



EXPLORE **THE BIBLE.**

Adults

Numbers & Deuteronomy

Commentary

Fall 2025



STEP BY STEP

In poetry and music, various metaphors have been applied to life on earth. For example, one song tells us that “life is a highway,” a journey that never stops and takes us on any number of adventures if we will take the time to embrace the magic. Decades earlier, a poet suggested that life is more like a choice between “two roads” that split at the edge of the woods. We’d love to try them both, but we have a choice to make—and the road we choose makes “all the difference.”

For all the images used for our short time on this earth, roads and highways might resonate more than others. It’s the simple process of putting one foot in front of the other each day that keeps us going. No matter how hard life gets, if we can just move a little farther down the line, we’re confident that better days will shine on us.

Humans are incredibly resilient that way.

Speaking of resilient, the ancient Israelites had started a life journey on pretty solid footing. They escaped the slavery of Egypt, walked through the walls of the Red Sea, and received God’s gameplan at Mount Sinai. Before long, they were on the edge of the promised land . . . until they weren’t.

Stubborn rebellion and disobedience moved them back to “Start” in the game of life. Now, their journey entailed forty years of walking around in circles until an entire generation died out. But while putting one foot in front of the other raised new struggles, they never lost God’s presence or His promises. Even as they were marking time in the desert, He was leading them—step by step—toward a second chance at Canaan.

That’s the story of Numbers and Deuteronomy. It’s all about God leading and protecting a band of imperfect people through a wilderness as they learned to trust Him. And as they learned to trust Him, they moved closer to the promised land.

That’s not just the story of the Israelites, though. It’s our narrative, as well. Rebels against our Creator we are born into a wilderness of sin that we can’t escape on our own. But God demonstrated His love by sending His Son to die in our place, to pay the price for our sin. All we have to do is put one foot in front of the other, step toward Him, and trust Him with our lives. If you’re ready to take that step, here’s what you must do . . .

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning from your sin.
- **By faith receive** Jesus as God’s Son and accept His gift of forgiveness from sin. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross. Jesus also rose from the dead, making a new, eternal life possible for us.
- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. You may pray a prayer similar to this as you call on God to save you: “Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn away from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In the name of Jesus I pray, amen.”

After you have received Jesus Christ into your life, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show others your faith in Christ by asking for baptism by immersion in your local church as a public expression of your faith.

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MEET THE WRITERS



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FROM **THE TEAM LEADER**



Steadfast faith. Time-tested devotion. We each desire a deep faith in God that enables us to persevere through the valleys and rejoice on the mountaintops of life. In the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy, we get a front-row seat as the Israelites journeyed from Mount Sinai through the wilderness to the edge of the promised land. Like most expeditions, this journey was packed with unexpected events, a longer-than-expected timeline, and unforeseen challenges. The Israelites responded to these circumstances with grumbling, frustration, and disobedience to God's commands. Upon reaching the Plains of Moab, Moses called the Israelites to commit to wholehearted devotion—following God, His commands, and His ways.

Through the twists and turns of events, God's faithfulness to His people never faltered. He was with them. Time and again God demonstrated His loyalty to provide for and protect them as He led them to the promised land. His promise to be their God was neither forgotten nor dismissed. Despite their unfaithfulness, He remained fully faithful.

The lessons learned by the Israelites prove to be powerful truths we can cling to today. Our journeys will take unexpected turns, leaving us frustrated or unsure of what may lie ahead. Thankfully, we aren't left on our own to navigate our experiences. Like the Israelites, we can choose to follow Him each day. We serve a God who is wholly trustworthy. He is with us!

In Him,

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Explore

Discover



BIBLICAL **BACKGROUND**

The books of Numbers and Deuteronomy are just that. They are books of transition and final words. The book of Numbers serves to bridge the gap between the first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt and the second generation of people born during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The events cataloged in the book of Numbers also cover the journey from Mount Sinai to the Plains of Moab, tracing the years between the receiving of the Ten Commandments and the final days before entering the promised land.

Deuteronomy is a book of final instructions from Moses. In the book Moses reiterated the Lord God's special relationship with the children of Israel and implored them to faithful obedience to all God commands. The book contains warnings to the Israelites about the temptations that lay ahead for them as a nation. The three lengthy addresses in this book were Moses's attempt to equip the new generation of Israelites for life in the promised land.

WRITER

Christian and Jewish tradition are in almost unanimous agreement that Moses was the author and compiler of the first five books of the Bible. These books are known as the "Pentateuch," which means "five vessels." They are also known as "the Law of Moses." In Jewish theology, these books are called "the Torah," which means "teaching" or "instruction."

For centuries, the recognized author of these five books was Moses, who served as the Lord God's deliverer from Egyptian slavery for the children of Israel. The internal evidence in Scripture, the centuries-long belief, and even modern archaeology continue to point to the authenticity of Moses's authorship. Jesus spoke of Moses as the author of the Law of Moses (Mark 7:10). A strong internal witness supports that much of these five books was written by Moses (Josh. 1:7-8; 2 Chron. 25:4; Neh. 13:1). While some passages Moses obviously did not write, such as the death of Moses in Deuteronomy 34, most of the content was recorded by Moses—much of which was written down at the command of God (see Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:24). This doesn't preclude the thought that these writings were compiled and organized in their final form by the work of others.

DATE

First Kings 6:1 notes that Solomon began building the temple "in the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt." Solomon began building the temple in 996 BC so the exodus event would



have begun around 1446 BC. Forty years of wandering in the wilderness would put the Israelites entering the promised land around 1406 BC. Thus, the books of the Pentateuch would have been written during this time frame with Numbers and Deuteronomy being written just prior to the people entering the promise land.

NUMBERS

This fourth book of the Pentateuch takes its name from the fact that it begins with a census of the fighting men in Israel (Num. 1:1-46). Numbers contains a second census in chapter 26. Because of this fact, the title *Numbers* was given to the book.

The book of Numbers covers most of the years of the Israelites' journey to Canaan. It chronicles the forty years of wandering from Sinai to Canaan. The book also covers three cycles of rebellion by the children of Israel that brought punishment and chastisement from God. At the center of these rebellions and perhaps the crisis point in the book of Numbers was the sending out of twelve spies to reconnoiter Canaan. The report brought back by ten of the spies led to wholesale rejection of God's planned inheritance. Because of these episodes of rebellion, the first generation to leave Egypt died in the wilderness. The book closes with this second generation poised to enter the land of promise.

Purpose and Themes in Numbers

Numbers sets out two sides of the character of God. The first aspect is the chastening wrath of God in response to the frequent rebellion of the children of Israel. Israel's disobedience permeates the book as pictured in both rebellion and a lack of faith in God's power and plan. The book points in graphic details to the consequences of disobedience to God.

The second aspect of God's character is His continuing love and faithfulness to His chosen people. The Lord God remained faithful to the Israelites even when they chose to reject Him. Here is the theme of reconciliation and hope. God shines through as the God of the second chance. Because of these "second chances," we also see a growing development of Israel as the people of God and an understanding that they are answerable to God.

DEUTERONOMY

The name *Deuteronomy* means "second law." The name is believed to have come from the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek called "the Septuagint." The translators, working in about 250 BC,

changed the meaning of Deuteronomy 17:18-19 where God instructed any king on the throne of Israel to make a copy of the law for his own personal meditation and constant reading. Instead of translating these words as “copy of this law” they recorded it as “this second law.” Most likely this mistranslation accounts for the name of the book. The Hebrew Bible instead uses the opening words of chapter 1 and simply calls this book, “these the words” or “words.”

Deuteronomy contains what might be called Moses’s farewell address. The book contains three major addresses to the people of Israel. As Moses faced his own imminent death, he took one more opportunity to prepare the Israelites for what lay ahead. The first address (1:1–4:49) gives a summary of God’s deliverance from Egypt and His leadership through the wilderness to the moment when they camped directly across the Jordan River from Jericho. In this first address, Moses gave a series of warnings against abandoning the Lord God after the Israelites entered the land.

The second address (5:1–26:19) contains a series of instructions on godly living. Over and over the people of Israel were urged to be obedient to God. The final address (27:1–30:20) contains a heartfelt challenge from Moses to the people to stay fully committed to the Lord. Moses reviewed the covenant commitment of Israel with the Lord God and pleaded for them to remain faithful.

Purpose and Themes in Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy is the high point in the relationship between God the Deliverer and the children of Israel that He had chosen for His own. Through the messages of Moses, the love relationship between God and the people becomes vividly clear. The much-repeated call for complete and undivided obedience and devotion to God dominates much of this book.

Another theme in Deuteronomy is the training and education of children. They, too, must be taught to love and obey God continually. Still another theme is the emphasis on the holiness of God and the worship of God.

Israel had a unique relationship with God, unlike that of any other nation on earth. The book continually emphasizes the critical necessity for complete and undivided love toward God. Moses gave to Israel an extensive list of consequences for disobedience to God. Israel would learn the hard way that choices make a difference. Because of these themes of obedience, commitment, and holy living, Deuteronomy stands as one of the most quoted books throughout the rest of Scripture, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.



Numbers

- I. **First Census and Consecration of Israel at Sinai**
(Num. 1:1-6:27)
- II. **Preparation for Departure to the Promised Land**
(Num. 7:1-10:36)
- III. **From Mount Sinai to Kadesh**
(Num. 11:1-15:41)
- IV. **Rebellion Against Aaron's Priesthood**
(Num. 16:1-19:22)
- V. **From Kadesh to the Plains of Moab**
(Num. 20:1-25:18)
- VI. **Second Census and Preparation of the New Generation**
(Num. 26:1-30:16)
- VII. **Preparation for Entering the Promised Land**
(Num. 31:1-36:13)

Deuteronomy

- I. **First Address of Moses**
(Deut. 1:1-4:49)
- II. **Second Address of Moses**
(Deut. 5:1-26:19)
- III. **Third Address of Moses**
(Deut. 27:1-30:20)
- IV. **Final Days of Moses**
(Deut. 31:1-34:12)

The Journey

GOD GIVES DAILY GUIDANCE TO HIS PEOPLE.

Overseas travel has been a privilege of mine. These trips have included walking tours of some historic sites such as the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany, Versailles in Paris, plus several ancient sites in Rome. Each time the tour guide would raise his or her “banner” so we could easily follow.

The walking tour in Beijing, China, stands out in my mind. Our young tour guide carried an unopened, brightly colored umbrella that stood out in stark contrast to the various colored pennants of other tour guides. As we stood in Tiananmen Square preparing to enter the Forbidden City, I was struck by the sight of literally thousands of tourists gathered in little groups under the “banners” of scores of tour guides. I was thankful that our tour guide’s brightly colored umbrella stood out in stark contrast. I couldn’t imagine getting lost in that crowd in a strange city where I didn’t know the language. My job was to keep the umbrella in sight. If I became distracted by all the fascinating sights within the Forbidden City, I could have easily become lost and left behind in this wondrous but unfamiliar place. The presence of that raised umbrella was a source of comfort and confidence as we wove our way through the various temples and palaces of this ancient site.

Wandering in an unknown place can be confusing and even frightening. Comfort abounds in knowing that we are with someone who knows the right way. For the Israelites as they prepared to leave Mount Sinai on their way to the land that God had promised to them, everything about the trip was marked by the unknown. All they had ever known was their little area of Egypt, known as Goshen. The descendants of Jacob had lived in this northeast region of the Nile Delta for four hundred years. Suddenly they had left Egypt and entered into a great expanse of wilderness of which they knew nothing. Thankfully, God provided them with a guiding “marker.” This marker was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The nation learned early on that they were to obey the leading of God through this divine sign He had given them.

Numbers 1:1–10:10

The book of Numbers is the fourth book of the Pentateuch written by Moses during the exodus event. This book covers the transitional period between the events at Mount Sinai and the preparation for entering the promised land that took place on the Plains of Moab across the Jordan River from Jericho. Keep in mind that Moses faced a monumental task of taking a group of used-to-be slaves and forming them into a cohesive nation. Throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the tasks of providing laws of conduct, provisions for worship, regulations of that worship, and the organization for travel, protection, and war are outlined. The early chapters in Numbers continue that organization.

Included in Numbers 1; 3; and 4 are instructions for the various tasks given to the tribe of Levi. Their special responsibility was the oversight of the tabernacle and its furnishings. The tabernacle had been completed in the first day of the second year of the exodus (Ex. 40:2,17). These tasks were assigned to the Levites to facilitate worship in the tabernacle. Also, provision was made for transporting the tabernacle.

The organization of the Israelites continued in Numbers 2 as details are given as to the way the camp was to be set up. Because the worship of the Lord was central in all that the Israelites did, the tabernacle was centrally located in the camp with those who led and assisted in worship camped adjacent to the tabernacle. This would also provide physical protection from the enemies of Israel who sought to prevent their advance. The population figures given for each section (east, south, west, and north) were similar in size. Later in chapter 10, the marching order of the tribes and those moving the tabernacle would point to the ongoing importance of protecting the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle.

God had told the people, “You must be holy because I am holy” (Lev. 11:45). Numbers 5 takes up where many of the instructions in Exodus and Leviticus left off: holiness within the camp and within the nation was absolutely essential.

While the narration of the construction and set up of the tabernacle is recorded in Exodus 36–40, in Numbers 7 the offerings of dedication of the tabernacle are given. Note that in 7:2-9, six wagons were given to the Levites for transporting the tabernacle. The ark of the covenant and the other sacred objects of the tabernacle were to be carried.

Numbers 8 details the purification/consecration of the Levites for service to God. With that, the congregation of Israel was ready to leave Mount Sinai. The children of Israel were now ready to move toward the land that had been promised to them centuries earlier.



God's Presence (Num. 9:15-16)

God was with the Israelites as they journeyed from Mount Sinai to the Plains of Moab. He directed them by fire at night and as a cloud by day. This pillar was a continuous and visible appearance of God's glory.

VERSE 15

On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and it appeared like fire above the tabernacle from evening until morning.

The ever-present pillar of **cloud** by day and **fire** by night was a visible, assuring symbol of the presence of God that accompanied the Israelites throughout their journey from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. This pillar of cloud first appeared when the Israelites left Egypt (Ex. 13:21-22). The pillar of cloud served as a protective shield for Israel when the chariots of the Egyptian Pharaoh pursued them (14:19-20). The pillar of cloud moved between the Israelites and Egyptians, protecting the Israelites as they prepared to cross the Red Sea. The book of Exodus closes with a summary statement of God's use of this pillar of cloud and fire to direct the journeying of the Israelites (40:34-38).

Exodus 14:19 indicates that "the angel of God" was present in the pillar of cloud. On several occasions in the Old Testament, the mention of "the angel of the LORD" was a reference to an appearance of the Lord Himself. Exodus 14:24 gives further insight: "the LORD looked down at the Egyptian forces from the pillar of fire and cloud." Because of these verses, some Bible expositors see this as a theophany, that is, a personal and physical manifestation of God to the Israelites. This was not an appearance in human form; rather, it was in the form of the pillar of cloud and fire. "The angel of the LORD" appeared to Moses in "a flame of fire within a bush" (3:2). Frequently in the Old Testament clouds were

indicators of the presence of God. Other occasions where the cloud of God's presence and glory appeared include God's appearance on Mount Sinai (19:9,16), at the tent of meeting (33:7-11), and the dedication of the tabernacle (40:34).

The pillar of cloud/fire continuously rested over the **tabernacle** day and night. The Hebrew term for *tabernacle* comes from a verb meaning "to dwell." The tabernacle was God's chosen dwelling place among the Israelites. Details regarding the tabernacle, its furnishings, and so forth are found in Exodus 25-40. Exodus 40 records how after the construction of the tabernacle was completed, "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (40:34). While in this instance the tabernacle was also called "the tent of meeting," this structure should not be confused with the smaller "tent of meeting" Moses set up outside the Israelite camp to meet with God after the golden calf incident (33:7-11).

The tabernacle is also called **the tent of the testimony** (see also Num. 17:7,8; 18:2; "tabernacle of the testimony," Ex. 38:21; Acts 7:44). This name was most likely applied to the tabernacle because it housed the ark of the covenant ("ark of the testimony," Ex. 25:22), which contained the Ten Commandments (Deut. 10:5). God had said He would meet with Moses and later the high priests above the mercy seat of the ark (Ex. 25:21-22). The mercy seat consisted of a lid of pure gold (v. 17) with two golden cherubim that stood guard over the ark of the covenant (vv. 18-20). Both the tabernacle and the ark bore witness to the special relationship between God and His people.

VERSE 16

It remained that way continuously: the cloud would cover it, appearing like fire at night.

The pillar of cloud/fire was a constant part of the Israelites' journey to the promised land. It was easily recognizable in contrast to all other clouds by its shape and fixed position over the tabernacle or in front of the marching line of the Israelites. Moses spoke of the presence of this pillar of cloud/fire as a clear sign of God's presence and watchcare over the people He had chosen (Num. 14:14).

God's presence at the tabernacle was indicated by the cloud/fire remaining over it **continuously**. The pillar of cloud/fire first appeared on the first day the Israelites left Egypt and is last mentioned in Deuteronomy 31:14-15. The pillar was present "throughout all the stages of their journey" (Ex. 40:36,38).

Numbers 9:16 is a parallel verse to Numbers 9:15, essentially repeating the same information. In fact, much of Number 9:15-23 contains a repetition of the same thoughts. This may indicate that the passage is closely akin to Hebrew poetry or celebratory prose. Hebrew poetry is characterized by such things as parallel ideas and repetition of thought. This passage may be an echo of an earlier celebratory song or Hebrew poem rejoicing in God's presence among the Israelites.

In any case, the entire passage speaks volumes about the wonder of God's continual presence and guidance of the Israelites as they made their way through the wilderness. There is a sense of excitement and wonder in these verses describing the manifest presence of the God of the universe. The prayer of praise by the Levites and other leaders recorded in Nehemiah 9 recounted how even after the golden calf incident, God did not abandon His people. "Even after they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, 'This is your god who brought you out of Egypt,' and they had committed terrible blasphemies, You did not abandon them in the wilderness because of your great compassion. During the day the pillar of cloud never turned away from them, guiding them on their journey. And during the night the pillar of fire illuminated the way they should go" (Neh. 9:18-19; see vv. 17-21).



Explore Further

Read "Pillar of Fire and Cloud" on page 1270 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In addition to God's revelation of Himself through creation (Rom. 1:18-20), what are some ways you can know and trust that God is present in your circumstances? How are things like regular prayer, Bible study, and gathering with other Christians on a regular basis helpful in seeing God's presence in our lives?

Faithful Direction (Num. 9:17-21)

The Israelites watched the pillar of cloud. When the cloud lifted from its place above the tabernacle and moved, the Israelites moved with it. They followed the cloud. When the cloud stopped moving and remained in one place, they stopped traveling and remained in that location. The Israelites journeyed or camped at the Lord's command.

VERSE 17

Whenever the cloud was lifted up above the tent, the Israelites would set out; at the place where the cloud stopped, there the Israelites camped.

God's presence with His people Israel pointed to their uniqueness among the peoples present in the land of Canaan. Later on the border of the promised land, Moses marveled to the people, "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?" (Deut. 4:7). This awareness of the presence of God with them gave the Israelites the certainty that He would also guide them throughout their journey to the land of Canaan.

Numbers 9:17-23 sets forth a continuing pattern of travel followed by encampment—**Whenever the cloud was lifted up above the tent, the Israelites would set out; at the place where the cloud stopped, there the Israelites camped.**

The theme of this entire passage is the leadership of God. The position and movement of the cloud spoke the "orders for the day." Obviously, the position of the cloud was within sight of the entire camp of Israel—"visible to the entire house of Israel throughout all the stages of their journey" (Ex. 40:38). The words "the entire house of Israel" indicate that every household was responsible for obedience to the direction of God through the cloud. Again, Exodus 40:38 affirms that God directed Israel through the cloud for the entire time they were journeying from Egypt to the promised land.

Moses, speaking from the Plains of Moab at the end of their journey, portrayed this divine guidance with the picture of God carrying the Israelites "as a man carries his son all along the way you traveled until you reached this place" (Deut. 1:31). Here is an affirmation once again that the pillar of cloud/fire led the Israelites the entire time from Egypt to the cusp of the promised land.

VERSE 18

At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at the LORD's command they camped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they camped.

This verse continues the pattern of travel followed by encampment. Six times in verses 18-23 it is stated that the movement of the Israelites was **at the LORD's command** (italics added). The position and movement of the pillar of cloud/fire was a direct command from God as to whether the

Israelites should remain where they were encamped or break camp and move on with their journey. The nation of Israel was not traveling and camping at the discretion of Moses or Aaron or one of the tribal leaders. Instead, they were following direct guidance from God Himself. God was present and actively involved in this whole journey of the children of Israel from Egypt to Canaan.

VERSE 19

Even when the cloud stayed over the tabernacle many days, the Israelites carried out the LORD's requirement and did not set out.

The length of time of this wilderness wandering of the Israelites was forty years. What we know about those years is contained in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. One aspect of their journey was that the travels and encampments of the Israelites were irregular in length. Numbers 9:19-22 indicate this irregularity with such phrases as **many days**, “a few days” (v. 20), “only from evening until morning” (v. 21), “two days, a month, or longer” (v. 22). But what from a human perspective may have seemed to be random was from God's perspective working out His purposes and plans according to His sovereign will. No doubt each period of travel and encampment played a role in shaping the generation who would enter the promised land into the nation they would become. To gain a feel for the Israelites' travels during those years, see the listing of stops in Numbers 33.

Part of the Israelites' training was that they **carried out the LORD's requirement** (“kept the charge of the LORD,” ESV, KJV; “obeyed the LORD's order,” NIV). This phrase seems to be more than just following the Lord's command to travel or encamp. The Hebrew word for *requirement* is a different word from “command” (Num. 9:18,20,23). It has the meanings of “responsibility,” “duty,” “service,” “obligation,” “guard,” “watch.” The term for *carried out* is used of God's command that the Levites were to “watch over” the tabernacle (Num. 1:53). In this case, the term carries the meaning of “guard duty.” The whole idea was that the Levites were to stand watch over the tabernacle and its sacred furnishing. They were to ensure that no Israelite violated the sacredness of the tabernacle by approaching the tabernacle inappropriately.

In the case of the other tribes of Israel, who were encamped at a distance surrounding the four sides of the tabernacle (2:1-34), the use of the same language suggests that the tribes also had a duty to watch over the

tabernacle as well, standing guard and protecting it from any external threats from enemies while they were encamped.

VERSES 20-21

Sometimes the cloud remained over the tabernacle for only a few days. They would camp at the LORD's command and set out at the LORD's command. Sometimes the cloud remained only from evening until morning; when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out. Or if it remained a day and a night, they moved out when the cloud lifted.

These two verses continue the pattern of camp, travel, and camp again, emphasizing the irregular lengths of stay at various locations on the journey to Canaan. Because the amount of time at each encampment was not spelled out by God beforehand, the Israelites needed to be prepared both to stay for an extended period or move at a moment's notice. Note again the emphatic statement that **they would camp at the LORD's command and set out at the LORD's command**. Again, the cloud's movement or lack thereof served as the indicator of whether God wanted the Israelites to remain at or leave from their present location.

The text also indicates that the Israelites were obedient to God's directions. How refreshing that this text highlights the ready obedience of the children of Israel to God's commands. This certainly would not always be the pattern of the nation in the years to come, neither in the wilderness nor in the promised land.



Explore Further

Just as God was present with the Israelites at the tabernacle and later the temple, so too He is present with us today through His Holy Spirit who indwells every believer. God has promised never to leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5-6). He has also promised us that nothing can ever separate us from Him and His love for us (Rom. 8:31-39). How can knowing these promises encourage you in the days ahead? Consider memorizing Romans 8:37-39 as an assurance of God's presence and love you can draw upon in times when you need such reassurance.

Active Obedience (Num. 9:22-23)

The Israelites were faithful to follow God's direction regardless of the amount of time spent traveling or camping. Whether it was two days or a month, the people carefully followed God's direction.

VERSE 22

Whether it was two days, a month, or longer, the Israelites camped and did not set out as long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle. But when it was lifted, they set out.

Note again the repetition of thought concerning the cloud and its movements guiding the people. The formula of departure and encampment is again prominent. The signal to move was the cloud being **lifted** from over **the tabernacle**. Until then, whether it was **two days, a month, or longer**, the Israelites **did not set out**. Verses 22-23 further highlight an important theme repeated over and over in the focal passage: the exacting obedience to God's directions given through the pillar of cloud/fire. Again, as we will see in the following sessions, the Israelites' obedience here stands in sharp contrast to the many occasions during their journey when they complained against God. They exhibited disbelief and ungratefulness throughout the journey to the promised land.

VERSE 23

They camped at the LORD's command, and they set out at the LORD's command. They carried out the LORD's requirement according to his command through Moses.

This verse summarizes the whole of this passage: **They camped at the LORD's command, and they set out at the LORD's command**. The Hebrew term for *command* literally means "mouth" and by extension refers to speech or commands.

Once again, we see a reference to carrying out **the LORD's requirement** (see v. 19). This included the watch over the tabernacle that God required from the Levites (1:53) and the people (2:1-34). The tabernacle and the worship of the Lord were central to the life of the nation. Nothing was more important than the presence and glory of the Lord.

Moses is mentioned for the very first time in this section outlining God's guidance of the nation through the pillar of cloud/fire. The text clearly indicates that God was the one leading and guiding, while Moses was simply God's conduit for His commands.

This visible symbol of God's presence, the pillar of cloud/fire, was such a monumental part of the exodus event that it is written about in a variety of places throughout Scripture. In addition to the references in the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy), the pillar is mentioned in such Scripture passages as Nehemiah 9:12,19; Psalms 78:14; 99:7; 105:39; Isaiah 4:5; and 1 Corinthians 10:1-2. Clearly this experience of God's presence and guidance left a major impression on the nation of Israel.

Beyond that, during the Festival of Tabernacles the miraculous presence of God in the pillar of cloud/fire was memorialized by the lighting of four enormous menorahs, or candelabra, in the temple courtyard. It is claimed in the Mishnah (collection of Jewish oral laws) that the light from these huge menorahs filled Jerusalem with light to the extent that there wasn't a dark courtyard in the city.¹ The lighting of these menorahs would have been a poignant reminder to the worshipers of God's guidance in the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel. Even more significant is that during a particular Festival of Tabernacles, Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). While God led the Israelites through the pillar of cloud/fire during their journey from Egypt to the promised land, followers of Christ now have the assurance of Jesus's divine presence within them in the Person of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9-11; Gal. 4:6). As we follow Jesus Christ, we will never walk in darkness again. He promises never to leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5-6), and through Him we have eternal life (John 3:16).



Explore Further

God's guidance in life is vitally important, but acting in obedience to that guidance is important as well. God's guidance is there for our benefit and protection. But without obedience, God's guidance is of little value. Read the article "Obedience" on pages 1176–1177 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. According to the article, what should motivate believers to obey God? What is the relationship between trust in God and obedience to His commands? What does a lack of obedience in the life of a believer indicate? What is the fruit of obedience? Of disobedience? (See Gal. 5:16-25.)

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 206, note 1.

Provision

GOD HEARS HIS LEADERS AND SUSTAINS THEM
FOR HIS PURPOSES.

If one thing characterizes our society today, it is the fact that griping and complaining seems to be our number one activity. Whether complaining about the weather, or the economy, or the woes of our favorite sports team, we complain a lot. Complaining is simply our response when we feel that our perceived needs are not being met. I expect my meals to be at a certain temperature. When the restaurant serves them at a temperature different from my expectations, I complain. When my body doesn't perform perfectly as I think it should, I complain. When my drive to work doesn't go as planned, I complain. In reality, much of our complaining is caused by unrealistic expectations and inconvenience.

A culture of complaint pretty much sums up our society today. It also sums up much of the account of the children of Israel as they journeyed from Mount Sinai toward the promised land. Because of the continual complaining and opposition of the people, Moses found himself constantly in prayer to God. In prayer, he was either lamenting over the waywardness of the people or interceding for them before God. The testimony of Scripture is that God heard Moses's prayers and provided what was needed at the time so that His plans and purposes could be accomplished through Moses. This truth continues to be so in our day and time as well. God hears our prayers and provides not only for our needs; He provides what is necessary to carry out His plans and purposes.

▶ **UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT** ◀ 

Numbers 10:11–12:16

For almost a year, the children of Israel had been camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. God had given them the Ten Commandments, the laws related to day-to-day conduct, the laws concerning proper worship, and more during this period of time. In addition, the tabernacle had been

constructed and worship at the tabernacle had begun. Now the time had arrived to begin the journey from Sinai to the land of promise.

Number 10:11-12:16 form a complete literary unit and provide a picture of the events of the journey from Mount Sinai to Kadesh in the Wilderness of Paran. The narrative begins with the Israelites marching in triumph from Sinai. Each tribe had an assigned location in the line of march. Within this line of march, two groups of Levites also marched transporting the parts to the tabernacle and the sacred items of the tabernacle (10:17,21). The journey had begun! However, within short order, the joy and excitement of the journey turned into complaint and bitterness.

Numbers 11 begins with the first of a string of complaints against God and the leadership of Moses. Each narrative of the complaint and rebellion follows a similar pattern. The complaints began over one of three things—hardship, food, and leadership. In the cycle of complaint, the next element was some type of judgment from God against the rebellion. Finally, in two of the three instances, Moses interceded to God on behalf of the people, and the Lord relented in His judgment.

The first rebellion in 11:1-3 illustrates this pattern. The people of Israel complained about the hardship of the journey (11:1). God sent fire on the outskirts of the camp to punish the complainers (v. 1). As a result, the people cried out to Moses, and he interceded with God on their behalf (v. 2). The place was named *Taberah* (v. 3) which means “blaze.”

The second rebellion chronicled in the focal passage for today began with a complaint over God’s provision of manna and a craving for something different (vv. 4-6). After providing additional leadership to help Moses with the people (vv. 11-17), God provided quail as an addition to the manna for the people. Along with the quail, though, came God’s judgment through a plague (vv. 31-33). In this instance, there was no intercession on the people’s behalf. The place where this happened was called *Kibroth-hattaavah* (v. 34), which means “graves of craving.”

This literary section of Numbers concludes with one more instance of complaint, this time a complaint over leadership. While the initial complaint was Moses having married a Cushite woman, the root cause was clearly Aaron and Miriam’s jealousy over the special relationship that Moses had with God (12:1-3). Once again, this rebellion was met with God’s judgment as Miriam became a leper (vv. 4-10). Only after Moses interceded on her behalf was Miriam cured of the disease (vv. 13-15).

One of the most prominent features of Numbers 10:11-12:16 is the leadership and intercession of Moses. Moses’s life serves as a great illustration of the fact that God hears His leaders and sustains them to accomplish His plans and purposes.

Dissatisfied Followers (Num. 11:4-9)

On the journey, the Israelites began to complain to Moses about food. They had grown dissatisfied with the manna God was providing that fell to the ground each morning with the dew. The people wanted the meat, fish, and vegetables they'd enjoyed in Egypt.

VERSE 4

The riffraff among them had a strong craving for other food. The Israelites wept again and said, “Who will feed us meat?”

Numbers 11:4 introduces a second rebellion of the people, this time over food (rebellion one, 11:1-3). This account parallels a similar incident in Exodus 16 where the people also complained about the lack of food. In response to that complaint, God gave them the miracle of manna each day. Now some were complaining about the manna. They felt they'd had enough of the manna.

The instigators in the wave of complaint were identified as **the riffraff**. The term *riffraff* speaks of “a gathering” or a mob of people “gathered together.” This is the only place in the Old Testament where this term is used. These people were the “mixed multitude” (see KJV; “rabble,” ESV, NIV) that accompanied the children of Israel as they departed out of Egypt (Ex. 12:38). Nothing in the biblical record identifies who this “mixed multitude” was or why they left Egypt with the Israelites. This indicates that not all who left Egypt when God delivered the Israelites were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹

A strong craving for other food is literally translated, “craving a craving.” This doubling of the word speaks of intensity, a literary technique common in the Hebrew language. They had a strong desire for something besides manna. Such a complaint was a huge misrepresentation of the situation. The Israelites had flocks and herds with them (Ex. 12:32). More than likely, this cry, “**Who will feed us meat?**” was a general complaint and exaggeration about the hardship of the journey.

The Israelites wept again refers most likely to the original complaining in Numbers 11:1-3. Or it could go all the way back to the original complaint in Exodus 16:2-3. This time the complaint began with the riffraff but was taken up by the entire group—family by family. Discontent and griping have a way of spreading throughout a group of people.

VERSE 5

“We remember the free fish we ate in Egypt, along with the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.”

The foods they craved were what they had eaten while **in Egypt**. What they called **free fish** is a misnomer. The fish had come at the terrible price of miserable slavery and harsh treatment. They wanted to return to the foods grown in the land of Egypt; more specifically, foods commonly grown in the fertile region of the eastern Nile Delta in the area called Goshen where the Israelites had settled (Gen. 46:28-34). They had forgotten the toil of slavery, glossing over the hardships in Egypt because of their cravings. In their cravings, they demonstrated ingratitude. They did not acknowledge that God had delivered them from slavery, taken them as His people, and provided for their needs during their journey.

VERSE 6

“But now our appetite is gone; there’s nothing to look at but this manna!”

But now our appetite is gone is better translated “our bodies are dehydrated,” “our strength is dried up” (ESV), or “our lives are vanquished.” Perhaps the change in the Israelites’ diet from the moisture rich foods of Goshen to the dryer climate of the desert and the daily **manna** had created some dehydration.

VERSES 7-8

The manna resembled coriander seed, and its appearance was like that of bdellium. The people walked around and gathered it. They ground it on a pair of grinding stones or crushed it in a mortar, then boiled it in a cooking pot and shaped it into cakes. It tasted like a pastry cooked with the finest oil.

The miraculous, daily provision of **manna** began during the second month of the exodus (Ex. 16:1). *Manna* took its name from the exclamation of the Israelites when it first appeared: “What is it?” (v. 15; Hebrew, *man hu*). The people’s part was to gather it and then prepare it to be eaten. **Coriander seed** was used for flavoring, similar to poppy or sesame seeds. **Bdellium** is a pale yellow or white aromatic resin. Note how this description of manna and its taste like that of a **pastry cooked with the finest oil** stands in stark contrast to the people’s complaints of how much they disliked manna.

VERSE 9

When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall with it.

God was faithful to provide **manna** every night along with the dew. It was a daily gift. Manna that was kept longer than a day bred worms and stank (Ex. 16:19-20). But on the day before the Sabbath, the Israelites were to gather enough for two days, for on the Sabbath day no work was to be done (20:8-11). In that case, God preserved the manna for two days (16:22-24). Besides providing food, manna was an important lesson that God often provides for His people one day at a time (Matt. 6:11,25-34).



Explore Further

Read the article “Manna” on page 1051 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Like the Israelites, we can easily take for granted the gifts God provides for us. Spend some time making a list of the gifts God has provided for you throughout your life. As you pray this week, choose a different gift from your list every day and thank God for His love and mercy in giving you this gift.

Frustrated Leader (Num. 11:10-15)

God also took note of the complaints and was angry. Moses approached God and asked a series of questions. Moses questioned why he had been burdened with the people and where he might obtain meat for them. Overwhelmed, he declared his frustration and misery with his predicament.

VERSE 10

Moses heard the people, family after family, weeping at the entrance of their tents. The LORD was very angry; Moses was also provoked.

The discontent expressed by the rabble-rousers spread quickly throughout the entire camp of the Israelites. Weeping was heard everywhere, from **family after family**. The nature of discontent is to spread easily

to others. Sadly, the people were complaining about the blessings given to them by God!

Because of the discontent of the people, **the LORD was very angry**. The Hebrew phrase translated *angry* literally means “the burning of the nose.” The image is that of the flaring of the nostrils as an expression of anger. This echoes verses 1 and 33 which both state that the Lord’s anger “burned”; that is, His anger was kindled against the Israelites.

Moses was also **provoked** by the Israelites actions and complaints. As the account develops, we see that the Moses’s anger was two-directional. First, he was angry at the people and the burden they were in his life. Second, Moses was frustrated with God for having given him such an overwhelming task of leading these rebellious people.

VERSE 11

So Moses asked the LORD, “Why have you brought such trouble on your servant? Why are you angry with me, and why do you burden me with all these people?”

The complaint of the people elicited a complaint from **Moses** to God. A hallmark of this prayer of complaint is Moses’s total honesty before God. Moses expressed despair, discontent, and even a hint of rebellion against God. Moses was no superman; he was a human being just like us. His level of frustration had reached the breaking point, and he poured out those frustrations to God.

This is not the first time Moses expressed frustration before God. At one point during Moses’s confrontations with Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, instead of releasing the Israelites, increased their workload. The Israelite foremen confronted Moses and Aaron over the increased suffering of the Israelites because of them. This led Moses to cry out to the Lord because He had not delivered the Israelites (Ex. 5:22-23); in that instance, Moses’s obedience to God only seemed to be making matters worse for the Hebrew slaves. The difference between these two expressions of frustration is this: In Exodus 5, Moses was concerned about the welfare of the people. In Numbers 11, the frustration of Moses had turned inward to his own suffering and needs.

VERSE 12

“Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth so you should tell me, ‘Carry them at your breast, as a nursing mother carries a baby,’ to the land that you swore to give their ancestors?”

Because of his frustration with the Israelites, Moses began distancing himself from the people. His attitude was this: he didn't conceive all these people; therefore, he was not responsible for them. Moses refused to be the nursemaid to the children of Israel. Overwhelmed by the weight of leadership, Moses no doubt had a great sense of loneliness as the "only" leader of the people. One wonders why Moses didn't find leadership assistance from those who were appointed to help mediate disputes among the people (Ex. 18:25-26). Most likely, Moses viewed this crisis as an issue far beyond a mere settling of arguments between neighbors and relatives.

VERSES 13-14

"Where can I get meat to give all these people? For they are weeping to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' I can't carry all these people by myself. They are too much for me."

The issue was where would Moses **get meat to give all these people**. As far as Moses was concerned the idea of providing meat for the nation was an impossible task. To emphasize the unthinkable nature of the challenge, Moses repeated the demand of the people: **"Give us meat to eat!"** Projections put the number of men, women, and children of the Israelites at this time to be in excess of two million people.² Providing meat for the Israelites would have been a miracle that only God could do. At this precise moment, however, Moses lacked the faith to trust that God would take care of His people. The despair of Moses was very deep.

Moses's plea, **"I can't carry all these people by myself,"** concerned more than just providing meat. It was a declaration that the entire task of leading the nation was more than Moses thought he could handle. This wasn't just a complaint; rather, it was a passionate appeal for deliverance. These words harken back to Moses's initial reaction to God's call to lead the people in Exodus 4:10-17 when he told God he wasn't equipped to carry out the task.

While we may be surprised at this despair of Moses, the great man of God, this plea is a great lesson in honesty before God. While we must approach God with respect, He understands our frustrations and offers grace when we pour our hearts out to Him.

VERSE 15

"If you are going to treat me like this, please kill me right now if I have found favor with you, and don't let me see my misery anymore."

In his despair, Moses told God he would rather be dead than continue to go through what he was experiencing with the Israelites. This incident was a major crisis in the leadership of Moses. He laid the responsibility for this crisis at God's feet—"If you are going to treat me like this." At this point, Moses considered God taking his life as a kindness—"If I have found favor with you." He despaired over what he viewed as an impossible task to lead a bunch of ungrateful and obstinate people.



Explore Further

Read the article "Wrath, Wrath of God" on pages 1672-1673 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the article define the wrath of God? How is the wrath of God in the New Testament both a present reality and a future judgment?

Gracious Provision (Num. 11:16-17)

God heard Moses's plea. He commanded Moses to gather seventy men from Israel to meet with Him at the tent of meeting. God would fill them with His Spirit. These men would help bear the load of leadership alongside Moses.

VERSE 16

The LORD answered Moses, "Bring me seventy men from Israel known to you as elders and officers of the people. Take them to the tent of meeting and have them stand there with you."

While Moses desired death, God dealt with him in grace. Rather than responding in anger toward the complaint of Moses, God graciously took the steps necessary to provide for the needs of the situation. God always deals in grace when we are honest before Him. In mercy, God didn't give Moses and the people what they deserved. Instead, in grace, God gave Moses and the people what they didn't deserve. God's answer to Moses's complaint was to provide other leaders who could give assistance to Moses in leading the people (vv. 16-30). In addition, God also would provide quail as another food source beyond the daily provision of manna (vv. 31-33).

God instructed Moses to choose men **“known to you as elders and officers.”** The term *elders* spoke of those with the experience and wisdom of age. These would have been seasoned leaders from among the people. The word *officers* or “leaders” refers to those who arrange or organize. The word indicates leaders who probably had some responsibility to record official information. This same Hebrew word for *officers* is used in Exodus 5:14-19 for the Israelite foremen who oversaw the daily brick production of the children of Israel when they were Egyptian slaves. Perhaps a part of their function was keeping track of daily production in writing. The *elders* and *officers* would have already been recognized as leaders on the tribal and clan levels. God’s direction was to give these **seventy men** greater leadership, influence, and responsibility.

This new body of leaders would give immediate assistance to Moses with the burden of leadership. The number *seventy* speaks of an adequate representative group who could support and administer Moses’s leadership. Seventy elders had the privilege of ascending Mount Sinai with Moses to share a sacred meal in the presence of the Lord God (Ex. 24:1,9-11).

During the time of the exodus event, the place where God met with Moses shifted. First, Moses met with God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:3). Next came a tent that Moses set up outside the Israelite encampment after the incident with the golden calf (chap. 32-33). God spoke to Moses at this tent. Finally, the site of communication between God and Moses (and the people) shifted to the newly erected tabernacle (chap. 40) that had been designed and built according to the specific instructions from God (chap. 25-31). Once the tabernacle was in place, it was also known as **the tent of meeting** (Num. 11:16).

An interesting side note to the initial tent of meeting, Exodus 33:7-11 seems to indicate that the cloud of God’s presence would settle at the entrance of the tent outside the camp whenever Moses entered the tent. When Moses departed from the tent, the cloud would lift from the tent. When the tabernacle was set up on the first day of the second year of the exodus (Ex. 40:1-2), the movement of the cloud shifted. The cloud covered the tabernacle and “the glory of the Lord” filled the tabernacle (vv. 34-38), and the Lord dwelt there among His people (25:8).

VERSE 17

“Then I will come down and speak with you there. I will take some of the Spirit who is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you bear the burden of the people, so that you do not have to bear it by yourself.”

God’s remedy for this situation was shared leadership. His solution to relieve some of Moses’s frustration was to add another layer to the leadership for the Israelites. The seventy appointed leaders were to help **bear the burden of the people** that had been carried up to this point by Moses alone.

God would endorse the seventy men selected to help Moses before the tent of meeting. God would **take some of the Spirit** that was on Moses and put it on these seventy men who had been chosen. Some conjecture supports that the term for *Spirit* could simply be referring to the spirit of Moses in the sense of giftedness and personality. This, however, is not the spirit of man. Instead, this is a reference to the Spirit of God—God the Holy Spirit. The gifts and influence of the Holy Spirit would be put on these men to assist Moses in the leadership of the people.

There are numerous instances in the Old Testament of God’s Spirit coming upon leaders to enable them to carry out the tasks assigned to them by God. See for example Gideon (Judg. 6:34) and Samson (14:19). Realize that God bestowing His Spirit on others did not diminish the leadership abilities of Moses in any way. These leaders were given the same gifts of leadership, wisdom, and discernment as Moses possessed. Furthermore, these men appear to have had a different function from the mediators selected earlier by Moses (Ex. 18:25-26). Those men were to help in administrative and judicial matters. The seventy chosen and endowed with the Spirit of God were to assist Moses in bearing the burden of spiritual leadership.³



Explore Further

Read the article “Holy Spirit” on pages 759–761 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. While the Spirit was given to individuals for specific purposes in the Old Testament, after Christ’s ascension God poured out the Holy Spirit upon believers to indwell them permanently and apply the benefits of salvation in the believer’s life.

What are some of the works of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual believer? How does the Holy Spirit work in the body of Christ as a whole?

1. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 303.

2. Ralph L. Smith and Eric Mitchell, “Exodus,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 528.

3. R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, vol. 3B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 188–89.

The Land

GOD REQUIRES OBEDIENT FAITH IN THE FACE OF FEAR.

At the end of my junior year in high school our church planned a junior/senior day trip from our home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to El Morro National Monument. This national monument, located about 120 miles west of Albuquerque, is famous as a large rock outcropping where travelers throughout the centuries have left their marks and signed their names. Everyone from Spanish conquistadors in the late 1500s to Native Americans leaving petroglyphs, to emigrants and soldiers moving westward during the 1800s, left their marks on the rock wall of this outcropping. In all, about 2,000 different people left evidence of their visits to this site.

Naturally as teenage boys, my friends and I took a quick look at the inscriptions and headed off to climb the rising rocks along the loop trail that ascended and then descended the heights of this imposing rock structure. Also typical of teenage boys, we lost track of time and soon realized that it was almost time to get back to the bus for the scheduled departure. We quickly began looking for a quicker way down the mountain than continuing on the loop trail to the base of the rocks and the parking lot. Lonnie, my best friend, thought he found a way to descend down the face of the mountain. Rather quickly he determined that there was no way to go down any further than the ledge that he stood on. It was still almost 200 feet of sheer cliff below him.

Our group shouted for him to come back up, telling him we would look for a different route. “I can’t,” Lonnie shouted. “I’m not sure I can get back up.” It was then that all of us became aware of the danger in which we had put Lonnie and ourselves. Only after much verbal guidance on where to place hands and feet, and the forming of a human chain holding ankles, arms, and hands did we successfully lift Lonnie back on top of the rocks. For an extended period of time, we all sat there and contemplated how close we had come to disaster. The taste of fear was in each of our mouths as we recognized the danger we had faced.

Fear is a part of life, at times even when it comes to being obedient to God’s guidance in our lives. Today’s session will focus on the account of

when the Israelites were on the edge of the promised land but their fears led the people to be disobedient to the direct command of God.



Numbers 13:1-33

One of the major themes of the book of Numbers is rebellion against God and God's leader, Moses. Chapter 11 details the Israelites' general complaint concerning the hardships they faced (Num. 11:1-3) and their griping about the daily miracle of manna (vv. 4-10). Even Moses complained to God about being burdened by leadership (vv. 10-15). This was followed by the complaint of Aaron and Miriam, Moses's siblings, against the exclusive nature of God's relationship with Moses (chap. 12).

This week's session focuses on a rebellion regarding the land God had promised to give the Israelites' forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This promise of the land was now an impending reality! God spoke in the present tense of the land "I am giving to the Israelites" (13:2). The command was given to Moses to deploy scouts to explore the land.

The account of sending out the scouts to explore the land is also told by Moses in a summary of the exodus event in the book of Deuteronomy. In that retelling in Deuteronomy 1:19-46, Moses indicated that the idea of sending out the scouts was initiated by the people themselves (Deut. 1:22). There in Deuteronomy Moses stated that he approved of the idea (v. 23). The summary in Deuteronomy and the account in Numbers do not contradict each other. The command of God likely came subsequent to the people's initial request.¹

God directed Moses to send out one leader from each ancestral tribe on this special mission (Num. 13:1-2). The twelve leaders from the tribes of the Israelites were chosen. Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen. 41:50-52), made up two of the tribes (replacing Joseph and Levi). Note that this list is followed by a special statement concerning Joshua as one of those chosen (Num. 13:16; see v. 8, Hoshea). Joshua served as Moses's assistant. Why was Joshua singled out? Probably to mark him as a leader and a soon-to-be spokesman for God among the people.

The instructions of Moses to the twelve scouts were very specific (vv. 17-20): they were to scout out the land to determine the quality and productivity of the land, the strength of the inhabitants, and the type of fortifications in the land. This scouting was necessary because it had

been four hundred years since any of the descendants of Abraham had been in the land; this was all new territory to them. New people groups were probably in the land as well. Any information that had been handed down from generation to generation would have been outdated.

The area explored by the scouts reached from the Negev, an arid region in the south, through the hill country in the middle of Canaan, and reaching north to the area of southern Lebanon. This area is likely more familiar to us by the New Testament designations of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. The scouts apparently traveled in late summer or early fall since they brought back some of the harvest of grapes, pomegranates, and figs (v. 23).

Chapter 13 closes with the return of the scouts and their report to the Israelites. Some said the land was good, but the possibility of conquering the people of the land was bad!



The Task Outlined (Num. 13:17-20)

As the Israelites neared Canaan, God commanded Moses to send out scouts to assess the land. Moses chose twelve men, one man from each tribe. He instructed them to assess the land, the people, and the cities. He also told them to bring back fruit.

VERSE 17

When Moses sent them to scout out the land of Canaan, he told them, “Go up this way to the Negev, then go up into the hill country.”

Many centuries had passed since God had promised **the land of Canaan** to the Israelites’ ancestor Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-17). The designation *Canaan* describes the land that lay between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The southern and northern boundaries have varied throughout history. Southward they extended most likely to the Brook of Egypt. To the north, the land of Canaan reached into Syria.

The scouts were to travel through two areas. First, **the Negev** (“dry land”) was a very dry region in the southern part of Canaan that extended into the Wilderness of Zin. Because of its location to the south of the main part of Canaan, the word would take on the meaning of “south.”

The Negev included Kadesh, the departure point for the scouts. Second, **the hill country** referred to an elevated ridge of hills between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The ridge is created by the natural rise of the land from the coastal plains opposite the Mediterranean Sea and the contrasting elevation change into the geographical trough of the Jordan River Valley which stretches for about seventy miles from north to south. The Jordan River begins at 1,000 feet above sea level on the slopes of Mount Hermon in the north, it runs south and ends at 1,300 feet below sea level as it enters the Dead Sea in the south. This creates the spine of elevation running throughout the length of Canaan.

VERSES 18-20

“See what the land is like, and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. Is the land they live in good or bad? Are the cities they live in encampments or fortifications? Is the land fertile or unproductive? Are there trees in it or not? Be courageous. Bring back some fruit from the land.” It was the season for the first ripe grapes.

Moses set forth a series of questions to which the scouts were to find answers. Note that each question was couched in a positive and negative answer. What were **the people** like—strong or weak, few or many? What was **the land** like—good or bad, fertile or unproductive? What were **the cities** like—spread out encampments or enclosed fortifications? What about the **trees**—many or none? God’s promise to Moses and the Israelites was that Canaan was a good land “flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8,17; 13:5). The scouts were charged with confirming that the land was in fact “flowing with milk and honey.” The statement **it was the season for the first ripe grapes** pinpoints the time frame for this reconnaissance mission as late summer or early fall.



Explore Further

Read the article “Canaan” on pages 256–261 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded* (see the map on page 257). What about the makeup of Canaan led to the Israelites succumbing time and time again to idolatry and immorality? What are some cultural influences that are temptations for believers today that can hinder our walk with God?

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The Land Assessed (Num. 13:21-25)

The scouts explored the land from the Wilderness of Zin to Rehob. They gathered grapes, pomegranates, and figs, returning after forty days.

VERSE 21

So they went up and scouted out the land from the Wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob near the entrance to Hamath.

The twelve scouts departed from the **Wilderness of Zin**, a region stretching from Kadesh-barnea northward to the Dead Sea. This desert area formed the southern border of Canaan and later would be the southern limit of the tribal allotment to Judah. The forty-day journey of the scouts took them to the northern reaches of Canaan to the area of **Rehob**. The exact location of Rehob is unknown, but it was identified as being near **Hamath** which was a city-state located in the valley of the Orontes River about 120 miles north of Damascus. In all, the scouts traveled somewhere between 350 to 500 miles in their exploration of Canaan.²

VERSE 22

They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the descendants of Anak, were living. Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.

The narrative of the travels of the twelve scouts singled out the major city of **Hebron**. Hebron was a leading city in the hill country of Canaan and was located approximately nineteen miles south of Jebus (Jerusalem). Hebron played a major role in the sojourning of Abraham in Canaan. Abraham camped near the oaks of Mamre at Hebron (Gen. 13:18). He may have lived there for some time after separating from Lot and his household (chap. 13). Hebron was also known as Kiriath-arba. It was here that Sarah died (23:2). Abraham bought a field with a cave “at Machpelah near Mamre (that is, Hebron)” (vv. 17-20) in which to bury Sarah. Later this cave would serve as the burial place for Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah.

Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, leaders of the clans of the **descendants of Anak**, were living in the hill country and Hebron. The Hebrew term *Anak* means “long necked” or “strong necked” and was both the name of a person and the name of the clans in his lineage. Anak most likely served as a reference to the height of Anak’s descendants. These especially tall men (“men of great size,” Num. 13:32) were the

giants that produced fear among the ten scouts upon their return. When Caleb later received the region as his inheritance, he drove out these three particular clans (Josh. 14:12; 15:13-14). The Anakim were also dwelling in the coastal plain in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod (11:21-22).

The city of **Zoan**, the Egyptian city of Tanis, was located about one hundred miles north of Cairo on a branch of the Nile River. According to the reference, Hebron was **seven years** older than Zoan. Zoan was the capital of Egypt from 1070 BC until 655 BC. No exact date is known for the founding of these two cities, but both were ancient communities.

VERSES 23-24

When they came to Eshcol Valley, they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes, which was carried on a pole by two men. They also took some pomegranates and figs. That place was called Eshcol Valley because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut there.

One of the prominent features of the journey of the Israelite scouts were the **pomegranates** and **figs**, and the huge **cluster of grapes** brought back as samples of the productivity of the land they explored. The cluster of grapes was so large that it was **carried on a pole by two men**. The harvest of the grape cluster appears to have played into the naming of the place where the grapes grew, **Eshcol Valley**. The *Eshcol Valley* is literally translated “cluster [of grapes].” Obviously, it was a region wholly suited for growing grapes. However, the name of the valley may reach back to the time of Abraham. *Eshcol* was also the name of an ally of Abraham while the patriarch was living near the oaks of Mamre at Hebron (Gen. 14:13). The Eshcol Valley may have been in the vicinity of Hebron.

VERSE 25

At the end of forty days they returned from scouting out the land.

The twelve scouts returned **at the end of forty days**. The term *forty days* frequently appears in the Bible in relation to significant events. For example, during the flood it rained on the earth forty days and forty nights (Gen. 7:4,12). Moses was on Mount Sinai with God for forty days and forty nights (Ex. 24:18; 34:28). Before His temptation, Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights (Matt. 4:2). If the scouting mission covered about 500 miles, the scouts would have covered around ten to twelve miles per day traveling by foot through the region.



Explore Further

Read the article “Anak, Anakim, Anakites” on page 63 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. The giants dwelling in Canaan created great fear among the Israelites. What are some metaphorical giants in your life that you struggle with? Spend some time in prayer asking God to enable you to face those “giants” in His strength as you wrestle with them.

The Decision at Hand (Num. 13:26-31)

The scouts reported back to Moses about the land and its fruitfulness. They also recounted that the cities were well fortified with strong people living in them. Still, Caleb declared that they should go and take possession of the land at that time, certain of their ability to conquer it. The other scouts disagreed, saying they should not attack due to the strength of the current inhabitants.

VERSE 26

The men went back to Moses, Aaron, and the entire Israelite community in the Wilderness of Paran at Kadesh. They brought back a report for them and the whole community, and they showed them the fruit of the land.

After their reconnaissance mission, the twelve scouts returned to the Israelite encampment at **Kadesh** in the **Wilderness of Paran**. The Israelites’ encampment at Kadesh sat between the Wilderness of Zin (v. 21) to the northwest and the Wilderness of Paran to the south and east. Kadesh was one of the few oases in this region that had abundant water.

VERSE 27

They reported to Moses, “We went into the land where you sent us. Indeed it is flowing with milk and honey, and here is some of its fruit.”

The scouts confirmed Canaan was a land **flowing with milk and honey** as God had promised (Ex. 3:8). The phrase *flowing with milk and honey* is

used about twenty times to describe Canaan. No doubt the twelve scouts found this description to be true and brought back some of Canaan's **fruit**. But for ten of them, there was a giant problem!

VERSE 28

“However, the people living in the land are strong, and the cities are large and fortified. We also saw the descendants of Anak there.”

However, ten of the scouts saw major problems that outweighed the benefits and bounty of the land. **The people living in the land are strong**. The Hebrew word for *strong* speaks of fierceness and strength. Furthermore, **the cities are large and fortified**. The Hebrew term for *fortified* means something that is inaccessible or cut off. From the ten scouts' perspective, the cities were full of strong people and had walls of fortification that would have made capturing the cities very difficult if not impossible. In other words, the beauty and productivity of the land paled in comparison to the dangers that awaited them and the seemingly impossible task at hand.

VERSE 29

“The Amalekites are living in the land of the Negev; the Hethites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea and along the Jordan.”

To reinforce their negative assessment the ten scouts next began to list all the foes in the land that the Israelites would face. The **Amalekites** were the descendants of Esau (Gen. 36:12) and were a people who lived a nomadic life in the wilderness of the northwestern section of the Sinai Peninsula and also the Negev in the southern part of Canaan. The Israelites had engaged the Amalekites in battle at Rephidim in the early part of the exodus before they had reached Mount Sinai (Ex. 17:8-16). It would be the Amalekites in partnership with the Canaanites who would repulse the Israelites' belated attempt to enter the promised land after God had passed judgment on their initial refusal to enter Canaan (Num. 14:39-45).

Little is known about the **Hethites**, other than they appear to have been descendants of Heth, descendant of Noah by Canaan (Gen. 10:15). Abraham bought his burial plot for Sarah from the Hethites (23:3-20).

The **Jebusites** were the original inhabitants of Jerusalem or, as it was originally called, Jebus. The Israelites waged war against the Jebusites throughout the years but never fully drove them out. David conquered

the city of Jebus, fortified it and made it his capital (2 Sam. 5:6-7; 1 Chron. 11:4-8). David also bought the future site of Solomon's temple from Araunah the Jebusite (2 Sam. 24:18-25; 2 Chron. 3:1).

The **Amorites** perhaps were the most formidable opponents for Israel as they sought to conquer the promised land. Originally from Syria, these semi-nomadic tribes migrated into Mesopotamia and Canaan beginning around 2000 BC. In their journey to Canaan, the Israelites first encountered the Amorites on the east side of the Jordan Valley as they approached the promised land. In the battles that followed, the Israelites defeated the two Amorite kings Sihon and Og (Num. 21:21-35). Israel would battle various groups of Amorites on the west side of the Jordan as well.

The last group mentioned were the **Canaanites**. In this verse, the designation *Canaanites* is limited to the region “by the sea [the coastal plains] and along the Jordan.” While that might be where the scouts encountered them, the fact is that the term *Canaanites* was often used generically for all of the inhabitants of Canaan. In similar fashion, the term *Amorites* was sometimes used to identify all who lived in Canaan as well. Often the term *Canaanites* was used as synonymous with *Amorites*. This would include other people groups not mentioned here in Numbers 13 such as the Girgashites, Perizzites, and Hivites (Deut. 7:1).

VERSE 30-31

Then Caleb quieted the people in the presence of Moses and said, “Let’s go up now and take possession of the land because we can certainly conquer it!” But the men who had gone up with him responded, “We can’t attack the people because they are stronger than we are!”

Caleb was first introduced in the list of the twelve scouts (v. 6). Caleb, a leader from the tribe of Judah, and along with Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim (Hoshea, v. 8) refuted the negative report of the ten scouts who spoke against entering the promised land. Caleb emerged as the spokesman for the two and urged **the people** to be obedient to God and depend on God’s power to conquer these daunting foes. He reminded them that God promised to give the people the land, and God could be trusted to deliver on His promise (14:6-9). Because of his vocal faith in God, Caleb along with Joshua were the only two among the scouts that were allowed to enter the promised land (v. 24). In fact, Caleb was given a special allotment in the region of Hebron where he settled and began his own clan (Josh. 14:6-15). The testimony concerning Caleb is given in Joshua 14:14—

“He followed the LORD, the God of Israel, completely.” Amazingly, Caleb conquered the city of Hebron and ran out the three clans of Anak living in the region at the age of eighty-five (14:6-14; 15:13-14).

Caleb’s confidence, of course, was not in himself. Although he refuted the negative report of the ten scouts when he said, **“We can certainly conquer it!”** Caleb was very aware that it would only be through God’s power that they would conquer the various people groups in Canaan. After all, God had promised to give the children of Israel this land; God would fulfill that promise (Num. 14:7-9). Caleb (and Joshua) stood on the Word of God and the promise He gave. In next week’s session from Numbers 14, we will discover more about the faith and confidence of Caleb and Joshua. They both had learned that obedience was essential, even when facing seemingly dangerous situations.

In contrast, the other ten scouts held to their negative report. **“We can’t attack the people because they are stronger than we are!”** From a purely human perspective what these scouts said was true. They were motivated by fear and not faith. In their fear, the ten scouts and the Israelites in general forgot or chose to ignore how God had miraculously provided for and protected them throughout their journey from Egypt to the promised land. Their refusal to move forward in faith and enter Canaan was ultimately a rebellion against God. They allowed their fears to override their faith in God, and there would be consequences for their choice.

Explore Further

Fear can be a powerful emotion. At times it can surge so fast that it catches us off guard and gives us tunnel vision so we are momentarily unable to see and think about anything but our fears. Overwhelmed, like the Israelites we can be in danger of making rash decisions. During such times we need to choose faith in God over fear of our current circumstances. We need to focus on God, whom we know and can depend upon, rather than only on how we feel—afraid. Memorize some favorite Bible passages that speak to you about the certainty of God’s love, provision, and protection so that you can draw upon them and their truths to help you trust in God in such times of fear.

1. R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, vol. 3B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 216.
2. *Ibid.*, 221.

Rebellion and Judgment

GOD BRINGS JUDGMENT WITH CONSEQUENCES ON THE
DISOBEDIENT.

Every decision has a set of consequences, either good or bad. Decisions are not made in a vacuum. On April 16, 1846, Jacob and George Donner and their families along with businessman James Reed set out from Springfield, Illinois, in a wagon train headed for California. Their wagon train was like hundreds of others over the decades of western expansion that made the trip of approximately four to six months to travel about 2,000 miles from the Missouri River to Sacramento, California. After stopping in Independence, Missouri, for provisions, the group again headed out. The Donners had heard rumors about a short-cut called the Hastings Cutoff and considered taking that route. Behind schedule, the prospect of shaving 300-400 miles off their journey was an attractive option.

The Hastings Cutoff was proposed in a travel guide written by Lansford Hasting. The route would take them directly west from Wyoming and across Utah rather than turning north into Idaho on the Oregon Trail and connecting to the California Trail. A friend of James Reed, though, begged them not to take the short-cut, pointing out that Hastings himself had never traveled that route. In addition, they met a man who traveled part way on the route and then turned around, advising against the Hastings Cutoff. Nevertheless, George and Jacob Donner thought it worth a try to shorten their trip since they were already running late. The group numbered seventy-four people in twenty wagons. They soon discovered that the short cut was very difficult traveling. Since it was not an established wagon route, the Donner wagon train had to carve out their own road through the mountains and across the deserts. The route added over a month to their travel time. Because of that, they arrived in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in winter and became stranded for almost four months. Reports of the incident indicated that survival for some depended on cannibalism of those who had died in the bitter cold.

One wrong decision led to catastrophic results and consequences. Again, every decision leads to consequences. This rang true for the children of Israel as they prepared to enter the land of Canaan. One wrong decision led to a cascade of consequences over the following forty years.

Numbers 14:1-45

Numbers 14 begins after the ten spies had given their negative report of the promised land (Num. 13). Impacted by the fear of the ten spies, the people mourned and wailed throughout the following night (14:1). Their grieving turned to bitter complaining against Moses and Aaron, and even God Himself (vv. 2-3). While all their experiences in the exodus had testified to God's power and faithfulness, the Israelites were still paralyzed by fear and chose to ignore God's track record.

Making it even more disheartening was their desire to go back into slavery and oppression in Egypt. They would have rather died in slavery than to trust in the promises of a faithful God. Not only did they refuse to trust God, but they even began blaming God, accusing Him of bringing them into the wilderness to kill them. Their solution was to appoint a leader who would take them back to Egypt (vv. 3-4).

In response to the rebellion of the people, Moses and Aaron fell prostrate on the ground praying to God. Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who had given a positive report, pleaded with the people to trust and obey God. The land promised to them was exceedingly good and their God was more than able to give them the land and fight for them (vv. 5-9).

The people responded by threatening to stone to death all four leaders: Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua. Only the supernatural appearance of the glory of God at the tent of meeting stopped this (v. 10). From this glorious appearance came the sobering truth of judgment from God. Despite the pleadings of Moses, God announced impending judgment. Open rebellion would not be tolerated. The consequences for disbelief and disobedience would be severe on God's chosen people (vv. 11-30).

These consequences would be in line with the reasoning of the Israelites. They had accused God of leading them into the wilderness to die (v. 3). "Tell them: As I live—this is the LORD's declaration—I will do to you exactly as I heard you say. Your corpses will fall in this wilderness" (vv. 28-29a). The nation would wander in the desert for forty years—one year for each day the spies spent in Canaan. During that time everyone who had registered in the census would die in the wilderness (vv. 29b-34; see 1:1-46).

At these words of judgment, the Israelites had a change of heart and attempted to march into the promised land in their own strength. They were soundly defeated by the Amalekites and Canaanites (vv. 39-45). Their disbelief had set in motion the consequences God had described.

God's Judgment (Num. 14:11-16)

At the spies' negative report about the inhabitants of Canaan, many of the Israelites wept. They complained to Moses and desired to return to Egypt (14:3-4). The Lord threatened to strike the people with a plague and start over with a new people through Moses. Moses intervened, saying God's plan would harm His reputation among the other nations who would conclude that God was unable to fulfill His promises.

VERSE 11

The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people despise me? How long will they not trust in me despite all the signs I have performed among them?"

In every great period in history, there comes a watershed moment. One such moment in the exodus was the Israelites' refusal to enter the promised land and God's response to their decision. Numbers 14:11-12 are the pivotal verses in the account of the spies' reconnaissance of Canaan and their negative report. Here, God intervened when the people threatened to stone Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb (v. 10).

At this critical moment, the visible manifestation of God's glory appeared to the Israelites at the tent of meeting (v. 10). God expressed His frustration with the people through the repetition of the question, **"How long?"**

These questions speak of the long-suffering nature of God. **"How long will these people despise me?"** The word *despise* means "to scorn," or "treat with contempt." How did the Israelites despise God? Through their whining, complaining, disobeying, blaming, and ignoring God. They continually failed to acknowledge His faithfulness and goodness to them.

"How long will they not trust in me despite all the signs I have performed among them?" *Trust* speaks of acceptance, obedience, and adherence to all of God's laws and teachings. This lack of trust came in the face of the multitude of ways the Lord God had already demonstrated His love and power toward the Israelites. God spoke of this demonstration of love and power as *"all the signs I have performed among them."*

Among those signs that God had performed on behalf of the nation were the plagues against the Egyptians (Ex. 7-11) and the deliverance from the pursuing Egyptian army by the parting of the Red Sea (chap. 14). There was also water from a rock in the desert (17:1-7) and

the provision of food in the form of manna and quail (chap. 16). Finally, there was God's strong help in a battle against the Amalekites (17:8-13).

All these signs should have been evidence enough of God's faithful love and power toward His chosen people. Instead, the people chose to abandon trust in favor of fear. They allowed their fear to override their trust and reliance on God to do what He had promised.

VERSE 12

"I will strike them with a plague and destroy them. Then I will make you into a greater and mightier nation than they are."

In light of the rejection of God's "promised" land, God said, **"I will strike them with a plague and destroy them."** The term *plague* means "pestilence" and points to something that may destroy plant life, animal life, and human life. God's proposal was simple: He would bring judgment on the nation and destroy them. The Hebrew term for *destroy* literally means "to cause someone else to possess," that is, to "disinherit them." This would be a rescinding of the statement of God that "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Ex. 6:7).

God proposed to start over with Moses. This was not God abandoning His plan to bring blessing and salvation to the world; instead, it would be the same plan but through a different people—the descendants of Abraham through Moses and his sons. This speaks volumes concerning the seriousness of the disobedience of the people.

VERSE 13

But Moses replied to the LORD, "The Egyptians will hear about it, for by your strength you brought up this people from them."

Moses responded by interceding for the Israelites. This wasn't the first time Moses interceded for the people with God nor was it the first time God had spoken of beginning anew through Moses. The first time had been after the incident of the Israelites worshipping the golden calf while Moses was on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments (Ex. 32:9-14). This gives to us a glimpse into Moses's humility. Moses didn't seek his own personal gain; instead, he sought what was good for the nation of the Israelites.

As Moses interceded, he pointed out to God that to destroy the children of Israel would tarnish the glory of the God of Israel. God had demonstrated His power to **the Egyptians** when He brought the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. As a result of the plagues in Egypt and

the destruction of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, the Egyptians and those who heard of those events were in awe of the God of Israel and held Him in high regard. If God were to destroy His people, the Egyptians and others would think that God didn't have the power to bring them into the land He had promised them. That thought continues in verses 14-15.

VERSE 14

“They will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, LORD, are among these people, how you, LORD, are seen face to face, how your cloud stands over them, and how you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.”

In verses 13-15, there is an interplay between the Hebrew word for “to hear” and the Hebrew word for “to say” or “declare.” If God destroyed the Israelites, the Egyptians would hear and tell. Other nations would hear and tell. In his intercessory prayer, Moses listed some things about God's activity that were known by the nations in the region. A key aspect of God's relationship with the Israelites was the fact that the Lord was personally present among His people in the form of **a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.**

VERSES 15-16

“If you kill this people with a single blow, the nations that have heard of your fame will declare, ‘Since the LORD wasn't able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them, he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.’”

Moses spoke of God killing the children of Israel **with a single blow.** Literally this means killing “people as one man” and speaks of God's killing of the entire group as if He were killing one person. Thus, Moses understood that God wanted to do away with the entire lot of the nation. Such a thought indicates that the rebellion against God was by the entire nation.

Moses argued that God should not destroy the Israelites because doing so would tarnish His **fame among the nations.** By God killing the Israelites, the nations would conclude that God was too weak to bring His people into the land He had promised to give them. Since He lacked the power to do so and could not, He fulfill His covenant promises to His people, He had **slaughtered them in the wilderness.** If that was the case, then the gods of the Canaanites would have been seen as being stronger than the Lord God of Israel.



Explore Further

Read the article “Sign” on pages 1470–1471 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. God’s actions toward the Israelites during the exodus should have served to enable the Israelites to trust in God’s power and faithfulness. Looking back on your life, what are some signs that illustrate God’s faithfulness to you?

God’s Glory (Num. 14:17-19)

Moses asked God to forgive the sinfulness of the Israelites. God’s protection of the people would demonstrate His power. Moses also recounted God’s character, proclaiming Him to be slow to anger, abounding in love, and forgiving of sin.

VERSES 17-18

“So now, may my Lord’s power be magnified just as you have spoken: The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in faithful love, forgiving iniquity and rebellion. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers’ iniquity on the children to the third and fourth generation.”

Rather than destroying the Israelites, in a startling twist, Moses pled with the Lord God to demonstrate His great **power** by forgiving the people for their rebellion. In doing so, God’s power would be magnified as the Lord revealed His heart of mercy and forgiveness. Sometimes the most powerful and courageous thing a person can do is to forgive someone. This was Moses’s thinking. Any lesser god could destroy people, but the Almighty God is powerful enough to forgive and restore.

Furthermore, God should not destroy Israel because His character was at stake. Moses reminded God of His declaration of who He was after the incident with the golden calf (Ex. 32): **“just as you have spoken”** (see 34:6-7).

In this reminder, Moses highlighted key features of God’s character that could be tarnished if God rejected His people. Moses spoke of God’s long-suffering nature, His faithfulness, and His loyal commitment to the covenant relationship He had made with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-19). God is also merciful and forgiving.

God is perfect in His holiness and His love and mercy. Remember, all are sinners; all deserve God's punishment. When God chooses to forgive, that is an outflow of His love and mercy. People often think of God in the Old Testament as a harsh God bringing judgment and killing innocent people and children. But that's not so. There are no innocent people! All are sinners! The Bible is clear that the person who sins will be answerable before God for their sin—their rebellion against Him.

And yet throughout the Old Testament, God dealt with the nation of Israel with faithful love and mercy. Time and time again the people sinned against God, and God dealt with them in mercy and love. **Faithful love** translates a Hebrew word that speaks specifically of God's loyalty to the covenant relationship that He made with Abraham and his descendants. One of the chief characteristics of that covenant was its one-sided nature. God promised much and required only obedience from Abraham and from the children of Israel.

However, make no mistake. Moses pointed out that God **will not leave the guilty unpunished**. Our disobedience toward God will always have **consequences**. How, then, can a balance be found between the love of God and the justice of God? Perhaps it is found in phrase that Moses used in verse 18: **forgiving iniquity and rebellion**. The word *forgiving* means "to take, carry, or bear." It is the picture of bearing the penalty of God's punishment. That, of course, took place when God gave His own Son, Jesus the Messiah, to take our punishment upon Himself on the cross. Only He lived a life of perfect obedience to God, and thus was able to atone for our sins. Through the cross God balanced His love and His justice. The cross expresses God's faithful love and satisfies God's holy anger toward sin.

VERSE 19

"Please pardon the iniquity of this people, in keeping with the greatness of your faithful love, just as you have forgiven them from Egypt until now."

Moses brought to God's attention His past record of forgiving the Israelites of numerous incidents during the journey **from Egypt** to Canaan—which reflected God's character. God had remained faithful to His covenant relationship with Israel even when time after time the Israelites had failed to obey Him. For God to forgive them now was **"in keeping with the greatness of your faithful love."** God had earlier said of Himself that He was "slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, . . . forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin" (Ex. 34:6-7).

While God granted the Israelites forgiveness, there were still consequences for the people's actions. Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that consequences will be avoided or canceled. God would maintain His covenant relationship with Israel. The children of Israel and their descendants would continue to be God's people. But there would be immediate consequences for the Israelites' sinful actions.



Explore Further

Read the article "Forgiveness" on pages 589–590 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Consider your own experience with God's forgiveness. Why is that forgiveness important in your life? Read and memorize Psalm 103:10-12.

Use these verses to write a prayer thanking God for the forgiveness He has given us in Jesus Christ.

Future Consequences (Num. 14:20-24)

God forgave the rebellion of His people, but He also announced that the people would not see the promised land because of their sins. The generation with whom God entered a covenant relationship would not receive the land that was promised. Caleb and Joshua would be rewarded for their faithfulness; they would enter the land and inherit their portion.

VERSE 20

The LORD responded, "I have pardoned them as you requested."

The Lord God responded to Moses's intercession in the manner which Moses had hoped. Scripture points to the unique, intimate relationship that Moses had with God. "The LORD would speak with Moses face to face, just as a man speaks with his friend" (Ex. 33:11). God told Moses: "**I have pardoned them as you requested.**" The word *pardon* speaks of forgiving or releasing, in this case the Israelites' sin. This pardon was based on God's mercy (not giving us what we deserve) and God's grace (giving us what we don't deserve). It was also an expression of His covenant love toward His chosen people.

The key thought here is that while God pardoned the Israelites and relented from His plan to destroy them, He would not remove the consequences for their disbelief. God had not changed His mind about the Israelites experiencing the repercussions for their disobedience and unbelief. What changed was God would not totally reject the nation. The following verses detail the consequences this generation would face.

VERSES 21-23

“Yet as I live and as the whole earth is filled with the LORD’s glory, none of the men who have seen my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tested me these ten times and did not obey me, will ever see the land I swore to give their ancestors. None of those who have despised me will see it.”

The taking of an oath was part of the culture of the ancient world. An oath was a promise or guarantee that something was true or that a pledge would be carried out. When someone took an oath, they swore by something or someone greater than themselves to validate the truth of the oath. Often in the Old Testament, the oath would be taken in the name of the Lord God, calling Him as witness and enforcer of the oath. In this case, God swore by Himself and His glory that none of the unbelieving generation of the Israelites would enter Canaan. God has nothing greater than Himself to swear by, so He took the oath in His name: **“As I live.”** Thus, this is a sacred promise that God would not and could not break.

The Hebrew word for **glory** means “weightiness” or “importance.” It is the idea of giving God the heaviest importance in life. Nothing is weightier or more important than God. For God to swear by His glory that fills **the whole earth** means God stands on His ultimate importance in all the universe in relation to the surety of His judgment of the Israelites.

God gave two reasons why this generation of Israelites were culpable for their rebellion against God and their refusal to enter the promised land: they had **“seen my glory”** (v. 10), and they had seen **“the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness”** (v. 11) on their behalf. Despite the awesome evidence of God’s power and His unfailing love, the people refused to trust in and obey God.

God spoke of the people as having **tested** Him. That is, they continued to push God to prove Himself faithful. God had done that multiple times during the exodus from Egypt, but it wasn’t enough to convince the children of Israel. They kept testing and trying God with their complaints when every new crisis arose. They would not accept what they had seen

or experienced. The reference to **these ten times** may refer to ten different incidents during the exodus journey or it could be figurative as in the sense of “very frequently” or in contrast to the ten plagues through which God had delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery.

The consequences facing the children of Israel were severe. God proclaimed, “**None of those who have despised me will see it.**” They had accused God of bringing them into the wilderness to die. God now would accommodate that belief. Only those under twenty years of age would enter the promised land along with Caleb and Joshua (14:28-30). This next generation would also suffer from the sins of their unbelieving parents as they were relegated to wandering in the wilderness for forty years—one year for each day the spies explored the land of Canaan (vv. 31-35; see Deut. 2:14-15).

VERSE 24

“But since my servant Caleb has a different spirit and has remained loyal to me, I will bring him into the land where he has gone, and his descendants will inherit it.”

God singled out **Caleb** for a couple of reasons. Apparently when the ten spies gave their report to the people, Caleb was the spokesman for himself and Joshua as they gave their positive report regarding how the Israelites would take Canaan by their trust in God (Num. 13:30; 14:6-9). God commended Caleb for having a **different spirit**. In contrast to the ten spies who did not trust God and gave a bad report of Canaan, Caleb had faith in God. He believed God and trusted Him. Caleb also **remained loyal** to God. He never wavered in unbelief. He fully believed the promises of God that through Him the Israelites could conquer Canaan. When the Israelites finally entered the promised land, God fulfilled His promise to give Caleb and his descendants an inheritance in the land (Josh. 14).

Explore Further

Read the article “Obedience” on pages 1176–1177 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

How does the article define true obedience to God? What is the believer’s motivation for such true obedience? What could be some of the consequences of disobedience?

Lack of Trust

GOD CALLS HIS PEOPLE TO TRUST HIM IN EVERY SITUATION.

Trust is a critical aspect in everyday life. You trust that your car will start in the morning and that the brakes will stop you. You trust that the other drivers on the road around you will drive safely. You trust that your drinking water is safe and that your food is free from contamination that will kill you. You trust that the lights in your house will illuminate when you flip the switch. And here's a big one: you trust the alarm will go off in the morning to awaken you on time. Trust is a part of life each and every day. We depend on and trust in certain things.

What happens when you can't trust something you should be able to trust in? An event happened in the Chicago area in 1982 that resulted in a radical change in everyday life in our world. A popular over-the-counter medicine designed to reduce pain and fever was suddenly poisoning people in the Chicago area. After at least seven deaths, the product was recalled nationwide. The discovery was made that the medicine had been tampered with and laced with potassium cyanide. Although the identity of the person who tampered with the medicine has never been ascertained, the result of this incident was that from that point onward, the product was sold in triple-sealed and tamper-proof packaging. People ought to be able to trust in what they take for a headache, but in this instance, such trust proved fatal for some. The result of this incident was the creation of a brand-new way that over-the-counter medicines are delivered to the consumer.

Look at trust from the opposite point of view. What happens when you should trust but you choose not to? Are there consequences? Probably so. Some may be minor consequences that have little impact. However, sometimes the consequences can be severe and even fatal. Someone might declare, "I don't trust seat belts; if I have a wreck and the car catches fire, I could die." Such rejection of trust in a seat belt could be more tragic than a remote possibility of a car fire.

As the nation of Israel continued to travel toward the promised land, time and time again they were called on to trust God. Unfortunately, they often chose not to trust God and the consequences were usually severe.

Numbers 15:1-22:1

The structure of the book of Numbers centers around three cycles of rebellion by the children of Israel against God and His appointed leaders Moses and Aaron. Cycle one ended in Numbers 14:45 with the disobedience of the nation as they tried to force their way into Canaan against God's will. Cycle two is found in Numbers 16:1-19:22. The third rebellion cycle is in 20:2-25:18. Rebellion cycle 2 includes a rebellion of Levites and some from the tribe of Reuben who rejected the exclusive nature of the priesthood of Aaron. They resented the special role that the family of Aaron played in the worship of the Lord God. The rebellious Levites were not content with their role of service to the tabernacle; they wanted to be priests as well. God judged the rebels by having the earth open up and swallow the leaders of the rebellion. In addition, God destroyed by fire 250 others who had joined in the rebellion (16:16-40). Instead of repenting, the people continued to complain against Moses and Aaron (vv. 41-42). In response, God sent a plague among the people that consumed 14,700 of them. The plague was only averted when Aaron took an incense burner and carried it throughout the camp, standing between those who were alive and those who had died (vv. 43-50).

Throughout these cycles of rebellion in the book of Numbers, challenges to the leadership of Moses and Aaron stand out as a key issue. In many ways, the event described in Numbers 17 laid to rest much of these leadership issues. God Himself took the initiative to resolve this source of strife. God instructed the leaders of each of the twelve tribes to bring a wooden staff to the tabernacle. The name of each leader was written on his staff. These staffs were then placed in the tabernacle before the ark of the covenant. Overnight, the staff of Aaron not only sprung leaves, but it blossomed and produced almonds (17:1-11). Through this miraculous sign, God put His seal on Aaron as the legitimate high priest of the nation. This staff was kept in the tabernacle as a permanent reminder to all future generations that Aaron and his descendants were God's only choice for the priesthood of Israel.

Despite their rebellion, the Levites had not forfeited their right to serve at the tabernacle. In chapter 18, God affirmed the ministry of the Levites in relation to the priests. The priests were responsible for the tabernacle interior and its furnishings. The Levites' responsibilities covered the external parts of this place of worship. In all of this, the holiness of God was paramount. Chapter 19 details the purification ritual specifically

for uncleanness associated with death. Remember, 14,700 people had just died. An entire generation would die in the following years of wilderness wandering. Those who dealt with the handling and burial of the dead would become ceremonially unclean. This would require a special purification to allow them back into the community.



The Problem (Num. 20:2-5)

As the Israelites journeyed toward the Plains of Moab, they entered the Wilderness of Zin. A shortage of water led to more complaints. The Israelites quarreled with Moses and questioned why he would bring them to such an inhospitable place that lacked food and water.

VERSE 2

There was no water for the community, so they assembled against Moses and Aaron.

Chapter 20 begins with death of Miriam (v. 1) and closes with the death of Aaron (vv. 23-29). In between is detailed Moses and Aaron's disobedience to God as to how He commanded that He would provide water for the Israelites (vv. 2-13). Implicit in the narrative from this chapter forward is the thought that the years of wandering in the wilderness brought about by the disobedience of the nation of Israel were ending. Moses once again assembled the nation in the Wilderness of Zin on the southern edge of the land of Canaan. As before, they were camped at Kadesh, the site from which the twelve spies had been sent to explore the promised land (20:1; see chap. 13-14). That they were back at Kadesh is significant. Their return to Kadesh points to the wasted time and lives of an entire generation lost because of their unbelief and refusal to obey God.

The area of Kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin was known for a number of abundant springs. The Bible speaks of these springs as the Waters of Meribah (or "strife"; 20:13; 27:14). The first encampment at Kadesh had presented no shortage of water. This time, however, things were different. Several possibilities have been proposed as to why the Israelites found no water. First, it might have been a year of drought or an

excessively hot season that dried up the water. Secondly, it could be that the Israelites were not camped in exactly the same spot in the Wilderness of Zin as before. Or thirdly, the large population may have simply used up all the water that was present at the springs.

The entire community of Israelite people **assembled against Moses and Aaron** to lodge their complaint. The word *against* is key for it reflects anger and hostility. This new generation of the children of Israel were following closely in their parents' footsteps. The entire incident recalls the earlier episode at Rephidim when God commanded Moses to strike a rock to produce water (Ex. 17:1-7). Moses called that place "Massah [testing] and Meribah [quarreling]" because of the arguing of the people. That incident also followed a serious challenge to Moses's and Aaron's authority (chap. 16).

VERSE 3

The people quarreled with Moses and said, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD."

Because of the scarcity of water, the people **quarreled with Moses**. The people were so distraught, they expressed a preference to have died in the wilderness. "**If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD**" possibly contains a double meaning. This statement could refer to the most recent incident of the rebellion led by Korah where over 14,700 people died (chap. 16). Thus, they were expressing the wish to have joined them in death. Or it could be referring to the entire generation who had died in the wilderness because of their unwillingness to enter the promised land after the spies returned from their reconnaissance mission (chap. 13-14). Quite possibly, it could refer to both instances. Their thinking was that anything would have been better than slowly dying of thirst.

VERSE 4

"Why have you brought the LORD's assembly into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here?"

The people had forgotten the One who was leading and providing for them and started blaming Moses for bringing **the LORD's assembly into this wilderness**. As far as they were concerned, Moses was to blame. He had failed in his leadership; he must have led them astray!

This blame on Moses is enhanced by the people identifying themselves as *the LORD's assembly*; that is, the people that God had chosen.

The people most likely thought that since they belonged to the Lord, He would not have led them astray. Therefore, their current situation must have been Moses's fault.

VERSE 5

“Why have you led us up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It’s not a place of grain, figs, vines, and pomegranates, and there is no water to drink!”

Moses was accused of guiding the nation into an **evil place**. Although not many of this new generation of the Israelites would have remembered life in the land of Egypt, in their complaint to Moses they indirectly compared their current situation to life in Egypt. Their feelings echoed words spoken years earlier as the nation marched away from Mount Sinai: “We remember the free fish we ate in Egypt, along with the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. But now our appetite is gone; there’s nothing to look at but this manna!” (11:5–6).

The truth is this wilderness was not where God purposed for them to be. They were to be in a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:7-8,17). Years earlier the twelve spies had brought back samples of the fruit of the promised land (Num. 13:23). They knew of its bounty. Where they were now certainly was not a place of **grain, figs, vines, and pomegranates**. The Israelites could have been in that bountiful land had it not been for the previous generation’s rebellion against God. Now with their words, this present generation exhibited that same attitude of unbelief and rebellion against God.



Explore Further

Rather than focus on the land flowing with milk and honey, in their murmuring the Israelites “remembered” the various foods of Egypt. Read the articles “Honey” on page 764 and “Milk” on pages 1101–1102 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What was the appeal of a land “flowing with milk and honey”? In their crisis, why would the Israelites have been drawn back to the foods of Egypt rather than looking forward to what awaited them in the promised land of Canaan?

The Plan (Num. 20:6-8)

Hearing the people's complaint, Moses and Aaron went to the doorway of the tent of meeting and fell facedown. The Lord spoke to Moses, instructing him to take Aaron and assemble the people. He and Aaron together were to speak to a rock. Water would come from the rock to provide for the people and their livestock.

VERSE 6

Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting. They fell facedown, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them.

Moses was God's appointed leader over the entire exodus event. **Aaron** was given to Moses as his spokesman when Moses balked at God's call to lead (Ex. 4:10-16). Although Moses always took the lead, oftentimes the two brothers were listed together as leaders of Israel. When Moses and Aaron heard the complaints of the people, they hurried from **the assembly** (congregation) of the Israelites to the tabernacle, called here **the tent of meeting**. This move was most likely partially to get away from the escalating dangerous emotions of the crowd, but also to intercede before God on behalf of the people.

Once they were at **the doorway** of the tent of meeting, Moses and Aaron **fell facedown**, an action of intercession before God on behalf of the people. Laying prostrate before God is one of several prayer positions found in the Old Testament and was a frequent position for Moses as he interceded for the Israelites (Num. 14:5; 16:4,22,45).

Moses and Aaron interceded before God most likely because they were frightened for the people. After all, the people once again were rebelling against God. Moses and Aaron over the years had witnessed firsthand the consequences of such rebellion.

In response to Moses and Aaron's intercession, **the glory of the LORD appeared to them**. This served as a reminder of God's presence with them and the special relationship that Israel had with God as His people. The continued presence of the Lord God with Israel was a distinguishing mark for the nation (Deut. 4:7).

The appearance of the glory of the Lord at Kadesh during this controversy mirrors the appearance of the glory of the Lord at Kadesh during the first visit to that oasis when the Israelites refused to enter the promised land (Num. 14:10). This was no coincidence. This manifestation of God's glory gave weight to the instructions that God delivered to Moses.

VERSES 7-8

The Lord spoke to Moses, “Take the staff and assemble the community. You and your brother Aaron are to speak to the rock while they watch, and it will yield its water. You will bring out water for them from the rock and provide drink for the community and their livestock.”

No record exists of the actions of the Israelites during the years of wandering in the wilderness due to the sin of rejecting God’s command to enter the promised land. What we do know is that this was now a new generation of adults confronting Moses and Aaron. However, just like their parents, they doubted God’s provision for their needs. Such unbelief certainly deserved God’s wrath. Instead, God chose to deal with them in mercy and grace. His plan was to graciously furnish them with the water they needed for themselves and their livestock. God would demonstrate to this new generation not only His power, but also His mercy and grace. He would provide a miracle of mercy and not an act of judgment.

God’s instructions to Moses were twofold. He was to **assemble the community** so they could see God’s power and miracle of provision for themselves. He was also to **take the staff** with him to meet the people. The Hebrew word for *staff* can also mean “rod,” and various texts and translations speak of the rod of Moses, the rod of God, or the rod of Aaron (Ex. 4:2,20; 14:16; 17:9; Num. 17:8-10.) The various passages that talk of the staff of Moses and the staff of God suggest that these refer to the same item. Sometimes it was called the staff/rod of Moses and other times it was called the staff/rod of God. Instances exist, however, where God called on Aaron to use his staff to perform God’s bidding. These instances include calling down a number of the plagues in Egypt (Ex. 7:19; 8:5). Then, of course, we have the account of God choosing the staff of Aaron over the staffs of the other tribal leaders in the context passage for this session (Num. 17:1-10). So which staff was God speaking of?

A clue can be found in verse 9 where it says that Moses took the staff from the Lord’s presence. In Numbers 17:9-10, Moses was commanded to put the staff of Aaron in the Lord’s presence in the tabernacle. Here Moses was instructed to remove that staff in the tabernacle from the presence of the Lord and to take it with him as he assembled the people.

Why take the staff when Moses was simply going to speak to the rock? In the first instance of God providing water from a rock at Rephidim, Moses used the staff to strike the rock in obedience to God’s command (Ex. 17:6). That was not God’s plan here at Kadesh. Most likely the staff was a visible reminder of Moses’s authority under God.



Explore Further

Explore the term “staff” further by reading the article “Rod, Staff” on page 1374 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revise and Expanded*. Note the slight difference between a rod and a staff. Pay attention to the variety of ways the rod and the staff were used. Read Psalm 23:4. How do these various uses for the rod and staff give us confidence in our Great Shepherd?

The Result (Num. 20:9-13)

Moses and Aaron summoned the people to the rock where Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water poured forth. However, since Moses and Aaron did not trust the Lord to provide water as He said He would, God declared a punishment. Moses would not lead the people into the promised land.

VERSE 9

So Moses took the staff from the LORD’s presence just as he had commanded him.

God’s instruction to Moses was that both he and Aaron were to gather the people and speak to the rock to bring forth water to quench the thirst of the people and their animals. As such, Moses and Aaron would become God’s agents in providing for the needs of the people. Moses began in obedience to God by taking **the staff from the LORD’s presence** and carrying it with him to the rock outcropping where God had directed. The phrase **just as he had commanded him** points to a continued pattern of obedience on Moses’s part. The similar phrase, “just as the LORD had commanded him,” is found multiple times in the book of Exodus speaking of Moses’s obedience to God (Ex. 34:4; 40:16,21,23,25,27,29).

VERSE 10

Moses and Aaron summoned the assembly in front of the rock, and Moses said to them, “Listen, you rebels! Must we bring water out of this rock for you?”

With this verse, everything suddenly changed. Instead of speaking to the rock as God had instructed him to do, Moses angrily confronted the people. One can almost hear the exasperation in Moses's words. His patience with the people evidently had finally reached a breaking point. The use of the word **rebels** highlights the anger that Moses felt. Here was an entire shift in attitude by Moses from one who pleaded before God on behalf of the people to one who was consumed by anger against the people.

The statement of Moses, **“Must we bring water out of this rock for you?”** indicates Moses had lost sight of the fact that he was not the miracle worker but only the instrument that God would use. By claiming that he and Aaron would produce water from the rock, Moses was stealing the glory away from God.

VERSE 11

Then Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff, so that abundant water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

Not only did Moses sin in his angry words, but he also sinned in disobeying God's direction to speak to the rock. Remember, God was mercifully preparing to furnish the people with the water they so desperately desired. Instead of speaking and acting with the same kind of grace and mercy with which God was acting, Moses reacted with anger and a physical manifestation of that anger: he **struck the rock twice with his staff**. While that was how water was miraculously produced in the prior incident at Rephidim (Ex. 17:5-6), that was not God's plan in this instance.

After Moses *struck the rock*, water did come out of the rock face. Through this miracle God graciously provided **abundant water** for the people. The disobedience of Moses and Aaron did not stop God from being merciful to the people. He dealt with the people as He had purposed. Now, God would deal with Moses and Aaron.

VERSE 12

But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust me to demonstrate my holiness in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this assembly into the land I have given them.”

While Moses was the one who struck the rock, Aaron was implicated as being complicit in this disobedience. God held both of them guilty

because of this action. As a result, God’s judgment came on both by forbidding either of them from entering the promised land. In the passage concerning Aaron’s death (vv. 24-29), God declared: “Aaron will be gathered to his people; he will not enter the land I have given the Israelites, because you both rebelled against my command at the Waters of Meribah” (v. 24). Moses also was told that because of his disobedience his death would occur before the Israelites entered the promised land (27:12-14).

God’s indictment against Moses and Aaron was the fact that they “**did not trust me to demonstrate my holiness**” before the Israelites. God desired to bring glory to Himself in the sight of Israel through a miracle of water flowing from the rock. Moses and Aaron got in the way of God’s purposes and stole glory from Him. God had desired to show His full power and might to the people, but Moses and Aaron distracted from that with the fit of rage they exhibited.

VERSE 13

These are the Waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD, and he demonstrated his holiness to them.

The phrase **Waters of Meribah** echoes the earlier incident at Rephidim (Ex. 17:5-7). There God contended against the people. Here, however, God also contended against His disobedient leaders Moses and Aaron. The text indicates that through this incident, God **demonstrated His holiness** by providing water to the people. He also demonstrated His holiness by the consequences for Moses and Aaron’s disobedience—bringing severe punishment on His chosen leaders of His people.



Explore Further

Read the article “Holy” on page 758 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. God is holy in that He is separate from His creation. God is also holy in the sense that He is perfect in all His attributes, including His moral purity. God in His holiness calls His children to be holy (Lev. 20:26; 1 Pet. 1:15-16). What does it mean that you are to be holy? How can you demonstrate such holiness in the way you live your life each day?

God's Plans

GOD CAN USE ANY MEANS HE CHOOSES TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL.

From time to time in the news there will be stories of people trying to hire hitmen to eliminate spouses, rivals, business partners, or even a parent or a child. Sometimes these attempts succeed, and the person is convicted of murder. Other times, the plot is discovered before the actual deed is carried out, and the person is convicted of conspiracy to commit murder or murder-for-hire charges. Murdering another person is a sad way to deal with relationship problems. In today's study, we see a similar approach as King Barak of Moab sought to hire a "hitman" to bring a curse on the Israelites whom he perceived to be a threat to his kingdom.



UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT



Numbers 22:2–25:18

Today's study focuses on a story that takes place at the end of the third cycle of rebellion of Israel during the exodus event. (The third cycle of rebellion in the book of Numbers covers 20:2–25:18.) This extended incident featuring the prophet/diviner Balaam ended in a terrible act of idolatry, immorality, and rebellion of the men of Israel. This rebellion resulted in 24,000 deaths (25:1-9).

The years of wandering in the wilderness were now behind the nation of Israel, and they were approaching the moment when they would enter the promised land of Canaan. Much had changed. Both Miriam and Aaron, sister and brother of Moses, were dead. God had informed Moses of his own impending death. The nation found themselves moving up the eastern edge of Canaan skirting around the Dead Sea and traveling through the eastern side of the Jordan River Valley. As they traveled north in preparation for entering Canaan near the city of Jericho,

they encountered several small tribal kingdoms such as Arad (21:1-3) and the Amorites under King Sihon (vv. 21-31). In addition, the forces of Israel had conquered the kingdom of Bashan and its king, Og (vv. 33-35). Their next encounter was with the Moabites under Balak, the tribal chieftain or king.

Balak came to rule over the Moabites after his predecessor had suffered defeat under Sihon and his Amorite armies (21:26). Sihon had taken control of much of the land of Moab. When Sihon and his forces were defeated by Israel, this would have allowed Balak and his forces to assert themselves in the area. Only one thing was in Balak's way of dominating the region—the Israelites. Here was a nation of over 600,000 people moving into his tribal territory (26:51). Balak was frightened and realized that he didn't have the manpower to ward off this mass of people. Nor were his gods effective. In his mind, there had to be a better way to fend off Israel than a direct military confrontation.

Enter a prophet and diviner with a great reputation by the name of Balaam. Balaam was from an area of Mesopotamia called Pethor (22:5), thought to be the city Pitru, which was thirteen miles south of Carchemish on the Sajur River, a tributary of the Euphrates River. Balaam appears to have been an "expert" in various religions including the religion of Israel. Balak sought to enlist Balaam to cast a curse on Israel so that they might be defeated and run out of Moab. Gathering a number of officials of Moab and Midian, Balak sent them to Balaam. This trip was not a short trek; Pethor was approximately 420 miles from Moab and the journey would have taken up to twenty-five days.

Through his emissaries, Balak let Balaam know of the situation. He also sent a hefty reward to persuade Balaam to come and curse the Israelite nation. Casting a spell on one's enemy using various rituals and incantations was a common practice in ancient times. Balaam heard the requests of the emissaries but put them off while he consulted God (vv. 7-8). Balaam used the sacred name of God, Yahweh, in addressing these officials. While he would consult with Yahweh, the Israelite God was just one of several gods that he served.

Initially, Balaam was instructed by God to decline the invitation (vv. 9-13). More than a month later, new and more dignified emissaries came from Balak with a greater reward. Again, Balaam consulted God overnight. This time he announced that God would permit him to travel with them to the Plains of Moab (vv. 15-21).

The trip to Moab was not without excitement as will be seen in today's study. When Balaam arrived, God did not allow him to curse Israel. Instead, God called on Balaam to actually bless the nation. As Balak

showed him various views of the nation scattered across the Plains of Moab, Balaam pronounced God's blessing on the people (23:1-24:25).

Balak failed in defeating Israel through casting a curse on them. The Moabite and Midianite people, however, would inflict disaster on the Israelites later when they lured Israel into idolatry and immorality in pagan worship to their god Baal (chap. 25). The result was under God's command, those guilty of these actions were killed by the leaders of Israel (25:4-5). Later, God would command Moses to slaughter the Midianites for their part in leading Israel into idolatry and immorality (31:1-18). During that annihilation of the people of Midian, Balaam the prophet was also killed (v. 8). The nation of Israel was to rid themselves of anything that might bring them to abandon their faithfulness to God.



Obstacles Met (Num. 22:22-27)

Having continued toward Canaan, the Israelites reached the Plains of Moab and camped east of the promised land. The Moabite king, Balak, sought to employ Balaam to put a curse on the Israelites while they were in his land (22:1-6). Balaam set out on his donkey to meet with Balak. Unseen by Balaam, an angel of the Lord blocked the donkey's path causing her first to turn off the path, then wedge against a wall, and finally, to crouch down to the ground. Each time, Balaam hit the donkey with a stick attempting to get her moving along the path.

VERSE 22

But God was incensed that Balaam was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand on the path to oppose him. Balaam was riding his donkey, and his two servants were with him.

The main action in the Balaam story occurred in the Plains of Moab which were located in the southern section of the east side of the Jordan River just north of the Dead Sea. This quite fertile plain was on the other side of the Jordan River from the city of Jericho. This area would serve as the location for the nation throughout the remainder of the book of Numbers and throughout all the messages given in the book of Deuteronomy. From here the children of Israel would cross the Jordan

River and begin the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 1-3). About fifteen miles east of the Jordan River and rising above the Plains of Moab was Mount Nebo from which Moses would view the promised land before his death on the mountain (Deut. 34:1-7).

Balaam had refused to go with the emissaries of Balak the first time they tried to hire him. Balaam had informed them that the Lord God had refused to let him go (Num. 22:7-13). On the second inquiry from messengers from Balak, God gave permission for Balaam to go (vv. 15-20). Why? God allowed Balaam to go, not so that he might curse Israel but so that God could use him for His purposes in blessing the children of Israel.

Why, then, would God have been incensed that Balaam was going? God knows the human heart. While on the outside Balaam was obeying the Lord God, inside he probably was hoping that he still might be able to curse Israel and receive the reward from Balak (see v. 7). When he was presented with the greater reward when the officials came a second time (vv. 15-19), he had told them, “Please stay here overnight as the others did, so that I may find out what else the LORD has to tell me.” Balaam was trying to push the boundaries with God to see what he might get away with. Maybe he thought he could influence God in some way so that he might have the reward. Somehow Balaam thought he still might be able to curse Israel.¹

A key truth here is that Balaam was no follower of the Lord God of Israel. His subsequent action of leading Israel into an idolatrous and immoral situation proved that truth. In fact, the Bible states plainly that it was under the influence of Balaam that the Moabites and Midianites were able to lure Israel into idolatry and immorality (see Num. 31:16). From this point on, the name *Balaam* was synonymous with immorality in the history of Israel and Christianity (see 2 Pet. 2:15-16; Rev. 2:14).

Despite his hidden motives of desiring to curse Israel and reap the rewards for his words, God was going to use Balaam for His purposes. First, God was going to teach him a lesson through his donkey. Then, ironically, God was going to use him to bless Israel. God positioned **the angel of the LORD** in the path ahead of Balaam and his donkey. Throughout the Old Testament this term *the angel of the LORD* often is used in relation to what is called a “theophany.” By definition a *theophany* is a physical appearance of the Lord God to a person. Many scholars understand these physical manifestations of the Lord God to be an Old Testament appearance of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. In this instance, whether this was a theophany or one of God’s messenger angels is much debated. Needless to say, the angel was God’s way of arresting the progress of Balaam’s donkey and gaining the attention of Balaam.

The phrase **to oppose him** in the Hebrew language is the term for “adversary” and is sometimes used as the name of Satan. Here, however, the word simply points to the one who opposed Balaam and his donkey.

VERSE 23

When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing on the path with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the path and went into the field. So Balaam hit her to return her to the path.

The donkey clearly saw **the angel of the LORD** and reacted out of fear. Balaam, on the other hand, was oblivious to what was going on. Balaam struck the donkey to make it return to the path so that his journey might continue.

VERSES 24-25

Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow passage between the vineyards, with a stone wall on either side. The donkey saw the angel of the LORD and pressed herself against the wall, squeezing Balaam’s foot against it. So he hit her once again.

For a second time **the angel of the LORD** blocked the path. This time Balaam and his donkey were traveling in a **narrow passage** between vineyards. These stone walls were used to mark boundaries. They also were used to prevent soil from eroding during rainstorms. The donkey reacted to the angel’s presence by pressing against one of the rock walls which pressed Balaam’s foot against the wall. Balaam reacted again by striking the donkey. He was still oblivious to the fact that something was amiss. Balaam was spiritually blind to what God was doing.

VERSES 26-27

The angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn to the right or the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she crouched down under Balaam. So he became furious and beat the donkey with his stick.

A third, and final encounter with **the angel of the LORD** occurred as the donkey entered a **narrow place** in the path. With nowhere to go because of the angel of the LORD, the donkey folded her legs and rested her belly on the ground under Balaam. Balaam responded in anger by beating the donkey a third time.



Explore Further

Read the article “Theophany” on pages 1560–1561 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. A theophany was an occasion when there is an actual physical manifestation of God. Read about three of these incidences in Genesis 18:1-33; Exodus 3:1–4:17; and 24:9-11. In your own life, what are some ways that you have encountered God?

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Attention Gained (Num. 22:28-31)

The Lord “opened the donkey’s mouth” (v. 28) to question Balaam. A conversation ensued between Balaam and his donkey. Finally, the Lord opened Balaam’s eyes so he could see the angel of the Lord on the path. Seeing the angel, Balaam bowed in worship.

VERSE 28

Then the LORD opened the donkey’s mouth, and she asked Balaam, “What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?”

Balaam was so preoccupied with his own plans and the possibility of a reward that God used an amazing miracle to get his attention. God had already told Balaam that the Israelites were blessed, and Balaam must not curse those the Lord God had blessed (v. 12). Now God allowed the donkey to speak to express her displeasure at being beaten by Balaam. The donkey asked in protest: **“What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?”**

The LORD opened the donkey’s mouth and gave her words. This was a supernatural act of God. God can do whatever He chooses to do because He is the all-powerful Sovereign Lord who created and sustains everything! As such He has the right and ability to act outside of the laws of nature which He established whenever He so chooses.

VERSE 29

Balaam answered the donkey, “You made me look like a fool. If I had a sword in my hand, I’d kill you now!”

While **the donkey** speaking is an amazing miracle, perhaps even more amazing is the fact that **Balaam** answered back to the beast! Instead of reacting in amazement, Balaam responded to the question of the donkey. Remember, all of this occurred in the presence of two servants and probably the emissaries from Balak. Balaam expressed embarrassment at the actions of his donkey: **“You made me look like a fool.”** In response to the complaint of his donkey, Balaam threatened to kill the beast. He was furious. In fact, the apostle Peter described the anger of Balaam as “madness” (2 Pet. 2:15-16). In this entire dialogue, the donkey was closer to being the wise man and Balaam was closer to being a stubborn mule. Balaam still failed to grasp the situation in which he was involved.

VERSES 30-31

But the donkey said, “Am I not the donkey you’ve ridden all your life until today? Have I ever treated you this way before?” “No,” he replied. Then the LORD opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the path with a drawn sword in his hand. Balaam knelt low and bowed in worship on his face.

Once again, **the donkey** spoke, pointing out her faithfulness to Balaam over all the years. The implication was that Balaam should have sensed something different was going on. He should have recognized that the donkey was acting strange, and he should have sought an answer to her behavior. Balaam answered the donkey by acknowledging the faithfulness of the animal.

Finally, **the LORD** allowed Balaam to see what the donkey had seen. God had opened the donkey’s mouth (v. 28). Now God **opened Balaam’s eyes**. The Hebrew term for *opened* means to reveal something or uncover an object. The picture might be that of an artist pulling a drape from a statue or a painting to reveal their finished work of art.

When the blinders were removed from Balaam’s eyes, he realized the reason for his donkey’s strange behavior. There, blocking the donkey’s way forward, stood **the angel of the LORD standing in the path with a drawn sword in his hand**. The phrase **knelt low and bowed in worship on his face** speaks of the response of a lesser person to someone who is greater. Balaam’s reaction of kneeling and bowing in worship were likely an indication of confession on his part rather than reverence to the Lord God. Remember, Balaam was not wholly devoted to the Lord God of Israel. He spoke for and served many different gods. Of interest, though, is the fact that God used the pagan prophet Balaam as an instrument in His plan of the conquest of Canaan by the nation of Israel.



Explore Further

Read the article “Balaam” on pages 166–167 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Balaam is referenced in Deuteronomy 23:4-5; Joshua 13:22; 24:9-10; Nehemiah 13:2; and Micah 6:5. What does this indicate about the importance of Balaam and this incident? What else could you conclude about Balaam and his importance in the history of the early church from 2 Peter 2:12-16; Jude 10-11; and Revelation 2:13-16? What are some ways you can ensure that you are not led astray by a modern-day Balaam?

God’s Plan (Num. 22:32-35)

The angel of the Lord explained that he was there to oppose Balaam, declaring his plan of going to Balak to be “evil” (v. 32). The donkey, by turning away from the angel several times, had saved Balaam’s life. Balaam relented and offered to turn back. The angel instructed him to continue with the plan to meet with Balak, but he should only communicate to him what the angel would tell him to say. Balaam continued on his journey to meet with Balak.

VERSE 32

The angel of the LORD asked him, “Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? Look, I came out to oppose you, because I consider what you are doing to be evil.”

The angel of the LORD echoed the question of the donkey: “**Why have you beaten your donkey these three times?**” This no doubt was to call further attention to the irrationality of Balaam’s actions against the animal. Balaam acted out of selfishness by striking his donkey. He gave no thought to his confrontation with the Lord God or the Lord God’s instructions regarding speaking only what God told him. Instead, he was undoubtedly focused on the riches promised by King Balak of Moab.

The angel of the LORD quickly informed Balaam that instead of the donkey being killed (v. 29), Balaam was the candidate for death. Balaam thought the donkey was opposing him; in reality God’s opposition to Balaam was the larger issue at hand. Outwardly, Balaam appeared to be obedient to the Lord God (v. 20). The reality, however, was the opposite.

The angel of the LORD further replied, **“I consider what you are doing to be evil.”** God knew Balaam’s heart and knew of the greed he was harboring within. Note that with God, the intent of Balaam’s heart was the same as *“doing . . . evil.”* God makes little differentiation between the thoughts of the heart and the actions of people. In fact, Scripture is plain that evil actions arise out of the darkness of the heart (Jer. 17:9-10; Matt. 15:18-19).

VERSES 33-34

“The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away from me, I would have killed you by now and let her live.” Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, **“I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the path to confront me. And now, if it is evil in your sight, I will go back.”**

Three times the donkey had sought to turn away from the danger ahead. The angel of the LORD indicated to Balaam that the actions of his donkey had saved his life. The Lord God was out to kill Balaam for the disobedient attitude in his heart. Had it not been for the fear of the animal toward the angel brandishing the sword in its path, Balaam’s story would have ended right there.

Quickly, Balaam exclaimed, **“I have sinned.”** In what way had Balaam sinned? Was this a genuine confession or was he simply sorry he got caught with greed in his heart? Through the angel of the LORD, God had said, **“I consider what you are doing to be evil”** (v. 32). Notice the response of Balaam which cast doubt on God’s indictment. **“And now, if it is evil in your sight, I will go back.”** That is, I will stop.

VERSE 35

Then the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but you are to say only what I tell you.” So Balaam went with Balak’s officials.

The angel of the LORD repeated the words of the Lord God from verse 20. Some take this as further evidence that this is a theophany of God, that *the angel of the LORD* here is an appearance of the Lord God Himself. They suggest that the repetition of the instructions indicates both are from the same person. Another suggestion is that *the angel of the LORD* was God’s angelic messenger to carry God’s word to Balaam.

While Balaam had volunteered to stop his journey and return home (v. 34), that didn’t serve the purpose of God. The angel emphasized that

Balaam must speak, but only speak what God wanted declared. This is the second time that Balaam had been told this (see v. 20). Balaam went with the men under the condition that he would speak only what God wanted him to speak. This encounter with God so impressed Balaam that when he finally met Balak, the first thing out of his mouth was that he would only speak what the Lord God allowed him to speak (v. 38).

What follows then are two chapters (chap. 23–24) where Balak continually pressed the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelite nation. In fact, he took Balaam to three different mountain overlooks so that Balaam could have three different perspectives of the vast nation of people. Each time, however, from these overlooks Balaam blessed the Israelites instead of cursing them. He spoke only what God told him to speak.

While Balaam was obedient in blessing the nation of Israel, his subsequent actions contributed to another incident of rebellion by Israel (Num. 25:1-3; see Rev. 2:14). Through the advice of Balaam, the women of Moab enticed the people of Israel into idolatry and immorality. As a result, Balaam established his place in the history of Israel as an evil-hearted pagan prophet.

With the conclusion of the Balaam story, the third cycle of Israel's rebellion comes to an end. The entire account showcases God's ability to work for the good of His people in spite of their rebellion and lack of faithfulness. In addition, God chose to use a pagan prophet to bless His people. God is sovereign and will accomplish His purposes using whatever methods He chooses.



Explore Further

The account of Balaam illustrates that outward obedience does not always translate to obedience in the heart. We must obey God with both our hearts *and* actions. How is your heart obedience? Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commands” (John 14:15), and “The one who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me” (v. 21). Spend some time in prayer asking God to search your heart and show you areas in your life where you lack obedience to Him. Thank God for His forgiveness and ask Him to strengthen you so that you can bring those areas of your life into obedience to Him.

1. For the background on this perspective, see R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, vol. 3B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 388–89.

Instructions Given

GOD'S PLANS REQUIRE BELIEVERS TO ACT
ON THE INSTRUCTIONS HE GIVES.

For many people whitewater rafting is one of the great adventures of life. It offers the participant both the most exhilarating and the most terrifying experience ever. A person is having the most fun of a lifetime while experiencing the greatest fear of a lifetime! What a rush!

With every whitewater rafting adventure, the trip begins with the rafting guide meticulously going over the safety instructions: wear proper clothing. Life jackets are to be worn at all times. The same is true for the protective helmet: keep it on always. Obey the commands of the guide. Learn to hold and use the paddle properly. Stay in the boat! Repeat—stay in the boat! If you fall out of the boat, don't panic. Listen for the guide's instructions. Learn the proper swimming techniques. Don't stand up in the river.

Each of these instructions is given to ensure that you have the time of your life, and that you protect your life! Even the best swimmers can find themselves in trouble if they don't use the proper swimming techniques in whitewater rapids. The proper technique of floating on your back, feet downstream and knees slightly bent, head-up looking downstream is designed to protect a person from the hidden rocks that could seriously injure them. The same is true for the rule of not trying to stand up in the river. The rapid water can quickly force a foot into a position of being wedged in underwater rocks that can lead to fatal disaster. Above all else—listen to the guide. Their guidance comes from hours of training and weeks, months, and years of experience in whitewater rafting. Following the instructions of the guide is essential! These rules are designed to provide maximum safety and maximum enjoyment while on the river.

The same is true of navigating the river of life. God's instructions are designed to bring the blessings of God into our lives. But they are also there to provide protection from all the things that can pull us down. God's instructions are not suggestions. Rather His laws and commandments are essentials for living life to the fullest. Following God's instructions is a constant part of God's plan for our lives as we live out the great adventure of following Him!

Numbers 26:1–36:13

Numbers 26 chronicles the start of a new beginning for the nation of Israel. Gone was the first generation of Israelites who left Egypt. Their numbers were recorded in the census contained in Numbers 1. Forty years had passed since that first census. A new census of the men of fighting age, twenty years of age and older, took place in Numbers 26.

This second census was for military purposes, but it also served as guidelines for assigning territory in Canaan. The allotment to each tribe of Israel was based on the tribe's population size. While the allotment would be assigned by the casting of lots, God was precise in His instruction that larger tribes would receive larger portions of land (33:53-54). Special instruction was given concerning the tribe of Levi which did not receive an allotment of land (26:57-62). Instead, they were assigned to forty-eight cities throughout the land in which they were to live (35:1-8).

Of the previous generation of Israelites, only three were still alive—Moses, Joshua, and Caleb (26:63-66). Moses was not permitted to enter the promised land (Num. 27:12-21; Deut. 34:1-7). Joshua and Caleb were rewarded for their faithfulness to God. They had been the two spies who stood against the evil report of the other ten spies after the twelve returned from exploring the promised land (chap. 13-14). Joshua had been Moses's assistant and was God's choice for succeeding Moses as leader of the nation. In Numbers 27:15-23 the ordination of Joshua and the transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua is highlighted.

Sandwiched in between this narrative concerning the counting of the people and the allotment of the land is a section of regulations regarding eight different offerings the people were to make to God (chap. 28-29). This section gives to the reader a glimpse into the enormous amount of work of those in the priesthood of Israel. No doubt it was included in the narrative because of the upcoming transition of leadership. This would serve as a reminder to the new generation of the importance of the prescribed worship practices of Israel.

At the end of the description of the sacrifices, instructions concerning vows made to the Lord are mentioned (30:1-16). The keeping of these vows was essential. Interestingly, most of these instructions are related to vows made by women, either single women or married women. While vows made by any member of the Israelite community were considered binding, special exemptions were made for women based on their life circumstances. This section focuses on those exceptions.

In Numbers 31 the narrative concerning the preparation for entering the promised land continues with war against the Midianites because they had led the Israelites into the sins of idolatry and immorality (31:1-54; see 25:1-3,16-18). This is followed by an explanation of the request of the tribes of Reuben and Gad and part of the tribe of Manasseh to be allowed to take their allotted portion of the land from the fertile region east of the Jordan River (chap. 32).

Following a summary of the stops along the journey from Egypt (33:1-49), the instructions for dividing the promised land among the tribes are detailed (33:50-35:34). This was to be done by leaders selected from each tribe. Select cities were designated for the Levites to live in. In addition, six cities were to be designated as cities of refuge to protect those who committed unintentional manslaughter. Numbers closes with more regulations regarding special inheritance situations (chap. 36).



The Land (Num. 33:50-53)

God spoke to Moses while the Israelites were still camped on the Plains of Moab, just east of Jericho. He instructed Moses to tell the Israelites they would have to drive out the land's current inhabitants and destroy the idols and high places devoted to the worship of false gods. The land would belong to them, given to them by God.

VERSE 50

The LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho,

The setting for these instructions was **the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho**. This fertile strip of land lay on the east side of the Jordan River Valley opposite the city of Jericho, which was located on the west side of the river valley. These plains extended southward to where the Jordan River flows into the Dead Sea. This area was well-watered by abundant rain and would have been much more fertile than the land on the other side of the river. This territory became the allotment for the tribes of Reuben and Gad who owned many flocks and herds that required adequate grazing land (32:1-5).

VERSE 51

“Tell the Israelites: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan,”

Throughout the book of Numbers, the phrase **“Tell the Israelites”** is used as a formal way to introduce instructions from the Lord God to the people (5:6; 9:10; 27:8). Through Moses, God gave the nation instructions concerning their responsibilities upon entering the promised land. This moment had been forty years in the making, but God’s promise of the land had not changed. The period of delay had not changed God’s plans nor rendered His promises null and void. This land had been promised to the descendants of Abraham centuries before (Gen. 13:14-16). The time had finally arrived for Abraham’s descendants to inherit the land.

VERSE 52

“you must drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you, destroy all their stone images and cast images, and demolish all their high places.”

The instructions that the Lord God gave to Israel were specific. Notice the cadence in this verse: **drive out . . . destroy . . . demolish**. Every remnant of the Canaanites’ religious system was to be removed. They were to *drive out* all the people living in the land of Canaan. They were to *destroy* all their idols and *demolish* all their places of idol worship.

The term *drive out* speaks of dispossessing, expelling, driving out completely. As a part of the conquest of Canaan, the Israelites were to rid the land of every semblance of pagan worship. God’s instruction was to *destroy* all **stone images** and **cast images**. The word *destroy* means to annihilate, make vanish, to cause to perish, while *demolish* means to exterminate, obliterate. All idols and places where idolatry was practiced were to be removed completely from the land so that no temptation to idolatry would remain for the Israelites.

Stone images were instruments of worship carved out of rock (see Lev. 26:1). *Cast images*—sometimes called “molten images”—were anything worshiped that had been created by casting metal (Ex. 34:17). **High places** were shrines for worship at the tops of hills or mountains throughout the land. High places usually contained such things as a stone altar for animal sacrifice, a carved wooden pole that represented Asherah (the goddess of fertility), a stone pillar that represented the male deity (most often the god Baal), various other idols, and a small incense altar.

“You are to take possession of the land and settle in it because I have given you the land to possess.”

There are two fundamental questions concerning God’s command to drive the inhabitants from the land. First, *What right did the Israelites have to do this?* God answered that with His statement, **“because I have given you the land to possess”** (see Lev. 20:24). Perhaps a more basic question is, *why? Why would God order the expulsion and destruction of these people groups living in the land?* This has always been a sticking point for many people. Why would a loving God order such a thing? In Deuteronomy 7:2, God commanded Israel to “completely destroy them.” Now why?

Begin by realizing that God is a sovereign as well as holy and loving God.¹ Realize also that God does not operate under the same prohibitions that we do. God is the Giver and Taker of life (1 Sam. 2:6; Luke 12:20). For us to take an innocent life would be murder. But God can give and take any life He chooses, and it is certainly not murder. We would all agree that if God wanted to take our lives this very minute, He is the sovereign Lord over all His creation and certainly has that right.

With that in mind, recognize that God rightfully could take the lives of the people groups living in the promised land using whatever means He chose and whenever He chose. Why were their deaths necessary? Because of the wickedness of the people living in the land. Remember, God never punishes innocent people because there are none! All are sinful, then and now. The inhabitants of Canaan rightfully fell under the judgment of God because they were sinful people. God told Abraham centuries before this event that “Your offspring will be resident aliens for four hundred years in a land that does not belong to them and will be enslaved and oppressed. . . . In the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen. 15:13,16).

What is pictured in those two verses is the God of mercy and grace. Regardless of the wickedness of the Canaanites (called “Amorites” in this verse), God granted them four hundred years of mercy to repent. This is not a God of capricious wrath, inflicting death on innocent people. In fact, God allowed His chosen people to suffer in slavery in Egypt for four hundred years because He was being patient and long-suffering with the current inhabitants of Canaan.

Repentance on the part of the Canaanites never happened. In fact, they became more and more wicked. Hence God called on the Israelites

to drive them out of the land to prevent Israel from falling into the same sins of idolatry.



Explore Further

Read the article “Idol” on page 788 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. While there are still places in our world where people worshiping images of stone or metal continues, in our culture most idolatry today is of a different sort. What sort of things are idols in our society?

The Task (Num. 33:54-56)

The land would be divided out by the ancestral tribes, each tribe possessing its own land. If the Israelites failed to drive out the current inhabitants, the people would remain in the land and become problems for them.

VERSE 54

“You are to receive the land as an inheritance by lot according to your clans. Increase the inheritance for a large clan and decrease it for a small one. Whatever place the lot indicates for someone will be his. You will receive an inheritance according to your ancestral tribes.”

As noted earlier, all the earth belongs to the Lord (Ps. 24:1; 1 Cor. 10:26); therefore, it is His to do with whatever He chooses. In His sovereign will, the Lord God made the decision to give the land of Canaan to His chosen people Israel as **an inheritance**. They were to view the land always as a gift from the Lord God.

At this point, the census of the people taken earlier in Numbers 26 comes into play. Each tribe would receive a portion of the land based on their population size. **A large clan** would receive a larger share of the land; **a small one** would receive a smaller portion of the land.

The distribution of the land was accomplished by the casting of lots. Because the Israelites knew that the casting of lots was under divine guidance, they would have recognized that it was the Lord God who was

guiding the selection process. Thus, because the allotment was from the hand of God, there could be no room for jealousy or complaint of unfairness among the tribes of Israel. The sentence **“Whatever place the lot indicates for someone will be his”** does not refer to individual Israelites, but to each tribe of Israel. Within the tribal leadership, subdividing of the allotment would take place over time.

Mention is made of **“your ancestral tribes.”** This was simply a way of pointing back to the origins of the tribes of Israel—each had been named for one of the sons of Jacob with the exception of the two tribes that came from Joseph—Manasseh and Ephraim. In many of the listings of the twelve tribes, these two tribes take the place of the original brothers Levi and Joseph. The tribe of Levi did not receive an allotment of the land because they were assigned the task of assisting Israel with worship in the tabernacle. To accommodate them, forty-eight different towns scattered throughout Canaan were given to them to live in (Num. 35:1-8).

VERSES 55-56

“But if you don’t drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, those you allow to remain will become barbs for your eyes and thorns for your sides; they will harass you in the land where you will live. And what I had planned to do to them, I will do to you.”

God expected obedience from the people of Israel. That theme resonated throughout the exodus event. Sometimes they obeyed the Lord God’s instructions; sometimes they did not. Each time they failed to act on the instructions that God gave them, there were consequences. Here in verses 55-56 is a stern warning of the consequences of disobedience to the instructions of the Lord God. The warning begins by describing the situation Israel would face from any of the people they didn’t drive out of the land. Allowing the various people groups to remain in the land wouldn’t just be an inconvenience; it would result in those groups being **barbs** and **thorns** to torment the Israelites. The word *barbs* paints the picture of a splinter in the eye. A splinter is small, but its sharpness can create great discomfort and even result in infection if not dealt with. If left unattended it might even lead to blindness.

The word *thorns* translates a different Hebrew term but carries the same thought. Those people left in the land would be thorns in the sides of the Israelites and a constant source of harassment. This warning about allowing these pagan groups to remain in the land echoes other warnings given to the Israelites (Ex. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-6). The book of

Judges gives a vivid picture of the harassment of Israel by the pagan peoples left in the land.

Not only would consequences for disobedience come from the people not driven out of the land; they would also come from the hand of God Himself. God warned that **“what I planned to do to them, I will do to you.”** Instead of the people of the land being driven out and dispossessed from the land, the tribes of Israel would be driven out and lose their possession. Later Joshua would warn the Israelites using similar language (Josh. 23:12-13). Sadly, the tribes of Israel failed to fully drive out and destroy the prior inhabitants in Canaan (see Judg. 1:21,27-36). Soon Israel was infected with idolatry that characterized the nation for centuries. Eventually their idolatry and disobedience led to the exile and disappearance from history of the ten northern tribes of Israel in 722 BC (see 2 Kings 17). The Southern Kingdom of Judah fell in 586 BC and the people were sent into exile in Babylon (chap. 25). The children of Israel would learn the hard way through the years that failure to follow the Lord God’s instructions leads to disaster.



Explore Further

Read the article “Lots” on pages 1030–1031 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Today believers do not rely on the practice of casting lots to understand God’s will. We use such things as prayer, Bible study, and godly counsel from people we trust. Who could you turn to for guidance in seeking God’s will for your life?

The Plan (Num. 34:13-15)

Moses detailed the land each ancestral tribe would receive. Nine and a half tribes would live west of the Jordan River, while two and a half remained east of the Jordan. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh had already received their allotment of land (32:33).

VERSE 13

So Moses commanded the Israelites, “This is the land you are to receive by lot as an inheritance, which the LORD commanded to be given to the nine and a half tribes.”

When Moses spoke to the people about **the land**, he was referring to all the land within the boundaries listed in verses 1-12. Moses reminded the people once more that this land was to be received **as an inheritance**. The land was a gift from God. This new generation of Israelites camped by faith on the edge of the land that the previous generation had rejected out of fear. The same inhabitants and fortified cities that had terrified Israel forty years earlier still stood. Yet this new generation, by faith, was on the verge of entering and conquering it. What a sharp contrast between this generation of Israel and that of their fathers!

VERSE 14

“For the tribe of Reuben’s descendants and the tribe of Gad’s descendants have received their inheritance according to their ancestral families, and half the tribe of Manasseh has received its inheritance.”

Mention is made in verse 13 of only “nine and a half tribes” receiving the command of the Lord God in dividing up the land by casting lots. This serves as a reminder that the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh had requested through Moses that they be allowed to receive their inheritance on the east side of the Jordan River (chap. 32).

Initially Moses objected to the request of these two and a half tribes based on the perception that they were trying to avoid fighting against the inhabitants of Canaan. An agreement was reached with Moses and these tribes that they could settle in the region east of the Jordan River if their troops would cross the Jordan with the other tribes and participate in conquering the land. They would leave their families and their flocks in the Transjordan region (meaning the land immediately east of the Jordan River in which their tribes would settle) and lead the attack along with the nine and a half other tribes (Num. 32:20-27; Josh. 4:12).

Because of their willingness to fight with their fellow Israelites, Moses granted their request. The tribe of Reuben was given the southern part of the Transjordan region, an area that used to belong to King Sihon of the Ammorites (Num. 21:21-31; 32:33-38). The tribe of Gad was allotted the central portion of the Transjordan region. This was perhaps the most fertile area in the region east of the Jordan.

The tribe of Manasseh would receive two portions of land—one west of the Jordan River and one in the northern part of the Transjordan region. The eastern location would be along the Sea of Chinnereth (Sea of Galilee) extending south into Gilead and north toward Mount Hermon.

VERSE 15

“The two and a half tribes have received their inheritance across the Jordan east of Jericho, toward the sunrise.”

The relationship of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh with the nine and a half tribes on the western side of the Jordan River would be tested following the completion of the conquest of Canaan. In Joshua 22 is a fascinating story of the return of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh to their homes across the Jordan River after the conquest. Based on very good intentions, they built an altar—really a monument—beside the Jordan River. Their intent was that the monument would serve as a reminder between the tribes west of the Jordan and those east of the river that they were all fully members of the nation of Israel.

Unfortunately, the western tribes misinterpreted the monument and thought that the people of Reuben, Gad, and half-tribe of Manasseh had already abandoned the Lord God and had built a pagan altar. Because of this misunderstanding they mustered their armies to wage a destructive war against their wayward brothers. Only at the last minute were the two and a half tribes able to explain their rationale and a national disaster was averted.

Of the two and half tribes in the Transjordan region Manasseh became more prominent in the subsequent history of the early years in Canaan. For instance, Gideon from that tribe served as a deliverer from marauders who harassed Israel (Judg. 6). Little is heard from Gad and Reuben in the years following the conquest.



Explore Further

Read “Canaan” on pages 256–261 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. The article notes that the usual practice of a people settling in a land was to adopt the gods and goddesses of that land. God called the Israelites to reject the religion and culture of the Canaanites. Why did the Israelites fail to do this? What were some of the factors that lead to this failure?

1. Parts of the next four paragraphs are excerpted from my book *Clearing the Fog: Gaining an Understanding and Appreciation of the Old Testament* (Xulon Press, 2021), 53–55.

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.

Love

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS DEFINED BY LOVE.

When Jesus was asked by a religious leader of His day, “Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?” (Matt. 22:36), in His answer Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, which revolves around the word *love*. Jesus said to the expert in the law, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command” (vv. 37-38).

Modern people primarily think of *love* as a noun, that is, in subjective terms as a pleasant disposition or warm emotions. However, the ancient idea of love found in Scripture is more akin to it being a verb or active commitment. Love, in the long run, is not always something that sweeps you up involuntarily (though that can happen at times); more often than not, it is a deliberate choice or commitment to another. Perhaps love is best understood as both affection and action! In a romantic relationship, it would be quite strange to demonstrate love in action but never voice one’s affection by saying, “I love you.” On the other hand, voicing one’s affection while never demonstrating love in actions indicates such love to be nothing more than empty declarations. Love must be declared affectionately with our words and demonstrated by actions in our lives.

Throughout Scripture, God is the primary Actor in the covenant relationship He established with Israel (Ex. 19:4-6). Indeed, God had promised His faithful, steadfast love to those who keep His commands (Ex. 20:6; Deut. 5:10). Even though Israel repeatedly failed to uphold their end of the covenant and reciprocate that love, God continued to love them with faithful love. Throughout the cycle of Israel’s running to God for relief and running away from God in rebellion, God’s affection never changed, and God’s pursuing action never ceased. Indeed, Israel was to love God because God first loved them.

Deuteronomy 4:44–11:32

Deuteronomy details Moses’s three speeches to the people of Israel before their entrance into the promised land of Canaan. The structure of chapters 1–11 are as follows: Deuteronomy 1:1–5 serves as the preamble, Deuteronomy 1:6–4:49 offers a historical prologue (“Remember”), and in Deuteronomy 5:1–11:32, Moses emphasized the importance of Israel living in relationship with God that was to be characterized by obedience to His commands.

In this session, we will examine, in part, the second of Moses’s speeches, the section which directly follows the Ten Commandments (5:1–21) and Moses’s admonition for the Israelites to live in obedience to the Lord’s commands (vv. 22–33). God’s love and grace precede and interpret the law of Israel (v. 6). God’s “Who I am” and “What I have done” statements come before His command for Israel to obey His law—“You shall.” Simply put, it was God’s love demonstrated through His actions that was to be the primary motivation for Israel to live obediently in covenant relationship with Him. The law issues a call to a life of obedience motivated by gratitude for God’s compassion and deliverance.

The Ten Commandments are at the heart of the entire law of God, the foundational summary of the body of God’s commands given in the Torah. The body of God’s commands can be understood as specific applications of the Ten Commandments in religious, civil, and moral aspects of life. The Ten Commandments are structured in two tables or sections. Commands 1–4 express how God’s people are to relate to Him. Commands 5–10 express how God’s people are to relate to one another. This is why Jesus, when asked to summarize the law of God, quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 (see Matt. 22:37–40). In essence, Jesus summarized the entire law by succinctly using the two-fold structure of the Ten Commandments. In other words, “Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind” (Commands 1–4; Deut. 5:7–15) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Commands 5–10; Deut. 5:16–21). The Ten Commandments are to be understood as a unified whole. The entirety of the commandments reflect God’s character. At the same time, the first four commandments are the basis for the last six. In other words, who God is determines who His people should be and how they should live.

Fear of the Lord (Deut. 6:1-3)

Moses instructed the Israelites to follow God’s commands. Following His statutes would demonstrate their fear of the Lord. In return, God would bless them with prosperity and a fruitful land in which to live.

VERSE 1

“This is the command—the statutes and ordinances—the LORD your God has commanded me to teach you, so that you may follow them in the land you are about to enter and possess.”

From the very outset, Moses reminded the people of the **command** he had been given by God, His **statutes** and **ordinances**. Note that this collection of terms (*statutes* and *ordinances*) under the broader term *command* refers to the Torah as a whole (from the Hebrew, reflecting “five-fold book”; Gen.–Deut.), namely, the entire body of God’s law. The word *command* is singular, denoting the unity of the Torah as God’s Word. Earlier Moses had commanded the people not to add anything to God’s Torah or take anything away from it (Deut. 4:1-2). As the Word of God, the *command* is unified and must not be broken apart or edited, lest it cease to be what God intended.

Moreover, Moses was **commanded** by God to teach the Torah to Israel. God’s command was necessary for the life and flourishing of God’s people as they complied with His teaching as a nation, families, and individuals. In learning the law, Israel would understand the proper fear of God, which in turn encouraged faithful obedience. This was important as Israel’s ability to remain in **the land** they were about to **enter and possess** depended on their steadfast adherence to the God’s commands. Obedience to the law and occupying the land always go hand-in-hand regarding Old Testament Israel. Failure to live in obedience to God led to suffering and eventual expulsion from the land (see Deut. 28–30).

VERSES 2-3

“Do this so that you may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life by keeping all his statutes and commands I am giving you, your son, and your grandson, and so that you may have a long life. Listen, Israel, and be careful to follow them, so that you may prosper and multiply greatly, because the LORD, the God

of your ancestors, has promised you a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Moses offered a series of commands that if obeyed would yield positive results. First, following God’s command is associated with **the fear of the Lord your God**. *The fear of the Lord* is a prominent theme in the Old Testament, which speaks of having a healthy regard (reverential awe) for who God is and motivates the person to obediently follow God’s commands. Indeed, the book of Proverbs states, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Prov. 9:10; see 1:7). And King Solomon, regarded as the wisest of men, concluded: “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Eccl. 12:13-14, KJV).

In the books of Moses (the Pentateuch—Gen. through Deut.), when a person encountered God they had a sense of reverence, of awe involving fear. The Hebrew word for *fear* has overtones of respect and awe. As sinners, this fear involves terror. “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). Indeed, as sinful people, we all have every reason to fear God’s judgment. For the people of God, such fear is to be overwhelmed with wonder before His greatness, power, and love. And this type of reverent fear of the Lord results in willing, even worshipful, obedience. The Israelites were to fear the Lord **“all the days of your life by keeping all his statutes and commands.”** God’s *statutes* and *commands* were also for the Israelite’s **son** and **grandson**. Obedience to God’s commands also would mean that **“you may have a long life.”** Obedience to God would yield a full life in the sense of its length and the quality of such life.

Moses restated the need for obedience in terms of listening to the Lord’s commands and being **careful to follow them**. The Israelites were to follow God’s commands **“so that you may prosper and multiply greatly, because the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you a land flowing with milk and honey.”** In other words, the Israelites’ lives in the land were directly tied to their obedience to God as they lived out their lives. The Israelites’ obedience was necessary to experience God’s blessing—“so that you may live, enter, and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you” (Deut. 4:1). Such blessings would take the form of prosperity in the sense of a multiplied population and the enjoyment of *a land flowing with milk and honey* that God had promised to the patriarchs Abraham (Gen. 12:1; 15:7; 17:8), Isaac (26:2-3), and Jacob (28:13-14) and their descendants (Ex. 3:16-17).



Explore Further

Just as God promised Abraham and his descendants a land they would possess, God promises to believers in Christ a land that will be theirs as well, the new heaven and new earth in the eternal age to come (Rev. 21–22). How should this promise affect your Christian life? Do you need to reorient your life so that you live not just in the now, but in light of our sure hope of spending eternal life with Jesus?

Devoted (Deut. 6:4-9)

Moses explained that the LORD alone is God, and He is one God. The Israelites were commanded to love Him wholeheartedly. They were to repeat God’s commands to their children, discussing them intentionally throughout daily life events. They were to be devoted to God’s Word.

VERSE 4

“Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

It’s essential to understand the significance of these verses (Deut. 6:4-5) to the ancient Hebrews, referred to as the “Shema” in Judaism. The word *Shema* comes from the Hebrew term meaning “hear” or **listen**. Thus, it is a divine declaration that carries a commitment to the God of Israel and a call to obey Him. It’s been said that the *Shema* could be understood as a pledge of allegiance to Israel’s God. When the Israelites recited the *Shema*, they declared their undivided and unqualified devotion to the Lord their God.

VERSES 5-6

“Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart.”

God is the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists. He had also entered into a covenant with the Israelites to be their God and they were His special people. As such He expected and required Israel’s total and exclusive devotion. Indeed, God’s people were **“to love the LORD your God with**

all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Recall that Jesus quoted this verse when He was asked what was the greatest command in the law (Matt. 22:36-37).

The anatomical metaphors here imply that every aspect of one’s personhood should be directed toward loving devotion to God. In summary, the people of Israel were being called to love their God with every fiber of their beings—in thought, emotion, energy, action, and ability. In this sense, we are reminded once again that love is action-oriented and has to do with loyalty, commitment, and obedience.

The old saying that our words and actions flow from our hearts is helpful here. When Moses said these words were to **“be in your heart,”** he directed these commands to the center of each Israelite’s being, from which all things flow. The idea is that every Israelite was to keep the law firmly in their possession and internalize it so that it became deeply ingrained in their way of being—in both their thoughts and actions. In other words, the law of God was to be “committed to memory” and “to be in one’s constant, conscious reflection.”¹

VERSES 7-9

“Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your city gates.”

It’s been said that if one generation assumes the things of God, the next generation will lose the things of God. Thus, Moses commanded the people to **repeat** the commands, **talk** about the law, **write** these words on their homes’ doorposts and their city gates, even **bind** the words to their bodies. In many ways, this not only ensured that God’s commands were embedded in the Israelite’s heart, but also would be passed on to others. Israel’s identity as a people was tied to God’s Word given to them. God’s law dictated how they were to live as His distinct people, and in obeying and passing on that law to each successive generation they would continue as His distinct people. If we take each of these commands in turn, we see how Israel was to apply God’s Word in all areas of their lives.

First, Moses commanded the Israelites to **“repeat them to your children.”** God’s people are called and charged to be disciples that make disciples. In other words, as a people who are called to learn God’s Word, they are also charged to pass on what they have learned. This is especially true within families, where the parents are entrusted with

children to raise them in the ways of God. Indeed, teaching our children is the primary service we render within families, the “first society” that our young ones learn to be good citizens in. This is why Moses used the word *repeat*, which means to teach diligently and persistently.

Second, Moses instructed the Israelites to **“talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”** In other words, discussion about God’s law was not to be relegated to only formal times of instruction; it was to be part of the ordinary conversation of the people of God during the ordinary times of coming and going, eating and sleeping. Indeed, we know from experience that much of our learning happens not just through formal training, but also in everyday conversations. The law of God should always be on the lips of His people.

Then Moses exhorted them to **“bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead.”** In modern language, God’s instruction should always be within “arm’s reach.” Here, Moses’s words give many of us the image of a Jewish *phylactery*, a headress containing portions of the law—including the *Shema*. Over time, committed Israelites developed these tiny boxes, which were to be fastened to their foreheads or arms, that contained compartments for copies of passages from the law (which included Ex. 13:1-10,11-16; Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21). However, the general principle is clear: for Israel the law was something to be read, taught, discussed, and meditated upon “day to day.”

Finally, Israel was to **“write them on the doorposts of your house and on your city gates.”** Ancient Israelite families would commonly post tiny plaques or signs that would contain the *Shema* or other portions of Scripture over the doors of their homes. This is not unlike when we see a sign or doormat today that says “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” quoted from Joshua 24:15 (KJV). These signs signified that God’s law was the guiding principle of the *house*. Posting such signs on the *city gates* would remind the people that the city itself was to be governed by God’s commands. In ancient Israel, the city gates served as the place where the elders would make important decisions and decide legal cases, so this reminder was a necessary guiding principle.

Whether these commands were to be taken literally or metaphorically, the intent was that every Israelite was to base their personal, familial, and national life on God’s divine instruction for His people. Again, this was central to their identity. Both inwardly and outwardly, the Israelites’ lives were to demonstrate full commitment to the God who loved, delivered, and constituted them as His people.



Explore Further

Read the article “Frontlets” on page 596 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. The Jews used frontlets (also known as *phylacteries*) as a way of keeping God and His Word before them at all times. Some Christians do the same through Scripture memorization. Consider choosing one Scripture passage and commit it to memory so that it can be an aid in living for God in your daily life.

Righteous (Deut. 6:20-25)

When asked by their children about the meaning of God’s statutes, the Israelites were to share what God had done in the past for them. God had brought them out of Egypt and led them to the land promised to their ancestors. God’s commands are for their prosperity and preservation. They will be counted righteous if they follow God’s ordinances.

VERSES 20-23

“When your son asks you in the future, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees, statutes, and ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ tell him, ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand. Before our eyes the LORD inflicted great and devastating signs and wonders on Egypt, on Pharaoh, and on all his household, but he brought us from there in order to lead us in and give us the land that he swore to our ancestors.’”

After Moses commanded the Israelites to repeat the law to their children and raise them by teaching them God’s ways, he looked forward and anticipated the day when those children would inquire about the motivation to do so. When the time came for children to ask, **“What is the meaning of the decrees, statutes, and ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?”** parents would have the opportunity to tell the story of God’s love and faithfulness to His people. It’s the story of God delivering Israel from over four hundred years of back-breaking slavery under **Pharaoh in Egypt**. It’s the story of God inflicting **great and devastating signs and wonders on Egypt, Pharaoh, and all his household** in judgment. It’s not just the story of God saving the Israelites from slavery,

but saving them to be His people. Even more, it's not just about being His people but receiving His promise of a land of their own. "It is crucial with the passing of time that descendants of people who have participated in or witnessed events that have been fundamental to their origin and that explain their unique destiny should be continually reminded of those events lest they lose their sense of history and meaning."²

This returns us to the preamble of the Ten Commandments—that which must be said before the law is heard. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery" (5:6). Again, the Israelites' grace-given relationship with God preceded the Lord's call to respond in obedience. This is what's unique about our God. Other religions say, "Clean yourself up before you come to god." God says, "I will save you and make you clean." In other religions, adherents follow their laws to earn favor with their gods. The God of the Bible grants us favor in love, and in response, we obey. As J. D. Greear wrote, "Obedience that does not flow from love ends up being drudgery." But, God's love turns drudgery into delight. "It changes us from being slaves who *have* to obey God to sons and daughters who *want* to obey God."³

VERSES 24-25

"The LORD commanded us to follow all these statutes and to fear the LORD our God for our prosperity always and for our preservation, as it is today. Righteousness will be ours if we are careful to follow every one of these commands before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us."

After recalling God's mighty saving acts, Moses reminded the Israelites that the Lord **commanded** them to follow **all these statutes** and **fear the LORD** because it would bring **righteousness** as well as **prosperity** and **preservation**. This call for recommitment is the reciprocal response to God's loving protection and care. In this context the word *righteousness* doesn't refer to the Israelites' legal status before God, but their "right" response to His commands. And such a right response would result in their flourishing and well-being.

As we consider all that has been laid out in this passage, it is hard not to be reminded of the expert in the law's question to Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). The question implies that eternal life can be earned. And it can if one perfectly lives according to the commands of God without sin. I remember hearing R. C. Sproul answer the question, "Can we be saved by works?" on a panel discussion years ago. His answer was as memorable as it was provocative. "We are

all saved by works,” he said. “But they are the works of another, not of our own.” Sproul was speaking of Jesus Christ, the perfect Israelite who kept the law perfectly in our place, and He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our lawbreaking. While the expert in the law was wrong in asking, “What can I do?” he was right in that it is an “inheritance” in the sense that salvation is a good gift of grace, given to us by a loving Father.

How do we know if our faith in Christ is genuine, and we have received this inheritance? Returning to the central command in our text, the *Shema*, I would remind us that one of the ways we know that God’s Spirit resides in us is that we have a love for God that expresses itself in the love of others (1 John 3:11-18; 4:20-21). To put it another way, if you want to see how attentive you are to cultivating a love of God in your life, look at how you treat other people. According to Jesus, they go hand-in-hand (Luke 10:25-37).

Love God with all that you are. And, to define the “Golden Rule,” love others with the same amount of intentional attention and energy that you would use on yourself. This type of love-directed living exemplifies the heart of the Ten Commandments, indeed, the entire law of God. Remember, the commandments have been given to those whom God intends to bless with abundant life, and this type of life is experienced under the worshipful obedience to His commands as a response to His grace. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). For in our obedience, we mirror the character of our loving God, from whom the commands overflow as an expression of His being. As the people of God, this sets us apart as distinct from the rest of the world.



Explore Further

Read the article “Love” on pages 1031–1032 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are the nine characteristics of love listed in the article? What are some ways we can demonstrate God’s love to other Christians?

- To non-Christians? To those who make themselves our enemies?

1. Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 167.

2. *Ibid.*, 174.

3. J. D. Greear, *Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 23.

Undivided Worship

BELIEVERS ARE TO AVOID IDOLS AND WORSHIP GOD ALONE.

As Christians, we understand the senselessness of idolatry in the ancient world (Isa. 44:6-20). The very words of the second command make it clear, “Do not make an idol for yourself” (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8). Idolatry is literally making a god. It’s when humans, who are made in God’s image, make a god with their own hands in an attempt to fulfill their own needs. In ancient times, idols were made by carving wood, chiseling stone, or casting metal. People, who were given dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28), took earthen materials and fashioned images that exercised dominion over them. Senseless, isn’t it? Well, it sounds silly until you realize that modern people make idols too—not with tools, but through our thoughts and actions. It’s still senseless for (at least) two reasons.

First, consider a statement like *“this is how I like to think about God”* that is not directly tied to God’s revelation of Himself in Scripture. Someone who makes a statement like that is well down the road of making God in our own image. But, the one true God can’t be condensed, domesticated, or controlled. Too often we think of God apart from how He has revealed Himself, and thus respond to Him according to our perceptions and not according to His revelation. This is why we need to continually measure our perceptions of God against His revelation of Himself. Thus, the problem of idolatry gets to the very heart of the authority of Scripture. Scripture is to be what reigns in our disordered and warped imaginations of who God is, and teaches us to reverently accept God as He is. We need God’s revelation to guard our thoughts about God, because it will also guide our worship of the one true God. In short, God reveals who He truly is and prescribes how He must be worshiped; therefore, we must be careful to be attentive to His Word.

Second, we were made for God, and our hearts are restless until we are brought into relationship with Him. You might be thinking, *what does this have to do with worship?* Well, the word *worship* is related to the idea of ascribing worth. We will sacrifice to whatever we believe is most worthy. People sacrifice their families for their careers. People sacrifice going to church to pursue their children’s sports dreams. People sacrifice

their dignity to get what they want and have their desires met. The problem is, if what we value or believe has the most worth is something or someone other than God, it is idolatry. Furthermore, if we look to some created thing to give us the meaning, hope, and happiness that only God Himself can give, it will eventually fail to deliver and break our hearts. All idols ultimately disappoint us. No earthly idols can give us the comfort, security, and fulfillment that can only be found in God. We all have a God-sized hole in our hearts which only He can fill. We may not worship statues, but just like the ancient Israelites all of us struggle from time to time with the temptation to fill this hole with something other than God.



Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19

If you remember the structure of Deuteronomy 1-11, Deuteronomy 1:1-5 serves as the preamble, Deuteronomy 1:6-4:49 offers a historical prologue (“Remember”), and in Deuteronomy 5:1-11:32 Moses emphasized the importance of Israel living in relationship with God that was to be characterized by obedience to His commands. Now, in Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19, Moses drilled down on specific covenant stipulations. Moreover, chapter 12 is focused on the proper worship of the one, true God of Israel. This chapter on worship is an expansion of the first two commandments found in Deuteronomy 5:7-9, namely, “Do not have other gods besides me” and “Do not make an idol for yourself” to bow down to and serve. In many ways the first two commandments are two sides of the same coin. The first commands us to worship only the one true God. The second commands us to worship the one, true God in the correct way.

Deuteronomy 12 focuses on worship and makes the distinctiveness of the covenant God its primary concern, namely that there is no other besides Him (see Deut. 4:35,39). We would be mistaken to view God’s command for unadulterated worship as coming from a tyrannical dictator who “needs praise.” God lacks no attributes or qualities in Himself that could be nurtured by the praise of others. Even in the New Testament, the apostle Paul was emphatic: God is not worshiped by us “as though he needed anything” because He is perfect in Himself (Acts 17:24-29). Apart from God alone being worthy of worship, the sovereign God’s command that humanity worship Him alone is issued

out of His generous love. In this sense, God desires worship not because it meets His need (He has no such need) but because it meets our need. Remember what we have learned thus far in Deuteronomy: God's laws (including the ones concerning proper worship) were aimed at bringing about Israel's good (Deut. 4:40; 5:16,29,33; 6:1-3,18,24; 10:12-16; 12:25,28; 30:16-20).

As we noted earlier, God is the only one in whom we can have our deepest desires met. Indeed, He created us to find our ultimate joy and satisfaction in Him alone. Thus, if we turn to anyone or anything else in idolatry, ultimately we will be disappointed. And unless we turn to God from everything else (in repentance and faith in Christ), we will be eternally condemned. So the words of our passage are important—our souls literally hang in the balance on these principles. Thus, like Israel, we must be diligent to hear and obey God's Word.



Remove Idolatry (Deut. 12:1-7)

Upon entering Canaan and taking the land, the Israelites were to destroy the local shrines devoted to the worship of Canaanite gods. The Israelites were told to worship God in a separate place. In Canaan, they would establish one central sanctuary that would be recognized as the Lord's dwelling place.

VERSES 1-3

“Be careful to follow these statutes and ordinances in the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess all the days you live on the earth. Destroy completely all the places where the nations that you are driving out worship their gods—on the high mountains, on the hills, and under every green tree. Tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, burn their Asherah poles, cut down the carved images of their gods, and wipe out their names from every place.”

Perhaps you have noticed how often Moses instructed the people to be careful in following God's **statutes and ordinances in the land**. Remember, God reveals who He truly is and prescribes how He must

be worshiped. This is why we must be careful to be attentive to His Word. This became difficult for Israel to remember when living in a land filled with false gods and pagan shrines.

In the pagan religions of Canaan, outdoor shrines known as *high places* were usually dedicated to the Canaanite god Baal, but the Ammonite god Molech and the Moabite god Chemosh also were worshiped at some high places. These pagan shrines were constructed **on the high mountains, on the hills, and under every green tree**. For both Israel and the pagan nations, mountains were the place where heaven and earth met. Thus, climbing a mountain was akin to ascending as far as one could go into the heavens. For pagans, groves of trees symbolized fertility. These high places generally consisted of “an altar (2 Kings 21:3; 2 Chron. 14:3), a carved wooden pole that depicted the female goddess of fertility (Asherah), a stone pillar symbolizing the male deity (2 Kings 3:2), other idols (2 Kings 17:29; 2 Chron. 33:19), and some type of building (1 Kings 12:31; 13:32; 16:32-33).”¹ At such high places, people offered animal (and sometimes human) sacrifices, burned incense, prayed to their gods, ate sacrificial meals, and partook in cultic prostitution.

God’s call for the Israelites to **“tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, burn their Asherah poles, cut down the carved images of their gods, and wipe out their names from every place”** was comprehensive and complete. Being obedient to this command was a call for the utter destruction of all idols. Once these idols were obliterated, only one God would remain: the one true God of Israel. The removal of all the idols of false gods and their places of worship would remove the influence and temptation for the Israelites to worship and serve these gods.

God’s call for Israel to remove all idols and pagan places of worship reminds us we too have weaknesses. Temptations abound to find fulfillment in persons, places, and things other than the one true God. This is why Scripture commands in the most absolute terms to remove (or remove ourselves from) hindrances and enticements which might draw us away from our singular loyalty to and worship of Him.

VERSES 4-5

“Don’t worship the LORD your God this way. Instead, turn to the place the LORD your God chooses from all your tribes to put his name for his dwelling and go there.”

The command **“Don’t worship the LORD your God this way,”** that is, as the pagans did, is instructive. Such high places were forbidden. The location of worship would be **“the place the LORD your God chooses from**

all your tribes to put his name for his dwelling,” first at the tabernacle and then at the temple in Jerusalem. At this point in Israel’s history, however, the place was not named, which underscores the importance of the one who would choose it, namely, God. In this sense, what matters most here is not just the “where” of worship but “who” Israel was commanded to worship: Yahweh, the one true God.

Moreover, this command, *“Don’t worship the LORD your God this way,”* meaning as the pagans worshiped their gods, concerned not only the location and manner of idol worship but also the intent of idol worship. In the Canaanites’ religion, using idols to manipulate the deities they represented was common. Furthermore, in the ancient Near East people generally believed that gods and goddesses had their own realms of influence in the world (weather, fertility, war, and so forth). They also believed that each of these deities was associated with particular shrines or temples, as well as particular lands or territories. Thus, if a pagan religious adherent wanted to manipulate the god of a particular realm, he would visit that god’s shrine and offer sacrifices, take vows, and formalize contracts with that god. In other words, “I worship you, and you work for me.” Israel’s God, however, is the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists (Gen. 1–2; Ps. 146:6; Isa. 45:18; Acts 17:24; Col. 1:17), the Lord of heaven and earth (1 Chron. 29:11–12; Ps. 103:19). He alone was worthy of Israel’s worship in the place where He designated, and He could not be manipulated by human beings. This remains true in our day.

VERSES 6-7

“You are to bring there your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tenths and personal contributions, your vow offerings and freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. You will eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice with your household in everything you do, because the LORD your God has blessed you.”

Israel’s God also commanded His people to worship Him in the ways He prescribed. **“You are to bring there your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tenths and personal contributions, your vow offerings and freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.”** All of these types of offerings and sacrifices are detailed elsewhere in the Torah, particularly in Leviticus 1–7 (see also Lev. 23; Num. 18). In sum, offerings and sacrifices generally involved a costly ritual instituted by God. Thus, worship was not driven by the adherents’ needs or desires but by God’s command. It was also gracious institution from God,

reminding Israel of the seriousness of sin and their need for atonement. This points to the relational nature of God's covenant with Israel. The Israelites were to **“eat [feast] there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice with your household in everything you do, because the LORD your God has blessed you.”** Some sacrifices and offerings involved a sacrificial meal eaten in God's presence by those making the sacrifice. Even more, their worship was not to be motivated by a desire to manipulate God for some purpose but rather as a response to God's goodness for already providing all they needed—He had *blessed* them. This inclusion of feasting and rejoicing is also notable, as Israel's annual feasts (Day of Atonement, Lev. 23:26-32; Passover, Deut. 16:1-8; Pentecost, 16:9-12) were times of covenant renewal or reaffirmation of their relationship with God.



Explore Further

Read the article “Sacrifice and Offering” on pages 1398–1401 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*, to learn more about the various sacrifices offered to God by the Israelites in the Old Testament. How did the atoning sacrifice of Jesus make such sacrifices unnecessary?

Worship God (Deut. 12:8-11)

The Israelites were directed to bring all their offerings to the Lord into the sanctuary once they crossed into the promised land. The Lord would choose the place where His Name would dwell.

VERSES 8-9

“You are not to do as we are doing here today; everyone is doing whatever seems right in his own sight. Indeed, you have not yet come into the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you.”

Now that God through Moses had declared that there would be a centralized place of worship, He contrasted it with the Israelites' manner of worship that was being done since Sinai. As evidenced by what they were **“doing here today,”** the Israelites had been **“doing whatever seems**

right in his own sight.” The nature of this statement is not elaborated on, but the Israelites had not been without prior instruction as to the worship of Yahweh. Guidelines had been established forty years prior (Ex. 25-31; 34:1-28; 35:1-2).

Here the emphasis is on the coming time when the Israelites would enter into the promised land, **“the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you.”** During this period, there would be a centralization of the worship of Yahweh, first at the tabernacle and then at the temple in Jerusalem that would be built by King David’s son Solomon (1 Kings 6).

VERSES 10-11

“When you cross the Jordan and live in the land the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and he gives you rest from all the enemies around you and you live in security, then the LORD your God will choose the place to have his name dwell. Bring there everything I command you: your burnt offerings, sacrifices, offerings of the tenth, personal contributions, and all your choice offerings you vow to the LORD.”

As Israel had traveled through the wilderness, God had been with them at the tabernacle. It would only be when they crossed **the Jordan** River and settled in the promised land God was giving them that they would finally live in **rest** and security from all their **enemies**. The first established location of the tabernacle in Canaan was at Shiloh (Josh. 18:1), thirty miles north of Jerusalem. But the promise of God was that He would establish a permanent location; **“the LORD your God will choose the place to have his name dwell.”**

One of the points of a centralized place for the worship of *the LORD* (Yahweh) was to protect the Israelites from the dangers of being pulled into the practices of pagan religions and becoming acclimated to the surrounding pagan cultures. It is difficult to fully comprehend the importance of a physical temple of God to the Israelites because no one building is as important and integral to our modern lives as the Jerusalem temple was to the Israelites. All aspects of their lives centered around God and His temple. In the eyes of the people, the temple constituted the divine dwelling-place of the God of Israel. There the worship of God was performed through **“your burnt offerings, sacrifices, offerings of the tenth, personal contributions, and all your choice offerings you vow to the LORD.”** By following God’s commands to offer such sacrifices, the people of Israel showed their allegiance to and faith in Him alone.

Burnt offerings were offered every day in the morning and evening, as well as on specific days such as the Sabbath, the beginning of each month, and the annual feasts (Lev. 1; Num. 28–29). They were offered using specified animals such as bulls, sheep, goats, turtledoves, and young pigeons (Lev. 1; Num. 28–29). The nature of *sacrifices* and *choice offerings* are not detailed, but other types of offerings/sacrifices included the grain offering (Lev. 2), the fellowship offering (chap. 3), and the sin offering (chap. 4–5). *Offerings of the tenth* were tithes on livestock and produce offered at the tabernacle/temple that acknowledged the goodness of the Lord in providing the bounty of the land. Their purpose was to instill in the Israelites a fear of the Lord (Deut. 14:22–29).

In the end, the centralized importance of the temple would preserve Israel’s unity and distinctiveness, as they were only to meet in one place and worship the one true God precisely as He had prescribed. Now, within the context of the entire canon of Scripture, God’s presence and direction for proper worship remain central.

In the time of the New Testament, worship moved away from a physical structure in the sense that Jesus is with us wherever believers gather in worship (Matt. 18:20). Jesus Christ came to dwell (tabernacle) among us (John 1:14). Jesus proclaimed that “an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” Instead, God’s people would worship Him “in Spirit and in truth” (4:21–24).

After Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection, that promise was fulfilled as the Holy Spirit descended on the first believers (Acts 2). As Christians, when we think about offerings and sacrifices today, it’s important to remember that we do so on the other side of the cross. Today, God’s people’s sins have been atoned for by the shedding of Christ’s blood, and we are indwelt by God’s Holy Spirit (Rom. 8). Because we are forgiven in Christ, we can now offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1). This means sacrificially giving our resources, energies, gifts, and time for His kingdom—using all that we are and all that we have for His purposes rather than our selfish motives. This is our act of true, spiritual worship.



Explore Further

Read the article “Worship” on pages 1670–1672 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In what ways is Christian worship today similar to and different from the worship of the ancient Israelites?

Stand Firm (Deut. 12:29-32)

God Himself would aid the Israelites in their military battles to take the land promised. God warned them to be careful and to avoid being ensnared by the worship of the pagan gods of the Canaanites. They were not to adopt any of the Canaanite worship practices or incorporate them into Israelite worship.

VERSE 29

“When the LORD your God annihilates the nations before you, which you are entering to take possession of, and you drive them out and live in their land,”

One of the prominent biblical motifs is that of God being a Divine Warrior. The central principle of the Divine Warrior theme is that God engages in battle on behalf of His people, defeating their enemies and bringing them victory. It’s important to remember that God’s intervention on behalf of Israel was rooted in their covenantal relationship with Him. In this relationship, God protected the Israelites from their enemies. However, there were times when God gave them over to their enemies in situations where Israel had rebelled against God in violation of their covenant with Him (28:15,49-52,64-68).

In this verse, the first thing we are told is that God **annihilates the nations** when Israel was entering **to take possession of . . . their land**. It was only after the nations of Canaan were defeated that centralized worship of God could be established and undertaken without the threat of Israel being lured into idolatry. Note, however, that even with this divine promise, Israel had to take possession of the land and **drive . . . out** the pagan peoples. But as the following few verses make clear, the destruction of the pagan peoples and the Israelites’ possession of the land would not totally remove Israel’s propensity toward idolatry.

VERSES 30-32

“be careful not to be ensnared by their ways after they have been destroyed before you. Do not inquire about their gods, asking, ‘How did these nations worship their gods? I’ll also do the same.’ You must not do the same to the LORD your God, because they practice every detestable act, which the LORD hates, for their gods. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Be careful to do everything I command you; do not add anything to it or take anything away from it.”

The warning to **be careful not to be ensnared** by foreign nations' ways reminded Israel of its proclivity to follow false gods, as would be illustrated in its history as a nation. Because of their past inclinations, even inquiring, **"How did these nations worship their gods?"** would be a grave danger to the Israelites. It was possible that Israel would find the sensual religious practices and elaborate rituals of the Canaanites alluring—"I'll also do the same." However, God's warning was intensified by His reference to **every detestable act**, illustrated by the horrific practice of child sacrifice among the Canaanites. Indeed, **"They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods."** Once again, like so many times before, this warning was bolstered by God's command for Israel, **"Be careful to do everything I command you,"** followed by the instruction, **"Do not add anything or take anything away from it [God's commands]."** Ignoring the divine commands against worshipping other gods would violate the covenant relationship between God and Israel. The first two of the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:6-10) and the Shema (6:4-5) demand a single-minded allegiance to God. Anything else would be a treasonous violation of their covenant.

This section's call for Israel to identify and reject all forms of idolatry is needed for the church as well. Just as Israel often was drawn to idols, so our hearts can be drawn to so many things to find comfort, success, pleasure, and meaning apart from God.



Explore Further

Read the articles "Baal" on page 156 and "Molech" on pages 1121-1122 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. These were just two of the many gods that the pagan nations worshiped in Old Testament times. To worship these false gods was a constant temptation for the Israelites. The article on "Molech" notes that the Israelites were particularly susceptible to turning to Molech in times of desperation. What are the differences between acting in faith and acting out of fear and desperation?

1. Gary V. Smith, "High Place," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 747.

Covenant Relationship

BELIEVERS FIND GOD'S BLESSINGS THROUGH OBEDIENCE.

We recently gave our teenage son his first cell phone. Not only is it a gift to him, but it's also a weighty responsibility that requires a measure of spiritual maturity. He was among the last in his friend group to receive one, and you can imagine why. The whole world, both wholesome and wicked, is now at his fingertips. In a real sense, the direction of his spiritual health depends on what he does with this gift.

Now, the cell phone came with built-in content monitoring, but we also outlined our expectations and stipulations as his parents. The built-in controls operate in the phone's background, blocking certain content and keeping him from accessing the depths of depravity displayed online. But, as his parents, our stipulations determine whether or not he can enjoy the benefits of owning a phone. He is free to enjoy conversing with his friends, but if the language isn't wholesome or the images being sent aren't appropriate—we are notified, and he loses his phone. He is free to browse the internet for entertainment and education, but if he attempts to access restricted websites—he loses his phone. As his parents, we have authority over these things because he is in our home, and we pay for the phone, which is a gift to be stewarded. Again, and essential to our point, there is an agreement between us that he will operate according to our stipulations to continue enjoying the gift of a cell phone.

Ancient covenant agreements functioned similarly, with expectations and stipulations within a relationship. A covenant relationship with God was a gift to His chosen people. It was a relationship that had accountability and consequences, both positive and negative. The biblical word *covenant* conveys the idea of a commitment with promises and obligations undertaken by the parties involved. In a covenant agreement, there were blessings for keeping the stipulations and curses for not keeping the stipulations of the relationship. When God established a covenant with His people, it was a “certain” reality. It's a reality of which Israel needed to be reminded. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses repeated God's Word of covenant given from Sinai to when the Israelites were on the verge of entering the promised land.

Deuteronomy 27:1–28:68

At this point in Deuteronomy, God’s law had already been outlined for the people of Israel. Deuteronomy 27–30 contains Moses’s third speech, where he gave God’s direction to His covenant people. In chapter 27, Moses instructed the Israelites to erect large stones when they crossed over into the promised land and write God’s law upon them that the people would remember the terms of their covenant with God. As long as the memorial stones stood, they would be a reminder to Israel of their life with God. While the monument was a marker of Israel’s history, it also provided direction for their future. The covenant reaffirmation reminded the Israelites of their identity as “the people of the LORD your God” (27:9) and called them to fresh commitment with the blessings of obedience and curses for disobedience laid out in Deuteronomy 28.

Perhaps no other section in the Torah articulates the importance of obedience and the implications of disobedience like Deuteronomy 28. Fifty-four verses are devoted to warning Israel of the curses of disobedience, and only fourteen verses speak of the blessings for obedience. The longer list of curses not only gives us an unfortunate glimpse of Israel’s future, but also provides the background for the blessings. The warnings are also a gift of grace. For God knows the propensity of His people to sin. The blessings and curses are implications of obedience or disobedience to the Mosaic covenant and its laws which outline what it meant to live as the people of God. Remember, Israel was called to live a holy lifestyle, exhibiting the character of God by living according to His law which reflects that character. In this sense, obedience is the proper response to God’s grace, while the blessings are the benefits of resting in His care and promise.

In the ancient Near East, covenants or treaties were typical in religious life. In ancient religions, covenants were brought before the deities, confirmed by oath in the names of those deities, and believed to be enforced by the deities. What is outlined in Deuteronomy between the God of Israel and the Israelites would have been familiar to ancient readers. However, unlike other religions, Israel’s God was a party in the covenant and not just an enforcer of the covenant. This difference speaks to the relational nature of God’s covenant with Israel. As we know, the God of the Bible is not a distant deity. God is sovereign over all things, a transcendent God. But He is also immanent and relational. That is, He is “our” God. Israel’s God sustained His people with His presence

and promise. He was with them. In many ways, God’s care for Israel prefigures Christ’s care for Christians (Rom. 8:15–17).

Regarding the curses of disobedience in the covenant relationship, we should remember as we read these passages in the Old Testament that Scripture also reveals to us that all people are subject to the curse of sin and the judgment that comes with it. We escape the curse and receive the blessings only through Christ’s taking the curse on Himself at the cross, as Paul wrote in Galatians 3:10–14. In this sense, the apostasy of Israel and the consequences of that rebellion anticipate the implications of rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news is that God offers salvation to all who will place their faith in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ provides power to the believer to obey God from the heart (Gal. 5).



Faithfulness (Deut. 28:1-6)

The relationship between God and Israel was a covenant relationship. Faithfulness to God’s commands would be rewarded. God would exalt the Israelites above all other nations. They and their children would be blessed. In addition, their land and crops would be prosperous.

VERSE 1

“Now if you faithfully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all his commands I am giving you today, the LORD your God will put you far above all the nations of the earth.”

The “if-then” structure of this passage outlines the conditions for Israel to live faithfully in covenant relationship with God—to **follow all his commands** as laid out in the Mosaic covenant. It’s important to note, however, that the blessings of God are not a reward for obedience. Rather, obedience is the worshipful response to who God is and what He has already done for Israel. The blessings of obedience come from resting in the provision and promises of God.

Remember, Israel had already been declared the people of God at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:3-6). God had already established their identity as His people. The call to obedience flowed out of this identity they had already been given. Thus, the blessings were not an identity they earned

as a reward but a reality to which they were called to enjoy through obedience. Keeping Deuteronomy 26:18-19 in mind is essential. It is foundational to understanding our passage, and comes two chapters earlier. “And today the LORD has affirmed that you are his own possession as he promised you, that you are to keep all his commands, that he will elevate you to praise, fame, and glory above all the nations he has made, and that you will be a holy people to the LORD your God as he promised.” Notice the declarative language of the verses—“you are” and “you will be.” Again, Israel’s identity and the blessings of the covenant relationship had been declared by God already. In other words, here they are being summoned to live according to who God has already declared them to be. Thus, flowing from their existing covenant relationship with God, the blessing of being elevated far above all other nations would be enjoyed when they lived according to God’s commands. In essence, Israel would be put far above other nations as they were set apart as God’s people when they exhibited their distinct lifestyle in covenant relationship with God. For the people to flourish, following God’s instructions seems intuitive. God created human beings and established how they were to live in relationship with Him to enjoy all the blessings of life. That God gave these specific instructions to Israel marked His special relationship with them as His people.

In living according to God’s law and proclaiming God’s glory Israel was to be a light unto the nations. In this sense, Israel’s mission was tied into their identity. The same is true for the Christian today. What God has declared of you in your salvation is not only something you grow into through sanctification but part of your mission in evangelization. Just as a parent reminds his teenager before the child leaves the house, “Remember, you represent this family,” so too does God call us to live according to His family’s values. We cannot separate who we are from how we live. In fact, how we live tells others who we are. This is why obedience was so important for Israel’s life, not only for them but also for the watching world around them.

VERSE 2

“All these blessings will come and overtake you, because you obey the LORD your God:”

Notice the aggressive language, the **“blessings will come and overtake you”** if the Israelites were obedient to God. Deliverance from slavery in Egypt was a gift of grace. Indeed, the giving of the law and the formation of the nation were gifts of grace. The promised land itself was a gift from

God's hand. It's no different when it comes to the blessings of covenant obedience. The promised blessings of obedience overtake them by the grace of God. Like a pleased father unexpectedly gifting a child with something they could not imagine, Israel would flourish and enjoy the fruit in the land from God's hand. But, this was not prosperity theology. Rather, God has promised to honor those who honor Him with proper actions and motives. All these blessings were tied to the Israelites living according to dictates of their covenant relationship with God.

VERSE 3

“You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.”

Notice that the blessings for obedience are tied to life in the promised land. First, the Israelites would be **blessed in the city and blessed in the country**. The *city* and the *country* (lit. “field”) represent everywhere the Israelites would live, the entirety of their existence in the promised land. Their lives would be blessed with security and abundance as long as they lived obediently in covenant with the Lord. This security is reflected in the Lord's later promise: “The LORD will cause the enemies who rise up against you to be defeated before you. They will march out against you from one direction but flee from you in seven directions” (v. 7).

VERSES 4-6

“Your offspring will be blessed, and your land's produce, and the offspring of your livestock, including the young of your herds and the newborn of your flocks. Your basket and kneading bowl will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.”

The Israelite society was both family and agrarian based, so God's blessings focus on the Israelites' **offspring** and their **land**. God's blessings extended to the Israelites' children and **livestock**. As the people dwelled in the land living according to God's law, their lives would be lived within the domain of God's desire to bless His people. The God who creates and sustains all life had given Israel His law so that they might live life to the fullest—that is, according to His design. Their **produce** would be abundant. The God who gives rain, grows crops, and fills baskets is attentive to those who depend on Him. “The LORD will grant you a blessing on your barns and on everything you do; he will bless you in the land the LORD your God is giving you. . . . The LORD will open for you his abundant storehouse, the sky, to give your land rain in its season and to bless all the

work of your hands” (vv. 8,12). Finally, as the people **come in** and **go out**, God would be with them. This figure of speech describes all of life’s activities lived in the presence of God. In the same way, Jesus has promised to always be with His people—even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

As we have seen, the relationship between God and Israel was a covenant relationship, personal in nature. Faithfulness to God’s commands reaped the blessings of life as God outlined in His law. The Israelites’ children would be blessed, and their land, crops, and livestock would be bountiful. Another of those blessings was that God would exalt the Israelites, His people, above all other nations: “The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he swore to you, if you obey the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples of the earth will see that you bear the LORD’s name, and they will stand in awe of you” (vv. 9-10). As we noted earlier, all these blessings were not a reward earned—but rather the enjoyment of life lived as God has designed.



Explore Further

Read the article “Covenants” on pages 355–360 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is a covenant? What is the relationship between covenants in Scripture and God’s overall plan of redemption? What are the six major covenants in the Bible? What are the differences between the five covenants found in

- the Old Testament and the new covenant of the New Testament?

Disobedience (Deut. 28:15-19)

Just as faithfulness to God’s commands was rewarded, failure to follow God’s commands would lead to consequences. If they disobeyed God, the Israelites would be cursed wherever they journeyed, along with their children. Their land and crops would not be fruitful.

VERSE 15

“But if you do not obey the LORD your God by carefully following all his commands and statutes I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overtake you:”

Just as faithfulness to God's commands would lead to blessings, failure to follow God's commands would lead to curses. Just as obedience to God's law would lead to all the blessings coming and overtaking the Israelites, so too disobedience to God's law would lead to all the **curses** overtaking the people. Verses 20-68 detail the consequences for disobedience in greater detail. One thing that is clear throughout these verses is that the consequences for disobedience come from the hand of God. "The LORD will send against you curses, confusion, and rebuke in everything you do until you are destroyed and quickly perish, because of the wickedness of your actions in abandoning me" (v. 20).

VERSES 16-19

"You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and kneading bowl will be cursed. Your offspring will be cursed, and your land's produce, the young of your herds, and the newborn of your flocks. You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out."

The curses detailed in verses 16-19 correspond to the blessings in verses 3-6. In contrast to the safety, security, and wholeness in the city and the country the Israelites would experience if they were obedient to God and His law, faithlessness would bring fear and uncertainty. The blessings of family would be lost, with both the Israelites and their **offspring** being curse.

The greatest crisis that could strike an agrarian-dependent society would occur as well. The abundance of the land's produce would be lost. As a result, food would be scarce and even lead to famine—**"your basket and kneading bowl will be cursed."** "The sky above you will be bronze, and the earth beneath you iron. The LORD will turn the rain of your land into falling dust; it will descend on you from the sky until you are destroyed" (vv. 23-24). The Israelites' land would not bear fruit: "You will sow much seed in the field but harvest little, because locusts will devour it. You will plant and cultivate vineyards but not drink the wine or gather the grapes, because worms will eat them. You will have olive trees throughout your territory but not moisten your skin with oil, because your olives will drop off. . . . Buzzing insects will take possession of all your trees and your land's produce" (vv. 38-40,42).

God's promises of victory over the Israelites' enemies (v. 7) would turn to curses of defeat. "The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will march out against them from one direction but flee from them in seven directions. You will be an object of horror to all

the kingdoms of the earth. Your corpses will be food for all the birds of the sky and the wild animals of the earth, with no one to scare them away” (vv. 25-26).

Now, we must guard ourselves against thinking that God is vindictive and punitive in these warnings. Every warning before final judgment is an act of mercy from God’s hand. As with any warning related to the committing of sins, the goal is repentance and restoration. If Israel were to become wayward and blind to their own sin, the downfall of their cities, the destruction of their crops, and the deterioration of their social life would function as a warning and wake-up call. After all, they had God’s word these things would happen.

The history of Israel details their continued failure to fulfill their covenant responsibilities in their relationship with God. The covenant renewal ceremony at the end of the book of Joshua is indicative of the continual struggle the Israelites faced—whom would they worship and serve. Joshua, nearing the end of his life, stated to the Israelites: “Therefore, fear the LORD and worship him in sincerity and truth. Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and worship the LORD. But if it doesn’t please you to worship the LORD, choose for yourselves today: Which will you worship—the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living? As for me and my family, we will worship the LORD” (Josh. 24:14-15). The peoples response seemed promising: “The people replied, ‘We will certainly not abandon the LORD to worship other gods! For the LORD our God brought us and our ancestors out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery, and performed these great signs before our eyes. He also protected us all along the way we went and among all the peoples whose lands we traveled through. The LORD drove out before us all the peoples, including the Amorites who lived in the land. We too will worship the LORD, because he is our God’” (vv. 16-18). However, ultimately their actions did not match their words.

As the book of Judges states, they failed to teach their children about the Lord and what He had done for them. “That whole generation was also gathered to their ancestors. After them another generation rose up who did not know the LORD or the works he had done for Israel. The Israelites did what was evil in the LORD’s sight. They worshiped the Baals and abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed other gods from the surrounding peoples and bowed down to them. They angered the LORD, for they abandoned him and worshiped Baal and the Ashtoreths” (Judg. 2:10-13). While there would be periods of hope and faithfulness, the cycle of sin and

abandoning the Lord their God so clearly detailed in Judges would continue throughout Israel's history. This faithlessness would culminate with the Northern Kingdom of Israel being conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC and the Southern Kingdom of Judah being conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Thus, the curses of Deuteronomy 18:15-68 would find their complete fulfillment as the people of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms were taken into exile.

It's noteworthy, however, that curses do not have the last word for the repentant people of God. This is where the gospel of Jesus Christ shines like a light through dark! In Galatians, the apostle Paul noted that Jesus became the "curse" for those who failed to abide by God's law (Gal. 3:10-14). It's interesting that Paul alluded to the Sinai covenant here, that both Jews and Gentiles are under the same judgment of God for failing to live according to God's good law. Indeed, all people are condemned by the law. The blessings of God come from throwing oneself onto the mercy of Christ in repentance and faith so as to receive salvation. While many of the blessings of salvation are experienced in part while we live in "God's kingdom" in this world (Matt. 5-7), they will not be fully realized until we reach the promised land of the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1-4).

The operative principle of the gospel is that God's blessings come by faith, by receiving the unmerited grace of God in Christ. This is a grace that overtakes us. Obedience, then, is both the believer's response and blessing—both from God's hand, all by the power of the Spirit. Obedience demonstrates the reality that one has found God's blessing in Christ and lives a blessed life in response to His grace. In this way, the New Testament echoes the Old Testament's relational view of both blessing and cursing. The blessings are primarily those of salvation—forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with God, receiving eternal life, growing in Christlikeness, and so forth. The material terms of the relationship so prominent in the Old Testament covenants (as seen in this passage regarding life in the land) are secondary in the new covenant, flowing from the relational experience of being God's people (through the work of Jesus Christ).

The realities of blessing and cursing find their eternal culmination in the biblical realities of heaven and hell. Those who have embraced God's salvation through Jesus Christ will dwell eternally with God in heaven (and eventually the new heaven and new earth) while those who refuse God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ in this life will be judged and condemned for their sins and cast out of God's presence forever into the place called hell. In Scripture, the words *punishment* and *destruction* stress the active side of hell, while the idea of *banishment* stresses

the horror of hell by highlighting what a person is excluded from—the blessed presence of God for all eternity. The curse of hell is a reminder that belief, obedience, and evangelism should weigh heavily on Christians’ hearts, not only for our own souls but also as the Spirit leads us to share the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ with those who are lost and enslaved to sin. Remember, God desires that all people would come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). The biblical concepts of blessing and curse—being inside and outside the covenant relationship with God—are just as relevant today as they were in the days of Moses.

How wonderful it is, then, that we have the opportunity to respond in faith and obedience in this life! Once more, the gospel teaches us that Christ bore the curse for us, so that we might receive salvation through our faith in Him—not by our obedience (Rom. 5:19; Gal. 3:13-14). Through Christ God established a *new covenant* and welcomes Christians into relationship with Him by grace. This new covenant is secured by Christ’s work and is both climactic and eternal. It is climactic in that all other covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic) in the Old Testament culminate in the New Testament covenant established by Christ. It is eternal in that the inheritance received by Christians in Christ is forever established by grace and cannot be lost. The ultimate eschatological reality awaits in the “new heaven and new earth.” Again, as Christians we experience some of the blessings of the new covenant in this life even as we anticipate experiencing the fullness of those blessings in the world to come.



Explore Further

One question we as Christians should ask ourselves daily is am I living according to God’s Word? Remember, how we live demonstrates who we are. As Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Again, obedience is not a means to earn favor with God or obtain blessing. Obedience is evidence that we are already in Christ. Obedience flows from a changed heart that has already obtained the promised blessings found in Christ and in Christ alone. Consider making it a priority to answer the question of how you are living in relation to God and His Word a daily practice along with prayer to God that He would guide and enable you through His Holy Spirit to consistently live your day-to-day life in faithfulness to Him.

Fully Committed

BELIEVERS ARE TO BE CHARACTERIZED BY A WHOLEHEARTED
COMMITMENT TO GOD.

What is commitment? By definition, commitment is being dedicated to a cause, person, or institution. Commitments have obligations. Defining commitment is vital in our day. I fear that commitment is a virtue that has gone by the wayside in our culture. Indeed, in our highly individualized—personal pleasure-seeking—culture, being “commitment-free” has a beauty and allure to it. We like to do what we want and when we want to do it. Tired of your job? Find a new one. In fact, research has shown that the average length of time people stay in the same job today is around four years. Has your marriage grown stale? Find a new spouse. A good number of people in the United States divorce and remarry for less than substantial reasons; it’s common to do so. Has the place you live lost its luster? Well, pick up and move somewhere else. In the United States, the average person moves eleven times in their lifetime. Of course, I am being somewhat sarcastic in treating these commitments as mere commodities to be tossed aside. However, I fear that is where we have come as a society. What has happened to the idea of commitment in our day?

For this reason, as believers it’s important to remind one another of the commitments to which we are called. In many areas of life, recommitment should be a regular part of the Christian life. This is especially true of faithful living. When it comes to faithfulness, all of life is recommitment. Indeed, you don’t commit less of yourself as you grow in Jesus, you commit more as you grow in holiness. When we place our faith in Christ and become His disciples, our lives are to be characterized by a wholehearted commitment to God. After all, God is committed to His people. Jesus Christ was committed to His ministry and mission. The first disciples were committed to following Christ, and the apostles were committed to spreading the gospel of salvation in Christ to the farthest corners of the earth. Today the church is called to commit to the same.

A large part of this commitment to God is expressed in holiness, the pursuit of righteousness. We’ve all seen how waning commitment or lack of commitment leads to the deterioration of one’s faith, and thus the power of one’s witness. As we will see in this session, God is committed

to our perseverance in the faith. Moreover, God has provided the power for us to persevere in the pursuit of holiness. As we consider our passage today, it's vital that we ask God to search our hearts. But we can do so knowing that He not only began a good work in us but will also "carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). How committed are you to God? In what ways does that commitment shape your day-to-day life? How committed are you to the mission of God of spreading the gospel and making disciples? How does your life demonstrate the sacrificial giving and going to which God calls all Christians?



Deuteronomy 29:1–30:20

In Deuteronomy 29:1–30:20, we have Moses's third speech in the book of Deuteronomy given as his life drew to its end. In this final speech, Moses urged Israel to live out their covenant with God. Remember, the unbelieving exodus generation who heard the covenant at Sinai died in the wilderness for their refusal to enter into the promised land (Num. 13–14). This next generation was now about to cross the Jordan River into the promised land. Their covenant commitment to God as His people was renewed. However, the problem was the entire story of Israel in the Old Testament is a story of apostasy, of affections enslaved to sin, of hearts that refused to listen to the Lord God.

However, God was patient and long suffering despite Israel's continued faithlessness to their covenant. The initial failure of the Israelites to enter the promised land seemed to threaten the fulfillment of God's promises that they would be His people and live in the land He had promised to them (Num. 14:11–12). However, God is a God of second chances. While that first generation would die in the wilderness, their children would be offered the opportunity to enter and live in the promised land (vv. 20–35). He is a God of grace who fulfills His promises, even in spite of His people's rebellion. That is the beauty of God's covenant-keeping.

In Deuteronomy 29:1–9 Moses recounted how God brought the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt with great signs and wonders. He cared for the people in their journey through the wilderness, so much so that even their clothing and shoes did not wear out. Moses recalled that God had made the Israelites victorious over King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan and given their land east of the Jordan River to the Reubenites,

the Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh. Now God was establishing with this generation of Israelites the covenant He had made with their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (vv. 10-15).

Moses then warned the Israelites that if they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, God would bring His judgment upon them like the judgment He had brought upon Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities of that region for their sins (vv. 16-29). After they had abandoned the Lord and experienced His judgments, they should turn their hearts fully back to the Lord. Then the Lord who had driven them from their land into exile would bring them back to the land and pour out His blessings upon them (30:1-10). Moses urged the Israelites to commit themselves to the Lord. To choose God through committing themselves to the covenant and wholeheartedly living it out in the land would be to choose life (vv. 11-20).

Deuteronomy 31 relates the transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua (31:1-23). The chapter ends with Moses commanding the Levites to place the scroll containing the law Moses had written beside the ark of the covenant as a witness against the people. Moses also noted the Israelites' stiff-necked attitude and that after he was gone they would violate their covenant with God and experience His judgment (vv. 24-29).



The Command (Deut. 30:11-14)

Moses encouraged the Israelites to pledge themselves anew to God as His chosen people (29:9-13). He reminded them that keeping up their end of the covenant with God was not too difficult for them. God's commands were to be in their hearts.

VERSES 11-14

“This command that I give you today is certainly not too difficult or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven so that you have to ask, ‘Who will go up to heaven, get it for us, and proclaim it to us so that we may follow it?’ And it is not across the sea so that you have to ask, ‘Who will cross the sea, get it for us, and proclaim it to us so that we may follow it?’ But the message is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, so that you may follow it.”

Moses encouraged the Israelites to pledge themselves anew to God as His chosen people (29:9-13). Moses summed up the law—which outlined their lives in allegiance to God—with one word: **command**. The Hebrew term for *command* refers to a law, an order, instruction, or precept. Generally, it can refer to a commandment given by God or a human being such as a king. In this context it refers to all of God’s law.

Moses asserted that God’s *command* was **not too difficult** for the Israelites to obey. The ability to obey God’s law is not relegated to human beings of “exceptional” character. Indeed, there is a “natural assumption that ordinary people can indeed live in a way that is broadly pleasing to God and faithful to God’s law [albeit imperfectly], and that they can do so as a matter of joy and delight. . . . Obedience to the law in the OT . . . was not the means of achieving salvation but the response to a salvation that was already experienced.”¹

God’s *command* was not **beyond** [the Israelites’] **reach**. The law was not so transcendent so as to be inaccessible in heaven. There was no need to ask, “**Who will go up to heaven, get it for us, and proclaim it to us so that we may follow it?**” The law was not unattainable, as if the entire geography of **the sea** separated it from God’s people. After God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, He covenanted with them that He would be their God, and they would be His people. At Mount Sinai, God provided them with His law so that they knew what was expected of them as they lived in covenant relationship with Him. The God of Israel had not only revealed Himself to the Israelites; His Word, a perfect treasure of divine instruction, had been delivered personally to Israel through Moses. Therefore, the people could not claim either ignorance or inability in regard to the law. They had a choice and were responsible for how they lived, either in relationship with God or in the idolatrous worship and service of the pagan gods.

This was very different from the pagan nations who worshiped false gods. These “gods” did not provide the people with such a law. The people were on their own in the sense they were continually guessing as to how they could please their gods. Indeed, it is this covenant relationship between God and the Israelites that provided the accessibility and nearness of God and His Word to Israel. As Moses earlier had stated in Deuteronomy 4, God’s nearness made Israel distinct among the nations. “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.’ 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?” (4:5-8).

The apostle Paul used these verses from Deuteronomy 30 in Romans 10:5-13 to demonstrate that Christ has fulfilled the law. Paul did not negate the law but affirmed the law as something good. Considering Paul’s use of our passage we must remember that only those who perfectly keep the law can attain righteousness before God. But no one is without sin so righteousness cannot be obtained by the law. However, in the life of Christ we see the purest expression of the law. Christ is the Word become flesh (John 1:14), and the only one who has ever perfectly kept God’s law. The Lord Jesus established the new covenant through His blood (Luke 22:20), being the sacrifice for our sins. This is why Paul asserted that righteousness comes by faith, namely, through faith in Christ. There is no need to travel to heaven to bring the Word to earth because Christ, the incarnate Word of God, has come from heaven to earth. Thus, if we confess Christ as our Savior we are permanently given His perfect righteousness, eternal life, and the indwelling Holy Spirit. We are empowered by His Spirit to live according to God’s law not to earn salvation but in gratitude for receiving salvation through faith in Christ.



Explore Further

Read the article “Grace” on pages 670–672 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. The article notes several times that salvation is all grace from beginning to end. Since this is the case, what would you say to a person who was trying to “earn” God’s love?

The Commitment (Deut. 30:15-18)

Moses entreated the people to choose a life of blessing. They were to love God and walk in His ways. By doing so, God would bless them in the promised land. Turning away from God and worshiping other gods would lead to judgment. Their days in Canaan would be cut short.

VERSES 15-16

“See, today I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity. For I am commanding you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, statutes, and ordinances, so that you may live and multiply, and the LORD your God may bless you in the land you are entering to possess.”

These verses serve as the climax and summation to the book of Deuteronomy. Notice the link between the law and the land. In the opening of the book, Moses recalled God’s command to the previous generation of Israelites: “See, I have set the land before you. Enter and take possession of the land the LORD swore to give to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their future descendants” (Deut. 1:8). But that generation rebelled against God, refusing to trust in the Lord by entering and conquering the land (Num. 13–14; Deut. 1:19–33).

Now Moses set before this new generation of Israelites the same choice. That Israel faced this choice *today* speaks to the importance and immediacy of the life of faith in God, particularly as the Israelites prepared to enter the promised land. *Today* was the day they could choose the trajectory of both individuals and of their nation as a whole.

There was stark contrast in the options set before the Israelites: **life and prosperity OR death and adversity**. The key to experiencing *life and prosperity* was connected to obedience: **“Love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, statutes, and ordinances.”** As noted above, God had clearly laid out before the Israelites what was required to live in covenant relationship with Him. This was not a cold and distance relationship. It was to be one of love between “*the LORD your God*” and the Israelites. The Lord had already demonstrated His love for the Israelites by delivering them from Egyptian enslavement and bringing them to the land of Canaan as He had earlier promised to their ancestors and to the Israelites themselves. God’s expectation was that the Israelites would return His love by obediently *walking in His ways* and keeping His law (*commands, statutes, and ordinances*).

The Israelites’ love and obedience would be returned by the Lord. He would bless them in the promised land. Those blessings were previously detailed in Deuteronomy 28:1–14.

There is always an immediacy for people to heed God’s Word. In a sense, God draws a line in the sand with His Word: will a person follow Him or not? God calls for us to repent of our sins and receive by faith and live out new life in Christ. Like the Israelites, today we are accountable to God for how we choose to live our lives: before Him or apart from Him.

VERSES 17-18

“But if your heart turns away and you do not listen and you are led astray to bow in worship to other gods and serve them, I tell you today that you will certainly perish and will not prolong your days in the land you are entering to possess across the Jordan.”

Turning away from God would lead to judgment. Verses 17-18 are the mirror of verses 15-16. There would be consequences for those whose **heart turns away** from and **do not listen** to the Lord. Instead of walking in His ways, such individuals would be **led astray** to other gods. Instead of keeping God’s Word, they would **bow in worship to other gods and serve them**.

The consequences for such idolatry would be severe. Instead of experiencing the Lord’s blessings of living and multiplying in the land (and enjoying all the other blessings of God as well), the idolaters’ days would be cut short and they would **certainly perish** (on all the curses the people would experience see 28:15-68).

Moses entreated the Israelites to choose God and a life of blessing. They were to love God and walk in His ways. However, a life of blessing did not make the Israelites immune from all the difficulties and tragedies of life, and the same is true for Christians, the people of God, today.

Nor are believers today immune from the lure and temptation to follow false gods. The world has many false gods that bid us to sacrifice our lives on their altars. The false god of success calls us to sacrifice our health, our families, and ethical principles to climb to the top of the ladder. The false god of pleasure calls us to sacrifice our purity, morality, and the resources God has given us to steward for the experience of a temporary dopamine rush. There are false gods all around us making promises they cannot keep, offering pleasures that do not last. It’s important to remember that for us, idols are not necessarily statues but rather anything that captures the affections of our hearts other than God. What captures our hearts directs our lives. We must remain faithful and vigilant!

This struggle is clearly seen in Jesus’s interaction with the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-22). The man’s desire for eternal life appears to have been not as strong as the hold his many earthly possessions had upon him. But, as noted above, the problem with all the pleasures and things of this world is they don’t last and ultimately don’t deliver what they promise. God’s command to Israel and Jesus’s command to the young rich ruler (and all of us) are one and the same. We are to choose God and forsake all other false gods and the false promises of this world. The Christian life is a life of commitment. And with that commitment to Christ,

we receive the blessings of heaven—with a few blessings on earth thrown in. Remember Jesus’s admonition: “Don’t store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don’t break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19-21).



Explore Further

Read the article “Heart” on pages 719–720 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are the aspects of the heart? What is the relationship between God and the believer’s heart?

The Challenge (Deut. 30:19-20)

Moses instructed the Israelites to choose life so that their descendants would also live to love and honor God faithfully. God would prolong their days in the land He promised to give them.

VERSES 19-20

“I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, love the LORD your God, obey him, and remain faithful to him. For he is your life, and he will prolong your days as you live in the land the LORD swore to give to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

Many ancient Near Eastern covenants used witnesses as part of the process of ratifying the agreements. These witnesses were often the people’s gods. For Israel, however, **the LORD** Himself was the initiator of the covenant agreement, and **heaven and earth** were called as witnesses to the treatise (see 4:25-26). When these witnesses were invoked, the decision had a formality and finality, with implications for all of creation. “The heavens and earth, permanent and unchanging features of God’s creation, would bear silent witness in the future to the faithfulness of the people in living out the implications of their choice.”² Similarly, “For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater to swear by, he swore by himself: I will indeed bless

you, and I will greatly multiply you. . . . For people swear by something greater than themselves, and for them a confirming oath ends every dispute. Because God wanted to show his unchangeable purpose even more clearly to the heirs of the promise, he guaranteed it with an oath” (Heb. 6:13-14,16-17).

The Hebrew phrase for “make a covenant” is literally translated “cut a covenant.” The covenant ceremony often called for the sacrifice of animals. The animals would be cut in two and the covenant makers would pass between the parts of the animals, implying that if they broke the covenant that they would experience the same fate as the animals. In Genesis 15, when Abraham asked how he could know that he would possess the land God was promising, God told Abraham, “‘Bring me a three-year-old cow, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.’ So he brought all these to him, cut them in half, and laid the pieces opposite each other, but he did not cut the birds in half” (Gen. 15:9-10). God then put Abraham in a deep sleep, and He proclaimed the covenant He was making with the patriarch. Then God’s presence passed between the animals as He made His covenant with Abraham (vv. 13-21).

As we have seen, for the Israelites to *choose life* was to choose God Himself and to hold fast to the promises He gave to their ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus, for Israel, “life is *loving* God, *listening* to God, and having *loyalty* to God. [While living in obedience to God’s law was an expression of the Israelites’ love for Him,] Life, in the end, is not found in the law itself, but in the God who gave it; for ultimately, **the LORD is your life.**”³ Loving loyalty to God was also the key to enjoying the land of promise with the One who “*is your life.*”

God’s command to *choose life* finds particular expression in the person of His Messiah Jesus Christ. As John stated in the opening of his Gospel concerning Jesus, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created. In him was life, and that life was the light of men” (John 1:1-4). Jesus promised that He would give this life to those who believe in Him (10:27-30; see 1:12-13). This is the sure hope offered to those who will repent of their sins and place their faith in Jesus for salvation.

God loved the world so much, that He sent Christ to live, die, and rise again to demonstrate His love (3:16-18). It is because of God’s love for us in Christ that we return that love to Him. Like God’s relationship with the Israelites, believers do not love God to earn salvation. Salvation is by

grace through faith in Christ alone. Rather, we love God because He has first loved us in providing for our salvation (1 John 4:19).

If we truly love Jesus, we will keep His commandments (John 14:15). Again, this is not obedience to gain His love, but obedience as proof that they have truly experienced His love in salvation. Even more, Jesus said that eternal life is found in knowing Him and God the Father (17:3). Once more, we see Christ as the climax and fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of salvation. It is only in Him that we can live to love and honor God faithfully. And it's only by God that our days will be prolonged forever in the promised new Jerusalem, that is, eternity.

Just as this new generation of Israelites learned from the exodus generation, we must also consider how we are leading the generations coming after us. It's been said that if our generation assumes the gospel, the next generation will lose the gospel. If we treat God's commands as optional, the next generation will see them as unnecessary. This is one of the reasons God designed His church to be a learning community where one generation shares with the generations that come after them. It is essential that we teach and remind those coming after us of the great works of our God.

Commitment to God and commitment to God's church are two great needs in our day. God calls us to respond "today." His mercies are new every morning. And every morning we are given breath, we are given a chance to recommit ourselves to our God. The decisions we make each day, and the lessons we pass on each day, have implications for eternity.



Explore Further

Just as God called the Israelites to be completely devoted to Him, so too Jesus calls us to be completely devoted to Him. On a scale of 1 (less) to 10 (more), how much of a part does Jesus play in your daily priorities? If you are currently on the low end of that scale, what could you do to move closer to making Jesus the center of your life? Spend some time in prayer asking God to help you do this and thanking Him for the presence of His Holy Spirit within you who will enable you to do this.

1. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 290.

2. Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 366.

3. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 292.

God's Power

BELIEVERS CAN LIVE WITHOUT FEAR KNOWING THAT
THEY SERVE THE ONE TRUE GOD.

If you want to understand the needs of a people and their culture's deepest longings, attend to their art. I say this because the arts are the second stop downstream from the philosophy of the day. We could say that art puts the spirit of the times in a common language for all; it's the soundtrack of a society. In any culture, regardless of the time—love is one of our deepest longings as human beings.

This focus on the need for love is universal. Love is what everyone in the world is crying out for. Everyone is asking, *"Am I worthy of love?"* Everyone wonders, *"Do others truly love me?"* Since the '60s, we've pushed further and further away from God. Now, in a world where few believe in a creator God or even the supernatural, the world asks: *"Isn't love just a trick that our chemistry plays on us? Love can't possibly be something more, pointing to someone more—could it?"* Indeed, now people are asking, *"What is love?"* These questions turn us to the heart of the Christian faith, don't they? Here is why: it has been said that the kind of God we have determines the kind of relationship we will have with Him.

We know as Christians that God is love, and love comes from God (1 John 4:7-8). This doesn't mean that God is just loving. Other religions believe their god is loving. When Christians teach that God is love, we are saying He Himself is love; that real love has its origin and essence in God. Understanding this truth is vital to grasping the overwhelming love of God for us.

But we have a problem? Adam and Eve rejected God's love and care in the fall. With their sin, they cast all of humanity out of God's loving presence. However, in love, we see the relentless pursuit of God, even immediately after the fall. When Adam and Eve felt the guilt of what they had done and hid themselves, when they experienced shame, when their sinfulness was uncovered—naked before God—God was there. Immediately after the fall, God came looking for them, pursuing them, and made them a promise that He would crush the head of the serpent and bring humanity back into relationship with Him.

From that time on, God has always been in loving pursuit of His people—from creation, to the cross, to the church. The story of Israel is rich with examples of God’s unwavering, steadfast love, even amidst their rebellion. Throughout the ages, God’s love has been a constant theme, resonating through the songs, stories, and art of His people. This divine love not only beckons humanity back to Him but also ignites a longing in our hearts that can only be fulfilled through a relationship with our Creator God. God’s love transcends mere sentiment; it is redemptive, transformative, and eternal, calling us to recognize the profound love that God offers us all.



Deuteronomy 31:1–34:12

Deuteronomy records a crucial intersection in Israel’s history, as the Israelites transitioned from wandering in the wilderness to being settled in the promised land. Through Moses, God had led Israel out of slavery in Egypt. God had used Moses to constitute Israel as His people with the covenant and the law on Mount Sinai. For their refusal to enter the promised land, an entire generation of Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years until all but Joshua and Caleb had died. Now, with Israel on the verge of entering the promised land, God led Moses to give the people a final admonition—calling Israel to love God and live for Him.

Deuteronomy 31–34 detail the transition to Joshua’s leadership and Moses’s last words to the Israelites. Moses told the people that God would go before them as they entered Canaan, and He would drive the Canaanites out of the land. Joshua would be their new leader (31:1-8). Moses delivered the law of God to the priests and gave orders for its annual reading to the people once they were in the land (vv. 9-13). After commissioning Joshua as the new leader of the Israelites (vv. 14-15,23), God foretold that the Israelites would not be faithful to Him, and He gave Moses a song that would bear witness against the Israelite (vv. 16-22).

Chapter 32 contains this song. There are three songs of Moses recorded in Scripture (Ex. 15; Deut. 32; Ps. 90). In Deuteronomy, God told Moses to write down the song and teach it to the people (Deut. 31:19,30). Then, in chapter 33, Moses gave his final blessing to the Israelites.

Chapter 34 records the death of Moses. Just as the Lord had commanded (32:48-52), Moses went up Mount Nebo, and God showed him

the promised land (34:1-4). Then Moses died, and the Lord buried him in an unnamed location in a valley of Moab (vv. 5-7).

Even though Moses's preaching had ended, Deuteronomy 31-34 are beautiful chapters that reinforce the theological concerns of the book as a whole. As Deuteronomy ends, God empowered Joshua to take up the role of leadership of the Israelites as the saga of the nation continued. Israel was encamped on the eastern side of the Jordan River Valley in the Plains of Moab on the verge at last of crossing over into the promised land of Canaan.

In the final chapters of Deuteronomy, the Israelites stood on the brink of doing what the previous generation had failed to do because of their fear and disobedience—entering Canaan. The current generation had been called to make the choice of serving the Lord. Their decision would define their trajectory into the future and had lasting implications for their lives and the lives of their children in the land (31:1-13).



King (Deut. 33:1-5)

In Deuteronomy 33, Moses spoke a blessing over the Israelites before their entry into the promised land. He first declared how God had led His people out of Egypt to the land He had promised to them. Moses emphasized God's love for His people and His role as their King.

VERSES 1-2

This is the blessing that Moses, the man of God, gave the Israelites before his death. He said: “The LORD came from Sinai and appeared to them from Seir; he shone on them from Mount Paran and came with ten thousand holy ones, with lightning from his right hand for them.”

Deuteronomy 33:1-2 describes Moses's blessing of the tribes of Israel before his death. In this passage, Moses spoke about God's presence and the greatness of His revelation, highlighting how God **came from Sinai** and **shone on** His people. The blessings emphasize God's guidance and the special relationship He had with the Israelites, affirming their unique status as His chosen people.

The Israelites, the people Moses loved, were on the border of the land God had promised to them. That Moses is identified as **the man of God** speaks both of Moses's special relationship with the Lord and to the high esteem in which he was held by the Israelites. While the concept of **blessing** in Deuteronomy certainly refers to material benefits such as prosperity, peace, and protection, all those blessings flowed from the ultimate blessing, which was Israel's covenant relationship with **the LORD** (Yahweh). Through this relationship with God Israel would experience all the other blessings and gifts of God—including their possession of Canaan, the promised land. Then as now, it is important not to elevate such gifts over the Giver.

Indeed, all of Israel's history involves gifts of grace from God. The Lord God chose Israel not because of their own worthiness; they were a small and insignificant people. Through their weakness, God chose them to make His name and His power known. Even more, God's patience with them flowed from His love for them. As for Moses, he was the instrument through which God brought these things about. It was Moses that God used to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt. It was Moses who ascended Mount Sinai to meet with God and receive the law. **Sinai** is also termed "Horeb" in Deuteronomy. Sinai, **Paran**, and **Seir** (also called "Edom") are all places where God disclosed Himself to the Israelites during their journey to the promised land.

These verses cast God in the role of the Divine Warrior who fights for His people, particularly the wording, **The LORD . . . came with ten thousand holy ones, with lightning from his right hand for them**. It is *the LORD*, Yahweh, who is Israel's King, Protector, and Provider.

It's important to keep this passage in context with the entire canon of Scripture. As central as Moses was in redemptive history, Jesus is greater than Moses. This is one of the arguments that the writer of Hebrews makes in 3:1-6. While Moses was a servant in God's house, Jesus built the house. While Moses delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, Jesus delivered God's people from sin and death. Thus, Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses. Here in Deuteronomy, we are given Moses's last words. Last words and lasting words. Before Jesus ascended to the Father, His last words to the disciples were also words of instruction, namely, to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:16-20). Unlike Moses who gave his last words and departed through death, Jesus gave His last words and ascended into heaven (Acts 1:9-10)—but He will return again (v. 11; Rev. 19:11-16). While Israel had to go on without Moses, Jesus declares that He will never leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). That is true love.

VERSES 3-5

“Indeed he loves the people. All your holy ones are in your hand, and they assemble at your feet. Each receives your words. Moses gave us instruction, a possession for the assembly of Jacob. So he became King in Jeshurun when the leaders of the people gathered with the tribes of Israel.”

Deuteronomy 33:3-5 speaks about God’s love for the people of Israel and the blessings bestowed upon them. It describes how the Lord is present among His people and emphasizes the leadership of **Moses**. Indeed, as the passage says, God **loves the [His] people**. The theme of God’s love for His people runs throughout the whole Bible. It is the witness of redemptive history. God holds His people in His **hand**, providing them with protection and comfort. God assembles them at His **feet**, providing them with the assurance of His presence and the power to carry out His will. Again, this was the ministry of *Moses*—through whom God gave His people **instruction** regarding His will. The blessings and their fulfillment lay not in Moses or in any human ability but in God Himself. God is His peoples’ **King**.

Jeshurun, which means “upright” or “straight,” is a poetic way of referring to Israel (Deut. 32:15; 33:5,26; Isa. 44:2). “It may represent a play on Jacob, the original Israel, known for deception. Jeshurun would show Israel had quit deceiving and become upright or straight in actions.”¹

The blessings pronounced in this chapter by Moses upon the tribes of Israel (Deut. 33:6-29) parallel those Jacob gave to his twelve sons from whom the twelve tribes of Israel descend (Gen. 49:3-27). Unlike Jacob, who spoke prophetically, Moses issued commands. Moreover, Moses’s blessings do not follow birth order of the sons of Jacob as do Jacob’s blessings of his sons. Moses organized his blessings geographically. It’s often noted that there is no mention of Simeon in Moses’s blessings. This is most likely due to their dispersion and integration into the tribe of Judah.

The similarity between Jacob’s and Moses’s blessings also would have reminded Israel about their past, namely, God’s faithfulness and generosity to His people. The Lord had promised the land of Canaan first to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Israel’s ancestors. Tying the past to the present would have comforted the people in God’s presence, giving them the confidence to move forward. God would be with them and accomplish the conquest of Canaan just as He had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and led them to the promised land. While Moses

would not be with them as they cross into the land, God would. The blessings of Moses read as very pastoral and personal. Remember, Moses had spent over forty years with these people as they traveled to the promised land—hearing their problems, navigating difficulties, giving them comfort, fortifying them with hope, and providing them leadership. Like a parent instructing a child before they move out into the world and a new season of life, Moses reminded the Israelites of their priorities, what was truly important. Any good parent knows their child’s particular strengths and weaknesses and instructs them accordingly. Here, Moses did just that—leaving the people he loved with lasting words as they headed into their future without him. But God would be with them (Deut. 31:1-6). When facing an unknown future, it’s vital that God’s people remember His promises and past faithfulness in our lives. While we can’t always recognize His hand in the present circumstances of our lives, we can certainly trust His heart. That is true love.



Explore Further

Read the articles “Salvation” on pages 1403–1404 and “Sanctification” on pages 1412–1413 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some immediate blessings we receive when we place our faith in Christ (such as justification and the gift of the Holy Spirit)? How is sanctification an ongoing blessing? How could a greater awareness of these blessings strengthen your faith in Christ?

Dwelling Place (Deut. 33:26-29)

Moses concluded his blessing by exalting God’s sovereignty and majesty. God was both Israel’s dwelling place and the One who would drive out their enemies. Of all the nations on earth, they were God’s own people who would enjoy His protection.

VERSES 26-29

“There is none like the God of Jeshurun, who rides the heavens to your aid, the clouds in his majesty. The God of old is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms. He drives out the enemy before you and commands, ‘Destroy!’ So Israel dwells

securely; Jacob lives untroubled in a land of grain and new wine; even his skies drip with dew. How happy you are, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? He is the shield that protects you, the sword you boast in. Your enemies will cringe before you, and you will tread on their backs.”

Moses emphasized the greatness of God. “**There is none like the God of Jeshurun.**” As noted earlier, *Jeshurun* is a poetic way of referring to Israel. This links these verses with the earlier mention of Jeshurun in verse 5, where God is identified as the “King in Jeshurun.” **Who rides in the heavens to your aid, the clouds in his majesty** is the language of God as the Divine Warrior and emphasizes God’s incomparable and omnipotent power. There is none like God, who is Israel’s King.

The description of God riding the heavens is similar to the description of God in Psalm 18: “He rode on a cherub and flew, soaring on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his hiding place, dark storm clouds his canopy around him. From the radiance of his presence, his clouds swept onward with hail and blazing coals. The LORD thundered from heaven; the Most High made his voice heard. He shot his arrows and scattered them; he hurled lightning bolts and routed them” (Ps. 18:10-14). This language pictures God in heaven, both overseeing and able to come to the aid of His people on earth.

Israel had God for their **dwelling place** and **underneath are the everlasting arms**. Israel would dwell securely because of their relationship with God. They could trust in Him because He is both all-powerful and eternal. This concept of God as His people’s *dwelling place* appears elsewhere in Scripture. Psalm 90, attributed to Moses, speaks of God being Israel’s “dwelling place throughout all generations” (v. 1, NIV; similar ESV, KJV). The term *dwelling place* carries connotations of refuge or shelter from danger (v. 1, CSB). God is a safe and constant habitation (see Pss. 32:7; 71:3). The security and joy that come from living in God’s presence are further emphasized by the phrases **Israel dwells securely** and **Jacob** [another term often used for Israel] **lives untroubled**. Because the Lord is their omnipotent God and Protector, Israel would live in covenant with Him as a people both protected and blessed by God in the promised land.

The Divine Warrior language continues in the description of how God **drives out** Israel’s enemies and commands, “**Destroy!**” God’s words gave the vulnerable, small nation of Israel reassurance that God would protect them as a **shield** and strike down their enemies as a **sword**. God Himself is the source of their security. This theme recalls God’s promise to Abraham years before—“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am

your shield” (Gen. 15:1). All of this mounting evidence called Israel to remember and trust that God would be with them as they began their conquest of the promised land. The Lord would defeat their enemies.

By living faithfully in relationship with God by obeying His law, Israel would experience all the blessings of living in the promised land. The land would yield its bounty of **grain** and **new wine**. In Israel’s agrarian culture, water was crucial for both life and produce. **His skies drip with dew** speak of the provision and abundance that God would provide for His people.

The passage concludes with a sense of triumph and assurance for the Israelites, affirming that their relationship with God set them apart from other nations. **“How happy you are, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD?”** Their uniqueness was not in themselves. Rather, it was in God’s choosing them and entering into covenant with them. He saved them from Egyptian slavery. **“The LORD had his heart set on you and chose you, not because you were more numerous than all peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors, he brought you out with a strong hand and redeemed you from the place of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt”** (Deut. 7:7-8). Of all the nations on earth, the Israelites were chosen by God to be His own people who would enjoy His blessings and protection. Their God is the one who causes the sky (rain) and land (grain, new wine) to yield its bounty for His people.

The passage ends with a promise of victory in battle, an important assurance given the Israelites were about to begin the conquest of Canaan: **“Your enemies will cringe before you, and you will tread on their backs.”** But this would not be due to the strength of Israel’s army, but rather the strength of Israel’s God. Joshua spoke of this reality in his farewell address to the Israelites after they had defeated their enemies and established themselves in the promised land. He connected this reality to Israel’s relationship with God—both in Israel’s past and in their future: **“The LORD has driven out great and powerful nations before you, and no one is able to stand against you to this day. One of you routed a thousand because the LORD your God was fighting for you, as he promised. So diligently watch yourselves! Love the LORD your God!”** (Josh. 23:9-11).

God is love, and Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God. He is the answer to the question: *“What does love look like?”* In Jesus, God came in the flesh—Christ is love in flesh. The dwelling of God with man, in Christ, is the most powerful move of pursuing love (John 1:14). Thus, if you ever question God’s love for you, look to Christ and the cross. In His

life, Jesus exemplified perfect obedience to the law (love of God and love of neighbor), that which we could not achieve. In the cross, God sent His only Son to bear our sins in our place. Greater is no love than this—that a man would lay down his life for his friends (15:13). In the resurrection, Jesus defeated sin and death, so nothing can separate believers from the love of God (Rom. 8:31-38). In His love, God sent Jesus to redeem us—so that we can be enveloped in His love. It is through faith in Christ that we enjoy access to God (Eph. 2:18). We experience God’s presence and protection through Christ and in Christ alone (John 6:51-58; 15:1-17). Just like Israel journeyed to the land of promise, we journey toward the promised eternity where we will dwell with God (Rev. 21:3).

With these promises believers can live without fear, knowing that we serve the one true God. These gospel truths speak to our assurance in two ways. First, we know that God is with us through His indwelling Holy Spirit. Second, we know that we will one day dwell with God eternally in the new heaven and new earth. Comfort now. Confidence in what’s to come. That is the power of the gospel! What was lost in the fall, what Israel longed for but never experienced in full, is ours in Christ. This promise is sealed in the words of Christ: “Everyone the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. This is the will of him who sent me: that I should lose none of those he has given me but should raise them up on the last day” (John 6:37-39).



Explore Further

Read the article “Eternal Life” on pages 512–513 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is the article’s definition of “eternal life”? In what way is eternal life experienced in the present? In what ways is eternal life a future experience? What are the indicators that we as believers possess eternal life in Christ? How should knowing that we have been saved by Christ and will spend eternity with God influence how we live in the present?

1. “Jeshurun,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 880–881.

The Journey From Kadesh-Barnea to Moab



*The Journey from Kadesh-Barnea to Moab is taken from the *Human Bible Atlas* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1998), p. 71. Used with permission.

NUMBERS, DEUTERONOMY

As road trips wind down, travelers start thinking about the work waiting for them back home. The ancient Israelites were no exception. The books of Numbers and Deuteronomy recount how the nation of Israel wandered in the wilderness for four decades and how God taught them to be His people as they approached the promised land. He wanted to remind them how much still needed to be done once they got “home.” As you study these final two books of the Pentateuch, ask God to show you what He longs to accomplish in you and through you. Learn how to avoid a life of spiritual wandering and embrace the best He has to offer.

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