

Deuteronomy 5:28-33

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The LORD accepted Israel's request for Moses to serve as their mediator. So, He commanded Moses to tell the people to return to their tents while Moses alone would stay near Him in order to receive the instructions for the people.

In the previous section (vv. 22-27), all the heads of Israel's tribes urged Moses to serve as Israel's intercessor and be the only one to hear God's voice because they were afraid they might die if they continued to hear God's voice. The fact that they heard His voice and saw His glory being displayed in a blazing fire at Mount Sinai seemed to have generated their fear.

This section tells us that the LORD was pleased with the request made by the heads of Israel's tribes. As Moses recounted, "*The LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me.*" Since the LORD was well pleased, He said to Moses, "*I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They have done well in all that they have spoken.*"

God might have been pleased with Israel's request because it was made with such a spirit of reverence and humility. For, according to the parallel account in the book of Exodus, the purpose of God's manifestation at Mount Sinai was "to test" the people so that the fear of the LORD would "remain" with them, to keep them from sinning ([Exodus 20:20](#)). Therefore, since Israel passed the test, God was pleased and said, "*Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me.*"

[Exodus 20:20](#) is instructive in understanding having a proper fear of the LORD. It says, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin."

The first instruction is to "not be afraid." God first says to not fear death, which was the prime concern of the people. Then God makes clear He "tested" them by allowing them to fear death to help them see that they needed to fear something much more grave than physical death. God wanted them to fear Him so they would not sin. Standing before God in sin was the thing they ought to fear more than physical death. The message seems to be clear that it is preferable to die physically than to bring sin into the presence of God.

The Apostle Paul seems to use this same sort of imagery with respect to the judgment of believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ. In [1 Corinthians 3:13-15](#), Paul writes to the believers in the church at Corinth:

“... each man’s work will become evident: for the day will show it because it is *to be* revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”

This makes clear that works of self-seeking and behavior tainted with sin will burn up in a blaze of judgment fire. Because our relationship as children of God is granted unconditionally, even if all our works are burned, each believer is still “saved.” However, that believer will not receive rewards, and will be saved “so as through fire.” This is something that ought to be feared much greater than simply dying physically. We all will die physically. But living a life we watch go up in smoke because we did nothing lasting is a tragedy much greater to be feared.

The New Testament book of Hebrews also refers to this episode on Mount Sinai (Horeb) in warning New Testament believers to fear God and the loss of rewards that comes from disobedience. After exhorting the Hebrew believers to “strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble” ([Heb. 12:12](#)), Paul tells his believing brethren that they have not just come to Mt. Sinai. They have come to something even more fearsome, Mt. Zion in heaven ([Heb. 12:22](#)).

Mt. Sinai was so fearsome that the people begged to be sent home and have Moses be their mediator. But standing before Jesus will be immensely more frightening ([Heb. 12:18-29](#)). Therefore, we need to “See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking” ([Heb. 12:25](#)). Listening to God’s voice is still vital for us as New Testament believers. We should walk in obedience and fear to live in sin because “our God is a consuming fire” ([Heb. 12:29](#)). We do not want to stand in God’s presence and see our works burned and be “Saved through as fire.”

God’s desire that Israel understand the dire consequences of sin was for their own benefit. He wanted them to fear Him so they would live a life of blessing. Similar to a parent who desires their children not harm themselves due to ignorance of dangerous behavior. Such a fear would allow Israel to *keep all God’s commandments always, that it may be well with them and their sons forever!* God’s desire is clearly for the benefit of His people. He is the Creator

and knows what brings great benefit. Obedience to God brings lasting benefit, while sin brings destruction. However, it often does not feel that way in the moment. So, we as humans need to fear properly that we might pursue our own best.

God commanded Moses to say to the Israelites, “*Return to your tents.*” God granted the request of the people and dismissed them to go back to their dwellings, which at this point in their history was in *tents*. But as for Moses, God said to him, “*Stand here by Me, that I may speak to you all the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which you shall teach them.*”

The word “commandment” refers to the laws and rules, that is, the whole legal corpus. The words “statutes” and “judgments” are used synonymously here for God’s commandments, although each one has a distinct meaning. The term “statutes” (“*ḥuqqîm*” in Hebrew) refers to something prescribed by an authority. As such, it could be translated as “prescriptions,” or “decrees.” The second term (“*mišpāṭîm*”) refers to legal procedures, or commands issued by a judge. Hence, the use of these three words (commandments, statutes, and judgments) is seen as a standard way of referring to the covenant stipulations of the agreement or covenant between God, the ruler or Suzerain and the people (the vassals).

Therefore, as the Israelites requested, God disclosed the covenant stipulations to Moses so that Moses in turn could teach the people at a later time. The overall goal was that the Israelites *may observe them in the land which* God was about to *give them to possess*. Again, Moses emphasized that the gift of land God had already granted, but the land was before the people awaiting them to take possession.

The land was granted to them through Abraham. It was given to him as a royal grant as a reward for obedience. And the grant of land was given in an unconditional covenant between God and Abraham ([Genesis 12-15](#)). This covenant of grant (of land) was not mutual; Abraham had no obligations. Only God was obligated.

The land had been granted long ago, but now it was time to possess the land. And faithful submission to the Suzerain God (the Ruler) was now required in order for Israel to live well in the land and enjoy all its privileges as vassals. The land would always be theirs. But to possess and enjoy it required obedience. This is the same pattern as New Testament believers. We are granted membership in God’s family unconditionally, as a royal grant of God’s

grace, received through faith. But the enjoyment of the benefits of that grant requires faithful obedience.

Following the narrative which summarized the events at Mount Sinai, verses 32 and 33 close with a strong exhortation. Verse 32 reads, “*So you shall observe to do just as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left.*” The Israelites needed to follow God’s covenantal law wholeheartedly, and without deviation. Integrity to the covenant stipulations was required in order to enjoy the benefits of God’s grant of the land. God’s own statement to Israel — *not to turn aside to the right or to the left* — means that the people needed to follow a straight path, as if one were walking on a highway in order to keep their part of this mutual covenant. In other words, the Israelites should never fail to do exactly what God commanded them. This is how the Israelites were supposed to live as vassals in order to represent their Suzerain (Ruler) well and serve a priestly function unto the other nations.

Finally, in verse 33, God commanded His people to obey Him completely in order to receive His blessings. He stated, “*You shall walk in all the way which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you will possess.*” To “walk in all the way” of God means to live as God requires, that is, to obey Him and keep all His commandments. Integrity to God’s laws was required since He is the Suzerain (Ruler) of His people. Such an act of obedience would guarantee a long and prosperous life in the Promised Land.

Biblical Text:

²⁸ The Lord heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me, ‘I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They have done well in all that they have spoken. ²⁹ Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever! ³⁰ Go, say to them, “Return to your tents.” ³¹ But as for you, stand here by Me, that I may speak to you all the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which you shall teach them, that they may observe *them* in the land which I give them to possess.’ ³² So you shall observe to do just as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left. ³³ You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong *your* days in the land which you will possess.