

# Remember

RECALLING GOD'S PAST FAITHFULNESS LEADS US  
TO WORSHIP HIM.

Did you know that the word *remember* is one of the most often used commands for Old Testament Israel in Scripture? It's normal to forget things from time to time. The older I get, the more pronounced my forgetfulness becomes. But when the Bible speaks of remembering, it's not a commentary on natural aging or some other ailment. In Scripture, the command to *remember* is related to the spiritual symptom of forgetting God's past faithfulness. The command to *remember* is important in the biblical narrative because recalling God's faithfulness in the past encourages faith when walking toward the future. Memory builds faith. When the Old Testament leaders and the people of Israel faced a challenge, God would often call them to remember how He had delivered or provided for them in the past. Those memories of God's faithfulness motivated Israel's faith.

I've been a Christian for over thirty years. I've been a pastor about half that time. As a pastor I am often called to lead through difficult situations. There are certain circumstances that seminary can't prepare you for—circumstances that are only learned through experience. Not all situations are the same, but many difficulties have similarities in ministry. I've seen firsthand how the past can prepare you for the future. Even more, I've learned that God never changes regardless of what's happening in our lives or the lives of those around us. He is always faithful. He always provides. Providentially, He is always working out His purposes according to His perfect will. That's much easier to say in retrospect. In moments of difficulty, we sometimes can't see God's hand so we must trust His heart. Recalling God's faithfulness reinforces our faith and reassures us as we walk in His ways. I am sure you can look back on your life and recall God's faithfulness in difficult times. Even more, I am sure you can remember God's grace in times when you were unfaithful. These times of remembrance are important to steady our faith in the character of God and His goodness to His people. They were just as important for the Israelites as well.

## Deuteronomy 1:1–4:43

The name *Deuteronomy* itself suggests “recalling the original law” God gave at Mount Sinai. Indeed, most of the book reflects the sermons Moses delivered to the people on the Plains of Moab following their wilderness journey and just before they crossed the Jordan River into the promised land (see Deut. 31:9). In these first chapters of Deuteronomy, Moses reminded the Israelites of their wilderness wanderings and rehearsed the Ten Commandments to exhort them to trust God as they conquered the promised land. Moses also reminded Israel of their past mistakes and used those memories to exhort Israel not to repeat their missteps. An essential part of Moses’s message was for the Israelite people to remember that exile was on the horizon each time they failed to keep the law of God or fell into idolatry worshiping pagan gods.

However, Israel’s failures do not overshadow God’s faithfulness in the message of Deuteronomy. Throughout the book, God is shown to be the one true God, incomparable to the false gods of foreign nations. His power over enemy armies and grace toward His wayward people are stressed as evidence of His superiority. In response, Israel was called to trust and obey! The God who had made His covenant with them was to be their confidence. Practicing the Ten Commandments would demonstrate their conviction in all national, familial, and personal areas of life.

In giving His people the Ten Commandments, God was expressing what it looked like for the Israelites to live in relationship to Him—the one true God, their King. The laws given were not arbitrary; they stem from and reflect the character of God and His purposes for His people. Israel’s obedience was meant to reflect God’s nature to the world around them as a concrete expression of their devotion to the God of the exodus. Simply put, the covenant people of God were to be marked with the character of God.

In the New Testament, Jesus told His disciples that one way to demonstrate the genuineness of their faith was to walk according to His Word (see John 8:31). Similar exhortations were given to Israel in the Old Testament (Ex. 19:5-6; Deut. 28:1-14). Ultimately, Israel always failed to live perfectly according to God’s law—and so do we. In this sense, the law consistently reminds God’s people of their inability to achieve God’s standard of holiness and to love Him with all their heart, soul, and strength (Deut. 6:5). Here we see the reality of the continuing effects of sin: the blessings of covenant obedience that would be lost by Israel’s sin and the curses of disobedience that Israel would incur for their sins.

Once again, our unfaithfulness doesn't overshadow God's faithfulness to us. Although the Israelites had been chosen by God, and He was to be their God and they were to be His people, the history of Israel is a history of failure to live in obedience to Him and to be a light to the nations of the world. But what Israel could not do, God did Himself. Jesus came to uphold the law in righteousness and wisdom perfectly. He came to fulfill all righteousness for us. By faith we receive the gift of Jesus's perfect righteousness, and in Him we become the righteousness of God. In other words, we uphold the law by turning our backs on our own warped efforts to keep the law and by putting all our confidence and trust in Jesus who satisfied all the law's demands on our behalf. Moreover, just as Israel entered the promised land, as Christians we anticipate entering the promised new heavens and earth (Rev. 21:1-22:5). In Deuteronomy, even as we read of God's law and His call to Israel to be obedient—we are pointed to Christ, the only perfectly obedient Israelite, in whom we receive salvation by faith in Him.



## Obedience (Deut. 4:1-4)

Moses, speaking to Israel prior to their entrance into Canaan, reminded the Israelites to follow God's statutes and ordinances. They were not to add to or remove anything from God's commands. He reminded them of God's punishment on the people who followed Baal of Peor.

### VERSE 1

---

**“Now, Israel, listen to the statutes and ordinances I am teaching you to follow, so that you may live, enter, and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.”**

After reminding Israel of their earlier disobedience in refusing to enter the promised land and recounting their journey to the border of Canaan (1:6-3:29), Moses exhorted them to be faithful. Moses commanded Israel to **listen to the statutes and ordinances** he was about to teach them to follow. There is an urgency to these words, and the implication is not only to hear but to obey what is heard as well. They were to listen and obey in order to **“live, enter, and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.”** The exhortation to listen and

obey is a stark contrast to the previous generation of Israelites who did neither and thus were not permitted to enter the promised land (1:26-36).

Within this command is a beautiful example of the combination of God's sovereignty ("*the land the LORD . . . is giving you*") with the call to responsible obedience ("*enter, and take possession*"). This coupling of God's promise to act and the people's call to action is similar to Joshua 1:3, where God promised to give Joshua every place he set his foot, and verse 6 where Joshua was commanded to be strong and courageous. Both these passages remind us that we need to affirm God's sovereignty and assert human responsibility to respond to God's call. In Scripture, these truths coexist. They are not contradictory but complementary. Remember, God promised to give His people a land (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:13-16; 17:3-8; Ex. 33:1-3). Now God's people were called to walk in His ways. God's promise to give Israel the land of Canaan was to be the motivation to respond in faithful obedience to God. Without faithful obedience to God, they would fail to obtain the blessings before them and instead experience God's judgment as their parents had by refusing to trust God and enter into the promised land.

#### VERSES 2-4

---

**"You must not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, so that you may keep the commands of the LORD your God I am giving you. Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal-peor, for the LORD your God destroyed every one of you who followed Baal of Peor. But you who have remained faithful to the LORD your God are all alive today."**

Moses warned the Israelites that they were not to **add anything** to God's commands or **take anything away from it**. If the Israelites amended or edited the Word of God, they would no longer be obeying the perfect Word of God. The point is that Israel was to fully submit to the full Word of God. Such a strict command was necessary following Israel's history of unfaithfulness. This call to diligently attend to God's Word remains today. As Christians, we receive God's Word as a perfect treasure of divine instruction. The Bible has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. God's Word reveals the principles by which His people are to live and by which He judges humanity, and therefore it is and will remain to the end of the world the supreme standard by which all human conduct should be tried. Thus, any addition to or rejection of God's Word should be met with a stern warning!

The implications of turning from God’s Word either by adding to it or subtract from it would be disastrous. As an example, Moses recalled the incident at **Baal-Peor** on the edge of the promised land, where Israel’s idolatry and immorality resulted in large numbers of people being **destroyed** by God. **Baal of Peor** was the false god of the Moabites. Peor was a mountain in Moab to the east of the Jordan River opposite the wilderness of Judah. While the Israelites were encamped at Shittim, at the instigation of Balaam, the Israelites were enticed by the Moabite women to commit sexual immorality with them and to worship and offer sacrifices to pagan gods (Num. 25:1-3). In doing so, Israel aligned themselves with Baal of Peor, and **“your God destroyed every one of you who followed Baal of Peor.”** This historical example is definitive proof of God’s faithfulness to His Word. Those who rebelled against Him were destroyed, while those who listened to Him and were faithful lived (Deut. 4:1). This incident is also a reminder of how a gift of God (the promised land) can be so easily forfeited without faithful obedience.



### **Explore Further**

Read the article “Faith, Faithfulness” on pages 547–550 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

What is the definition of “faith”? What is God’s role in the faith relationship? What is the believer’s role?

---

## **Wisdom (Deut. 4:5-9)**

Keeping and doing God’s commands would be viewed as wise by surrounding nations. The Israelites’ covenant with God would be viewed as a source of their wisdom. They would be considered a great nation as a result of their covenant relationship with God. They were to teach what they had learned to their descendants.

### **VERSES 5-6**

---

**“Look, I have taught you statutes and ordinances as the LORD my God has commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to possess. Carefully follow them, for this will show your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the peoples.**

**When they hear about all these statutes, they will say, “This great nation is indeed a wise and understanding people.”**

We often forget that part of Israel’s calling was to be a witness to the nations through their relationship with God. Moses taught God’s people the **statutes** and **ordinances** so that they could **follow them in the land**. By following God’s law, Israel would demonstrate **wisdom** and **understanding** in the eyes of pagan peoples. Thus, Israel’s obedience to the law was not only for their benefit but also for the benefit of others as well. Israel’s obedience to God was to be a witness to the *wisdom* and *understanding* of God as they lived out their relationship with God in the various spheres of life.

At Sinai, God called the Israelites “my own possession” and “my kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:4-6). They were to be “my holy nation,” set apart for God. As the nations witnessed the way in which the Israelites lived out the covenant relationship between God and themselves, they would say, **“This great nation is indeed a wise and understanding people”** and be drawn to God.

#### **VERSES 7-8**

---

**“For what great nation is there that has a god near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call to him? And what great nation has righteous statutes and ordinances like this entire law I set before you today?”**

Now Moses turned to the foundational truths that undergirded the nation as a whole. First, God was intimately **near** to Israel as their Lord and was available when they **call** to Him. Note, however, that God’s nearness was directly related to His Word given to the people. “The message is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, so that you may follow it” (30:14). The second foundational truth that bolstered Israel’s uniqueness among the nations was that Israel stood apart as the only nation whom God had given His divine **statutes** and **ordinances**. God’s *statutes* and *ordinances* are **righteous** in that they reflect His perfect, holy, moral character. In this sense, Israel was incomparable to any other nation in the Old Testament world. Thus, if Israel would live according to God’s law (v. 16), the other nations would take notice and be attracted to their quality of life. Thus, for Israel, their mission and ethics were inseparable.

In the ancient world, and particularly in Mesopotamia, the king presented laws on behalf of the gods, and those laws reflected the impersonal nature of the relationship between the gods and the people.

Unlike the pagan gods, whom the people often considered indifferent at best and hostile at worst, the God of Israel was near to His people. In revealing His law, He disclosed His character and His love. Unlike the nature of the relationship between the pagans and their deities, the Israelites did not have to guess at what pleased or displeased God. He had revealed to them through His law who He was and how they were to live in covenant relationship with Him.

## VERSE 9

---

**“Only be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves, so that you don’t forget the things your eyes have seen and so that they don’t slip from your mind as long as you live. Teach them to your children and your grandchildren.”**

Here we return to the importance of remembrance! Moses warned Israel to **“be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves.”** There are two ways to fall into the sins, which were the patterns of the Israelites’ existence as a nation. First, Israel could **“forget the things your eyes have seen.”** The Israelites could forget what God had done for them, such as His deliverance from Egypt in the exodus, or they could forget what God required of them as detailed in His giving of the law on Mount Sinai. Israel needed to both remember their salvation from slavery and their call to be God’s holy people.

Second, Israel was not to allow the truths of God’s deliverance and giving of the law to **“slip from your mind as long as you live.”** One of the dangers Israel faced throughout its history as a nation was accommodation to the pagan cultures around them. The warnings to remember and not allow these truths to be forgotten would sustain Israel’s distinctiveness as God’s people in both their beliefs and their behavior. When they failed to do this, they abandoned God and fell into idolatry.

Ultimately, when Israel failed to remember and fell into idolatry this led to God’s judging of the Israelites through them being conquered by pagan nations and taken into exile. The person who heeded these warnings demonstrated a healthy fear of God which yields obedience to His statutes and ordinances (v. 8). It’s a fear that should motivate us to be faithful to God and obey His Word as well.

Just as one of the purposes of Israel’s being God’s people was to be a witness to the nations (v. 6), similarly one generation of Israelites was to be a witness to their **children and grandchildren**. They were to teach them about what God had done in the past and His call for them to be His people. Unfortunately, the Israelites often failed to do this.

When one generation considers obedience to God's Word optional, the next generation will often see it as unnecessary.



### **Explore Further**

Spend some time making a list of the ways that God has been faithful to you in the past. Post the list in a spot in your home that you visit often every day so it will be a constant reminder that you can trust God to be faithful to you whatever the future may bring.

## **Worship (Deut. 4:15-20)**

Moses encouraged the Israelites to refrain from making idols and worshipping the creation of God instead of God Himself. God brought them out of slavery in Egypt to be His people. He is the One worthy of their worship.

### **VERSE 15**

**“Diligently watch yourselves—because you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you out of the fire at Horeb—”**

When the Lord met with the Israelites at **Horeb** (Mount Sinai), they did not see any form and in fact were forbidden to approach the mountain (Ex. 19:9-20). God descended upon the mountain in fire. It shook violently, there was thunder and lightning, and the mountain was enveloped in smoke. There was also the sound of a loud blast of a ram's horn (vv. 16-19). While God was not seen, He was heard in the sense that through Moses He gave the Israelites the specific terms of the covenant by which the people were to live in relationship with the Lord as His people (chap. 20). Israel's faith was based on what they had heard from God (His law) and what they had seen Him do in delivering them from Egyptian slavery. This was a stark contrast to the visual elements of idolatrous pagan religions. This is why Moses exhorted the Israelites, **“Diligently watch yourselves.”** The Israelites were not to make a physical representation (a human's creation) of God who is the Creator of all things.



## VERSES 16-20

---

**“so you don’t act corruptly and make an idol for yourselves in the shape of any figure: a male or female form, or the form of any animal on the earth, any winged creature that flies in the sky, any creature that crawls on the ground, or any fish in the waters under the earth. When you look to the heavens and see the sun, moon, and stars—all the stars in the sky—do not be led astray to bow in worship to them and serve them. The LORD your God has provided them for all people everywhere under heaven. But the LORD selected you and brought you out of Egypt’s iron furnace to be a people for his inheritance, as you are today.”**

The operative command here is **don’t act corruptly** in fashioning idols. The heart of the warning here is not to be led astray by idolatry. In the ancient world, idols were made of such materials as wood, stone, clay, gold, and silver. Aaron made an idol of gold for the Israelites in the form of a calf (Ex. 32). This warning is reflected in God’s second command from Sinai: “Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow in worship to them, and do not serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God” (Ex. 20:4-5; see also Lev. 26:1).

This warning against idolatry is directly related to Israel’s ability to hear and respond to God’s Word. If you think about physical idols, that is, representations of earthly creatures or pagan gods, they have eyes but cannot see. They have ears but cannot hear. So, to, do those who give themselves over to the worship of idols. Any time Israel slipped into idolatry, they became resistant to and/or abandoned God and His commands. Just as idols are lifeless, their worshipers become spiritually lifeless by abandoning God, the Source of life (see Pss. 115:4-11; 135:15-18). Paul also noted this principle: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles. . . . They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what has been created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever” (Rom. 1:22-23,25).

**“The LORD selected you and brought you out of Egypt’s iron furnace to be a people for his inheritance.”** The language of God selecting the Israelites and delivering them out of Egyptian slavery is that of intentionality. God chose Israel to be His people. This relationship is further emphasized by Israel being identified as God’s *inheritance* or possession. “Now if you will carefully listen to me and keep my covenant, you will be my own possession out of all the peoples, although the whole

earth is mine, and you will be my kingdom of priests and my holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). The term *inheritance* presupposes a familial relationship, and various passages in Deuteronomy liken the relationship between God and the Israelites to that of a father and son (Deut. 1:31; 8:5; 14:1) or identify Israel as God’s sons (14:1; 32:6). In that time, the heir was the firstborn son, and Israel was God’s firstborn son (Ex. 4:22). As with any family, as God’s children Israel was expected to represent God, their father, and honor Him in their behavior before the watching world.

This principle applies to Christians as well. Human beings are made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26-27), and we are to worship God in whose image we are made. However, there are times when we give ourselves over to idolatry, focusing our hearts’ affections on things other than God.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). He is the incarnate Son of God who “images” God the Father. Therefore, to see Jesus is to see the one, true God (John 14:9-10). Furthermore, He is the only person who lived a life of complete obedience to God the Father, and through His obedience He accomplished our salvation. Through Christ we are redeemed and adopted into the family of God. And, as part of that family, our lives should demonstrate who we belong to and where our true home is (Gal. 4:1-7). As we pursue righteousness through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are transformed more and more into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18) and the more human we become in the sense that we are and live as God intends humans to be.



## **Explore Further**

Today we often think of idol worship as something that pagans did. The blatantly obvious examples in the Old Testament can lull us into a false sense of security. Ask yourself these questions: *Is anything in this world so central to your life that, should you lose it, you’d think, “I don’t know how I can go on”?* *Is there anything in this world that you think “if I could just have that I would finally be happy and fulfilled”?* *Is there anything that absorbs your heart and imagination so much that you constantly think about it during the day or you imagine it when lying in bed at night?* These questions help identify persons, places, or things you might be tempted to idolize. Spend some time in prayer asking Jesus to center your heart and your life on Him and Him alone, so that you worship and serve only Him through the power of His Holy Spirit.

---