

Hope PCA Sermon August 25, 2024  
“LORD God of the Covenant” (Deuteronomy 4:1-43)  
Rev. Martin Hedman

Continuing in Deuteronomy this morning, we’re going to cover a big, big chunk of Deuteronomy chapter 4, verses 1 through 43. Again, this is a very long passage, so when we do stand, if that is a challenge for you, feel free to remain seated. This is not a biblical requirement that we stand, although it is biblical wisdom, I think.

As we go through this, different writers, commentators on this chapter look at it as a kind of a summary of the book of Deuteronomy, especially chapters 5–28 and then Moses’ song in chapter 32. Think of that as I read through it, how this kind of anticipates and summarizes this book of the covenant. In fact, there are parts of it that are like a mini summarized treaty with a prologue and with stipulations, laws and covenants and whatnot, even curses and blessings. One commentator calls it a short sermon on covenant and on God’s law. You’ll hear the covenant name of God repeated over and over and over again, and even the very personal way of putting it, the LORD your God. So things to listen for, and if you would, again, please stand, and we will read through Deuteronomy chapter 4 verses 1 through 43:

*<sup>1</sup> “And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. <sup>2</sup> You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you. <sup>3</sup> Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal-peor, for the LORD your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor. <sup>4</sup> But you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today. <sup>5</sup> See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. <sup>6</sup> Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ <sup>7</sup> For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? <sup>8</sup> And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?*

*<sup>9</sup> Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children’s children — <sup>10</sup> how on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, ‘Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.’ <sup>11</sup> And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. <sup>12</sup> Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. <sup>13</sup> And 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. <sup>14</sup> And the Lord commanded*

me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess.

<sup>15</sup> Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, <sup>16</sup> beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, <sup>17</sup> the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, <sup>18</sup> the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. <sup>19</sup> And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. <sup>20</sup> But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day. <sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the Lord was angry with me because of you, and he swore that I should not cross the Jordan, and that I should not enter the good land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. <sup>22</sup> For I must die in this land; I must not go over the Jordan. But you shall go over and take possession of that good land. <sup>23</sup> Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you. <sup>24</sup> For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

<sup>25</sup> When you father children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, so as to provoke him to anger, <sup>26</sup> I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed. <sup>27</sup> And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you. <sup>28</sup> And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. <sup>29</sup> But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. <sup>30</sup> When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice. <sup>31</sup> For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.

<sup>32</sup> For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. <sup>33</sup> Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? <sup>34</sup> Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? <sup>35</sup> To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him. <sup>36</sup> Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of

*the midst of the fire. <sup>37</sup> And because he loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, <sup>38</sup> driving out before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day, <sup>39</sup> know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. <sup>40</sup> Therefore you shall 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 that the LORD your God is giving you for all time.”*

*<sup>41</sup> Then Moses set apart three cities in the east beyond the Jordan, <sup>42</sup> that the manslayer might flee there, anyone who kills his neighbor unintentionally, without being at enmity with him in time past; he may flee to one of these cities and save his life: <sup>43</sup> Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland for the Reubenites, Ramoth in Gilead for the Gadites, and Golan in Bashan for the Manassites.*

So ends this long but powerful reading from God’s holy and infallible Word. Please be seated. Let me pray for us.

God, we thank you for your words. Write it upon our hearts. Cause it to bear fruit in our lives. And may this Word this morning be part of accomplishing that task within us. We pray it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

So perhaps you heard in that, that was about a 10-minute reading from scripture. Hopefully you heard some of those covenant ideas and names and themes in this chapter that’s again kind of a preview of the rest of Deuteronomy. Here Moses is calling upon Israel to listen, to hear. It’s a little bit of a preview of Deuteronomy 6 and the Shema. “Shema” means “hear”. It’s an imperative: “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The foundational confession of faith of the Jewish people. What we can see here, I think, is another reminder that the Lord gives the people through Moses of their relationship with their God, past, present, and future. What God has done with and for Israel, calling them out of Egypt, speaking to them from the mountain. The present, giving them laws and precepts and statutes to prepare them for life in the promised land. And then a future, a warning about idolatry and what will happen to them with a hope and promise of mercy and forgiveness.

I’m not going to go through this verse by verse, it’s just too long. But it is a unity, and I want to keep it as a unity. There are several themes that are woven in and out of these verses, and that’s what I want to try and focus on this morning. And I think those themes give us insight into the kind of relationship that God has with his people, the character of that relationship, even the character of God. That’s what we’ll focus on, God willing, this morning.

So the first theme is the title of the sermon, “LORD God of the Covenant”. We see in these verses God as the LORD, God as the covenant maker. And that’s a key principle in the Bible anyway. It’s a theme throughout. God is a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping God. That principle is absolutely foundational for a proper understanding of God, of who he is, of what he’s doing, what he has done and what he has promised to do. Chapter 4 is steeped in this idea. It bathes in it, if you will, language that Moses uses that would have been clear and

obvious to his Hebrew listeners. The most obvious one (I mentioned it already, and it's clear to us as English speakers and readers as well) is the repeated use of God's covenant name. The name he revealed to Moses at the burning bush: Yahweh, printed in most of our English Bibles today in capital letters, LORD. That word is in 24 of these 43 verses and used 26 times. The LORD, Yahweh, our covenant God. Over and over the Israelites would have heard this divine name.

We don't know if Moses said "Yahweh" when he spoke it or if already by that time they had adopted the practice of not speaking the divine name but substituting something else. Sometimes if you meet Jewish people or hear them read scripture, whenever the covenant name of God comes up, they'll say something like "Hashem", which means the name. Or they'll combine the word "Adonai", which is Lord, with the word for name and say something like "Adoshem". So when I learned a Hebrew scripture song based on the Shema, it was "Shema Yisrael Adoshem Eloheinu Adoshem Echad". They don't want to say Yahweh. We know how that's pronounced, by the way. I know there's a video, a meme that comes up regularly on social media about how the divine name is somehow some sort of breathing out and breathing in. No, it's not. You can't talk by breathing in. Try it. Air comes out, our vocal cords vibrate, our mouths shape the sounds. It's bunk. This name is Yahweh.

All right, enough of that. Now if that's all Moses had done is use the covenant name time after time after time, God the LORD may still have seemed somewhat distant out there. And that would have been consistent with the attitudes of the surrounding peoples and nations. Baal, he would disappear for long seasons and have to be revived and invited back in the spring so that crops could grow. The sun god, the moon gods, they're way up in the sky, they're distant, they're far away. The gods of the various nations were disinterested, they were impersonal, and they had to be cajoled to do something by specific kinds of rituals and quasi-magical incantations. If you say the right words the right way enough times, maybe this god will do something. Think of the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel with Elijah. Or even Jesus' instruction in the Sermon on the Mount about how to pray: don't babble like the pagans do.

The LORD, however, is Israel's God. And so Moses reminds them frequently in this little mini-sermon, if you will, that he is the LORD your God. It's in 14 verses, and it's used 15 times. Over and over and over again, Moses is emphasizing the people's relationship with their covenant LORD God. He is the LORD your God. So unlike the pagan false gods, Israel's God, who is indeed *the only true God, is near to them. This covenant God is close by, he's not distant.* Verse 7, "*What great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call upon Him?*" We don't need rituals, we don't need incantations. We call upon him. We know he'll answer because he is near. What other nation is there that has that? Well, that's a rhetorical question. None. None. Nowhere. Israel called out to God in Egypt and he answered. He brought them out. He took them to Mount Sinai (called Horeb here in this passage). There we're reminded in verse 10 that they stood before the LORD their God in his presence, in front of (it could literally be translated "before the face of"). That's a personal kind of language. And verse 11 reminds them that they came near and stood at the foot of the mountain. And God did this after bringing them out of Egypt with his very own presence. Moses reminds them in verse 37. He's near. They came near to him. His own presence went with them out of

Egypt. Again, these false gods are far off, distant, impersonal, but the LORD our God, the LORD your God, says Moses, is near and ready to answer when you call.

And I think we can pause and ask ourselves this: if the LORD God is near to Israel, how much more near is he to we Christian believers today? What did God do for Israel? What did he do for believers? The Son of God himself personally came near to us. became a man and dwelt among us, says John 1, died for us in our salvation, rose from death to life, that we also, believing in him, might one day rise from death to life. He taught his disciples face-to-face, the crowds as well, and before ascending into heaven promised his disciples that he would ask the Father to send them another Comforter, in fact, a Comforter who would teach them and call to mind all the things that he had taught them. That Comforter, of course, is the Holy Spirit, who is present and now dwells with and in every believer. Brothers and sisters, He is here right now. The Holy Spirit is here right now with us. That's the promise of God. That's why we come with reverence and awe to worship our God. He is with us. If Israel had a close relationship with the covenant LORD God, how much more do you and I have a close relationship with God today? Christian, your God is near. He teaches you. He helps you. He hears you. He answers you. He gives gifts to you. He empowers you to use those gifts and even to follow his commands. The LORD your God, is near. What a precious thing that is.

So the covenant God is a theme here. Chapter 4 is going to be a theme throughout Deuteronomy. This covenant God gives commands. Moses again calls upon Israel to listen in verse 1, to see in verse 5. Pay attention. And then several times calls upon them to guard themselves or keep themselves. Watch over your soul, verses 9 and 15 and 23. Protect your soul, protect your life, guard it, watch over it. And what are they to listen to? What are they to see? How are they to guard and protect themselves? What are they to do? What are they not to do? Well, God's law. Deuteronomy is a book of God's law. Keep God's covenant with them.

Again, the repetition of language drives this home. Here are the different ways that God refers to his law and the keeping of it. "*Statutes and rules*", they're called in verses 1 and 5 and 8 and 14. Four times that little phrase is used. Keep them "*that you may live*", says Moses. Moreover, in verse 2: do not "*add to them or take away from them*". Why? They're sufficient. They're enough. It's what we need. And moreover, they're unchangeable. So they can't be added to or taken away from.

Very clearly here in verse 13, the Ten Commandments or Ten Words are called God's covenant with Israel. Do not forget this covenant. They're admonished in verse 23. Why? Verse 31: God does not forget his covenant. They're called "*statutes and commandments*" in verse 40. These statutes in verse 6, are the source of wisdom. In fact, they produce wisdom. A people following them would be considered wise by the nations around them. In fact, in verse 8, these statutes and rules are called God's very law to the people of Israel. Not just a little list of do's and don'ts, but a whole system of knowing what is right and wrong. Punishing wrong so that justice abounds. "This is how you live," is what Moses is saying in verse 1. "Do these that you may live." Verses 32 to 34 describe this law, these statutes, these rules. And again, with a rhetorical question, "Has any other God done such a great thing for any other people?" Ever? Since creation itself? Again, rhetorically, no.

But then God answers in verses 35–38, “I showed these to you so that you may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other beside him.” Why did God do this? Verse 37. Because he wants to punish? Because he wants to be mean? Because he’s a dictator? Look at the answer Moses gives in verse 37. God did this because *“he loved your fathers and their offspring”*. “You, Israel, pass this on to your children and to your children’s children. The LORD loves you. That’s why he gave you these statutes, these rules. He demonstrated that love by bringing you out of Egypt with his very own presence, by his very great power.”

And again, I think it’s helpful to stop and consider: if God did this for Israel, how much more has he done an even greater thing, for all believers, for us today? How much more has God loved us? Again, the God of all creation, who himself became man, his own creation, died the perfect sacrifice, the perfect substitute, rose from death to life. No other false god has done such a great and amazing thing. Well, they might appear as a person, but never became one. And what about his love? We’re reminded in Scripture that “greater love has no one than this, that they would die for a friend”. And then we’re told, “Christ died for us, while we were still his enemies”, to make us his friends. to pay for our sins, take them as if they were his very own, give us in exchange his perfect obedience, to make us his own people, to give us life eternal. There’s nothing we can do to merit this, to earn it, to pay for it. It’s all a free gift received with the open hand of faith. What other god is so great? Whatever god is so full of love? There is none. Search the world wide over, you will find none. Only the LORD God of the covenant loves and is as great as our God.

Moses talks about statutes and rules and so forth, but he really seems to focus in, another theme here, on two fundamental commands, two fundamental principles, if you will, that stand out. They form the basis for the rest, they’re key. And they are this: there is one God only. Do not make images of him, or of anything, and worship them. There’s one God only, we’re told, in verses 35 and 39. The LORD God. “The LORD is God”, we heard that already. There is none other besides him. 39 reiterates this: *“The LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.”* Look around the world, study the pagan religions of the world, and the gods and the things that they worship start to sound awful and look awful familiar. Awful alike one another. Sun, moon, this or that creature, this or that mountain, this or that whatever. A panoply of gods. Or some sort of false god. The LORD God in heaven and above and on earth beneath, he is God, and there is no other. That, of course, we find in the First Commandment of the Ten. It’s where everything begins. Again, the foundation. One God, the Covenant LORD, all other gods are false. They’re either fakes, in which case they’re probably demonic, or they’re just pure fiction, the imaginations of men. They’re worthless. They’re powerless. They are impersonal. There is no love. They are far, far, far off, because they don’t exist.

What follows next is logical. Don’t worship these other gods. Do not make idols that you serve or bow down to. Spelled out at length in verses 16 to 19, the second of the Ten Commandments, it flows from the first. There are no other gods than the LORD God. Then don’t worship other gods. As we’ll see when we get there, don’t worship the true God through images either. It’s just foolish. Moses gives a very powerful reason in verse 16 [12]: You heard the voice of God, *“but you saw no form”*. You heard his voice, you saw no form. You do not

know what God looks like. And since God revealed himself to you by speaking to you, that's how he wants you to know him, in His Word, that Word that cannot and must not be added to or taken away from, because that's how we know God. Still true for us today, God reveals Himself to us in his Word. We must not worship him via images. And Moses gives a warning in verse 19, "beware", beware "*if you forget the covenant of the LORD*" (as he puts it in verse 23), and you look up "*to heaven and you see the sun and the moon and the stars and the hosts of heaven and are drawn away from God to them, to bow down to them and serve them*".

I like what John Currid in his commentary notes about verse 19, that it outlines, it describes, the descent into idolatry. It follows steps. "*Raise your eyes.*" See something, get drawn to it, and in being drawn to it, be led to bow down to it and serve it. And isn't that true? Isn't that so true? We look away from God to something else. It catches our eyes. It catches our attention. We see it. We gaze at it. We check it out. And in doing so, we're drawn to it. We want it. We desire it. It's attractive. It's good. Think of Adam and Eve and the fruit in the garden. And then we bow down to it. Hebrew language for acknowledging something or someone as greater than we are, worthy of our praise and honor. We humble ourselves before it or that person. And we justify that idolatry by telling others how great it is, how worthy it is, how much we like it, how happy it makes us, how useful it is. And so we serve it. We do what it wants us to do, what it calls us to do. See, taste, eat, touch, indulge. Any idol, any idolatrous behavior follows that pattern, whether it's money, or sex, or drugs, or alcohol, or food, or status, or power, or influence, or accommodating things so I can just fit in.

And note the language of this kind of worship: bowing down and serving. I talked in our Sunday school class some time ago about how when you see the English word "worship" in your Bible, especially in the Old Testament, it almost always is translating a Hebrew word or a Greek word that means either "bow down, prostrate oneself before it, or serve". Hebrew had no good word like our English word "worship" until the exile in Babylon. Greek had very good words for worship, like our English word for worship, but the New Testament writers, generally speaking, didn't use them. Because the concept of worship in the Old Testament is this idea of humbling oneself, exalting something that's better than us, and then serving it. Don't do this with idols.

And Moses warns in verses 25 to 28 that indeed this is going to happen and Israel will be punished for it. And that brings up the final theme here: justice and mercy. We know that God does not let the guilty go unpunished. That well-known verse in Exodus 34 verse 7. It's also in Numbers 14 verse 18, and the prophet Nahum 1 verse 3. Israel's actions in 25 and 26 are described as "corrupt" as they bow down to and worship and serve false gods, idols, and this will result in their destruction. Their corrupt action results in destruction. Now, "corruption" and "destruction" in Hebrew are just different forms of the same word. The same language is used in Genesis 6 to describe the wickedness or the corruption of humanity that resulted in its destruction in the flood. God's punishment will be that Israel will be scattered among the nations, says in verse 27. That's a reversal of the promise to Abraham, right? "I will gather your people back from a nation where they are slaves. They will inherit the land. They will be many." Moses tells them that they will be few. He tells them this even before they go into that land and possess it. Warns them that this is what will happen if you chase after false gods.

It's quite a punishment for the people of Israel. But thankfully the LORD God is also a merciful and compassionate God (verse 31). That language of God being "merciful" or "compassionate" is almost always only used of God. One exception is in Psalm 112 verse 4. But Moses prophesies that in this scattered situation among the nations, Israel will seek the LORD. They will seek the LORD their God and they will find him, and they will return to him and obey his voice. Verses 29 and 30. It's a picture of repentance. It's what we've been going through in our evening service: repentance unto life, the chapter in the Confession. It's a reminder, another reminder that the LORD God is near and can be found. And interesting, not by looking with the eyes, that leads to idolatry, but by listening to his voice, hearing his Word, heeding his Word. And for these repentant people, verse 31 tells us that God is merciful. He does not leave them. He does not destroy them. He does not forget his covenant with them. That is God's mercy to his people.

And I see verses 41 to 43 as a very practical example of this. Murderers must be punished. It's the death penalty. But if by accident one person kills another, that person can flee to one of these cities of refuge. And here we're told about how they're set up in the land east of the Jordan that's already been conquered. Israel serving a God who himself is just and merciful are themselves to grant mercy when it's appropriate to do so. Don't let the avenger of death kill them before they've had a chance to make their case. And if they can make a valid case, have mercy upon them. They may deserve a lesser punishment, but at least it's not death.

Well, this also is true for us today. God is still the same God. He does not change. He is still the God of justice and of mercy. We all deserve justice. But instead, in Christ, we have received mercy. We have fled for refuge to Christ, and in him we have found mercy. He is, if you will, our city of refuge. Again, on the cross, he took the justice that we deserve, the punishment that we deserve. Death itself took our place, though he himself had committed no sin and deserved no punishment, so that we might have mercy, so that we might be forgiven, so that we might be right with God, so that we might call upon him in repentance and faith and find him very near to us to answer our call. And then for us, he writes this law, not on tablets of stone, as Moses will, as God will for Moses, but he writes it on our very hearts. He makes a new and better covenant with us in Christ Jesus. We live now not by law-keeping, but by grace through faith in Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Christians, the LORD God of Deuteronomy is our LORD God in and because of Jesus. And because of Jesus, he will never leave us. He will never forsake us. He remembers his covenant. As we saw from 1 Peter, we may be scattered, elect exiles, but we also saw in Peter that we are greatly loved and powerfully protected, guarded, by our very own Lord God. This morning may your hearts overflow with gratitude and love for our covenant Lord God. And may that gratitude and love overflow through all your heart, throughout your soul, in all your minds, and with all your strength.

Let me pray for us.

Oh God, our Father, we thank you for your countless gifts, which are ours in Christ Jesus. Fill our hearts with gratitude. Write your laws upon our hearts that we might do them and live. Not through merit, but in response to what God has, what you have done for us in Christ Jesus,



the fruit of our faith. Bless us, O Lord God. We thank you. We praise you. In the name of Jesus, amen.

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