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Deuteronomy 29:14-21 “Foolish Thinking”

Intro. Do you seek peace and well-being for your life? Do you want to be among the blessed of the Lord rather than those who are cursed by their own unbelief and sin? Well today, we are going to read of an individual who made a tragic mistake, thinking he could have peace and well-being even though he turned from the Lord to embrace the false gods of this world.

Now here in Deuteronomy 29 we read of Moses calling the people together to renew the covenant with God once again, this time while they were in the land of Moab. This chapter begins his climactic third and final sermon before he dies. After reminding them of God’s gracious acts toward them, he said in v.9, “therefore keep the words of this covenant, and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do.” Likewise, he says in v.12, “that you may enter into covenant with the LORD your God....” A covenant is a binding agreement which often served as the basis of an ongoing relationship between two parties. We see from v.11 that the Gentiles among them could also enter the covenant and become a part of the people of God. We know from the last of v.15 that future generations could enter into this covenant as well.

There is no doubt that Moses was concerned that his people could quickly turn away from the Lord and turn to idols. So he warns them not to take the provisions and warnings of the covenant lightly. Likewise, I am concerned we could easily be only one generation away from widespread apostasy. We are already witnessing that trend right here in the United States. Unless we teach our children and grandchildren the truth of the Lord, and unless we frequently reaffirm our commitment to the Lord, we could experience the terrible consequences that we read about in our text of Scripture.

In a sense the Lord’s Supper is a covenant renewal ceremony. It reminds us of the fact that Jesus promised to ratify the New Covenant by the shedding of His blood. In the Lord’s Supper we are to repent of our sins, confess our sins and claim the forgiveness that God provided through His New Covenant. We reaffirm our commitment to live for the Lord. We gather once again to observe the Lord’s Supper together, and I will make a new application based on this text of Scripture which you probably haven’t thought about.

So I want to expound the meaning of our text and seek to make application to us today. The first appeal from our text that I want to share with you is this:

I. DON’T BE ENTICED BY FALSE RELIGION

The first two of the 10 Commandments address this topic and are the most fundamental commandments in our relationship with God. When Moses restated the law here in Deuteronomy, he said in 5:7-9, “You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image — any likeness of *anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, *am* a jealous God....” These commandments addressed a significant problem in the ancient world, and Moses was concerned that the temptation of idolatry would prove too strong. God is a jealous God and will not allow rivals.

Now notice from vv.16-18 how Moses addresses this problem, “(for you know that we dwelt in the land of Egypt and that we came through the nations which you passed by, and you saw their

abominations and their idols which were among them — wood and stone and silver and gold); so that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations....” Israel had already made a golden calf as an idol (Exod. 32:1-14), proving that this temptation to idolatry was truly a danger to be concerned about. Though made by Israelite craftsmen as a representation of the Lord, the golden calf ultimately was inspired by Egyptian idolatry.¹

Idolatry is not much of a problem in a society like ours with such a strong Judeo-Christian heritage, but I can assure you that there are many among us who have embraced a deity that is different from the God who is revealed in the Bible. They believe in a Santa Claus type god, or some other god that is more palatable than the God of the Bible. Also, Paul said in Colossians 3:5 that covetousness is idolatry. If material things or material wealth is more important to you than God, then you have an idol in your life.

So what should you do to stay faithful and true to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? First of all, we see from our text that you should:

A. Guard Your Heart - Note the fundamental problem stated in v.18, “whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations....” In Hebrew the “heart” is a term that identifies the seat of thought as well as of the will, emotion, and passion. Unbelief and sin are both rooted in the heart (Mt. 15:19). Before sin is manifested on the outside, it begins in the heart. In fact, Moses warns in v.18 of “a root bearing bitterness....”

Even so we need to guard our hearts against turning away from the Lord Jesus to embrace the many forms of false religion that are about us. Dt. 6:5 commands that we are to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” There is only one true God, one true Savior and one true gospel. Guard your heart. Only you and God know whether your heart is straying from Him, at least initially. As we see in v.4, we ought to ask God to give us a perceptive and loyal heart.

B. Accept Personal Responsibility – The doctrine of individual responsibility before God is clearly stated here. While in v.18 Moses mentions the possibility of an entire family or tribe turning from God to idols, the primary focus of this text is on the individual. Just because you are part of a Christian family, or a church, or a nation that has “In God We Trust” as our national motto, that does not mean that such an association will enable you to spurn the grace of God and embrace a false god with impunity. Apostasy in a family, a community, or a nation always begins with individuals, from whom it spreads to others.

So accept your own personal responsibility to stay true to the Lord. No one can make that decision and commitment for you, including a Christian group to which you belong.

C. Recognize that False Religion Is Despicable and Foolish - Moses says in v.17, “you saw their abominations and their idols which were among them — wood and stone and silver and gold.” He uses two words to describe the gods and idols of these nations. The word translated “abominations” refers to something that is abhorrent, disgusting, or detestable. That’s how God views idols, whether visible or invisible. We should have the same attitude. Then the word translated “idols” (*ghil-lool*) based on a verb that refers to something that is round or rolled about, like a log. Indeed, idols were often made from logs that were carved and overlaid with gold or

¹ Also, Amos 5:25-26 says, “Did you offer Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? You also carried Sikkuth your king and Chiun, your idols, The star of your gods, Which you made for yourselves.” These idols are only mentioned here, though the first is a reference to Moloch according to the LXX and Acts 7:43.

silver. Some of the bitterest satire of the Bible is reserved for idols and those who worship them. Moses derides the foolishness of idolatry back in 4:28 when he said that they are “the work of men’s hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell.” They are pathetic lifeless creation of human hands. These so-called gods can do nothing. How foolish people are to worship and serve them!

Even so, the gods that people worship today cannot save us from our sins. They cannot bring blessing. They are just human creations, giving people the kind of deities they want. We should recognize how abhorrent other gods are to the one true God, and we should recognize how foolish a person is to worship them or pray to them.

D. Don’t Follow the World - Moses acknowledges that such false religion was practiced in Egypt where they came from, as well as by all the nations around them. Idolatry was dominant and pervasive. The idolatry of Moab may have been especially in his mind (4:3; Num. 25:1-3). He knew the strong tendency of humanity to follow the crowd, to follow the world and their practices. He knew they would cast a longing eye to be like the other nations.

Even so, the Christian is surrounded with the influences that are unfavorable to faithfulness to the Lord. We are tempted to want to be like the world. Yet we are to be a holy people. We are to be different from the world and faithful to God. Don’t follow the beliefs, values, and practices of the world!

So Moses has made a strong appeal not to allow their hearts to be enticed by false religion and follow the false religion of world. Now he warns of what will happen to those who do not guard their hearts and are deceived into thinking that they can give verbal assent to the covenant of the Lord and yet secretly go after the gods of this world. So my next main point is this:

II. BE WARNED OF THE END RESULT OF TURNING FROM GOD

Later in Dt. 32:29 Moses says, “O that they were wise, *that* they understood this, *that* they would consider their latter end!” A fool does consider the long-term consequences of his beliefs and actions. A wise person does. So listen to the warnings that Moses gives here. The threat of judgment may not be the noblest ground for evangelistic pleading, but it is sometimes necessary.

So what are the consequence of turning from the Lord to embrace the gods of false religion?

A. It Leads to Bitterness - Moses says in the last of v.18, “that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood.” The Hebrew word translated “bitterness” (*Rosh*) stands for a plant of a very bitter taste, as we may see from the frequency with which it is combined as here with the Hebrew word for “wormwood” (*la’anaah*).²

This is similar to what Moses says in Dt. 32:32-33, “For their vine *is* of the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gomorrah: their grapes *are* grapes of gall (*Rosh*), their clusters *are* bitter: Their wine *is* the poison (*Rosh*) of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps.” And so the first Hebrew word can also refer to something poisonous (see Job 20:16). The point is that the person who turns from the Lord to false gods and the sin that results from it will experience bitterness and death, though at first he seems to find happiness and pleasure. After all, it takes a while for a root to produce the bitter fruit of rebellion and unbelief. Sin seldom appears in its true color at the time of temptation.

This verse is very important, for it is quoted in part in Heb. 12:14-15, “Pursue ... holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God;

² See Jer. 9:15; 23:15; Lam. 3:19; and Amos 6:12.

lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.” Here we see that such defection from the faith not only defiles one person but others as well.

So a heart that turns from the true God to embrace a false god and a life of sin is like a root that eventually bears the fruit of bitterness and death. It has happened to many people. Don’t let this happen to you!

B. It Leads to Hypocrisy – We read in v.19 of a man who “hears the words of this curse.” In other words, he hears someone reading from chapter 28. Furthermore, the context is describing the people gathering to reaffirm their acceptance of the covenant with God. So Moses is describing a person who, standing in the audience and joining in the public declaration of loyalty to God, nevertheless had idolatrous intentions. So the *root bearing* bitterness may refer to a person among God’s people who may not appear to be an idolater, but in time manifests such sin of the heart, and influences others.

How many times have people gathered with others for a communion service, taken the elements, and yet in their hearts instead of confessing their sins, they have every intention of continuing in them. They are hypocrites! Don’t make that mistake. The sin of hypocrisy is added to a person’s other sins and leads to a more bitter end.

Such hypocrisy is further brought out as I discuss yet another consequence of turning from the Lord:

C. It Leads to Foolish Thinking - Moses says in v.19, “and so it may not happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my heart’ — as though the drunkard could be included with the sober.” Moses had already warned in the previous chapter that a series of curses will fall upon the one who turns from the Lord and turns to false gods and the sins of the world. Yet here he describes a man thinking that such curses will not fall upon him though he turns from the Lord. Instead, he blesses (*barak*) himself and imagines that he will have peace or wellbeing, as well as the other blessings promised in chapter 28 unconditionally. Some believe that to bless himself means “to congratulate himself.” But I take the meaning of the word literally. He may be reciting the blessings of Deuteronomy 28 upon himself though his beliefs and actions will instead bring the curses of Deuteronomy 28. To him such blessing of himself is nothing more than the mouthing of magical words designed to bring blessing and protection. He doubts and denies God’s Word and instead believes the lie of the devil spoken to Eve, “You shall not surely die.”

Furthermore, he imagines blessing and peace for himself in spite of the fact of what he says here, “I follow the dictates of my heart....” The word translated “dictates” can be used in a good sense to denote firmness, yet it is generally used in a bad sense, denoting hardness or stubbornness of heart. For example, the same combination of words is used in Ps. 81:12, “So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels.”³ In other words, even though he will follow his stubborn heart to turn from the Lord, and embrace false gods and sin, he expects to have peace and blessing instead of the curse that brings the opposite.

Now notice Moses’ comment in the last of v.19, “as though the drunkard could be included with the sober.” This is most likely an incorrect translation. Everywhere else the word translated “drunkard” is translated something like “well-watered” (Isa. 58:11; Jer. 31:12). Most of the time the

³ Likewise, Jer. 11:8 says, “Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone followed the dictates of his evil heart; therefore I will bring upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but which they have not done.” There are many other examples where Jeremiah uses the same combination of words, perhaps reflecting on Deuteronomy 29:19.

word translated “sober” refers to someone that is thirsty (8 out of 9 occurrences). What is well watered is a picture of the blessings of the first part of chapter 28, and the dry, thirsty conditions may depict the curses of the last part of chapter 28.⁴ Yet to arrive at the true meaning, we need to understand that most of the time the Hebrew word translated “included” refers to being swept away in judgment or in battle. Thus, the HCSB translates the last part as, “This will lead to the destruction of the well-watered /land/ as well as the dry /land/.” You see, the combination of words “watered” and “dry” may form a figure of speech denoting totality. All, wet and dry, would be consumed in fiery judgment. So instead of the hoped-for blessing would come the dreaded “curses of this book” that all together were the lot of covenant violators.

So how foolish it is to think that one can turn from the true God, embrace false gods in their permissive lifestyles, and somehow reap blessing and well-being instead of a curse. The Bible and nature itself teaches that you reap *what* you sow, and not something else. As Paul says in Gal. 6:8, if you sow to the flesh you will reap corruption, not life and well-being.

The apostle Paul noted the same problem of foolish thinking in Romans 1:21-22, “although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools.”

Why would he even think that he could secretly worship other gods in the form of idols and have peace in his life? One reason is that he supposed that identification with Israel and participation in the formalities of religion would protect him. It’s like the nominal church member who regards his association with Christians and his presence at worship service as an insurance policy against coming judgment. There is no hiding place for the rebellious sinner, least of all in the congregation of God’s people.

Such a person described here is also a practical atheist. He leaves God out of the calculation.

There is a strong contrast between our foolish thinking and the revelation given by the Lord in v.29, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” We should give heed to the truth that God has revealed to us.

D. It Leads to Severe Judgment - The words which describe the anger of God against such foolish hypocrisy are terrible in their intensity. Moses says in vv.20-21, “The LORD would not spare him; for then the anger of the LORD and His jealousy would burn against that man, and every curse that is written in this book would settle on him, and the LORD would blot out his name from under heaven. And the LORD would separate him from all the tribes of Israel for adversity, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this Book of the Law.” Since Moses said, “the Lord would not spare him,” that may indicate that intercession to spare, either by the man himself or a priest or a family member, was made. Yet such intercession would be pointless in such a case. It reminds me of what God said in Jer. 15:1, “*Even* if Moses and Samuel stood before Me, My mind *would not be* favorable toward this people. Cast *them* out of My sight, and let them go forth.” Therefore, the consequences of such foolish thinking and actions will be severe. Actually, the Hebrew indicates that the Lord’s anger and passionate jealousy will “smoke” against that man, that is breakout in destructive fire. The New Testament speaks of the fire of hell even more than heaven. Is that not the ultimate fulfillment of this warning? Here we also see that the Lord knows how to single out the individual for destruction, just as an advanced missile in modern warfare can

⁴ note how the word is used in Isa. 44:3, “For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground.”

strike with pinpoint accuracy. As already stated, such a person cannot find protection by being a part of a group of believers.

Now folks, this is not just the theology of the Old Testament. The apostle Paul says in Rom. 11:22, “Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God....” God is both and don’t you let some false teacher tell you otherwise.

Both Moses concern about idolatry and the judgment that would surely come proved to be true. Within a generation or two of taking possession of the land, Israel turned to idols, as we see in the book of Judges. Even Moses own grandson was among the idolaters, according to Judges 18:30 (NKJV, LXX). They continued to do so in the historical records of the Bible, and as indicated in the writings of the prophets. So just as God warned, He swept away the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. and the southern kingdom in 586 B.C. Though God graciously restored the nation, they committed the ultimate sin of rejecting and killing God’s Son and once again God swept them away and scattered them in 70 A.D., just as we read in v.28. For the next 1800 years the land of Israel became a desolate, dry wilderness to a large degree, just as we read in v.23. Only since the re-establishment of Israel in 1948 has a significant portion of the land been restored.

Conclusion: Folks, it gives me no pleasure to preach such a message, but if I do not preach it, who will? Such a message is rarely heard from the pulpits of America these days. You say, “I do not believe in such a God as described here.” If that is the case, then you have just created your own God. That is the very sin that I have been warning about today.

So don’t be enticed by the feel-good and indulgent gods of the modern world. The true God was so serious about sin and ungodliness that He required the sacrifice of His Son on a cross to save us from our sin. And if He would not spare His own son because of His righteousness and holiness, what makes you think he will spare you if you do not accept the terms of His New Covenant, to repent of your sins and trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord?

Sources: Donard F. Ackland, *Studies in Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1964); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2019; Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); Eugene H. Merrill, *New American Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); H. D. M. Spence & Joseph S. Exell, ed., *The Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977); John D. W. Watts, *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy*, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Broadman, 1970). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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