

Why Should We Obey God?
Deuteronomy 4

Turn to Deuteronomy 4 in your Bibles. Why should we obey God? Why should we live in God's ways? Why should we listen to him and follow him?

The Bible gives different answers to that question in different places. There would not just be one reason to follow God; but Deuteronomy 4 does give a few direct answers.

Deuteronomy is this great sermon that Moses preached to Israel at the end of their 40 years of wandering around in the desert. In chapter 12 Moses begins to talk about particular commands of God that Israel should obey.

Deuteronomy 4 begins *Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you.* But Moses does not get to actual decrees and laws until Deuteronomy 12. In the first eleven chapters Moses explains how a relationship with God works. I plan to preach through Deuteronomy 1-11, but not much from chapter twelve on.

Today we go through Deuteronomy 4:1-9, which gives us two different reasons to follow God's ways; and we'll also look at 4:23-31.

Why Obey? To Live and to take Possession of what God is Giving.

Deut 4:1 - *Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.*

Now, Israel, **hear** the decrees and laws, and **follow** them. Why? So you may **live**, and you may **take possession** of what God is **giving** you.

God has many good things for people. Some of them we get in this life, and some we get when the Lord returns. Let's summarize it as eternal life and the kingdom of God. God offers these things, he gives, puts them where we can reach it, but we still need to take hold of it.

Matthew 7:13-14 - *Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*

Matthew 7:24, 26 - *Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. . . ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.*

Deut 4:1 – Hear God’s ways, and follow them: why? This is how we take hold of what God offers, this is how we make it ours. Paul writes to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:12) *Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.* He’s encouraging Timothy to simple faithfulness to God.

Does this mean that if we follow God **more** we get **more** of what he offers? No, that is not what it means. In Deuteronomy, as in Jesus’ teaching, all people are divided into two groups: those who listen to God and aim their lives toward him, and those who do not. That’s all.

Those who listen to God and aim their lives toward him, who also sin and need the Father to forgive their sins, will live and take possession of what God gives. The others do not.

Deut 4:2 - *Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.*

Do not decide God said things he has not said. And do not decide that God never said things he has said. At the end of Revelation we read about God’s judgment on anyone who adds to the words of this scroll, and anyone who takes away from the words of the scroll.

Revelation is quoting Deuteronomy there. We miss lots of what Revelation says because we do not know the Old Testament. Revelation is saying there exactly what Moses says here.

Do not add to what I command you, and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.

Deut 4:3-4 - *You saw with your own eyes what the Lord did at Baal Peor. The Lord your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor, ⁴ but all of you who held fast to the Lord your God are still alive today.*

This is a story from Numbers 25, events that happened within the year before Moses spoke what’s in Deuteronomy. These Israelites did NOT hear and obey, so they did NOT take possession of what God was giving them.

In those days, God often brought consequences on people more quickly. In NT times this is a little different, in that he lets things go during this life. But there is a judgement coming, and everyone will stand before God and give account then.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 10. There Paul reminds the Corinthians about the sins of Israel during Moses’ time, during the 40 years in the wilderness, and he writes this to the Corinthians about how God judged those sins.

1 Cor 10:6, 11-13 - *Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did . . . ¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*

So we listen to God's ways and follow them so we can take possession of what he gives. Don't change God's ways, don't add to them or take away from them. People who turn away from God do not take possession of what he's giving.

Remember that we are not talking here about ongoing struggle with sins, which has always been a part of the life of children of God. James says that we all stumble in many ways. John says that if we say we don't sin, we are lying and we made God a liar. We are talking here about a basic direction in life, a life that is aimed toward God.

I am going to read you a prayer from the ancient world, written in Sumerian with an interlinear Akkadian translation. The document with this prayer is dated about 700 years before Christ.

That we have it in two different ancient languages means it was a famous prayer already then. Many people back then found this a meaningful prayer. I read it because we sometimes feel sorry for Israel having all those laws. Our sympathy is silly. You put yourself in the mind of the person who prayed this prayer.

Prayer to an Unknown God, or, Prayer to Any God (“Google” search will pull this up quickly.)

May the fury of my god's heart be quieted toward me.
 May the god who is not known be quieted toward me.
 May the goddess who is not known be quieted toward me.
 May the god whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me.
 May the goddess whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me.
 May the heart of my god be quieted toward me.
 May the heart of my goddess be quieted toward me.
 May my god and goddess be quieted toward me.
 May the god who has become angry with me be quieted toward me.
 May the goddess who has become angry with me be quieted toward me.
 In ignorance I have eaten that forbidden by my god.
 In ignorance I have set foot on that prohibited by my goddess.
 O Lord, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.
 O my god, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.
 O god whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.
 O goddess whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are many; great are my sins;
 The transgression which I have committed, indeed I do not know.
 The sin which have done, indeed I do not know.
 The prohibited place on which I have set foot, indeed I do not know.
 The lord in the anger of his heart looked at me.
 The god in the rage of his heart confronted me.
 When the goddess was angry with me, she made me become ill.
 The god whom I know or do not know has oppressed me.
 The goddess whom I know or do not know has placed suffering upon me.
 Although I am constantly looking for help, no one takes me by the hand.
 When I weep they do not come to my side.
 I utter laments, but no one hears me.

I am troubled; I am overwhelmed; I cannot see.
 O my god, merciful one, I address to you the prayer, turn toward me.
 I kiss the feet of my goddess; I crawl before you.
 How long, O my goddess, whom I know or do not know, before your angry heart will be
 quieted?
 Man is dumb; he knows nothing; mankind, everyone that exists, what do they know?
 Whether they are committing sin or doing good; they do not even know.
 O my lord, do not throw your servant down.
 He is plunged in the waters of a swamp; take him by the hand.
 The sin which I have done, turn into goodness.
 The transgression which I have committed, let the wind carry away.
 May my misdeeds strip off like clothing.
 O my god, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions.
 O my goddess, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions.
 O my god whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my
 transgressions.
 O goddess whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my
 transgressions.
 Remove my transgressions and I will sing your praise.
 May your heart, like the heart of a real mother, be quieted toward me.
 Like a real mother and a real father may it be quieted toward me. Amen.

The person praying this prayer knows he has sinned to make some god angry, and he needs to soften this anger. He does not know which god, he does not know what he has done wrong, and he does not know how to correct the problem. Remember that this was a famous prayer.

The Israelites under Moses were in an incomparably better situation than the one praying this prayer. They knew their God, and we know their God. They knew what he wanted, and we know what he wants. They knew what to do when they sinned against God, and we know what to do when we sin against God.

Pages 391-2 in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, edited by James Pritchard, 3rd edition with supplement. The prayer is written in a Sumerian dialect, with an interlinear Akkadian translation. It dates from about the year 700 BCE. Also in D Block, *Deuteronomy: NIV Application Commentary* (2012): 120-121.

The first reason to obey God was to live, and to take hold of what God is giving us.

Why Obey? Because it is a Privilege to Know and Obey, it will make us Great.

Deuteronomy 4:5-8 - *See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it.* ⁶ *Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."* ⁷ *What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?* ⁸ *And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?*

Three times Moses uses the word “great,” vv6, 7, 8. What will make Israel great? Two things: one, the way they live shows wisdom and understanding, and two, their God is so near them when they pray.

And these two are completely tied together. Living in God’s ways, and having God close to us and listening to our prayers – this is the single package of greatness. Together it makes us the greatest people on earth. Not because we are good, not at all, this is **not** about wonderful people.

This is about a GOD who is close to us, a GOD who is right with us when we pray, a GOD who knows the right and wise ways to live and who has shown these right and wise ways to us.

In Deuteronomy 9 Moses says to Israel, *Understand that it is NOT because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. . . You have been rebellious against the LORD ever since I have known you.* (Deut 9:6, 24)

What makes us great is not what we’re like, not that we’re wise or righteous. What makes us great is that God is near us whenever we pray, and that he has taught us the one and only right and wise way to live. God has given us this privilege, this honour.

Deut 4:9a - *Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live.*

Be careful. Watch yourselves closely. Don’t forget. The NT says things like this often. People, we lose our way, we get fooled and wander away from God. In the Bible, there is no shame in admitting that we easily leave God’s ways.

If we are **not** careful, if we **don’t** watch ourselves, if we **don’t** +-keep reminding ourselves and each other, then the Lord will return when we’re not ready to meet him. And then we will be ashamed.

Deut 4:9b - *Teach these things to your children and to their children after them.* We are responsible for two generations. We are to teach our children, and then also to their children, our grandchildren.

The biggest part of teaching is by example. My parents taught some things in words, but mostly our family went to church every Sunday, and the congregation worshipped God there and prayed and we were taught, and I paid attention to that, and my parents clearly lived their lives that way, and I paid attention to that. In my life, that was more significant than I can describe. Huge.

God told these things to Moses, and Moses to Israel, and wrote them down, and after that each generation of God’s people is responsible to take hold of it and pass it on to the younger ones.

Why should we obey God? One, so we can live, and take hold of what he gives, eternal life and the kingdom of God.

Why should we obey God? Because it is a privilege, a great honour, to live in the right and wise way and to have God so near us when we pray.

Third, why should we obey God? Because he is a jealous and merciful God.

Deut 4:23-24 - *Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you . . . ²⁴ For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.*

Deut 4:31 - *For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which he confirmed to them by oath.*

Be careful not to forget about God, because he is a consuming fire, a jealous God. When you do forget and turn away, then come back to God, because he is a merciful God, he will not abandon you or destroy you.

Our God has a particular relational style. He is fiercely loyal. He offers himself to all people, to every single person on earth: “I want to be your God, and I want you to be one of my people.” That’s the offer. When people say “yes” to that, and agree to live in his ways, he binds himself to those people in a deep and powerful way, and binds them to himself.

There is nothing casual about this. He means it deeply and completely. And, he expects the same from us. He wants complete loyalty from us as well. That’s what he gives, and he wants the same in return.

So when we forget him, we wander away, some other god seems more attractive, our God gets upset. He’s like a hot-blooded husband, and we’re the wife that finds another man attractive and we flirt with the other man. Then the Lord our God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

When we are moving away from God, he is a consuming fire, a jealous God. As soon as we begin to move back toward God, he is a merciful God. He will not abandon us or forget the covenant. He remembers that we said we wanted him to be our God, and we wanted to be his people. He remembers that, and that he bound himself to us, and we bound ourselves to him.

We are bound to him, and he is bound to us. This is what happened to us when we put our trust in Christ, when we decided to live God’s way, and were baptized. We’re bound to him, and he is bound to us.

And that is why, when we wander away from him, he is a consuming fire, a jealous God. And that is why, when we move toward him, he is a merciful God who will not abandon us, or forget that we are bound to him, and he to us.

So, why should we obey God? Because he is fiercely loyal, a jealous God, a merciful God.

One, we obey God order to live eternally and to take hold of all he gives us.

Two, we obey because it is a privilege to live in his good ways, and have him so near us.

Three, we obey God because he is fiercely loyal, a jealous God and a merciful God. Amen.