

Obedient Faith

Bible Background • DEUTERONOMY 4:1–14; 5:1–21

Printed Text • DEUTERONOMY 4:1–8, 12–13 | Devotional Reading • HEBREWS 8:1–12

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: SUMMARIZE why people should obey God’s commandments, EXPERIENCE awe at the majesty of God, and COMMIT to faithfulness to God through the new covenant as the Israelites were to be faithful to the Old Covenant.

In Focus

Danielle was a college student at Clark-Atlanta University in Georgia. She was student government president for the senior class and on the dean’s list. The youth in her Bible study class admired her wisdom about the Bible and how she related it to real-life issues. However, some of the youth began to notice Danielle’s clothes smelled like marijuana, and she always was eating snacks while teaching the class. They began to talk among themselves. Was she using drugs?

One youth, Trent, decided to confront Danielle. One night before youth group, he prayed and then said, “The youth love coming to your class. You’re a great teacher.” “Well, thank you, Trent.”

“But we think that there is a problem. You sometimes smell like marijuana and look high when you come to class. You’re not using drugs, are you?” Trent swallowed hard and waited for a response.

Danielle looked at Trent’s worried face and knew she had to repent. “I am so sorry. You’re right. I’m teaching you how to follow God’s commands but I don’t follow them myself. Using marijuana is not the best way to handle my stress. I will go talk to Pastor Hearst and maybe take some time off from teaching. Thank you, Trent, for being so concerned about me.” She hugged Trent and went to find the pastor.

Why is it important for Christians to be good examples for others?

Keep in Mind

“Do not add to or subtract from these commands I am giving you. Just obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you” (Deuteronomy 4:2, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Cleave (v. 4) dabeq (Heb.) — To cling or adhere or to stick closer

B. Keep (v. 6) shamar (Heb.) — To guard, observe, protect or attend to

Say It Correctly

Synecdoche. sih-NECK-doe-key

Baal-peor. BALE-pee-OR.

Kadesh Barnea. KAH-desh bar-NAY-uh.

KJV

Deuteronomy 4:1 Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you.² Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

3 Your eyes have seen what the LORD did because of Baalpeor: for all the men that followed Baalpeor, the LORD thy God hath destroyed them from among you.

4 But ye that did cleave unto the LORD your God are alive every one of you this day.

5 Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it.

6 Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

7 For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for?

8 And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?

12 And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice.

13 And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone.

NLT

Deuteronomy 4:1 And now, Israel, listen carefully to these decrees and regulations that I am about to teach you. Obey them so that you may live, so you may enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.² Do not add to or subtract from these commands I am giving you. Just obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you.

3 You saw for yourself what the LORD did to you at Baal-peor. There the LORD your God destroyed everyone who had worshiped Baal, the god of Peor.

4 But all of you who were faithful to the LORD your God are still alive today—every one of you.

5 Look, I now teach you these decrees and regulations just as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may obey them in the land you are about to enter and occupy.

6 Obey them completely, and you will display your wisdom and intelligence among the surrounding nations. When they hear all these decrees, they will exclaim, ‘How wise and prudent are the people of this great nation!’

7 For what great nation has a god as near to them as the LORD our God is near to us whenever we call on him?

8 And what great nation has decrees and regulations as righteous and fair as this body of instructions that I am giving you today?

12 And the LORD spoke to you from the heart of the fire. You heard the sound of his words but didn’t see his form; there was only a voice.

13 He proclaimed his covenant—the Ten Commandments—which he commanded you to keep, and which he wrote on two stone tablets.

The People, Places, and Times

Baal-peor. Baal was worshiped in various aspects all around Canaan, taking on different names to denote a particular shrine's worship. Peor refers to a mountain in Moab, the location of this branch of Baal worship. People worshiped Baal as a god of storms, dew, and fertility. From the biblical account, it appears the worship of Baal-peor was focused on fertility since the practice involved licentiousness with Moabite women (Numbers 25:1–9). God's punishment for falling into the idolatry of Baal-peor was to send a plague, which killed 24,000 Israelites before the nation's crimes were expiated by Phineas.

Stone Tablets. Often used for recording the legal documents of that day, stone tablets were generally shaped like rounded off rectangles. God inscribed stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, which gave insight into the nature of God. There were two sets of stone tablets. In anger, Moses destroyed the first set that God inscribed, when Moses saw the Israelites worshiping a golden calf. He cut the second set that was rewritten by God.

Background

The book of Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Pentateuch. The new generation of Israelites was standing on the banks of the Jordan River, preparing to go possess the Promised Land that their parents never got acquainted with. Moses told them about God's mighty acts in the past, including the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, as well as His provisions and protection in the Exodus and the wilderness. But this never satisfied the Israelites, so they complained and rebelled against God, provoking Him to let them wander in the wilderness forty years and then die without ever entering the Promised Land.

This book is a partial restatement and explanation of the previous laws given to the Israelites, so the new generation would not repeat the same rebellious behavior. They also renewed the covenant with God before entering the Promised Land. God requires obedience to His commands. If they obeyed His commands, God promised blessings. If they disobeyed, God promised curses.

What happens when new generations do not know their family history?

At-A-Glance

1. Hear and Obey God's Commands (Deuteronomy 4:1–4)
2. The Benefits of Keeping the Covenant (vv.5–12)
3. God's Covenant Keepers (v.13)

In Depth

1. Hear and Obey God's Commands (Deuteronomy 4:1–4)

Moses addresses the new generation of Israelites and first reviews God's mighty acts (1:6–3:29). It was important that they knew the history of God's faithfulness to their ancestors. Now, Moses urges the people to listen and obey God's commands. If they are obedient, everything would go well in their lives and relationships. Moreover, their obedience will lead to guaranteed possession of the Promised Land, victory over enemies, wealth, and contentment.

The people were warned not to add nor subtract anything from the commands of God (4:2). It is easy for humans to desire to add or take away something in God's Word to please themselves. This enables us to do what we please and not what God commands. And it will end up being harmful to us.

The example Moses gave as a warning was the incident at Baal-peor (4:3–4). The incident at Baal-peor referred to when 24,000 Israelites are noted to have died because of unfaithfulness (Number 25:1–9, cf. Psalm 106:28–

29). If we insist on defying God, we have to be willing to accept the consequences. But those who faithfully obey God will be saved from destruction.

Moses told the people it is obeying God's commands that gives a person a reputation for wisdom (4:6). Studying and obeying God's Word makes us wise (4:8).

How does obeying the Word impact our relationship with God and others?

2. The Benefits of Keeping the Covenant (vv. 5–8, 12)

Keeping the covenant by keeping the commandments will set Israel apart and cause them to possess and display uncommon wisdom and understanding. If their ingenuity and understanding flow unhindered from the God whose covenant they keep, the unbelieving nations will observe them and call them great, wise, and understanding. This assessment and estimation may lead the nation to seek out the God of their covenant, and thus God's glory will be magnified. Israel should have such relational intimacy with Yahweh—manifested through their obedience and its resultant wisdom and understanding—to show them to be a great nation. It will also remove the Gentile notion that God is so far that objects in creation must be deified. For in the case of Israel, their obedience will show that God is imminently intimate with them and is the LORD “our God” who answers when they call upon Him as a father does with his children.

The statutes, judgments, and precepts that surround the covenant are the impetus toward righteousness, which will keep them exalted as a nation. Even for us as children of God today, following divine declarations and listening to His voice through the Word, especially as it has been spoken in the person of His son Jesus Christ, places before us the same promises here proclaimed for the nation of Israel. Moses ends this call to covenant keeping with the statement, “Ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice,” suggesting that all covenant obedience is informed by faith, a kind of trust in speech offered within context of the covenant. A covenant can only be kept effectively where the words of covenant are believed.

How can faith help the keepers of the covenant? In what ways can we express obedience to the covenant of God in our lives?

3. God's Covenant Keepers (v. 13)

God's covenant with the Israelites was given at Horeb, but this generation needed to be told and reminded of its significance for their lives. It is vital that we share with our children the stories of God's faithfulness and mighty works. This can encourage them to remain faithful to God even in the midst of trials because He is always present with us. All we have to do is pray, and God hears us. God will respond because He's loving, merciful, and forgiving. The new generation would possess the Promised Land as God promised. But He required obedience to His commandments, which were inscribed on two tablets (4:13; Exodus 19–20).

Have you encountered people who believe some part of God's Word is more important to obey than others? Why or why not?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why do you think Moses reminded the new generation of Israelites of the incident relating to Baal-peor (4:3–4)?
2. What did Moses tell the people to do to gain wisdom and discernment (4:6)?
3. Why was obedience to the statutes and ordinances of God vital for the Israelites to have success in the Promised Land (4:14)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Some people argue about the interpretation of a verse to prove their sinful behavior is acceptable according to the Scripture. How can we handle those who add or take away from the Word of God for selfish reasons?
2. How can we instill into the next generations the importance of obeying God's Word?

3. When we have an encounter with God’s presence during prayer or worship, how does it inspire us to be faithful to God’s commands?

Liberating Lesson

People hate to obey rules because they believe it restricts their freedom. But God has given His Word to us, so we can be in right relationship with Him and others. The Ten Commandments give the people the laws of God. The Israelites promised to obey the covenant between them and God, but they continued to break the covenant over and over again. Christians are under the covenant of grace. When we violate God’s Word and repent, God forgives us because the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. We have to make a commitment every day to demonstrate our love for Jesus by showing love for others. This includes how we treat people as individuals, as well as a community. We must advocate for laws that uphold the value of all lives and protect everyone, not just those who have power. God holds all of His people accountable to obey Him, and in our obedience, we are blessed and bring a better world to everyone around us.

Application for Activation

This week think about the covenant of grace we are now under. First, pray and ask God how to reflect His love and grace in all relationships. Second, make an effort to love others in the same way Jesus loves you. And third, remember to study Scripture to discover how God wants you to live as a Christian. How can your knowledge of God’s faithfulness in keeping His Word impact your response to God?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Deuteronomy 4:1–8, 12–13

It has been 40 years since the children of Israel left Egypt for the Promised Land. They have reached the oasis of Kadesh Barnea, an eleven-day journey from Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai) where the Law was given. The land of Canaan is now in sight, only a few days’ journey and within reach. As a result of their unbelief and rebellion, the Lord had vowed that none of the older generations that left Egypt would enter the Promised Land except Joshua and Caleb. Therefore the Lord turns a few days’ journey into 38 years of wilderness wandering (Numbers 13–14). Moses and Aaron were also forbidden to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 20:12), Moses is instructed to commission Joshua in his place to lead the people (Number 27:12–14, 18–23; cf. Deuteronomy 3:27–28). Therefore, Deuteronomy is Moses’ farewell message to prepare the new generation to enter Canaan. In his farewell speech to the new generation, Moses reviews Israel’s past and reminds them who they are and how they got where they are (Deuteronomy 1–5). Knowing their past, the new generation of Israelites could avoid repeating the sins of their fathers as they settle in the land, which they are about to possess. Moses narrates to them all that the Lord has done for Israel and how graciously He has dealt with them and led them.

He now exhorts them to observe the law and the ordinances, which the Lord has given them so that they would continue to enjoy the blessing of the covenant.

1 Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you.

Using the Hebrew conjunction ‘attah (at-TAW), translated “Now therefore,” referring to what he has been telling them (chapters 1–3), Moses calls on the people to diligently pay attention to the “statutes and the judgments” he is teaching them. The word to “hearken” is the Hebrew, shama‘ (shaw-MAH), which means “to hear intelligently” with the implication of paying attention and obedience. “Hearkening” involves laying it in the heart and changing your behavior to match what you just heard. The phrase “Hear . . . O Israel” or Shema Yisrael is a common theme in Deuteronomy, calling on God’s people to hear and obey (5:1; 6:3–4; 9:1; 20:3). It is also found in other places in the Old Testament. This phrase is also found in Deuteronomy 6:4–9 where it is referred to as the Shema; there it is recognized as the Jewish confession of faith. The Shema is central in the Jewish morning and evening prayer services. It is recited daily by devout Jews and on every Sabbath day in the synagogue. It is quoted by Jesus (Mark 12:29-30; Matthew 22:37–38, etc).

So, Moses says to the people, based on all that the Lord had done for you, listen and obey all the statutes and judgments that I am about to expound to you. Obedience to this law has its reward: they would live for a long time and enjoy the land, which the Lord of their fathers is giving them. The word translated “statutes” is the Hebrew choq (KHOKE), while “judgments” is mishpat (mish-POT). The two often appear synonymously together in the Bible and are often translated as “decrees and regulations” or “ordinances.” The combined use of the words denotes the sum total of the Law or the covenant (see Leviticus 19:37).

2 Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

Moses tells them that the whole law should be kept as it was given. Nothing is to be added or taken from it, but men should submit to it as to the unbreakable Word of God. In other words, they should not make new laws of their own and join them to God’s set laws. This precept was repeated later in Deuteronomy (13:1–3) and is proclaimed by the prophets (Jeremiah 26:2). They were not to abolish or diminish the law of God or make void any part of it. However, the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ day were guilty of this offense. They treated the Word of God as less important than their traditions (Matthew 15:1–9; Mark 7:1–13). Jesus says that He did not come to destroy or nullify the law but to fulfill it and that not even the smallest detail of God’s law would fade away until its purpose is achieved. He then warns, “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). The Apostle John warns about the consequences for anyone who adds or takes away anything from “this book” (Revelation 22:18–19). Obedience to the law of God is a mark of faith and has its rewards, but disobedience to the law is a mark of unbelief and has its consequences. This truth is made apparent in the immediate history of the people of Israel.

3 Your eyes have seen what the LORD did because of Baal-peor: for all the men that followed Baal-peor, the LORD thy God hath destroyed them from among you. 4 But ye that did cleave unto the LORD your God are alive every one of you this day.

To reinforce his point and stress the importance of keeping the law, Moses calls the attention of the people to a recent event that took place along the way, as a reminder of God’s consistency and faithfulness to His words. The Israelites had just witnessed how a faithful observance of the law could mean life, while disobedience could result in death. The people had been enticed into the sin of adultery and idol worship at Baal-peor by the daughters of Moab and Median (Numbers 25:1–9; cf. Psalm 106:28–29, Hosea 9:10). All those who participated in this evil were either put to death by the sword or died in a plague (about 24,000 died in the

plague). It was not made known the type of plague that killed these people. The Lord probably allowed it because of the people's unbelief and disobedience to the Law. Apart from safeguarding the moral principles, the Law can be seen as rules for our own and others' physical safety and health. In this context, the Seventh Commandment reads: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Paul warned the Corinthian church, "Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body" (1 Corinthians 6:18). In contrast, all those who held fast to the Lord were spared.

This incident was still fresh in the minds of the people Moses was presently addressing. He says to them, "You saw for yourself what the Lord did to you at Baal-peor" (NLT). The Lord spared their lives because they remained faithful and did not follow the rest of the people to sin; neither did they fall into the trap of the Moabite women in their adultery and idolatry. Moses uses the Hebrew word *dabeq* (daw-BAKE), meaning to cleave, to cling or adhere, or to stick closer to describe the people's faithfulness to the Lord. Because of their obedient faith and close relationship with the Lord by obeying the law, they all lived and were still alive at the present time. It is therefore undeniable because they were not only eyewitnesses, but they were beneficiaries of God's grace and reward of faithfulness. God spared them from being killed in battle or by the plague.

5 Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it.

Moses now tells them that he has taught them the Law (i.e., "statutes and judgments") as the Lord directed him. In other words, he has fulfilled his part, and it is now their part to obey and follow his teachings. Here Moses applies the Hebrew word *ra'ah* (raw-AW), translated "see or look" (or to see with attention). It is sometimes used as an interjection to stress an important point in the discourse. With the clause "even as the Lord my God commanded me," Moses seems to say, "I have taught you the whole law, I have not added or subtracted (withheld) anything" (cf. v. 2). It is now left for them to totally follow God's order as they go into the land. Moses tells them that these decrees and ordinances should guide them once they take possession of the land. Obedience to the commandments should be part of their lifestyle in the new Promised Land.

6 Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

Moses now appeals to them to "Keep therefore and do them," referring to what he has been teaching them, the whole commandment of God. He employs two Hebrew verbs to emphasize the importance of this teaching. The first is *shamar* (shaw-MAR), translated "keep." It means "to guard, observe, protect, or attend to." The second verb is *'asah* (AW-saw), which means to "do." Here keeping or guarding the word of God is tantamount to doing it. In other words, they are to practice or live it out in their daily living and worship. As they keep and practice the law, they will become wise and filled with understanding. When other nations hear of or see them, they would acknowledge them as a great and distinctive nation among other nations because of their wisdom. Therefore, through Israel's faithful obedience to the covenant, God's intention was to exalt them among their neighboring nations so that foreign nations would recognize that their God was indeed God (cf. 1 Kings 10:1–13). Therefore, by knowing God's wisdom, the people would not only succeed, but they would also be an influence and witnesses to other nations dwelling among them in the land they are about to possess. Their life would shine as light in the midst of a dark world. Jesus says, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

7 For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for? 8 And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?

Moses reminds the people how privileged they are to have the Lord as their God and to have a righteous Law for guidance. This relationship has put them so close to God that He does whatever they ask of Him. Rhetorically, Moses questions what other nation has a God like the Lord who gives a Law like this. Of course,

the answer is obvious: “None!” There is no nation so privileged as Israel. Later in this discourse, Moses would remind them that God chose them and set them apart as His special possession. He did this not because of what they have accomplished, but because of His love for them and because of His covenant with their forefathers. Moses says, “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers” (from Deuteronomy 7:6–8; 14:2). Moses emphasized God’s great favor toward Israel. Having such knowledge ought to encourage them to obey the law faithfully. They do not have to work to be worthy; God has already chosen them and will not change His mind.

12 And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice. 13 And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even Ten Commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone.

Moses encourages them to be diligent in keeping the commandment the Lord gave to them (vv. 9–11). They should never forget their experience as long as they lived; they should teach them to their children and grandchildren. He narrates to them of their awesome experience when they were gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai. There they witnessed an amazing sight. The mountain blazed with fire up to heaven; black clouds and thick darkness covered the whole place; the place was filled with thunder and lightning. The people were utterly frightened by this sight.

Then the Lord spoke to them out of the fire. Moses reminds them that while they heard the voice of God speak to them, they “saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice” (v. 12). The word “similitude” comes from the Hebrew, *temunah* (te-moo-NAW), and means “something fashioned out, as a shape, or an embodiment, or (figuratively) manifestation.” It also means an image, likeness, or representation. The people heard the voice of God, but they didn’t see any form of God or how He looks. With this, the Lord made it known His people would be guided by His Word rather than His face. They can hear their God speak but could never see any image of Him that could be copied and worshiped (Deuteronomy 4:12, 15). With this, God forbids His people from worshiping any visible representations of Him or anything created, whether humans, animals, birds, fish, or the sun, moon, and stars. To worship the creation instead of the creator is a form of idolatry (Romans 1:22–25). Since God has no visible form or similitude, any image intended to look like Him is a sinful misrepresentation of Him. Jesus told the woman at the well that God is Spirit (He has no form, and He is invisible); therefore, He is to be worshiped in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

Verse 13 continues Moses’ narrative reminding them of the Mount Sinai phenomenon. Although they could not see a form of God, they heard Him speak, proclaiming to them His covenant, which they are to keep and observe. That covenant is the “Ten Commandments,” which God Himself had written on two tablets of stone and given to Moses (Exodus 20:1–14, 24:12; cf. 31:18). “Covenant” is translated from a Hebrew noun, *berith* (ber-EETH); it is derived from the verb *bara’* (baw-RAW), which means “to cut down” or “to create.” It is common to use the word “cut” when making a covenant so that the phrase is “to cut a covenant.” In business even today, people sometimes use the phrase “Let’s cut a deal.” The “Ten Commandments” here are shorthand for the entire Law of the covenant. Referring to a large concept by only mentioning part of it is a common literary device called a synecdoche.

Moses wants the Israelites to remember that obeying the law does not save them; rather they ought to obey the law because they are saved. From verses 7–8 on, Moses couches his exhortations to follow the law not as a “have to” but as a “get to.” This awesome God revealed Himself to the people at Mt. Sinai, not as any form they could understand, but as a voice and a fire. This awesome God gave His people a law that makes its adherents wise and understanding, a law that is far better than any other country’s laws. This awesome God is the one who loves us, and whom we get to worship.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Praise God's Works
(Psalm 111)

TUESDAY

Mediator of the New Covenant
(Hebrews 8:1–12)

WEDNESDAY

God Made a Covenant with Us
(Numbers 13:30–33)

THURSDAY

Remember That You Were There
(Deuteronomy 4:9–11)

FRIDAY

Make No Heavenly or Earthly Idols
(Deuteronomy 1:34–40)

SATURDAY

God Will Not Abandon You
(Deuteronomy 4:25–31)

SUNDAY

Commit to Covenant Obedience
(Deuteronomy 4:1–8, 12–13)