

THE NEED TO HEED GOD’S MEDIATED WORD

A Sermon on Deuteronomy 5:1–33

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I invite you to follow along as I read Deuteronomy 5.... Pray with me.... “Nothing good happens after midnight.” Friends told Teresa and me this during our dating years, and we are so glad we heeded their warning. The Israelites gathering to Moses remembered the recent late-night party and the dangers of forsaking Yahweh. Peor was just across the valley, and children holding their daddy’s hands could feel the callouses, shaped from the hours of digging graves. Giving into temptation had brought an Egypt-like plague that killed 24,000 of their brothers.

“All Israel,” God’s old covenant people, had gathered to Moses to hear Yahweh’s word. The end of Deuteronomy clarifies that “all Israel” included “the men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner” who was among them (Deut 31:11–12). Growing out of the “mixed multitude” who accompanied Israel at the exodus (Exod 12:38; cf. Lev 24:10–11; Num 11:4), sojourners were non-native-born Israelites—once foreigners but who had become Yahweh-followers, even willingly accepting the covenant sign of circumcision (Exod 12:48–49). So, some of Israel had an Egyptian heritage, growing up worshiping Egypt’s gods and witnessing Yahweh’s greater power through the plagues. The recent events reminded them that Yahweh was indeed supreme and that doing what he commanded mattered. Later in Israel’s history, figures like Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabite, and Uriah the Hittite would be drawn to Israel, declaring, “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (cf. Ruth 1:16). In the new covenant non-Jews can join God’s people without having to embrace old covenant regulations, signs, and symbols (Eph 2:11–18; 3:6), but in Moses’s day, every follower of Yahweh had to embrace the outward distinctives of the old covenant.

The Need to Heed Moses’s Teaching (5:1)

Moses opens, “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them” (5:1). Listening is necessary to any relationship. In this instance, hearing the specific statutes and rules that Moses will detail in chapters 12–26 must result in learning and doing them. Knowing God’s instructions is not enough; true followers heed them. While unclear in English, Moses opens speaking to the whole community, calling it to tune its spiritual ears to God’s Word. But then he signals that the responsibility to comprehend and carry out the teaching lies with every individual in the covenant. From old to young and least to greatest, all needed to heed God’s prophet to live.

At this, an abrupt shift happens in Moses’s message. After only one verse of giving instruction, Moses digresses for the next thirty verses by recalling some

events from Israel's time at Mount Sinai, beginning with the giving of the Ten Commandments but then highlighting what took place afterwards (vv. 2–31). For the interpreter, the question becomes, Why does Moses shift from preachy speech in verse 1 to historical narrative in verses 2–31, only to return to his main exhortation in verses 32–33? How does the account of something that took place forty years earlier contribute to his call for the people to heed his words? To answer this, we will need to walk carefully through the historical account itself, noting the details on which Moses chooses to focus.

The Reason to Heed Moses's Teaching (5:2–31)

The Binding Nature and Members of the Horeb Covenant (vv. 2–3)

In verse 2, Moses first recalls the covenant Yahweh originally made with the people. God's unique, personal name is Yahweh, which the ESV represents with LORD in all caps. *Yahweh* means, "He causes" all things. God refers to himself as "I am," but we refer to him as "He causes." C. S. Lewis did more than write the *Chronicles of Narnia*, but had he written himself as a character into the books, the Narnians would have only known him as the author, the cause of their reality.

Moses's stresses that the author of all things is "our God," who established a covenantal relationship "with us at Horeb." In Deuteronomy, Moses normally refers the region of Mount Sinai as *Horeb* (Deut 1:2, 6, 19; 4:10, 15; 5:2; 9:8; 18:16; 28:69; cf. 33:2), a term meaning "dryness or drought" (Gen 31:40; Deut 28:22; Isa 25:5) or by extension "desolation or waste" (cf. Isa 61:4; Jer 49:13; 50:38). The choice of *Horeb* over *Sinai* likely anticipates how the old covenant would result in death, not life.

Having introduced the binding nature of Horeb covenant in verse 2, Moses adds emphasis to this in verse 3. He says what God did at Horeb was "not with our fathers ... but with us, who are all of us here alive today." In Deuteronomy, when "fathers" refers to a past group it consistently connotes the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (e.g., Deut 1:8; 6:10; 7:8; 9:5; 10:22; 29:13; 30:20). So, Moses is underlining that what God spoke at Horeb is not ancient history but matters for his generation. Moses and his audience were part of the covenant and needed to heed its demands and account for its promises and warnings. They are the people of the covenant and must listen to the words of the covenant. But there is more.

The Prophetic Mediator of the Horeb Covenant (vv. 4–31)

Moses himself is the covenant mediator and thus Yahweh's mouthpiece. This part of the prophet's argument is developed in two units: the context (vv. 4–22) and the process (vv. 23–31) of Moses's appointment as covenant mediator.

The Context of Moses's Appointment as Covenant Mediator (vv. 4–22)

Moses opens in verses 4–5 by giving us the setting for God's covenantal revelation. The mountain was blazing with fire from the presence of God, and Yahweh was speaking in a way that generated great fear in the people, causing them not to approach the mountain. As such, Moses tells them, "I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD." Already, Moses is operating as the middleman.

Moses then recalls the covenant revelation itself, which we often refer to as the Ten Commandments. My next sermon on Deuteronomy is going to focus solely on these Ten Words in verses 6–21, so at present we are going to hop over them and continue with the story. Beginning in verses 22, Moses reflects on the revelation: "These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me." The imagery of fire, cloud, and thick darkness is common in Scripture whenever God manifests himself in our world. Usually, it happens in contexts of punishment, as at the day of the Lord, when Yahweh enters space and time as a warrior to crush his enemy and save his own (e.g., Zeph 1:14–16). The cataclysm at Horeb may anticipate how the covenant would bear a ministry of condemnation (2 Cor 3:9).

Once Yahweh proclaimed the Ten Words, "he added no more," which indicates that the call to love God and neighbor in the Ten Commandments encapsulates the totality of the people's responsibilities before God. While God would later build upon these words, he added no more now because they were enough to formalize and summarize the relationship.

Yahweh then "wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to [Moses]" (Deut 5:22). Again, the emphasis is on Moses mediating the relationship between God and the people. Last week we noted how a covenant is a special, formal relationship between two parties based on binding promises with God as witness. Both tablets likely included all the Ten Words, for the ancients commonly made duplicates of the covenant document so that both covenant parties had copies to place in the temple of their gods, who would hold them accountable. In the case of the old Mosaic covenant, the two parties were Israel and God, yet both copies would be placed within the tabernacle inside the arc of the covenant, God's throne, because Yahweh served both as a party of and witness to the covenant.

The Process of Moses's Appointment as Covenant Mediator (vv. 23–31)

Having noted the context, Moses now clarifies the process by which the people formally recognized him as covenant mediator. The Hebrew text signals

this part of the story as the climax of Moses's historical account, thus showing that the story at Horeb in chapter 5 is less about "The Ten Commandments" like the heading in my ESV says and more about what we are now going to read. The report develops in two paragraphs, with the first addressing the people's request that Moses mediate between them and God and with the second detailing Yahweh's affirmation and appointment of Moses as covenant mediator.

Verse 23 notes, while Yahweh's voice was rumbling out of the darkness and the mountain was ablaze, the twelve tribal leaders and other community influencers approached Moses to request that he operate as a go-between. We then read their collective perspective. Verse 24 says, "Behold, the LORD our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live." Israel's auditory and visual senses were in overload, having seen Yahweh's majesty and heard his roar. They were amazed that they were not yet dead, but they were also convinced that their end would be soon unless something changed fast.

We pick up in verse 25: "Why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die." Verse 26 then tells us that they knew their doom was certain because, in their limited global understanding, no human had ever survived a similar encounter with "the living God." I think of Adam and Eve in the garden, meeting Yahweh God after he had declared, "In the day that you eat of [the tree] you shall surely die" (Gen 2:17; cf. 3:8–10). This is the first time in Scripture that Yahweh is called "the living God," and in other every instance, as here, the title highlights the certainty that he, as God, is real and superior to all other forces. Thus, Jeremiah declares that, in contrast to the idols of men, "the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation" (Jer 10:10; cf. 1 Sam 17:26, 36; 2 Kgs 19:4, 16). In verse 27, the leaders clarify the community's plea. "[Moses, you] go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it."

At this, Moses shifts in verses 28–31 to record Yahweh's response, for God was aware of what was going on at the base of the mountain. Yahweh notes first that he heard the leaders' words to Moses, and then God affirms they were indeed correct that they would die from his presence: "They are right in all that they have spoken" (v. 28). This statement in verse 28 seems to assume that the people's hearts were not righteous before God, and he knew it.

I will substantiate this idea shortly, but I first must stress that, when the living God appears in space and time, we must be ready. Just as he met Israel at the

mountain out of the fire and the cloud, he will appear again in fire and cloud, and every eye will see him. Anticipating this day, the author of Hebrews said, “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb 10:24–27). Paul adds that the Lord Jesus will be “revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess 5:7–8). Are you ready to see the living God face to face?

That Israel’s hearts were indeed not right with God is clarified in verse 29, but to see this we can’t follow the ESV. Where the ESV has, “Oh that they had such a mind as this always,” the Hebrew raises a question: “Who will give so that their heart would be this to them—to fear me and to keep all my commandments all the days, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever?” Later Moses will tell the community, “To this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear” (29:4). Yet the age would indeed come when he would reshape their hearts so that they would revere and follow him. “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (30:6). God queries, Who will give the people the heart that they need to live in my presence? The answer: *he will* ... in the new covenant.

At this, Yahweh tells Moses to send the people home but commands the prophet to remain: “You, stand here by me, and I will tell you the whole commandment and the statutes and the rules that you shall teach them, that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess” (5:31). We read again three categories of law. In 4:45 it was “the testimonies and the statutes and the rules”; now in 5:31 its “the whole commandment and the statutes and the rules.” We saw that “the statutes and the rules” are the detailed covenant stipulations in Deuteronomy 12–26. Yet what of “the whole commandment”?

The word rendered “whole” is the term “all,” so I at times refer to this as “the all-commandment,” captured in 6:5 in the call to love the Lord with *all* your heart, *all* your being, and *all* your substance. Throughout Deuteronomy, this singular supreme commandment summarizes the instructive thrust of the whole book (see 6:1, 25; 7:11; 8:1; 11:8, 22; 15:5; 17:20; 19:9; 27:1; 30:11; 31:5; cf. Josh 22:5). Love is what Israel is to do; all the other instructions clarify how to do it. In Scripture, the singular “commandment” stands alongside “the law” as a summary for all Moses’s teaching (cf. Exod 24:12; Josh 22:5).

Building off the Ten Commandments Moses had already received, Yahweh committed to give the prophet “the whole commandment, even the statutes and the rules,” and Moses was to teach the people to obey them in the land (Deut 5:31). They are now on cusp of entering the promised land, and in 5:1 Moses urges them to hear and learn and obey his teaching. So, why would he give a single verse charge and then shift into a thirty-verse historical digression on the events of Horeb forty years earlier? The answer is that those very events bind the present generation to the covenant and establish Moses as Yahweh’s mouthpiece.

Affirming the Need to Heed Moses’s Teaching (5:32–33)

Moses is done with his story telling, and in verse 32 he returns to this exhortation, yet in a way that recalls his last direction in verse 1. With “the statutes and the rules” in mind, 5:1 ended with Moses commanding Israel, “Be careful to do them.” Now, 5:32 opens, “*And* you shall be careful therefore to do as the LORD your God has commanded you.” Note how what Moses was speaking is now explicitly called Yahweh’s command. The prophet’s instruction is God’s law, God’s commandment, so for Israel to reject Moses was to reject God.

“The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt 7:14). In verses 32–33, Moses says that to obey requires not veering to the right or to the left but remaining on the singular path. He ends by supplying three promises that motivate this resolve: (1) life; (2) wellness; (3) extended days in the promised land. Because we are reading Deuteronomy’s synthesis of Moses’s law, we often will encounter the foundational principle of the old covenant: *do this so that you may live; obey perfectly so that you may enjoy blessing* (cf. Lev 18:5; Deut 4:1; 8:1; 11:27–28; 30:16–17; 32:47). As in the garden of Eden, where Adam and Even could have, hypothetically, enjoyed eternal life had they heeded God’s directive, so, too, the Mosaic law makes eternal life a goal in the relationship and not a ground of it. If God’s people perfectly followed his Word through Moses, they would enjoy full provision, protection, and lasting life. That is how law works: *do this and live*. Why then do we need the gospel?

Paul tells us that it’s because the complete inability of every mere mortal to perfectly honor God always results in our doom. As he says in Galatians, “All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written [in Deut 27:26], ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them’” (Gal 3:10). The hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:3–4). In weeks to come we’ll unpack these beautiful truths more.

Conclusion

For now, let me summarize and consider some lasting relevance. In this first of three testimonies in Deuteronomy 5–11, Moses defines the fundamentals of the Moab law-covenant. At base, Israel needed to heed Moses’s instruction because they were the people of the covenant and he was the mediator of the covenant. The mediator’s voice matters, for he serves as God’s ambassador and mouthpiece. His words are God’s words, bearing all the authority of heaven. To reject the mediator is to reject the living God and to put yourself in danger of blazing divine fury.

Christians are in the new covenant, not old, so Moses is not our mediator. At the transfiguration, when Moses encountered God’s glory on another mountain, “a bright cloud overshadowed [Moses, Elijah, and Jesus], and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him’” (Matt 17:5). Here God recalls Moses’s pledge in Deuteronomy 18: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is *to him you shall listen*—just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die’” (Deut 18:15–16). Yahweh then said, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him” (18:18–19; cf. Acts 3:22–26).

Brothers and sisters, Jesus “is the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb 9:15), and it is to him we must listen. The better covenant in Christ has now superseded the Mosaic administration, so we must heed the law of Christ (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:3), seeking to make mature new covenant disciples by “teaching [every covenant member] to observe all that [Jesus] commanded” (Matt 28:20).

At the beginning of Moses’s second and longest sermon in Deuteronomy, Yahweh stresses the importance of knowing our covenant and its mediator. Moses charged the Israelites to “hear, learn, and do” his instructions. Yet for most in the old covenant, Yahweh did not grant ears to hear (Deut 29:4), and without hearing, they could not learn and do and so would experience curse, not blessing. Yet the book’s hope is God’s promise to one day enable what he commands. Thus, Jesus says, “It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has *heard* and *learned* from the Father *comes* to me” (John 6:45). Nothing good happens after midnight; I urge you: do not forsake the Lord. The old covenant pattern that all Israelites except Jesus failed to heed was *hear, learn, and do*. The new covenant pattern provided to us by grace through faith is *hear, learn, and come*. I urge you today: come to Jesus, our better covenant mediator.