

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?

What Kind of Book Is This?

By AIKI SAITO

A stranger handed a Bible to the 12-year-old girl as she walked home from school in Japan. But she wasn't interested and placed the book on a shelf in her bedroom. Later, as she cleaned her room, she saw the Bible on the shelf and felt a strong desire to give it to her eight-year-old brother, Ryotaro.

"Would you like to read this?" she asked.

Ryotaro wondered what kind of book she was holding. When he looked more closely, he saw the word "Bible" on the cover. He had seen a Bible at his grandfather's house, and he was curious about what kind of book it might be.

"Yes, I'd like to read it," he said.

The Bible was his.

The Bible contained only the New Testament, and he started reading from the beginning, the Gospel of Matthew. *Who is Matthew?* he thought.

As he read, he learned about a Man named Jesus who healed many sick people. He realized that Jesus was a great Person. When he finished Matthew, he wondered what would happen next, so he started reading the next book, Mark. But the story sounded similar to what he had just read in Matthew, so he quit halfway through. After that, he read here and there, but he didn't finish any book. He longed to know more about Jesus. His family was not Christian, and he didn't tell them about the longing of his heart.

Meanwhile, the Bible became an important part of his life. Inside he found a page with promises that he could claim. There were promises for when he was sick or having a bad day. Every time he needed peace, he read the promises and felt comforted. With a pencil, he underlined the verses that he liked. When he left the house, he always carried the Bible with him. Although no one had ever taught him to pray, when he went on trips with his family, he always prayed, "God, please protect us."

When he finished elementary school, he decided to go to Okinawa Saniku Junior High School, a Seventh-day Adventist school that Father and Mother found on the internet. He hoped to learn more about Jesus—and he is. Today, Ryotaro is 12 and living in the boys' dormitory at the school.

Not long ago, he announced to his parents that he wanted to be baptized.



RYOTARO learned about the Adventist school through the internet. Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will go to a project to help many Japanese people, especially young people, learn about Jesus through the internet. Thank you for planning a generous offering.

Key Text: *Deuteronomy 4:8*

Study Focus: *Deut. 4:1–8, Deut. 4:32–35, Deut. 12:32, Matt. 5:13–16, Matt. 15:1–9.*

Part I: Overview

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.

Lesson Themes:

The lesson this week will reflect on this mystery and will revolve around three main themes:

- *The law is perfect.* There is nothing to add and nothing to take away.
- *The law is wise.* The vibrant and intelligent life of the keeper of the law testifies to the Creator.
- *The law is divine.* Unless Israel "cleaves" to God, it will not benefit from that law and will not be "a great nation."

Part II: Commentary

As we study the value and the authority of the ancient laws of Moses, we will consider whether they are still relevant for modernity. We do not understand the nature of this law if we reduce it to a set of chores that will alienate human beings and deprive them of their judgment and freedom. The reason why Israel should "turn to the LORD [their] God and obey

His voice' ” (*Deut. 4:30, NKJV*) and accept the law with all their intelligence is so that the people “may live” (*Deut. 4:1*), blossom, and fulfill themselves as human beings. God, the Creator, has given the recipe for life, through the law, precisely because, as the Creator, He knows the formula of Israel’s being.

A Different Law

Because the law comes from heaven (*Deut. 4:36*), it is designed to be different from all other laws. Although there are some commonalities between the law given by Moses and the laws of the surrounding cultures, there are fundamental differences between the two systems. Recent research has revealed, in fact, many important differences between the two systems of laws. 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 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. The importance in the Bible of the so-called apodictic laws—that is, laws that are absolutely normative—is significant. Biblical laws speak with authority, and this style is all the more striking as the legal literature of the ancient Near East is dominated by casuistic laws. The commandments “thou shall not kill” or “thou shall not commit adultery” (*Exod. 20:13, 14*) fall absolute and sharp. The law of God is not justified on the basis of a logical process. Only the experience of obedience will allow us to verify its rightness. In casuistic laws, we know why the law is right *before* having experienced it, while in the apodictic laws of Israel we know it afterward. Israel’s response to the gift of the law accounts for this process: “We shall do, then we shall understand” (*Exod. 19:8, author’s translation*). The law of Moses is thus different from all the others, for it implies a dimension that is absent elsewhere. Israel will obey by faith.

A Universal Law

The law of Moses is not described as an expression of Israel’s specific culture and wisdom. Moses clearly makes that point in referring to the cosmic horizon and to the past Creation, even before the apparition of Israel: “ ‘Ask now concerning the days that are past, which were before you, . . . and ask from one end of heaven to the other’ ” (*Deut. 4:32, NKJV*). This universal intention of the law also is testified within the law itself. One of the most eloquent signs of the universal invitation of this

law is its reference to Creation. It is noteworthy that in the Decalogue, the Sabbath, the memorial of Creation, is situated in its geometric and thematic center. That is the very place where the seal was put in ancient covenant documents. This position of the Sabbath suggests that the awareness of God as the Creator lies at the heart of the Ten Commandments, which also echo the ten words of Creation (*see the ten "God said" statements in Genesis 1*).

Likewise, the dietary laws of kosher, which distinguish between clean and unclean meats, remind us of Genesis 1. Indeed, the language of Leviticus 11, which records these laws, uses the same technical words and stylistic expressions (*beasts of the earth, creeping animals, after its kind*, etc.). Furthermore, the listing of the animals in Leviticus 11:2–8 follows the same sequence as in Genesis 1:24–26 (the sixth day of Creation). For example, the creation of humans is related successively to the creation of the animals of water (*Lev. 11:9–12; compare Gen. 1:26*), followed by the creation of the animals of the air (*Lev. 11:13–23; compare Gen. 1:26*), and finally the animals of the earth and the reptiles (*Lev. 11:24–43; compare Gen. 1:26*). Last, in Leviticus 11, as in Genesis 1:24–26, the relation between humans and animals has its counterpart in the relation between humans and God. In Genesis 1:26, the duty to exercise dominion over the animals is associated with the fact that humans are created in the image of God. Likewise, in Leviticus 11, the duty to distinguish between clean and unclean meats is associated with the fact that human holiness reflects divine holiness: “ ‘You shall be holy; for I am holy’ ” (*Lev. 11:44, 45, NKJV*).

Applicable Law

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, 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.

In fact, any law that is neither ceremonial nor circumstantial maintains

its status as an absolute law. This is the case for the laws of sexuality, hygiene, relations with neighbors, et cetera; most of these laws extend and explicate the laws already contained in the Decalogue. The law of Israel comprehends, then, two laws: an absolute and universal law and a relative law that depends on times and circumstances. This distinction is found again in the New Testament, wherein texts that speak about the abolition of the law are balanced with many other texts that exalt it. While the early Christians who were religious Jews were led to cancel the laws of sacrifices because they referred to the coming Messiah, they never questioned the law of the Decalogue, which Jesus had even deepened and extended in its application. It is the same for the dietary laws concerning the consumption of meat (*Kasherut*), which are alluded to in the apostolic recommendations “ ‘to abstain . . . from things strangled, and from blood’ ” (*Acts 15:20, NKJV; compare Lev. 17:14*). From these observations, it follows that the principle of law in religious life remains valid for the Christian as well as for the Jew.

Part III: Life Application

The Test of Wisdom

Read Deuteronomy 4:6: “ ‘Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people” ’ ” (*NKJV*).

Discussion and Thought Questions: From what you understand in the preceding verse, what is in yourself that should be an evidence of the divine providence? Do people say about you that you are “a wise and understanding people”? Why *don't* they say that about you? What should you do to fulfill the promise in Deuteronomy 4:6? How do you explain that intelligence and true wisdom are not really values in traditional Christianity?

How to Read the Scriptures

Read Deuteronomy 4:2.

1. Make a list of new traditions in other Christian denominations that have been added to the law of God.
2. What justifications have been found for these additions?
3. Do we, as Seventh-day Adventists, also create new habits and principles that have not been included in the Law of Moses? List them,

