

Deuteronomy 4:15-24

Dr. Steven R. Cook

“So watch yourselves carefully [to remember and obey God; cf. vs 23], since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire [because God is Spirit; John 4:24],¹⁶ so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure [which would degrade God by reducing Him to the form of a creature; cf. Rom 1:22-25], the likeness of male or female,¹⁷ the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky,¹⁸ the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth.¹⁹ “And *beware* not to lift up your eyes to heaven [i.e., to the stellar luminaries] 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 [stellar bodies] which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.²⁰ “But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace [of suffering], from Egypt [Moses mentions God’s deliverance of Israel out of Egypt at least seventeen times; see Deut 1:27; 4:20, 37; 5:6; 6:12, 21; 7:8; 8:14; 9:12; 9:26; 13:5, 10; 15:15; 16:1; 20:1; 26:8; 29:25], to be a people for His own possession, as today [different from the environment they came from, and holy to the Lord].²¹ “Now the LORD was angry with me on your account [because Moses disobeyed the Lord; see Num 20:1-12], and swore that I would not cross the Jordan, and that I would not enter the good land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.²² “For I will die in this land, I shall not cross the Jordan, but you shall cross and take possession of this good land [Moses’ third mention of his failure and God’s judgment in order to warn Israel that their reward-inheritance of the land can be forfeited through disobedience; cf. Deut 1:37; 3:26-27].²³ “So watch yourselves [to obey the Lord, and not fail like Moses did], that you do not 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 [don’t worship idols].²⁴ “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire [destroying what is worthless and preserving what is valuable], a jealous God [i.e., zealous to protect what is His, not sharing His glory with vain idols; see Deut 5:9; 32:16, 21; Isa 42:8; 48:11].

Summary:

The main point of this pericope is Moses’ warning to Israel to watch themselves carefully and stay committed to the Lord, lest, through idolatry, they forfeit God’s blessing and experience His judgment. Moses opens this section with a warning for Israel to be very careful to maintain their relationship with the Lord, reminding them, “you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire” (Deut 4:15). Israel’s experience at Mount Sinai was to be instructive, for they had not seen God, and were told not to make an image of anything they thought represented Him, for this would

be a false representation and would diminish His attribute of transcendence. The Bible is very clear that “God is Spirit” and does not have physical form (John 4:24). To reduce God to an idol would be to think like the pagans around them, who sought to encapsulate their deities in the form of a physical image. The danger for Israel was that they would adopt the pagan mindset and “act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure” (Deut 4:16a), whether that of a person (Deut 4:16b), or “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, [or] the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth.” (Deut 4:17-18). There was also a danger they would lift up their 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” (Deut 4:19). These were activities prevalent in the culture of Egypt, from which they’d come, as well as activities of the culture of Canaan, to which they were going. Moses reminded them the Lord had taken them “out of the iron furnace, from Egypt, to be a people for His own possession, as today” (Deut 4:20). As a means of inculcation, Moses mentions God’s deliverance of Israel out of Egypt at least seventeen times in his messages to Israel (Deut 1:27; 4:20, 37; 5:6; 6:12, 21; 7:8; 8:14; 9:12; 9:26; 13:5, 10; 15:15; 16:1; 20:1; 26:8; 29:25). This was to reinforce their prior liberation from slavery, suffering, and idolatry. Moses’ desire was to entrench God’s past deliverance from Egypt into their consciousness and firmly establish their new identity as His special people, who bear a special responsibility before Him and others to live holy lives consistent with His character. Sadly, the first generation of Israelites kept wanting to return to Egypt, and future generations persisted in forgetting God’s deliverance and pursuing idols to worship. Sharing from his personal experience, Moses mentions for the third time his failure to obey the Lord and the consequences that followed, which included God’s refusal to let him enter the land (Deut 4:21-22; cf. Deut 1:37; 3:26-27).

The inheritance could be obtained by faith plus obedience, but it could also be lost by disobedience. Even Moses was excluded from the land of Canaan (i.e., the inheritance) because of his disobedience (Deuteronomy 4:21-22). Clearly Moses will be in heaven, but he forfeited his earthly inheritance. Failure to enter Canaan did not necessarily equate with failure to have eternal life; if so, Canaan provides a poor type of heaven. Even though Israel had become God’s firstborn son (Exodus 4:22-23), the entire wilderness generation, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, forfeited the inheritance due to the firstborn. God disinherited them, and they wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and most of them died there.¹

¹ Joseph C. Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings, 4th Edition* (Houston, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2018).

For a second time in this pericope, Moses cautions them, saying, “So watch yourselves, that you do not 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” (Deut 4:23). The command for Israel to “watch yourselves” had to do with idolatry in both places (vs. 15 and 23), which Moses reveals is synonymous with forgetting the covenant. “This connection is almost self-evident, for the very essence of the covenant is the truth that there is only one God, the Lord, and the recognition and worship of any other is nothing other than high treason, covenant violation of the grossest kind (cf. Deut 6:4–5).”² Idolatry is a sin that degrades God by reducing Him to the form of a creature and brings His judgment upon those who practice it. The reason God judges is because He “is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deut 4:24), who does not share His glory with others (Deut 5:9; 32:16, 21; Isa 42:8; 48:11). “God’s jealousy is His zeal for righteousness that springs from His holiness. He would not tolerate Israel’s allegiance to any other god. The connotation of pettiness that is present in the English word ‘jealousy’ is totally absent from the Hebrew idea.”³ Healthy jealousy seeks to protect what is properly loved, such as when a husband seeks to protect his wife from harm, or a mother to protect her children from what may injure them. God’s people can know His blessing and avoid His judgments if we live holy lives as He prescribes.

We’re called to be a separated people who are not conformed to this world (2 Cor 6:14–7:1; Rom 12:1–2), and yet the trend today is for churches to pattern ministry after what the world is doing. The philosophy is that the church will attract more people if the lost feel more comfortable with the services. The tragedy is that the sanctuary becomes a theater and “ministry” becomes entertainment. But Scripture and church history make it clear that what Campbell Morgan said is true: “The church did the most for the world when the church was the least like the world.” Jesus didn’t compromise with the world and yet He attracted sinners and ministered effectively to them (Luke 15:1–2). Unless we are a separated people, devoted wholly to the Lord, we can never follow His example.⁴

² Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 125.

³ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Dt 4:15.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 32.