RETELLING HISTORY

Deuteronomy 1–4 retells the story of God’s deliverence of Israel from slavery in Egypt all the way to the Jordan. Before Moses reiterates the Ten Words, he makes one more appeal based on the past rebellion of the people and the consequences that resulted. In addition, he warns of more consequences to follow if they continue in rebellion. Along with many other places in the Old Testament, this is a prediction of the exile that the people will experience when they are totally given over to evil. The exile will be God’s last resort to bring them back to Him. While God wants us to be happy here on earth, His ultimate goal is eternal happiness with Him in heaven, and He will leave out no possibility to bring us to repentance, even if it means privation and exile.

The key to remaining faithful to God has to do with one’s heart. Deuteronomy is full of references to the heart, and it notes how that is where we connect with God and He speaks to us and changes us. Moses reminds the people that they need to examine themselves and watch to make sure they do not forget what they have seen. All that God has done for them is in their hearts, and it is when they forget this that they are in danger of rebellion. To remember also involves telling others about what God has done; this cements it in the memory. Israel was to know and consider in their hearts that the God they serve is the only God, the one who loves them and chose them. It is only as they focus on this love that they will remain faithful.
Write out Deuteronomy 4:7–40 from the translation of your choice. If you are pressed for time, write out Deuteronomy 4:29–31. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
IDOLATRY STILL HAPPENS

Along with the focus on relationships and heart issues, Deuteronomy 4 includes several injunctions to not make any images or worship other gods. While this might seem irrelevant to many today who do not experience temptations of idolatry in a physical sense, Moses was speaking to a people who had struggled with idolatry since their beginnings, even after they agreed with their words that it was wrong. Their hearts were not in the right place, and Moses reiterates many times throughout Deuteronomy that they are prone to fall into idolatry again. One of the main reasons for this is that the nations all around them worshipped gods of wood and stone, and they believed this was necessary for the fertility of the land. People tend to be affected by the culture around them, even if they are not intentionally going down that road. People are also attracted by legalistic things they think will give them salvation.

Idolatry can take many forms, not just making images, and Moses hints at this as well. Rebellion in the heart, and betrayal by giving the greatest affection to another other than God, also constitute idolatry. Each person must examine their own hearts and situations because idolatry is so pervasive and individualized that it is easily missed or misinterpreted. Even Moses himself struggles to see his sin in the proper perspective. When retelling the reason why he will not enter Canaan, he blames the people rather than himself, both here and in his final sermon. And yet, while the people provoked him, the fault for his rebellious act lies totally on his shoulders (Num. 20:1–13). It is always a great temptation to blame others for our sins, rather than taking responsibility and owning it and then repenting and turning away from our rebellion.

And yet, Yahweh is exceedingly merciful in dealing with His erring and rebellious children. While there are consequences to our sins, God does not ever give up on us and is always seeking to bring us back. God is a jealous God, full of consuming fire, but this is because He loves us passionately and is a personal God. Rather than standing aside as a tyrant who just wants us to obey, God is married to us and wants a heart relationship of love and commitment. When we betray Him, Yahweh is heartbroken and responds as one would expect a jilted lover to do, filled with jealousy as well as longing for restoration.
**WHAT DOES GOD LOOK LIKE?**

This passage can be confusing when trying to understand what God looks like and how we experience Him. The people are instructed to not make any image of God, and Moses reiterates over and over that they did not see a specific form when God came down on the mountain. Many people use this, along with the phrase “God is spirit” in the New Testament (John 4:24), to say that God is formless. However, it seems clear that the reason God did not want them to make an image of Him is that the nations all around them worshipped images, and the danger was that Israel would do so as well. This does not necessarily mean that God does not have any form. In fact, Moses saw God “face to face” (Deut. 31) and also asked to see God’s presence, and God showed him His “back” (Exod. 34). Both of these passages imply that God does have a form; it is just that He is so beyond our comprehension that we cannot make an image because it would lessen God.

In addition, when Jesus shows up in the Old Testament, He often appears as an angel, and people are able to see Him. In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar recognizes that the being in the furnace with the three Hebrews is divine but appears like the “son of man,” also implying that God is a personal being whom we look something like. Indeed, this could simply be the form that God chooses to take. But this may also hint at what it means to be made “after God’s likeness” in Genesis 1:28, in that we look the most like God of any of His creatures (“likeness” is the word used elsewhere for appearance, as in Gen 12:11; 24:16; 26:7, etc.). In contrast, being made in God’s image likely implies our functional role as rulers of the earth in God’s place.

All through the Old Testament, God is described as having a face, eyes, ears, hands, arms, legs, and so on. For example, when God appears on his fiery throne to Ezekiel, and again in Daniel and Revelation, He is described as we might describe a person (or, more accurately, we are described as similar in appearance to God). While this could simply be anthropomorphizing language and must be on some level because we are not God, the preponderance of evidence implies that there is something more here to be understood. Indeed, the things that the people were not to worship are listed: humans, all animals, sun, moon, stars. God is far beyond our comprehension and understanding, and yet He is also close to us, lives in our hearts, and ultimately humbled Himself to become a human.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Numbers 20:1–13  
Exodus 19:1–16  
Genesis 15:1–6  
Judges 13:8–23  
Exodus 33:12–34:9  
Ezekiel 1:19–28  
Revelation 1:12–18  
Daniel 7:9, 10, 13, 14

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Deuteronomy 4?
COMPASSION AND MERCY

Once again, the picture of Yahweh in this passage is powerful and complex. First and foremost, Yahweh is the only God. There are no other gods, and so any intimation contrary to that is a lie from the devil. In addition, what Yahweh longs for is a true and intimate relationship with His people. He wants to be close to each one of us (v. 10). And this perhaps hints at the insidious evil of idolatry. Rather than leading our hearts close to God, idolatry removes us from who God really is, and means that we are focusing on an image or object or false copy, rather than the true personal God. God is not able to be showcased or worshipped in a form, because He is the God who is all powerful, all knowing, and all loving. God works mighty miracles for His people, which is easy to forget if one is looking at a statue. God speaks to us in our hearts, through His word, through other people, and even in powerful miraculous ways. Yahweh wants to rescue us from our stilted, flimsy views of who He is, and give us grander visions of His love and mercy and compassion.

Yahweh is merciful. Even though the people have been steeped in rebellion and will continue to betray Him, God shows compassion and love toward them (vv. 29–31). God brought them out of Egypt to be His people, and this defining deliverance should be the foundation of their faith. Based on His actions for them in the past, they are to look forward to more miracles, with greater faith. Rather than disregard the covenant, they are to see in it God’s ultimate commitment to save them, which is never based on their actions. This love and salvation is to change their hearts and draw out a corresponding desire to love God in return, manifested by loving actions of obedience and gratitude.

God’s Torah is righteous and true. The laws are not to burden the people but to set them free. The Torah is not to be followed in order to be saved but because the people already are saved. When the people pour their hearts and souls into their relationship with God, they will find Him always and already there, waiting to enter their hearts and restore them anew.
THE LAW GIVEN TO ISRAEL

“On the morning of the third day, as the eyes of all the people were turned toward the mount, its summit was covered with a thick cloud, which grew more black and dense, sweeping downward until the entire mountain was wrapped in darkness and awful mystery. Then a sound as of a trumpet was heard, summoning the people to meet with God; and Moses led them forth to the base of the mountain. From the thick darkness flashed vivid lightnings, while peals of thunder echoed and re-echoed among the surrounding heights. ‘And Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.’ ‘The glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount’ in the sight of the assembled multitude. And ‘the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder.’ So terrible were the tokens of Jehovah’s presence that the hosts of Israel shook with fear, and fell upon their faces before the Lord. Even Moses exclaimed, ‘I exceedingly fear and quake.’ Hebrews 12:21.

“And now the thunders ceased; the trumpet was no longer heard; the earth was still. There was a period of solemn silence, and then the voice of God was heard. Speaking out of the thick darkness that enshrouded Him, as He stood upon the mount, surrounded by a retinue of angels, the Lord made known His law. Moses, describing the scene, says: ‘The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; He shined forth from Mount Paran, and He came with ten thousands of saints: from His right hand went a fiery law for them. Yea, He loved the people; all His saints are in Thy hand: and they sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words.’ Deuteronomy 33:2, 3.

“Jehovah revealed Himself, not alone in the awful majesty of the judge and lawgiver, but as the compassionate guardian of His people: ‘I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.’ He whom they had already known as their Guide and Deliverer, who had brought them forth from Egypt, making a way for them through the sea, and overthrowing Pharaoh and his hosts, who had thus shown Himself to be above all the gods of Egypt—He it was who now spoke His law.

“The law was not spoken at this time exclusively for the benefit of the Hebrews. God honored them by making them the guardians and keepers of His law, but it was to be held as a sacred trust for the whole world. The precepts of the Decalogue are adapted to all mankind, and they were given for the instruction and government of all. Ten precepts, brief, comprehensive, and authoritative, cover the duty of man to God and to his fellow man; and all based upon the great fundamental principle of love.”

(White, Patriarchs and Prophets, 304, 305.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Though we may think we do not have idols as graven images in our house, how else may we have an idol?

How do we know when we have an idol in our hearts?

How do you seek God with all your heart and soul?

How can God’s jealousy be a positive element?

How can we rejoice in the apparent paradox between God’s almighty power and consuming presence, and His compassion and tender-hearted love?

What are some promises that give you courage to return to God after you sin, trusting in His love and compassion, no matter your sin?

How has God shown compassion and mercy to you?

Where is your heart with God right now?