

To God Alone Be The Glory

Moses was right! Israel was blessed like no other nation on earth to that point in history. While the rest of the world had been pursuing false gods, the only true God had been pursuing Israel, even when Israel did foolish things like grumbling against the Lord. The Lord gladly kept the promises he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: to bring their descendants up out of Egypt, the land of slavery, into Canaan, the land of rest. And best of all, these promises were linked to the Savior from sin, whom God would someday send to them. Israel was supremely blessed!

Here they were finally on the brink of the promised land, preparing to cross the Jordan River. But first Moses writes down Deuteronomy for them, 33 chapters of last-minute instructions before he dies, instructions that have continued to be important for God's people, which if followed result in others saying, SURELY THIS IS A WISE AND UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE!

What makes a people wise and understanding? First, they are a people **Who Have God Near Them in His Word** (7,8). Moses asks: *7What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?*” What other nation? None. The gods of

the other nations didn't even exist, except in the minds of their followers. So when the people prayed to their false gods, no one listened. Therefore, no one answered (for example, see 1 Kings 18:26). But in Israel, when the people prayed, the Lord heard their prayers because he is always near to his people. It's too bad the Lord was too weak to do anything about answering their prayers, right? No! Israel received answers in some big ways, like the time the Egyptian armies were forced to gargle and swallow salt water at the bottom of the Red Sea instead of recapturing Israel. The Lord heard Israel's prayers because he is all-present. He understood their requests because he is all-knowing. He answered their prayers beyond their wildest imaginations because he is all-powerful. Lord, you do the same for us today, “for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Brothers and sisters, although our God is near us whenever we pray to him, this verse doesn't talk about why. He's near us, but not because we are so good (we aren't). In his divine grace and mercy God chooses to come close to us. Our heavenly Father treats us like a good father should.

Also not pointed out in this verse is how the Lord comes near to us. Some people say he is near because they can **feel** the Lord's presence. This confuses

me. Do they mean the Lord is not present when they don't feel him? Of course he is! So then what's the difference between when they **feel** his presence and when they don't? Their feelings. Brothers and sisters, while our feelings can be helpful, they are unreliable: they can mislead us. I don't mean to say that we can't feel God's presence. Frankly, I feel his presence all the time, even when I am doing something I know I should not be doing. And he leads me to repent. But there is a much better way to be assured the Lord is coming near to us when we pray: by using **the means of grace**, the gospel in Word and Sacraments. When we baptize a baby, God is present to create saving faith in the child. Ditto with adults, except baptism strengthens their faith. We know Jesus is present with his body and blood to assure us of forgiveness whenever we receive the Lord's Supper. We know God is present whenever at least two or three are gathered to hear his Word. This is how we can know that the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him—because he says he comes close to us in his Word and Sacraments.

Moses asks: ⁸*“And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as the body of laws I am setting before you today?”* The old covenant was indeed righteous and glorious! By it the Lord brought the people relatively near to him. But we

have something even better from him than Moses' law. We have the gospel, the good news about how Jesus' death works forgiveness for us, and how his resurrection confirms all Jesus' claims and promises. We New Testament believers have been brought all the way close to God. Each of us can go directly to Jesus, the God/man. We don't need a human mediator like Israel needed the high priest. And it's not just one nation that's included anymore: Jesus is bringing all nations to himself through the gospel. **SURELY** the people who grasp this are **WISE AND UNDERSTANDING**—wise churches who care about spreading the gospel near and far. Through *the Holy Scriptures* we have been made *wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus* (2 Timothy 3:15).

But far too many Lutherans stop short: “God did it all, so now I do nothing.” No, dear friends, since we have God's Word, let's use it. Let it be said of us: **SURELY THIS IS A WISE AND UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE Who Observe God's Word Carefully** (1,2,6), who put it into practice. Let it be that people can tell when they interact with us: we care to keep fixing our life so it lines up with God's good and gracious will.

Moses says: ¹*Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live*

and may go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. Did you catch those very important words: “*Follow these decrees so that...*”? For the Israelites, their receiving Canaan and holding onto the Holy Land was contingent on their keeping the law. No keep law, no keep land. The key to their success was their obedience. The only way for them to hold on to the land was to obey God’s Word.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, would we do any better at keeping God’s Word our highest priority in life if getting into heaven depended on whether we read the Bible daily? I don’t think so. And I’m glad the new covenant doesn’t work that way. We have something better—not just laws: “You shall, you shall not, or else.” We have the gospel: “God did, God sent, God died, God rose, God ascended, God rules—all for you.” And God has promised us, without condition, a land even better than Canaan or America. In God’s new covenant with us, there is no, “If you do this, then God will save you and keep you as his own.” Eternal life is a free gift to us sinners through Jesus.

So then why obey God’s commands? For us New Testament believers, cheerfully following God’s law comes after we have been given a full

scholarship to heaven. God doesn’t have to add an “or else” to his commands in the New Testament, at least not for our new self. So when Moses says, ²“*Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you,*” we reply, “Why would we add or subtract words? That would change the meaning. Not only are we not authorized to do so, this could mess up the message for everyone else whom God wants to reach with the gospel.” My new self already wants to obey. It needs no threats. But my sinful flesh does. My flesh finds it easy to add or subtract from God’s Word. How about yours? “Speed limit 60? Pfft! Don’t share juicy gossip? Ha! Don’t lust? Yah, that was written back when everyone was ugly.” The Pharisees in today’s Gospel (Mark 7:1-23) did something similar. They added laws about clean and unclean so they could become purer to God. They even taught that God’s laws didn’t have to be followed as stringently as their laws (see the Mishna). Church people do this today too. When they don’t like how something is going at church, they want to pass a binding resolution in the voters meeting instead of taking the time to examine the issue and work through it together. Maybe you’ve heard about churches that wrote into their constitution: “At this church we

will always and only use the King James Version.” And they placed this sentence into the part of the constitution that could not be changed, repealed, or altered. But let’s be less dramatic. Subtracting from God’s Word happens every time someone acts as if a part of the Bible is no longer true. “It doesn’t really matter if Jesus was born of a virgin.” “It’s okay to be stinky towards those who deserve it.” “You don’t have to respect or obey a government that you don’t agree with.” No, a wise and understanding people keeps God’s Word just the way he wrote it. And when we realize we have added to or subtracted from God’s Word, we repent of it, and we know without a doubt that eternal life still depends on how well Jesus lived for us, and not on how well we lived.

Moses says, *Observe [God’s laws] carefully for this will show your wisdom and understanding.* Moses isn’t trying to appeal to anyone’s sense of self-esteem: “If you do this, people will say nice things about you.” He’s trying to point out that ‘obeying’ means more than staying out of trouble, that ‘obeying God carefully’ is wise just because it is right, that ‘obeying God’ is not about what we can get from our obedience. While it’s true that God pours out gracious

blessings on those who observe his ways carefully, we aren’t trying to extract God’s blessings. He already promised to bless us in Christ before we were born. Right away the sinful flesh likes to ask, “So then I don’t have to behave?” And our Lord answers our flesh, “Have to, shmaf to. I’m not talking to you, flesh. I’m talking the new self: I am going to bless you in Christ.” And our new self says, “Then I’m going to behave. My Lord is giving me eternal life through Jesus, so I gladly gather with God’s people for worship. He’s going to let me possess the eternal promised land someday as a free gift—so I’m going to treat others well as someone who loves God’s mercy.”

Your flesh will fret over the sinful stuff God wants you to let go of. But instead of feeling the loss, a wise and understanding people feels the gain of knowing that everything we give up for Christ will be more than replaced in the life to come, not thing for thing, but by things that are even better than what’s available to anyone on earth. This is wisdom. This is understanding. **SURELY THIS IS A WISE AND UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE, Who Have God Near Them in His Word, and Who Observe His Word Carefully.** Lord, let this always be true of us.