

The Peril of Idolatry

Deuteronomy 4:15–31

by Felton Spraggins

“. . . So watch yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which the Lord your God has commanded you. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

“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, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you shall surely perish quickly from the land. . . .” (4:15–31).

God has always demanded that men have no idols in either their lives or their worship. Man is to worship only the true and living God. Notice these words from the Ten Commandments:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before Me.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, . . .” (5:6–9).

Our text is an excellent commentary on the second of the Ten Commandments (5:8–10). The temptation of idolatry would be strong when Israel possessed the land of Canaan. So Moses turned their attention to graven images and the consequences that would follow if they practiced the sin of idolatry. He gives five truths regarding idolatry in this passage.

GOD CANNOT BE SYMBOLIZED

Moses began with a description of events that occurred at Horeb: “So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire” (4:15). The reality of God’s presence at Mount Horeb could never be questioned, since they heard His voice and sensed His glorious presence in the fire. Yet the greater danger was the danger of turning a spiritual experience into a physical representation. Since God had not revealed Himself in physical form, it would be foolish to represent the Lord in any material or physical form. Any attempt to symbolize God in an idol would be an attempt to limit Him to man’s finite restrictions.

The revelation was spiritual, demanding a spiritual response. Israel was to take heed lest they corrupt themselves by any materialistic representation of Jehovah. They were to be on guard against two forms of idolatry: the worship of graven images (4:15–18) and the worship of the sun, moon, and stars (4:19). The Israelites later fell into the worship of graven images and the host of heaven which led to their downfall (2 Kings 17:16; 21:3).

IT IS IDOLATROUS TO WORSHIP THE WORK OF MAN’S HANDS

Israel was to beware of worshiping the work of man’s hands, a graven image.

“Lest you act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that

flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth" (4:16–18).

They were to make no graven images in the likeness of male or female (4:16), any beast (4:17), any winged bird (4:17), anything that crawled on the ground (4:18), or any fish (4:18).

Images of these forms were found throughout the ancient world. Even Israel had made a golden calf at Sinai (Exodus 32:1–4), and later Jeroboam introduced the calves into worship in northern Israel (1 Kings 12:26–33).

To make any image for worship would be to exchange "the truth of God for a lie" (Romans 1:25). To represent an infinite spirit by an image and the Creator of the universe by the image of a creature is the greatest affront man can put before God. Paul wrote of such: "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (Romans 1:22, 23). The Lord has nothing to do with paganism or materialism. Worship of the Creator, not the creature, is God's demand.

Jehovah is spirit. He speaks to the mind and conscience and demands a religion of spirit. Jesus said, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

IT IS IDOLATROUS TO WORSHIP THE WORK OF GOD'S HANDS

Israel was also to beware of worshipping the work of God's hands, "the host of heaven."

"And beware, lest you lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven" (4:19).

The worship of the sun, moon, and stars was the most ancient type of idolatry and the most plausible. Its plausibility makes it most dangerous. Moses feared that when they saw "the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven," they would marvel at their height and brightness, their regularity in the cosmos, and their powerful influence and be tempted to worship and give honor to them.

These were blessings God had given to all nations. How foolish it would be to worship

them, for they are servants of man and were made and ordained by God to give light and order to the universe.

IDOLATRY VIOLATES OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Nature worship and worship of materialism in any form were to be avoided, for Israel belonged to Jehovah. Moses wrote, "But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, from Egypt, to be a people for His own possession, as today" (4:20).

Jehovah had taken Israel out of the iron furnace of Egypt to be His very own people (4:20; 7:6; 14:2; 26:18). For Israel to turn aside into idolatry was to prefer the lot of reprobation to her divine election as God's own redeemed and exclusive possession, an exclusive service and devotion.

As Christians, we are a people of God's own possession through Jesus: "Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, . . ." (Titus 2:14). Being God's own possession should have a profound effect on our behavior. Worship with graven images is totally out of character for the children of God.

IDOLATRY IS A STRONG TEMPTATION

Moses lamented that he would not be able to enter the promised land (4:21, 22), but he gave a stern warning against Israel's forgetting God and turning to idolatry:

So watch yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which the Lord your God has commanded you. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God (4:23, 24).

The term "jealous" in the Hebrew refers to an active zeal for righteousness, which is generated from God's own holiness. As a result of His holiness, Jehovah demands man's entire affection and adoration and will not tolerate a rival. As a consuming fire, God purifies what is precious and destroys what is worthless.

Prophetically, Moses warned that prolonged enjoyment of the blessings of Canaan would produce forgetfulness.

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. 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. And there you will serve gods, the work of man's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell (4:26-28).

The phrase "remained long in the land" (4:25) means literally, "slumbered in the land." It expresses not only long continuance, but a loss of vigor, a gradual weakening of the first impressions due to unbroken peace and prosperity. Prosperity sometimes acts like a narcotic and sends the soul to sleep (6:10-13; 8:10-20; 32:15).

The worship of the visible and the creature were characteristics of the Gentile nations whom God had abandoned to perverse folly. When Israel moved into the promised land, they lived among these Canaanites, who worshiped Baal. "You had better offer sacrifices to Baal," their pagan neighbors would advise, "or your seed might be bad or you might not get rain."

Before long, many Israelites were going into the high places to offer sacrifices to Baal. "After all," they reasoned, "nobody wants the harvest to fail. Besides, it won't do any harm." The day came when Israel's spiritual worship grew stale, its freshness faded, and they turned to the fleshly idolatry of Canaan.

The Canaanite always worshiped Baal to get something for himself. Baal was the god of the storm, the god of the food supply, the god of fertility, the god of fire, and the god of healing. Israel wanted sons and daughters, good health, and warmth. So he made sacrifices, sometimes even the sacrifice of his own children (Jeremiah 19:5), to get blessings from Baal.

Through Elijah and Elisha, God demonstrated convincingly and miraculously that He grants His blessings freely. He provided rain or withheld it (1 Kings 17:1-18:1); He sent fire to consume the sacrifice on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:30-40); He gave the widow of Zarephath an endless supply of flour and oil (1 Kings 17:14); He raised the widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:18-23). God did those things, not

because a ritual had purchased His favor, but for His own good purposes.

When Israel, through corruptness and idolatry, departed from the covenant they had made with Him, Jehovah's anger would be kindled against them. The curse of the covenant was the national death of Israel (4:26), their separation from the land (4:26), their being scattered among the nations (4:27), and their serving other gods (4:28). "Heaven and earth" were to witness Jehovah's declaration of judgments (4:26; 30:19; 31:28).

God's warning came to fulfillment on many occasions, with the most prominent being the fall of Samaria (2 Kings 17:6) and the fall of Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:14-25:11). In his prayers to Jehovah, Nehemiah referred to Israel's apostasy and God's promise to scatter them (Nehemiah 1:7, 8).

GOD IS MERCIFUL

Even when Israel faced tribulation, God, unlike the gods of the nations around them, would not abandon them (4:30, 31). God's covenant is one of salvation, and its fulfillment is guaranteed by the oath of God to the patriarchs.

As Israel sought God in their anxiety, they would find Him to be merciful, "for the Lord your God is a compassionate God." True repentance would procure divine mercy, for God does not forget His part of the covenant, even if His own people forget theirs. Israel's hope rested not only on the fact that they were God's chosen ones, but on His mercy.

CONCLUSION

As Christians,

... we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him (1 Corinthians 8:4-6).

Unlike Israel of old, may we live unto God and Him only.