

CHAPTER 4

In this chapter we have,

- I.** A most earnest and pathetic exhortation to obedience, both in general, and in some particular instances, backed with a great variety of very pressing arguments, repeated again and again, and set before them in the most moving and affectionate manner imaginable (v. 1-40).
- II.** The appointing of the cities of refuge on that side Jordan (v. 41-43).
- III.** The particular description of the place where Moses delivered the following repetition of the law (v. 44, etc.).

FROM DEUTERONOMY 4:1-40

EXHORTATIONS AND ARGUMENTS

This most lively and excellent discourse is so entire, and the particulars of it are so often repeated, that we must take it altogether in the exposition of it, and endeavour to digest it into proper heads, for we cannot divide it into paragraphs.

- I.** In general, it is the use and application of the foregoing history; it comes in by way of inference from it: *Now therefore harken, O Israel, v. 1.* This use we should make of the review of God's providences concerning us, we should by them be quickened and engaged to duty and obedience. The histories of the years of ancient times should in like manner be improved by us.
- II.** The scope and drift of his discourse is to persuade them to keep close to God and to his service, and not to forsake him for any other god, nor in any instance to decline from their duty to him. Now observe what he says to them, with a great deal of divine rhetoric, both by way of exhortation and direction, and also by way of motive and argument to enforce his exhortations.

1. See here how he charges and commands them, and shows them *what is good, and what the Lord requires of them.*

(1.) He demands their diligent attention to the word of God, and to the statutes and judgments that were taught them: *Hearken, O Israel.* He means, not only that they must now give him the hearing, but that whenever the book of the law was read to them, or read by them, they should be attentive to it. “Hearken to the statutes, as containing the great commands of God and the great concerns of your own souls, and therefore challenging your utmost attention.” At Horeb God had *made them hear his words* (v. 10), hear them with a witness; the attention which was then constrained by the circumstances of the delivery ought ever after to be engaged by the excellency of the things themselves. What God so *spoke once*, we should *hear twice*, hear often.

(2.) He charges them to preserve the divine law pure and entire among them, v. 2. Keep it pure, and do not add to it; keep it entire, and do not diminish from it. Not in practice, so some: “You shall not add by committing the evil which the law forbids, nor diminish by omitting the good which the law requires.” Not in opinion, so others: “You shall not add your own inventions, as if the divine institutions were defective, nor introduce, much less impose, any rites of religious worship other than what God has appointed; nor shall you diminish, or set aside, any thing that is appointed, as needless or superfluous.” God’s work is perfect, nothing can be put to it, nor taken from it, without making it the worse. See ²¹⁸⁴Ecclesiastes 3:14. The Jews understand it as prohibiting the alteration of the text or letter of the law, even in the least jot or tittle; and to their great care and exactness herein we are very much indebted, under God, for the purity and integrity of the Hebrew code. We find a fence like this made about the New Testament in the close of it, ⁶²⁸Revelation 22:18, 19.

(3.) He charges them to keep God’s *commandments* (v. 2), to *do them* (v. 5, 14), to *keep and do them* (v. 6), to *perform the covenant*, v. 13. Hearing must be in order to doing, knowledge in order to practice. God’s commandments were the way they must keep in, the rule they must keep to; they must govern themselves by the moral precepts, perform their devotion according to the divine ritual, and administer justice according to the judicial law. He concludes his discourse (v. 40) with this repeated

charge: *Thou shalt keep his statutes and his commandments which I command thee.* What are laws made for but to be observed and obeyed?

(4.) He charges them to be very strict and careful in their observance of the law (v. 9): *Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently;* and (v. 15), *Take you therefore good heed unto yourselves;* and again (v. 23), *Take heed to yourselves.* Those that would be religious must be very cautious, and walk circumspectly. Considering how many temptations we are compassed about with, and what corrupt inclinations we have in our own bosoms, we have great need to look about us and to keep our hearts with all diligence. Those cannot walk aright that walk carelessly and at all adventures.

(5.) He charges them particularly to take heed of the sin of idolatry, that sin which of all others they would be most tempted to by the customs of the nations, which they were most addicted to by the corruption of their hearts, and which would be most provoking to God and of the most pernicious consequences to themselves: *Take good heed, lest in this matter you corrupt yourselves,* v. 15, 16. Two sorts of idolatry he cautions them against: —

[1.] The worship of images, however by them they might intend to worship the true God, as they had done in the golden calf, so changing the *truth of God into a lie* and his *glory into shame.* The second commandment is expressly directed against this, and is here enlarged upon, v. 15-18. “Take heed *lest you corrupt yourselves,*” that is, “lest you debauch yourselves;” for those that think to make images of God form in their minds such notions of him as must needs be an inlet to all impieties; and it is intimated that it is a spiritual adultery. “And take heed lest you destroy yourselves. If any thing ruin you, this will be it. Whatever you do, make no similitude of God, either in a human shape, *male of female,* or in the shape of any *beast or fowl, serpent or fish;*” for the heathen worshipped their gods by images of all these kinds, being either not able to form, or not willing to admit, that plain demonstration which we find, ³⁸⁸⁶Hosea 8:6: *The workman made it, therefore it is not God.* To represent an infinite Spirit by an image, and the great Creator by the image of a creature, is the greatest affront we can put upon God and the greatest cheat we can put upon ourselves. As an argument against their making images of God, he urges it very much upon them that when God made himself known to them at Horeb he did it by a voice of words which sounded in

their ears, to teach them that *faith comes by hearing*, and God in the word is nigh us; but no image was presented to their eye, for to see God as he is is reserved for our happiness in the other world, and to see him as he is not will do us hurt and no good in this world. You saw *no similitude* (v. 12), *no manner of similitude*, v. 15. Probably they expected to have seen some similitude, for they were ready to *break through unto the Lord to gaze*, ~~(v. 12)~~ Exodus 19:21. But all they saw was *light and fire*, and nothing that they could make an image of, God an infinite wisdom so ordering his manifestation of himself because of the *peril of idolatry*. It is said indeed of Moses that he *beheld the similitude of the Lord* (~~(v. 12)~~ Numbers 12:8), God allowing him that favour because he was above the temptation of idolatry; but for the people who had lately come from admiring the idols of Egypt, they must see no resemblance of God, lest they should have pretended to copy it, and so should have received the second commandment in vain; “for” (says bishop Patrick) “they would have thought that this forbade them only to make any representation of God besides that wherein he showed himself to them, in which they would have concluded it lawful to represent him.” Let this be a caution to us to take heed of making images of God in our fancy and imagination when we are worshipping him, lest thereby we corrupt ourselves. There may be idols in the heart, where there are none in the sanctuary.

[2.] The worship of the sun, moon, and stars, is another sort of idolatry which they were cautioned against, v. 19. This was the most ancient species of idolatry and the most plausible, drawing the adoration to those creatures that not only are in a situation above us, but are most sensibly glorious in themselves and most generally serviceable to the world. And the plausibleness of it made it the more dangerous. It is intimated here, *First*, How strong the temptation is to sense; for the caution is, *Lest thou shouldest be driven to worship them* by the strong impulse of a vain imagination and the impetuous torrent of the customs of the nations. The heart is supposed to *walk after the eye*, which, in our corrupt and degenerate state, it is very apt to do. “*When thou seest the sun, moon, and stars*, thou wilt so admire their height and brightness, their regular motion and powerful influence, that thou wilt be strongly tempted to give that glory to them which is due to him that made them, and made them what they are to us — gave them their beings, and made them blessings to the world.” It seems there was need of a great deal of resolution to arm them against this temptation, so weak was their faith in an invisible God and an

invisible world. *Secondly*, Yet he shows how weak the temptation would be to those that would use their reason; for these pretended deities, the *sun, moon, and stars*, were only blessings which the Lord their God, whom they were obliged to worship, had imparted to all nations. It is absurd to worship them, for they are man's servants, were made and ordained to give light on earth; and shall we serve those that were made to serve us? The sun, in Hebrew is called *shemesh*, which signifies a *servant*, for it is the minister-general of this visible world, and holds the candle to all mankind; let it not then be worshipped as a lord. Moreover, they are God's gifts; he has imparted them; whatever benefit we have by them, we owe it to him; it is therefore highly injurious to him to give that honour and praise to them which is due to him only.

(6.) He charges them to teach their children to observe the laws of God: *Teach them to thy sons, and thy sons' sons* (v. 9), *that they may teach their children*, v. 10.

[1.] Care must be taken in general to preserve the entail of religion among them, and to transmit the knowledge and worship of God to posterity; for the kingdom of God in Israel was designed to be perpetual, if they did not forfeit the privilege of it.

[2.] Parents must, in order hereunto, particularly take care to teach their own children the fear of God, and to train them up in an observance of all his commandments.

(7.) He charges them never to forget their duty: *Take heed lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God*, v. 23. Though God is ever mindful of the covenant, we are apt to forget it; and this is at the bottom of all our departures from God. We have need therefore to watch against all those things which would put the covenant out of our minds, and to watch over our own hearts, lest at any time we let it slip; and so we must take heed lest at any time we forget our religion, lest we lose it or leave it off. Care and caution, and holy watchfulness, are the best helps against a bad memory. These are the directions and commands he gives them.

2. Let us see now what are the motives or arguments with which he backs these exhortations. How does he order the cause before them, and fill his mouth with arguments! He has a great deal to say on God's behalf. Some of his topics are indeed peculiar to that people, yet applicable to us. But, upon the whole, it is evident that religion has reason on its side, the

powerful charms of which all that are irreligious wilfully stop their ears against.

(1.) He urges the greatness, glory, and goodness, of God. Did we consider what a God he is with whom we have to do, we should surely make conscience of our duty to him and not dare to sin against him. He reminds them here,

[1.] That the Lord Jehovah is the *one and only living and true God*. This they must *know and consider*, v. 39. There are many things which we know, but are not the better for, because we do not consider them, we do not apply them to ourselves, nor draw proper inferences from them. This is a truth so evident that it cannot but be known, and so influential that, if it were duly considered, it would effectually reform the world, *That the Lord Jehovah he is God*, an infinite and eternal Being, self-existent and self-sufficient, and the fountain of all being, power, and motion — that he is *God in heaven above*, clothed with all the glory and Lord of all the hosts of the upper world, and that he is *God upon earth beneath*, which, though distant from the throne of his glory, is not out of the reach of his sight or power, and though despicable and mean is not below his care and cognizance. And *there is none else*, no true and living God but himself. All the deities of the heathen were counterfeits and usurpers; nor did any of them so much as pretend to be universal monarchs in heaven and earth, but only local deities. The Israelites, who worshipped no other than the supreme *Numen — Divinity*, were for ever inexcusable if they either changed their God or neglected him.

[2.] That he is a *consuming fire, a jealous God*, v. 24. Take heed of offending him, for, *First*, He has a jealous eye to discern an affront; he must have your entire affection and adoration, and will by no means endure a rival. God's jealousy over us is a good reason for our godly jealousy over ourselves. *Secondly*, He has a heavy hand to punish an affront, especially in his worship, for therein he is in a special manner jealous. He is a *consuming fire*; his wrath against sinners is so; it is dreadful and destroying, it is a *fiery indignation* which will *devour the adversaries*, ^{<3807>}Hebrews 10:27. Fire consumes that only which is fuel for it, so the wrath of God fastens upon those only who, by their own sin, have fitted themselves for destruction, ^{<4013>}1 Corinthians 3:13; ^{<2704>}Isaiah 27:4. Even in the New Testament we find the same argument urged upon us as a reason why we should serve *God with reverence* (^{<3028>}Hebrews 12:28, 29),

because though he is our God, and a rejoicing light to those that serve him faithfully, yet he is a consuming fire to those that trifle with him. *Thirdly*, That yet he is *a merciful God*, v. 31. It comes in here as an encouragement to repentance, but might serve as an inducement to obedience, and a consideration proper to prevent their apostasy. Shall we forsake a merciful God, who will never forsake us, as it follows here, if we be faithful unto him? Whither can we go to better ourselves? Shall we forget the covenant of our God, who will not *forget the covenant of our fathers*? Let us be held to our duty by the bonds of love, and prevailed with by the mercies of God to cleave to him.

(2.) He urges their relation to this God, his authority over them and their obligations to him. “The commandments you are to keep and do are not mine,” says Moses, “not my inventions, not my injunctions, but they are the commandments of the Lord, framed by infinite wisdom, enacted by sovereign power. He is the *Lord God of your fathers* (v. 1), so that you are his by inheritance: your fathers were his, and you were born in his house. He is the *Lord your God* (v. 2), so that you are his by your own consent. He is the *Lord my God* (v. 5), so that I treat with you as his agent and ambassador;” and in his name Moses delivered unto them all that, and that only, which he had received from the Lord.

(3.) He urges the wisdom of being religious: *For this is your wisdom in the sight of the nations*, v. 6. In keeping God’s commandments,

[1.] They would act wisely for themselves; *This is your wisdom*. It is not only agreeable to right reason, but highly conducive to our true interest; this is one of the first and most ancient maxims of divine revelation. *The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom*, ~~838~~ Job 28:28.

[2.] They would answer the expectations of their neighbours, who, upon reading or hearing the precepts of the law that was given them, would conclude that certainly the people that were governed by this law were a wise and understanding people. Great things may justly be looked for from those who are guided by divine revelation, and unto whom are committed the oracles of God. They must needs be wiser and better than other people; and so they are if they are ruled by the rules that are given them; and if they are not, though reproach may for their sakes be cast upon the religion they profess, yet it will in the end certainly return upon themselves to their eternal confusion. Those that enjoy the benefit of divine light and laws ought to conduct themselves so as to support their own reputation for

wisdom and honour (see ²¹¹¹Ecclesiastes 10:1), that God may be glorified thereby.

(4.) He urges the singular advantages which they enjoyed by virtue of the happy establishment they were under, v. 7, 8. Our communion with God (which is the highest honour and happiness we are capable of in this world) is kept up by the word and prayer; in both these Israel were happy above any people under heaven.

[1.] Never were any people so privileged in speaking to God, v. 7. He was nigh unto them in all that they called upon him for, ready to answer their enquiries and resolve them by his oracle, ready to answer their requests and to grant them by a particular providence. When they had cried unto God for bread, for water, for healing, they had found him near them, to succour and relieve them, a very present help, and in the midst of them (²³⁴¹Psalms 46:1, 5), his ear open to their prayers. Observe, *First*, It is the character of God's Israel that on all occasions they call upon him, in every thing they make their requests known to God. They do nothing but what they consult him in, they desire nothing but what they come to him for. *Secondly*, Those that call upon God shall certainly find him within call, and ready to give an answer of peace to every prayer of faith; see ²³⁸⁰Isaiah 58:9, "*Thou shalt cry, as the child for a nurse, and he shall say, Here I am, what does my dear child cry for?*" *Thirdly*, This is a privilege which makes the Israel of God truly great and honourable. What can go further than this to magnify a people or a person? Is any name more illustrious than that of Israel, *a prince with God? What nation is there so great?* Other nations might boast of greater numbers, larger territories, and more ancient incorporations; but none could boast of such an interest in heaven as Israel had. They had their gods, but not so nigh to them as Israel's God was; they could not help them in a time of need, as ⁴¹⁸²1 Kings 18:27.

[2.] Never were any people so privileged in hearing from God, by the statutes and judgments which were set before them, v. 8. This also was the grandeur of Israel above any people. *What nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous?* Observe, *First*, That all these statutes and judgments of the divine law are infinitely just and righteous, above the statutes and judgments of any of the nations. The law of God is far more excellent than the law of nations. No law so consonant to natural equity and the unprejudiced dictates of right reason, so consistent with itself in all the parts of it, and so conducive to the welfare and interest of

mankind, as the scripture-law is, ^{<HEB>}Psalm 119:128. *Secondly*, The having of these statutes and judgments set before them is the true and transcendent greatness of any nation or people. See ^{<HEB>}Psalm 147:19, 20. It is an honour to us that we have the Bible in reputation and power among us. It is an evidence of a people's being high in the favour of God, and a means of making them high among the nations. Those that magnify the law shall be magnified by it.

(5.) He urges God's glorious appearances to them at Mount Sinai, when he gave them this law. This he insists much upon. Take heed *lest thou forget the day that thou stoodest before the Lord thy God in Horeb*, v. 10. Some of them were now alive that could remember it, though they were then under twenty years of age, and the rest of them might be said to stand there in the loins of their fathers, who received the law and entered into covenant there, not for themselves only, but for their children, to whom God had an eye particularly in giving the law, that they might teach it to their children. Two things they must remember, and, one would think, they could never forget them: —

[1.] What they saw at Mount Sinai, v. 11. They saw a strange composition of fire and darkness, both dreadful and very awful; and they must needs be a striking foil to each other; the darkness made the fire in the midst of it look the more dreadful. Fires in the night are the most frightful, and the fire made the darkness that surrounded it look the more awful; for it must needs be a strong darkness which such a fire did not disperse. In allusion to this appearance upon Mount Sinai, God is said to show himself for his people, and against his and their enemies, in fire and darkness together, ^{<HEB>}Psalm 18:8, 9. He tells them again (v. 36) what they saw, for he would have them never forget it: *He showed thee his great fire*. One flash of lightning, that fire from heaven, strikes an awe upon us; and some have observed that most creatures naturally turn their faces towards the lightning, as ready to receive the impressions of it; but how dreadful then must a constant fire from heaven be! It gave an earnest of the day of judgment, in which *the Lord Jesus shall be revealed in flaming fire*. As he reminds them of what they saw, so he tells them what they saw not; no manner of similitude, from which they might form either an idea of God in their fancies or an image of God in their high places. By what we see of God sufficient ground is given us to believe him to be a Being of infinite power and perfection, but no occasion given us to suspect him to have a body such as we have.

[2.] What they heard at Mount Sinai (v. 12): “*The Lord spoke unto you with an intelligible voice, in your own language, and you heard it.*” This he enlarges upon towards the close of his discourse, v. 32, 33, 36. *First, They heard the voice of God, speaking out of heaven.* God manifests himself to all the world in the works of creation, without speech or language, and yet their voice is heard (³⁹¹Psalm 19:1-3); but to Israel he made himself known by speech and language, condescending to the weakness of the church's infant state. Here was the *voice of one crying in the wilderness, to prepare the way of the Lord.* *Secondly, They heard it out of the midst of the fire,* which showed that it was God himself that spoke to them, for who else could dwell with devouring fire? God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, which was terrible; but to Israel out of the fire, which was more terrible. We have reason to be thankful that he does not thus speak to us, but by men like ourselves, *whose terror shall not make us afraid,* ³⁹⁶Job 33:6, 7. *Thirdly, They heard it and yet lived,* v. 33. It was a wonder of mercy that the fire did not devour them, or that they did not die for fear, when Moses himself trembled. *Fourthly, Never any people heard the like.* He bids them enquire of former days and distant places, and they would find this favour of God to Israel without precedent or parallel, v. 32. This singular honour done them called for singular obedience from them. It might justly be expected that they should do more for God than other people, since God had done so much more for them.

(6.) He urges God's gracious appearances for them, in bringing them out of Egypt, from the iron furnace, where they laboured in the fire, forming them into a people, and then taking them to be his own people, a *people of inheritance* (v. 20); this he mentions again, v. 34, 37, 38. Never did God do such a thing for any people; the rise of this nation was quite different from that of all other nations.

[1.] They were thus dignified and distinguished, not for any thing in them that was deserving or inviting, but because God had a kindness for their fathers: he chose them. See the reasons of free grace; we are not beloved for our own sakes, but for his sake who is the great trustee of the covenant.

[2.] They were delivered out of Egypt by miracles and signs, in mercy to them and in judgment upon the Egyptians, against whom God stretched out his arm, which was signified by Moses's stretching out his hand in summoning the plagues.

[3.] They were designed for a happy settlement in Canaan, v. 38. Nations must be driven out from before them, to make room for them, to show how much dearer they were to God than any other people were. Egyptians and Canaanites must both be sacrificed to Israel's honour and interest. Those that stand in Israel's light, in Israel's way, shall find it is at their peril.

(7.) He urges God's righteous appearance against them sometimes for their sins. He specifies particularly the matter of Peor, v. 3, 4. This had happened very lately: their eyes had seen but the other day the sudden destruction of those that joined themselves to Baal-peor and the preservation of those that clave to the Lord, from which they might easily infer the danger of apostasy from God and the benefit of adherence to him. He also takes notice again of God's displeasure against himself: *The Lord was angry with me for your sakes*, v. 21, 22. He mentions this to try their ingenuousness, whether they would really be troubled for the great prejudice which they had occasioned to their faithful friend and leader. Others' sufferings for our sakes should grieve us more than our own.

(8.) He urges the certain advantage of obedience. This argument he begins with (v. 1): *That you may live, and go in and possess the land*; and this he concludes with (v. 40): *That it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee*. He reminds them that they were upon their good behaviour, that their prosperity would depend upon their piety. If they kept God's precepts, he would undoubtedly fulfil his promises.

(9.) He urges the fatal consequences of their apostasy from God, that it would undoubtedly be the ruin of their nation. This he enlarges upon, v. 25-31. Here,

[1.] He foresees their revolt from God to idols, that in process of time, when they had remained long in the land and were settled upon their lees, they *would corrupt themselves, and make a graven image*; this was the sin that would most easily beset them, v. 25.

[2.] He foretels the judgments of God upon them for this: *You shall utterly be destroyed* (v. 26), *scattered among the nations*, v. 27. And their sin should be made their punishment (v. 28): *“There shall you serve gods, the work of men's hands, be compelled to serve them, whether you will or no, or, through your own sottishness and stupidity, you will find no better succours to apply yourselves in your captivity.”* Those that cast off the

duties of religion in their prosperity cannot expect the comforts of it when they come to be in distress. Justly are they then sent to the *gods whom they have served*, ^{<0714>}Judges 10:14.

[3.] Yet he encourages them to hope that God would reserve mercy for them in the latter days, that he would by his judgments upon them bring them to repentance, and take them again into covenant with himself, v. 29-31. Here observe, *First*, That whatever place we are in we may *thence seek the Lord our God*, though ever so remote from our own land or from his holy temple. There is no part of this earth that has a gulf fixed between it and heaven. *Secondly*, Those, and those only, shall find God to their comfort, who seek him with all their heart, that is, who are entirely devoted to him, earnestly desirous of his favour and solicitous to obtain it. *Thirdly*, Afflictions are sent to engage and quicken us to see God, and, by the grace of God working with them, many are thus reduced to their right mind, “When these things shall come upon thee, it is to be hoped that thou wilt *turn to the Lord thy God*, for thou seest what comes of turning from him;” see ^{<0711>}Daniel 9:11, 12. *Fourthly*, God's faithfulness to his covenant encourages us to hope that he will not reject us, though we be driven to him by affliction. If we at length remember the covenant, we shall find that he has not forgotten it.

Now let all these arguments be laid together, and then say whether religion has not reason on its side. None cast off the government of their God but those that have first abandoned the understanding of a man.

^{<0744>}DEUTERONOMY 4:41-49

EXHORTATIONS AND ARGUMENTS

Here is,

1. The nomination of the cities of refuge on that side Jordan where Israel now lay encamped. Three cities were appointed for that purpose, one in the lot of Reuben, another in that of Gad, and another in that of the half tribe of Manasseh, v. 41-43. What Moses could do for that people while he was yet with them he did, to give example to the rulers who were settled that they might observe them the better when he was gone.

2. The introduction to another sermon that Moses preached to Israel, which we have in the following chapters. Probably it was preached the next sabbath day after, when the congregation attended to receive instruction. He had in general exhorted them to obedience in the former chapter; here he comes to repeat the law which they were to observe, for he demands a universal but not an implicit obedience. How can we do our duty if we do not know it? Here therefore he sets the law before them as the rule they were to work by, the way they were to walk in, sets it before them as the glass in which they were to see their natural face, that, looking into this perfect law of liberty, they might continue therein. *These are the testimonies, the statutes, and the judgments*, the moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws, which had been enacted before, when Israel had newly come out of Egypt, and were now repeated, *on this side Jordan*, v. 44-46. The place where Moses gave them these laws in charge is here particularly described.

(1.) It was over-against Beth-peor, an idol-temple of the Moabites, which perhaps Moses sometimes looked towards, with a particular caution to them against the infection of that and other such like dangerous places.

(2.) It was upon their new conquests, in the very land which they had got out of the hands of Sihon and Og, and were now actually in possession of, v. 47. Their present triumphs herein were a powerful argument for obedience.