In a nighttime conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus pointed to an Old Testament event to explain the need for a Savior. In the Book of Numbers, the Israelites rebelled against God. Judgment came in the form of poisonous snakes, and many people died as a result. God, however, provided a remedy for their sin. He directed Moses to make a snake image and mount it on a pole within the camp. If anyone who had been bitten looked at the bronze snake, he or she would be healed (Num. 21:6-9).

Jesus explained that God loved the world so much that He sent His only Son to save those who look to Him in faith. Like the Israelites who looked at the bronze serpent and were saved from the poisonous snakebite, it is only by turning to Jesus in faith that we are freed from sin and death.

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness,” explained Jesus, “so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). By “lifted up” He meant His death on the cross—the only remedy for our sin, and the only means to a right relationship with God.

Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). He is waiting for you now.

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning away from your sin.
- **By faith receive** Jesus Christ as God’s Son and accept Jesus’ gift of forgiveness from sin. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross.
- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. You may pray a prayer similar to this as you call on God to save you: “Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn away from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In Jesus’ name I pray, amen.”

After you have received Jesus Christ into your life, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show others your faith in Christ by asking for baptism by immersion in your local church as a public expression of your faith.
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*Evangelistic Emphasis
MEET THE WRITER

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Numbers is filled with stories of the Israelites traveling toward the promised land. We discover detours and complaints along the way. Deuteronomy is made up of three sermons presented by Moses as he prepared the people to cross the Jordan and take the land. This book ends with the death of Moses, who was allowed to see the promised land but not step foot into it.

Certainly there are lessons we can learn from history, but there are some greater insights for us to consider when we think about the value of studying these two books. Fast forward 1,600 years or so from the death of Moses, and we find Jesus fasting for forty days before facing Satan in a battle royale (Matt. 4). In this battle, Satan presented three different temptations with Jesus responding by quoting three Old Testament passages—all from Deuteronomy (Deut. 8:3; 6:13; 6:16).

Fast forward again, and we find Jesus and Nicodemus discussing how to have eternal life (John 3). In the middle of that conversation, Jesus compared Himself to a snake lifted up by Moses in the desert. The story of the lifted snake comes from the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrews recorded in Numbers 21.

Our prayer is that as we look at the stories in Numbers and the messages of Deuteronomy, we will discover afresh our need for a Savior and encouragement for living a life that honors that Savior. These books were important to Jesus and should be to us as well, giving us deeper insights into His life and death and how we should live our lives as His people.

Humbly,

G. Dwayne McCrary

Team Leader
Adult Explore the Bible
Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

**Abarim** [AB uh rim]—a mountain range east of the Jordan River, east and southeast of the Dead Sea

**Balaam** [BAY luhm]—a non-Israelite prophet whom Balak, the king of Moab, summoned to put a curse on the Israelites

**Balak** [BAY lak]—the king of Moab

**Beth-peor** [beth-PEE awr]—a place in Moab, east of the Jordan River, where the Israelites camped and Moses delivered the speeches of the Book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 3:29); it belonged to the tribe of Reuben (Josh. 13:20)

**Eleazar** [el ih AY zuhr]—the third son of Aaron (Ex. 6:23) and high priest of Israel after Aaron’s death (Num. 20:28)

**Gadites** [GAD ights]—members of the tribe of Gad; when the Israelites were preparing to enter Canaan, this tribe, along with the tribe of Reuben and half the tribe of Manasseh, requested permission to settle east of the Jordan (Num. 32:1-5)

**Horeb** [HOH reb]—alternate name for Mount Sinai

**Kadesh** [KAY desh]—the site where the Israelites camped when Moses sent spies into Canaan (Num. 13:26); Israel later stayed there before entering Canaan

**Meribah** [MEHR ih buh]—place name that means “dispute”; site where Moses struck the rock (Num. 20); not to be confused with an earlier Meribah near Rephidim where God instructed Moses to strike the rock from which would come water (Ex. 17:7)

**Nebo**—one of the mountains of the Abarim range; place where Moses surveyed the promised land and died

**Reubenites** [RHOO ben ights]—members of the tribe of Reuben; when the Israelites were preparing to enter Canaan, this tribe, along with the tribe of Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh, requested permission to settle east of the Jordan (Num. 32:1-5)

**Tabernacle**—sacred tent and portable sanctuary where God dwelt among His people; also called the tent of meeting (Ex. 29:42,44) and tabernacle of the testimony (Num. 10:11)

**Wilderness of Zin**—wilderness region stretching from Kadesh-barnea to the Dead Sea; formed part of the southern border of Canaan (Num. 13:21; 34:3-4)
BIBLE READING PLAN

DECEMBER

1. Numbers 1:1-18
2. Numbers 1:19-46
3. Numbers 1:47-2:34
5. Numbers 3:40-51
6. Numbers 4:1-20
7. Numbers 4:21-49
8. Numbers 5:1-31
10. Numbers 7:1-29
11. Numbers 7:30-59
12. Numbers 7:60-89
13. Numbers 8:1-26
15. Numbers 10:1-36
17. Numbers 12:1-16
19. Numbers 13:26-33
20. Numbers 14:1-25
21. Numbers 14:26-45
22. Numbers 15:1-21
23. Numbers 15:22-41
24. Numbers 16:1-21
25. Numbers 16:22-35
26. Numbers 16:36-50
27. Numbers 17:1-13
28. Numbers 18:1-18
29. Numbers 18:19-32
31. Numbers 20:1-29

JANUARY

1. Numbers 21:1-35
2. Numbers 22:1-21
3. Numbers 22:22-41
5. Numbers 24:1-25
7. Numbers 26:1-27
8. Numbers 26:28-65
11. Numbers 29:1-40
12. Numbers 30:1-16
14. Numbers 31:31-54
15. Numbers 32:1-42
17. Numbers 33:28-56
18. Numbers 34:1-29
19. Numbers 35:1-34
21. Deuteronomy 1:1-18
22. Deuteronomy 1:19-46
23. Deuteronomy 2:1-37
24. Deuteronomy 3:1-29
25. Deuteronomy 4:1-43
26. Deuteronomy 4:44-5:21
27. Deuteronomy 5:22-33
29. Deuteronomy 7:1-26
30. Deuteronomy 8:1-20
31. Deuteronomy 9:1-29

FEBRUARY

1. Deuteronomy 10:1-22
2. Deuteronomy 11:1-32
3. Deuteronomy 12:1-32
5. Deuteronomy 14:1-29
6. Deuteronomy 15:1-23
7. Deuteronomy 16:1-22
8. Deuteronomy 17:1-20
10. Deuteronomy 19:1-21
11. Deuteronomy 20:1-20
12. Deuteronomy 21:1-23
15. Deuteronomy 24:1-22
17. Deuteronomy 26:1-19
18. Deuteronomy 27:1-26
19. Deuteronomy 28:1-14
20. Deuteronomy 28:15-44
21. Deuteronomy 28:45-68
22. Deuteronomy 29:1-29
23. Deuteronomy 30:1-20
24. Deuteronomy 31:1-22
25. Deuteronomy 31:23-30
27. Deuteronomy 32:28-52
28. Deuteronomy 33:1-29
29. Deuteronomy 34:1-12
INTRODUCTION TO **NUMBERS; DEUTERONOMY**

**NUMBERS**
The Book of Numbers receives its name from two major censuses taken by Moses, the first near the beginning of Israel’s wilderness wanderings and again near the end (Num. 1; 26). Traveling from Sinai to the plains of Moab, the focus is on events in the second and fortieth years after the Exodus.

The experiences of two generations of Israelites are recorded in Numbers. The first generation left Egypt during the exodus but refused to enter the promised land. Except for Caleb and Joshua, the rebellious generation died before entering the land (Num. 1–14). In chapters 15–25, the first and second generations overlap as the first dies out and the second grows into adulthood. Starting in chapter 26, the story of the second generation continues through the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua.

The book details the structure needed by the traveling Israelites: rules for governing themselves as a fledgling nation, the ongoing duties of the priests and Levites, and the necessity of obeying God. God communicated His expectations and outlined the consequences of disobedience. Numbers also emphasizes God’s faithfulness.

**DEUTERONOMY**
The Book of Deuteronomy is a series of farewell speeches by Moses to the second generation of Israelites, retelling and explaining the law. Moses delivered these speeches in the final weeks of his life as the Israelites were camped on the plains of Moab east of the Jordan River.

Deuteronomy covers Moses’ three farewell speeches reviewing Israel’s history (chaps. 1–4), explaining God’s covenant with Israel (chaps. 5–26), and encouraging Israel’s obedience to the covenant (chaps. 27–30). With the speeches finished, the book records Joshua’s commissioning as the new leader and the events surrounding Moses’ death.

In Deuteronomy, Moses used the phrase, “the LORD your God” over 250 times, calling Israel to walk in the Lord’s ways and keep His commandments. Moses urged the people to follow God into the promised land, warning them that if they compromised their faith, they would be scattered among the nations—a promise that eventually came true.
OUTLINES OF NUMBERS; DEUTERONOMY

NUMBERS

I. The Consecration of Israel at Sinai (1:1–10:10)

II. The Rebellious Generation in the Wilderness (10:11–25:18)

III. Preparation of the New Generation (26:1–30:16)

IV. Preparation for War and Entry into the Promised Land (31:1–36:13)

DEUTERONOMY

I. Moses’ First Address (1:1–4:49)

II. Moses’ Second Address (5:1–26:19)

III. Moses’ Third Address (27:1–30:20)

IV. Moses’ Final Days (31:1–34:12)
God leads His people according to His will and purposes.

**NUMBERS 9:15-23**

“Are we there yet?” Every parent knows what it is to hear this question coming from the backseat of a car. When children say this, they are voicing something that is true of all of us: We are by nature impatient to get to our destination. This week’s Bible passage tells us not of the destination but of the journey. Every day, God led the nation in the form of the pillar of cloud. The journey, not just the destination, has important things to tell us about God and ourselves.

*How do lessons learned while trying to reach a goal increase our joy once we achieve that goal?*
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

NUMBERS 1:1–10:10

Concentrating on the journey of God’s people from Egypt to the promised land, most of the events in Numbers occur in the wilderness. The word *wilderness* appears in the book over forty times. Numbers records the history of two generations: the generation that left Egypt but refused to enter Canaan (Num. 1–14) and the generation that followed after them (chaps. 15–26). With an overlap of generations in chapters 15–25, only two people from the first generation—Joshua and Caleb—entered the promised land with the second generation, and it was because of their trust in God (14:6–9).

Centering around four major events, the book easily divides into four sections: (1) The consecration of Israel at Sinai (1:1–10:10); (2) the rebellious generation in the wilderness (10:11–25:18); (3) the preparation of the new generation (26:1–30:16); and (4) preparation for war and entry into the promised land (31:1–36:13).

A central focus in the first nine chapters is the tabernacle—a portable temple where the presence of God resided. Because of its significance, the Lord defined the duties of the Levites and their helpers. With the tabernacle in the center, the twelve tribes camped beside the tabernacle with three tribes on each side, indicating God should be the central focus of their lives (chap. 2). To help them live as a covenant people, God provided instructions about relating to Him and to one another (chaps. 5–6). Before beginning their journey, Moses led the people in the second observance of the Passover as a reminder of God’s deliverance (chap. 9). By being obedient to God’s commands, He would lead them home to the promised land.

*Notice the number of times the phrases “the Lord’s command” and “the Lord’s requirement” occur in Numbers 9:15-23. What was Israel’s response?*
EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PRESENCE (NUM. 9:15-16)

15 On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and it appeared like fire above the tabernacle from evening until morning. 16 It remained that way continuously: the cloud would cover it, appearing like fire at night.

VERSE 15

Moses prepared the people for their journey by leading them in the second observance of the Passover (Num. 9:1-14). The first observance took place just prior to the exodus when the Lord passed over the houses of the Israelites while the first born males of the Egyptians died (Ex. 12–13). This is the only recorded celebration of this feast between the exodus and the entrance into Canaan. The cloud that first appeared at the Red Sea after the first Passover (Ex. 13:17-22; 14:19) would be their constant guide as long as they remembered, worshiped, and followed the God who delivered them from bondage.

The tabernacle, also known as the tent of the testimony and the tent of meeting, was the place and means by which God dwelled with His people and moved them toward the promised land. The tent was surrounded by a fence, providing a courtyard where cleansing rituals were performed at the altar of the burnt offering and the bronze laver. The tent itself was divided into two sections. Called the holy place, the first section included a golden lampstand, an altar of incense, and a table with twelve loaves of bread, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The back portion of the tent was separated by a veil and called the most holy place—the place the glory of the Lord resided. Inside the most holy place was the ark of the covenant. Inside the ark were two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, a jar of manna, and Aaron’s rod. (See Heb. 9:1-5.)

The tabernacle reminded the Israelites of God’s power and presence. The word covered indicates the cloud filled the sky directly above the tabernacle. Since clouds are not as visible at night, God illuminated the cloud with fire. This cloud covering is often called the shekinah glory of God. Although the word shekinah doesn’t appear in the Bible, it is used in Jewish writings to speak of God’s presence and to depict His glory. This set the Israelites apart
from all other nations—their God was personally involved in their lives. Through this supernatural act, God reminded His people that He was always with them, leading them all the way. Having been in captivity in Egypt for over 400 years (Ex. 12:40), the cloud also reminded the people of their responsibilities to serve and obey God.

**God is not just a promise-making God; He is a promise-keeping God.**

**VERSE 16**
The cloud guiding Israel was not a single occurrence; it covered the tabernacle *continuously* throughout their travels. God was with them, guiding them to inherit the promise He made hundreds of years earlier to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). Even if the promise had been forgotten by the people, God would bring it to pass. God is not just a promise-making God; He is a promise-keeping God.

**KEY DOCTRINE: God**

To God we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience (Deut. 32:6).

This isn’t the only time in the Bible that a cloud denoted God’s presence. Jesus was overshadowed by a cloud at His transfiguration, and He disappeared into a cloud at His ascension. (See Luke 9:34; Acts 1:9.) The tabernacle would be replaced with a temple, but Jesus is the perfect Tabernacle/Temple who dwelt among men (John 1:14). God graciously offered His presence to His people in the day of Moses. He makes the same offer to us today. Although He doesn’t use a cloud or fire, He has demonstrated His presence by sending His Son (Matt. 28:20), His Spirit (John 14:16), and His Word (Ps. 119:105) as a reminder that He is always actively involved in the lives of His people. There is never a time when God is far from those who love Him.

*What are some roadblocks that keep God’s people from being aware of His presence?*
KEY THEMES IN NUMBERS

- God is sovereign over all people and nations (22:22-35; 33:53).
- God is present among His people and leads them according to His will and purposes (9:15-23).
- God is faithful to the covenant with His people and keeps His promises to them—even when they are unfaithful (32:11-12).
- Failure to trust and obey God has consequences (14:20-23; 20:12; 21:4-9; 32:13).

THE PRACTICE (NUM. 9:17-18)

17 Whenever the cloud was lifted up above the tent, the Israelites would set out; at the place where the cloud stopped, there the Israelites camped. 18 At the Lord’s command the Israelites set out, and at the Lord’s command they camped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they camped.

VERSE 17

Burdened with the care of so many people—many of whom complained incessantly (Ex. 17:2)—the cloud and the fire relieved Moses of the headache of informing and persuading the multitude of people that it was time to march or to camp. By following the cloud, these pilgrim people marched through the wilderness like an army, pursuing the goal of inheriting the promised land. Throughout their long march, God supplied their needs, giving them manna and quail for food (Ex. 16:13,31) and a cloud as the vehicle of His guidance. While following such a routine may have seemed boring after a long duration, following the Lord’s leadership daily would produce blessings and joy.

VERSE 18

The cloud appeared at the Lord’s command. The phrase the Lord’s command is repeated throughout verses 18-23. The commands came from God. The people’s arrival at their new home would be determined by His timing and direction, as long as they trusted God by following Him. The practice of following the cloud served two purposes. First, it reminded them the Lord was their God. Second, it reinforced the necessity of unconditional obedience to His will. As believers march to their promised heaven, God will guide them
step by step. His primary method of guidance today is by His Word. The Bible provides the road map for the kind of life God desires and blesses.

*How does God direct His people today? How does today’s means of receiving God’s direction compare to the cloud followed by the Hebrews?*

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**THE PATTERN (NUM. 9:19-22)**

19 Even when the cloud stayed over the tabernacle many days, the Israelites carried out the LORD’s requirement and did not set out. 20 Sometimes the cloud remained over the tabernacle for only a few days. They would camp at the LORD’s command and set out at the LORD’s command. 21 Sometimes the cloud remained only from evening until morning; when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out. Or if it remained a day and a night, they moved out when the cloud lifted. 22 Whether it was two days, a month, or longer, the Israelites camped and did not set out as long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle. But when it was lifted, they set out.

**VERSES 19-22**

James declared that genuine faith produces good works in the lives of believers (Jas. 2:14-20). For the Israelites, the evidence of faith was following the cloud, moving only when the cloud moved before them. Regardless of how many days the cloud hovered over the tabernacle, they didn’t move without God’s command. If this was a divine test, they passed; they *carried out the LORD’s requirement.*

While the Bible doesn’t specifically say, certain Levites or priests may have watched the cloud constantly so they could alert the people. When the cloud moved, the people broke camp and followed. When the cloud stopped moving, they set up camp and waited. They could have a great sense of assurance and security, knowing beyond any question that God was present with them, guiding and protecting them day and night. God never abandoned His people.

Verse 22 begs the question: Why did the cloud linger at unspecified intervals, *whether it was two days, a month, or longer?*
Moving a multitude of people with their belongings and herds of animals took time. Sheep especially can only travel a few miles per day. Because they needed a large grazing area for their animals, they moved slowly. Some of their travels could have been at night or at least in the evening rather than the heat of the day. The Lord, no doubt, paused longer for certain situations, providing an adequate time of rest for the children and elderly, observance of cleansing rituals, and worship and reflection. God always knows what is best for His people—physically and spiritually.

Just as God did for Israel, He still expects His people to follow His leading. This passage reminds us of the importance of staying in step with God, never getting ahead or behind Him.

What habits can people practice today to demonstrate their willingness to follow God?

This passage reminds us of the importance of staying in step with God, never getting ahead or behind Him.

THE PRINCIPLE (NUM. 9:23)

23 They camped at the Lord’s command, and they set out at the Lord’s command. They carried out the Lord’s requirement according to his command through Moses.

VERSE 23

As they journeyed to the promised land, the children of Israel would often try God’s patience, yet they followed the cloud. At the Lord’s command they would move and camp as He led them.

In His wisdom, God gave Moses a tool that complemented the cloud. Devising a system of gathering the people before the tabernacle, Moses made two silver trumpets. A long blast of both trumpets summoned all the people, while a long blast of only one trumpet summoned the leaders of the clans (Num. 10:3-4). Short blasts indicated the tribes were to set out (vv. 5-6). They also sounded the trumpets for battle, observance of offerings and sacrifices, appointed festivals, the beginning of each month,
and other joyous occasions. The trumpets served as a reminder that Yahweh was their God, and His expectation was unwavering obedience (v. 10).

**God’s people can find comfort in following God because His presence always accompanies His command.**

When following God, obedience is always crucial. With an unusual but divine plan, Joshua and the Israelites defeated the city of Jericho (Josh. 6:6-20). With the small army God selected, Gideon defeated the Midianites (Judg. 7:1-22). Stories like these and many more remind believers of the role obedience plays in following God. Regardless of the task, God’s people can find comfort in following God because His presence always accompanies His command. God’s people never walk alone when following Him. This brings comfort and reassurance to us even on the darkest days. We are able to say with David, “Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4). God is honored through His people’s obedience to His direction, and as a result, His people experience His presence.

*How does a person’s obedience serve as a means of honoring God? Can a person honor God and be disobedient to Him?*

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**BIBLE SKILL: Compare related Bible passages.**

Scan Exodus 25–31 (construction of the tabernacle). Read 1 Kings 6 (Solomon’s temple) for comparison. Does either one of these seem to be the better representation of the presence of God among His people? How does 2 Samuel 7:6-7 bring insight to this question?
IN MY CONTEXT

• God graciously offers His presence to His people.
• God offers direction to His people.
• God expects His people to attentively follow His leadership.
• God is honored through His people’s obedience to His direction.

List hindrances that keep you from following God’s direction. How can you minimize these hindrances?

How can your Bible study group assist people in following God’s leadership? What steps should be avoided?

Reflect on Numbers 9:23. In what ways are you honoring God with your obedience? How can you honor Him even more?

Prayer Needs
GOD JUDGES

Refusing to trust God and His promises leads to judgment.

NUMBERS 14:5-19

Many of us have stories about some adventure we almost embarked on only to back out at the last minute. It may have been a roller coaster, skiing a black diamond slope, or some other adventure we left for others to try. We could not get over the fear. The Israelites looked at the obstacles facing them in the promised land and decided the obstacles were too great. As a result, the blessing that awaited them would be left for another generation to enjoy. Instead, they faced God’s judgment.

What activities do you refuse to do even though others in your family do that activity and recommend it to you?
UNTESTAND THE CONTEXT

NUMBERS 10:11–17:13

While the Israelites followed God’s cloud, they didn’t necessarily trust Him. They complained loudly and often. “If only we had died in ... Egypt!” was their favorite lament (Num. 14:2). Moses often took the brunt of their complaints (Ex. 17:4). He grew so frustrated with the people that he wanted to die (Num. 11:14-15). Even his brother and sister turned against him (Num. 12). The display of God’s presence and glory through the cloud and tabernacle wasn’t enough for the people. They wanted a life without the hardships.

Arriving at Kadesh, Moses sent twelve spies into the promised land. Their report was unanimous: the land was as God promised, flowing with abundance (Num. 13:26-27). However, ten of the spies brought a negative report: the Canaanites were stronger and unbeatable. Hearing the assessment, the hearts of the people melted. But Joshua and Caleb saw things from a different perspective (Num. 13:30). Yes, the people of the land were strong, but they were no match for God and His people. Joshua and Caleb believed the Hebrews should immediately invade the land, following God’s banner of protection and guidance. But the naysayers wouldn’t be silent. They continued to warn that everyone would be doomed if they crossed into Canaan (Num. 13:30-33).

The people wept in fear through the night (Num. 14:1-4). The next morning, instead of trusting God, they devised their own plan. They would overthrow Moses and Aaron, elect their own trusted leaders, and head back to Egypt, believing the Egyptians would gladly take them back. Although they were now free by God’s gracious act, they believed going back to bondage was a better choice. The Israelites had forgotten the incredible things God had done for them. Their act of rebellion didn’t start at Kadesh-barnea. It was the culmination of a series of missteps (complaining, not trusting God) by the people.

Notice Joshua and Caleb’s reaction and Moses’ discussion with God in Numbers 14:5-19. What made these men so different from the rest of the people?
EXPLORE THE TEXT

CHALLENGE ISSUED (NUM. 14:5-9)

5 Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole assembly of the Israelite community. 6 Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who scouted out the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite community: “The land we passed through and explored is an extremely good land. 8 If the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and give it to us. 9 Only don’t rebel against the LORD, and don’t be afraid of the people of the land, for we will devour them. Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us. Don’t be afraid of them!”

VERSES 5-6
Feeling the wrath of a disobedient people, Moses and Aaron reacted as men of God. Rather than arguing or calling down God’s fury at the sacrilegious blasphemy, they humbly **fell facedown** before God and the people, believing God would deal with the growing revolt. To fall on one’s face was usually a sign of worship or awe, but here it anticipated judgment. (See Num. 16:4-7; 20:6.)

A majority can be wrong. The narrow road of righteousness is the least traveled path.

Joshua and Caleb **tore their clothes**—a gesture of distress. As the two spies who brought back a good report, they knew what Israel would miss if they didn’t enter the land. Out of the multitude of people, only four men sided with God. A majority can be wrong. The narrow road of righteousness is the least traveled path. (See Matt. 7:13-14.)

VERSES 7-9
Not only did Joshua and Caleb rip their clothes, they passionately offered a plea. They didn’t deny the report of the other spies; the inhabitants of the land were formidable. However, Joshua and Caleb differed from the other spies on four points. First, if Israel obeyed God by entering the land, He would give them the land (v. 8). Second, if they didn’t follow God, they were committing an act of rebellion against Him (v. 9). Third, the people were responding in
fear instead of faith (v. 9). Fear is wrapped in the sin of unbelief. Fourth, although their enemies appeared invincible, God had removed their protection (v. 9). The Hebrew word translated protection literally means “shadow,” meaning the Canaanites only appeared to be protected. With God in the equation, the balance of power was altered.

Some people treat the Lord’s will as some sort of harsh punishment. But God’s will provides fulfillment. His will reflects His heart. When we rebel against God, we reject His love and provoke His discipline. Joshua and Caleb pleaded with the people, hoping they might act like children of God, not like fearful slaves. Having confidence in God and His plans would help them make the right choice.

What can a person do to encourage others to express faith in God? What kind of argument might a person use to encourage others to take action?

BIBLE SKILL: Compare accounts of the same event.

Compare the account of the rebellion at Kadesh-barnea in Numbers 14 to how Moses recounted the story in Deuteronomy 1:19-46. What aspects of the story did Moses emphasize, and what parts did he leave out? What does Deuteronomy 1 tell you about Moses’ inner thoughts on the rebellion, and how does this compare to his public actions before the congregation in Numbers 14?

ACCOUNTABILITY COMES (NUM. 14:10-12)

10 While the whole community threatened to stone them, the glory of the LORD appeared to all the Israelites at the tent of meeting.
The LORD said to Moses, “How long will these people despise me? How long will they not trust in me despite all the signs I have performed among them? 12 I will strike them with a plague and destroy them. Then I will make you into a greater and mightier nation than they are.”

VERSE 10

Joshua and Caleb’s speech did not elicit their desired response. The people grew violent and threatened to stone them. Stoning was usually reserved for major religious offenses (Lev. 20:2,27; Num. 15:36) and for serious breaches of the covenant (Deut. 21:21; 22:21). The two spies accused the people of rebelling against God; the people however, felt their complaint was against Moses, ignoring the fact that Moses was God’s messenger. They felt justified demanding the death penalty, believing that Joshua and Caleb were false witnesses. When covering up sin, a little justification goes a long way—the wrong way.

While God is full of love and mercy, His character demands that He must also be a God of justice and judgment.

The glory of the LORD appeared before the people could utter another word. God protected His faithful leaders and ended the rebellion. The time for disobedience was over. Verse 10 emphasizes that all the Israelites saw the Lord’s glory. While God is full of love and mercy, His character demands that He must also be a God of justice and judgment.

How do we know when God is upset with us?

VERSES 11-12

God asked Moses two pointed questions that reveal the heaviness of His heart. Like a prosecuting attorney, the Lord presented His case against the Israelites. How could the people despise God by forgetting all He had done for them? Despise means “to abhor or blaspheme.” God could have left them in Egypt, living as slaves. But instead He heard their cries and delivered them. He gave them
the cloud as a constant reminder of His presence and guidance. He faithfully supplied all their needs as they traveled through the wilderness. But standing now just outside Canaan, the people would not trust Him.

Refusing to trust God is rebellion against Him.

As both prosecutor and judge, God announced His verdict. He would destroy them and start over with a nation of people who trusted Him. Their rebellion, demonstrated by their fear and grumbling, culminated in God’s judgment. Refusing to trust God is rebellion against Him.

God holds His people accountable for their rejection of Him. In an era when people act like there is no accountability for their actions, passages like Numbers 14:10-12 serve as reminders that God still holds all people accountable for their choices.

What does a lifestyle of accountability to God look like?

KEY DOCTRINE: God the Father

God is fatherly in His attitude toward all men (Rom. 8:14-15).

GRACE SOUGHT (NUM. 14:13-19)

13 But Moses replied to the LORD, “The Egyptians will hear about it, for by your strength you brought up this people from them. 14 They will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, LORD, are among these people, how you, LORD, are seen face to face, how your cloud stands over them, and how you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. 15 If you kill this people with a single blow, the nations that have heard of your fame will declare, 16 ‘Since the LORD wasn’t able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them, he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.’ 17 So now, may my Lord’s
power be magnified just as you have spoken: 18 The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in faithful love, forgiving iniquity and rebellion. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers’ iniquity on the children to the third and fourth generation. 19 Please pardon the iniquity of this people, in keeping with the greatness of your faithful love, just as you have forgiven them from Egypt until now.”

VERSES 13-16
Just as he had interceded for Israel following the golden calf episode (Ex. 32:11-14), Moses now interceded with God on the border of the promised land. His primary concern was God’s character and reputation. If God destroyed His people, the Egyptians would hear about it. After witnessing the ten plagues and the event at the Red Sea, all of Egypt feared God. (See Ex. 12:29-30; 14:27-28.) If God destroyed His people, Egypt would tell the inhabitants of Canaan that He wasn’t powerful enough to deliver His promises. They would say that God could lead them out but wasn’t able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them. As a result, the investment God made in the Israelites would be wasted and His reputation would be tarnished. Moses was not telling God something He didn’t already know. He was interceding on behalf of the Israelites; he was appealing to God’s mercy.

Moses didn’t want God’s name belittled; he wanted it bolstered in the eyes of their enemies.

Not only was Egypt watching Israel’s progress, but other nations with their false gods were watching too, including the inhabitants of Canaan. If God slaughtered His people in the wilderness, their enemies would develop an erroneous assumption about God, believing He wasn’t able to bring them into the land He had promised them. Moses didn’t want God’s name belittled; he wanted it bolstered in the eyes of their enemies. Although Moses pleaded with God for Israel’s survival, he understood the power God possessed. The Lord could take the lives of all the Israelites with a single blow.

VERSES 17-18
Moses’ intercession moved from a concern for God’s reputation to an appeal based on God’s character. The tone of Moses softened.
He no longer called on Yahweh, but my Lord. Knowing God’s plan, he pleaded that God would show it in a different way. Recalling the revelation he received from God at the cleft of the rock (Ex. 34:6), Moses reminded God of His promise to be slow to anger and abounding in faithful love, forgiving iniquity and rebellion. Although Moses knew the guilty must be punished, he begged the Lord to dispense His judgment in such a way that His true nature would be revealed to both the people of God and their enemies.

**The sinful actions of one generation influence the spirituality and morality of succeeding generations.**

Even as Moses pleaded with God, he knew the sins of the fathers would impact their children and grandchildren. Every action has a consequence. The sinful actions of one generation influence the spirituality and morality of succeeding generations. Likewise, the opposite is also true. A godly home will help promote godly living in the next generation. While breaking the cycle of ungodly living can be difficult, it can be done with the Lord’s help.

**VERSE 19**

Interceding on behalf of a people who rejected his leadership, Moses offered a final summation. As he prayed for these wicked people, he exalted God’s great and faithful love. God had forgiven them numerous times before, and Moses asked for grace one more time. Moses’ loyalty was not fully appreciated until after his death, much like many spiritual leaders today. As Moses knew, people facing judgment need to know that God is gracious and will forgive those who turn from their rebellion and trust Him. God is waiting and ready, day or night.

*If God is already compassionate, why do we need to intercede for sinners? How do the arguments Moses made in his prayer serve as a model for our intercessory prayers?*
IN MY CONTEXT

• Faithful followers of God challenge others to express faith in God as well.
• God holds people accountable for their rejection of Him.
• People facing God’s judgment need to know that God is gracious and will forgive those who turn from their rebellion to trust in Him.

**What keeps you from challenging people’s lack of faith? What steps can you take so you speak more boldly? What should you avoid?**

**Discuss ways your Bible study group can foster accountability within the group and with others in a loving way. How can your group implement this plan?**

**Reflect on Numbers 14:18. How does sin impact your life? How can you break any sin cycles that may be present in your life?**

Prayer Needs
God Requires

God requires the leaders of His people to follow Him fully.

NUMBERS 20:1-13

Successful leaders hold themselves accountable, mindful of those who follow them. They don’t want to do anything to disqualify themselves as leaders. This is true also of Christian leaders. Effective spiritual leaders act in a way that honors God and benefits people. Unfortunately, even the best leaders can lose their focus and make costly mistakes.

What can a leader do to make sure he or she remains a leader? What actions might disqualify someone from continuing as a leader?
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

NUMBERS 18:1–20:29

Although God forgave Israel for their lack of faith and rebellion, they still suffered the consequences of their sin (Num. 14:26–35). Anyone twenty years and older wouldn’t be allowed in the land, traveling until the last one died. Upon hearing God’s judgment, the people tried forcing their way into Canaan but were routed by their enemies (14:39–45). Frustrated, Korah and 250 tribal leaders incited a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. This resulted in God’s punishing the rebels and their families by opening the earth and swallowing them into the ground (Num. 16:1–32). Thinking the judgment came from Moses, the entire camp rose against him. This time God sent a plague on Israel, killing 14,700 people (16:49).

Because of a growing discontent, the people challenged Aaron, believing the only reason he was the chief priest was because he was Moses’ brother. God settled the dispute when He made Aaron’s staff bloom with blossoms, signifying Aaron and his descendants were God’s choice (17:1–11).

Nearly all of the Israelites died in the wilderness. Because contact with dead bodies caused ceremonial uncleanness, the Lord established a purification ritual so that those who came into contact with corpses could be cleansed, allowing them back into fellowship quicker (chap. 19). Until the events of Numbers 20, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb were the only ones over nineteen years of age who would enter the promised land with the younger generation. Sadly, Moses and Aaron disobeyed God and thus forfeited their privilege of entering the promised land.

Arriving back at Kadesh with a new generation of people, the Israelites were on the verge of writing a new chapter in their history. Before entering the new land, God would test them and prepare them for their journey into Canaan. However, just as their ancestors before them, they would make some of the same mistakes. Each time, the Lord would prove He was their God.

Notice Moses and Aaron’s disobedience in Numbers 20:1–13, focusing on verse 12. Why does a lack of trust lead to disobedience?
The entire Israelite community entered the Wilderness of Zin in the first month, and they settled in Kadesh. Miriam died and was buried there. There was no water for the community, so they assembled against Moses and Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses and said, “If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord. Why have you brought the Lord’s assembly into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Why have you led us up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It’s not a place of grain, figs, vines, and pomegranates, and there is no water!”

VERSES 1-2

Miriam died just four months before Aaron died (Num. 33:38). Being Moses’ older sister, she held considerable influence in his life. When Moses was a baby, she watched over him when his mother hid him in a basket on the banks of the Nile. After Pharaoh’s daughter found him, it was because of Miriam’s quick thinking that their mother was able to be his nurse (Ex. 2:1-8). When the Israelites victoriously crossed the Red Sea, Miriam led the celebration. Micah 6:4 credits Miriam as being a leader in the Exodus, along with Moses and Aaron. Her fault was she opposed Moses on one occasion. Even then, Moses interceded on her behalf (Num. 12:1-15). Her death, after the people returned to Kadesh, reinforced God’s judgment that the first generation would not enter the promised land.

Before Moses could grieve over the loss of his sister, a problem arose in the camp—there was no water. While traveling through the wilderness, water was a top priority for survival. God would use the lack of water as a means of testing this new generation of people so He could demonstrate His power.

VERSES 3-5

As their forefathers before them, the people quarreled with Moses. The sins of the fathers became the same sins of the new generation (Num. 14:18). Wishing they had been among those who died in Korah’s rebellion, their difficulties once more brought out the worst in them. Instead of falling down on their faces before God, the people blamed Moses. Their two questions in verses 4-5 accused
Moses of incompetence: Why have you brought the LORD’s assembly into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Why have you led us up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place? With animosity in their hearts, they complained this was not a place flowing with milk and honey. There wasn’t even water to drink! Moses, it’s all your fault!

These accusations weren’t new to Moses; he had heard them repeatedly from the older generation. (See Ex. 14:11-12; 16:3; Num. 14:3.) The cycle of facing challenges and blaming Moses never ended. Their constant bickering must have pushed Moses to the brink of exasperation.

Moses lost a sister. The people wavered in their confidence in Moses. These two issues remind us that life continues even in the wake of grief and change. Whatever issues we wrestle with throughout our lives, life waits for no one. Only by taking one day at a time and trusting God for that day can we find peace and grace in any situation.

**What can a person gain from the hardships of life that will help grow his or her trust in God?**

**KEY DOCTRINE: God the Father**

God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace (Matt. 7:11).

**THE DIRECTIONS (NUM. 20:6-8)**

6 Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting. They fell facedown, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. 7 The LORD spoke to Moses, 8 “Take the staff and assemble the community. You and your brother Aaron are to speak to the rock while they watch, and it will yield its water. You will bring out water for them from the rock and provide drink for the community and their livestock.”
**VERSE 6**

*Moses and Aaron* went to the entrance of the tabernacle and **fell facedown** before God. The unruly mob should have been the ones facedown, humbling themselves before God. But it was Moses and Aaron who did so. In times of trouble, Moses often humbled himself before God (Num. 14:5; 16:4,22). God responded, as He does today when believers cry out to Him. Meeting personally with His hurting and harried leaders, His **glory** filled the tabernacle. The Lord appeared in all His splendor and majesty. God didn’t just offer Moses a solution; He gave Moses His presence. The Lord never changes; His eyes are still on His children today in every circumstance.

**God didn’t just offer Moses a solution; He gave Moses His presence.**

**VERSES 7-8**

Moses’ **staff** played a significant role in Israel’s history. Although it was a normal shepherd’s staff, it became God’s supernatural tool that demonstrated His presence and power. The staff became a serpent, proving Moses was God’s messenger as he demanded the release of God’s people in Egypt (Ex. 4:1-5). With the staff, the Nile River turned into blood during the plagues on Egypt (7:19-21). Leaving Egypt with the Israelites, Moses parted the Red Sea with the staff (14:16). When the people complained about a lack of water the first time, Moses struck the rock with his staff, and water came gushing forth (17:5-7).

Now it was time for another display of God’s power. Forty years earlier at Massah, God told Moses to strike the rock (Ex. 17:6). This time, however, God commanded that Moses should **speak to the rock**. God would once again prove He could supply all their needs if they trusted Him and followed their divinely chosen leaders.

God is bigger than any problem we encounter. No matter the circumstances, His children are to seek Him. God specializes in providing His people with whatever they need to face life’s difficulties. Nothing is difficult for the One who created the rock, the water, and the staff. With the sound of His voice the world came into being; with the sound of His voice the battles of life are won.
What insights do we gain from Moses and Aaron about approaching God with our burdens?

THE FRUSTRATION (NUM. 20:9-11)

9 So Moses took the staff from the LORD’s presence just as he had commanded him. 10 Moses and Aaron summoned the assembly in front of the rock, and Moses said to them, “Listen, you rebels! Must we bring water out of this rock for you?” 11 Then Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff, so that abundant water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

VERSES 9-10

Moses started off well, but his emotions got the best of him. He was suffering right along with the people, tired and thirsty. Like the people, he had buried loved ones too. Reaching his breaking point, he lashed out at the people: “Listen, you rebels!”

Venting his frustration, Moses made the tragic mistake of sounding like he would supply the water. Although no one would blame Moses for his tirade, he never mentioned it was God who supplied the water. Moses’ angry speech centered on himself, not on God and His gracious provision. By letting his temper get the best of him, Moses missed an incredible teaching moment desperately needed by this younger generation. The staff should have represented God’s generous supply, but Moses used it as a whip.

Does frustration reveal our true character or does it cause us to react in a way that is inconsistent with our character? Explain.

VERSE 11

Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. Ignoring God’s command to speak to the rock (v. 8), Moses took out his frustration by beating the rock. God, in His benevolent grace, still
provided the much-needed water in spite of Moses’ disobedience. However, the end didn’t justify the means, for Moses sinned.

Moses made several mistakes. First, he disobeyed God’s command. He should have spoken to the rock, but he struck the rock. This wasn’t partial obedience; it was a total disregard for God’s directives. Second, he let his anger get out of control. In a fit of rage, he struck the rock after calling the people rebels. He confronted disobedience with disobedience. Third, he modeled the same contentious spirit as the people. Fighting fire with fire only makes the fire of discontent grow stronger. Fourth, he didn’t acknowledge God. By his words and actions, Moses took credit for what God did, drawing the attention to himself. While God still blessed, Moses brought God’s judgment on himself. Because Aaron never said a word, he was consenting of Moses’ sinful behavior, making him as liable as Moses.

Moses’ actions dishonored God. God expects all His people to honor Him with obedience. To behave as the world behaves might bring some temporary satisfaction, but it doesn’t glorify the Lord. He expects more of His followers.

**THE FALLOUT (NUM 20:12-13)**

12 But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust me to demonstrate my holiness in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this assembly into the land I have given them.” 13 These are the Waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD, and he demonstrated his holiness to them.

**VERSES 12-13**

God responded quickly. Moses and Aaron would not enter the promised land. The Lord gave two reasons for His judgment. First, they did not trust Him. In dramatic fashion, God had appeared personally to Moses and Aaron (v. 6). But this wasn’t enough; Moses took matters into his own hands. Moses’ lack of faith brought God’s chastisement, just as He had often chastised the unfaithful people. Second, Moses’ disobedience hindered God’s demonstration of His holiness in the sight of the Israelites. God had a reason for His command. He wanted this new generation to witness His grace in the midst of a crisis. Moses wasted this divinely orchestrated opportunity.
Aaron lived about four months before Eleazar became Israel’s new high priest (Num. 20:22-29; 33:38). Moses was permitted to see the promised land with his own eyes before his death (Num. 27:12-14). Although God’s judgment might seem harsh, His holiness demands that He punish all sin, including the sins of His leaders.

On the previous occasion when God provided water for Israel, Moses “named the place Massah and Meribah” (Ex. 17:7), which means “testing” and “quarreling” respectively. Recalling that previous experience, Moses called this place Meribah because it was a place where the people quarreled with the LORD. It was also the place God demonstrated his holiness to them, but in a different way—in judgment of the sins of Israel’s leaders. Both these places served as reminders of God’s grace and justice—His life-giving water and His punishment of sin.

God holds us accountable for our actions. Regardless if we are provoked, emotionally drained, or physically exhausted, no excuse exists for a lack of faithfulness among leaders and followers alike. We are to represent our Lord well in this world.

*How does God hold believers accountable for their actions today? How does this accountability compare with what Moses faced?*

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**BIBLE SKILL: Compare similar experiences.**

Compare Exodus 17:1-7 to Numbers 20:1-13. List the differences and similarities. Take note of what Moses said in Exodus 17:2-4 and consider how that has bearing on God’s commands.

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IN MY CONTEXT

• Life continues even in the wake of grief and change.
• God provides His people solutions for life’s difficulties.
• God expects His people, especially His leaders, to honor Him with obedience.
• God holds His followers accountable for their actions.

Discuss as a group ways of encouraging those who are hurting (physically, emotionally, or spiritually) to be faithful in spite of their pain. What specific steps can the group take to encourage others?

What difficulties do you face right now? Voice a prayer asking for God’s direction and strength to remain faithful to Him.

Describe how you honor God each day. What should you stop doing? What should you start doing?

Prayer Needs
GOD SAVES

Jesus came to earth for the purpose of saving all people who turn to Him.

MATTHEW 1:18-25; NUMBERS 21:6-9

Most families have a Christmas tradition. It may be the timing of pulling out the decorations. For others, it might be about who reads the Christmas story and when they do that. For many families, it just wouldn’t be Christmas without that special ornament, activity, or way of doing things. Our celebration of Christmas would not be the same without the cross. Jesus was born with a purpose, and that purpose included Calvary.

Why might Christmas get more attention than Easter? Why are they important to each other?
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 1–2; NUMBERS 21:4-9

This lesson falls on the Sunday before Christmas, and we honor that by stepping back from exclusively focusing on Numbers. We will stay with Numbers but will also take a look at a familiar passage from Matthew’s Gospel.

Proving Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah to whom the Old Testament pointed, Matthew traced the genealogy of Jesus through forty-two generations, moving from Abraham, to David, to the Babylonian exile, and ending with the birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:1-17). Matthew then reminded his original Jewish readers that educated men from the east searched and found Jesus by examining Old Testament Scripture (Num. 24:17; Jer. 23:5; Mic. 5:2; Matt. 2:1-12). Moreover, Jesus fulfilled the prophetic promises of Scripture when God relocated His family to Egypt (Num. 24:8; Hos. 11:1; Matt. 2:13-15) while Herod massacred all the male children two years of age and younger (Matt. 2:16-18).

The Numbers passage tells us why Moses set a bronze image of a snake in the camp of Israel. Sending poisonous snakes as part of His judgment on Israel for their constant complaining (Num. 21:4-6), God used a bronze snake on a pole as a means of salvation. After being bitten by a snake, only those who trusted Him by looking at His appointed method of healing lived (Num. 21:8-9). The bronze snake foreshadowed the cross. Jesus stated that this episode illustrated His mission (John 3:14-15).

As you read Matthew 1:18-25 and Numbers 21:6-9, look for connections between the two passages. How does God provide a remedy for sin in both passages?

KEY DOCTRINE: Salvation

There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord (John 3:36).
THE SAVIOR (MAT. 1:18-23)

18 The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit. 19 So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly. 20 But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” 22 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel, which is translated “God is with us.”

VERSES 18-19

Contrary to what some people may think, Jesus’ last name is not Christ. While His given name is Jesus, the word Christ (Christos in Greek) means “Anointed One” and identified Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. The title indicates the uniqueness of Jesus. His birth was different from any other birth.

Mary was engaged to Joseph. Engagement in that culture was a legally binding contractual agreement that could be dissolved only by divorce. Although the wife would remain at her parent’s home until the wedding ceremony, they were legally husband and wife.

Taking a radical turn from the norm of that day for engaged couples, Mary found herself pregnant. Just as the Spirit of God had been at work in the creation of the world (Gen. 1:1-2), He was now at work in Mary’s body in a miraculous way. Through the supernatural work of God, Mary was God’s divinely chosen delivery method of bringing the Savior into the world.

When Joseph heard the news, he must have thought that Mary had been unfaithful because he decided to divorce her secretly. Joseph was a righteous man, meaning he was honest and upright.
in his character and actions. If he made the scandal public, Mary would be humiliated and rejected by the community, possibly even stoned to death. (See Deut. 22:23-24.) Evidently, Joseph’s love for her gave him pause.

VERSES 20-23

God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream. Addressing him as son of David, the angel pierced Joseph’s heart with a long-forgotten promise made to King David of a perpetual reign through his descendants (2 Sam. 7:11-16). The line of David lost its glory when Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC. Over 500 years had passed since a descendant of David had been on the throne. Descending from David, Joseph would inherit that promise through Jesus. Afraid of what others might say or do, the angel reassured Joseph, explaining how and why Mary was pregnant.

Jesus was conceived ... from the Holy Spirit. Yet God entrusted Joseph with the task of being Jesus’ earthly father and guiding Him in His childhood and teenage years. This task wasn’t given to the high priest or a religious leader, nor was this charge given to a rich or influential person. Joseph, an ordinary laborer with limited income and education, received this tremendous responsibility.

The angel informed Joseph the baby’s name would be Jesus. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Yehoshua, which means, “Yahweh saves.” Thus, the very name of Jesus reflects the purpose of His life—he will save his people from their sins. This is the first mention of sin in the New Testament. Jesus would bring freedom from the power, guilt, and penalty of sin.

God provides salvation through Jesus alone (John 14:6).

Matthew tells us that all of this took place to fulfill Isaiah 7:14, See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel. From the beginning, the promises of God pointed toward this event. Jesus would be the seed promised in Genesis 3:15 and the promised seed of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. He would be Immanuel, literally “God with us.” In Jesus, God came to earth and dwelt among men (John 1:14). Only this child would save people from their sin (Acts 4:12). God provides salvation through Jesus alone (John 14:6).
The virgin birth was a miracle of God, but the sequence of events included acts of grace and obedience by Joseph. How might our acts of grace and obedience pave the way for a work of God?

THE ARRIVAL (MATT. 1:24-25)

24 When Joseph woke up, he did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He married her 25 but did not have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. And he named him Jesus.

VERSES 24-25

Waking from his dream, Joseph did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He fulfilled his engagement commitment by marrying Mary. Lost in the birth narrative is the fact that Joseph put his own reputation on the line as much as Mary. He too would face scrutiny and criticism. Regardless of the truth, some would likely accuse Joseph of getting Mary pregnant, while others would condemn him for marrying someone they thought was unfaithful. But his love for Mary and God’s angelic affirmation were enough for Joseph. He married her, and this in turn made it possible for Joseph to take Mary with him to Bethlehem for the census, fulfilling another prophecy concerning the Christ child (Mic. 5:2; Luke 2:1-5).

Filled with integrity, Joseph restrained his newlywed desires, leaving no doubt that Jesus was God’s Son. It is a mistake to think Mary remained a perpetual virgin. The language in verse 25 is clear—Joseph did not have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. The word until indicates that after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary lived together as husband and wife and produced children of their own (Matt. 12:46-50; 13:55-56). In obedience to God, Joseph named the child Jesus. At the time, the birth of Jesus made little stir on earth, except in the hearts of a few shepherds (Luke 2:8-12). Later, Herod would learn of Jesus’ birth from a group of magi and take drastic measures (Matt. 2:16-18). But on the night He was born, Jesus arrived on earth with little recognition. In heaven, however, there was celebration and singing. The angels filled the skies, declaring His praises (Luke 2:13-14).
Believers demonstrate their faith in God through obedient action, just like Joseph. God has given His Word as a guide for faithful living. By doing what the Bible commands, believers join hands with Joseph and countless others in fulfilling God’s purposes here on earth. Life’s greatest privilege is living in faithful obedience so others will know Jesus as Savior. This Christmas, give Christ your undivided loyalty.

What does a person’s response to God’s Word reveal about that person? Highlight the difference between those who obey and those who disobey. What factors contribute to a person’s willingness to obey?

THE REQUIREMENT (NUM. 21:6-9)

6 Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and they bit them so that many Israelites died. 7 The people then came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD so that he will take the snakes away from us.” And Moses interceded for the people.

8 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake image and mount it on a pole. When anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will recover.”

9 So Moses made a bronze snake and mounted it on a pole. Whenever someone was bitten, and he looked at the bronze snake, he recovered.

An event in the Book of Numbers pointed to the reason Jesus came into the world, foreshadowing the cross of Jesus. When addressing Nicodemus, Jesus pointed to this event recorded in Numbers 21 to explain the need for a Savior. Jesus then followed by explaining that God loved the world so much that He sent His only Son to save those who believe in Him. (See John 3:14-16.)

VERSES 6-7

The new generation grumbled like their forefathers had. Because the Edomites refused them safe passage through Edom, the people of God were forced into a longer journey (Num. 20:14-22). Becoming impatient and frustrated, they blamed God and Moses (21:4-5). In times past, when Israel complained, the
Lord would send warnings and then judgment. This time there apparently was no warning. God immediately sent His judgment in the form of *poisonous snakes*, and *many Israelites died*. The Lord made sure this was the last time they complained about food, and never again did Israel complain about God’s provision.

Suffering and dying, the people approached Moses for relief. Previously, when the judgment of God fell, Moses would instinctively fall on his face before the Lord and pray for the people. This time, they begged for his intercession. Once before have we seen the people admit their sin, and that happened after they didn’t follow God into the promised land (Num. 14:40). Here they confessed, *we have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you.* The lethal snakebites had gotten their attention. Moses then *interceded for the people.*

Even today, God loves His people too much to overlook their sins. Like the Israelites, we must quickly and humbly seek His forgiveness for our sins (1 John 1:9).

**BIBLE SKILL: Examine uses of the same word.**

Apart from John 3:14 and 12:32, the verb “lifted up” (sometimes translated as “exalted”) also occurs in Luke 14:11 and Acts 5:31. Look at these four verses. How is the word used differently in these verses? Construct a summary statement of the Bible’s teaching on being lifted up.

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VERSES 8-9

God answered Moses’ prayer in a most unusual way. He did not remove the snakes. Instead, He told Moses to make a snake image and mount it on a pole. Having learned his lesson at Meribah, Moses followed God’s command without deviating (Num. 20:9-13). Anyone bitten by a poisonous snake would recover if he looked at the bronze snake. The sculpture possessed no magical power; it was merely a man-made object. The power came from God in response to people’s faith in Him.

The bronze snake was an object lesson and a foreshadowing of Jesus’ atoning death on the cross.

Teaching His people the necessity of faith, the bronze snake was an object lesson and a foreshadowing of Jesus’ atoning death on the cross. Drawing from this passage, Jesus taught that He too would be lifted up for the salvation of the world (John 3:14-15). Like the snake in the wilderness, those who look to Jesus in faith find life, while those who refuse face eternal death (Rom. 6:23).

Looking at the snake in Moses’ time required an act of the will, just as trusting in Jesus’ death on the cross for salvation involves an act of the will. Unlike the bronze snake that provided only a physical recovery, the suffering Savior provides permanent healing of the sin-sick soul.

Why did God use a model of a serpent—the very creature that killed the people? Because on the cross, Jesus became sin—the very thing that condemns people. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that God “made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Salvation is available only by turning to Jesus in faith (Acts 16:31). This Christmas, receive the greatest gift of all—Jesus, the One who saves people eternally from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

What does God’s provision for sin teach about God? Why is faith in Jesus imperative?
IN MY CONTEXT

• God provides salvation through His Son.
• Believers demonstrate their faith in God through obedient action.
• Salvation is available only by turning to Jesus in faith.

*What are you doing this Christmas to celebrate the gift of salvation? How can you point to salvation through Jesus this Christmas season?*

*Discuss with your Bible study group ways of helping others express their faith in God through obedient action. What actions need to be taken that might aid others in their spiritual development?*

*Who in your circle of family and friends needs Jesus? Starting with prayer, make a plan to share Jesus this week. What else should you include in your plan?*

Prayer Needs
God Calls

God calls His followers to represent Him and His purposes in this world.

NUMBERS 22:22-35

Telling the truth can be hard. We may be called on to tell the truth, but what about when doing so hurts someone we love? What if the truth offends or angers a neighbor or coworker? We may find ways to justify not telling the whole truth so we don’t run the risk of offending or angering. We really didn’t lie; we just didn’t tell everything we knew. We know we should tell the full truth, but our emotions and fears sometimes get in the way.

What makes telling the whole truth tricky? What if that whole truth is about God and salvation?
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

NUMBERS 22:1–25:18

The Israelites had defeated every enemy they encountered since leaving Egypt, except when they irresponsibly attacked the Canaanites (Num. 14:41-45). They defeated the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16), the king of Arad (Num. 21:1-3), the Amorites (Num. 21:21-25), and King Og of Bashan (Num. 21:33-35). With the Transjordan firmly under Israel’s control, they settled in the plains of Moab just across from Jericho, the first city in Canaan Israel would attack (Num. 22:1; Josh. 6).

Seeing how the Israelites thoroughly routed their enemies, King Balak and the Moabites feared they were next on the Israelites’ agenda. In hopes of rebuffing the Hebrews, the Moabites formed an alliance with the Midianites (Num. 22:1-4). Both of these nations were actually relatives of the Israelites. The Moabites were descendants of Lot (Gen. 19:36-37), and the Midianites were descendants of Abraham through Keturah (Gen. 25:1-4). Unknown to Balak, God had forbidden the Israelites from attacking Moab (Deut. 2:9).

Terrified by the Israelites’ presence, Balak wasn’t satisfied with increasing the size of his army. He enlisted spiritual help by calling on Balaam, a pagan diviner and prophet (Num. 24:1; Josh. 13:22). Believing a curse would tilt the odds in his favor, Balak hired Balaam to curse the Israelites (Num. 22:5–7). God spoke to Balaam, telling him that he shouldn’t curse His people (Num. 22:8-14). After Balak sent another impressive entourage and probably a higher fee for Balaam’s services, God came to Balaam again. This time God permitted Balaam’s visit with Balak on the condition that he would only do what God said (Num. 22:15-20).

Balaam is an enigmatic figure. He was from a town called Pethor in Syria west of the Euphrates River (Num 22:5). The name Pethor meant “soothsayer.” This would imply that he was a pagan diviner. On the other hand, when he had a command from Yahweh, God of Israel, he was obedient. In parts of the narrative, Balaam appears to be pious. He declared that no amount of money could persuade him to go to Moab against the prohibition of Yahweh, whom he calls “my God” (22:18). His words, however, do not indicate he was a true worshiper of Yahweh. The Bible elsewhere regards him as evil and as the instigator of the seduction of Israel at Baal of Peor (Num. 31:8,16; Deut. 23:4-5; Josh. 24:9–10).
Observe the number of times the word LORD appears in Numbers 22:22-35. What is the significance?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THREE STRIKES (NUM. 22:22-27)

22 But God was incensed that Balaam was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand on the path to oppose him. Balaam was riding his donkey, and his two servants were with him. 23 When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing on the path with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the path and went into the field. So Balaam hit her to return her to the path. 24 Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow passage between the vineyards, with a stone wall on either side. 25 The donkey saw the angel of the LORD and pressed herself against the wall, squeezing Balaam’s foot against it. So he hit her once again. 26 The angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn to the right or the left. 27 When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she crouched down under Balaam. So he became furious and beat the donkey with his stick.

VERSE 22

God was incensed with anger that Balaam was going. The Lord had told Balaam to go (v. 20) but now was angry that Balaam was going. Why? We may surmise Balaam had done or said something along the way that God had not authorized, thereby disobeying God’s command to do and say only what the Lord told him.

The soothsayer who was seen by the world as a man of great spiritual stature would be shown by the God of heaven and earth that he was spiritually blind and powerless. The angel of the LORD was likely the physical manifestation of the Lord Himself in the form of an angel. Demonstrating His sovereign power, God stood in the way of Balaam. The holy God who dealt harshly with the sins of His own people (Num. 14:20-23) would not tolerate any disobedience in the pagan diviner. Balaam would do things God’s way or forfeit his life.
VERSES 23-27

Donkeys were reliable animals, carrying loads, grinding grain, and plowing fields. And on this day, the animal was smarter than its master. Seeing the angel with a sword blocking the way, the donkey turned off the path into an open field, saving Balaam’s life. How did Balaam reward her? He beat her.

Down the road, the angel reappeared between a narrow passage way. Moving out of the way, the donkey pressed up against the wall, squeezing Balaam’s foot against the wall of stone. Boiling with anger, Balaam beat her again. In the road ahead, the angel positioned himself where the donkey couldn’t get around him, leaving the donkey with no other choice but to lay down. Exploding emotionally, Balaam beat the donkey a third time.

Balaam thought the only thing standing between him and Balak’s riches was the donkey. Little did he know the donkey saw what he could not see. If Balaam was a specialist in the supernatural sphere as he claimed, an ordinarily obedient animal being disobedient three times should have told him something was amiss.

Although boundaries may at times seem burdensome, God sets them so His children can be fruitful and blessed.

Just as God set boundaries in Balaam’s life (Num. 22:20), God provides boundaries to keep us within His will. Like Balaam, we can ignore the warning signs and keep going our way, or we can respect them, going only where God wants us to go. Although boundaries may at times seem burdensome, God sets them so His children can be fruitful and blessed.

How is a person who lives within God’s boundaries different from one who does not observe His boundaries?

TWO QUESTIONS (NUM. 22:28-30)

28 Then the Lord opened the donkey’s mouth, and she asked Balaam, “What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?” 29 Balaam answered the donkey, “You made me look
like a fool. If I had a sword in my hand, I’d kill you now!” 30 But the donkey said, “Am I not the donkey you’ve ridden all your life until today? Have I ever treated you this way before?” “No,” he replied.

**VERSES 28-30**

For the first and only time, a donkey spoke. The LORD opened the donkey’s mouth, and the donkey asked Balaam two questions. The first question focused on the reason for the three beatings: “What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?” Balaam explained that the donkey had made him look like a fool—that he couldn’t control her, embarrassing him in front of his two servants. If he had a sword, he would have killed the poor donkey.

The second question revolved around the animal’s prior behavior: “Am I not the donkey you’ve ridden all your life until today? Have I ever treated you this way before?” Throughout her lifetime of service, the donkey always faithfully complied with every command. Confronted with this question, all Balaam could do was respond with a one-word answer: No. These questions were a prelude to the question the Lord would ask of Balaam in verse 32. If he couldn’t honestly answer a beast of burden, he certainly couldn’t answer God.

Not displaying any shock that his once speechless donkey could talk, Balaam apparently conversed as if he talked regularly with animals. Some have made the assumption that the pagan diviner had heard such things before, dabbling in the occult. Recall that Satan spoke in the form of a serpent (Gen. 3:1; 2 Cor. 11:3). Jesus cast demons out of a man and allowed them to inhabit a herd of swine. Though the pigs didn’t speak, the demons identified with the animal world (Luke 8:26-39). In his involvement in the spirit realm, it’s possible Balaam thought he talked with animals. On this occasion, however, it clearly was God who gifted the animal with speech, getting Balaam’s attention so he could hear a message from the Lord.

God can communicate to humans through whatever means He chooses. Throughout the Bible, He spoke in a variety of ways, including angels (Num. 22:22-35; Luke 1:28), dreams (Gen. 28:12), symbolic actions (Judg. 6:36-40), a soft whisper (1 Kings 19:12), an audible voice (1 Sam. 3:9-10), prophets (2 Kings 7:1), the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:16), and Jesus (Heb. 1:1-2). Being the Creator of the universe, He can speak even through the mouth of a donkey...
if He chooses to do so. Just know that if God does impart His will through a brute beast, that person has probably reached a low point in his or her spiritual life!

**It’s imperative that we filter everything we perceive as a message from God through His written Word.**

Listening and learning are two hallmarks of growing believers. The primary way God speaks today is through His Word, the Bible. While God can speak in and through all things, He is consistent. It’s imperative that we filter everything we perceive as a message from God through His written Word. Living by the Bible, we can know without hesitation we are following God’s will.

*How does God communicate to us today? How do we know a message is from God and not our own wishes?*

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**KEY DOCTRINE: Scripture**

The Scriptures are the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried (Ps. 19:7-10).

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**ONE VIEW (NUM. 22:31-35)**

31 Then the LORD opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the path with a drawn sword in his hand. Balaam knelt low and bowed in worship on his face. 32 The angel of the LORD asked him, “Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? Look, I came out to oppose you, because I consider what you are doing to be evil. 33 The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away from me, I would have killed you by now and let her live.” 34 Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the path to confront me. And now, if it is evil in your sight, I will go back.” 35 Then the angel of the LORD said to
Balaam, “Go with the men, but you are to say only what I tell you.” So Balaam went with Balak’s officials.

**VERSE 31**

Accustomed to dealing with man-made gods, Balaam thought he could do whatever he pleased—until he met the God of the Israelites. After opening the mouth of the donkey, God opened the eyes of the pagan diviner.

Angels in the Bible are presented as mighty beings and warriors (Jude 1:9; Rev. 18:21). Standing before Balaam was the angel of the LORD … with a drawn sword in his hand. A sword in its scabbard indicated it was time for mediation, but a drawn sword indicated it was time for war. Completely unaware, Balaam almost paid the ultimate price for his disobedience. Realizing the severity of his situation, he fell prostrate on the ground. Laying on one’s face was a sign of surrender. Although he may not have had a relationship with the one true God, the soothsayer understood he was in the presence of a powerful being that he had never before encountered.

*What are some ways people respond to hearing God’s truth? What are the dangers of ignoring His truth? What are the benefits of heeding God’s truth?*

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**VERSES 32-35**

The angel echoed the donkey’s question (v. 28), asking why he had beaten the beast three times. He said he came out to oppose Balaam because he considered Balaam’s actions evil. The evil cannot be the mere fact that Balaam was going to Moab; God had given Balaam permission to go. The angel reaffirmed this, refusing Balaam’s offer to turn around and head home. It is more likely that Balaam had been looking for a strategy to allow him to say what God told him to say but also say things that would please Balak and earn Balaam a large payment. Because of his lesson on the road, he now knew that this was a bad idea. When he got to Balak, his prophecies contained only what God had given him to say.

Acknowledging God had the power of life and death, Balaam admitted his sin, stressing he was ignorant of the angel’s appearance and offering to return home. Was Balaam sincere? Probably so, since
he was overwhelmed with the fact that he nearly died. However, this doesn’t mean he became a true worshiper of God, as his later actions would testify (Num. 31:16). Uttering the phrase, I have sinned, doesn’t necessarily mean one is putting saving faith in God and is willing to turn from the sin. Pharaoh (Ex. 9:27), King Saul (1 Sam. 15:24), and Judas Iscariot (Matt. 27:4) all spoke similar words but didn’t turn to God. More often than not, they were sorry for what they did or that they got caught, like Balaam.

God told Balaam to continue his journey: Go with the men. However, Balaam could only speak the oracles God gave him: you are to say only what I tell you. Balaam now realized this mission was about more than cursing a nation and making some money. The Lord would use Balaam to pronounce a great blessing on Israel in front of their enemies (Deut. 23:3-6; Josh. 24:9-10).

As humble servants of God, we represent Him when we declare His truth. It is His message we speak, and speaking God’s truth is a privilege—one of the greatest privileges granted by the heavenly Father. As a result, the message should be delivered as God gave it, without compromise. While standing for the Lord may be costly, believers can bear the cost, knowing God will ultimately reward their efforts.

How do people’s attitudes about God impact their ability to express His truths?

BIBLE SKILL: Read the context to get a clearer picture of a passage.
Review the oracles given by Balaam to Balak recorded in Numbers 23–24. Evaluate how Balaam’s encounter with God impacted his message. What did Balaam say that displeased Balak? How might he have changed his words to please Balak? What lessons can we glean from the life of Balaam?
IN MY CONTEXT

- God provides boundaries designed to keep us within His will.
- God can communicate to humans through whatever means He chooses.
- As humble servants of God, His people must be careful to present God’s clear message to others regardless of the cost.

*Discuss with your Bible study group ways of holding one another accountable for living within God’s boundaries. What actions need to be taken to more effectively help each other stay in those boundaries?*

*Make a list of ways you can place yourself into a position to hear from God. What steps do you need to take to more readily place yourself in a position to hear from God?*

*Read Numbers 22:38. Reflect on how well you humbly and clearly shared the gospel this year. How can you build on this in the upcoming year?*

Prayer Needs
God Commissions

God’s people must affirm and invest in the next generation.

Numbers 27:12-23

Most people understand the value of mentoring others. The problem is we don’t do it. Our excuses range from it’s easier to do it myself, I don’t have time, or I can do the job better. Sometimes it’s a pride issue; we like impressing people with our hard work. Investing in others can also be messy. It takes time, patience, and grace. Conversely, there is no greater joy than seeing someone reach his or her potential, taking the reins of leadership and moving forward for Christ.

What are the benefits of investing in the next generation?
NUMBERS 26:1–30:16

Looking toward the future, Moses took a census of the new generation (Num. 26). Much like the first census (Num. 1:1-46), God was preparing Israel for the conquest of the promised land by measuring the size of their army. Based on the size of each tribe, the second census also determined how much land each tribe would inherit. After the first census, Israel had a total of 603,550 available soldiers (Num. 1:45-46). After the second census, they had 601,730 (Num. 26:51). The difference of only 1,820 men is a small number considering they wandered in the desert for thirty-eight years.

Upon dividing the inheritance of the land, a problem arose (Num. 27:1-11). Zelophehad died without having any sons. While the eldest son received two-thirds of the inheritance and the other sons divided the remaining one-third (Deut. 21:15-17), the daughters were excluded from the inheritance. Fearing their father’s name would be forgotten, the five daughters of Zelophehad petitioned Moses, who in turn sought God’s counsel. The Lord ruled the daughters should receive the inheritance, establishing a perpetual law regarding inheritances.

With the inheritance issues settled and the people almost readied for the promised land, Moses asked God for a successor (Num. 27:12-23). The Lord chose Joshua, one of the two spies who had argued for entering the promised land (Num. 14:6-10). The Lord had Joshua commissioned before the entire community of Israelites (Num. 27:22-23).

God then outlined the specific offerings Israel should observe, along with regulations about vows (Num. 28–30). These observances would reflect their relationship with the Lord. Being God’s covenant people is what set them apart from other nations; therefore, their worship must focus on Him, offered at the right time and in the right way. Just as God kept His Word, He demanded the same from His people (Num. 30:1-2).

Notice Moses’ plea for a replacement in Numbers 27:12-23. What does this request reveal about Moses’ understanding of leadership?
EXPLORE THE TEXT

FACING DEATH (NUM. 27:12-14)

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go up this mountain of the Abarim range and see the land that I have given the Israelites. After you have seen it, you will also be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother was. When the community quarreled in the Wilderness of Zin, both of you rebelled against my command to demonstrate my holiness in their sight at the waters.” Those were the Waters of Meribah-kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin.

VERSES 12-13

Moses’ time on earth was near its end. For forty years he faithfully led the Israelites, bearing their burdens, sharing their victories, and teaching them God’s laws. At 120 years of age, he was still actively engaging with God and His people (Deut. 32:2; 34:7). As he had done throughout his ministry, one last time Moses ascended a mountain at God’s command. Going up Mount Nebo in the Abarim range, Moses would view the promised land from a distance and die shortly thereafter (Deut. 32:48-52; 34:1-6).

Moses lived a remarkable life from infancy. Saving his life, his mother hid him on the banks of the Nile River (Ex. 2:3). Raised in Pharaoh’s palace, he killed an Egyptian for mistreating his people (Ex. 2:5-22). Fleeing for his life, he spent forty years as a shepherd before meeting God in a burning bush (Ex. 3:2-6). He stood before Pharaoh, demanding the release of God’s people and ushering ten plagues on Egypt (Ex. 7-12). For the next forty years he would lead the children of Israel through the wilderness (Deut. 2:14). Meeting with God on the mountain, he delivered God’s law (Ex. 20:1-17). He witnessed miracles, put up with the complaints of the people, and set up the tabernacle (Ex. 15:25; 17:1-2; 25:1-40). Centuries later, he and Elijah would stand on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus (Matt. 17:1-8). The writer of Hebrews would include him in the list of those who lived by faith (Heb. 11:23-28).

VERSE 14

Moses would see the promised land but not enter it because of his sin at Meribah-kadesh. (See Num. 20:1-13.) After the people had complained about a lack of water, Moses beat the rock instead of...
speaking to the rock as the Lord commanded. The holiness of God demanded that Moses be disciplined for his sin of pride and anger. Because Aaron stood by and watched, he too was disciplined.

Death is the byproduct of living in a fallen world, resulting from the sin of Adam. Unless Jesus comes first, everyone will die, regardless of social standing, title, or influence. All people must face the reality of death. No one gets out of this world alive. Advances in modern medicine have come a long way in promoting good health and longevity, but no cure exists for death. For people everywhere, the only hope of an eternal life after death is found in Jesus Christ (John 6:27). Just as Moses was gathered with his people in glory, we can be gathered to our people in heaven when we put our faith in Christ alone.

**How does faithfulness to God’s purposes help a person face death?**

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**LOOKING TO THE FUTURE (NUM. 27:15-17)**

15 So Moses appealed to the Lord, 16 “May the Lord, the God who gives breath to all, appoint a man over the community who will go out before them and come back in before them, and who will bring them out and bring them in, so that the Lord’s community won’t be like sheep without a shepherd.”

**VERSES 15-16**

In one of his most passionate prayers, Moses appealed to the Lord, calling on Him as the **God who gives breath to all**. Apart from God, humanity is lifeless and without purpose. The phrase, the **God who gives breath to all**, appears only one other time in the Bible, when Moses interceded for the Israelites so God wouldn’t destroy them for Korah’s rebellion (Num. 16:22). Just like in Korah’s day, the fate of the people rested in the Lord’s hands. Instead of slipping into self-pity, worried only about his uncompleted task, Moses begged God for a successor. Moses’ prayer reveals much about him as a man and as a leader. On two previous occasions God considered destroying the Israelites. Both times Moses humbly pleaded that God would spare His people. (See Ex. 32:7-14; Num. 14:11-19.)
Criticized, misunderstood, and nearly stoned, he remained a faithful shepherd, worrying about the future of the people without capable leadership.

*How does the reality of death cause a person to think about the future needs of those who will outlive them?*

**VERSE 17**

Moses knew the people needed someone who was experienced—a leader who had and would go out and victoriously accomplish God’s will and who would oversee the needs of the people. Moses knew that *the Lord’s community* needed someone who could set the example and guide them. Moses called the Israelites *sheep*. Literal sheep need constant supervision and protection. Without it, they wander aimlessly and fall easily into a predator’s trap. Just as sheep need a shepherd, the people of Israel needed a *shepherd* (1 Kings 22:17; Ezek. 34:5). Using this same imagery, Jesus also described the spiritual condition of people as sheep with no shepherd (Matt. 9:36), meaning they were adrift spiritually and open to the enemy’s attacks. All generations of believers are in need of shepherds committed to God and His purposes.

**Effective leaders understand that God’s work is greater than one person.**

Like Moses, godly leaders must focus on the future of God’s work. If the work of God centers around one person, that work will die after one generation. Effective leaders understand that God’s work is greater than one person. Accordingly, they invest themselves in people who will carry on the work after their passing. While delegation is never easy, it is how the work of God continues. In the era of the patriarchs, the covenant passed from Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, and then to the twelve tribes of Israel. In the period of Israel’s kings, Saul gave way to David, who passed the torch to Solomon. In the New Testament, Jesus turned His earthly ministry over to the apostles. By focusing on the future, godly leaders leave behind a faithful legacy and a framework for continued success in the Lord’s work.
What steps can believers take that will both raise the awareness about needing future leaders and invest in future leaders?

**BIBLE SKILL:** *Compare similar situations.*

Compare what you see about the selection of Joshua in Numbers 27 to the exhortations Paul gave to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:3-14. What points of similarity do you see, and what differences? How should principles in both passages guide investing in future leaders?

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**GOD PROVIDES** *(NUM. 27:18-23)*

18 The LORD replied to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man who has the Spirit in him, and lay your hands on him. 19 Have him stand before the priest Eleazar and the whole community, and commission him in their sight. 20 Confer some of your authority on him so that the entire Israelite community will obey him. 21 He will stand before the priest Eleazar who will consult the LORD for him with the decision of the Urim. He and all the Israelites with him, even the entire community, will go out and come back in at his command.” 22 Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua, had him stand before the priest Eleazar and the entire community, 23 laid his hands on him, and commissioned him, as the LORD had spoken through Moses.

**VERSE 18**

God chose Joshua. The Spirit was in Joshua and would empower him with wise leadership. Joshua also had a proven track record. He worked closely with Moses after leaving Egypt. He led the army that defeated the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16). From his youth, he
served faithfully as Moses’ assistant (Ex. 33:11). When God gave Moses the law on Mount Sinai, Joshua was with him (Ex. 24:12-13). Along with Caleb, he was one of the two spies who argued favorably for entering the promised land (Num. 14:6-9). He was the right candidate as Moses’ successor.

The laying on of hands signified Joshua was God’s choice. The laying on of hands played an important role in Israel’s history, implying either blessings or guilt. Jacob blessed his grandsons when he placed his hands on their heads (Gen. 48:14). The people acknowledged the guilt of a blasphemer and subsequent judgment by laying on hands (Lev. 24:14). Worshippers recognized the sacrificial animal died for their atonement by laying hands on it (Lev. 1:4). The Levites were ordained through the laying on of hands (Num. 8:10). This practice continued in the New Testament when people were set apart for service (Acts 6:6; 13:3).

VERSES 19-21

So that the people would know that Joshua was divinely chosen, God had him stand before the high priest in front of all the people for a public commissioning. Eleazar, Aaron’s son (Ex. 6:23), had succeeded Aaron as high priest after his death (Num. 20:26-28).

Moses would extend only some of his authority to Joshua, indicating a departure from how God worked through Moses. In the past, God spoke directly with Moses (Num. 12:6-8), but now God would make His will known through the high priest. The unique role that Moses filled would be no more. Joshua would serve as a commander-in-chief, leading the army of Israel into battle in Canaan.

To discern God’s decisions, Eleazar would use the Urim. When creating the priestly garments, God mandated the priests wear an ephod, an apron covering their chests, when entering the sanctuary of the tabernacle (Ex. 28). In the pockets of the ephod were two objects known as the Urim and the Thummim. While not much is known about these objects, the priests used them as some sort of sacred lots, providing either a yes or no response on questions not covered by the law (Ex. 28:30). Through these devices, Joshua would know God’s will and command His people accordingly.

How does God call out His leaders? What can be done to commission today’s leaders?
VERSES 22-23
As he had done for most of his life, Moses did as the Lord commanded him. Deuteronomy 31:1-8 records part of Moses’ commissioning speech. In that speech, he conferred his authority to Joshua, explaining that the people should follow him into the promised land. He reminded them they should be courageous because God would be constantly with them. He spoke of impending victories and God’s prior faithfulness in battle. After Moses’ speech, Moses and Joshua were joint leaders, a transition period that ended with Moses’ death on Mount Nebo (Deut. 34), making Joshua the official leader of the Israelite people. Later, God would appear to Joshua and offer additional words of encouragement and confirmation. (See Josh. 1:1-9.)

All followers of Christ should actively listen for His call, knowing the Lord works through those who are available and willing to follow Him wherever He may lead.

Moses’ transfer of authority to Joshua serves as a reminder that God calls out leaders to lead His people. Jesus validated this when He selected twelve men who would carry on His work after He ascended (Mark 3:13-19). The early church ordained deacons and charged them with the task of serving in the church (Acts 6:1-7). Effective leaders mentor and invest in the next generation so the work of God will continue. All followers of Christ should actively listen for His call, knowing the Lord works through those who are available and willing to follow Him wherever He may lead.

In what ways can mature believers help younger believers hear and respond to God’s call on their lives?

KEY DOCTRINE: Stewardship
Believers are under obligation to serve God with their time, talents, and material possessions; and should recognize all these as entrusted to them to use for the glory of God and for helping others (Matt. 25:14-29).
IN MY CONTEXT

• All people must face the reality of death regardless of their influence.
• Godly leaders must focus on the future of God’s work.
• God calls out people to lead His people.

Reflect on your life, paying attention to the goals you have set for yourself. What actions are you taking that will have results that outlive you?

How can you avoid the temptation of becoming so busy today that you fail to focus on the future of God’s work in and around you? What actions do you need to take?

How many potential young leaders can your Bible study group identify? Discuss ways your group can encourage and mentor these future leaders.

Prayer Needs
God expects His people to keep their promises and commitments.

**NUMBERS 32:20-32**

One of the blessings of being a Christ follower is knowing God always keeps His Word. For example, our assurance of heaven is based on the faithfulness of God. Just as the Lord keeps His promises and commitments, He expects the same from His followers. While others might lie, cheat, and deceive, believers are called to live by a higher standard—Christ Himself. As His representatives, our lives should reflect His character in everything we do and say. Anything less distorts His image.

*How do hypocritical believers hurt the cause of Christ?*
Before entering the promised land, Israel had unfinished business with the Midianites. Since Balaam couldn’t curse Israel (Num. 22:35), he seduced them into idolatry (Num. 25:1-5). Under Balaam’s direction, the Midianites held a religious festival and invited the Israelites. The festival included acts of immorality and idolatry. God judged Israel, killing those who participated in the debauchery. Then the Lord turned His attention to Midian, sending the Israelites into battle against them. This battle served two purposes. First, it would prepare the people for future battles in their conquest of Canaan. Second, it was God’s divine judgment on the Midianites. This battle would also be Moses’ last battle. Demonstrating the Lord was with the Israelites, all the Midianite men were killed, including Balaam (Num. 31:7).

With the people ready to invade the promised land, two tribes of Israel decided they would stay on the east side of the Jordan River and not follow the other tribes (Num. 32). The Reubenites and Gadites preferred the east side because it was better for raising livestock. After meeting with Moses, they promised they would join the other tribes in conquering Canaan. Afterward, they would return to the Jazer and Gilead region on the east side.

Approaching the end of his life, Moses reviewed the wilderness travels of the Israelites (Num. 33), reminding the people that God was always with them. Next, God outlined the boundaries of their new homeland in Canaan and the areas each tribe would inherit (Num. 34). Since the Levites didn’t receive an allotment of land, they were given forty-eight cities throughout the land so they could serve all the tribes (Num. 35:1-8). Six cities would serve as cities of refuge (Num. 35:9-24), places that provided protection for anyone who accidentally killed another person until a trial could be held or the situation rectified.

As you read Numbers 32:20-32, observe the number of times the Lord is referenced. Why was it important for everyone to be reminded of God in this agreement?
WARNING ISSUED (NUM. 32:20-24)

20 Moses replied to them, “If you do this—if you arm yourselves for battle before the LORD, 21 and every one of your armed men crosses the Jordan before the LORD until he has driven his enemies from his presence, 22 and the land is subdued before the LORD—afterward you may return and be free from obligation to the LORD and to Israel. And this land will belong to you as a possession before the LORD. 23 But if you don’t do this, you will certainly sin against the LORD; be sure your sin will catch up with you. 24 Build cities for your dependents and pens for your flocks, but do what you have promised.”

VERSES 20-22

Standing on the edge of the promised land with a second generation, Moses heard statements that reminded him of the rebellious first generation when they stood at the same place, refusing to follow God into the land. Being herdsmen, the tribes of Reuben and Gad felt they had all they needed just outside of Canaan, east of the Jordan River. The land there was ideally suited for their animals and people (Num. 32:1-5). These two tribes risked infecting everyone else with the same sentiment, forfeiting the land God promised them, just as the ten spies had done earlier in Israel’s history. Moreover, Moses knew it would take all twelve tribes working together as one army to defeat the inhabitants of Canaan. After Moses called them “a brood of sinners” (v. 14), the tribes explained they would accompany their brothers into battle but only after they built fortified cities for their wives and children and pens for their livestock (vv. 16-19).

Fearful the sins of their fathers would once again bring God’s anger and judgment, Moses responded quickly by issuing a warning. Every available soldier from the tribes of Reuben and Gad must assist in the war effort until the war was over and the land belonged to the Israelites. Only then could the two tribes return to the land on the other side of the Jordan and rejoin their families. As a reward for their services, the Transjordan area would be their inheritance—if they fulfilled their obligations first. Now with firm resolve, Moses was determined that nothing would stand in the
way of obeying God. Facing his mortality and feeling the sting of not completing his task as leader of the people, Moses insisted on everyone's obedience to God's will.

**What is the importance of communicating the expectations of obedience?**

**VERSES 23-24**

Moses’ warning had both a positive and a negative side. If the two tribes kept their vow by providing warriors for the battle, they would receive their inheritance. If they didn’t do as they promised, then God would judge them. While the phrase, *be sure your sin will catch up with you*, is sometimes used evangelistically today, the original application was a word of warning for God’s disobedient people, not unbelievers. By disobeying, they would not only sin against Moses and the other tribes, but they would sin against the Lord Himself.

As a sign of good faith, Moses encouraged them to proceed with their building endeavors. Moses may have believed that by keeping his word, the two tribes would feel obligated to keep their word. Moses demanded they fulfill their promise. Just as God had been with them from the beginning, they must be together as one army. God’s purpose and promise was for all His people, not just for ten tribes.

**To disobey God is an act of rebellion that brings defeat and judgment.**

Believers must be aware of the costs of failing to fulfill God’s purposes. Moses understood this; it’s why he demanded the allegiance of the tribes of Reuben and Gad. To disobey God is an act of rebellion that brings defeat and judgment.

**For believers today, what are the costs of failing to fulfill God’s purposes?**
AGREEMENT GIVEN (NUM. 32:25-27)

25 The Gadites and Reubenites answered Moses, “Your servants will do just as my lord commands. 26 Our dependents, wives, livestock, and all our animals will remain here in the cities of Gilead, 27 but your servants are equipped for war before the LORD and will go across to the battle as my lord orders.”

VERSES 25-27

The Gadites and Reubenites agreed with Moses’ stipulations, leaving their families and possessions behind so they could join the other Israelites in taking possession of the promised land. They humbly called themselves servants, indicating their word was their bond. They also called Moses lord, a term of respect and honor. Recognizing that Moses had been the leader of the people since the time of the exodus—before any of them were born—they acquiesced to Moses’ authority. Everyone not eligible for war would remain at home in Gilead. The warriors would stand on alert, awaiting Moses’ command to attack. Equipped means they were ready and armed, anticipating Moses’ call. Without hesitation, they would move swiftly across the Jordan and join their brothers in battle.

Why is humility necessary for submission? What does humble submission look and sound like for a believer?

In examining the tribes’ response, the following conclusions can be made. First, they were not abandoning their brothers and sisters. After traveling through the wilderness all this time, they would not turn their backs on them now. Second, they knew going into battle was God’s will for all the tribes. This is something God had made clear from the beginning. Third, they knew their participation was not only expected but demanded by Moses, the other tribes, and God. Fourth, they believed living this close to the promised land would be ideal for their tribes, since they would be just across the river. As proof of their good intentions, they assured Moses they were ready for battle. Even if Moses didn’t believe their words, they hoped their preparedness for war would persuade him otherwise.
In the Book of Joshua, the Gadites and Reubenites kept their word, spear-heading the campaign into Canaan until the opposition was subdued and the land was distributed among the other tribes. They fought beside their brothers, not holding back their resources or efforts. Then the Transjordan tribes returned to their desired land on the other side of the Jordan, raising their families, building their homes, and cultivating their herds (Josh. 4:12; 22:1-5). Being faithful, they did what they said they would do.

The lesson learned from the willful obedience of Gad and Reuben is that humble submission to those in authority leads to God’s blessing. Jesus modeled this lifestyle during His earthly ministry. He humbly followed God’s purpose all the way to the cross. God rewards faithfulness. On the other hand, He opposes those with a haughty spirit who have a blatant disregard for authority and who think they are above everyone else or the law. In a world where people are constantly claiming their rights, God has a different standard for His people.

**BIBLE SKILL: Compare passages.**


ACCOUNTABILITY ESTABLISHED (NUM. 32:28-32)

28 So Moses gave orders about them to the priest Eleazar, Joshua son of Nun, and the family heads of the Israelite tribes. 29 Moses told them, “If the Gadites and Reubenites cross the Jordan with you, every man in battle formation before the LORD, and the land...
is subdued before you, you are to give them the land of Gilead as a possession. But if they don’t go across with you in battle formation, they must accept land in Canaan with you.” The Gadites and Reubenites replied, “What the LORD has spoken to your servants is what we will do. We will cross over in battle formation before the LORD into the land of Canaan, but we will keep our hereditary possession across the Jordan.”

**VERSES 28-30**

Knowing he wouldn’t be alive to lead the Israelites into Canaan, Moses made **Eleazar, Joshua and the family heads of the Israelite tribes** aware of his decision regarding the Gadites and Reubenites. In his absence, they would be responsible for making sure the tribes went into battle with the other tribes. If the tribes kept their commitment, they could live peaceably in **the land of Gilead**. If they didn’t keep their promise, they would be forced to settle across the river in a much smaller area in Canaan.

Moses left no room for misunderstanding after his death. First, he notified everyone publicly of his decision. Second, he clearly restated the details of the arrangement. Third, he outlined the consequences if the two tribes didn’t make good on their word. Moses knew the importance of accountability. The leaders of Israel would be accountable for executing and enforcing the plan, and the two tribes would be accountable for fulfilling their part of the plan.

Moses left a clearly defined set of checks and balances. Accountability doesn’t indicate a lack of trust; it promotes trust by outlining duties and consequences. When people understand the boundaries, it frees them to work without fear of suspicion or undue demands. A lack of accountability often breeds mistrust, creating a spirit of uneasiness between the parties involved. Realizing the twelve tribes were one family, Moses created unity and agreement in purpose by settling the qualifications upfront.

*What are some of the pitfalls of not holding others accountable? What are some of the benefits of accountability?*
VERSES 31-32

In front of the whole assembly, the Gadites and Reubenites confirmed they would abide by Moses’ decision, restating the terms of the agreement. Accountability can only work when both sides agree. Among believers, coercion seldom works. Believers need to reach unified decisions that are mutually beneficial for everyone.

The Gadites and Reubenites made their choice based on what they perceived was best for them, preferring the rich grazing lands across the Jordan over the land of Canaan, thus ignoring God’s choice for them. Their decision not only separated them geographically from the other tribes but later would separate them spiritually. (See Josh. 22.) While the Lord’s permissive will allowed them to live elsewhere, the reason He freed them from Egypt in the first place was so they could enter the land and enjoy His blessings. By staying on the other side of the Jordan, they opened themselves up to unnecessary temptations and problems.

Following in the steps of Moses, believers hold one another accountable for fulfilling their commitments to the Lord. Christian accountability isn’t a chain but a bond of love that strengthens our walk with Christ. Left to ourselves, we stray from the narrow pathway of blessings. Not only does God expect His people to keep their promises and commitments, the local church body is part of the process that ensures everyone finishes life’s race well.

Why do some believers resist the idea of holding other believers accountable? What is the difference between someone who is overbearing and someone who holds people accountable?
IN MY CONTEXT

• Believers must be aware of the costs of failing to fulfill God’s purposes.
• Humble submission to others in authority leads to God’s blessing.
• Believers hold each other accountable for fulfilling their commitments to God.

What is God asking you to do that you have yet to act on? List the benefits of doing so and the potential costs of failing to act. What steps do you need to take in light of the list you created?

In what areas of your life do you need to submit to an authority placed over you? Identify the actions that demonstrate humble and Christ-honoring submission.

Discuss as a group the responsibility believers have for holding each other accountable. Identify the limits and principles required. How can your group be a source of encouragement to each other?

Prayer Needs
VALUED

God values human life and expects His people to value it as well.

DEUTERONOMY 5:17; 19:4-13

For some people, justice is the equitable and fair distribution of resources available to a group of people. Some see justice as giving everyone what is due them. Others see it as allowing people to freely express themselves as long as they do not violate the rights of another person to do the same. In each of these is a concept of fairness that requires some type of authority to define fairness.

How would you define justice? What is the relationship between justice and fairness?
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

DEUTERONOMY 5:6-21; 19:1-13

Standing at the Jordan River, Moses reminded the Israelites of the commands God gave on Mount Horeb (Sinai). God’s law was the foundation of their relationship with the Lord and with one another as they entered the new land. This perpetual covenant outlined how they should live as God’s people (Deut. 5:1-6).

The Ten Commandments are primarily prohibitions, meaning things from which people should abstain. By telling them what they should avoid, the people would know what they should do. The first four commandments dealt specifically with their relationship with the Lord. The next six commandments dealt specifically with how they should relate with one another (Deut. 5:7-21).

The sixth commandment regarding murder is elaborated on in Deuteronomy 19:1-13. Knowing there would be accidental deaths, God graciously established cities of refuge—places the offending party could safely go until the matter was resolved. Centrally located so they could be easily accessible by everyone, God called for six cities of refuge. The cities were havens for those who accidentally killed another person, not for those who committed premeditated murder. These cities not only protected the accused, they protected the family of the victim from committing murder as well, eliminating unnecessary bloodshed on both sides.

As you read Deuteronomy 5:17 and 19:4-13, look for the directives given. How does each directive point to God’s justice?

KEY THEMES IN DEUTERONOMY

- God is faithful (5:10; 7:9; 32:4).
- God is holy and expects His people to live holy lives (5:1–6:25; 7:6; 23:14).
- Blessings await those who are obedient to God (4:1; 8:1; 30:16-20).
EXPLORE THE TEXT

PROHIBITION (DEUT. 5:17)

17 Do not murder.

VERSE 17

In preparation for the conquest of Canaan, Moses reminded the Israelites that the Ten Commandments would be their moral compass, guiding them in their relationship with God and one another (Deut. 4:6-21). Included in the law was the sixth commandment prohibiting murder. Murder is especially heinous to God because every person is made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26-27).

KEY DOCTRINE: Man

Man is the special creation of God, made in His own image (Gen. 1:26).

The Hebrew word translated “murder” always concerned the taking of human life. It was not used for a lawful execution or for killing in battle but referred to killing a human without legal sanction. The most precise translation for Deuteronomy 5:17 would be, “Do not commit homicide.” Therefore, Deuteronomy 5:17 tells us that we are not to take a human life without legal sanction. This obviously includes normal acts of murder.

But what about abortion or euthanasia? A person might try to argue that if abortion is not illegal, the command has not been violated. But this argument makes God’s command subject to shifting human laws and cultural traditions. What if, in a given land, it were legal to kill a family member who brought shame upon his family? So-called “honor killing” is still practiced in some cultures. Would we say that an honor killing of a relative is not a violation of God’s command if, in the land where it happened, honor killing is an accepted practice? What about a land where the worship of Baal was the official religion and child sacrifice was an accepted practice? Would we say that no homicide has been committed since it was legal by the standards of that place and time? In reality, when child sacrifice was practiced in ancient
Israel, the prophets condemned it as a heinous evil, even though it was sanctioned by the king. Any act of taking a human life is “homicide” unless the act is specifically sanctioned by the Bible itself.

**We can affirm that the Bible treats a baby in the womb as a living person; to claim otherwise is willful blindness.**

A baby does not suddenly become human at birth; he or she already is human. In the Bible, babies in the womb can respond to stimuli (Luke 1:41) and are marvelous works of God (Ps. 139:14). We can affirm that the Bible treats a baby in the womb as a living person; to claim otherwise is willful blindness. The Bible does not sanction taking the life of a fetus or consider the question a matter of personal choice. God—not shifting societal laws—defines right and wrong.

**How is murder a show of disrespect for God? Does murder reveal more about the value placed on a person or the value placed on God?**

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**BIBLE SKILL: Identify cities on a map.**

On a Bible map, locate the cities of refuge identified in Deuteronomy 4:41-43 and Joshua 20:7-9. Analyze the location of each city in relation to the other. What are the advantages of how they are located? What does their location teach us about God’s grace?

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**GRACE (DEUT. 19:4-10)**

4 “Here is the law concerning a case of someone who kills a person and flees there to save his life, having killed his neighbor accidentally without previously hating him: 5 If, for example, he
goes into the forest with his neighbor to cut timber, and his hand swings the ax to chop down a tree, but the blade flies off the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies, that person may flee to one of these cities and live. Otherwise, the avenger of blood in the heat of his anger might pursue the one who committed manslaughter, overtake him because the distance is great, and strike him dead. Yet he did not deserve to die, since he did not previously hate his neighbor. This is why I am commanding you to set apart three cities for yourselves. If the LORD your God enlarges your territory as he swore to your fathers, and gives you all the land he promised to give them — provided you keep every one of these commands I am giving you today and follow them, loving the LORD your God and walking in his ways at all times — you are to add three more cities to these three. In this way, innocent blood will not be shed, and you will not become guilty of bloodshed in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

VERSES 4-7
In His grace, God set up refuge cities for the individual who accidentally killed another person, without previously hating him. The word accidentally can be translated more literally, “without intent.” The example provided, in which an ax head flies off its handle and fatally injures someone, makes it clear that the homicide in view did not come about because of malice or violence; it was without intent.

The avenger of blood would have been a near kinsman, the nearest male relative. Ancient Israel had no police force. Most communities were very small, and justice was determined at the local level. If one person wronged another, the victim could complain to the town elders. The elders would hold a trial at the city gate, and the accused and the plaintiff could make their cases. If guilt or liability were established, the guilty party would face various penalties, depending on the crime. In the case of homicide, a close relative of the victim could find and slay the person who committed the homicide. The close relative who carried this out was called the avenger of blood (literally, the “blood redeemer”).

The near kinsman was responsible for buying a relative out of slavery (Lev. 25:48-49), redeeming a relative’s property (Lev. 25:26-33), marrying a relative’s widow and raising her children in
the name of the deceased (Ruth 3:13; 4:5-10), as well as avenging the death of a relative (Num. 35:19-28). Because an avenger might conclude that a relative was killed with intent and seek revenge, cities of refuge prevented more bloodshed. The person guilty of accidental homicide could flee to one of these cities. These cities reflected just how much God valued life.

Cities of refuge allowed a person guilty of accidental homicide to live a fairly normal life but did impose on him a penalty for his involvement in an unjustifiable death. Even if the death was accidental, the perpetrator still must surrender his freedom for an extended time. The avenger of blood could not touch him as long as he remained in that place, but if he left it, he could be slain. When the current high priest died, however, the manslayer was no longer confined to the city of refuge; he could go back home (Num. 35:26-28).

How can believers extend God’s grace, in practical ways, to those who don’t believe in the sanctity of life?

VERSES 8-10
Moses reminded the people that they must keep God’s commands and love Him fervently. Their obedience would be an expression of their love for Him. As a result, they would continue experiencing His blessings. A right standing with God is a prerequisite for knowing His fullest blessings. When asked by a scribe which command was the greatest, Jesus said loving God was the greatest and most important (Matt. 22:34-38). He quickly asserted that loving one’s neighbor was the second most important (Matt. 22:39-40). By loving God and establishing cities of refuge, the Israelites would keep the two most significant laws.

Sadly, the Israelites did not fulfill God commands. They eventually abandoned their faith in God, resulting in God’s judgment of sending them into exile (2 Kings 18:9-12; 25:8-11). But initially, while standing on the edge of the promised land, the new generation of Israelites enthusiastically embraced God’s plan and faithfully prepared for the future.

Several contrasts exist between the cities of refuge and salvation in Christ. A person fled to the city of refuge because he wasn’t...
guilty; we come to Christ because we are guilty. The elders of a city of refuge investigated the case to determine the accused’s innocence; believers know they deserve the Lord’s punishment. To save his life, the accused must remain in the city out of fear of the avenger. Those in Christ are free and can live without fear. Whether in times of old or today, God provides grace and protection for those who seek Him and follow Him.

**How do the cities of refuge point to the salvation offered through Christ?**

**JUSTICE** (DEUT. 19:11-13)

11 But if someone hates his neighbor, lies in ambush for him, attacks him, and strikes him fatally, and flees to one of these cities, 12 the elders of his city are to send for him, take him from there, and hand him over to the avenger of blood and he will die. 13 Do not look on him with pity but purge from Israel the guilt of shedding innocent blood, and you will prosper.

**VERSES 11-12**

After explaining the procedure for unintentional deaths, Moses revealed what should be done with someone who committed premeditated murder, breaking the sixth commandment. Moses’ description of such a person in verse 11 reflects one who held grudges and fostered resentment, both of which are preludes to violence. If a murderer fled to a city of refuge, the elders where the crime took place had a legal and moral responsibility to bring him back to the scene of the crime. However, the officials in the city of refuge must be convinced first, by the testimony of at least two or three witnesses, before releasing the convicted (Num. 35:30). Upon returning to the city of the crime, he would face a trial, and if found guilty, he would be executed by the avenger or near kinsman.

Murder was just one of several capital crimes in ancient Israel. Others were idolatry and sorcery (Lev. 20:1-6), violating the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36), repeated willful disrespect of parents (Deut. 21:18-21), kidnapping (Ex. 21:16), bestiality (Ex. 22:19), homosexuality (Lev. 20:13), adultery, and rape (Deut. 22:22-27).
From the time of the Exodus, Yahweh had been their God and Ruler, making them a theocracy instead of a monarchy or democracy. Therefore, breaking the law was sin against God, and the people needed to know the seriousness of their disobedience. No one could claim ignorance of the law; the Lord had directed Moses to carefully explain His expectations and consequences. The murderer would forfeit his life as well. While that wouldn’t entirely eliminate murder in Israel, God’s law restrained widespread bloodshed by limiting the number of people who would lose their lives; that is, only the offender would die instead of entire households who were blameless for the action of a family member. Retribution would be only for the guilty.

**VERSE 13**

To *pity* meant to cover the offender’s transgression. Taking a life was so grievous that Moses firmly stated that it couldn’t be overlooked by anyone. *Purge* means to take away or extinguish. Although individuals and communities might ignore sin, God never does. If the city didn’t act justly and neglected its duty, it risked losing God’s blessings. The death of a murderer was regarded as a cleansing ritual for the land that had been defiled by *shedding innocent blood*.

God’s people are called to work for justice. The lives of the innocent demand believers be vigilant in defending the sanctity of life. Justice takes place when God’s people stand for biblical truth. Ignoring the problem or believing it is someone else’s problem never resolves the issue, nor does it please God. For believers, there is never a wrong time to do the right thing. The sanctity of human life must be protected. Whatever costs believers may encounter in defending the innocent, the cost of disobeying God is even higher. The charge Moses gave Israel still stands true today—love God and walk in His ways (Deut. 19:9). We will experience God’s blessings when we love Him without reservation and obey His Word.

*How would you define the balance between compassion and justice? Can the two co-exist? Explain.*

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IN MY CONTEXT

• God forbids premeditated murder.
• God provides grace and protection.
• God’s people are to work for justice.

*Besides prayer, what steps can you take personally that will help both believers and nonbelievers know what God thinks of premeditated murder? How can you put your plan into action?*

*Take time to define God’s grace. What actions can you take to demonstrate that kind of grace to others this week?*

*What can your group do that will help promote the sanctity of life? How can you work toward justice for all people?*

Prayer Needs
Honored

God is honored when His people listen to, follow, and teach His Word.

Deuteronomy 4:1-9

Honoring God involves more than attending church, doing good deeds, and praying over a meal. To honor means to esteem, respect, or revere. These three verbs require action and focus. We esteem God by intentionally learning all we can about Him and His commands so we can know Him intimately and follow Him closely. Helping others in their spiritual development also honors God.

What is the difference between giving lip service and true respect? How can a person tell the difference?
DEUTERONOMY 1:1–4:49

Deuteronomy is the last of five books written by Moses. This book gives additional insight into God’s law and its application in the promised land. Referenced over forty times in the New Testament, it is the third most quoted, behind Psalms and Isaiah. The narrative takes place in the plains of Moab over a period of about a month.

Like Leviticus, Deuteronomy contains the law but focuses on the people instead of the priests. Moses called on this generation to trust God and to be obedient to the covenant made at Horeb (Sinai).

His first speech reminded them of the previous generation’s failure to enter the promised land and the devastating consequences that followed (Deut. 1:19-26). After describing where and why they traveled (2:1-23), Moses revisited the military victories the Lord gave them (2:24–3:11). He explained why two tribes would fight with them against Canaan but live just outside the promised land (3:12-20).

Moses clarified why he would not join the Israelites in Canaan and that Joshua would succeed him as leader (3:21-29). He begged the Lord several times for the privilege of going with the people into the new land, but because of his sin, God refused his request (3:23-26).

Moses not only reviewed Israel’s history but looked ahead, warning the people that God would scatter them among the nations if they did not comply with the Lord’s commands (4:25-31). Concluding his first address, Moses called for Israel’s unwavering obedience.

Read Deuteronomy 4:1-9. What were God’s expectations of His people? Why did Moses emphasize these points?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

LISTEN (DEUT. 4:1-5)

1 “Now, Israel, listen to the statutes and ordinances I am teaching you to follow, so that you may live, enter, and take possession of
the land the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 You must not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, so that you may keep the commands of the LORD your God I am giving you. 3 Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal-peor, for the LORD your God destroyed every one of you who followed Baal of Peor. 4 But you who have remained faithful to the LORD your God are all alive today. 5 Look, I have taught you statutes and ordinances as the LORD my God has commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to possess.

VERSES 1-2
The first step in a walk with God is to listen to what He has to say. There is more to this than simply taking in information. The word translated listen means to hear intelligently with the implication of obedience. The future success of Israel was dependent on hearing and obeying God’s word. Statutes and ordinances refer to all God’s requirements of His covenant people.

The goal of Moses’ instruction to the Israelites was threefold. First, it was so they could live abundantly in God’s grace and protection. Second, it was so they could enter the promised land. Third, it was so they could take possession of the land God was giving them. Not only was Israel’s obedience tied to God’s word, so was their victory over their enemies. Apart from their obedience to the commands of God, the people could not defeat the entrenched nations across the Jordan River. To capture the land God had promised their forefathers, they must listen and do as God directed. Moses taught the law with the anticipation the Israelites would faithfully follow it.

The Lord’s commandments were sufficient and complete for leading the people.

Moses warned against changing God’s word in any way—either by adding anything or taking anything away from it. The Lord’s commandments were sufficient and complete for leading the people. To add or take away from God’s commands would not only jeopardize their success but risk their lives. The Pharisees were guilty of violating this command and drew a harsh rebuke from Jesus (Mark 7:1-13). In the closing book of the Bible, Jesus warned...
that adding to or taking away from God’s revealed Word would result in judgment (Rev. 22:18-19).

How did the word of God serve as a foundation for life during the time of Moses? What role should God’s Word have in our lives today?

BIBLE SKILL: Compare uses of a phrase.

Matthew recorded Jesus saying three times, “Let anyone who has ears listen” (Matt. 11:15; 13:9; 13:43). Look at the context of these verses to determine why Jesus on these occasions made a special point of calling on people to listen. Compare this to the context of Moses’ appeal to listen in Deuteronomy 4:1. What insights did you gain through the comparison?

VERSES 3-5

Recalling a previous incident of idolatry and disloyalty, Moses reminded his listeners of the danger of disobedience. When the prophet-for-hire, Balaam, couldn’t curse Israel, he invited the Israelite men to one of the Moabite religious feasts. The Moabite women seduced them, and they willingly worshiped the pagan idol, Baal (Num. 25:1-9). In front of Moses and the priests, an Israelite man brazenly brought back one of the women and entertained her in his tent. Because of their sin, God’s judgment was severe—24,000 Israelites died in a plague (Num. 25:9). This lapse wasn’t Israel’s first foray into idolatry. With Moses on Mount Sinai meeting with God,
the people in the camp worshiped a golden image (Ex. 32). On that
day, about three thousand Israelites lost their lives (Ex. 32:28). Moses
cautioned his current listeners against making the same mistake.

After pointing out the consequences of idolatry, Moses
commended his listeners who remained faithful to the LORD,
encouraging their continued obedience. Just as Moses passionately
obeyed the Lord in teaching the Israelites about God’s commands,
the people should be just as faithful in following God’s
commandments when they entered Canaan.

Godly leaders must actively and intentionally help others know
the expectations and truths found in the Bible. Both the presenter
and the hearer are responsible for action.

**HONOR** (DEUT. 4:6-8)

6 Carefully follow them, for this will show your wisdom and
understanding in the eyes of the peoples. When they hear about
all these statutes, they will say, ‘This great nation is indeed a wise
and understanding people.’ 7 For what great nation is there that
has a god near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we
call to him? 8 And what great nation has righteous statutes and
ordinances like this entire law I set before you today?

**VERSE 6**

By honoring God’s word, the children of Israel would gain three
distinct blessings in the new land. First, their witness would
permeate the other nations. Living by God’s law would set them
apart from other peoples. Other nations will say, ‘This great
nation is indeed a wise and understanding people.’ God’s laws were
concrete, not abstract and not subject to the whims of despot
leaders. By seeing God’s wisdom in action through the Israelites,
other nations would be drawn to the true and living God.

*Why was it important for the Israelites to live by a different standard than the standards followed by other nations?*
VERSES 7-8
Second, their intimacy with the Lord would astound the other nations. Moses asked, For what great nation is there that has a god near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call to him? The Canaanite gods were inanimate objects, made by human hands. God’s nearness was a foreign concept to them. Although Israel hadn’t invaded Canaan, these pagan nations had already heard of all that God had done for His people: parting the Red Sea and destroying their enemies (Josh. 2:10-11). By honoring God’s law, the Israelites would attract the attention of surrounding nations, fulfilling their mission of becoming a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6).

Third, their character would amaze the other nations: And what great nation has righteous statutes and ordinances like this entire law I set before you today? Laws that protected the sanctity of life and promoted goodness and fairness were unheard of in Canaan, making Israel different from other peoples. Just like in Egypt, these governments typically made laws that benefited their leaders. Their laws were taskmasters, keeping the people in line with little regard for the welfare of the citizens. The statutes and ordinances of Israel not only reverenced God, but honored parents, provided rest for the people, and protected the rights of the individual. The integrity of God and His laws would be magnified throughout Canaan as the people of God faithfully followed them, setting the example for others who would exalt the greatness of Israel’s God as well.

Living by God’s wisdom, believers can demonstrate to the rest of the world that God is loving, caring, and merciful.

If Israel departed from the law God had graciously given them, they would dishonor Him and themselves. By following the law they would testify to the righteousness of God, exalt God’s name among the pagan peoples, and provide a good name for themselves. What was true of Israel is still true today. Living by God’s wisdom, believers can demonstrate to the rest of the world that God is loving, caring, and merciful. Believers paint a picture of God with their words and actions.

How can the life of a believer draw others to Christ?
TEACH (DEUT. 4:9)

9 “Only be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves, so that you don’t forget the things your eyes have seen and so that they don’t slip from your mind as long as you live. Teach them to your children and your grandchildren.

VERSE 9

Surrounded by idol worshipers in Canaan, Israel was one generation away from walking away from the Lord. Since Moses wouldn’t be with them, he insisted that they practice what they had learned from him and share that heritage with their children and grandchildren.

Moses provided three steps for keeping their faith alive. First, he told them, be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves. To guard means to hedge in as with thorns. They must hold God’s truths tightly. Unless they were careful, they would soon fall into apostasy that would bring them to the brink of annihilation as a nation (Deut. 4:15-31).

Second, they must remember. Perhaps alluding to verse 3, Moses said they must remember their history—don’t forget the things your eyes have seen. Recognizing how quickly people fall into idolatry and how severe the consequences are for abandoning God, the tragedy of Baal-peor should remain in their memories, lest they succumb to temptation. Those images of death and heartache must always weigh heavy on their minds. Mind referred to the heart or innermost being. Only by taking Moses’ words to heart and remembering their past would they not repeat the mistake of spiritual adultery by worshiping other gods, and thereby, breaking the first commandment (Deut. 5:7).

Why is it important for a believer to remember his or her past? What are some healthy ways for a believer to remember that past?

By remembering the past, they would not forget God’s faithfulness and would be encouraged to remain obedient. Even today, retelling stories of God’s work is an excellent...
way of remembering His presence, guidance, and blessing for future generations.

If they neglected God’s word, they would be no different than the peoples around them.

Most of Moses’ audience had been born in the wilderness. They had not witnessed the events of the exodus first hand. Therefore, it was imperative that they become acquainted with the laws of God and the reasons behind them. They couldn’t rely on the faith of their forefathers; their faith must be their own. Later, Moses would encourage them to imprint God’s words on their hearts and minds and to write them on their hands and foreheads as a way of remembering the importance of knowing and keeping God’s word (Deut. 11:18). God’s word made them different from the other nations. If they neglected His word, they would be no different than the peoples around them.

What can believers do today to help them remember God’s Word? How can they help future generations remember God’s Word?

Third, they must intentionally teach their descendants: teach them to your children and grandchildren. Out of this command the Hebrews developed a confession of faith called the Shema, named after the Hebrew word for “hear” (Deut. 6:4-5). The Shema reminded them they served one God and were to love Him unconditionally. Parents were to diligently teach these truths to their children (Deut. 6:6-9).

KEY DOCTRINE: Education

In Jesus Christ abide all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. All sound learning is, therefore, a part of our Christian heritage (Matt. 7:24-29).
IN MY CONTEXT

- Godly leaders teach God’s Word to others, trusting them to follow it faithfully.
- God’s people honor Him through their obedience to Him.
- Believers are to teach God’s truth to future generations.

How can your group encourage godly leaders before, during, and after they teach? How can your group assist in the spiritual development of the listeners so they will follow God’s Word faithfully?

List all the areas in which believers should be obedient to God. In what areas are you strong? How can you improve?

List the names of people in your family who look to you for spiritual help. What are you doing to teach the next generation in your family about God’s Word? List one action you can take for each person listed.

Prayer Needs
Loved

Loving God with all of one's being leads to obedience.

Deuteronomy 6:1-13

Loving God is the single most important command according to Jesus. More than feelings or words, love is a choice—a willful determination regardless of circumstances. Loving God also results in obedience. The believer’s love for the Lord incites an intense desire to follow Him relentlessly—not out of obligation but because the heart of the believer delights in doing God’s will above everything else.

What is the connection between love and obedience? What are the results if you have one without the other?
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

DEUTERONOMY 5:1-11:32

Moses’ first address (Deut. 1:1–4:49) gave a brief history of the Israelites’ travels and the formation of the cities of refuge. His second address (5:1–26:19) provided the foundation for Israel’s ongoing relationship with the Lord. Using the Ten Commandments as the baseline in the relationship (chap. 5), God expected absolute obedience from His covenant people (chap. 6) and strict separation from the pagan gods of the Canaanites (chap. 7). Moreover, the Israelites must remember the Lord and His commands in everything they do (chap. 8), lest they make the same mistakes as their forefathers (chap. 9). As long as they demonstrated a fear and love for the Lord, the Israelites would occupy the land while enjoying the Lord's blessings (chaps. 10–11).

Moses also taught the Israelites about the character of God. First, the Lord is a jealous God (6:15). He zealously protects what belongs to Him, namely His honor. Second, the Lord is holy. The Ten Commandments were the means by which the Israelites could live in a right standing before a holy God (6:16-18). Third, the Lord is faithful (6:22-23). Without His divine intervention, the Israelites would still be slaves in Egypt. Because He was committed to Israel, He expected Israel to follow His commands faithfully. Fourth, the Lord’s continued grace is provisional. The promise of the land and Israel’s future prosperity were dependent on how well the people responded to God’s decrees (6:24-25). By disobeying God, they would anger Him and face His judgment (6:15). Fifth, the Lord expects His truths to pass from older generations to younger generations (6:20-21). By intentionally teaching their young, Israel would remain a God-fearing and God-blessed nation.

As you read Deuteronomy 6:1-13, look for ways the Israelites were to demonstrate their love for God. How can we demonstrate love for God today?
EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PROMISE (DEUT. 6:1-3)

1 “This is the command—the statutes and ordinances—the LORD your God has commanded me to teach you, so that you may follow them in the land you are about to enter and possess. 2 Do this so that you may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life by keeping all his statutes and commands I am giving you, your son, and your grandson, and so that you may have a long life. 3 Listen, Israel, and be careful to follow them, so that you may prosper and multiply greatly, because the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you a land flowing with milk and honey.

VERSES 1-3

Moses called on the people to learn and keep all the statutes and ordinances that God gave them. If Israel would do this, that is, if they kept God’s law, they would receive four blessings. First, their fear of the Lord would increase as they obeyed Him.

If our understanding of God is distorted, what we have is not the true fear of God but superstition.

We might think this is backward. Don’t we keep the law because we first fear God? Yes, but there is another side to it. A proper fear of God is based on a right understanding of who God is, how He relates to us, and what He requires of us. If our understanding of God is distorted, what we have is not the true fear of God but superstition. Fear, in this context, is reverential awe.

Second, keeping God’s law would result in a long and full life: Do this … so that you may have a long life. Long life means not only a lengthening of the number of days on earth, but it also carries the idea of a rich and full life. The promise does not mean that anyone who disobeys God’s commands will die young. It does mean that a nation in which the people serve God will come under His blessing. Individuals who keep God’s commands experience His peace and joy and avoid self-destructive habits.

Third, keeping God’s law would lead to their prospering in a land flowing with milk and honey. Prosper translates as happily successful. If they followed God, things would go well for them.
as a people; that is, God would be their protector and provider. If they disobeyed His laws, they would suffer the consequences. A land flowing with milk and honey pictures a fertile land capable of producing plentiful harvests. Although it had been almost forty years, the twelve spies’ initial assessment of the land was still true and would remain true as long as the Israelites kept God’s decrees (Num. 13:26-27). God’s covenant with the patriarchs of Israel gave them ownership of the land (Gen. 12:1-3), but only their obedience to the Lord assured their possession and enjoyment of the land.

Fourth, fidelity to God’s law carried the promise of children who would thrive: *Listen, Israel, and be careful to follow them, so that you may... multiply greatly.* This promise, like the first three, was for the community as a whole. It promised that the nation would grow and be healthy. A commitment to obey God’s Word implies that we pass it on to the next generation, and those who do so have children who make good decisions in life.

*How does knowing God’s promises motivate a person to love and obey God?*

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**BIBLE SKILL: Compare Bible passages.**

Compare Deuteronomy 6:4-5 to Ephesians 4:1-6. What common themes do you see in both passages? How does each passage make use of the number “one”? How are the actions called for in each passage related?

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**THE PASSION (DEUT. 6:4-5)**

4 “Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”
VERSE 4
For the second time in two verses (vv. 3,4), Moses called for Israel’s undivided attention: 
Listen, Israel. The word translated listen is shema. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is called the Shema, after the first word of the verse. It represents Israel’s core statement of faith. Jesus quoted this verse when He was asked which is the greatest commandment. (See Mark 12:28-30.)

This word listen means to listen closely for the purposes of obedience. The first thing Israel needed to listen to closely was that the LORD our God, the LORD is one. This statement points to the uniqueness and supremacy of the God of Israel and demands that the Israelites show complete faithfulness to Yahweh alone and not worship any other god.

The Canaanite people worshiped many gods. Their gods were unpredictable and morally capricious. The pagans feared that if they gave too much attention to one of their gods, the other gods might become angry with them, extracting some kind of retribution. The monotheistic Israelites were free from this kind of paranoia. They worshiped the one true God who dealt with them consistently and by His established commands.

KEY DOCTRINE: God
The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being (John 14:6-11).

VERSE 5
This verse focuses on our love and loyalty to God. Moses’ point was not only to recognize God’s uniqueness and supremacy; it was to respond to Him with love. Love for God is expressed with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

In Hebrew thought, the heart was the location of the intellect and the mind. One thinks in his heart (Zech. 8:17). Soul refers to the essence of the person and includes the volition and will. The Hebrews understood strength to go beyond physical power; it refers to intensity. They were to love God vehemently—a love that proves itself with obedience to His commands.
Which would you consider more difficult: loving God with all you are or keeping all the commandments? Explain.

THE PROCLAMATION (DEUT. 6:6-9)

6 These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. 7 Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead. 9 Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your city gates.

VERSES 6-9

To keep their relationship with God from becoming a mere legalistic observance of laws, Moses provided five practical ways the people were to express their love for the Lord. First, he said God’s commands are to be in your heart. More than simply memorizing and reciting them, they must both know and meditate on God’s truths. They should understand the intent behind the law and how it related to the welfare of their lives.

Second, repeat God’s commands to your children. The word translated repeat could describe the sharpening of a knife on a whetstone. Parents shape the lives of their children. Teaching their children about the Lord would ensure God’s continued blessings on their lives.

Third, they should make God and His Word part of their daily conversations and their normal routines. In your house suggests the everyday activities of life. Along the road suggests wherever life might take them.

Fourth, since the Israelites were to keep God’s commands in mind all the time, they were to keep Bible verses on their persons. They were to bind God’s commands to their hand and their forehead. Verse 8 is the origin of the Jewish practice of wearing phylacteries, Bible verses worn near the eyes and the hand. When Deuteronomy 11:18 says, “Imprint these words of mine on your hearts and minds, bind them as a sign on your hands, and let them be a symbol on your foreheads,” it may have been a metaphorical way of saying, “Make sure you keep these commands in mind.
wherever you look (the forehead) and whatever you do (the hands).” Some Israelites in Jesus’ day ignored the meaning behind the symbolism and drew a rebuke from Jesus (Matt. 23:5).

Fifth, they should put constant reminders of God’s commands in their houses and city gates. The doorposts of their houses and the city gates should draw the attention of those who entered upward to God and His Word. Out of this instruction, later Jews attached a small container of Scripture, called a mezuzah, to the doorway of their homes, touching it each time they passed by.

The lives of God’s people should be saturated daily with thoughts about God. By keeping God and His Word on their hearts and tongues, their relationship with Him would grow deeper and stronger.

What can believers do today to demonstrate their love for God? How do today’s actions compare with the actions called for by Moses?

THE POSSESSION (DEUT. 6:10-13)

10 “When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would give you — a land with large and beautiful cities that you did not build, houses full of every good thing that you did not fill them with, cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant — and when you eat and are satisfied, 12 be careful not to forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery. 13 Fear the LORD your God, worship him, and take your oaths in his name.

VERSES 10-11

Moses reminded the people that their inheritance of the land was a promise made long ago by the Lord. Given originally to Abraham (Gen. 15:18-21), God renewed His promise of Canaan with Isaac (Gen. 26:2-5), with Jacob (Gen. 28:10-17), and now with the twelve tribes of Israel. With God providing the victory over the Canaanites, this new generation wouldn’t be resident aliens but rightful citizens of their own nation. Instead of building their
communities from scratch, they would inherit flourishing *cities* and live in *houses* filled with things they didn’t provide. They would drink water from deep *cisterns* they didn’t dig and eat from *vineyards and olive groves* already established. God would bless them not only with a land of their own, He would give them the means to enjoy the land. God not only makes promises; He also keeps His promises.

**We were hopeless slaves to sin in need of a Savior.**

**VERSES 12-13**

Moses warned, **be careful not to forget the LORD.** Out of two opposite extremes of life—adversity and prosperity—the more difficult of the two is prosperity. Difficulty drives His people to their knees, asking for His deliverance. When facing success, believers may relax their spiritual zeal, taking the blessings of God for granted. The best remedy for an ungrateful heart is remembering what life was like before God intervened. In Israel’s case, they were hopeless slaves in *Egypt* until the Lord delivered them. In our case, we were hopeless slaves to sin in need of a Savior.

To help maintain their spiritual fervor, Moses told the people to do three things. First, they must maintain a healthy reverence for God. *Fear* doesn’t mean dread; it is a holy awe of a sinner before a holy God. They were to give God their utmost respect and undying loyalty. Second, the *worship* of God must be their highest priority. If they didn’t intentionally worship Yahweh alone, they would follow after other gods. Third, they must declare their allegiance to God by taking their *oaths in his name*. Just as the Lord kept His promise by delivering the people and returning them to the promised land, the people must keep their promises. With privilege comes responsibility. Their inheritance of the land was God’s gift. To continue living in the land with God’s blessings, Israel was to be humble, grateful, and faithful.

*What dangers do people face when they forget God?*
IN MY CONTEXT

• Blessings await those who are obedient to God.
• Believers are to love God with all their being.
• Believers demonstrate their love for God by proclaiming Him to everyone.
• Believers must continue to love God even in the good times.

As a group, list blessings received from the Lord. Share how each blessing changed the recipient’s life. How can the group make others aware of the blessings that obedience brings?

What actions can you take this week to demonstrate you love God with all your heart, soul, and strength?

With whom can you share Jesus this week? What actions do you need to take to put yourself in a position to share with them?

Reflect on why people forget God in the good times. What safeguards do you need to put in place so you continually love God in the good times?

Prayer Needs
REVEALED

God provides messengers to represent Him in this world.

DEUTERONOMY 18:15-22

It’s not easy to be an envoy, a person who represents another. An ambassador represents his or her government. A diplomat must be careful and tactful since saying the wrong thing could provoke an international crisis. If the CEO of a corporation sends an envoy to negotiate a deal, that envoy must represent the company’s interests. An envoy’s purpose is to represent the government or company from which he or she came.

*What challenges might an envoy face that adds to the pressure of clearly communicating the message to be delivered?*
Continuing his second speech (5:1–26:19), Moses gave the Israelites specific instructions for living in the new land. Clearly defined rules and order would govern the Israelites, touching every area of their lives. Moses outlined guidelines for worship, dietary restrictions, avoiding idolatry, and treatment of the less fortunate (chaps. 12–16). Their worship would include the observance of festivals, visible reminders that Yahweh was their only God (chap. 16). Moses delineated lines of leadership, along with expectations for those in leadership, including judges and future kings (chaps. 17–19). He taught how the Israelites should conduct themselves in battle, relying on the Lord for the victory (chap. 20). Knowing they were a covenant community, Moses gave them laws that would govern them as a society, dealing with both interpersonal and relational issues (chaps. 21–25). In his closing remarks, Moses emphasized the rights of the firstborn, the necessity of tithing, and the blessings that would come from obeying the covenant (chap. 26).

Throughout their wilderness journey, Moses had been the people’s liaison with God, relaying God’s messages and guidance. Since Moses would not enter the land with the people, he explained that God would raise up a line of prophets from among them who would speak on the Lord’s behalf, reassuring the people they would continue to hear from God (Deut. 18:15–19). Just as they had done with Moses, they must listen to and follow their prophet. Because the polytheistic Canaanites had false prophets who would claim to speak on behalf of God, Moses also gave the Israelites a plan for recognizing and dealing with false prophets (Deut. 18:20-22). With God’s help, Moses prepared the people for entering into the promised land.

Observe how the people could identify a false prophet in Deuteronomy 18:15-22. Why would someone intentionally mislead others?
EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE NEED (DEUT. 18:15-17)

15 “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. 16 This is what you requested from the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, ‘Let us not continue to hear the voice of the LORD our God or see this great fire any longer, so that we will not die!’ 17 Then the LORD said to me, ‘They have spoken well.

VERSE 15

After warning of the detestable practices of the Canaanites who used diviners, witches, spiritualists, and human sacrifices to learn the will of their gods (Deut. 18:9-14), Moses taught the Israelites that God would speak through a prophet.

Speaking of more than a successor for Moses, God instituted a prophetic ministry that would help guide Israel in future generations. These prophets would be God’s spokespersons, acting and speaking as Moses had done on the Lord’s behalf. Since they would also be Israelites, any proposed revelation from the people of Canaan should be ignored.

Whenever a true prophet of Israel spoke, the people must listen to him, indicating both hearing and responding. Moses would no longer be with them, but God wasn’t abandoning them. He would continue to speak to and direct His people through His prophets, leaving the people no excuse.

The singular use of prophet points to the coming of the ultimate Prophet, Jesus.

The singular use of prophet points to the coming of the ultimate Prophet, Jesus. Although Deuteronomy 34:10 suggests Moses was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, the coming Messiah would be greater than Moses. Peter identified Jesus as the One who fulfilled the prophecy of Deuteronomy 18:15 (Acts 3:22-23). In many ways, Moses foreshadowed Christ or was a type that pointed to Christ. Both Moses and Jesus were spared death as babies (Ex. 2; Matt. 2:13-23). Both expressed compassion for the people (Num. 27:17; Matt. 9:36). The two made intercession for the people.
(Deut. 9:18; Heb. 7:25). Moses and Jesus spoke with God directly (Ex. 34:29). Each relayed to the people what God said (Num. 11:18; John 12:49-50). Both Moses and Jesus were mediators of a covenant (Deut. 29:1; Heb. 8:6-7). The critical difference is that Moses was merely a man, while Jesus was the Son of God who came to seek and save those who believe in Him (Luke 19:10).

**VERSES 16-17**
Moses reminded the people that the office of a prophet was the result of their request at Mount Sinai years earlier (Ex. 20:18-19). After receiving the Ten Commandments, the people heard the voice of God in a dramatic appearance of God in the form of thunder, lightning, smoke, and the sound of trumpets. Frightened by the power and majesty of the Lord, they immediately requested that Moses act as their mediator with God so they wouldn’t be overwhelmed or even die. God granted their request because their request demonstrated genuine humility.

**Our sin keeps us from approaching God without Jesus as our mediator.**

We are all unworthy to approach God on our own. The most righteous person can never be righteous enough without being clothed in the righteousness of Jesus (Isa. 64:4). Our sin keeps us from approaching God without Jesus as our mediator. Only through Christ, the perfect mediator between humanity and God, can believers find acceptance in the Lord’s sight.

**What does our need for a mediator between us and God reveal about the nature of sin?**

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**THE PROVISION (DEUT. 18:18-19)**

18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. 19 I will hold accountable whoever does not listen to my words that he speaks in my name.
VERSE 18

God’s prophet would not be a stranger but would be from among them. Most importantly, the prophet would not speak his words, but the words God gave him. This individual was charged with the solemn responsibility of passing along everything God commanded him. Whenever he spoke on God’s behalf, he must repeat it precisely as God gave it to him. Just as Moses devotedly proclaimed every word that God spoke, whether he was received or scorned, God expected the same faithfulness from the new prophet of Israel.

KEY DOCTRINE: The Scriptures

The Scriptures reveal the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world (2 Pet. 1:19-21).

VERSE 19

God would hold the people accountable for responding to His message; they must listen and obey. Because the prophet was God’s mouthpiece, to reject the words of the prophet was to reject God Himself. As demonstrated repeatedly throughout their wilderness wanderings, God would not tolerate any rebellion from His children, including those in positions of leadership.

Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. Throughout history, there have been great teachers. Some have taught ideas upon which world religions would be established. But all these teachers have one thing in common—they were human teachers. Jesus is unique because He is God (John 1:1-3). Putting on flesh, He came so the world might know God (John 1:14). When Jesus spoke, the crowds were amazed at His teaching (Matt. 7:28-29; John 7:46). It was not His oratory skills that impressed them but the inherent authority by which He spoke. Other religious teachers, like the scribes, could quote Scriptures. But when Jesus spoke, He taught the law with an insight and power that the people had never heard or seen.

Everything we need to know about God and how to live in relationship with Him can be found in the pages of the Bible. But God still provides messengers who faithfully deliver His message.
from His written Word. Speaking through committed preachers, teachers, evangelists, and leaders, the Spirit trains, equips, and prepares believers to know, grow, and follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

The Lord still holds believers today responsible for receiving and responding to His message. Believers must resist railing against God’s messenger as the people did against Moses and the religious leaders did against Jesus. They should allow God’s Word to convict and transform their lives. As the apostle Paul learned, it is challenging to kick against the sharp prodding of God’s Word (Acts 26:14).

*How are believers held accountable today for following the message delivered by God’s modern-day messengers?*

**BIBLE SKILL: Compare similar passages.**

Compare Deuteronomy 18:5-22 to 2 Timothy 3. What does each passage say about detecting false teachers? In what ways are the passages similar? How are they different? What principles can you glean from these passages?
THE TEST (DEUT. 18:20-22)

20 But the prophet who presumes to speak a message in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods — that prophet must die.’ 21 You may say to yourself, ‘How can we recognize a message the LORD has not spoken?’ 22 When a prophet speaks in the LORD’s name, and the message does not come true or is not fulfilled, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.

VERSES 20-22

The penalty for claiming to be a prophet when one was not was severe: that prophet must die. Unfaithfulness to God and turning to idols were the besetting sins of Israel; these are the great dangers that Deuteronomy sought to guard against.

Why was the penalty for delivering a false message from God so severe?

How would the people distinguish between a true prophet and a false prophet? The rule for recognizing a true prophet was straightforward: If he made a prediction and it came true, he was a true prophet of God; if it did not, he was a false prophet.

Godly messengers who faithfully speak God’s truth will be validated in time.

This rule is general in nature and does not address complex situations. Deuteronomy 13:1-3 acknowledges that things could get more complex. A false prophet could work wonders or make true predictions: “If a prophet or someone who has dreams arises among you and proclaims a sign or wonder to you, and that sign or wonder he has promised you comes about, but he says, ‘Let us follow other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us worship them,’ do not listen to that prophet’s words or to that dreamer. For the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul.” The meaning
of both passages is that the Israelites needed to use discernment in distinguishing true prophets from false prophets.

While Moses explained that people claiming to be prophets would be validated when what they spoke came true, we should keep in mind that just because the fulfillment of a message is delayed does not mean the message is not from God. During the times of the major and minor prophets, the prediction of exile for the nations of Israel and Judah was delayed. Years later, the prophecies came true, proving the prophets and their messages were from the Lord. Even today, godly messengers who faithfully speak God’s truth will be validated in time. Until such time, the messenger must be faithful in delivering the message, and the people must be committed to following the message.

Preachers today proclaim God’s Word, but they are teachers of the Bible. They are not purveyors of new revelation.

Believers today must exercise spiritual discernment. Otherwise, they too will fall prey to and become ensnared in unbiblical teaching. But for us, the situation is somewhat different since no preacher today has the kind of direct, authoritative revelations that the prophets and apostles received. We have no Moses, Elijah, Peter, or Paul among us. Preachers today proclaim God’s Word, but they are teachers of the Bible. They are not purveyors of new revelation. For modern preachers, inspiration by the Holy Spirit is more a matter of empowerment than it is the conveyance of an oracle received directly from God. For us, the tests are what kind of fruit is evident in the messenger’s life, whether his messages agree with sound doctrine, and whether he gives evidence that God is working through him.

How can believers today protect themselves from preachers and teachers who don’t always handle God’s Word with integrity?
IN MY CONTEXT

- Our sin keeps us from approaching God without Jesus Christ as our mediator.
- God raises up messengers who faithfully deliver His message.
- Godly messengers will be validated by God in time.

*How can your group help people know that Jesus is the only mediator between God and themselves? In what ways can your Bible study group convince people of the danger of sin?*

*What steps can you take so that you recognize potential messengers God is raising up? How can you encourage their spiritual development?*

*List principles that should be followed when discerning the validity of a message. How can you help others follow these principles as well?*

Prayer Needs
CHosen

True life is found only when we live according to God’s purposes.

DEUTERONOMY 30:1-10,19-20

For some people, the good life is one free of responsibility—an escape from the cares of this life. For others, it is about having more and newer things than their neighbors. People invest their time, money, and energy in their pursuit of what they consider the good life. For the believer, the good life is found in a relationship with God. This relationship produces contentment as the believer lives according to God’s purposes.

How does our society define the good life? What presuppositions or assumptions about life do our definitions of the good life carry?
Moses instructed Israel to build a monument with God’s law written on it when they entered Canaan (Deut. 27:1-8). This would be followed by a ceremony of thanksgiving and remembrance of their commitment to the Lord. In the service, the priests would lead the Israelites in agreeing they would abstain from anything that dishonored God. The people would shout “Amen!” as an acknowledgment of God’s right to send curses on them if they disobeyed Him (27:9-26).

The curses were for infringements on the Ten Commandments. The first curse condemned idolatry, violating the first and second commandments. The second curse warned against dishonoring family relationships, breaking the fifth commandment. Conflict over property issues and unconcern for the disadvantaged were included in the third and fourth curses. The fifth curse dealt with treating the less fortunate with kindness and justice. Curses six through nine involved sexual purity, breaching the seventh commandment, while the tenth and eleventh curses involved murder, ignoring the sixth commandment. The twelfth curse charged the people with faithfully keeping every law.

Chapters 27 and 28 are repetitive for a reason. While the Levites and priests had a copy of the Law of Moses, the people did not. Therefore, average Israelites had to rely on their memories, making repetition necessary.

God is all-knowing, and He knew His people would forsake Him (chap. 29). In His mercy, the Lord prepared a pathway of return to Him and His blessings, but first Israel would declare their allegiance to Him alone.

_Circle each time the phrase “The LORD your God” appears in Deuteronomy 30:1-10,19-20. How does the use of this phrase point to God’s concern regarding our choices?_
EXPLORE THE TEXT

RESTORED PEOPLE (DEUT. 30:1-5)

“When all these things happen to you — the blessings and curses I have set before you — and you come to your senses while you are in all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, 2 and you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and all your soul by doing everything I am commanding you today, 3 then he will restore your fortunes, have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. 4 Even if your exiles are at the farthest horizon, he will gather you and bring you back from there. 5 The LORD your God will bring you into the land your fathers possessed, and you will take possession of it. He will cause you to prosper and multiply you more than he did your fathers.

VERSES 1-4

From the time Israel left Egypt, they repeatedly cycled between obedience and unfaithfulness to God. Knowing their wayward tendencies, Moses spoke of future restoration in his third speech (27:1–30:20), giving the people hope in spite of their sinful tendencies. The Lord promised He would gather His people from exile, even those scattered abroad. In the exile, many Jews were forcibly taken to Babylon and took up residence there, but many others were scattered among the nations. The Book of Esther, for example, takes place among Jews living in the heart of Persia (modern Iran).

Before God would bring them back to the promised land, there must be repentance. They must acknowledge that their sin is what caused the unleashing of the curses. Senses can also be translated “heart,” meaning when their hearts are pricked and humbled. Then they must return to obeying God’s covenant commands.

Living in Canaan and being a nation was the result of God’s conditional promise. If the Israelites violated the condition, they would forfeit their inheritance. By repenting and returning, God would restore their fortunes. That is, the Lord would once again give them the land of their inheritance. Repentance followed by unwavering allegiance would prove the sincerity of their words. No sinner is beyond the reach of the Lord.
VERSE 5
The Lord would not only allow Israel to be a nation again, but He would graciously supply them with two blessings. First, He would cause them to **prosper**. With a renewed fellowship with the Lord, they would rediscover the joy they lost while in exile. They would take full **possession** of the land, knowing God would watch over them and protect them from their enemies.

Second, God would **multiply** their numbers. After returning home, their descendants would become immeasurable just as God had promised Abraham earlier (Gen. 22:17).

**Obedience is not an option but a mandate for every believer.**

Disobedience brings God’s discipline, but He patiently woos His children to repent and return so that He might lovingly restore them. Obedience is not an option but a mandate for every believer. God dealt with Israel this way, and He deals with us in the same way. His blessings await those who follow Him wholeheartedly. His discipline awaits those who do not.

*How is discipline an act of love? How does this type of love compare with how the world views love today?*

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**RENEWED HEARTS** *(DEUT. 30:6-10)*

6 **The LORD** your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, and you will love him with all your heart and all your soul so that you will live. 7 **The LORD** your God will put all these curses on your enemies who hate and persecute you. 8 Then you will again obey him and follow all his commands I am commanding you today. 9 **The LORD** your God will make you prosper abundantly in all the work of your hands, your offspring, the offspring of your livestock, and the produce of your land. Indeed, the **LORD** will again delight in your prosperity, as he delighted in that of your fathers, 10 when you obey the **LORD** your God by keeping his commands and statutes that are written in this book of the law and return to him with all your heart and all your soul.
Earlier in Israel’s history, the Lord instructed Abraham that circumcision would perpetually serve as a physical sign of His covenant with the Jewish people and their acceptance of His covenant (Gen. 17). God intended the ritual to be a solemn occasion of submission and worship. But over time, the intent for the act would be lost. Realizing inward attitudes were more important than outward signs, Moses had previously called the people to circumcise their hearts by removing everything that interfered or distracted them from loving God exclusively (Deut. 10:16). Before the exile, Jeremiah again reminded Israel that the circumcision of their hearts would be the only thing that could save them (Jer. 4:4).

In the New Testament, Paul made the same argument (Rom. 2:28-29). The Jews of his day boasted in their physical circumcision, claiming it was evidence they belonged to God. Paul corrected this wrong belief by teaching that circumcision of the heart is the real evidence of genuine faith. Only the Spirit, not the law, can change a person from the inside out.

God Himself would perform the circumcision of their hearts, cutting away the hardness so they will love Him wholeheartedly. With new hearts, their former spiritual insensitivity and stubbornness would melt into gratitude for what the Lord had done for them. Notice too that God’s divine surgery would take place after the Israelites repented and returned. Right living takes place after we turn our hearts to Him and put our trust in Jesus.

What attitudes of the heart might need to be removed by God? How does a spiritually circumcised heart produce undivided love for God?

**KEY DOCTRINE: Salvation (Regeneration)**

Regeneration is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17-20).
VERSES 7-8
God would turn His attention to the nations that inflicted cruelty on His people. He would curse those who persecuted His people. Punishment of those who oppose God’s people is reserved for God alone.

With their borders firmly secured, the Israelites would be free to serve the Lord without fear of reprisal. God’s message, no doubt, encouraged Moses too, realizing the investment he had made in these people would not be wasted and that nothing could thwart the Lord’s plans.

VERSES 9-10
When the Israelites again obeyed God and followed His commands (v. 8), God would do three things. First, He would reward the work of their hands. Second, He would increase their offspring and the offspring of their livestock. Since the time of the patriarchs, the Israelites had been shepherders. Their economy was tied to the agricultural industry. Along with droughts and diseases, paying tribute to controlling rulers with their herds, and paying for grazing rights, they had been at the mercy of others. As the Lord had increased Jacob’s flocks, He would do the same for Israel in their renewed homeland. Third, He would increase their crop production. Traveling through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan, food was always a priority since they were always on the move. Once restored in their homeland, God would make the ground rich, overflowing with an abundant harvest.

Accompanying these blessings would be the most important blessing: God’s delight in His people. The Lord delights when He sees His people obeying Him and becoming the people He desires.

Three key words figure prominently in Deuteronomy 30: heart (vv. 2,6,10), commands (vv. 2,8,10), and return (vv. 2,10). If God’s people turned from their sins, returned to the Lord, and followed His commands, they would enjoy life as only the Lord can give. God finds no joy in disciplining His people. While correction and discipline are necessary, the Lord takes delight in those who wholeheartedly seek and love Him.

How does knowing that God delights in the loving obedience of His people encourage your obedience to Him?
RIGHTHEOUS CHOICE (DEUT. 30:19-20)

19 I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 20 love the LORD your God, obey him, and remain faithful to him. For he is your life, and he will prolong your days as you live in the land the LORD swore to give to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

VERESE 19

With the curses and blessings firmly fixed in the minds of the people and his solemn duties completed as the leader, Moses concluded his final address with an invitation. The law required at least two witnesses to bind contracts legally, and Moses called heaven and earth as witnesses to the choices this generation and future generations would make. More than just a dramatic statement, Moses may have implied that the angels in heaven and the people on earth would know of Israel’s choices by watching their lifestyles, whether faithful or unfaithful. Choices lead to actions, and by their actions others would know if they had abandoned God’s commands.

Unlike the many decisions the average person makes daily, Moses put before the people a choice that would result in life or...
death, blessing or curse. Disobedience would invoke the curses, bringing spiritual and even physical death to the people and the nation. Israel’s obedience would ensure their right standing with God, reaping spiritual and physical blessings on them and their nation.

What factors might cause someone not to choose life?

VERSE 20
Choosing life involved making a threefold response to God. First, they must love the Lord. More than saying the words, they must worship and revere Him in their hearts, homes, and communities. The people of Israel must intentionally seek a spiritual intimacy with the Lord.

Second, they must obey him. More than merely going through the motions, their obedience would flow out of their love for God. Their love for Him would be reflected in their attitudes and actions.

Third, they must remain faithful to him. The sinful practices of the surrounding nations would be seductive. Therefore, God’s people must guard their faith at all costs.

To choose God was to choose life. Apart from Him, they had no life.

In verse 19, Moses emphatically pleaded with the people to choose life. In verse 20 he reminded them, for he is your life. To choose God was to choose life. Apart from Him, they had no life. The same is true today; we face the same choice. Jesus came that we might have life and have it in abundance (John 10:10). Paul said to the Colossians, Christ “is your life” (Col. 3:4). By choosing Jesus, we find life.

Are the three responses of verse 20 still expected of followers of Christ? Explain.
IN MY CONTEXT

- God seeks to restore a holy people unto Himself.
- God delights in the loving obedience of His people.
- God honors those who choose to love Him.

Ask God to reveal to you areas in your life where you have strayed from His purposes. Record actions you need to take to return to His purposes in these areas.

Define ways your group can explain the consequences of disobedience to someone who has strayed from God’s purposes. What steps can the group take that will restore disobedient believers?

Record how you came to understand your need to make a choice to follow Jesus. Thank Him for your salvation, committing to honor Him with your life today. If you have not made that choice, review the information on the inside front cover and reach out to your Bible study leader.

Prayer Needs
Believers can find hope in God’s promises and presence when facing death.

**DEUTERONOMY 32:48-52; 34:4-7**

It is striking how few eulogies are found in the Bible. In the Old Testament, we see few accounts of the deaths of the heroes of the faith, and these are rarely accompanied by eulogies. Even David’s death is a simple summary (1 Kings 2:10-11). The extensive account of Moses’ death and the eulogy given to him are exceptional in the Bible. Within this account, we find hope and assurance for facing death.

*What do you hope is said about you at your funeral? What would be the ideal statement included on your headstone?*
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

DEUTERONOMY 31:1–34:12

Having served the Lord and His people for forty years, Moses’ life was nearing an end. After concluding his third and final speech (Deut. 27:1–30:20), Moses prepared the people for the next phase of their journey by recognizing Joshua as the new leader who would take the Israelites into Canaan (31:1-23). Joshua was no stranger to the people. Not only had he served as Moses’ servant (Ex. 24:13), he was also one of the twelve spies who scouted Canaan (Num. 14:6-9). When the people refused to claim God’s promise, Joshua spoke in defense of Aaron and Moses. After the Amalekites attacked Israel, Joshua led the army that defeated them (Ex. 17:8-13).

Having recorded God’s law for future generations, Moses instructed the priests to put this book beside the ark of the covenant since only the Ten Commandments were allowed in the ark (Deut. 31:24-30). This book of the law would serve as a witness or warning against Israel when they turned from the ways of the Lord.

At the beginning of the exodus, Moses led the people in singing a song that reminded them of God’s deliverance at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:1-18). As his ministry closed, he gave them another song of remembrance that was both historic and prophetic (Deut. 32). The song tells of Israel’s fall into idolatry and its consequences, but it also speaks of God’s goodness and mercy when Israel repents. The song highlights the character of God, the love of God for His people, the justice of God in dealing with Israel’s sin, and the vengeance of God against His enemies.

Moses then spoke with the tribes of Israel, giving each tribe their unique blessing (chap. 33). The Book of Deuteronomy closes with the death of Moses but not before God granted him the privilege of seeing the promised land from atop Mount Nebo (chap. 34).

Observe God’s actions when reading Deuteronomy 32:48-52 and 34:4-7. What do these acts reveal about God?
EXPLORE THE TEXT

OUR SIN REALIZED (DEUT. 32:48-52)

48 On that same day the LORD spoke to Moses, 49 “Go up Mount Nebo in the Abarim range in the land of Moab, across from Jericho, and view the land of Canaan I am giving the Israelites as a possession. 50 Then you will die on the mountain that you go up, and you will be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. 51 For both of you broke faith with me among the Israelites at the Waters of Meribath-kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin by failing to treat me as holy in their presence. 52 Although from a distance you will view the land that I am giving the Israelites, you will not go there.”

VERSES 48-49

After Moses left Israel with a song of remembrance, teaching them what happens when people leave God out of their lives, God directed Moses to ascend a mountain once again. Mount Nebo, one of the highest peaks of the ten-mile Abarim range in the land of Moab, is located at the northeastern end of the Dead Sea, just east of Jericho. Instead of meeting with God on the mountain as he had done in the past, Moses would view the promised land.

In preparation for Moses’ death, God gave Moses the privilege of seeing the culmination of his forty-year journey as the leader of the Israelites by allowing him to peer into the land of Canaan. Promised to Abraham years earlier, God was on the brink of giving His people a land of their own.

VERSES 50-52

Having just admonished the Israelites to obey God’s Word, Moses was reminded that he and Aaron broke faith with God. They had dishonored Him by their disobedience. At the waters of Meribath-Kadesh, tired of the people’s incessant complaining, Moses lashed out at the people by calling them rebels. He angrily struck the rock (Num. 20), ignoring God’s request that he speak to the rock. Moses and Aaron acted as if they produced the water. Their disobedience destroyed the picture that God wanted to be painted that day,
robbing God of displaying His power through the spoken word. As the leaders of the covenant community, they treated God and His command with disrespect in front of the people. Even if Moses felt his anger was justified, or if it was a case of temporary lapse brought on by stress, what Moses did was inexcusable.

Because of their sin, neither Moses nor Aaron were allowed into the promised land. In His mercy, the Lord let Moses view the land from the mountaintop before his death. While God’s action may seem harsh, it’s a reminder that all sin is offensive to the Lord. Moreover, God reserves a stricter judgment for spiritual leaders (Jas. 3:1).

Every cemetery is a reminder that the wages of sin is death.

Death reminds us of our sin. Every cemetery is a reminder that the wages of sin is death. But God gave His Son as the payment for sin, making forgiveness and reconciliation with Him possible through Jesus Christ. Jesus and the salvation He offers is the reason we no longer need to fear death. By putting our trust in Jesus, we gain eternal life with Him.

*How does death point to sin? What role does facing judgment for sin play in a person’s fear of death?*

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**GOD’S PRESENCE ASSURED** (DEUT. 34:4)

“The LORD then said to him, “This is the land I promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you will not cross into it.”

**VERSE 4**

God reminded Moses eight times in Deuteronomy that he would die and not set foot in the promised land. (See Deut. 1:37; 3:23-29; 31:2,14,16,27-29; 32:48-52; 34:4.) In light of God’s announcement, God’s grace was still evident in several ways. First, the Lord didn’t execute His judgment at Meribath-kadesh.
immediately; Moses continued serving as Israel’s leader until he was 120 years old. Second, although Moses didn’t enter the land, by God’s grace he got to see the land personally. Giving Moses the privilege of peering into Canaan was a commendation of Moses’ leadership and faithfulness. Third, God reassured Moses the people would inherit His covenant. Fourth, Moses was comforted when the Lord installed Joshua, the servant of Moses, as Israel’s next leader.

BIBLE SKILL: Review a Bible map.
Locate Mount Nebo on a Bible map that includes elevations. Consider the topography of the region to gain a clearer understanding of the view given to Moses. Focus on Deuteronomy 34:1-3. How does the topography demonstrate God’s mercy to Moses?

Mount Nebo provided a panorama of the entire land of Canaan. Although Moses wouldn’t personally lead the charge, God would still be faithful to the promise He made to the patriarchs of old and bring Israel into the new land. While the Lord previously refused Moses’ numerous requests to enter the promised land (Deut. 3:23-26), Moses did visit it centuries later, when he and Elijah met with Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration as witnessed by Peter, James, and John, the inner circle of Jesus’ twelve apostles (Matt. 17:1-3).

Those who seek the Lord through a growing, developing, and maturing relationship will find that He is full of tenderness and
compassion, and that He delights in demonstrating His gracious kindness in their lives. God’s grace is found in His presence. He will provide for our needs, comfort us in times of suffering, and bless us for our faithfulness. Nothing can compare to the grace of God.

What is the connection between God’s grace and His presence? How does His promised presence give believers hope?

GOD’S MERCY DISCOVERED (DEUT. 34:5-7)

5 So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the LORD’s word. 6 He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab facing Beth-peor, and no one to this day knows where his grave is. 7 Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his eyes were not weak, and his vitality had not left him.

VERSES 5-6

While the Scripture could have accurately called Moses a prince of Egypt, a shepherd, a spokesperson, a miracle worker, a prophet, or a leader of Israel, it bestowed on him the highest privilege a child of God can receive—

the servant of the LORD. Spending part of his ministry on the mountaintop alone with God, it is fitting that his final hours on earth would be with the Lord on Mount Nebo. Although he was disciplined for his previous sin, Moses’ death was not a tragic ending. He died as a man of faith and as an honored servant. Upon completion of his duties, the Lord called Moses home.

God gave Moses an additional honor. He buried Moses, demonstrating His love for the man who devoted forty years in the Lord’s service by leading the children of Israel from Egypt to the promised land. Laying Moses to rest in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth-peor, God kept Moses’ burial place a secret, eliminating the temptation to turn it into a shrine, or even worse, a place of idol worship—something Moses would have despised and God would have judged.
In some aspects, Moses’ life foreshadowed the life Jesus lived. Both were born during a difficult time in Jewish history. Moses surrendered the riches of Egypt; Jesus willingly laid aside His glory. Moses maintained an attitude of meekness just as Jesus did. Both finished the work God gave them to do. The people initially rejected Moses when he tried to help them, and Jesus too would be rejected. In comparison, the face of Moses glowed after he met with the Lord, and the face of Jesus shined on the Mount of Transfiguration. The Bible records that both Moses and Jesus did mighty works while on earth. Although Moses’ life wasn’t divine like that of the Son of God, his story serves as a reminder that all children of God should imitate Christ in every way.

How was God’s mercy and wisdom seen in Moses’ death?

VERSE 7

Dying at the age of 120 years old, Moses’ life is neatly divided into thirds. He spent forty years living in Egypt, forty years as a lowly shepherd in the wilderness, and forty years as the leader of Israel. The first two-thirds of his life were in preparation for the last third. Though he had grown older, he never lost a step—a sign that God was with him throughout his life. With the continued blessing of good eyesight and health, the term of his leadership was over. The people mourned for Moses for thirty days in recognition of the impact his ministry had on their lives (34:8).

The Book of Deuteronomy closes with a fitting tribute to Moses, mentioning four points of distinction:

• He was the greatest prophet in Israel’s history. “No prophet has arisen again in Israel like Moses” (v. 10a).

• Unlike other spokespersons for the Lord, Moses knew the Lord “face to face” (v. 10b).

• Through him, God did incredible “signs and wonders” in the sight of Pharaoh and his court while in Egypt (v. 11).

• By Moses’ hand, God repeatedly demonstrated His “mighty acts of power and terrifying deeds” in the sight of all Israel (v. 12).
Moses was faithful in his walk with God, in his devotion to his people, and in his role as an intercessor, praying for God’s blessings on Israel and pleading with God to hold back His judgment on their rebelliousness. Because God previously explained that Moses couldn’t enter the promised land, imagine the pain Moses would have felt, remaining outside while the people ventured inside, or the pain the people would have endured by leaving Moses behind. The most merciful thing God could do was take Moses home with Him at the end of a long and fruitful life. Death is not some kind of less-than alternative; it is the door to the very best God offers because it means living eternally with Him.

**God’s grace and mercy are present every moment, including the very moment when believers breathe their last breaths.**

Heaven awaits those who trust in the Lord. The struggles of this life will finally be over. The day is coming when God Himself “will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more” (Rev. 21:4). God’s grace and mercy are present every moment, including the very moment when believers breathe their last breaths.

*How can believers be more aware of God’s mercy in times of sorrow, including death?*

**KEY DOCTRINE: Last Things**

The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in heaven with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:14-18).
IN MY CONTEXT

- Death reminds us of our sin.
- God’s grace is found in His presence.
- God’s mercy is found even in the time of death.

*Ask God to show you any unconfessed sin in your life. As He reveals those to you, confess them to God.*

*List things that hinder you from spending time with God. What steps can you take to remove these things from your life?*

*Discuss as a group ways of showing God’s mercy to people dealing with death. Include actions for the person actually facing death and people grieving as a result. What actions does the group need to take on as a result of the discussion?*

Prayer Needs
Speaking to Israel at the end of his life, Moses said, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him” (Deut. 18:15). Peter identified Jesus as the One who fulfilled this prophecy (Acts 3:22). Readers of the Gospels should not be surprised, therefore, to see that Jesus quoted frequently from Deuteronomy.

THE WILDERNESS OF TEMPTATION

Moses delivered the messages of Deuteronomy to the second generation of Israelites after the exodus. The first generation failed to enter the land (Num. 14:22-23) and died in the wilderness. Deuteronomy was a warning to Israel not to make the sinful choices of the first generation and not to forget the Lord when they entered the promised land.

Jesus, like Israel, faced temptations in a wilderness in preparation for His public ministry (Matt. 4:1). Jesus’ responses in the wilderness, however, were quite different from those of unfaithful Israel.
Jesus faced three temptations from the devil and after each one Jesus responded with a quotation from Deuteronomy. In each instance Jesus demonstrated obedience to the Father in contrast to the Israelites’ failure in their wilderness experiences.

In the first temptation to turn stones to bread (Matt. 4:2-3), Jesus responded with Deuteronomy 8:3, which referred to God’s provision of manna for Israel in the wilderness. The Israelites grumbled and complained when they lacked food or water (Ex. 16:2). Jesus patiently trusted the Father to take care of His needs and refused to yield to the devil’s suggestion.

In the second temptation (for Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple) Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:16. This verse warned young Israelites not to test God as their fathers had done at Massah. Israel had grumbled against the Lord when they lacked water at Rephidim (later named “Massah,” Ex. 17:1-2). God provided water but only after a rebuke for their lack of faith and testing of Him (v. 7). Jesus demonstrated His trust in God’s promises and refused to test Him by jumping from a great height.

In the third temptation, the devil offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world if He would bow down to him. Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20, which command worship of God alone. Israel turned to idolatry at Sinai (Ex. 32:1-6) and later at Moab when Moabite women seduced the men of Israel (Num. 25:1-3). Jesus maintained His obedience to the Father and did not deviate from absolute submission to His will.

Jesus succeeded where Israel failed bysteadfastly trusting the Lord in the wilderness and keeping His commands. He was the “true Israel” who obeyed God.

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

During His public ministry, the scribes and Pharisees interpreted Jesus’ rejection of their human traditions as a violation of the Mosaic Law (Matt. 15:1-2). Jesus responded by dismissing their rules as human inventions and charged them with specific violations of the Mosaic Law (vv. 3-9). Jesus said He had not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17-18). Unlike anyone before or after Him, Jesus obeyed the Law of God in its entirety. He was supremely qualified to answer every question about the meaning and proper application of the Law.
In Matthew 22:36, an expert in the law asked Jesus, “which command in the law is the greatest?” Jesus did not hesitate; He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 as the greatest of the commandments.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 became the most famous Old Testament passage in Judaism (often referred to as “the Shema”). Verses 4-5 taught two essential truths. Verse 4 described the uniqueness of the one true God who revealed Himself to Israel. Verse 5 commanded believers to love God supremely. If we love God, we will obey His commands. Love and obedience are inseparable (John 14:15). Love is the greatest command because it is the basis for obedience to every command.

Jesus did not quote Deuteronomy 6:5 to offer a way of salvation through obedience to the Law. “For no one will be justified in his sight by the works of the law” (Rom. 3:20). The law reveals our need for grace and makes obvious the necessity of Christ’s substitutionary atonement. The elaborate institution of an Old Testament sacrificial system and priesthood pointed to the universal violation of the Law. Deuteronomy 6:5 uniquely pictures the eternal relationship of God the Son with God the Father. Perfect love resulted in perfect obedience—making Jesus uniquely the only acceptable sacrifice for sin.

We should not be surprised at the prominent place Jesus gave Deuteronomy in His life and ministry. He echoed Moses’ words and amplified them through perfect obedience to every divine command. He revealed that love—not fear—is the motivation of every genuine believer.

Jesus summons us to love God more than sin. He calls us to live in the world as a holy people who belong to Him and who obey His commands (Deut. 7:6-11; John 14:21-24).

This article originally appeared in the Winter 2011-12 issue of Biblical Illustrator. At the time of writing, Hal Lane was pastor of West Side Baptist Church, Greenwood, South Carolina.
COMING NEXT QUARTER

ROMANS

Session 1  Compelled  >  Romans 1:1-7,13-17
Session 2  Guilty  >  Romans 1:18-28,32
Session 3  Insufficient  >  Romans 2:17-29
Session 4  Justified  >  Romans 3:21–4:3
Session 5  At Peace  >  Romans 5:1-11
Session 6  Free  >  Romans 6:1-14
Session 7  Raised!  >  Luke 24:1-12
Session 8  Secured  >  Romans 8:12-25
Session 9  Saved  >  Romans 10:5-15
Session 10  Mercy  >  Romans 11:17-32
Session 11  Sacrifices  >  Romans 12:1-2,9-18
Session 12  Citizens  >  Romans 13:1-14
Session 13  Accepting  >  Romans 14:1-12
Session 14  Reach  >  Romans 15:14-21,30-33
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