

## Why Should We Obey God?

Deuteronomy 4:1–14, 23, 37, 45

by Felton Spraggins

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*“ ‘And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, in order that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord . . . . So watch yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which the Lord your God has commanded you. . . . Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power’ . . . these are the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which Moses spoke to the sons of Israel, when they came out from Egypt” (4:1–14, 23, 37, 45).*

While in a local shopping mall, I heard a mother tell her young son to be quiet and come along without complaining. The youngster took a few steps and then shouted, “I don’t know why I should do what you want just because you said it!” Her answer was swift and to the point, “Do you want to live?” The young man nodded and then quietly followed.

Obedience irritates all of us at times. Submission to another is contrary to our human nature. We like to think that we are the captain of our own fate.

Israel found obedience a difficult concept to put into practice. Moses gave four fundamental reasons for obedience in chapter 4. These rea-

sons are important in every man’s relationship with his heavenly Father.

### **BECAUSE OBEDIENCE BRINGS LIFE**

First, obedience brings life. Israel is told to listen “in order that you may live and go in and take possession of the land” (4:1; cf. 4:40). The full enjoyment of life depended upon Israel’s ability to keep the law. This included listening, observing, and doing in order to reach their full potential in the land of promise.

The words “that you may live” are far from being a mere synonym for “existence.” They are equivalent to “healthy existence,” a state of being in which all of man’s powers and functions are in harmonious activity and directed to proper ends. The Israelites would find in their new home that obedience to God’s law has a tendency to promote true comfort and success in this life.

If Israel chose to “strive with her maker,” her course in life would be filled with agony and destruction. Barnard Iddings Bell said, “God estimates the nations of the earth by one standard: obedience or non-obedience to the moral law.” Obedience would insure life, entrance into, and possession of the land. Israel’s happiness depended on their ability to obey the commands of God. Failure to obey would bring death and separation from God. Moses then brought to their remembrance a vivid illustration of disobedience bringing death and obedience bringing life (4:3, 4). While at Baal-peor

certain men of Israel joined in the idolatrous worship by committing sexual immorality with Moabite women who had invited them to their sacrifices to the god Baal (Numbers 25:1–9). God’s judgment was swift and deadly, being understood as the consequence of the idolatrous worship. The faithful were spared the consequences of that judgment. Moses said of the obedient, “You who held fast to the Lord your God are alive today, . . .” (4:4).

### **BECAUSE OBEDIENCE MAKES A GREAT PEOPLE**

Second, obedience makes a great people. It would make Israel a great people in the eyes of the nations about them. Moses said,

So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him? . . . (4:6–8).

Obedience would demonstrate their understanding and wisdom among the surrounding nations.

These nations would hear of God’s decrees and conclude that Israel was a great nation to have the Lord God so near to them at all times. The superiority of Jehovah’s judgments could be demonstrated by a comparison with the other codes of law found within the neighboring nations.

Egypt never had a law code that gave consistent guidelines for the rights, duties, and penalties of her people. The Egyptian language did not have a word for “law.” The Pharaoh was regarded as a god on earth, and his every decree was to be regarded as the embodiment of truth and justice. The kings of ancient Palestine and Syria also had no law code and dispensed justice based on their personal views of each situation and not by permanent laws.

Several Babylonian codes were permanent in nature, namely those of Ur, Lupit-Ishtar, and Hammurabi. However, none of these stated what judges were supposed to do. They only recorded what some judges had done in the past so that a

judge might use a case as a guide if he chose to do so. Assyria, similarly, compiled past decisions but left the judges free to judge by their own personal opinions or feelings.<sup>1</sup>

No other code than Israel’s claimed that a God gave it or that divinity was its authority for justice. The Mosaic law was the only code that set forth the motives or reasons for its decisions as found, for instance, in Deuteronomy 22:24 and Exodus 20:5; 23:8, 9.

Other codes of that period treated the common people as less valuable than a nobleman. They regarded all harm to a woman, a slave, or an ox as harm to a man’s property. If a nobleman caused the death of a noblewoman, Hammurabi’s Code said that the killer’s daughter had to die. If a nobleman caused a slavewoman’s death, he paid one-third of a mina or silver to her owner.<sup>2</sup> The law of Moses protected women and slaves from being used as property and made justice the same for the social classes.

The nations surrounding Israel would be forced to conclude that no other nation was so great as to have such righteous laws as the body of laws Moses was setting before Israel. The eternal principles of holiness, justice, and truth come not from man but from God. Israel’s unique claim to greatness, as it is with every person, was founded upon obedience to God. Obedience to the law would bring life and greatness to Israel among the nations.

### **BECAUSE OBEDIENCE SHOWS LOVE**

Third, obedience shows God’s love. His love was evident to Israel and their forefathers.

“Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power” (4:37).

“. . . the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (7:7, 8).

God’s love had brought them out of Egypt and was at that time sustaining them. Their deliverance was to be a constant reminder of His love to them. Moses reminded them of the close

tie of love and obedience: "Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments" (7:9).

God's lamp of love never burns out. It has a lifetime guarantee! After reflecting on God's love, Isaac Watts penned these words:

Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

How can we return a love so far-reaching? What demands are made on us as a result of God's unlimited love?

God's love demands that His love for us be returned. Moses clearly emphasized that Israel should "love Him and keep His commandments" (7:9). Jesus also linked love and obedience together. On three occasions in John 14, we find Jesus linking love with the keeping of His commandments.

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments  
(v. 15).

He who has My commandments and keeps them,  
he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall  
be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and  
will disclose Myself to him (v. 21).

... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and  
My Father will love him, and We will come to him,  
and make Our abode with him (v. 23).

Our love for God is continually tested by our willingness to obey His commands. Love, by its very nature, requires that we give ourselves to the thing loved. Love demands the fulfillment of certain obligations. Love does whatever is needed. The loving mother is not free to ignore her child's needs or desires. Neither can man take the liberty of ignoring God's wishes without giving evidence that he does not love God.

To love is a decision that grows out of our will. As we give love, it comes back to us. Love multiplies as we share it. James Dillet Freeman wrote: "It is when love makes the greatest *demands* on us that we find our greatest *gifts*, our greatest *oneness* with life. It is *then* we gain a sense that our life has meaning and serves a purpose. The struggle to find love: *that's what life is all about.*"

Obedience is a masterpiece painted by the brush and pigments of love. In it is revealed the true attitude that submits to the mandate of heaven. By it can be seen the heart that loves God, for in the beams of obedience, faith can be seen as it works by love.

## BECAUSE OBEDIENCE IS PART OF THE AGREEMENT

Fourth, obedience is part of the agreement of God's people with Him. God had made a covenant. The covenant relationship between Israel and God was the result of God's love for His chosen people. Israel had entered into a contractual agreement with God at Horeb. This covenant is mentioned twenty-six times in Deuteronomy. Israel had ratified this covenant in Exodus 24:1-8. "So watch yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which He made with you, . . ." (4:23).

In verse 10, Moses called their attention to a specific day at Horeb when God had said to him, "Assemble the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words so they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children." As they stood before the mountain, it burned with fire into the very heart of the heavens, which were shrouded in darkness with thick clouds as the Lord spoke out of the midst of the fire. They had heard the voice, but had seen no form. God had given them the Ten Commandments.

The basic lesson at Horeb was for Israel to fear and reverence God. Israel had actual evidence and guarantee that their covenant was divine. They were to remember this as long as they lived and communicate it to their children and grandchildren.

## CONCLUSION

From the life of Helen Keller, we find an account of how she was able to conquer deafness, blindness, and speechlessness. Anne Sullivan quickly learned the value of obedience when she began teaching her. Miss Sullivan confided to a friend,

I saw clearly that it was useless to try to teach her language or anything else until she learned to obey

me. I have thought about it a great deal, and the more I think, the more certain I am that obedience is the gateway through which knowledge, yes, and love too enter the mind of a child.<sup>3</sup>

Obedience is the gateway to life, greatness, and love, all of which are found in God's rela-

tionship with man. It is the gateway to salvation, for Jesus is "the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 5:9; KJV). Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work" (John 4:34).

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, vol. 1, *Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1965), 144–50.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1982), 144.

<sup>3</sup>Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954), 265.

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