

# Deuteronomy 4:25-31 Commentary

**Background-** Deut 4:26-31 sets the [context](#) for an incredible prophecy of Divine judgment and mercy concerning the nation of Israel. Let's [observe](#) the context verse by verse. Although, Habakkuk's prayer was many years after Moses' words below, it is a prayer that is "answered" in Deuteronomy 4:26-31 for this Jewish prophet prayed "**In wrath remember mercy.**" (Hab 3:2-[note](#)). As you study this section, you will see that while there is indeed divinely ordained wrath, when God has the final word, it will be "I will show mercy to my people!".

**Deuteronomy 4:25** "When you become the father of children and children's children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the LORD your God so as to provoke Him to anger,

## THE CORRUPTION AND CONSEQUENCES OF IDOLATRY

In this section Moses is speaking as God's prophet. Recall that a [prophet](#) had the role of *forth*-telling and *fore*-telling and in this section Moses carries out both these functions.

**The land** - Referring to the promised land of Canaan.

**When...you act corruptly** - Note not "if" but "when" so the [Omniscient God](#) (speaking through His "*mouthpiece*" Moses) sees the future failure of His [Chosen People](#) Israel. He had just warned them when they entered the land to "**watch yourselves carefully.**" (Dt 4:15) The Hebrew word for "**watch carefully**" is [shamar](#) (08104) which means to be on one's guard and is rendered in the [Septuagint \(Lxx\)](#) with the Greek verb [phulasso](#) a vivid word calling for one to set up a watchman to guard and protect from enemy incursions. It is fascinating that both [shamar](#) and [phulasso](#) are used in Genesis 2:15 where Adam was commanded by God guard ("keep") the garden against intruders! Adam failed to guard not only the Garden but also his wife and the rest is history!

Deut 4:16 goes on to explain that Israel was to be on guard so that they would "**not act corruptly**" ([shachath](#)) so that they would not be spoiled, ruined, perverted, destroyed or wiped out. This same verb describes the [corrupt](#), ruined (morally rotten) state of the world in Ge 6:11,12! In context the "corrupting agent" was idolatry and as Deut 4:25 teaches while idols may be "dead," they still exert a controlling effect on the human heart, resulting in evil in the sight of God thus provoking the "Refiner's Ire" and the "Refiner's fire!" (cp Dt 32:16)

**Warren Wiersbe** - God made a covenant with His people and He expected them to keep it **Ed**: See [Covenant: Abrahamic versus Mosaic](#)). The word "**covenant**" is used at least twenty-seven times in Deuteronomy and comes from the Hebrew word [beriyth](#) which some scholars say means "to eat bread." In the East, when people broke bread together, they formed a covenant or treaty that they would help and protect each other (see Ge 26:26-35) (**Ed**: See [Table Summary of Biblical Covenants](#)). When God established His covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, Moses and the Jewish elders ate before God on the mountain (Ex. 24:11). The terms of the covenant were simple: if Israel obeyed God's laws, He would bless them; if they disobeyed, He would chasten them. He would show His love to them in both the blessing and the chastening, "for whom the Lord loves, He chastens" (Heb. 12:6-[note](#), NKJV). (Be Equipped)

**John Butler** rightly reminds us that "Idolatry corrupts. It leads to low morals and cruel deeds. Corrupt creed leads to corrupt conduct. This explains the corruption that prevails in our country. Bad doctrine precedes bad deportment." (Analytical Bible Exposition) Have you done an "idol check" in your life lately? You might consider praying Psalm 139:23, 24 periodically.

**Deuteronomy 4:26** I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you shall surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but shall be utterly destroyed.

**GOD CALLS THE UNIVERSE  
AS A WITNESS!**

Moses acting as God's spokesman (prophet) begins this section with the solemn words "I call heaven and earth to witness".

**KJV Bible Commentary** on "I call heaven and earth" - (This) is in the accusative case, which means to give a witness against a person under oath. **Heaven and earth** are personified, not as the instruments of judgment if they disobey, but as witnesses that God had warned His people against idols.

**Bratcher** on calling **heaven and earth** - the punishment that Moses is about to describe is so severe that he calls the whole universe to listen to what he is about to say. Among other peoples at that time it was common to call upon the gods to witness to what someone was about to say or do; here the whole world, as God's creation, is to be witness. (Handbook on Deuteronomy)

**Bob Utley** on "I call heaven and earth to witness" - This was part of the Suzerain Hittite Treaties (need for powerful spiritual witnesses, cf. Intro. to Book, VII). These are the two most permanent things in physical creation. They are often called on by God to act as witnesses. It also reflects the Israeli legal system's need for two witnesses in a court case (cf. Ex 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15). The phrase is used often in connection with the ratification of the covenant with YHWH (cf. Dt 4:26; 30:19; 31:28).

**Treasury of Scripture Knowledge Notes** says this oath is "A most solemn method of [adjuration](#), in use among all the nations in the world; God and man being called upon to bear testimony to the truth of what was spoken, that if there was any flaw or insincerity it might be detected, and if any crime, it might not go unpunished. Such appeals to God shew at once the origin and use of oaths."

**Deuteronomy 4:27** "And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you shall be left few in number among the nations, where the LORD shall drive you.

## GOD'S PROMISE TO SCATTER IS SURE

**The LORD will scatter you** (see more detailed description of this punishment in Deut 28:64-68) - Compare similar promises in Deut 28:64-67. This is one of those promises we don't usually see in a collection like ["God's Promises for Your Every Need."](#)

**The LORD will scatter...shall drive you** - Jehovah Himself would in His sovereign control of the Gentile nations inflict this promised punishment.

**You shall be left few in number among the nations**(Gentiles) (see the contrast in Dt 28:62) - Jews are located throughout the world today but their numbers are relatively [\(13.9 million in 2014\)](#). The number of Jewish believers, while increasing in recent years, is still a small percentage of the population. However God had promised that there would always be a [remnant](#) of Jews who were genuine believers in the Messiah.

Israel's disobedience provoked the LORD's anger which brought His righteous punishment and the scattering of the nation among **the peoples** (the Gentile nations). The Hebrew verb **scatter** is translated in the Septuagint with the verb diaspeiro which means to scatter abroad which calls to mind the [Jewish diaspora](#). (see Greek word [diaspora](#) used in NT) This prophecy was first fulfilled when the 10 northern tribes were carried into exile in Assyria in 722BC (2 Kings 17:6) and the 2 Southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, were taken into exile in Babylon in 586BC (2Chr 36:15-21 - note the tragic phrase "*until there was no remedy*" - no 'healing' in 2 Chr 36:16!). In addition, the nation of Israel was scattered from her land after her rejection of Christ, [this dispersion](#) occurring at the hands of the Romans.

**John MacArthur** sums up Deut 4:25-31 - In fact, this briefly outlined the future judgment of Israel, which culminated in the northern 10 tribes being exiled to Assyria (ca. 722 B.C.; 2Ki 17) and the southern two tribes being deported to Babylon (ca. 605–586 B.C.; 2Ki 24, 25). Although the Jews returned in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (ca. 538–445 B.C.), they never regained their autonomy or dominance. Thus, the days of promised restoration and return look forward to Messiah's return to set up the [millennial kingdom](#). (Study Bible)

**Warren Wiersbe** - During the closing years of Solomon's reign, to please his many wives he introduced idolatry into the land (1 Kings 11:1-12) and this led to God's judgment and the division and deterioration of the nation (1 Kings 12). In 722 B.C., Assyria captured the ten tribes that formed the Northern Kingdom of Samaria, and Babylon took the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C. From A.D. 70 until May 14, 1948, when the modern nation of Israel was recognized (**Ed:** [See summary of events leading to nationhood](#)), the Jewish people were **dispersed throughout the world** and had no national homeland. (Be Equipped)

**Deuteronomy 4:28** "And there you will serve gods, the work of man's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear

## GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY! GOD OR IDOLS

The title of this section comes from Bob Dylan's classic "[Gotta Serve Somebody!](#)"

It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody!

**You will serve gods** - What a pitiful description for God's Chosen People! Another divine promise. The truth of this passage applies to all men of all ethnicity. If man does not serve God, he will by default serve gods! Jesus made this quite clear when He declared

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You (absolutely) cannot serve God and mammon." (Matthew 6:24-[note](#))

**Serve** - The Jews were set free from the bondage of slavery in Egypt so that they might serve Jehovah (Ex 7:16, 8:1, 20, 9:1, 13, 10:3, 7) but they rejected God as their Master instead choosing to serve dumb idols! In this passage God says in essence "If you want idols, not Me, then I will give you what you want!" That is personally my greatest fear when I commit a [presumptuous](#) ("[high handed](#)") sin against God (Ps 19:12-13-[note](#)) - that He may say "*Okay, you want it. Go for it!*" That would be horrible!

**Deuteronomy 4:29** "But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul.

## A BLESSED "BUT"!

**But** - Note this blessed [term of contrast](#)!!! This blessed contrast reminds us the wonderful "but God" in Ephesians 2:4-[note](#) where in the face of our spiritually dead condition, God, because of His rich mercy and great love, "made us alive together with Christ." (Ephesians 2:5-[note](#)).

**From there** - From where? From their worldwide dispersion.

**Seek the LORD** - Do you see God's great covenant mercy, His abundant lovingkindness? No man, Jew or Gentile, seeks for God (Ro 3:11, Ps 14:2), so in order for the dispersed Jews **in the latter days** to seek for Him, God Himself (His Spirit) must put that desire in their heart. Of course, they still have the responsibility to follow through and "seek for Him" -- this is a great mystery - God's sovereign provision, man's responsibility.

**With all your heart and all your soul** - Try accomplishing this in reliance on your natural strength, the [Old Man](#)! This description is of a heart which has been touched by God's grace and mercy (see Zech 12:10 in summary below).

**Deuteronomy 4:30** "When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and listen to His voice.

## IN THE LATTER DAYS IN TRIBULATION

**NOTE:** For a more detailed discussion of this passage, especially as it relates to future prophecy for the nation of Israel see [Deuteronomy 4:30 Commentary](#) (there is some repetition).

**When** - Note Moses does not say "if" but "**when**" -- Israel will be "**in distress**" and then he gives the time frame **in the latter days**. This is a key time phrase! Notice it is made more specific by the phrase "in the latter days" - so this is a prophecy that speaks of the "end times" prior to Messiah's return

**When you are in distress** (KJV, ESV = **in tribulation**) -

**Distress** - The Hebrew word for **distress** is **tsar** ([06862](#)) (See study of related noun [tsarah](#)) In the [Septuagint \(Lxx\)](#) the phrase "**in your affliction**" is found in the last section of the previous passage Dt 4:29. In the [Septuagint \(Lxx\)](#) the word for **affliction** is the noun **thlipsis** which literally describes a pressing together, and figuratively refers to trouble that inflicts distress.

Thlipsis is the same Greek word used by Jesus to describe the **Great Tribulation** in Mt 24:21-[note](#) (*thlipsis megale*) where Jesus warned His Jewish audience "For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will." (See Daniel's seventieth week where the last half or 3.5 years represents the **Great Tribulation**). The question is "When is then?" When does the alarm go off marking the beginning of this never seen before and never to be seen after **Great Tribulation**? As usual, it pays to check the context, and in the preceding passages (Mt 24:16-20) Jesus clearly describes a situation demanding a sense of urgency.

So what is the sign that marks the beginning of this horrible time? In Mt 24:15 Jesus declared "Therefore when you see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)" (Mt 24:15-[see in depth analysis and commentary](#)). Then Jesus calls for an urgent response upon seeing this sign because it was the beginning of the distress, the Great Tribulation, the "**time of Jacob's trouble**" (Jer 30:7-note), "**a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time**" (Da 12:1-note).

## SUMMARY OF INTERPRETATION OF DEUTERONOMY 4:30

In the **last days** prior to (and including) the return of Israel's Messiah, Israel will undergo a time of **distress** that Jesus referred to as the Great Tribulation in Matthew 24:21. He explained in Matthew 24:15 ([see excursus below](#)) a clear sign that would signal to the Jews the beginning of this time of distress, a time which would last for only 3.5 years (1260 days, 42 months or "time, times, and half a time"). Jeremiah 30:7 referred to this time period as the "**time of Jacob's trouble**." Daniel 12:1 said "there will be a **time of distress** such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your (Daniel's) people (in context clearly referring to Israel), everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued." Paul spoke of this "rescue operation" in Romans 11:26-27 explaining that "all Israel will be saved (or "rescued" as in Daniel 12:1); just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER (Messiah) WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB. "AND THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." At that time Zechariah 12:10 says "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me (Messiah) Whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born." So the reason these Jews in the latter days will mourn is because they have been given the Spirit of grace. No man seeks for God and they would not be broken if they had not received God's great grace! Nor would you or I dear fellow believer! Zechariah 13 goes on to explain that in **the latter days** "it will come about in all the land (Israel)," Declares the LORD, "That two parts in it will be cut off and perish; But the third will be left in it. 9 "And I will bring the third part through the fire, Refine them (referring to the Jewish remnant who will be saved) as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested (cp Deut 4:30 "a time of distress"). They will call on My name (Why? Because they have received a Spirit of grace and supplication), And I will answer them; I will say, 'They are My people,' And they will say, 'The LORD is my God (This is clearly covenant language, and describes the remnant of 1/3 of the Jews in the latter days who will enter into the New Covenant by grace through faith) .'"

**Deuteronomy 4:31 "For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.**

## IN THE MIDST OF WRATH GOD REMEMBERS MERCY

For - [term of explanation](#)

**A compassionate God** (cp the "moral definition" of God in Exodus 34:6) - **Compassionate** is the adjective [rachum](#) (see in depth study of the noun [racham](#)) The psalmist records that

But He, being **compassionate**, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them;  
And often He restrained His anger  
And did not arouse all His wrath. (Psalm 73:38)

**Nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them**- This is not the conditional Mosaic Covenant, the covenant of law which Israel could not keep, but repeatedly broke, but is a reference to the unconditional promises of the Abrahamic Covenant with was made first with Abraham and then reaffirmed both to Isaac and then to Jacob ("with your fathers."). The New Covenant is in a very real sense an extension of the Abrahamic Covenant, which Abraham entered by faith in Genesis 15:6 and thus

was reckoned as righteous, just as we were when we believed the Gospel and entered into the New Covenant.

**MacArthur** - God mercifully, not because they deserve it, will fulfill the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with repentant Israel in the future. God will not forget the Word that He has given to Abraham and his seed (cf. Ro 11:25–27).

**Nelson Study Bible** - The future of God's people depends on God's love. The emphasis on God's mercy in this verse is a necessary balance to the emphasis that Moses placed on God's refining wrath (Dt 4:24). not forsake ... nor forget: The Lord was free to scatter His people. But after His discipline, He would regather them and show them His favor. God was and is faithful to His promises. The covenant of your fathers is God's solemn commitment to fulfill the promises He made to the patriarchs (Gen. 17:6–8; 22:16, 17; Ex. 3:15–17).

**ESV Study Bible** has an excellent note - In Deuteronomy, mercy is grounded in the Lord's faithfulness to the Abrahamic promises (Dt 9:27; 30:5, 20). God will maintain his covenant with Abraham, even if Israel forgets it (4:23; see Rom. 3:3–4). God also swore those promises under oath (Gen. 22:16; Heb. 6:13, 17–18). Cf. note on Deut. 1:8 [The promise of land was made first to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 15:18–21), reiterated to Isaac (Gen. 26:4), and then to Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12; cf. Deut. 6:10; 9:5; 29:13; 30:20; 34:4). The promises to the three patriarchs included land for their offspring after them.]