

Deuteronomy 4:1-14
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Now, O Israel, listen [שמעו *shama* – to hear, with the idea of obeying] to the statutes and the judgments [i.e., written laws and case laws] which I am teaching you to perform [knowledge precedes application], so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you [obedience to God results in blessing].² “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it [i.e., don’t modify the law], that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you [only obey].³ “Your eyes have seen what the LORD has done in the case of Baal-peor [concerning second-generation Israelites], for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the LORD your God has destroyed them from among you [because they worshipped idols; see Num 25:1-9].⁴ “But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you [because of their obedience].⁵ “See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me [Moses was under divine mandate to teach God’s Law], that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it [to keep God’s Law and live; cf. Deut 8:1; 30:19-20].⁶ “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.’ [wisdom means learning and living God’s Word in order to develop a godly character]⁷ “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? [the pagan gods were thought to be busy and aloof from the activities and concerns of people]⁸ “Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today? [by implication...none]⁹ “Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently [i.e., intentionally and constantly focus on God and His Word], so that you do not forget [שכח *shakach* – to forget, so as to ignore God and His commands; cf. Deut 8:11-20] the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons [i.e., pass on wisdom and godliness through instruction and right living].¹⁰ “Remember [specifically] the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when the LORD said to me, ‘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 [pass along God’s Word].’¹¹ “You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the *very* heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud and thick gloom [visual witness of God’s power].¹² “Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form [which the Israelites might have been tempted to fashion into an idol]—only a voice [verbal witness].¹³ “So He declared to you His covenant [ברית *berith* – covenant, contract; agreement for a committed relationship] which He commanded you to perform, *that is*, the Ten Commandments [the moral code required for the relationship; Ex 20:1-24]; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone [identical copies, one for each party].¹⁴ “The LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might perform them in the land where you are going over to possess it.

Summary:

The main point of this pericope is that Israel was to listen to God's statutes and judgments, obey them, and teach them to their children and grandchildren so the covenant people could take possession of the land and live prosperous lives. This section marks a literary turning point from historical review to giving instruction for living, drawing from Israel's historical failings up to this point. Moses now focuses on the statutes and judgments so that they would "live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you" (Deut 4:1b). *Statutes* likely refers to written laws, and *judgments* to case laws. Israel was not to modify these statutes and judgments in any way (Deut 4:2). Moses recalled to their memory a recent event in which some of the second-generation Israelites had already been disobedient at Baal-peor and worshipped idols (Deut 4:3; cf. Num 25:1-9), and God judged them for their rebellion (Deut 4:4). In contrast, Israel was to learn and keep God's statutes and judgments which God transmitted through Moses so the people would possess the land of Canaan and not forfeit it as their parents had done (Deut 4:5). Israel will show their wisdom and understanding when they keep and follow God's laws, which others will see and acknowledge (Deut 4:6). Speaking rhetorically, Moses asks if any nation has a god who is as near to its people as Yahweh was to Israel, who answers when they call (Deut 4:7). Or if there was a nation with statutes and judgments as wise as those transmitted from Yahweh through Moses (Deut 4:8)? The implied answer is no! Moses then warns them, saying, "Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life" (Deut 4:9a). Israel had an obligation in the relationship which was not to forget what they had seen and learned. The word *forget* translates the Hebrew verb שָׁכַח *shakach*, and is used by Moses to refer to the danger that one invites to oneself when God's commands are ignored (Deut 8:11); a danger that is most likely to occur when His people become prosperous (Deut 8:12-14), and turn to idolatry (Deut 8:19). Not only was Israel to preserve and obey God's commands, but they were to model and teach them to their children (Deut 4:9b). Though Israel's priests had a special responsibility to teach God's Word, the parents were called to teach it to their children (cf. Deut 6:6-7; 20-25; 11:19). Passing on God's Word was very important, for Israel was always only one generation away from forfeiting God's blessings if they failed to obey and transmit God's Word to the next generation. Moses reminds his audience that they had personally witnessed God's presence and heard His voice at Mount Sinai (Deut 4:10-11), and it was at that place where "He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, *that is*, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone" (Deut 4:13). The Ten Commandments refer to the objective laws that reflect God's moral character, and what He expected from His people if they were to walk with Him and know His blessings. Moses informed them, "The LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might perform them in the land where you are going over to possess it" (Deut 4:14). Success and blessing for Israel meant learning and living God's Word. Of course, this assumes positive volition on the part of His people and the transmission of His laws from one generation to the next through the institution of the family.

