**Deuteronomy 4:1-4**

[*https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-4/deuteronomy-41-4/*](https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-4/deuteronomy-41-4/)

*Moses urges the Israelites to be loyal to God by reminding them of the incident at Baal-peor where 24000 of them died because of idolatry.*

After reviewing Israel’s history in their journey from Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai) to the plains of Moab (1:1—3:29), Moses exhorted the people as they were preparing to enter Canaan. The chapter opens with the word “now,” (literally, “and now”) suggesting that it is built upon the preceding chapters. Stated differently, the word “now” introduces the point the author is going to make from the historical narrative. For it was necessary for Moses to review Israel’s past experiences to remind them of God’s faithfulness, as well as their successes and mistakes before they entered the Promised Land. Such a reminder would serve as a lesson to teach them the proper way to please their covenant partner, the Suzerain Yahweh, in order to enjoy life in the land as a loyal vassal.

Moses thus began by calling the Israelites to *listen to the statutes and the judgments* *which* he was about to teach them. The verb translated as “listen” (shema, in Hebrew) describes both the mental activity of listening (hearing) as well as its effects. In other words, listening (or hearing) is always followed by obeying what was said. In fact, the Bible equates listening with obeying and keeping God’s commandments. That explains why James argued,

“Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does” ([James 1:22-25](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=James+1.22-25&t=NASB95)).

Moses knew it was important for the Israelites to be doers of the word and not merely hearers. That is why he exhorted them to obey *the statutes and the judgments* which he was *teaching*them *to perform*. The words “statutes” and “judgments” are used synonymously here for God’s commandments. However, each one has a distinct meaning. The term “statutes” (“ḥuqqîm” in Hebrew) refers to something prescribed, like an ordinance. As such, it could be translated as “prescriptions,” or “decrees.” The second term (“mišpāṭîm”) refers to legal procedures, or commands issued by a judge. Moses used these two terms together to emphasize the importance of obeying the whole decree of God. The purpose of obeying was so that the Israelites *may* *live* *and go in and take possession of* *the land which the LORD*, *the God of* their *fathers,* was *giving* them. Moses emphasized that the gift of land was before the people because it was promised to them through an unconditional covenant between God and Abraham ([Genesis 12](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+12&t=NASB95); [Genesis 15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+15&t=NASB95)). However, faithful submission to the covenant partner was required in order to live well in the land and enjoy all its privileges.

In verse two, Moses warned the Israelites not to *add to the word* he was *commanding* them, *nor* *take away from it*, *that* they *may keep the commandments of the LORD* their *God*. The Israelites needed to follow God’s law wholeheartedly because it is perfect and unchangeable ([Psalms 19:7-9](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Psalms+19.7-9&t=NASB95)). Integrity to these laws was required. This sort of arrangement — not to add nor to subtract from the stipulations — was common in the ancient Near Eastern treaties where only the suzerain (ruler) sets his own expectations. The vassal could only agree with the terms and then abide by them. That explains why, upon receiving God’s commandments at Mount Sinai, the Israelites answered, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” ([Exodus 19:8](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+19.8&t=NASB95)).

In verses 3-4, Moses reminded the Israelites of the tragic incident at Baal-peor, a place to which he had alluded earlier in [Deuteronomy 3:29](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+3.29&t=NASB95). In this incident, recorded in [Numbers 25:1-9](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Numbers+25.1-9&t=NASB95), we learn about Israel’s involvement in sexual sin and in idol worship with the daughters of Moab. Verses 1-2 read, “While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.” Consequently, all who participated in the worship of Baal-peor died by a plague; 24000 in total. Moses reminded the Israelites that their *eyes have seen what the LORD has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor*, *the LORD* their *God* *has destroyed them from among* the people. But those *who held fast to the LORD* were preserved and were still *alive* at the time Moses was speaking ([Deuteronomy 4:4](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+4.4&t=NASB95)).

The verb translated here as “*held fast*,” basically means “cling,” or “cleave to.” It expresses emotional closeness and loyalty. Moses used the same verb in [Genesis 2:24](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+2.24&t=NASB95) to explain how a man leaves his parents to “be joined” to his wife to “become one flesh.” Based on the meaning of the verb, we can safely say that those who refused to violate God’s covenant did so based on love and loyalty to God. In contrast, those who involved in pagan worship did so because of unfaithfulness to God’s covenant. This incident at Baal-peor shows us the importance of submitting to God’s commands. Negative consequences always follow disobedience to covenant stipulations.

**Biblical Text:**

**Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you. 3Your eyes have seen what the Lord has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the Lord your God has destroyed them from among you. 4But you who held fast to the Lord your God are alive today, every one of you.**