Lesson 1

Keeping God’s Commandments

Purpose
To remember how God created us as God’s people

Hearing the Word

The background text for this lesson is Deuteronomy 8:1-20.

Deuteronomy 8:1-10 (NIV)
1 Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors.
2 Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.
3 He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.
4 Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years.
5 Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.
6 Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him.
7 For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills;
8 a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey;
9 a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.
10 When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.

Deuteronomy 8:1-10 (KJV)
1 All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord sware unto your fathers.
2 And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.
3 And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord.
4 Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years.
5 Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the Lord thy God chasteneth thee.
6 Therefore thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him.
7 For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills;
8 A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey;
9 A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack anything in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass.
10 When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the Lord thy God for the good land which he hath given thee.
### Seeing the Need

Forty-one years in pastoral ministry have taught me that there will always be times of trial and depression. Everything will not always go our way. One of the more depressing times during my career was when I was moved from a full-time appointment to a part time appointment (technically, it was one fourth of the time). I didn’t feel that the district bishop and cabinet had it in for me; my superintendent simply said that there simply were no other appointments available in the conference for me. It was a drastic financial decrease on the home front and a blow to my ego.

My choice at that time was either to go on the attack, call the bishop, and explain that “I can’t accept this,” or to take what was offered, pray, and hope for the best. It was definitely a trying time. A friend sympathized with my plight, saying that if this had happened to him, he may have seriously considered leaving the church. In short, it really came down to me getting an appointment that I thought I didn’t deserve, or feeling that I deserved something better. The conclusion was, I stayed!

Thankfully, this crisis situation was not only a time of prayer, but also a time a reflection and remembering God’s past acts of provision to me during my ministry. Self-talk encourages the wounded spirit (1 Samuel 30:6, KJV). “Bob,” I said to myself, “this is not your first setback. God has always been with you and I don’t think God will abandon you now.” I believe the Lord honored this attitude, as this one fourth of the time appointment became one of the bright lights of my ministry. I would not have wanted to conclude my ministry without having experienced the extravagant and over-the-top love that this small congregation showed toward me.

The Bible passage for this lesson is for us a call from the Lord to remember who we are as God’s people so that we might receive the wonderful promises of God.

### Keep Your Eyes Open

My youngest son recently graduated from high school. As with my other five children, my wife and I wanted him to go to college. Furthermore, he wanted to go. My college of choice for him was 30 miles away.

#### DAILY BIBLE STUDY

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down the road with a student population of 7,000; his college of choice was 130 miles down the road with a student population of 25,000. No argument, and quite frankly, my wife and I understood, as his last three siblings had gone to his college of choice.

My parting words to him after we had moved him into his dormitory were, “Keep your eyes open.” That message of fatherly advice was for him to simply be aware of his surroundings. His university is huge, and a lot is always going on. I wanted him to do the right thing and remember why he had gone to college. I like to think that these heartfelt words of mine might better prepare him for his new journey in life.

God’s parental words to the wandering Israelites were, “You must carefully perform all the commandments . . . so you can live and multiply and enter and take possession of the land” (Deuteronomy 8:1). This was simply preparation for the journey into their Promised Land. It would be a new day in the life of God’s people. They had never traveled this way before. Expectations (and fears) would have been understandably present during such a time. The Lord’s command thus was directed and motivated by love for the people of God so that they might be prosperous and successful.

God’s greatest desire seems to have been a holy yearning to be used by God. The idea of teaching, preaching, or being a missionary is particularly appealing to them. They melodiously sing, “Here I am, Lord, Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.” My experience has been that while many people will go and commit to ministry tasks, others will wane and even quit when they discover the cost and responsibilities
that come with doing a particular min-
istry. Israel’s wilderness experience
would show their true commitment and
dependence upon God.

What specific acts or circumstances in
your life show God’s love toward you?

Divine Health

God next wanted the people to know
eternal and enduring love. This new land
was land that the “LORD swore to your
ancestors” (verse 1). God had set the
wheels in motion long before the present
generation that Israel would be blessed
and remain the apple of God’s eye.
However, the wilderness became a test-
ing ground to measure the people’s faith.
God allowed hunger and some level of
depivation to come upon these Israelites
as a prompting tool to show and teach
them their need for God. Even though the
people had moments of complaining and
frustration, the LORD never withdrew love
from them.

Verse 4 gives us a closer and more
vivid look at God’s abiding and longsuf-
ferring love toward Israel. Their 40 years in
the wilderness had been marked by not
only provision and protection but by
divine health. “During these forty years,
your clothes didn’t wear out and your feet
didn’t swell.” Wow! Understandingly,
some people today might have trouble
with this verse. Forty years of walking in
the desert, and no one’s clothes so much
as got tattered, and no one ever experi-
cenced swollen feet? Exodus 12:37 tells
us that originally about 600,000 men
plus children left Egypt. That text does
not mention women, though we know
that surely women were part of the group
too. Seamstress and physician may not
have been the best career choices during
this time!

Needless to say, scholars differ on how
to understand this verse. Because the
text does not explain the how of this phe-
nomena, we will likely never rise above
conjecture and speculation. Some schol-
ars speculate that this verse was later
added to the text to create effect; others
suggest that the Israelites made good of
the spoils they received from defeated
armies along the way. Finally, some con-
tend that this simply was a miracle per-
formed by the God of miracles. Wherever
our theological anchor may fall, the con-
text of this verse makes it clear that
God’s protection, power, provision, and
presence never left this wandering peo-
ple. It is an eternal truth that we can
embrace today.

Regarding the phrase, “Your feet didn’t
swell up,” again we are at a theological
impasse. However, for me the simple
mention of this occurrence suggests that
God was not only concerned about the
people’s material needs but also about
their physical needs. The LORD was mind-
ful of the rough and rugged conditions of
the desert, yet God’s watchful eye and
concern was on something as simple as
aching feet. The fact that God knows and
is concerned about things as simple as
the number of hairs on our heads (Luke
12:7) causes me to love God even more.
Several months ago, my wife and I attended a relatively large church in a metropolitan area for their morning service. One of the main announcements that day was an upcoming health fair sponsored by the church. The theme of the event was, “Health Is Wealth.” The understanding as I perceived it was that we should not minimize or take lightly the gift and blessing of good physical health. Nothing is as draining on the mind, body, and spirit as an illness or constant sickness that simply will not go away. God is actively concerned about our health and welfare. We owe it to ourselves as good stewards of the temple that God has given us to be concerned about our physical bodies.

How do you personally see God working on behalf of your prosperity and health?

A Wonderful Land

Living in a new land would be the highlight and end result of faith and obedience to God. Keeping God’s commandments was not meaningless ritual. Neither was obeying God the demand of a harsh and dictatorial God. These Israelites had free choice as to whether they wanted to serve God. Whether they loved God or not, God’s abiding love remained the same. The decision of the one making the choice does not diminish the love of the person offering the choice. In other words, the Lord loves us at our best and at our worst. However, and in the final analysis, choices do have consequences!

In Deuteronomy 30:19 the Lord calls heaven and earth as a witness that the people have been offered life or death and a blessing or a curse. The Lord’s desire was that they choose life so that they and their descendants might live. Joshua followed up years later with a similar invitation to “choose today whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). God’s love and desire for these Israelites to come into this “wonderful land” (Deuteronomy 8:7) shows the nature of this stern commandment to them. God wanted the best for Israel, and the best in terms of blessings would only come by obedience to the divine will. Later in this wilderness story, the Lord told the people to “watch yourself! Don’t forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commands” (Deuteronomy 8:11). God’s insistent command comes from God’s persistent and abiding love.

What would this wonderful land look like? First, it would be a land unlike Egypt with its harsh realities; and second, it would be land that would belong to the people. Even though these Israelites would war for the land, nevertheless the Lord gave them clear title to “take possession” of it (verse 1). There would be “wheat and barley, vines, fig trees, and pomegranates; . . . olive oil and honey” (verse 8). No wonder this was called the Promised Land, and the Lord called it “wonderful.”

And it gets even better! Verse 9 says that there the people would “eat food without any shortage.” This would be radically different from the rationed and con-
trolled food distribution system given to slaves in Egypt. We can understand how this new and radically different lifestyle might be a cultural shock to some of these Israelites, thus causing them to forget God. Not only would this new land be plenteous in food ("you won’t lack a thing there," verse 8), but there would be opportunity to create prosperity and wealth through the mining of iron and copper (verse 9). God’s holy promise to these weary travelers was that they would be fully satisfied. Hence, the assumption is that these Israelites would out of gratitude and love “bless the LORD your God in the wonderful land that he’s given you” (verse 10). Unfortunately (and as history reveals), assuming is not always the best thing to do.

My hope and prayer is that we can see this wilderness story as more than just another episode in Israel’s history. This is our story! It is a picture wrapped in the artifacts of ancient Israel that symbolizes our modern-day journey through life. It is a picture of what the Lord has for the faithful. Our final destination is good and is available to all who will stay on the journey (tired feet and all). Where are you in the picture? How did you do on the test?

Finally, our promise is wonderful! Our hope is sure! I encourage you during this upcoming week to “put feet to the journey.” Set aside a specific time during the day in which you will reread this story (include background text) and listen to the sounds of God’s love over against the frailty and often rebelliousness of the human will. Don’t just learn the story, but seek to capture the spirit that comes through the story. It is love worth finding! May we as disciples of Christ fix our eyes on Jesus and “run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us” (Hebrews 11:1-2).

Are the promises of God wonderful to you? If so, how might you share these promises with others?

Lord, may we always remember that we are your people and the sheep of your pasture. Help us to humbly embrace the wonderful plan you have for us; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.