

Deuteronomy 4:25-31

Dr. Steven R. Cook

“When you become the father of children and children’s children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly [by turning away from God; which Moses knew would happen; cf. [Deut 31:29](#)], and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil [[עָרָע ha-ra](#) – lit. *the evil*] in the sight of the LORD your God so as to provoke Him to anger [by theological treason],²⁶ I call heaven and earth [i.e., the whole creation] to witness against you today [i.e., to testify against Israel’s disobedience before the Supreme Court of heaven], that you will surely perish quickly [God’s judgment for Israel’s unfaithfulness] from the land [of Canaan] where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed [both physically, as well as quality of life].²⁷ “The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the [Gentile] nations where the LORD drives you [into exile].²⁸ “There you will serve gods [giving them over to pursue their desires], the work of man’s hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell [idols are physical and lifeless, in contrast to God who is spiritual and living; see [Psa. 115:3-11](#)].²⁹ “But from there [the place of humbling] 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 [i.e., renew their commitment to the covenant; cf. [Deut 6:5](#); [10:12-13](#)].³⁰ “When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you [by divine discipline], in the latter days you will return to the LORD your God and listen to His voice [so as to obey His covenant commands].³¹ “For the LORD your God is a compassionate God [forgiving their evil ways when they turn to Him]; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them [“the covenant with your fathers” refers to the bilateral covenant made with the exodus generation ([Lev 26:44-46](#)), not the unilateral covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ([Gen 17:7-8](#))].

Summary:

In this pericope Moses warns Israel they will experience exile-punishment if they turn away from the Lord and pursue idols (Deut 4:25-28), but also restoration and blessing if they humble themselves afterward and return to the Lord in obedience (Deut 4:29-31). Moses knows it’s possible for God’s people to be seduced by the culture around them and to turn away from the Lord and serve idols for selfish reasons. He anticipates a time when they will be in the land long enough to have children and grandchildren (Deut 4:25a), and realizes the possibility they will “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” (Deut 4:25b). The word *evil* ([עָרָע ra](#)) has the definite article ([עָרָע ha-ra](#)) and refers to a specific kind of evil, the worst kind of evil, namely, idolatry. “That this idiom commonly occurs with the article (“the evil”) suggests a particular kind of evil; violating

the Supreme Command (“You shall have no other gods before me,” 5:7) by manufacturing competing images of worship, which “provoke” Yahweh’s ire.”¹ Moses warns his people that if they commit this most egregious sin, God will summon them before His heavenly court and call the whole creation to witness against them (Deut 4:26a), specifying the judgment, saying, “you will surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed” (Deut 4:26b). As the supreme Judge of all the earth (Gen 18:25), God will execute His punishment, and “will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD drives you” (Deut 4:27). The punishment will consist of giving them what they want, saying, “there you will serve gods, the work of man's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell” (Deut 4:28).

In our text idolatry involves reverential acts of homage and submission to objects other than God—objects made either by human hands or by God’s own hands. While modern Westerners tend not to create concrete objects to be worshiped, we are constantly crafting new substitutes for God. Indeed an idol may be defined as anything (whether concrete or abstract) that rivals God—anything to which we submit and which we serve in place of God himself. The stuff of idols is not necessarily bad. The sun, moon, and stars are good; they govern the universe. Wood and stones are good and useful for limitless projects and tasks. But when we pervert their function and treat them as ultimate things on which our well-being and destiny depend, they rival God—and that makes them an idol... Idols are not necessarily physical. Many have identified money, sex, and power as pervasive idols in our day. However, the same may be true of our spouses, our children, our hobbies, our books. If we are unwilling to give them up for the sake of the kingdom, they have become idols and God is robbed of the exclusive worship he deserves.²

Sadly, Moses knew God’s people would do this (Deut 31:29), and by their own choice, bring upon themselves God’s judgment. As centuries passed and Israel repeatedly turned away from God and worshipped idols and engaged in all forms of corruption (even child sacrifice), the Lord eventually removed them from the land and sent them into captivity. First, the ten northern tribes of Israel were destroyed in 722 BC by the Assyrians, then the two southern tribes of Judah were taken into captivity in 586 BC by the Babylonians. But God, who righteously judges His arrogant people, will also be merciful to them if/when they humble themselves and return to Him in obedience. Moses said, “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. When you are in distress and all these things have come upon

¹ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 132.

² *Ibid.*, 139–140.

you, in the latter days you will return to the LORD your God and listen to His voice” (Deut 4:29-30). If Israelites were to find themselves living in captivity in a pagan land and humble themselves and return to the Lord, seeking Yahweh alone, He promises they would be restored to the place of blessing. The reason for God’s promise of restored blessing was twofold. First, because “the LORD your God is a compassionate God” (Deut 4:31a). Compassion is a chief characteristic of the Lord, as revealed in Scripture (Ex 34:6; 2 Ch 30:9; Neh 9:17, 31; Psa 78:38; 103:8; 111:4; 116:5; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2). Second, “He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them” (Deut 4:31). The Lord has integrity and will keep His covenant promises to bless His people if they abide by the terms of the contract-relationship. The phrase, “the covenant with your fathers,” refers to the bilateral covenant made with the exodus generation (Lev 26:44-46), not the unilateral covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 17:7-8). This understanding is reinforced by the language of the chapter, specifically when Moses mentions Israel entering into covenant with God at Mount Horeb/Sinai (see Deut 4:10-13; cf. Jer 34:13). “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.”³

A unilateral covenant is an unconditional contract in which one party promises to do something for another without any stipulations. A bilateral covenant is a conditional contract in which one party promises to bless or curse based on obedience or disobedience to specific commands. With the bilateral covenant, blessings and cursings were built into it, so the Israelites would know with certainty what to expect from God depending on how they treated their relationship with Him. This does not mean the Israelites could manipulate God to do their bidding; rather, it simply meant He was predictable and would do what He promised. A healthy relationship relies on predictable behavior.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 33.