

Deuteronomy 31:9-13

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Moses then instructed the priests and the elders of Israel to perform a covenant renewal ceremony every seven years. They were to read the law in front of all of Israel in their hearing.

After presenting Joshua to the people of Israel as their next leader and encouraging him to be strong and courageous to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land, Moses turned his attention to the priests and the elders of Israel. Sometime before he died, *Moses wrote this law* (v. 9), which certainly includes Deuteronomy 5 – 26 or possibly the entire book. Once complete, *Moses gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord.*

The *ark of the covenant* was a box containing the two tablets of the Ten Commandments that was placed within the tabernacle (Exodus 25:10 – 16); Deuteronomy 4:13). The *priests* were also the ones who worshiped before the LORD to offer sacrifices to Him and to pronounce benedictions upon the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 10:8; 2 Chronicles 29:11; Ezekiel 44:15). *The priests and the sons of Levi* constituted Israel's spiritual leadership.

Moses also *gave the law to all the elders of Israel*. The *elders* were well-known and well-respected men serving as authorities in their respective communities (Deuteronomy 1:13). The *elders* constituted Israel's political and civic leadership. Both the spiritual as well as the political leaders were responsible to keep the law. The implication is that they were to lead Israel consistent with the words of the law, which was an integral part of the covenant/treaty Yahweh God had entered into with His people (Exodus 19:7-8). The essence of the treaty was that if the people would walk in a manner as to serve one another, loving their neighbor as themselves, they would be greatly blessed, and if they lived in a manner so as to exploit one another (like the pagan cultures) they would be cursed (Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

Moses gave the *law* to *the priests and the elders* to keep and use, but specifically *Moses commanded them to read it in front of all Israel in their hearing* (v. 10). This *law* was not to be a secret knowledge Israel's leaders

used to coerce and control. It was to be something Israel applied individually, every day (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). But God's law was also something Israel was to honor and follow as communities and as a nation.

The leaders were to recite the *law* (the covenant document) at a public gathering *at the end of every seven years*, which was *the time of the year of remission of debts*. This refers to the seventh year, the "sabbatical year," the time designed as the "*year of remission of debts*" (Deuteronomy 15:1 – 9). Every seventh year every lender was to let drop the exactions to release the person who owed the money. Further, the lender was not to take into account that the seventh year was looming in deciding whether to make loans to aid someone in poverty (Deuteronomy 15:9).

In this seventh year, when debts were to be forgiven, the reading of *the law* would occur at *the Feast of Booths*, a seven-day festival which began after the grain and grapes had been processed, placed in containers, and stored away (Deuteronomy 16:13). According to Leviticus 23:33–44, this celebration began *on the fifteenth day of the seventh month* (called Tishri), roughly corresponding to the month of October in our solar calendar (Leviticus 23:34). [Click here to read our commentary on the Feast of Booths\(Tabernacles\)](#).

The reason for reading *the law* at *the Feast of Booths* was because *all Israel* would be expected to gather *before the LORD their God at the place which He will choose* (v. 11). At this point in time, Israel is still on the eastern side of the Jordan River, and has yet to cross into the land. At this point the Lord had not yet chosen the place where Israel would gather. The initial place God would choose would be Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:3). Ultimately God would choose Jerusalem. The festival's purpose was to be a joyous celebration at the culmination of the agricultural year and to thank God in anticipation of the new year (Leviticus 23:39–43).

While there at the central sanctuary, the *priests and the elders* would *assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who was in their town* (v. 12). The *alien* refers to a non-Israelite making Israel his permanent home. Since the *alien* resided in Israel, he was to be included in the public gathering.

The purpose for such a gathering *at the end of every seven years*, at *the Feast of Booths* was to remind the covenant community of their obligations to the

covenant law. They constantly needed to *hear and learn and fear the Lord* their God. The three words—*hear, learn, and fear*—describe the people’s relationship to their Sovereign. To *hear* implies an obedient response to what is said. To *learn* is to increase one’s understanding of who the LORD is and to keep His perspective on life. To *fear* means to view the LORD with utmost reverential awe (and some dread). To *fear the LORD* includes believing His word, that He would execute the judgements He pronounced upon those who failed to follow His covenant.

It is worthwhile to reflect that a substantial part of the adverse consequence of not obeying God flows from natural consequences, the result of cause-effect. A New Testament version of this can be found in Romans 1, where Paul asserts that the wrath of God pours out upon anyone who chooses to serve their own fleshly appetites. They first are given over to their own lusts, it spirals into addiction, resulting in a loss of ability to think straight (Romans 1:18, 22, 24, 26). This is at the personal level. It seems apparent that for a community, if everyone loved and served their neighbor, as they also desired to be loved and served, the community will thrive (Leviticus 19:18). On the other hand, if a community embraces a culture of the strong exploiting the weak, it seems apparent that what will result will be full of corruption.

However, it is normal for this insight to be initially lost on humans, that the delayed gratification of love and service is actually in our best interest. Children do not have to be taught to be selfish, they must be taught to share and care for others. The starting place for wisdom, where we discover our true best interest, is the *fear of the LORD* (Proverbs 9:10). The public reading of the law would encourage people to confront the reality that their own choices would determine whether Israel was blessed or cursed. They would understand that the LORD was their Suzerain Ruler in Israel; He would execute His judgements based on how they treated one another. As a result, because they feared the LORD, they could *be careful to observe all the words of this law*.

The reading of the law every seven years would also perpetuate these teachings to *their children, who have not known* all that this generation had learned, through their experience in the wilderness (v. 13). By reciting the covenant law every seven years, the future generations of Israelites *will hear and learn to fear the Lord your God*, and it should be done *as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess*. God’s law was for Israel in perpetuity. It was not designed for a single generation. Therefore, future generations would need to *hear and learn the words of the law* to fear

God as long as they lived *in the land* which He had given to them. God made clear that if Israel ceased following in the ways of the law, and became exploitative like the neighboring pagan nations, they would be “fired” from their job of being a priestly nation, to show the world a better way (Exodus 19:6) and be exiled from the land (Deuteronomy 4:25-27).

Biblical Text:

⁹So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. ¹⁰Then Moses commanded them, saying, “At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, ¹¹when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place which He will choose, you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing. ¹²Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law. ¹³Their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.