

## Obedience First

We have a few different sermon series going these days. Today we are back in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, a series that I'm calling *God in the Midst*. The Book of Deuteronomy gives us a unique perspective of what it means to be the People of God... a people with *God in the Midst*.



We are in chapter 4 of Deuteronomy, and I have given it the title *Obedience First*. The Book of Deuteronomy contains the words of Moses given to the People of God before they entered the Promised Land. After God delivered the People from Egypt's tyranny under the leadership of



Moses, and after a generation had past as the People wandered in the dessert before finally possessing the Land God promised... Moses called the people, again, to obedience with these words in Chapter 4.

It could be a very short sermon, right? Obey God! It is an entirely reasonable command. If we believe God is God, then of course we will obey. If we believe that God is all powerful, what choice do we have? Obedience is the only logical choice, since the only logical conclusion is that we have no other choice.

Of course we rarely abide by such logic. Just ask any parent. We who are all-powerful and all-knowing in our homes rarely receive perfect, unquestioned obedience from our children. Obedience is the only logical conclusion... but *since when* do we start with the logical conclusion?

Obedience generally takes time and effort. We **learn** obedience.

While a command to simply **obey** might be entirely reasonable, it is rarely enough for us to **learn** obedience.

The most frustrating and flimsy rationale for obedience is "because I said so!" Obedience, lasting and meaningful obedience, requires more... such as: history, respect, rationale, and love.

We will find here in Chapter 4 that God's call for obedience is more than merely "because I said so."

Chapter 4 begins with Moses saying:

hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.<sup>1</sup>

*Right off the bat*, Moses begins to answer the implied question "why obey?"

The first answer is: **so that we may live.**

God loves us and wants us to have life.

Jesus said that **our life** was at the core of His mission, saying:

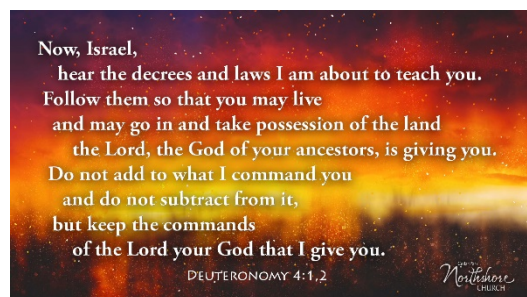
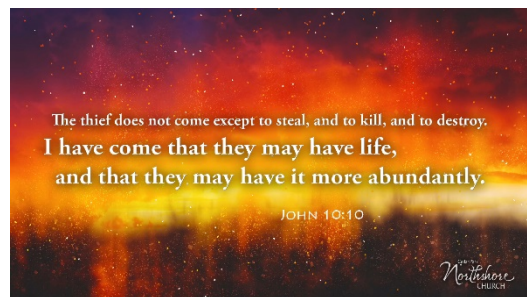
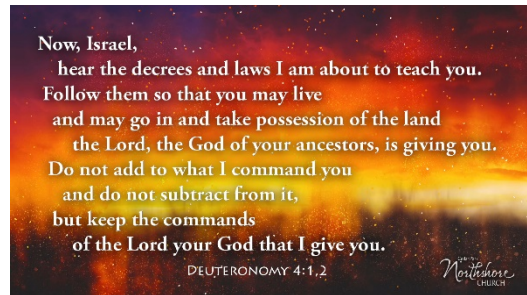
I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.<sup>2</sup>

Just as we want the best for our children, and all those we love... God only wants abundant life for us. Not only is God all-powerful, He is all-loving. His intention for us is full, abundant life; we were **created** for full, abundant life.

In contrast, the first lie that enticed humanity to sin (and continues to work today) is that God doesn't have our very best as His goal, that He is somehow holding something back from us, that if we'll disobey and stretch to grab something beyond what He has for us, *then* we will be happy. We easily fall for that lie, and we always find it to be just that... a lie.

Why obey? The first answer is so that we may live (abundantly), and the second is this: so that we can take possession of God's promised blessing.

Well... that sounds pretty good, doesn't it?



<sup>1</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 4:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Jn 10:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

It is important that we carefully consider this profound statement.

I think we too often think of this life of faith as *transactional*... as if God is somehow *coin-operated*. We *chunk in* our coins of obedience, good work, and such, and out pops God's provision. Most everything works like this, right? **We get what we pay for.**

Religion often works this way. *We get what we pay for*. We naturally think that our obedience is rewarded with blessing when it comes to God. We could read this passage that way... or more accurately, we could *misread* this passage that way.

hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, **is giving you.**<sup>3</sup>

It could seem contradictory. Is the Lord **giving** His People the Land, or are they **taking** possession of it? Is it a matter of God's gift, or is it a **reward** for obedience?

This could be *the biggest question* when it comes to religion, the way we *work out* our relationship with God. Is it a matter of God's grace or our works, a matter of God's doing or our doing? It seems pretty clear that it is a matter of **both**. Only God has the power to provide His blessings and provision, but the **enjoyment** of His blessings and provision requires our participation.

This is always the case, and has always been the case.

We err when we think that **grace** was somehow *invented* in the New Testament... that since most of what we see in the Old Testament proves that humanity is incapable of meeting God's demands, God somehow *gave in* and invented grace in the New Testament.

It has **always** been God's grace. Our meager attempts to play by the rules, and our various sacrifices of bulls and goats and lambs and such could never earn the favor of Our Holy God... it has always been grace.

When it came to the Promised Land, the people had not **earned** it, nor could they merely **take** it... before everything else, the Land was a gift from God, a demonstration of His grace.

---

<sup>3</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 4:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

But for them to enjoy the Land, it would require their participation; they would take it in obedience.

This hasn't changed; this is the Gospel. Our relationship with God, now and through eternity, is a **gift** from God. By putting our faith and trust in Him, by turning from our ways and turning to His, we merely believe and His gift of abundant life is ours. But to fully enjoy that abundant life, to fully enjoy all that God promises, we take possession of it by obedience.

Our obedience doesn't impress God; our obedience merely demonstrates that God's impression is on us.

It often happens that people want me to help determine who is **in** and who is **out**... that the *Reverend Neary*, with his special pastor powers, can determine who is safe and who is in danger. Sometimes people want me to help them know if they are in or out; other times they want me to help them know if their loved ones are in or out. While I can do all I can to lead people to believe and call people to lives of obedience and worship... knowing exactly who is in and out is *above my pay grade*.

The question often comes up when one once lived a Christian life, and now they apparently don't... that once they were saved, but somehow it doesn't seem that they are anymore (at least they are not acting like it). You know what I mean; maybe you've been there. We wonder if disobedience can disqualify us from receiving God's gift. Honestly, I'm not sure... it seems nearly impossible to believe and then *unbelieve*. If it is possible, I think it is far more difficult than what we might think. It is certainly more than merely disobedience. We didn't behave our way into God's grace, so I don't know how we could behave our way out of God's grace.

But here is what I do know, the enjoyment of God's grace and provision and blessing *is on us*. We can disobey our way out of that enjoyment; we can behave our way out of enjoying God's gift.

Think of how miserable it must have been to be on the east side of the Jordan, not yet possessing the Promised Land. Moses expressed that misery several times, including here in chapter 4. To know that God's gift is there for us, but to not be able to enjoy it, is truly miserable.

And so it is with us. Our disobedience, laziness, sin *and such* don't negate God's gift... it merely puts us in a place where we can't enjoy God's grace.

When people talk to me about their *backslidden* loved ones (an *old-timey* term that brings to mind an image of those sliding back into an old life), I wonder if they are *unsaved* or just really miserable Christians.

Let's be sure to welcome those back home... especially when they are so miserable that it is hard to welcome them back.

We obey to live, abundantly.

We obey to take possession of God's provision and blessing, capturing His grace.

And we obey to fulfill our mission.

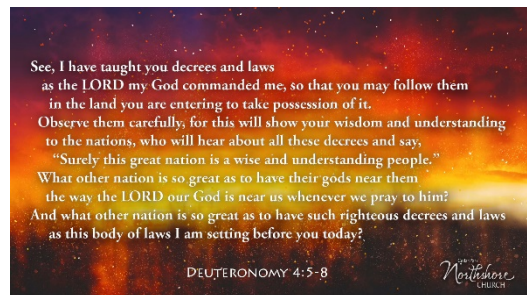
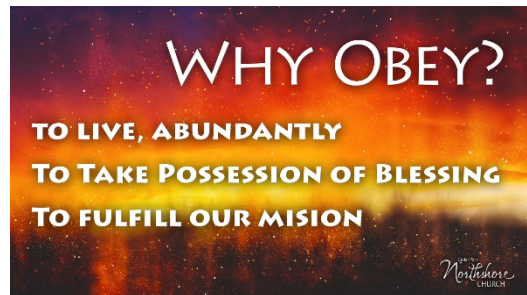
Hear what it says starting with verse 5:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it.

<sup>6</sup> Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."<sup>7</sup> What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?<sup>8</sup> And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?<sup>4</sup>

Somebody said "God so loved the world, that he chose Israel."<sup>5</sup>

Israel existed for the ultimate purpose of being the vehicle of God's blessing the nations.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>4</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Dt 4:5–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

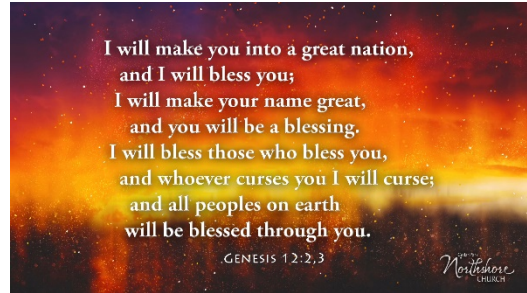
<sup>5</sup> Wright, C. J. H. (2012). *Deuteronomy*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.) (p. 57). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, C. J. H. (2012). *Deuteronomy*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.) (p. 48). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.



When God called Abraham to be the father of a special people, God's stated purpose was clear:

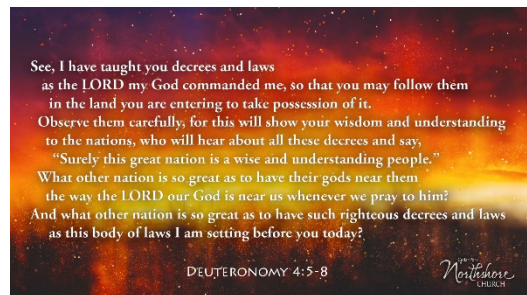
- <sup>2</sup>“I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing. <sup>i</sup>  
<sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.” <sup>7</sup>



We study an Old Testament Book like Deuteronomy to understand important aspects of being God's People, and to see how the blessing of all nations unfolds.

That blessing is ultimately embodied by Jesus Christ... but it was also conveyed through God's Ancient People Israel, just as it is conveyed through the Church (the Body of Christ) today.

God called His People then, and calls His People today, to demonstrate the goodness of God. As we follow and obey God, and as we live life to the fullest, others should see and believe too.



Consider what Moses was saying to those he led.

It is a remarkable expectation, given the situation of those addressed in the text—an as yet landless people, descendants of refugee slaves who had precisely *opted out* of one of the “great nations” of the world, Egypt. <sup>8</sup>

This ragtag bunch was to so impress the nations that they would see the greatness of God? Of course!

<sup>7</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ge 12:2–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, C. J. H. (2012). *Deuteronomy*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.) (p. 47). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

And so it is with us. Think of the few of us here at Northshore. Do we dare invite those around us to come and see? Of course! Maybe you read it on the sign outside: ***This place is alive!*** It is not merely alive with busy people and various activities; it is alive with the Spirit of God.

When we open our doors to our neighbors, like we do now on Thursdays with the *Kenmore Community Market*, we are saying “come and see!” We say so not merely because we are confident that we have something special to show them in ourselves; rather, we are confident in the Holy Spirit’s work in and through God’s People here at Northshore. In all of the ways we open wide our doors, on Sundays and throughout the week, we are saying ***come and see!***

We are not afraid of doubts or questions either (perhaps you saw that on the other side of the sign). Again, it isn’t because we are all that smart or clever; rather, we are confident in the Holy Spirit’s work to deal with doubts and questions. Perhaps the Spirit will wash those doubts and questions away *in an instant*; but more likely, the Spirit will use **us** to walk with people, wrestling through doubts and questions.

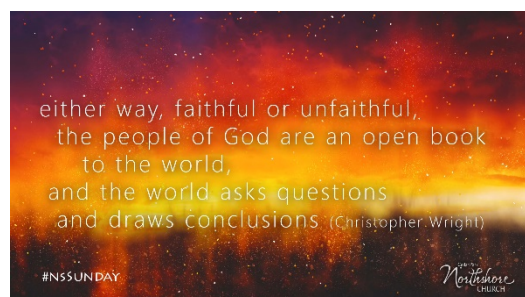


We obey God to fulfill the mission of God, demonstrating the goodness of God to all who will see.

I like the way Christopher Wright put it in his commentary on Deuteronomy:

Either way, faithful or unfaithful, the people of God are an open book to the world, and the world asks questions and draws conclusions<sup>9</sup>

**We are an open book... let’s make it a book worth reading.**

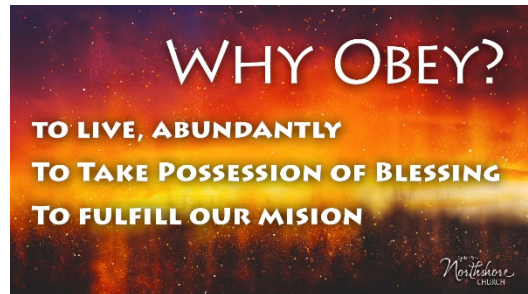


<sup>9</sup> Wright, C. J. H. (2012). *Deuteronomy*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.) (p. 47). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

We obey to live, abundantly.

We obey to take possession of God's provision and blessing, capturing His grace.

And we obey to fulfill our mission.



While I originally intended to get through all of Deuteronomy 4 today, there is a whole other sermon (at least) in these remaining verses, so I am going to jumble the schedule a bit and get to the rest of the chapter later this month.

Let's end today by considering this call to obedience, and responding to that call in each of these three ways. We'll have opportunity to pray together in a moment.

Are we obeying to live abundantly? Friend, we are created for abundant life, for lives full of faith and God's Holy Spirit. That life is ours by God's grace through Jesus. Today is a day to believe Jesus.

Are we obeying to take possession of God's provision and blessing? Do our choices make room for God's blessing... or do they crowd out God's blessing? Do we choose any cheap imitation over the best the God has for us? Are we standing on the wrong side of the Jordan, knowing what could be ours, but not possessing it because of our disobedience?

Are we obeying to fulfill our mission? Our lives, especially as the People of God, are an open book. What are people reading from that book? Are we living out our faith in bold and public ways, not jamming it in anyone's face, but living it in such a way that people can't help but find it attractive and want it for themselves?

It is to these ends we pray.