

JUSTICE AND OBEDIENCE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Deuteronomy 5:1–3; 10:12–13; 28:1–2

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 5; 10; 27; 28:1–2

DEUTERONOMY 5:1B–3

¹ Hear, Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. ² The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. ³ It was not with our ancestors that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today.

DEUTERONOMY 10:12–13

¹² And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

DEUTERONOMY 27:1–10

¹ Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: “Keep all these commands that I give you today. ² When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the LORD your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. ³ Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you. ⁴ And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today, and coat them with plaster. ⁵ Build there an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. Do not use any iron tool on them. ⁶ Build the altar of the LORD your God with fieldstones and offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God. ⁷ Sacrifice fellowship offerings there, eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the LORD your God. ⁸ And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up.”

⁹ Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, “Be silent, Israel, and listen!

You have now become the people of the LORD your God. ¹⁰ Obey the LORD your God and follow his commands and decrees that I give you today.”

KEY TEXT

Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?—Deuteronomy 10:12–13

JUSTICE, LAW, HISTORY

Unit 1: God Requires Justice

LESSONS 1–4

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize God’s requirements of the Old Testament covenant people.
2. Explain the connection between those requirements and the concept of justice.
3. Make a plan to be more consistent in one area of his or her Christian walk.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Lessons from a Kite’s Flight
- B. Lesson Context: Deuteronomy
- C. Lesson Context: Covenant

- I. Binding Covenant (Deuteronomy 5:1b–3)
 - A. Its Principles (v. 1b)
 - B. Its Parties (vv. 2–3)
- II. Basic Duties (Deuteronomy 10:12–13)
 - A. Crucial Question (v. 12a)
 - B. Clear Answer (vv. 12b–13)

Lean on Me

- III. Broader Instructions (Deuteronomy 27:1–10)

- A. Recording the Law (vv. 1–4)
- B. Raising the Altar (vv. 5–8)
Knowing Before Doing
- C. Reminding the People (vv. 9–10)

Conclusion

- A. That One Thing
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Canaan	<i>Kay-nun.</i>
Decalogue	<i>Dek-uh-log.</i>
Ebal	<i>Ee-bull.</i>
Gerizim	<i>Gair-ih-zeem</i> or <i>Guh-rye-zim.</i>
Horeb	<i>Ho-reb.</i>
Jordan	<i>Jor-dun.</i>
Sinai	<i>Sigh-nye</i> or <i>Sigh-nay-eye.</i>

Introduction

A. Lessons from a Kite’s Flight

A certain fable depicts the story of a kite and its owner. The kite enjoyed being taken outside and flying high above the ground. But the kite could go only as far and high as the length of its string. One day the kite began to complain about its lack of freedom: “It isn’t fair for me to be held back by my owner’s string. If only I could break loose from him, I could go wherever I wanted.”

Soon after, the kite’s wish came true when the string broke. For a few moments, the kite relished its newfound freedom. But a sudden strong gust of wind came along, and the kite soon found itself unable to control its flight. Before long, the wind swept the kite into a tangle of tree branches. The briefly free kite now hung captive. The freedom the kite longed for was its eventual ruin.

God’s requirements are for our benefit. Any perceived restrictions on our freedoms are in our best interest. He intends that we accept his will as our own so that we might become a blessing for the world. This week’s lesson highlights several times when the people of God are

reminded of those edicts as they are called to create a just society in witness to the just God they served.

B. Lesson Context: Deuteronomy

This lesson's texts come from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. Its name means "second law." That is an appropriate title as Deuteronomy is the second instance of the giving of God's law to Israel—the first time being to the generation that followed the one of the exodus from Egypt.

Israel's long journey to the promised land of Canaan had come to its climax as the people had arrived east of the Jordan River ([Deuteronomy 1:1](#)). The previous generation of Israel, prevented from entering the promised land, had perished in the wilderness because of unbelief ([1:35, 37](#)). Deuteronomy details Moses' expounding on God's law to Israel ([1:5](#)) and his farewell address to a new generation on the verge of entering the promised land.

One way Deuteronomy can be studied is on the basis of Moses' four major addresses. The first reviews the ways God worked in and provided for Israel throughout the desert wanderings. The review culminated in a reminder that Israel was a people set apart, called to live in obedience to God ([Deuteronomy 4:1–4](#)).

The second address reviewed God's law for Israel and provided moral boundaries for living in the promised land ([Deuteronomy 4:44–26:19](#)).

Moses' third address explored the demands of covenant life and the dangers of disobedience. It culminated in a call for Israel to commit to following God and his laws ([Deuteronomy 30:11–20](#)).

In what became the final scene of Moses' life, his fourth address presented Joshua as the new leader for Israel ([Deuteronomy 31:1–8](#)). This address served as that man's commissioning as the people entered the promised land ([32:48–52](#)).

C. Lesson Context: Covenant

God desired that Israel be known as a people well acquainted with his righteous standards. He expressed that desire in terms of a covenant. The covenant served as the formal agreement between God and his people, describing how Israel was to live as a holy people and how God committed to making Israel his people.

Covenants were not unique to ancient Israel. Other ancient Near Eastern cultures used similar legal agreements, often made between a more powerful kingdom and a lesser kingdom. These agreements often included a historical narrative (detailing the history between the parties), stipulations for the submission of the lesser party, and curses or blessings for the

disregard or obedience of the previously mentioned stipulations. For pagan cultures of antiquity, covenants provided legal precedent for how parties were to relate to one another, especially if a power differential was present.

Throughout Israel's history, God made several covenants with his people. Each detailed a different aspect of his commitment to and his expectations for the Israelites (see [Genesis 9:8–17](#); [15:1–21](#); [2 Samuel 7:8–16](#); [Jeremiah 31:31–34](#)). This week's Scripture texts describe how Israel was to commemorate and commit to the covenant God made with them at Sinai ([Exodus 19:3–8](#); [20:1–17](#); [24:3–8](#)).

I. Binding Covenant ([DEUTERONOMY 5:1b–3](#))

This passage serves as the introduction to the heart of Israel's relationship with God: the Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue.

A. Its Principles (v. [1b](#))

[1b](#). Hear, Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them.

Throughout Deuteronomy, the command to *hear* draws the attention and focus of *Israel* (see [Deuteronomy 6:3–4](#); [9:1](#); [20:3](#)). However, the command is more than a call to hear; it challenges the audience to live in obedience to that which is heard (compare [James 1:22](#)). God's *decrees and laws* are what Israel is called to hear and, therefore, obey.

Obedience begins by *hearing* and continues through proper action. To *learn* and *follow* God's laws communicates that Israel must accept God's commands, mediated through Moses, and make certain that those commands direct their behavior. Otherwise, true hearing had not occurred. The people needed to listen to Moses to learn what God had to say ([Deuteronomy 34:10–12](#)). The command to hear was especially important, given that the Lord made himself heard but not seen at Horeb ([4:12, 15](#)).

What Do You Think?

How can we ensure that our obedience to the Lord doesn't turn into legalism?

Digging Deeper

In addition to [Luke 11:37–54](#), what passages help you most in this regard?

B. Its Parties (vv. [2–3](#))

2. The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb.

Moses reminded Israel of where they had received God's law. Elsewhere, Scripture uses the names *Horeb* and Mount Sinai interchangeably as the designation of this location (see [Exodus 19:18](#); [Deuteronomy 1:6](#); [4:10](#); [1 Kings 8:9](#); [2 Chronicles 5:10](#); [Psalm 106:19](#)).

Now, a generation later, Moses recalled that moment when God *made a covenant with* Israel. This covenant reminded Israel of God's great acts of salvation and called Israel to live as God's people in light of that reality (see [Lesson Context: Covenant](#)).

What Do You Think?

How would you explain to someone the difference between the modern use of the word *covenant* (as in "community covenants") and how that word is used in the text?

Digging Deeper

Why is it important not to read the ancient word through the lens of the modern meaning?

3. It was not with our ancestors that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today.

This covenant was not merely an event for Israel's previous generations (see [Exodus 20:1–21](#)); its stipulations also applied to their current and future generations. A communal component to God's commands transcends generations. All Israel was bound by the covenant, even those not yet *alive* when it was given. Moses invited hearers to draw on collective memory and live as a people unified by the covenant.

II. Basic Duties

([DEUTERONOMY 10:12–13](#))

Preceding this passage, Moses again received the Ten Commandments and placed them in the ark of the covenant ([Deuteronomy 10:1–5](#)).

A. Crucial Question (v. 12a)

12a. And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you

Having confronted the people with their record of idolatry and rebellion ([Deuteronomy 9:7–24](#)), Moses set before them a rhetorical question that forced self-reflection to determine how best to live as people of God.

Centuries later, the prophet Micah would ask the same question of *Israel*. Both Micah and Moses were concerned with following God's law and ways. For Micah, following God's law meant "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" ([Micah 6:8](#)). While

Moses had a different focus (see commentary on [Deuteronomy 10:12b–13](#), below), their respective answers were complementary, not contradictory. Following God’s law implied a desire for justice and mercy.

B. Clear Answer (vv. 12b–13)

12b. but to fear the LORD your God,

The Lord’s requirements of his people are remarkably simple. *To fear the Lord your God* meant to possess a reverential respect for him. Fearing God was at the heart of the covenant as God reminded Israel, “You shall have no other gods before me” ([Deuteronomy 5:7](#); see also [5:29](#); [6:13, 24](#); [8:6](#); [13:4](#)).

12c. to walk in obedience to him,

To walk in obedience translates the fear of the Lord into righteous conduct that honors his authority and his commands ([Deuteronomy 5:33](#)).

12d. to love him,

Previously, Moses had expressed the centrality of *love* for the Lord, challenging Israel to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” ([Deuteronomy 6:5](#)). One way for Israel to show this all-encompassing love was to abide by God’s law ([11:1](#)).

12e. to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,

Love makes it a joy *to serve the Lord* with the totality of one’s being. For ancient Israelites, the *heart* was regarded as the location of an individual’s volition, while the *soul* implied the root of life. Serving God required the whole self and necessitated the total allegiance of God’s people.

What Do You Think?

Which imperative of *fear*, *walk*, *love*, and *serve* will you focus on improving the most in the week ahead?

Digging Deeper

Who can be a mentor for you in this regard?

13. and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

Moses concludes by stressing the importance of obedience to the Lord. His *commands* and *decrees* did not exist to frustrate God’s people. Instead, they were graciously given to his people for their *good*. God promised to bless his people as long as they obeyed his commands ([Deuteronomy 11:27](#)).

LEAN ON ME

In the mid-1960s, Bill Withers found himself working in a California manufacturing plant. Between shifts, Bill learned to play the guitar and began writing music. He found success as an artist and signed with a major record company. “Lean on Me,” one of his well-known songs, reminds us of the need to recognize our interdependence.

Skeptics may accuse Christians of using God as a crutch. Yes, we are to lean on him, but we also get to walk with him, love him, and honor him with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

How do you view the laws God gave to Israel? Do you see his instructions as loving commands, or harsh demands? Do you view his commands as a crutch, or an invitation to a deeper life? Perhaps another look at [John 14:15](#) is in order.

—D. F.

III. Broader Instructions

([DEUTERONOMY 27:1–10](#))

Following the exposition of God’s commands, [Deuteronomy 27](#) describes instructions for a yet-to-occur covenant renewal ceremony.

A. Recording the Law (vv. 1–4)

1. Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: “Keep all these commands that I give you today.

Moses would not be alive when the people of Israel entered the promised land ([Deuteronomy 31:2](#); [34:1–5](#)). Therefore, this address sets the stage for him to transfer his leadership responsibilities. Israel would soon enter the promised land under Joshua’s direction ([31:23](#); [34:9](#); [Joshua 1:1–2](#)).

Moses reminded the people of the necessity of keeping God’s *commands* (see commentary on [Deuteronomy 27:9–10](#), below). The commands were binding not only in the immediate moment but also as Israel possessed the land.

2–3. When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the LORD your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

Moses described a yet-to-occur ceremony in which Israel would commemorate its covenant with God. After Israel *crossed the Jordan into the land*, they were to remember God’s

covenant and renew their obligation to obey his commands. While it's possible the ceremony happened on the exact day they crossed the river (see [Joshua 4](#)), more likely Moses was referring to a general time afterward.

The practice of whitewashing *stones* and painting the law on them was a practice popularized by ancient Egyptians. Whereas other cultures would carve the words of the law into wood or stone, ancient Egyptians would paint the words of the law onto whitewashed stones.

To write every line of the law would constitute a project too large to be of any practical value. One possibility is that the Ten Commandments, which provided a kind of “constitution” for Israel, were written on the stones. Others note that perhaps the law’s blessings and curses were written, reminding Israel of the consequences of obedience and disobedience ([Deuteronomy 27:15–28:68](#)).

Previously, *the Lord ... God* had promised to Moses that he would “bring [Israel] ... into a good and spacious land, *a land flowing with milk and honey*” ([Exodus 3:8](#)). Now Israel would see the fulfillment of this promise.



Visual for [Lesson 1](#). Begin the lesson by asking the class how each of these directions is necessary for justice to be

practiced.

4. And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today, and coat them with plaster.

With one exception, this verse repeats much of the information found previously. That exception is the inclusion of the location where this ceremony is to occur, *Mount Ebal*. This mountain, located west of the Jordan River and north of Jerusalem, is mentioned in tandem with another nearby mountain, Mount Gerizim ([Deuteronomy 11:29](#); [27:12–13](#); [Joshua 8:33](#)).

Later, Moses instructed that 6 of the 12 tribes of Israel were to stand on Mount Gerizim and proclaim the covenant blessings ([Deuteronomy 27:12](#)), while the remaining 6 tribes were to stand on Mount Ebal and announce the curses of covenant disobedience ([27:13](#)). The valley between these two mountains provided a natural amphitheater to highlight the voices. The ceremony took place under the direction of Joshua ([Joshua 8:30–33](#)).

B. Raising the Altar (vv. 5–8)

5. Build there an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. Do not use any iron tool on them.

Israel was to *build there an altar* made of *stones* for the worship of *God*. Previously, God told Israel that any tool used on an altar would cause the altar to be defiled ([Exodus 20:25](#)). The prohibition of using an *iron tool* may be linked to the pagan religious practices of neighboring peoples, such as the Canaanites. Israel's altar was to be wholly different from altars to false gods.

6. Build the altar of the LORD your God with fieldstones and offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God.

As no iron tool could be used on *the altar*, these *fieldstones* were whole and uncut (see [Joshua 8:31](#)). Upon the altar Israel presented their *burnt offerings*. During these offerings, an entire animal was burned on the altar, symbolizing the worshipper's complete surrender to God ([Leviticus 1:1–17](#)).

7. Sacrifice fellowship offerings there, eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the LORD your God.

Following burnt offerings, *fellowship offerings* burned only a portion of the sacrificial animal; remaining portions were to be used by the worshippers in what amounted to a fellowship-with-God meal ([Leviticus 3:1–17](#)).

This would provide a time for Israel to rejoice *in the presence of the Lord* as the meal reminded them of God's presence and faithfulness (see [Exodus 20:24](#)). These acts of worship were to be acts of celebration!

What Do You Think?

What greater personal attention do you need to give to the idea of rejoicing in God?

Digging Deeper

What are various ways to do so? Give biblical examples of such variety.

8. And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up.”

The previous instructions are repeated, thereby stressing the importance of *the words of this law* (see commentary on [Deuteronomy 27:3](#)).

The Hebrew phrase translated *very clearly* describes the act of engraving words on a stone (see [Habakkuk 2:2](#)). This act was to be completed with intentionality and purpose, not haphazardly.

KNOWING BEFORE DOING

Have you ever heard the saying “Pale ink is better than the most retentive memory”? Every Friday I examine my calendar, look at the coming week, and create a to-do list. Additional tasks may arise, but my to-do list keeps me on task. The ink of my to-do list focuses my memory.

God instructed kings, prophets, disciples, and apostles to put his truth into writing. The Law of Moses, David’s psalms, John’s eyewitness testimony, and Paul’s letters detail God’s revelation for our lives. As people of God, we are called to live in accordance with his instruction. But we can’t *live* those instructions until we *know* them. Here’s a one-question test in that regard: Considering Jesus’ statement “If you love me, keep my commands” ([John 14:15](#)), how do you honor the two he called most important (see [Matthew 22:37–40](#))?

—D. F.

C. Reminding the People (vv. 9–10)

9. Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, “Be silent, Israel, and listen! You have now become the people of the LORD your God.

Moses’ exhortations focused the attention of the audience and drew them into a position of *silent* worship before God (compare [Nehemiah 8:11](#); [Zephaniah 1:7](#); [Zechariah 2:13](#)).

Those gathered before *Moses* were a generation removed from those who had experienced personally the establishment of God’s covenant. As such, this new generation needed to affirm their commitment to be God’s covenant *people*.

What Do You Think?

What can you do to overcome a tendency to talk too much and listen too little?

Digging Deeper

What biblical examples can you give of this kind of tendency?

10. Obey the LORD your God and follow his commands and decrees that I give you today.”

As a covenant people, Israel was held to certain standards of obedience: God’s *commands and decrees*. The Israelites’ obedience did not cause them to be the people of God. Instead, their obedience was to be grounded in the fact that they were in covenant with God ([Deuteronomy 8:1–6](#)).

Conclusion

A. That One Thing

Few are considered experts in the realm of corn cultivation. However, this is exactly the one thing for which Orville Redenbacher (1907–1995) was known. By the mid-twentieth century, he had perfected techniques that paved the way for mass consumption of popcorn. His name and likeness were associated with accessible popcorn snacks. A 1987 commercial for his brand described the focus of his work: “Do one thing, and do it better than anyone.”

The “one thing” for Israel was to be their *obedience* to God and his law. This was how they were to live according to the covenant. Moses recognized this requirement, and it’s the main reason imperatives like *obey*, *keep*, *serve*, and *do* are found throughout this week’s Scripture text. A people obedient to the commands of God would have a proper understanding of justice and just living (see [Leviticus 19:15–16](#); [Deuteronomy 16:20](#); [Isaiah 1:17](#); [Zechariah 7:9](#)).

It was one thing for Israel to write God’s laws on stones; it was quite another thing to practice faithful obedience to those laws. May we write God’s laws on our hearts and practice faithful obedience in all areas of our lives ([2 Corinthians 3:3](#)).

B. Prayer

Father, may we recognize that the challenge placed before the ancient Israelites is the challenge placed before us today. May we be more than hearers of your Word; may we resolve to be doers as well. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Obedience to God must remain
our top priority.

VISUALS FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: page 126) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Winter '21-'22 Quarter. That packet also contains the very useful *Presentation Tools* CD for teacher use. Order No. 2629122 from your supplier.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Distribute the following open-end sentences on slips of paper (one slip per learner; repeat sentences as necessary).

Children need to learn obedience because ...

The biggest problem caused by disobedience is ...

Here's what happened when I disobeyed ...

Discuss completions in one of two ways: either (1) form discussion pairs or triads of learners who have the same sentence, or (2) form discussion pairs or triads of learners who have the same sentences.

After three or four minutes, allow volunteers to share responses with the whole class. Make sure to hear at least one response for each sentence.

Lead into Bible study by saying, “Obviously, obedience is a big deal for people today. This was a challenge for God’s people in ancient times too.”

Into the Word

Prepare a brief lecture to remind class members of the setting and history of today’s texts. Use material from the [Lesson Context](#) above.

Divide the class into pairs or triads (consider using the same groupings as for the introductory activity). Ask students to survey today’s texts to list every verse that contains a command

to obey. Beside each verse, they can explain or paraphrase the admonition.

After several minutes, call the class together to share answers. Discuss, “Why did Moses make each of the exhortations we find here?”

Option. Distribute copies of the “Hear Here” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Ask all class members to complete this activity after finishing the above.

Next distribute copies of a chart (you prepare) that feature these three headings:

Activity / Purpose / Today

In the pairs or triads formed above, have class members list in the first column elements of the ceremony/worship described in [Deuteronomy 27:1–10](#). Under the second heading, have them list the purpose for each element. Allow about five minutes to complete these two columns. After you call time, ask volunteers to share responses with the whole class.

Into Life

Send class members back to their groups to make a list under the *Today* heading. For each item in the worship ceremony described in Deuteronomy, class members should list a comparable aspect or principle of worship today. After calling time, reconvene for whole-class sharing and discussion. Use the following discussion prompts as needed:

- 1–How prominent should God’s Word be in our services?
- 2–How meaningful is the use of Scripture in our services?
- 3–Why is it important for us to know and reflect on Scripture?
- 4–How can we make the teaching of Scripture more central to daily living?

Remind students that the theme of this lesson introduces the theme of the whole quarter: justice. Send class members back to their groups one more time and challenge them to look again at the five admonitions in [Deuteronomy 10:12–13](#). For each one, they should think of ways that heeding it contributes to justice in the world. After several minutes, discuss as a class.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Doing What God Wants” exercise from the activity page as a take-home devotional work. Close with five prayers that ask God’s help in heeding the five admonitions listed in the take-home activity, one request per prayer.