

For What Nation *Is* There So Great?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Deut. 4:1–9, Matt. 15:1–9, Num. 25:1–15, 1 Cor. 10:13, Deut. 4:32–35, Matt. 5:13–16.*

Memory Text: “‘And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?’” (*Deuteronomy 4:8, NKJV*).

The first three chapters of Deuteronomy were basically a history lesson, reminding the people of what they had been through up to that point. By the time we get to chapter 4, the history lesson shifts more into a sermonic mode. The recounting of events wasn’t just for history buffs; instead, it served a purpose, showing the people the power and grace of God working among them, and that even though they messed up, the Lord was still going to honor His covenant with them.

Chapter 4 begins with the Hebrew word (a conjunction and an adverb) *we’attah*, which can be translated as “And now” or “So now.” They just had reviewed their recent history, a reminder of what God had done in bringing them to this point—thus, or “so now,” they are to do what God tells them to do (*see also Deut. 10:12*) in response.

That’s why the first verb that appears after the “So now” is *shama’*, the same verb (and in the same form) as used in the beginning of the Shema prayer, and it means “hear” or “listen” or “obey”—a verb repeated all through Deuteronomy.

Thus, the chapter begins: *So now, Israel, because of what I have done for you, you must obey the following . . .*

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 6.

Do Not Add or Take Away

Read Deuteronomy 4:1, 2. What was the specific warning that the Lord gave them in regard to His “statutes and judgments,” and why would this be something that they are warned about right away? (See also Deut. 12:32.)

The Lord tells them to obey the “statutes and judgments” and not to add or take away from them. Why say that? After all, why would anyone want to *change God’s law*?

We know the answer, of course.

“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, p. 107.

When you think about the history of ancient Israel, you see that in many ways they got in trouble because not only would they ignore certain precepts of the law, which for all practical purposes was taking away from the law, but also they would add to it, in the sense of bringing in practices that were not specified in the law and that, in fact, led ultimately to transgressing it.

Read Matthew 15:1–9. How do we see an example here of the principle that, though in another context, Moses warned the children of Israel about?

When the Hebrews eventually got the land promised them, they would often ignore the direct warnings about, for instance, idolatry. As a result, they followed many pagan practices, sometimes even as part of their supposed worship of Yahweh. By the time of Jesus, however, they had added all sorts of human traditions that, as Jesus Himself said, made “the commandment of God of none effect.”

Either way, adding or taking away, the law was changed, and the nation suffered the consequences.

In what ways do we need to be careful about not adding to or taking away from what God tells us to do?

Baal Peor

In Deuteronomy 4:3, 4, the children of Israel are given a bit more of a history lesson, to function as a reminder of the past and of whatever spiritual and practical truths that they ideally should learn from it.

Read Numbers 25:1–15. What happened, and what spiritual and practical truths should the people have taken from this fiasco?

However uncomfortable we are with the stories of Israel wiping out some of the pagan nations around them, this account certainly helps in explaining the logic behind the command. Israel was to be a witness to the pagan nations around them of the true God—the only God. They were to be an example to show what worship of the true God was like. Instead, by adhering to the pagan “gods” around them, they often fell into outright rebellion against the very God whom they were to represent to the world.

Though the phrase to “commit harlotry” often has a spiritual meaning, in that Israel went after pagan gods and practices (*see Hos. 4:12–14*), in this case the language (and the rest of the story) suggests that there was sexual sinning, at least at first. Here again, Satan took advantage of fallen human nature, using the pagan women to seduce the men, who obviously allowed themselves to be seduced.

No doubt, the act of physical harlotry degenerated into spiritual harlotry, as well. The people involved eventually got caught up in pagan worship practices in which Israel was “joined to Baal of Peor”; that is, they somehow became attached to this false god and even sacrificed to it. Despite everything they had been taught and told, they were willing to throw it all away in the heat of passion and lust.

How could this have happened? Easily. By hardening their consciences with the first sin, the physical one, they were ripe for falling into the latter one, the spiritual one, which must have been Satan’s ultimate goal. They had become so debased that, according to the text, one man brought his Midianite woman right into the camp itself, right before Moses, and before the people who were weeping outside the tabernacle.

Our minds and bodies are intimately linked. What affects one affects the other. What can we learn from this story about how dangerous indulgence can be to us spiritually?

Cleave to the Lord Your God

Thousands died in the sin with Baal Peor. “All the men who followed Baal Peor” were destroyed. However, many didn’t follow in the apostasy. Who were they?

“But ye that did cleave unto the LORD your God are alive every one of you this day” (Deut. 4:4).

How does this text explain the difference between those who fell into sin and those who didn’t? What’s the important message for us here regarding sin and temptation and the power of God in our lives?

Notice the contrast between the word “all” in this verse and the verse before. “All” who followed after Baal Peor were destroyed; but “every one of you” who did cleave to the Lord were alive. There was no middle ground then, and there is none now, either. We’re either for or against Jesus (*Matt. 12:30*).

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.

What’s important to remember is that the people themselves are the subject of the verb: they must do the cleaving. They must make the choice to “cleave” to God and then, in His power and strength, avoid falling into sin.

Read Jude 24 and 1 Corinthians 10:13. What is being said here in the New Testament that also is found in Deuteronomy 13:4?

God is faithful; God is able to keep us from falling. But we have to make the conscious choice, as did the faithful at Baal Peor, to cleave to God. If so, then we can be assured that, whatever the temptation, we can remain faithful.

How do such things as prayer, Bible study, worship, and fellowship help us cleave to the Lord?

For What Nation Is There So Great?

What follow in the next few verses after Deuteronomy 4:4 are some of the most profound and beautiful texts in all Scripture (the Hebrew is magnificent!). One could argue that, in essence, the message of Deuteronomy is found right here, and everything else is commentary. As you read these texts, think about various ways the principle here could be applied to us today, as well.

Read Deuteronomy 4:5–9. Why would the Lord through Moses have said what He did here to Israel?

The Lord wants the people to realize that they have been called, chosen, for a special reason. They are a “great” nation, just as God had told Abram right from the first call out of the Chaldees that “ ‘I will make you a *great* nation’ ” (*Gen. 12:2, NKJV, emphasis supplied; see also Gen. 18:18*).

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!

In these verses, Moses pointed to two things that made Israel special. First, the Lord was near to them, as He was in a unique way such as through the sanctuary, and second, the “statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law” (*Deut. 4:8*).

Read Deuteronomy 4:32–35. What else was the Lord saying to them that should have made them realize what a special calling they had been given?

No question, Israel had been given so much. Now, how would they respond?

Your Wisdom and Your Understanding

Deuteronomy 4:1–9, as we saw, was a powerful expression of not merely the nation’s special status but of its missionary calling, as well. Woven all through those verses is the idea that they need to obey, to follow, to do what the Lord commands them to do.

Read again Deuteronomy 4:6. What specifically does the Lord say is their “wisdom” and “understanding” in the eyes of these nations?

At first glance it might seem as if the statutes and judgments themselves were what contained the wisdom and understanding. But that’s not what the text says. The Lord had taught them statutes and judgments, yes; but their wisdom and understanding came from their *keeping them*, from their *obeying them*. Their obedience—that was their wisdom and understanding.

Israel could have had the most wonderful system of law and rules and regulations the world had ever seen (in fact, it did), but what good would it all be if Israel didn’t follow it? Instead, their wisdom, their understanding, came from the real-time manifestation of God’s laws in their lives. They were to live out the truths that the Lord had given them, and they could do that only by obeying them. All the light and all the truth wasn’t going to do them or the pagans around them any good if Israel didn’t live out that truth. Hence, again and again they were called to obey, because their obedience to the statutes and judgments, not the statutes and judgments themselves, was what mattered in terms of being a witness to the world.

“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*, p. 288.

Read Matthew 5:13–16. In these verses, what is Jesus saying to us that reflects the same thing He had said to ancient Israel? How, especially, should this apply to us as Seventh-day Adventists?

Further Thought: “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*, p. 582.

Concerning Baal Peor, Ellen White wrote: “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 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*, p. 454.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think about the ways in which we Seventh-day Adventists are in the place where ancient Israel was. Think about all that we have been given in contrast to the world around us and, yes, even in contrast to other churches. The question for us, then, is this: How are we responding to what we have been given? How well are we projecting our “wisdom and understanding” before the world?
- 2 “But ye that did cleave unto the LORD your God are alive every one of you this day.” Again, the subject of the verb “did cleave” is the people. The Lord won’t cleave to us in the sense that He won’t force us to Himself. Instead, using the sacred gift of free will, we have to choose to cleave to Him. Once we make that choice, how do we follow through and cleave to Him?
- 3 Dwell more on the question at the end of Sunday’s study. What does it mean to add to or to take away from God’s commands? Outside of the obvious, such as the attempted change of the Sabbath, how might something like that happen so subtly we don’t even realize what is happening?