

**EXPERIENCING GOD'S PRESENCE**  
**Teaching-Learning Resources**  
**BAPTIST LEADER**

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Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:15–49

Key Passage: Deuteronomy 4:32–40

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This lesson ends Unit I, “Foundations for Faith” which is only the first of three units of study covering the Book of Deuteronomy. Two previous lessons of this unit dealt with the initial parts of Moses’ first speech along the themes of “Claiming God’s Promise” and “Recalling God’s Action.” The promise that waited to be claimed by the Israelites was Yahweh’s promise of the land and the assurance that God would fight for them when they began to settle in the land. Moses recalled the actions of Yahweh which were to have inspired the Israelites for faith and obedience as they prepared to possess the land. Our analysis of this “historical survey” led to the conclusion that the text now combines different traditions reflecting different “holy war” theologies, namely traditions about the Exodus and Yahweh’s war and victory over Pharaoh at the Red Sea, a tradition about the Israelite warfare in the destruction and extermination of the inhabitants of Heshbon and Bashan.

This lesson on “Experiencing God’s Presence” moves us from a “historical prologue” to the major theological affirmation and conclusion for which everything else in the speech has been introductory. The sermonic exhortations for obedience to Yahweh’s commands in Deuteronomy 4:1–13 are stepping stones to Moses’ major theological affirmation: “Yahweh is God; there is no other besides him!” (v. 35). The parenthetical historical comment in verses 3 to 4 about the

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fate of those Israelites who participated in Baa] worship at Peor illustrates the practical implications of this theological affirmation—experiencing the presence of Yahweh brings and sustains life, but any experience by Israelites with other gods is futile and fatal.

A hint of Moses' major affirmation "Yahweh is God; there is no other besides him!" occurred earlier in his speech when he asked the question, "What great nation is there that has a god so near to it as Yahweh our God is to us?" (v. 7). Yahweh was close enough to respond to the call of the people, but the gods were not that close because they were either restricted to the heavens (see the discussion below) or they really did not exist. In the final section of this speech, Moses moved from subtle hint to bold declaration: "Yahweh is God; there is no other besides him!"

However, this bold declaration stands in the shadow of a rather startling admission: "Beware lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and moon and the stars, all the host of heaven . . . which Yahweh your God assigned to all the [other] peoples under the whole heaven" (v. 19). The meaning of this verse is quite clear in Hebrew as well as in English. The heavenly bodies have been assigned to non-Israelites as the deities whom they were to worship, and this assigned order of worship was the design and will of Yahweh.

At first glance it seems difficult to reconcile bold statements of monotheism as those in verses 35 and 39 with the equally bold sanction of polytheism in verse 19. Such differences in theology here are similar to the problem in last week's lesson that dealt with the different holy war theologies. But while the problems appear similar, the solutions are quite different. It seems unlikely that either Deuteronomy

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4:19 or 4:35, 39 can be attributed to later editorial accommodation to political pressure. It seems more likely that the statements in these three verses deal with two different types of gods in the pantheons of the nations.

While the pantheons of the ancient Near East included deities whose existence, in the minds of the Israelites, hinged on the use and credibility of idols and images, other deities were conspicuously more real than that. When gods and goddesses seemed to live or die at the whim of the crafts-person who made them, there was little difficulty in denying their very existence and ultimate reality. To destroy the idol and the place of worship was to destroy the deity. This is clearly the understanding in Deuteronomy 12:2–3,

You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations . . . served their gods . . . you shall tear down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and burn their Asherim with fire; you shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their name out of that place.”

But there were some gods who could not be destroyed that easily. They were the gods and goddesses whose existence did not hinge upon the existence and survival of an idol or image. They were the heavenly deities, those gods and goddesses who could not respond to the call of their subjects as Yahweh could respond to Israel. As long as the heavenly bodies were perceived as divine beings, it was absurd to deny their reality. We recognize that the sun, moon, and stars are impersonal, physical bodies of matter, lacking in themselves any spiritual dimension approximating a divine quality. But our understanding of the heavenly bodies differs radically from the perception of those who lived up in the ancient Near East. For them, the sun, moon, and the stars were personal, animated,

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living bodies in the supra-earthly sphere, which by their definition was sufficient [page 60] to make them “divine bodies /beings.” This was not simply a personification of natural bodies, as found in the expressions “mother earth” and “man in the moon.” It was their understanding that the heavenly bodies were actually personal and living.

The Canaanite pantheon included the moon god Il (or El, El Elyon), the sun goddess Atherat, and their offspring, the Venus star Athtar. The existence of these deities did not hinge on whether the Israelites could destroy all the images or symbols used in the worship of these two gods and goddess. The heavenly bodies would obviously survive the destruction of all their symbolic representations. They would continue to move in their orbits and control the fate of people on earth. Thus, to deny the existence of the heavenly gods/ goddesses would have been to deny the reality of the sun, moon, and stars themselves. That would have been absurd.

Mere idols and earth gods could be destroyed and denied, but the heavenly beings had to be handled a different way. The way Moses handled it was to put them in their place. They were considered as real and were performing a specific function as ordained by Yahweh. Whereas Yahweh had chosen the people of Israel, had chosen to be their only God, and Israel would be uniquely Yahweh's people, other people on earth also had gods whom they would call their own. They could not really call Yahweh “their God,” for Yahweh was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; he was the God of the Israelites. But the other nations had not been left godless. Due provision had been made for their religious needs.

The idea that it was legitimate and divinely ordained that other nations should worship other gods (called “sons of God”

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sometimes or specified as the “sun, moon, and stars”) occurs also in Deuteronomy 17:3; 29:26. It was an idea that still survived in the days of Micah (during the last half of the eighth century B.C.) who stated,

For all the peoples walk  
each in the name of god,  
but we will walk in the name of Yahweh our God  
For ever and ever.

Micah 4:5

It is noteworthy that the prophet did not condemn the worship of other gods by other people. But any Israelite worship of the sun, moon, and stars was vigorously condemned by all the prophets (see, for example, Zephaniah 1:5; Jeremiah 7:18; 8:2; 19:13; 44:17; and Ezekiel 8:16). Such toleration of worship in other nations still survives in Judaism, stemming from this Mosaic tradition.

The affirmation of Moses: “Yahweh is God; there is no other besides him!” appears in a more expanded statement in Deuteronomy 32:39, “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” But the full impact of this monotheistic statement was not felt until long after the time of Moses. Even the first of the Ten Commandments and the words of the greatest commandment were addressed to Israel’s need to worship Yahweh only (see the “Teaching Learning Resources” for the next two lessons in this series). The unequivocal affirmations of monotheism are found in the prophetic declarations of Jeremiah (see especially chapters 10 and 44) and Second Isaiah (see especially chapter 45:5–23).

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The biblical theologian who built on the affirmation of Moses and carried it to its true and logical conclusion was the psalmist who, in Psalm 82, told a poetic parable to demonstrate that Yahweh is God of all the nations and there are no longer any other gods in the heavens although the sun, moon, and stars still stand in their orbits. This poetic parable is paraphrased here in prose, with interpretive additions placed in parentheses:

(Yahweh our) God has taken his place in the divine council (of the 'sons of God' and) in the midst of the gods (the sun, moon, and stars) he holds judgment (inquiring of the heavenly bodies:), "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked (in your assigned nations)? (You were charged to) give justice to the weak and the fatherless, to maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute, to rescue the weak and needy, to deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Due to your failures) the people have neither knowledge or understanding, they walk about in darkness and all the foundations of the earth are shaken. (Therefore,) I say to you: 'You are gods, all of you are sons of the Most High, nevertheless, you shall die like men and fall like any (mortal) prince.'"

The parable ends with the psalmist's prayer and confession: "Arise, O God, judge the earth, for to thee belong all the nations!" (Psalm 82:8).

The message of the parable is quite clear. The immortal gods—the sun, moon, and stars—were sentenced to death for permitting injustice on earth, just as their human subjects who practiced it were. This parable had tremendous influence in all of Israel's subsequent history. The demise of the sun, moon, and stars is a common motif in both the Old and New Testaments, as can be seen from the texts of Isaiah 13:10;

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34:4; Ezekiel 37:2; Joel 2:10–11; Zephaniah 1:14; Revelation 8:12; 12:1. Perhaps most noteworthy of all subsequent statements is the one in Matthew, “. . . [in] those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (24:29). The coming of the Son of Man, to whom God had given all authority in heaven and on earth, would eliminate all lingering vestiges of the older polytheism, even the limited polytheism which Moses and the earlier prophets tolerated.

An inadequate perception of reality was replaced by the truth of God in Jesus Christ. What Yahweh had proclaimed through the prophet has been made possible through the incarnation:

“Turn to me and be saved,  
*all the ends of the earth!*  
For I am God, and there is no other.  
By myself I have sworn,  
from my mouth has gone forth .  
a word that shall not return:  
‘To me *every knee* shall bow,  
*every tongue* shall swear.

Isaiah 45:22, italics added

Therefore God [Yahweh] has highly exalted him [the Christ] and bestowed on him [Christ] the name [page 61] which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of [Yahweh] God the Father.

Philippians 2:9–11

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Ephesians 2:11–22 provides an excellent commentary on this entire presentation on Deuteronomy 4:19 and 4:35, 39. The real Son of God actually came to earth to provide for both the Jew and Gentile, the Israelite and the non-Israelite. What the “sons of god” were supposed to do for the people of this world they were unable to do because they were not real, or if they were real (like the sun and moon), they were not gods. But in Christ those “having no hope and without God in the world (i.e., *without a real god in this world*) . . . are no longer strangers and sojourners but . . . fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:12–19, italics added).

### Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

**Deuteronomy 4:33—“Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live?”**

Israel’s unique experience with Yahweh was in the people’s ability to *hear* God although they could not *see* God, and in their survival after having had this close encounter with the divine. The gods that were allocated to the nations— gods like the sun, moon, and heavenly hosts—could be seen, but they could not speak. The idols were dumb and the images were mute. The invisible gods like Mot, the god of death, and Baal, the god of fertility, could not be seen nor heard. But Yahweh spoke and responded to the call of Israel.

The prohibition against Israel’s use of idols or images is related to this revelation by *word* rather than by *sight*. Images or idols may have been adequate symbolic representations of that which was *nothing* or even *something*, but Yahweh was not *thing* and had no form. This invisible voice of the divine



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could not be symbolized by form and mass. Spirit, like wind, cannot be easily symbolized by form.

This passage (vv. 33–39) contains a series of escalating wonders: (1) the wonder of Yahweh's speaking to Israel, (2) the wonder of Israel's survival after this, (3) the wonder that Yahweh did everything required to keep them alive throughout the Exodus and at the Red Sea, and (4) the wonder that Israelites were able to see with their eyes the *workings of Yahweh*, although they could not see Yahweh. All of these wonders demonstrate the uniqueness of the God of Israel.

### **Deuteronomy 4:37—“And because he loved your fathers and chose their descendants after them . . .”**

One must recognize that the term “love” in this context connotes much more than an emotional relationship. “Love” is frequently employed in biblical and extra-biblical texts to indicate a covenant obligation or treaty relationship. For example, in 1 Kings 5:1 Hiram king of Tyre is called David's “lover.” This had nothing to do with sex or emotion. It was a way of stating that David and Hiram had made treaty commitments to each other. The love of Yahweh for the ancestors of Israel was expressed in the covenant commitment to them, elements of which were discussed in the first lesson of this series.

### **Deuteronomy 4:37–38—“. . . [Yahweh] brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves . . .”**

As in verse 34, this verse speaks of God's waging war on and dispossessing the Canaanites alone. No credit or glory is given to any Israelite military force. The RSV phrase “driving

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out” is too strong a term for the Hebrew *yarash*, used here. As discussed in the lesson of June 14, this word may mean either “to possess” or “to dispossess.” This verse does not indicate violent dispossession, although numerous other passages do. There is enough violence in these traditions, and caution should be exercised in reading into the text violence which may not have been intended.

### **Applying the Lesson to Life**

A rereading of all of Moses' first discourse in conjunction with this last lesson of the unit suggests that we read the Bible with a new appreciation for the richness and variety of the traditions recorded in it. We can express our thanks that under the guidance of the Spirit, we are free to appropriate those traditions which enhance our commitment to Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. From our vantage point in history, especially the history of revelation, we can humbly thank God for the wisdom and Word available to us which was unavailable to Moses and ancient Israel. As Gentiles, for the most part, from the nations supposedly ordained to worship only the sun, moon, and stars, we can renew our covenant commitment to Jesus Christ, who reconciled us to God and made us joint heirs of the blessings of God.