

## ***Present Truth in Deuteronomy*** ***For What Nation Is There So Great?***

Lesson #6 for November 6, 2021

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 4:1-10,32-35; Matthew 5:13-16; 15:1-9; Numbers 25:1-15; 1 Corinthians 10:13.

1. In Deuteronomy, Moses gave four sermons as we have noted, reviewing whatever he could of Israel's history over the prior 40 years. In chapter 4, he turned to giving them serious instruction based on what had already happened to them. And he began with words that mean: "So, now, listen." Imagine how different the history of our world would be if Israel had taken those words seriously and had lived by them.
2. Moses was seeking to impress upon them the importance of listening carefully, accepting the message that God was giving them, obeying it, and applying it to their lives on a daily basis. Look at these first words from Deuteronomy 4:

**Deuteronomy 4:1-2:** <sup>1</sup>Then Moses said to the people, "Obey all the laws that I am teaching you, and you will live and occupy the land which the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. <sup>2</sup>**Do not add anything to what I command you, and do not take anything away.** Obey the commands of the LORD your God that I have given you."—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Deuteronomy 4:1-2). New York: American Bible Society [abbreviated as *Good News Bible*].<sup>†</sup>

3. Notice the very important instructions, admonishing them not to add anything to what God had commanded and not to take anything away. Does that remind you of some instructions given at the end of the Bible?

**Revelation 22:19:** And if anyone takes anything away from the prophetic words of this book, God will take away from them their share of the fruit of the tree of life and of the Holy City, which are described in this book.—*Good News Bible*.\*

4. But, who would want to change, take away, or add to God's instructions, His statutes, and judgments?

Satan has been persevering and untiring in his efforts to prosecute the work he began in heaven, to change the law of God. **He has succeeded in making the world believe the theory he presented in heaven before his fall, that the law of God was faulty, and needed revising. A large part of the professed Christian church, by their attitude, if not by their words, show that they have accepted the same error.**—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*,\* Book 2, 107.2.<sup>†</sup>

5. If you review the history of the children of Israel through much of the Old Testament, they were ignoring statutes that God had given them. But, when we come to the New Testament, the **Pharisees were intent on adding statutes that God had not given, thus making it very difficult for people to keep all of their directions.**

**Matthew 15:1-9:** <sup>1</sup>Then some Pharisees and teachers of the Law came from Jerusalem to Jesus and asked him, <sup>2</sup> "Why is it that your disciples disobey the teaching handed down by our ancestors? They don't wash their hands in the proper way before they eat!" [There was no specific instruction on washing hands in the Old Testament!]

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, "And why do you disobey God's command and follow your own teaching? <sup>4</sup>For God said, 'Respect your father and your mother,' and

'Whoever curses his father or his mother is to be put to death.'<sup>5</sup> But you teach that if a person has something he could use to help his father or mother, but says, 'This belongs to God,'<sup>6</sup> he does not need to honour his father. In this way you disregard God's command, in order to follow your own teaching.<sup>7</sup> You hypocrites! How right Isaiah was when he prophesied about you!

<sup>8</sup> 'These people, says God, honour me with their words, but their heart is really far away from me.

<sup>9</sup> It is no use for them to worship me,

because they teach human rules as though they were my laws!' —*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*</sup> [Jesus was quoting Isaiah 29:13.]<sup>†</sup>

6. Which group of Jews do you think was farther from God's plans for their lives? The Old Testament people who were ignoring many of God's instructions? Or, the New Testament Pharisees who were adding so many things to God's instructions? Or, both?
7. **Are there some forces in our church today that want to enforce more strict observance of all the church doctrines and requirements while others want to ignore many of what they regard as legalistic requirements?**
8. Remember that while the children of Israel were camped on the plains across the flooded Jordan River from Jericho and Moses was writing the book of Deuteronomy, the children of Israel were joining the nations of Midian and Moab in what turned out to be a fiasco.

**Deuteronomy 4:3-4:** <sup>3</sup> "You yourselves saw what the LORD did at Mount Peor. He destroyed everyone who worshipped Baal there, <sup>4</sup>but those of you who were faithful to the LORD your God are still alive today."—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*</sup>

9. Do you remember the details of that story?

**Numbers 25:1-18:** <sup>1</sup>When the Israelites were camped in the Valley of Acacia, the men began to have sexual intercourse with the Moabite women who were there. <sup>2</sup>These women invited them to sacrificial feasts, where the god of Moab was worshipped. The Israelites ate the food and worshipped the god <sup>3</sup>Baal of Peor. So the LORD was angry with them <sup>4</sup>and said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of Israel and, in obedience to me, execute them in broad daylight, and then I will no longer be angry with the people." <sup>5</sup>Moses said to the officials, "Each of you is to kill every man in your tribe who has become a worshipper of Baal of Peor."

<sup>6</sup> One of the Israelites took a Midianite woman into his tent in the sight of Moses and the whole community, while they were mourning at the entrance of the Tent of the LORD's presence. <sup>7</sup>When Phinehas, the son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron the priest, saw this, he got up and left the assembly. He took a spear, <sup>8</sup>followed the man and the woman into the tent, and drove the spear through both of them. In this way the epidemic that was destroying Israel was stopped, <sup>9</sup>but it had already killed 24,000 people. [This was an epidemic of sin!]

<sup>10</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>11</sup> "Because of what Phinehas has done, I am no longer angry with the people of Israel. He refused to tolerate the worship of any god but me, and that is why I did not destroy them in my anger. <sup>12</sup>So tell him that I am making a covenant with him that is valid for all time to come. <sup>13</sup>He and his descendants are permanently established as priests, because he did not tolerate any rivals to me and brought about forgiveness for the people's sin."

<sup>14</sup> The name of the Israelite who was killed with the Midianite woman was Zimri son of Salu, the head of a family in the tribe of Simeon. <sup>15</sup>The woman's name

was Cozbi. Zur, her father, was chief of a group of Midianite clans.

<sup>16</sup> The LORD commanded Moses, <sup>17</sup> “**Attack the Midianites and destroy them,** <sup>18</sup>because of the evil they did to you when they deceived you at Peor, and because of Cozbi, who was killed at the time of the epidemic at Peor.”—*Good News Bible*.\*†‡

10. To remind us of how corrupting pagan influences can be, we need to remember that the Midianites were descendents of Abraham (Genesis 25:1-2) and in-laws of Moses! (Exodus 2:11-25) What do you think Moses’s wife thought as the children of Israel were instructed to kill the Midianites, her relatives? The Moabites were descendants of Lot.
11. But, God could not allow the children of Israel to be falling into pagan practices and idolatry. If they were, indeed, going to be a witness for God to the nations around them, this was just the opposite of what they were supposed to be doing. God had to stop it right at the start.
12. Some commentators would like to suggest that this was “spiritual harlotry” because Israel was going after pagan gods and practices. But, the rest of the history of what happened to the children of Israel, especially in the northern kingdom, tells us that this was literal prostitution and harlotry.

**Hosea 4:12-14:** <sup>12</sup> “They ask for revelations from a piece of wood! A stick tells them what they want to know! They have left me. Like a woman who becomes a prostitute, they have given themselves to other gods. <sup>13</sup>At sacred places on the mountain tops they offer sacrifices, and on the hills they burn incense under tall, spreading trees, because the shade is so pleasant!

“As a result, your daughters serve as prostitutes, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery. <sup>14</sup>Yet I will not punish them for this, because you yourselves go off with temple prostitutes, and together with them you offer pagan sacrifices. As the proverb says, ‘A people without sense will be ruined.’”—*Good News Bible*.\* [Did Jesus explain any of these things when He was here?]<sup>†</sup>

13. At the beginning of Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness, even at the foot of Mount Sinai, they had become involved in sexual immorality and worshiping the golden calf. (Exodus 32) At the very end of those 40 years, they had done basically the same thing (Numbers 25) by adopting pagan practices and getting involved in immoral so-called worship ceremonies.
14. Doesn’t it seem like after 40 years of instruction from Moses and guidance from God, they would have learned not to make this kind of mistake? How could it happen? Could it happen in our day? **What would be a modern equivalent?** Our environment is permeated with immorality!
15. **Our world is steeped in immorality and anti-Christian ideas and practices.** Would it be possible for us to be influenced by some of those ideas and practices to corrupt our religion today? **What would Satan love more than that?**
16. About 24,000 people died as a result of that apostasy just before they were to enter the Promised Land! Although it is hard for us to imagine, the children of Israel that remained faithful to God were specifically told to go to their relatives and friends, those who had become involved in this pagan idolatry, and kill them! This does not seem right to us in our day!

**Deuteronomy 4:4:** “But those of you who were faithful to the LORD your God are still alive today.”—*Good News Bible*.\*

**Deuteronomy 4:4:** But ye that did cleave unto the LORD your God are alive every one of you this day.—*The Holy Bible: King James Version*.\* (2009). (Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version., Deuteronomy 4:4). Bellingham, WA:

Logos Research Systems, Inc.

17. It specifically talks about the men who were killed because they were involved in the sexual practices. What happened to their wives and children? There was no middle ground in this situation. It is hard for us to imagine even burying 24,000 bodies under those circumstances!

**Matthew 12:30:** “Anyone who is not for me is really against me; anyone who does not help me gather is really scattering.”—*Good News Bible*.\*

The Hebrew word for “did cleave,” *dbq*, often points to a strong commitment to adhere to something outside of oneself. The same Hebrew word root is used in Genesis 2:24, when a man shall leave his family and “cleave” unto his wife (see also *Ruth 1:14*). It, in this context, appeared four more times in Deuteronomy (*Deut. 10:20, Deut. 11:22, Deut. 13:4, Deut. 30:20*), and in each case the idea was the same: they, the people, were to cleave (cling) to their God. That is, they were to give themselves to Him and to draw power and strength from Him.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* for Tuesday, November 2. §

**Genesis 2:24:** That is why a man leaves his father and mother and **is united with his wife**, and they become one.—*Good News Bible*.\*†

**Ruth 1:14:** Again they started crying. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye and went back home, but Ruth held on to her.—*Good News Bible*.\*

**Deuteronomy 13:4:** “Follow the LORD and honour him; obey him and keep his commands; worship him and **be faithful to him**.”—*Good News Bible*.\*†

**Deuteronomy 10:20:** “Obey the LORD your God and worship only him. **Be faithful to him** and make your promises in his name alone.”—*Good News Bible*.\*†

**Deuteronomy 11:22:** “Obey faithfully all the laws that I have given you: Love the LORD your God, do everything he commands, and **be faithful to him**.”—*Good News Bible*.\*†

**Deuteronomy 30:20:** “Love the LORD your God, obey him and **be faithful to him**, and then you and your descendants will live long in the land that he promised to give your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”—*Good News Bible*.\*†

18. Notice the very important point that God gives instructions. He gives clear guidance; but, we must do the cleaving or the clinging to Him. **God refuses to use force on anyone. His kingdom is the kingdom of love, and love cannot be forced.**

The earth was dark through misapprehension of God. That the gloomy shadows might be lightened, that the world might be brought back to God, Satan’s deceptive power was to be broken. **This could not be done by force. The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan.** This work only one Being in all the universe could do. Only He who knew the height and depth of the love of God could make it known. Upon the world’s dark night the Sun of Righteousness must rise, “with healing in His wings.” Malachi 4:2.—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*\* 22.1.†

19. God is not asking us to fight the Devil in our own strength. The New Testament promises help.

**Jude 24:** **To him who is able to keep you from falling**, and to bring you faultless and joyful before his glorious presence—*Good News Bible*.\*†

**1 Corinthians 10:13:** Every test that you have experienced is the kind that normally comes to people. But **God keeps his promise, and he will not allow you to be tested beyond your power to remain firm**; at the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out.—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*†</sup>

20. God may provide help in strange and unexpected ways. But, we need to do the choosing. We need to do the committing to His ways. No temptation should overpower us. So, how can we be helped by prayer? Bible study? Witnessing? Worship? And fellowship with other Christians? Aren't those the ways we get to know God better?

21. In Deuteronomy 4:5-10, we have some of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture. Moses was trying to convince the children of Israel why it was so important for them to obey God. He told them what God wanted them to do. And then, he told them why God is so powerful and that they could depend upon Him. He reminded them of the ways that God had led them in the past.

**Deuteronomy 4:5-10:** <sup>5</sup> “I have taught you all the laws, as the LORD my God told me to do. Obey them in the land that you are about to invade and occupy. <sup>6</sup>Obey them faithfully, and this will show the people of other nations how wise you are. When they hear of all these laws, they will say, ‘What wisdom and understanding this great nation has!’

<sup>7</sup> “No other nation, no matter how great, has a god who is so near when they need him as the LORD our God is to us. He answers us whenever we call for help. <sup>8</sup>No other nation, no matter how great, has laws so just as those that I have taught you today. <sup>9</sup>Be on your guard! Make certain that you do not forget, as long as you live, what you have seen with your own eyes. Tell your children and your grandchildren <sup>10</sup>about the day you stood in the presence of the LORD your God at Mount Sinai, when he said to me, ‘Assemble the people. I want them to hear what I have to say, so that they will learn to obey me as long as they live and so that they will teach their children to do the same.’”—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*†</sup> [That was a real God!]<sup>‡</sup>

22. God wanted Israel to remember that they had been called and chosen and God had gone to extraordinary lengths including the plagues on Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the Ten Commandments, etc. to bring them out to the Promised Land. It was time for them to trust in His power and enter the land following His guidance.

23. Remember that this land had been promised to Abraham's descendants 400 years earlier.

**Genesis 18:18:** “His descendants will become a great and mighty nation, and through him I will bless all the nations.”—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*†</sup>

24. But, making the Israelites into a great nation was not just so they could enjoy those privileges; they were to be examples to all the world.

**But the purpose of making them great was that they could be a “blessing” (Gen. 12:2) to “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3, NKJV). And though the ultimate blessing would be that Jesus, the Messiah, would come through their bloodline, until then they were to be the light of the world. “** ‘I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth’ ’ ” (Isa. 49:6, NKJV). Not that salvation was found in them, but that, through them, the true God, who alone can save, was to be revealed.

**Israel was worshiping and serving the God who created the cosmos, the**

**Lord of heaven and earth; the pagans were worshiping rocks, stones, wood, and demons (Deut. 32:17, Ps. 106:37).**

**What a stark difference!**—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Wednesday, November 3.<sup>†§</sup> [How might a child that saw the events at Mount Sinai respond to a pagan child bragging about his carved “god”?]†

25. God was begging them to take Him seriously.

**Deuteronomy 4:32-35:** <sup>32</sup> “Search the past, the time before you were born, all the way back to the time when God created humanity on the earth. Search the entire earth. **Has anything as great as this ever happened before?** Has anyone ever heard of anything like this? <sup>33</sup>Have any people ever lived after hearing a god speak to them from a fire, as you have? <sup>34</sup>Has any god ever dared to go and take a people from another nation and make them his own, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt? Before your very eyes he used his great power and strength; he brought plagues and war, worked miracles and wonders, and caused terrifying things to happen. <sup>35</sup>**The LORD has shown you this, to prove to you that he alone is God and that there is no other.**”—*Good News Bible.\*†*

26. And remember these words which we reviewed earlier:

**Deuteronomy 4:6-7:** <sup>6</sup> “Obey them faithfully, and this will show the people of other nations how wise you are. When they hear of all these laws, they will say, ‘What wisdom and understanding this great nation has!’

<sup>7</sup> “No other nation, no matter how great, has a god who is so near when they need him as the LORD our God is to us. He answers us whenever we call for help.”—*Good News Bible.\**

27. To us—so many centuries, even millennia, later—reading these passages, we might get the idea that it is God’s statues and judgments that are full of wisdom and understanding. But, in the direct instructions from God, **it was to be Israel following the laws of God which would prove how wise they were.** They were to live out God’s directions. Other nations would say: “What wisdom and understanding this great nation has!”

28. And despite the fact that the other nations were supposed to see this wisdom and understanding in the behavior of the Israelites themselves, those other nations were supposed to recognize that it was because they were following God’s instructions and depending upon His power. Compare Exodus 23:20-33 with Deuteronomy 20:10-18.

29. Unfortunately, even in their conquest of the land, they insisted on doing it their way with their swords and their battles so that they would get the credit for conquering the land. **They did not let God do it for them for fear that He would get the credit!**

30. Today, could we gain wisdom and understanding by careful observance of God’s directions and instructions?

Their obedience to the law of God would make them marvels of prosperity before the nations of the world. He who could give them wisdom and skill in all cunning work would continue to be their teacher, and would ennoble and elevate them through obedience to His laws. If obedient, they would be preserved from the diseases that afflicted other nations and would be blessed with vigor of intellect. The glory of God, His majesty and power, were to be revealed in all their prosperity. They were to be a kingdom of priests and princes. **God furnished them with every facility for becoming the greatest nation on the earth.**—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons\** 288.3.<sup>†</sup>

31. Jesus Himself said that people were supposed to see our good works and glorify God.

**Matthew 5:13-16:** <sup>13</sup> “You are like salt for the whole human race. But if salt loses its saltiness, there is no way to make it salty again. It has become worthless, so it is thrown out and people trample on it.

<sup>14</sup> “You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.

<sup>15</sup>No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.”—*Good News Bible*.\*

32. This whole sequence of events was part of the much larger great controversy in which Satan has done everything possible to overthrow the government of God.

From the very beginning of the great controversy in heaven it has been Satan’s purpose to overthrow the law of God. It was to accomplish this that he entered upon his rebellion against the Creator, and though he was cast out of heaven he has continued the same warfare upon the earth. **To deceive men, and thus lead them to transgress God’s law, is the object which he has steadfastly pursued. Whether this be accomplished by casting aside the law altogether, or by rejecting one of its precepts, the result will be ultimately the same.** He that offends “in one point,” manifests contempt for the whole law; his influence and example are on the side of transgression; he becomes “guilty of all.” James 2:10.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*\* 582.1.†

33. Notice how Ellen White described what happened at Baal Peor.

They ventured upon the forbidden ground, and were entangled in the snare of Satan. Beguiled with music and dancing, and allured by the beauty of heathen vestals, they cast off their fealty [fidelity or faithfulness] to Jehovah. **As they united in mirth and feasting, indulgence in wine beclouded their senses and broke down the barriers of self-control.** Passion had full sway; and having defiled their consciences by lewdness, they were persuaded to bow down to idols. They offered sacrifice upon heathen altars and participated in the most degrading rites.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*\* 454.3.††

34. How are we responding to God’s instructions to us? Are we facing up to the time of transition at the second coming of Jesus Christ? Think about all the instructions and help that we as a church have been given. Are we studying those instructions and following them? Do you think you would be willing to take a sword or even a gun and kill other people who had been disobeying God if you were instructed to do so? By God? Some have claimed to do that!

What makes a nation great is generally what it achieves, its political power, the surface of its land, its exploits in war, or its wealth. Nothing of that sort characterizes the nation of Israel when the people hear Moses’ compliment. Moses’ rhetorical question, “What other nation is so great?” (*Deut. 4:8, NIV*), implies that this is the greatest nation on earth. This people of former slaves, of homeless migrants, hardly fit the definition of “a great nation.” What makes Israel so great is not what it did or did not do; it is not who the nation is or is not. It is God. A story about Prussian King Frederick II captures this mystery. The king asked his personal physician, “Could you give me at least one single evidence of the existence of God?” The man answered, “Your Majesty, Israel.” (For the diverse sources of this anecdote, see Steven Paas, *Christian Zionism Examined* [Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2019].) **Indeed, Moses’ description of**

**the grandeur of Israel baffles our mind. It is all about God and His laws.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 80.<sup>†§</sup>**

35. God's law is perfect. It is wise. In fact, it is divine. But, it will not help us unless we adopt and practice it, cleaving to God, depending fully and completely on His blessing.
36. As we noted last week in discussing Matthew 7:12, the golden rule and God's other laws come from heaven; they are different from all other laws. While there were clearly some similarities between the rules and laws of the surrounding cultures in Moses's day, there were some very important fundamental differences.

In Babylon, the death penalty was required for some thefts, while the Bible requires financial compensation. In Moses' law, human life prevailed over material values, and the law was the same for all persons. More important, Moses' laws differ from other eastern laws in that Mosaic law always refers to God. While in Middle Eastern legal documents the reference to God is rare and occasional and only formal, in the introduction, and sometimes in the conclusion, biblical laws are imbued with this reference to God, which is used as a leitmotif [*sic*] throughout the text. The law is not the result of human consultations and elaborations. The law is received as a gift; it is a revelation from above.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 81.<sup>‡</sup>

37. God's laws are clear and sharp. He does not wait for us to experience adultery or murder to see whether it is okay to do those things. He gives the instructions in advance.
38. It is interesting to note that in God's law, the Ten Commandments, reference is made back to creation. This implies that His laws are for all mankind. Furthermore, as was common in the days of Moses, the most important part of the law was located right in the center of the law as opposed to being at the end as would be common in our day. Thus, we see that the fourth commandment with God's seal in it is right in the center of the Ten Commandments.

Because they are related to Creation, the religious and moral laws of the Decalogue, as well as the dietary laws of clean and unclean meat, are universal and therefore still applicable to any human being. The so-called *ceremonial* laws, which are related to the temple and the sacrifices, were bound to disappear with it. As for the *circumstantial* laws, which are mostly casuistic [intellectually dishonest], they also were bound to lose their normative character as soon as the "circumstances" that generated them did not exist anymore. This is, for instance, the case for the laws concerning the slaves and the way to dress, to till the land, to organize, and to administer the city. These last two categories of laws (ceremonial and circumstantial) were not designed to be observed forever. **On the other hand, the Decalogue and the dietary laws do not belong to the ceremonial laws or to the circumstantial laws. These laws have nothing to do with the sacrifices.**—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 82.<sup>†‡§</sup>

39. From what we have learned in this study, do you see even more reasons why we should cling to and obey God's laws? As we face the final events in this world's history including the seven last plagues, do we need to be a wise and understanding people?

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