role in this process was to teach these statutes and judgments to the people so that they would do them. To teach and learn is a common refrain throughout the book of Deuteronomy as well as the books of Jeremiah and Hosea that true religion rests in the knowledge of God, and the fact that people sin because they fail to apply the basic instructions for life that the Lord laid down in His Law, as we read in Hosea, chapter four, verse six, where the Lord says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge."

In the very next part of this first verse, we find something very interesting. It's almost as if Moses hears someone in the congregation say, "Why do we have to listen to you?" // Do you see the special kindness of God here? He's not speaking through Moses laying down a bunch of dos and don'ts because He's God and He can do what He wants without ever having to explain Himself.

Sometimes we ask, “Why?” and we don’t get an answer, but here, God wants every single person not only to hear His instructions for them and do what He has decreed, but He also wants them to understand the reason for it: “so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you.” God had a beautiful plan for the people of Israel and He has a perfect plan for every person, but they had to and we have to conform their lives and our lives to His instructions in order for that beautiful plan to become a reality.

That plan included life: “so that you may live.” Life with a capital “L” is what God desired for them and desires for us. Jesus told His followers in John, chapter ten, verse ten, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly,” but the only way we can experience that abundant life is by allowing our lives to be conformed to God’s good and loving plans for life.

For the Israelites of old, the plan also included the fact that they would “go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of [their] fathers, [was] giving [them].” The land was a personal gift from God Himself that He was giving to the people in fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham nearly seven hundred years before.

The land wasn’t just a plot of dirt. For the wandering children of Israel, the land meant permanence, stability, and a sense of freedom they had never before experienced since Joseph moved his family to the land of Goshen. For the traveling vagabonds who, for the last forty plus years, had taken down their tents, packed up all their belongings, and loaded them onto carts to head out for their next destination, finally getting to settle down and plant some roots would have been a huge relief. Not only that, but in chapter six, verse ten, Moses tells them that, in the land they are about to inherit, they would possess “great and good cities that [they] did not build, and houses full of all good things that [they] did not fill, and cisterns that [they] did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that [they] did not plant.” Such was the beautiful plan God had for His chosen people.

But the fulfillment of this plan was conditional. The Lord says that, as the people as a nation hearkened to the statutes and the rules that Moses was teaching them / so that they conformed their lives to those statutes and rules, then they would live. Their continued existence as a nation depended on their keeping the Law. Obedience to the Law was their guarantee that they would not be conquered by any other nation or that their unique standing as the chosen people of God would be compromised. It was the same message the Lord would deliver to the people of Israel in Amos, chapter five, verse four: “For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: ‘Seek me and live.’” Their individual lives as well as their standing as a nation depended on their willingness to follow the loving instructions for life that He was giving them.

In the second verse, there’s a warning about the instructions he’s about to give: “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.” It seems that, in Jeremiah’s day, the Word of the Lord had been tampered with, altered, changed to fit the preferences of those who wanted to manipulate the Word of God for their own ends, so the Lord called them out in chapter eight, verse eight: “How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us?’ But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.” The people were to honor the Word of God as it had been delivered to them, neither adding to it nor taking away from it.

So, first, we have the command to listen. Second, is the illustration of why it’s so essentially important for them to listen and heed the Laws of the Lord--verses three and four: “Your eyes have seen what the Lord did at Baal-peor, for the Lord your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor. But you who held fast to the Lord your God are all alive today.”

What happened with Baal-Peor? Baal-Peor was the local idol of the Midianites who followed the advice of Baalam who told them, if they wanted to defeat the Israelites, they needed to intermarry with them. In the first verses of Numbers, chapter 25, we read, “While Israel lived in Shittim, the people

began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people"--meaning the Israelites--"ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel." As you continue to read about this event and the Lord's anger, you'll find that the Lord ordered "all the chiefs of the people [to be hanged] in the sun before the LORD, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." The Lord also sent a plague among the people that killed 24,000 people, and it wasn't stopped until a man named Phineas drove a spear through both an Israelite man and, presumably, his Midianite partner. God took this spiritual adultery very, very seriously, and He "destroyed from among [them] all the men who followed the Baal of Peor."

"But"--verse four--"you who held fast to the Lord your God are all alive today." Do you understand the consequences of sin--particularly the sin of worshiping those things that are not God? Why was this such a good example for Moses to use to underscore the importance of listening to and obeying the Law? They all had seen it with their own eyes. They didn't have to learn it from somebody else. There was irrefutable proof that if you do bad things, bad things happen; if you do good things, good things happen. Simple as that. It's not like he's talking to the best educated people in the crowd discussing the philosophical implications of failing to follow some obscure principle of the Law. They all saw what happened, and they're all responsible for understanding the connection between idolatry and its consequences and how to avoid it. None of them had an excuse as if to say, "Well, I didn't know."

In most of the modern translations of the Bible, the text reads something like, "All of you who held fast to the Lord your God are still alive today." The King James and Old American Standard versions read, "But ye that did cleave unto Jehovah your God are alive / every one of you this day." "Held fast" just doesn't have the same force that "cleave" does. The word actually expresses the closest, most intimate attachment and communion between husband and

wife as in Genesis, chapter two, verse 24 or here, between God and His people. “It is more than emotional sentiment; it is decisive allegiance unashamedly expressed in obedience.” The phrase is frequently used to speak of devotion to the service and worship of the one true God, and here it describes the contrast between the conduct of those who remained completely faithful to the Lord and those who forsook him to worship Baal. “Every one of you who cleaved to the Lord are standing here today while those who didn’t / aren’t with us.”

So, we have the instruction and a supporting illustration. In verses five through nine, we find the application that Moses made to the people of that day and the application that we can make to our lives today: “See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children’s children.”

The impact of their obedience would be two-fold: your own wisdom will make headlines around the world, and everybody else in the world will know how great God is. Everyone would say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” And why would that be the case? What’s so special about God’s laws that everyone in the world who heard and understood them would be so amazed?

The Law was not primarily about justice in society, and it wasn’t possessing the Law that would make the people wise and admired throughout the world. Doing right to your neighbor wasn’t the main focus of God’s

instructions. The Law was focused on Israel's relationship to God. God was near to them. He had revealed Himself to them and personally inscribed the Ten Commandments on stone for them.

Every group of laws in that day had precepts that said, "If you do this, then this must be done to you." For example, "If a man strikes down his neighbor and kills him, then that man shall be put to death." It was a rule that guided most of the world of that day. But in the Bible, we read of laws like that but we also read about laws that have a different form. It's the laws that say, "You shall not," like, "You shall not have any other gods before Me." Even a command like "Do not steal," impacts our relationship with God and our duty to Him. The other legal codes of other nations in that day didn't have these kinds of laws.

A second major difference between God's laws and the laws of the other nations of that day was that the ruler established the law, and sometimes, when a new king would come to power, he would change the laws of the previous administration, or change his own laws whenever he felt like it. Read the story of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar for an example. Those particular laws reflected the understanding of justice that whoever was the king at the time possessed, // and, very often, the king was above the law. Not so with God's Law--everyone is subject to His Law and no one can change His Law.

Because of the unique nature of God's statutes and rules, obedience to His Law would show the world how wise the people of Israel were, / so much so that people would say, "Certainly there is no other nation that is so wise and understanding." One commentator writes, "History has confirmed this. Not only did the wisdom of ... Solomon astonish the queen of Sheba--First Kings, chapter ten, verse four--, but the divine truth that Israel possessed in the law of Moses attracted all the more earnest minds of the heathen world to seek the satisfaction of the **in**most necessities of their heart and the salvation of their souls in Israel's knowledge of God, when, ... at last, in Christianity, it has brought one heathen nation after another to the knowledge of the true God,

and to eternal salvation, notwithstanding the fact that the divine truth was and still is regarded as folly by ... proud philosophers ... of ancient and modern times.”

So, if the Queen of Sheba and others of that day said, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people,” why aren’t people around the world today as impressed with God’s law as Moses said they would be back then? We find the answer in the first part of that verse--verse six: “Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples.” It was not in the judicial principles, the notion of compensatory justice, or the appeal to a divine authority that made the people of other nations stand in awe, it was the fact that the children of Israel kept and practiced the Law--at least for a time. And when other people saw how effective God’s Law was in maintaining a stable and just society--because the people held fast and cleaved to the Lord--they were amazed.

And they praised God--verse seven--they said, “what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?” God was physically near to them as His presence resided in the Tabernacle, resting in the most holy place between the cherubim over the mercy seat, and going before them in the pillar of cloud by day and in the pillar of fire by night. He was relationally near to them because He was their covenant God and Father, and they were His sons and daughters to whom He had personally communicated His statutes and rules that would allow them to live as God intended for them to live. No other nation in history could make such a claim that was the awesome privilege entrusted to God’s chosen people.

And, the Lord responded to them when they called upon Him. Psalm 34, verse seventeen: “When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.” Psalm 145, verses eighteen and nineteen: “The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them.” Proverbs fifteen, verse 29: “The LORD is far from the wicked,

but he hears the prayer of the righteous.” None of the idols made of stone, wood, or metal could respond as the Lord responded then and responds now to those who call upon Him.

Not only that, but--verse eight-- “And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?” Again, what other nation in the world had such a perfect law, founded in justice and righteousness, so clearly reasonable, and so well presented and adapted to lead people in the way of righteousness and truth and keep them from injuring each other or the property of others while maintaining good order, peace, and harmony?

This is the God Who revealed Himself to them, delivered them from their bondage to the most powerful empire of the day, personally presented to them His perfect law of life, and who was currently leading them to the land He had promised to the father of their nation nearly seven hundred years before. They were His chosen people, and He proved it time and time again. No other nation could make a claim like that.

But, being God’s chosen people so amazingly blessed by His personal engagement with them, His direction and purpose for them, and His promise to them / required a response of faithful obedience on their part, and Moses warns them not to forget their part of the covenant obligations--verse nine: “Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.” Moses is warning them literally to “keep” their souls--to defend the core of their lives from all dangers and injury by cleaving--holding fast--to the Lord their God.

The things that their eyes had seen were all the distinct, unambiguous, evident, and numerous acts of God that laid the foundation for their faith and His provision of the Law. In the opening words of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus, chapter twenty, for example, we read, “And God spoke all

these words, saying, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’ They were never to forget the many ways God had personally manifested Himself to them, for those manifestations were the objective truths to which they could always anchor their faith and be assured of God’s personal interest in and plan for them.

They knew that the Law they had received was truly from God, and they were to keep this in mind as long as they lived. Once again, no other nation could ever testify of such acts on their behalf in spite of their claims to the contrary.

One of the surest ways to take care and keep their souls diligently as a community would be to “Make them known to your children and your children’s children” --to pass on these enduring truths to every generation following so they would never forget God’s personal provision for them. Remembering and fulfilling the Law that the Lord had given them was the key to their future, to their life, to their destiny as a people, but only so long as the generations following obeyed the statutes and rules of the Lord. A more detailed process for ensuring their children is found in Deuteronomy, chapter six, but we’ll talk about that next week.

And there’s much more we could say about the absolute necessity of remembering what God has done and teaching our children and grandchildren about these enduring truths that will be life to them as well.

For Moses and the people of his day who heard this message, he went on in verses ten through fourteen to remind them of the high points of the works of God they had recently experienced: “On the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, ‘Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.’ And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud,

and gloom. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone. And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess.”

Those verses aren’t part of our focal texts for today, but it’s important to note those evidences of God’s presence in their midst and how He was developing them as a people chosen by Him for His purposes in the world.

Having reminded them of these particular proofs of God’s covenant relationship with them, Moses follows with yet another warning in our second focal text--verses fifteen through twenty: “Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.”

The tendency of people in that age was to make a physical representation of something they could worship--some tangible symbol or depiction of what they believed possessed a power greater than their own / that they could somehow coax, persuade, entice, or command to make their lives better or less worse. But the God of the Bible Who revealed Himself on Mount Horeb did not appear in a form that could be reproduced or reduced to an image formed

by human hands. As a result, the Lord commanded that no physical representation of Him was to be made, because the Creator cannot be represented by something He Himself has created. Additionally, no image or likeness of anything in creation is to be made for the purpose of worshiping it--not offering sacrifice or burning incense to it, not praying to it, not placing faith or trust in it, not expecting good things from it, and certainly not placing your greatest hopes and confidence in anything other than God, especially not something that you made with your own hands.

Were they to do so, they would be acting corruptly, as Paul writes in the first chapter of his letter to the followers of Christ in Rome regarding those “who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” In verse 21, he writes, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”

Those images prohibited here in our text from Deuteronomy and denounced by Paul included those made “in the form of any figure,” specifically those made in “the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, and the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.” The best image that human hands or AI designers could ever shape is inferior to the weakest and worst spiritual perception of God because it’s limited--it can’t grow or change as our understanding and appreciation of God should grow and develop. As a result, when we make for ourselves an image of God--physically or mentally--and turn to it as a permanent representation of God, we’re actually saying, “This fulfills my understanding of God. I don’t want or need anything more. But God is so much bigger and grander and more glorious and praiseworthy than anything we could create or imagine. One commentator writes, “Idolatry not only fail to develop, they degenerate; and systems, however orthodox they

may appear at starting, which connect worship with [tangible] imagery, are doomed to sink into superstition.”

Don’t make a physical representation, and don’t look to the heavenly bodies for something to worship--not the sun, moon, stars, or any other component of the host of heaven that were created by God for us to marvel at His handiwork but should never become objects of worship.

In spite of the fact that the Israelites often turned to the worship of the idols of other nations that were only the creation of human hands, the truth that there is only One God and that He alone is to be worshiped and served as God / was the fundamental principle of Israel’s faith that’s found throughout the Old Testament--verse twenty: “The Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.” This reality directly confronted a worldview that still exists in many parts of the world today where people think that there are many gods or no gods.

For the Israelites, though, the Lord--the One God and Father, Almighty--had delivered them from Egypt. This was in every way a profound, personal experience that had been foretold to them by Moses and came to pass before their very eyes. For them now to follow after an idol would be to place it beside the One Who had already demonstrated His sovereignty and His personal lovingkindness. To worship anything else besides God would not be a religious mistake but an act of ingratitude and treason.

Don’t forget what happened with Baal-Peor. Don’t forget what happened at Horeb. Don’t forget that God Himself brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance. Remember. Remember.

In Psalm 145, David wrote, “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable” as he meditated on the wondrous works, awesome deeds, abundant goodness, and the righteousness of God that he had experienced. For those of us today who have experienced the grace

and mercy of God, we need to hear and heed Moses' words of verse nine: "Take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life."

Thank you for being part of our brief look at the journey of faith the Israelites followed as they made their way to the land God promised to them through Abraham. Next week, as we turn to Deuteronomy, chapter six, verses one through nine and twenty through 25, we'll learn of the greatest commandment and how that commandment leads us to the life God intends for us to live.

As always, as it's still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!

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