

## The Choice of a New Generation | Deuteronomy

### *The Jealous God and His Rivals (On Idolatry)*

Deuteronomy 4.21-31, 5.1-10; 1<sup>st</sup> John 5.21

10.22.17

*Deuteronomy 4.21-23* "Now the LORD was angry with me on your account, 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. <sup>22</sup> "For I will die in this land, I shall not cross the Jordan, but you shall cross and take possession of this good land. <sup>23</sup> "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. <sup>24</sup> "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. <sup>25</sup> "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, <sup>26</sup> I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that 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. <sup>27</sup> "The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD drives you. <sup>28</sup> "There you will serve gods, the work of man's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. <sup>29</sup> "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. <sup>30</sup> "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. <sup>31</sup> "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.

*Deuteronomy 5.1-10* Then Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully. <sup>2</sup> "The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. <sup>3</sup> "The LORD did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all those of us alive here today. <sup>4</sup> "The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, <sup>5</sup> while I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain. He said, <sup>6</sup> 'I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. <sup>7</sup> 'You shall have no other gods before Me. <sup>8</sup> '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. <sup>9</sup> 'You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, <sup>10</sup> but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

*1 John 5.21* "Little children, guard yourselves from idols"

We're looking at The Book of Deuteronomy, the fifth and final book of Moses. It's a series of sermons or teachings given by Moses for the New Generation.

Their parents were born in Egypt as slaves...then rescued by God in the Exodus...and yet, due to their persistent unbelief, that Exodus Generation wandered in the desert until they all died...

And now Moses is instructing their children...giving the Law a second time (that's what Deuteronomy means – "second law"). Moses is giving Torah to a new generation...teaching them how to live in the Land of Promise...and preparing them to GO IN.

Earlier, we read from this passage, the whole of the Ten Commandments (also found in Exodus 20 – this is the second time) but in the sermon we're going to look only at the first two of the "Ten Words" and try to figure out some logic to the Ten Commandments. Why are they arranged this way...why is there such an apparent focus...almost a fixation on the matter of idolatry?

The Decalogue or Ten Commandments are a kind of expansion of God's basic requirements for all people i.e. to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves... The first five commands are about loving God and 6-10 are about loving people... but WHY are they arranged that way and WHY is the whole context so concentrated on issues of idolatry ....A N D ... doesn't this make the Ten Commandments sort of irrelevant to US because...probably very few of us have made statues of birds or bulls and offered incense at altars...so what, if anything, does idolatry mean to us?

So, let's ask:

- 1) Why is idolatry a big deal (then AND NOW)?
- 2) How could God's jealousy be a good thing?
- 3) What do we need to know about real worship?

Moses is thinking about dying. He recognizes that as much as God has blessed and used him in the Exodus and in the wilderness, he has joined the people in their rebellion and it will be a successor, Joshua, who takes this new generation into the Land NOT Moses.

And reflecting on his death, as if to say, "As I prepare to die, I'm compelled to issue an extremely urgent warning – I'm looking ahead to a lot of dangers that await you... but ABOVE ALL...ONE that is especially deadly and spiritually, socially, psychologically lethal: i.e. idolatry. (23) "Watch yourselves and do not forget the covenant of the LORD your God...by making a carved image..."

This is reiterated all the way through these early chapters. "You heard God speak at Sinai/Horeb but you saw NO FORM" (12) In other words, "Don't try to depict the God who can not be depicted!"

And then, when we come to the famous Ten Words, it turns out the first four have to do with worship and the first two have to do with the One/Unique God who cannot be sculpted...cannot be packaged.

And NOT only was this THE perennial/constant temptation for the Hebrew Church...not only is it addressed all throughout the Hebrew Bible...it ALSO shows up in the New Testament.

The Apostle John will end his First Letter with the ominous words; “Little children guard yourselves from idols.” And those closing words are really a kind of summary statement of his entire letter. It’s as if John says, “Or to sum up my whole letter in ONE short sentence, ‘Stay away from false imitations!’”

The parents of this New Generation who were about to enter the land...their parents had grown up in Egypt, surrounded by idols. They themselves would see idols everywhere in the Land... The ancient world was awash in gross idolatry...the attempt to contain the gods and the supernatural forces in statues so these forces could be influenced and controlled.

When we come to the time of Jesus Christ, Jerusalem and Israel were basically free from gross idolatry (no more statues) BUT idolatry had simply gone underground...and the apostles will sort of merge the First Commandments with the Tenth – greed or desire or coveting is the essence of idolatry. (Eph 5.5; Col 3.5)

In fact they will use a word “epithumia” meaning “over-desire” some 40 times in the New Testament to sort of internalize the whole concept of idolatry.

The essence of idolatry is the over-desire for anything other than God...something or someone that you HAVE to have...oftentimes a GOOD thing that we make into an ultimate thing.

It could be food (a good thing)... but we get weird about it. We use it as a substitute for love or inner peace... gluttony (eating when you've had enough) or other “eating disorders” can be expressions of idolatry – violations of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Commandments.

Clothing, a good thing, can be used as a source of significance (“the clothes make the man”).

Almost anything we trust to provide some sense of transcendent value or purpose or significance, to “complete” us... can be thought of as an idol.

Ed Welch has said that addictions are essentially a “worship disorder” – any addiction to substances (e.g. food, drugs, alcohol, chocolate) or a process (e.g. gambling, pornography, shopping, television) is invariably a worship disorder – a form of idolatry.

And in this urgent warning to the New Generation, Moses is already supplying rationale for why they should guard against it. First and foremost, v. 25, it’s “evil in the sight of God” and that’s really all we need to know... The One who made us and who knows us better than we’ll ever know ourselves calls it “evil” (and subsequent history of the Bible shows: idolatry is a source many other evils). It’s spiritual adultery (See Book of Hosea).

Second, it's destructive. It's a cosmic lie and it has a corrosive effect on persons and societies – v. 26, “you will surely perish quickly...and be utterly destroyed.”

Third, it leads to slavery. V. 28 “There you will serve gods, the work of man's hands”. The hope is that idols will serve US but we always end up serving them! The Bible writers will mock idols and those who serve them, “They have to be carried! HOW THEN CAN THEY POSSIBLE CARRY YOU?” WE have to support our habits – the habits NEVER support us!

Last, idols really don't work. We THINK that if we get a lot of recognition and acclaim that it'll make us feel special and secure and valuable but even if it's a whole stadium chanting your name, the idol of applause can't really fill you – (28) “ (they) neither see nor hear nor smell” Shopping really wasn't intended to fill you...other people (kids, spouse, boyfriend) – are unable to do what ONLY God can do.

And that's the thing that Augustine said, “Thou hast formed us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee”

And when this passage refers to God as jealous, THAT'S what it means. God is telling His people that no created thing can satisfy the deepest longings He has planted in the human heart. He wants us for Himself NOT because He needs us or because He's in any way threatened or worried that we'll find a better way and He'll be left out of the fun... All those ways of thinking are human projections...they're misguided attempts to think that God is like us.

You may know that Oprah Winfrey (and I hate to say anything negative about her because she's a great person in so many ways!) but it was this passage of Scripture that turned her away from the God of the Bible... She concluded that if God was jealous, then He must be petty and mean and insecure.

But it's just the opposite... God won't share us with the idols we make because ONLY He can contain us. Every other container is way too small...and if we try to find rest in anything other than Him...we will eventually be enslaved and destroyed.

We may feel free for a minute... Imagine a manatee who wanted to be free and go clubbin' on South Beach...and when they put him on the dance floor, he felt so satisfied...like he was born to boogie...but in about five minutes, he would just look grotesque and horrible... He has sought freedom outside of the realm for which he was made. So is everyone who looks for rest, for true and lasting peace and purpose and freedom in any source but God alone.

And the great truth of the whole Story is that THIS God, the jealous God who made us for unimaginable glory (“the eternal weight of glory” – 2 Cor 4.17) and who sees us making for ourselves broken wells that can't hold water...that can't satisfy us (Jer 2.13)... this God in order

to free us from the idols that enslave and eventually destroy us... this God stepped into our situation to rescue us from the rivals, our idols...to save us from ourselves.

Moses was the mediator who stood between God and the people – v. 5 “I was standing between the LORD and you...for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain...” Moses the mediator... But in time, another Mediator showed up, “Jesus Christ, the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises (Heb 8.6).

Moses was a great mediator...but he can't take us into the Land...for that we need a Better Mediator. We need God come into the valley where WE, (the spiritual adulterers that we are)...where we are dancing around our golden calves... trying to control the powers and define freedom in ways that become grotesque forms of slavery and always disappoint.

We need God to come into the valley...and then go up onto another Mountain...not Sinai... but Calvary.

And because He loved us...His unfaithful bride...this infinitely loving God came in Jesus Christ – to live like we were supposed to live...to die for our adulteries and to rise... so that we would know, “Here is the God we need... WE NEED HIS LOVE...like oxygen...we need His love...It's the ONLY way to be free!

Now what the Commandments DO for us...whoever believes in Jesus Christ begins to learn – NOT only that we regularly fall short of the commandments and we need a Savior to keep the commandments FOR us...but when we receive Jesus Christ by faith... and IN HIM we receive forgiveness and new life – THEN HE BEGINS TO LEAD US INTO TRUE WORSHIP.

He leads us to (v 23) “watch yourselves and do not forget the covenant” – that Abraham's Seed (Gal 3.16) has come to fulfill the covenant, the promise. True worship includes the practice of “watching ourselves” so that we don't return to “cheap imitations” – “Little children guard yourselves from idols.”

We recognize that we too have grown up in Egypt, a place that is awash in idols...and we do often wander to find satisfaction in the arms of rival lovers who always end up abusing and destroying us.

And when we do...when we find ourselves trusting in our own morality...in our comforts...in our pleasures ...in our privacy... in our securities... all of which we know will disappoint – then Jesus Christ says, “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. 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.” (vv. 30-31)

True worship is fixated on the Good News that our God is indeed jealous because He loves us too much to leave us in the arms of the abusive idols.

True worship loves to repent...to return to our compassionate God... we're NOT afraid to look at our idolatrous hearts because our Great High Priest has freed us of the penalty and is even now making us a New Generation of worshipers who worship in Spirit and in truth (John 4).

We are being called...again and again...by the still small voice...He has hushed the Laws loud thunder; He has quenched Mount Sinai's flame...

And we're learning to let Him define freedom for us... He knows infinitely better than YOU what it means for YOU to be free...Behold, my soul at freedom set, my Stand-In, my Surety, has paid my dreadful debt...not all that hell or sin can say shall turn His heart, His love away.

Let us worship God.