

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

So now, Israel, listen to the statutes and the ordinances that I am teaching you, and carry them out so that you may live and so that you may enter the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving to you and take possession of it. ²Do not add to the word that I am commanding you, and do not subtract from it, so that you keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you.

⁶Keep them and put them into practice, because in this way your wisdom and your understanding will be recognized by all the people who hear about all these statutes; and they will say, “This great nation is certainly a wise and understanding people,” ⁷because what other great nation is there that has a god as close to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call on him? ⁸What other great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances as righteous as this entire law that I am presenting to you today?

The End of the Road

I.

“Are we there yet?” The arrival of your family at Grandma’s house just can’t come fast enough for children who know that Grandma is going to have something special waiting for them. The younger they are, the harder it is to comprehend the concept of distance or time. How do you explain that the trip is going to take hours, or all day, or even longer? In the eyes of a child, the trip is going to last *forever!*

Along the way there are shenanigans between siblings. The rules of travel are violated again and again by the denizens of the back seat. Having had enough, dad shouts from behind the wheel: “If you don’t stop that fighting right now, I’m going to pull the car over and you can walk!”

It was the end of the road for Moses. Well, almost. He had some parting words for the people—a series of farewell sermons for them. The Children of Israel were at the end of the road. They stood at the brink of the Promised Land, almost at the end of a long journey.

The Exodus of the people from Egypt had already become a frequently retold story—walls of water at the Red Sea standing to let them pass through, God standing guard as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai and the travesty of the decision of the people to worship the golden calf.

All that and more Moses called attention to by simply saying: “It takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road” (Deuteronomy 1:2, NIV84). Mt. Horeb is better known as Mt. Sinai. After an eleven day journey they were poised to enter and possess the land of Canaan.

But there had been squabbling in the backseat. There had been obstinance and outright disobedience to God. In a manner of speaking, God pulled the SUV to shoulder of the road and told the Israelites they would have to get out and walk awhile. They had to learn their lesson. God said to Moses: “I have forgiven them, as you asked. ²¹ Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, ²² not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times— ²³ not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it... ³³ Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until

the last of your bodies lies in the desert” (Numbers 14:20-23, 33, NIV84).

“Are we there yet?” 40 years is a long journey. Some of you haven’t *lived* 40 years yet. The oldest of those who would be allowed to enter the Promised Land had been 20 at the time God pronounced his judgment.

Those who would be allowed in were now between the ages of 41 and 60. The journey was almost over. The end was in sight. The something special they were about to receive was better than any present from Grandma—it was the Promised Land—the land flowing with milk and honey—the land they had longed for for years.

A little reminder of the travesties of the journey was not out of line.

“So now, Israel, listen to the statutes and the ordinances that I am teaching you, and carry them out so that you may live and so that you may enter the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving to you and take possession of it” (Deuteronomy 4:1, EHV). Statutes and ordinances. A law is a law, no matter what synonym you use to describe it. It was pretty straightforward—Moses was referring to God’s Laws. Follow God’s will and you will live.

They had seen the results of *not* following God’s Law for 40 years. One by one their parents and grandparents had died out in the desert. One by one God fulfilled the dreadful condemnation he had made at the people’s rebellion. These people were the next generation of parents and grandparents. Now was a good time for them to be reminded of the consequences of sin against God.

II.

“But dad... you said not to touch *her*. This stuffed animal I’m holding is touching her, but *I’m* not touching her!” Children just *have* to test the lines, don’t they? Adults, too, really.

“Do not add to the word that I am commanding you, and do not subtract from it, so that you keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you” (Deuteronomy 4:2, EHV).

Which parts of God’s Word do you like to minimize and which do you like to emphasize?

In the Gospel today, the Pharisees and experts in the law were outraged that Jesus’ disciples didn’t follow the traditions that had been established to define ceremonial cleanness. By the time of the New Testament the Mosaic Law given to the people had been expanded and expounded upon until the religious establishment had come up with 613 separate statutes people were to follow. Jesus told them: “You abandon God’s commandment but hold to human tradition” (Mark 7:8, EHV).

Religious people continue to add and subtract things from God’s Word. Many claim a firm adherence to the Bible, but deny things in the Bible that conflict with their pet errors—things like the total depravity, or sinfulness, of mankind after the fall, or a denial of infant baptism, or that baptism creates faith.

“The stuffed animal is touching her, *I’m* not—*I’m* doing just what you said.” Sometimes we want to redefine God’s Commandments so the one we want to violate is not quite so stringent. It isn’t only homosexuality that God’s Word condemns, but *all* sexual union outside marriage. It isn’t just the wealthy who are guilty of materialism, but any of us who overemphasize possessions and money. Human nature loves to find loopholes in whichever Commandment contains our favorite pet sin.

III.

Was your dad one of those who actually pulled the car over and told you to get out? Did he *really* abandon you, or was he there all along? Even if it got to the point that your dad stopped the car and followed through on his threat to make you get out and walk, it was because he loved you and wanted you to learn a valuable lesson.

“What other great nation is there that has a god as close to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call on him? ⁸What other great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances as righteous as this entire law that I am presenting to you today?” (Deuteronomy 4:7-8, EHV).

Though God disciplined his people for a long period of time, he *never* abandoned them. He was there with them throughout even the 40 years of their time-out.

God *always* keeps his promises. The entire journey to the Promised Land was about preserving his Chosen Nation, because among that nation was the ancestor of the promised Savior.

Sin has to be paid for. Sin demands a life to make atonement. The Ceremonial Law that governed the people’s worship showed them that something must die because of their sins. The wandering in the desert taught them that, ultimately, the sinner must die, too. The Ten Commandments served as a mirror to show them that no matter how hard a person might try, *never* could one be perfect, the way God demanded.

Yet even through the time-out for their sin, God still preserved and protected his people. His promise of a Savior to come never wavered. How close the Lord was to them!

How close he is to us. Never does he waver from his promise to take away our sin. He has fulfilled that promise and has given us the completed history of what he had begun with Israel.

IV.

“Keep them and put them into practice, because in this way your wisdom and your understanding will be recognized by all the people who hear about all these statutes; and they will say, “This great nation is certainly a wise and understanding people” (Deuteronomy 4:6, EHV).

What is true wisdom and understanding? Is it not knowing the fact that God loves us, even in the midst of disciplining us? Is it not knowing that God punished his Son, Jesus, in our place, and has given to us Jesus’ righteousness and perfection in place of our sins? Is not true wisdom and understanding knowing that clothed in Jesus’ perfection we can stand confidently in the presence of God at the Last Day as we await the final judgment?

Even people who mock and ridicule Christians often have to grudgingly admit the wisdom of Christian conduct. Perhaps what they see in your life as a follower of Christ will pique their interest enough that they want to learn more about what gives you your quiet confidence.

No, we aren’t there yet. It’s not quite the end of the road.

The Promised Land of heaven still lies in the future for you and me. But we listen to the statutes and ordinances of God. We follow them, not out of fear from an angry God, but because we know that the Lord our God has given us our salvation. We know that he continues to be close to us and urges us to call on him for his help. We know that we have his blessings *on* our journey, and the greatest blessing of all at the end of our journey. God grant us his wisdom and understanding as we continue toward the Promised Land. Amen.