

# October 6 Lesson 6 (NIV)

## OBEDIENT FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING: Hebrews 8:1–12

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 4:1–14; 5:1–21

### DEUTERONOMY 4:1–8, 12, 13

<sup>1</sup> Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. <sup>2</sup> Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.

<sup>3</sup> You saw with your own eyes what the LORD did at Baal Peor. The LORD your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor, <sup>4</sup> but all of you who held fast to the LORD your God are still alive today.

<sup>5</sup> See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. <sup>6</sup> Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” <sup>7</sup> What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? <sup>8</sup> And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

.....

<sup>12</sup> Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. <sup>13</sup> He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets.

#### KEY VERSE

*Keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you. —Deuteronomy 4:2b*

## RESPONDING TO GOD’S GRACE

### Unit 2: Responses to God’s Faithfulness

LESSONS 6–9

## LESSON OUTLINE

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    - Amending the Law*
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- III. Reasons to Obey (DEUTERONOMY 4:12, 13)
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### Conclusion

- A. Perfect Rule-Giver
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## HOW TO SAY IT

Baal Peor Bay-al *Pe*-or.

Kadesh Barnea Kay-desh **Bar**-nee-uh.

Moabite Mo-ub-ite.

Shittim Shih-*teem*.

Sumerian Sue-*mer*-ee-un.

## Introduction

### A. Damaging Rule-Givers

Trauma-based research has discovered that when children are exposed to chronic distress, their developing brains adapt by becoming more alert to deal with future threats. The brain constructs new neural pathways to allow the child to consistently scan his or her environment for impending danger. The amygdala, the part of the brain that manages the fight-or-flight response, is placed on permanent high alert.

One of the prices of this self-protection is a decreased attention span. Focusing on a teacher's lesson or a book becomes difficult. This problem becomes semipermanent, tending to last into adulthood.

Our heavenly Father is nothing like a dangerous parent who changes rules randomly on a whim. Scripture says there are no "shifting shadows" with God (James 1:17). Our history with God provides us with confidence in his current dealings with us. And through the gift of his Word, we are given clear instruction on how we can please him. We face many anxious moments, but living with a capricious God is not one of them.

## **B. Lesson Context**

During their 400 years of slavery (Genesis 15:13), Abraham's offspring must have felt like spiritual orphans. Israel had been exposed to a myriad of deities, none of whom cared for them. These so-called gods were vested only in the fortunes of the Egyptians.

Spiritual anxiety wasn't unique to these slaves. The ancient Near East was crowded with deities, each with his or her own temperament and character flaws. Sharing a world with unpredictable gods was a source of stress for those who seemed to be suffering without reason. For instance, an ancient Sumerian had fallen on dark days. In his desperate prayer, found by archaeologists, he pleads to know how he had offended which god and what could be done to appease the god.

The book of Deuteronomy contains none of that cosmic angst. Moses wrote the majority of the book toward the end of his life, decades after God's character was revealed to Israel. The book is an anthology of Moses' sermons meant to remind the next generation of their history with God and what God expected of them. Moses alternated between narrative passages and exhortations that outline how Israel should respond to God in light of his faithfulness.

One of the devices that Moses uses in his sermons is borrowing from the legal language of "suzerainty treaties." In the ancient Near East, a king would enter into a covenant (treaty) with his people by first outlining examples of his greatness. The king would then outline the terms of the treaty. He would offer the people his continuing protection and just rule. In return, the people would offer their loyalty, which was expressed through their obedience to the king's laws. Moses uses these treaties to teach Israel about the type of covenant loyalty God wanted with Israel.

In Deuteronomy 1, Moses picked up Israel's history at a point of catastrophic failure: Israel refused to trust God and take the land, despite God's faithfulness to deliver them from Egypt. Moses then recounted the wilderness years, in which God's people wandered the desert until the disobedient generation passed away. He transitioned from recounting Israel's history (Deuteronomy 1–3) into an exhortation regarding the importance of Israel's keeping the terms of God's covenant (chapter 4). It's against the backdrop of Israel's continual struggle to trust God that Moses charges them to obey the covenant.

## **I. Obedient History** **(DEUTERONOMY 4:1–4)**

### **A. Brings Blessings (v. 1)**

**1. Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.**

*Now* connects Moses' first exhortation to Deuteronomy 1–3. He prescribes a course for Israel's current behavior based on God's past history with his people. Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness were the direct result of not trusting God to keep his promise to give Abraham land for the people to dwell in (Genesis 12:1–3; Deuteronomy 1:32–36; 2:14, 15; 3:21–29). This distrust festered until it became overt rebellion (1:26–46). Yet God's actions toward Israel demonstrate his fidelity to the covenant with Abraham (7:8) even when the people were unfaithful.

In light of their blemished history, Moses implores Israel to listen. This is not in the passive sense of merely taking in information but in the active sense of becoming aware of God's will and then responding to it with obedience (Leviticus 18:4, 5; Romans 10:5).

*Decrees* are statutes are given by a king to prescribe boundaries for his subjects to observe. Such decrees order society, outlining how the people should function together. *Laws* are more like what we call "case law" today in referring to historical precedent. Moses pairs these two concepts frequently in Deuteronomy. He does so to refer to the totality of God's revelation to Israel since the time of the exodus until God spoke to them at Kadesh Barnea (Deuteronomy 4:1, 5, 8, 14, 45; 5:1, 31; 6:1, 20, 21; 7:11; 11:32; 12:1; 26:16, 17).

Moses identifies himself as the teacher of the law and not its originator because the law was given by God. Israel will enjoy the benefits of covenant obedience if they heed Moses' instructions, namely enjoying the promised *land* that God pledged to Abraham (Deuteronomy 30:15–20).

## **B. Brings Standards (v. 2)**

**2. Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.**

Deuteronomy 4:2 can be considered Moses' tamper-proof clause regarding the law (compare Joshua 1:7; Jeremiah 26:2). The non-tampering clause is a common feature of suzerainty treaties that inform how Moses composes his sermons (see Introduction). A king uses a non-tamper clause to remind the masses that he alone sets the terms of the covenant. There is no negotiation or collaboration. In the same way, *God* alone sets the terms of the covenant.

Moses is God's sole interpreter of the law at this time. No other explanation of God's law but Moses' is to be considered normative in Israel. Moses isn't selfishly consolidating his power; he merely mediates God's terms to Israel as he was called to do.

When Aaron and Miriam challenged Moses' position as God's spokesperson (Numbers 12), Moses didn't speak in his own defense. Instead, Moses spoke to intercede on behalf of his rebellious family members. Thus, Moses reiterates the goal of his instruction again: the Israelites are to *keep the commands* of God. Consequences will follow when they do not.

While it's true that this no-tamper clause is specific to God's covenant with ancient Israel (see Deuteronomy 12:32; Proverbs 30:6), we find a similar clause in Revelation 22:18, 19. The new covenant, revealed by God through his Son, renews the non-tamper clause. Jesus is Lord and sets the terms of the covenant. It's up to us as his people to keep obeying the covenant as it was offered to us, not as we see fit.

## **C. Brings Consequences (vv. 3, 4)**

**3. You saw with your own eyes what the LORD did at Baal Peor. The LORD your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor,**

Next, Moses refers to the nation's most recent failure when they sojourned at Shittim (Numbers 25:1–9; Psalm 106:28). Several Israelites indulged in sexual immorality with the women of neighboring Moab. These immoral relationships led to worship of and sacrifices to the false gods of the Moabites. God responded by ordering the execution of all those who knelt before *the Baal of Peor*, a regional god the Israelites were wrongly worshipping.

**4. but all of you who held fast to the LORD your God are still alive today.**

Everyone who maintained their covenant fidelity to *God*, while others ran after Moabite women and their gods, is still standing and listening to Moses' voice now. Even before the blessings and curses are presented in Deuteronomy 28–31, the premium that God places on covenant obedience is evident. God rewards obedience and judges rebellion.

Moses views the Shittim event as a template for the nation to use to interpret their future choices. Soon they will be entering Canaan and again face the temptation of being corrupted by their idol-worshipping neighbors. Obedience will yield life; disobedience, death.

## **II. Obedient Future**

**(DEUTERONOMY 4:5–8)**

### **A. Invites Blessings (vv. 5, 6)**

**5. See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it.**

Moses opens his second argument as to why the congregation should obey God's law by reiterating the information covered in Deuteronomy 4:1, above. *God* has *commanded* Moses to teach the nation the scope of these *decrees and laws* so the Israelites will obey God. Obedience makes them eligible to enjoy the blessing of the covenant: the promised *land*.

The effect of this repetition is to emphasize how vitally important it is for Israel to obey God's covenant. In Deuteronomy 4:1–4, this necessity is expressed by reminding Israel of God's justice. He honors covenant faithfulness, but judges those who break their treaty with him. In the verse at hand, obedience will lead the faithful to inhabit the land just as God has promised.

**6. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."**

Moses begins to lay out his second rationale for the Israelites' future obedience to God's covenant: they will become an object of curiosity among the surrounding *nations*. Those people will observe Israel's being governed by God and notice their wisdom and *understanding*. Israel's neighbors will see God's people prosper, begin to inquire as to the cause of their well-being, and become aware of the source of Israel's strength: adherence to God's *decrees*. The impact of obedience will transcend Israel's borders.

### **B. Indicates Intimacy (v. 7)**

**7. What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?**

Moses develops his second appeal: God's nearness is the source of their greatness in comparison to any *other nation* (see Exodus 19:5, 6; 1 Peter 2:9, 10). Centuries later, when Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, he will taunt them by suggesting that their god

is out of the country on business (1 Kings 18:27). None of the other so-called gods offer the gift of closeness as does Yahweh with his people. As mentioned in the lesson Introduction, this lack of connection between a deity and the worshipper could become a source of spiritual anxiety, as demonstrated by the reaction of the prophets of Baal to Elijah's mockery (vv. 28, 29).

God's dealings with his people after Egyptian bondage emphasize his closeness to Israel. The cloud and pillar of fire were symbols of God's personal leadership in guiding Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21, 22). However, for Moses the gift of the law and its accessibility is another lasting sign of God's nearness to his people. Moses will later argue the importance of God's revealing his will through his commandments (Deuteronomy 30:15, 16). His law isn't hidden in the heavens or beyond the sea (30:12, 13). Instead, God reveals his will so it will be continually in the Israelites' speech and hearts (Deuteronomy 6:5–9; compare Ezekiel 36:26; Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10). The closeness of God, as demonstrated through the accessibility of his commandments, should provoke Israel to obedience (Deuteronomy 30:14).

### **C. Invokes Praise (v. 8)**

**8. And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?**

These words could easily come from the mouth of the Queen of Sheba when she visits King Solomon to test his wisdom (1 Kings 10:1–13). The queen will test Solomon's wisdom by confronting him with a battery of riddles. Unable to stump him, she will acknowledge the source of his wisdom: the Lord God. God will give Solomon this wisdom so that the king can discern good from evil and lead his people in God's ways (3:1–14).

So according to Moses, Israel's international fame will not be found in the size of the nation's armies or in great wealth but in the *body of laws* found within the covenant God enacted. Why? Because those laws are supernaturally received from the one true God (Exodus 19; 20). As such, each law is perfect and just. Conforming to these rules leads the people into a harmonious relationship with God and each other. No *other nation* can boast the same origin of their laws, nor can they boast that their laws are of equal benefit. God's laws will make Israel unique among all nations, but only if Israel obeys.

## **III. Reasons to Obey**

**(DEUTERONOMY 4:12, 13)**

### **A. Divine Voice (v. 12)**

**12. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.**

Moses presents the grounds for his final appeal as to why Israel should obey the covenant: God himself initiates and authors the covenant. He rescued the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus 2:23–25; 3:7–10). He led them to Mount Sinai, where he ignited *the fire* from which he proclaimed the terms of the treaty (19:18). Since God revealed himself in fire as *a voice* and not through the *form* of a human agent (19:19), there can be no confusion regarding the origin of the law.

### **B. Divine Hand (v. 13)**

**13a. He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow**

Moses describes in more specific terms how the covenant was received. He associates the *covenant* with *the Ten Commandments* that God revealed to Israel in Exodus 20. These commandments serve as the basis against which all other laws in Israel must be measured. They serve as the bedrock principles that outline covenant living, which other laws will expand on. In fact, most of the civil laws found in Deuteronomy should be viewed as case laws that apply these 10 commandments to precedents that will come to be in the life of the nation.

**13b. and then wrote them on two stone tablets.**

Moses closes his argument regarding the covenant's divine authorship: not only did God speak the terms of the covenant, but he also engraved them in *stone*. In the ancient Near East, it was customary for two copies of a covenant to be given to each party to remind them of the terms of the agreement (Esther 3:14; 8:13; Jeremiah 32:11). Deuteronomy 10:1–5 notes that both copies of the Ten Commandments are stored in the ark of the covenant. These *two* sets of *tablets* are a permanent reminder that God initiated the covenant. By implication, the only proper response is obedience.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Perfect Rule-Giver**

The three arguments that Moses made to persuade his people to obey the covenant apply to God's people today. First, Moses reminded Israel that God blesses obedience and punishes disobedience (see Deuteronomy 30:15–20). Similarly, Jesus described himself as the true vine. Believers who keep his commandments (John 14:15) are like fruitful branches, while those who will not abide in him are like dry branches that are torn off and thrown into the fire (15:1–17). While obedience doesn't secure our salvation, it is evidence that we are redeemed (James 2:14–26).

Moses' second argument was that obedience to the covenant made Israel special among the nations. The nations would see the way Israel prospered and discover that it was because of the righteous and just laws that God provided them. We all are familiar with personal testimonies of friends who were won over to Christianity because they observed a believer living with the conviction that God is real and that he has a knowable will. Conversely, we're all too familiar with stories of ministers whose actions have brought contempt to the name of Christ. It's vitally important that we keep God's law. By observing God's good laws, we draw attention to the author of those laws.

Finally, we share Moses' conviction that we should obey God's laws because they are of divine origin (compare 2 Peter 1:20, 21). Because the commandments were authored by a holy and loving God, given to us for our benefit, our only faithful response is to bow our knees and submit to the gracious terms of the covenant that God has provided.

### **B. Prayer**

God, thank you for your perfect commandments! May we submit ourselves to them as your Son, Jesus, would have us to. We pray this in his name. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

The nature of God's law compels obedience.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shallenberger, L., Eichenberger, J., Taylor, M. A., & Thatcher, T. (2019). [Obedient Faith](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, M. K. Williams, & J. Gerke (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2019–2020* (Vol. 26, pp. 49–55). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.