

## **Deuteronomy 4: Exhortations and Warnings Regarding God's Commands (4:1–40)**

One of the reasons that people so commonly reject Christianity—or at least one of their excuses—is that they don't want anyone to tell them what to do. They don't want to follow God's commands. People today want to be autonomous—they want to set their own rules and do their own thing. Their highest and ultimate authority is themselves—their own feelings, desires, and appetites. They refuse to even consider God's authority over them.

Deuteronomy is a very authoritative book; it runs directly contrary to sinful human nature. The focus in the book is on the stipulations, decrees and laws, the commands God gave to Israel which he expects them to keep. If they want God's blessing, they must obey his commands, statutes, and judgments.

That's still true for us today. We must obey God's commands if we want God's blessings. If you are a Christian, you have obligated yourself to obey God's commands. None of us obey them perfectly, but our desire and goal is to obey the biblical commands that pertain to us.

A significant part of the Christian life is simple obedience—do what God commands us to do. Failure to obey biblical expectations amounts to a denial of the faith. And so we must commit ourselves to simple obedience to God's commands.

At this point in Deuteronomy, Moses begins reviewing God's commands to the nation of Israel. Since they are standing at the border of the PL and just about ready to cross the Jordan and begin the conquest, Israel must understand how important it is to obey God's laws. If they obey, they will enjoy success; if they disobey, they face disaster.

And we'll also note multiple warnings in this section (4:9, 15, 23). Moses tells his audience to observe, to be very careful, and to take heed to God's commands, lest they experience God's chastisement—vs. 24—“the Lord your God is a consuming fire.” So we see here both the carrot and the stick—both rewards for faithful obedience and the threat of punishment for disobedience.

Let's consider how Moses exhorts and warns the people here. And this is an exhortation and warning to us as well.

### **I. Exhortation to obey the Lord's commands (4:1–14)**

- A. .1b The first verse focuses on the importance of obeying God's law. If they obey, they will live and possess the land.

In the first two verses here, we find *three words for God's laws*.

1. .1 The “statutes” (קִּהְ) are the ordinances, the tasks, the laws, the conditions commanded by God.

One author said that God’s statutes or decrees “are the ‘permanent authoritative rulings’ that nothing can be added to or subtracted from.”<sup>1</sup>

2. “Judgments” (מִשְׁפָּטִים) are God’s expressions of justice, decisions God has made, laws stating what is right.
3. A “command” (צִוָּה vs. 2a) is a charge, an order, a commission. The word “commandment” (מִצְוָה v.2b) stems from that verb.

Moses is emphasizing how important it was for the people to obey the laws, decisions, and orders that God had given. Only if they did that would they “live, and go in and possess the land” (vs. 1). The key to success was obedience to God’s commands.

**App:** We are obligated to obey what God commands. God, as the creator and Savior, has the right to tell us what to do. Much of the Christian life boils down to simple obedience to God’s commands.

Sadly, many Christians today ignore or neglect God’s commands. People accuse us of legalism if we talk about the importance of obedience. But promoting obedience is not legalism; it’s Bible.

- B. .2 Don’t add anything to or remove anything from the commands that God has already given. These commands are permanent and unchanging.

**App:** God’s word is the authority. One of the great errors that Israel committed and that people today continue to commit is adding to the Word or taking from it. We must not make our own ideas the authority. God’s word is the authority, not ourselves.

- C. .3 Warning about what God did to those who disobeyed him.

Baal Peor was the place where the Israelites committed adultery with the women of Moab; 24,000 people died in that instance (Num 25:1-9).

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<sup>1</sup> Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 5, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 105.

Numbers 25:1–3 *Now Israel ... began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. 2 They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate [with them] and bowed down to their gods. 3 So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel.*

Baal was a fertility god, and part of worshiping Baal was to engage in immoral acts. If Israel became idolatrous as they did at Baal Peor, God would destroy them. The only way to enjoy success in the PL was to avoid idolatry, refrain from sinful relationships, and remain loyal to God.

**App:** (Jer 10:2) “Learn not the way of the heathen.” The NT stresses that we must be separate from the ungodly world around us and not pick up its bad ideas and behaviors (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 6:14f). We must avoid relationships with others if those relationships compromise our obedience to God. Our relationship with God must come first.

- D. .4 Those who “held fast to the Lord” are still alive.

The people who indulged in sinful behavior died because of their sin. Those who were loyal and faithful to God were still living.

**App:** “The wages of sin is death.” In many cases, sin results in death. I wonder how many deaths are directly related to sinful behavior. We all die because of sin, but there are certain sins that often result in or hasten death. E.g., drug/alcohol abuse, certain crimes, particular immoral activities lead to diseases. We prolong our lives when we hold fast to the Lord.

- E. .6 Obedience amounts to wisdom in the sight of the pagan people around them. Obeying God’s law would make Israel different from their pagan neighbors.

**App:** Likewise, when we obey God’s law today, we stand out from our pagan culture. Jesus tells us to shine like a city on a hill. Paul tells us to shine as a light in a corrupt world. The unsaved world should notice a distinct difference between us and non-Christians.

The problem is that many Christians strive to be very much like the world. They seek acceptance and approval in this sinful and broken world. They adopt the wisdom of this world instead of the wisdom of God. We should stand out from the pagan culture around us because of our obedience to God’s law.

.6end Some people might find our commitment to biblical values attractive and wise.

- F. .7-8 There is no other nation like Israel to whom God has given his commands.

Israel was a distinct nation with a particular relationship to God as God's chosen people. No other nation had the same relationship to God as Israel did. Israel was God's chosen people.

**App:** That is an important interpretive principle—God's relationship with Israel was distinct. What was required of them was not the same as what was required of other nations.

We see a major distinction between Israel and the church.

- G. .9 be careful to obey. Note the words—"heed...keep...teach"—success depends on faithful obedience to God's laws. Don't forget these things. But it's not enough to know these things; they must do them, follow them, observe them, practice them.

Note that the verse starts with "only..." The construction is a strong and urgent appeal—they must be careful to watch themselves closely.

The besetting sin for Israel was idolatry. If they forgot God's work for them in the past, they could slip into idolatry. Or if they failed to teach these things to their children, the next generation could become idolatrous.

.9b, 10end "teach them to your children and your grandchildren."

**App:** Parents are primarily responsible to convey the faith to the next generation. We must make every effort to pass these things on to our children. Every family with children at home should have some strategy for doing this. Some children perhaps will not accept the faith of their parents, but we must make every effort to pass it along to them.

Probably the most effective way to pass the faith on to the next generation is having regular family devotions. Of course, the church helps in that process, but the influence of the parents is most significant.

We must always be mindful of the next generation. What are we doing to pass on the faith to the next generation and help them become strong and resilient in the faith?

H. .10f The reference here (Ex 19:16f) is to when God spoke to the people from Mt. Sinai, they saw the fire, smoke, lightning, and the sound of the trumpet. The people were shocked and terrified by this experience. This was such a fearful experience that the people wanted to avoid having it again. They asked for Moses to speak to them instead of God. The people rightfully feared God.

**Quote:** Fearing God (.10c) is becoming so acutely aware of His moral purity and omnipotence that one is genuinely afraid to disobey Him. Fearing God also includes responding to Him in worship, service, trust, obedience, and commitment.<sup>2</sup>

People today, even professing Christians, often lack a proper fear of God. They are often flippant and casual about God; they have little reverence or respect for God. The experience of the Israelites on Mt. Sinai revealed God’s awesome character—he is to be greatly feared.

I. .12b Moses emphasizes that they saw “no form.” That is very important; God did not reveal a form to them because God, in his essence/being/nature, has no form; God is pure Spirit; he has no bodily presence. And that implies that it is wrong to make images of God (more about that in the next part).

J. .13 God gave the people the 10 Commandments.

Moses will repeat the 10 Commandments in chapter 5—we’ll consider them in depth when we get to that passage.

**Trans:** The first part of the chapter amounts to many exhortations to obey God’s commands. We need the same exhortations today. A large part of the Christian life is simple obedience to God’s commands.

James 1:22 *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*

II. Exhortation to avoid idolatry—or else! (4:15–31)

A. .15 Moses repeats that the people heard God’s voice on Mt. Sinai but saw no form. God is not like the idols of the pagans. We don’t represent God through an image or form. We don’t worship God through a created object.

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<sup>2</sup> Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 269.

B. .16-18 Thus, it is unlawful to make a form and worship it.

One of the marks of paganism is worshipping a god through a form or object—idolatry. That’s what the Egyptians and virtually all of Israel’s pagan neighbors did—they worshipped idols made from stone, metal, or wood. Israel must intentionally avoid any kind of idolatry. God is a jealous God; he will not tolerate false worship.

**Quote:** [Idolatry was] the chief sin according to Deuteronomy, and runs counter to Israel’s imageless worship of God. God was to be heard and ... obeyed.<sup>3</sup>

**App:** It’s corruption and sin to use an image or figure representing God in Christian worship. We cannot image God because God is spirit. The only image of God we worship is Jesus—he was the “express image” of the invisible God (Col 1:15; cf. Heb 1:3). He’s God in the flesh.

Are there any Christian groups who worship God through images? Yes, in particular, Greek Orthodox and RCs. I don’t see how you can kneel down or bow down before an image and not violate this command.

We don’t use images to portray the invisible God. You don’t see any images in our church.

C. .19 They must also not worship anything in creation—sun, moon, or stars. This was also common among the pagans.

**Quote:** the heavenly bodies were among the most worshipped of the deities within the powerful nations of the Ancient Near East, especially the *sun* and the *moon*.<sup>4</sup>

The heavenly bodies ought to remind us of God’s power as creator—these things are merely the work of his fingers. They are part of the creation, not deities to be worshipped.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 5, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 108.

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Psalm 8:3–4 *When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained, What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him?*

**App:** Christians should avoid all these kind of pagan practices—like astrology, palm reading, fortune telling, horoscopes, etc. These are aspects of paganism, not Christianity.

- D. .20 “the iron furnace” – i.e., not a furnace made out of iron, but an iron-smelting furnace. The fire used to smelt metal would have been the hottest fire then known to man.
- E. .21-22 Moses acknowledges that he will not be able to cross the Jordan into the PL. He was very disappointed about this. He will not be there to insure that they keep the law.

The implication is that if God prevented Moses from entering the PL because of his sin, God could also chastise the entire nation if they indulge in sin.

- F. .23 Take heed not to make an image. To make an image of God would be to repudiate the covenant God made with Israel.

He repeats the same warning—vs. 15 “Take careful heed...” vs. 23 “take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant...” So this is a stern warning to avoid idolatry.

- G. .24 Threat—“our God is a consuming fire.” The imagery here is that God purifies what is precious and destroys what is worthless. He is a jealous God who will not tolerate idolatry. He will tolerate no rivals.

**Quote:** God cannot tolerate the worship of anyone or anything else on the part of his very own people because such worship is the essence of sinfulness and self-corruption.<sup>5</sup>

Also interesting is the fact that Moses describes Egypt as the “iron furnace” (vs. 20) and also God is a “consuming fire.” The threat is that Israel will be burned up under God’s judgment and wrath if they indulge in idolatry. So this is a very stern warning to avoid idolatry.

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<sup>5</sup> Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 46.

**App:** God presents himself in very stern terms. Paul mentions the “goodness and severity of God” (Rom 11:22). We should take our relationship to God very seriously; we should not be frivolous or casual in our thoughts about God. We don’t joke about God; we are not careless about how we think or talk about God. God is a consuming fire. We must have a proper fear and respect for God.

- H. .25-29 Moses, as a prophet, foresees a future in which Israel becomes idolatrous. He can see them corrupting themselves by worshipping carved images. So he continues to warn them about idolatry and its consequences. If the people neglected this warning and indulged in idolatry, the results would be disaster—they would “utterly perish from the land... [you] will be utterly destroyed” (vs. 26).

Vss. 27-28 is exactly what happened to Israel a few centuries later—the Assyrians and the Babylonians conquered the PL and took most of the people into captivity—largely because of their idolatry.

- I. .29-30 But even when people sin, God is still gracious. If you return to the Lord, who is merciful and gracious, he will hear and forgive.

God will forgive even heinous sins like idolatry and adultery if the people return to the Lord “with all your heart and with all your soul.” God is a “consuming fire” who is full of judgment and wrath, but at the same time, he delights in showing mercy when people repent from the heart.

**App:** He’s describing genuine repentance—“when you turn to the Lord” (.30b). Even if we have indulged in serious sin, we can always repent and return to the Lord if we do so “with all your heart and with all your soul” (.29). Cf. the Prodigal Son.

**Trans:** This whole long section is an exhortation to avoid idolatry. We may not be bowing down to idols like the pagans did, but if anything takes the place of God in our lives, it’s an idol, and we must get rid of it.

### III. Exhortation to acknowledge the Lord as God (4:32–40)

- A. .32 There is no other nation who has had such great things happen to them.

The Israelites had experienced one of the greatest events of history—the exodus of Israel from Egypt through the 10 plagues. They had unheard of experiences because of God’s direct intervention in their lives.



Vss 33f describe their experience.

1. .33, 36 They heard God's voice—that was on Mt. Sinai.
2. .34 They escaped from Egypt through miraculous means.  
.35 Lit. "the Lord Himself is the God." There is no other.
3. .37 They saw God's great power. These events were the extraordinary displays of God's love and power.
4. .38 God drove out greater nations before them.
5. .39 "heaven above...earth beneath" – God operates both in the supernatural realm and in the natural realm. He is the Creator and he acts within creation.
6. .39-40 Therefore, since God is the true and only God—there is no other. In light of all that God had done for them, they must obey his commands. Obedience will lead to long life and other benefits.

*Proverbs 3:1–2 My son, do not forget my law, But let your heart keep my commands; For length of days and long life And peace they will add to you.*

**App:** While we are not Israel, the same principle still applies today: when we obediently serve the Lord, we enjoy God's blessings. In fact, Ephesians 6 repeats the promise of long life for those who obey the Lord. Righteous behavior tends to lengthen life, while sinful behavior tends to shorten it.

God's love for us should motivate us toward obedience and loyalty. Cf. Jn 14:15—those who love God must keep his commandments.

B. The Transjordanian Cities of Refuge (4:41–43)

.42 Moses set apart three cities of refuge—Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan. Moses will say more about these cities in chapter 19, cf. Num 35:9f.

In this part of Deuteronomy, Moses is exhorting his people to obey God's commands, to avoid idolatry, and to acknowledge the Lord as the one and only God. If they obey, God will bless them. They'll enter the PL and destroy their enemies. But if they disobey, and especially if they engage in idolatry, God, as a consuming fire, will destroy them. God had allowed Israel to experience many remarkable things; no nation had the privileges that they had. The reasonable result should be that they obey the voice of the Lord with loyalty and commitment.

We are not the nation of Israel, but if you are saved, you are a son of Abraham by faith. We are obligated to obey God's commands that pertain to us. As a general rule, obedience results in blessing; disobedience results in chastisement. We should obey God's commands out of a sense of loyalty and gratitude for what God has done for us.

Is there a particular command that you are neglecting or ignoring?

If we violate God's commands, we face God's chastisement, and that chastisement might be severe. The AH quotes this passage from Deuteronomy—"our God is a consuming fire." But God is also merciful and gracious. If we repent and turn from sin, he will forgive and bless us.

We must set ourselves apart from the heathen and not adopt their behaviors. What makes us different from the unsaved is the fact that we are careful to obey God's commands.

*De 4:40 You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong [your] days in the land which the LORD your God is giving you for all time.*