

AUGSBURG ADULT BIBLE STUDIES

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# Justice, Law, History

Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy,  
2 Samuel, Ezra, Job, Isaiah, Nahum

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# AUGSBURG ADULT BIBLE STUDIES

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# Introduction to Justice, Law, History

The study this quarter focuses on Old Testament scriptures and the interaction between the ideal of justice, God's pursuit of justice in history, and God's gift of the law that allows humans to join in justice's pursuit. Justice flows from the heart and character of the God of Israel. The community of faith that gathers in God's name will display that very same character.

The first four sessions explore how leaders of God's people must rely on God's law as they administer justice. Deuteronomy demands that God's people be just and equitable. This call is rooted in the memory of God's deliverance of the people from slavery. In 2 Samuel, King David demonstrates justice by showing kindness to Mephibosheth, allowing his table to be set in the presence of his enemy. Isaiah describes a reign of justice and righteousness where war loses its primacy. Through the prophet Nahum, God metes out justice to Judah's enemies. Thus, justice and judgment go together in the divine plan.

The next five sessions focus on God's justice in the lives of God's people and in the gift of the law. Stories in Genesis reveal God's justice in the face of human violence and exclusion. Included are stories of Cain's murder of his brother Abel as well as Hagar and Ishmael being cast out

of Abraham's household. Exodus shows the way justice looks when the ten commandments are applied to everyday life. In Deuteronomy, judges, officials, and priests work together to administer justice for God's people. Furthermore, Deuteronomy demands justice for marginalized people.

The last four sessions deal with situations in which justice seems absent. In 2 Samuel, Nathan condemns David for his acts of injustice toward Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband. In Ezra, after years of exile in Babylon, Ezra returns to Jerusalem and determines to restore respect for God's law. The voice of a foreign king sounds in these passages. Sessions 12 and 13 explore the book of Job and the way suffering calls into question not only simplistic spirituality but even our best understandings of how God's justice and power stand in relation to real evil.

A special feature of this study is access to biblical storytellers whose craft brings out the energy and emotions in which these stories marinate. Their tone and sense of presence reveal the character of God and how the law functions as a wise invitation to a blessed way of living in the history in which God has placed us.

Through this study may we experience the depth the Old Testament provides us in shaping faithful living in the presence of the ever-faithful God.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Participants in this study will reflect on the interplay between God's vision for a just world, the law as Israel's guide in justice making, and history as the location where divine justice takes on flesh. We are invited to walk in this long tradition of justice as people of faith.

## Our Writer

Phil Ruge-Jones is pastor of Grace Lutheran, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and director of the Lay School of Ministry for the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This is his eighth contribution to the AABS series. Like the collaborators he has gathered for this study, he is a member of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, International.

## Supplementary Resources

A fine reference for studying the Old Testament is Robert Alter's three volume set, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (Norton).

An online source that includes summaries, outlines, background, theology, and other resources for every book of the Bible is Luther Seminary's Enter the Bible, [enterthebible.org](http://enterthebible.org).

Information on the spiritual discipline of biblical storytelling can be found at [nbsint.org](http://nbsint.org).

# Justice and Obedience to the Law

**Deuteronomy 5:1b-3; 10:12-13; 27:1-10**

The objectives of this session are to help participants

- understand that God renews the covenant with God's people from generation to generation.
- appreciate the Lord's expectations of people as they come into a new situation.
- identify how God's promises made long ago to Israel relate to faithfulness today.

## Session Preparation

Preview the online presentation of the focus text at [www.youtube.com/user/augsburgfortress](https://www.youtube.com/user/augsburgfortress). Click on "Playlists" and then on "AABS Sessions Winter 2021-22."

Also preview the scene from *Trains, Planes and Automobiles* used in Beginnings question 2, <https://tinyurl.com/5pr8s6an>.

For the session, have available Bibles, chart paper or whiteboard, pens, pencils, markers, and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* or another worship book.

Start discussion with the Beginnings questions on participant book page 11 (leader guide page 11).

## Bible Text Overview

While most Christians would not name Deuteronomy as their favorite Bible book, Jesus quotes it more than any other part of scripture except Psalms. The New Testament cites it more than any other book except Psalms and Isaiah. Deuteronomy provides the words Jesus uses to dispute the devil in the wilderness (Matthew 4:4, citing Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:7, citing 6:16; and Matthew 4:10, citing 6:13). In Mark 12:28-30 when asked which is the greatest commandment, Jesus' response begins with Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

Scholars believe that this book of Bible had a long journey of composition. While Deuteronomy presents Moses speaking to the people prior to their entrance into the promised land, the composition does not reach its final Hebrew form until roughly six centuries later. By that time the people of God had faced intense experiences of conquest and exile, first by Assyria and then by Babylon. This book is written for the people returning after those historically pivotal times. So, on the one hand, Deuteronomy looks back and claims, "We ended up in the horrible places we have been because we neglected the covenant God made with us." On the other hand, it looks forward and hopes that as the people return to the land, they will choose faithfulness to the covenant with God, the terms of which are laid out in this book.

This part of the Bible does something very interesting and complicated. The story within the book has Moses exhorting the children and grandchildren of those who were at the Mount of the Lord to claim the covenant as their own



possession. In the Gospel of Matthew's genealogy (1:1-17), the authors who wrote Deuteronomy are said to have lived sixteen generations after the first Israelites lived in the land. The distant descendants receive the same invitation as their ancestors many "begets" back: The Lord makes this covenant with us, those of us alive and those who have died in the Lord.

Ken Quiring, this session's digital storyteller, makes these observations about the text: "The stone tablets contained ten words of life that, lived out, result in profound harmony with Creator, each other, and all of creation. . . . I noticed that words like *learn, observe, fear, love, and keep* assume an embodied faith. The word of God wants to take up residence in every part of us: body, mind, gut (instinct), and spirit; we are privileged to live and proclaim this word."

### **Deuteronomy 5:1b-3 The covenant with us**

This passage draws the current generation into the story of God's covenant with their ancestors. Moses invokes the past, but then he emphasizes that God had those now standing on the banks of the Jordan in mind when the covenantal promise was made. Moses emphasizes the present sense of the promises with pronouns and verbs that reactivate the promise. The Lord God makes promises with *us*, not just them; God's promise is not backward focused but for this place (here), for those living, in this time (today).

### **Deuteronomy 10:12-13 What the covenant requires of us**

While each individual who listens to Moses will make decisions about whether to follow what the Lord commands, Moses addresses them as the collective Israel. He speaks to the community of the way God expects them to order their life together. Together the people of God bring their whole self to God's call: their heart, their soul. This phrase may

sound familiar. Earlier, Deuteronomy 6:4-5 added the phrase “and all your might” to this list. Jesus in turn cites this when he is asked what the most important commandment of all is (Mark 12:28-30). Jesus also brings that command into relationship with another that is like it, the call to love one’s neighbor. In this brief way he summarizes much of what the rest of Deuteronomy explores in painstaking detail.

As the participant book notes, the commandments are not only a divine demand but also a pathway toward well-being, understood both individually and communally. In the next chapter, Deuteronomy 11:8-9 defines well-being in terms of strength to go into the land and claim it as their own. The promise also offers longevity and blessedness in that land, symbolized by the phrase “milk and honey.”

### **Deuteronomy 27:1-10 Crossing the line**

The journey through the wilderness is bookended by the giving of God’s handcrafted tablets of the law and the human memorials meant to reflect on that gift. Writing on a plaster-covered stone does not have the permanence suggested by words carved in rock, yet writing them is a human way of “repeating the law” (recall that this is the meaning of *Deuteronomy*) that God provided through Moses. Given when scholars believe the book of Deuteronomy finally was written down (between 586 and 516 BCE), those tablets would no longer have been intact. But the memory of their construction connects the returning exiles to their first ancestors to inhabit the land.

The passage ends with the same injunction that began the focus passages for this session: Hear, O Israel. Listening to the Lord God who gives commands and makes promises is the alpha and omega of obedience.

# Questions for Discussion

## Beginnings

1. Observers of human behavior talk about liminal times in our life when we are between two realities. What once was is fading away, and something new is on the horizon but has not yet arrived. The in-between time lacks clarity and involves tensions, but it also holds possibility and promise. Some examples of these times might be adolescence, going off to a new job, becoming married, moving, becoming divorced, retiring, experiencing the loss of someone dear, or facing one's own death. Communities also undergo such shifts. Ask people to share things that helped them through such times, like the support of a community, mentors' wisdom about moving well through these transitions, or religious rituals that ease the process.
2. Watch the clip from the movie *Trains, Planes and Automobiles*. The weary characters pull onto a highway and are going the wrong direction. The movie uses humor to make clear that ignoring warnings and disobeying rules can be a life-or-death issue. Ask what general things this can teach us about why rules matter. Invite the participants to share times in their own lives when rules kept them moving in the right direction. They might also share times when ignoring rules had results they would never want to repeat.

## Exploring the Word

1. Divide participants into three groups. Give each group one of this session's focus passages to identify the words Moses uses to speak of the people's role in the covenant. After each group locates them, have a representative share their findings with the whole group. Discuss

which word each participant finds most interesting and helpful in navigating faithfulness.

2. Explain to the participants that a speaker's character shapes our reception of their message. This is why we might embrace advice from one person and reject that same advice from another. This is also true of a character we encounter in a story like this one.

Early on in Moses' life he had tremendous experiences of the power and purposes of God. He saw God split the Red Sea when Egypt's army was breathing down his people's necks. Those to whom Moses speaks on the banks of the Jordan River did not go through that sea, but since Moses did, he carries a profound sense of what is possible for the Lord. Moses also has been allowed access to God in a way no one else has. He has been in the flaming presence of God in the bush that blazed but was not consumed (Exodus 3–4) and upon the mountain, receiving the ten commandments (Exodus 19–20).

Yet over and against the faithfulness of God, Moses has witnessed human betrayal of the covenant. When Moses tells the people on the banks of the Jordan that there will be a need for obedience in the days ahead, he knows what he is talking about. The dynamics of a, b, and c give him vision and authority to speak on God's behalf in a unique way in this moment.

I imagine that his tone conveys that he is longing for something he personally will not see. His life will come to an end before they enter the land he has been moving toward for forty years. Moses is like a grandparent on his deathbed who knows he will not be with his grandchildren in the days ahead to guide, support, and enjoy them.

After guiding a discussion of these realities, invite the three groups from earlier to reread their assigned sections to explore the words again with Moses' life in mind. After they share within their small group what new things stood out, have them bring their observations to the larger group.

3. Just as Moses' earlier experiences shaped his later message, we know that the communal experiences of Israel decisively shaped Jesus and the gospel writers' message. In light of this study, ask the participants in what ways they hear the Mosaic roots of each gospel's story nourishing its message.

## **The Word Today**

1. Ask participants to raise their hands to indicate which of the three influences—role models, rules, and rituals—has shaped their own character most strongly. Ask for one person who chose each category to say a few words about how this was so.

## Closing

Sing or read together “Lord, dismiss us with your blessing” (ELW 545), and invite one of the participants to pray the prayer on page 12 of the participant book.