

INTRODUCTION TO DEUTERONOMY CHAPTER 13

Moses is still upon that necessary subject concerning the peril of idolatry. In the close of the foregoing chapter he had cautioned them against the peril that might arise from their predecessors the Canaanites. In this chapter he cautions them against the rise of idolatry from among themselves; they must take heed lest any should draw them to idolatry,

I. By the pretence of prophecy, #De 13:1-5.

II. By the pretence of friendship and relation, #De 13:6-11.

III. By the pretence of numbers, #De 13:12-18. But in all these cases the temptation must be resolutely resisted and the tempters punished and cut off.

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 5.

Here is,

I. A very strange supposition, #De 13:1,2.

1. It is strange that there should arise any among themselves, especially any pretending to vision and prophecy, who should instigate them to *go and serve other gods*. Was it possible that any who had so much knowledge of the methods of divine revelation as to be able to personate a prophet should yet have so little knowledge of the divine nature and will as to go himself and entice his neighbours *after other gods*? Could an Israelite ever be guilty of such impiety? Could a man of sense ever be guilty of such absurdity? We see it in our own day, and therefore may think it the less strange; multitudes that profess both learning and religion yet exciting both themselves and others, not only to worship God by images, but to give divine honour to saints and angels, which is no better than *going after other gods to serve them*; such is the power of strong delusions.

2. It is yet more strange that the sign or wonder given for the confirmation of this false doctrine should come to pass. Can it be thought that God himself should give any countenance to such a vile proceeding? Did ever a false prophet work a true miracle? It is only supposed here for two reasons:--

(1.) To strengthen the caution here given against hearkening to such a one.

"Though it were possible that he should work a true miracle, yet you must not believe him if he tell you that you must serve other gods, for the divine law against that is certainly perpetual and unalterable."

The supposition is like that in #Ga 1:8, *If we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you--which does not prove it possible that an angel should preach another gospel, but strongly expresses the certainty and perpetuity of that which we have received. So here,*

(2.) It is to fortify them against the danger of impostures and lying wonders (#2Th 2:9):

"Suppose the credentials he produces be so artfully counterfeited that you cannot discern the cheat, nor disprove them, yet, if they are intended to draw you to the service of other gods, that alone is sufficient to disprove them; no evidence can be admitted against so clear a truth as that of the unity of the Godhead, and so plain a

law as that of worshipping the *one only living and true God.*"

We cannot suppose that the God of truth should set his seal of miracles to a lie, to so gross a lie as is supposed in that temptation, *Let us go after other gods.* But if it be asked, Why is this false prophet permitted to counterfeit this broad seal? It is answered here (**#De 13:3**):

"The Lord you God proveth you. He suffers you to be set upon by such a temptation to try your constancy, that both those that are perfect and those that are false and corrupt may be made manifest. It is to prove you; therefore see that you acquit yourselves well in the trial, and stand your ground."

II. Here is a very necessary charge given in this case,

1. Not to yield to the temptation:

"Thou shalt not hearken to the words of that prophet, #De 13:3. Not only thou shalt not do the thing he tempts thee to, but thou shalt not so much as patiently hear the temptation, but reject it with the utmost disdain and detestation. Such a suggestion as this is not to be so much as parleyed with, but the ear must be stopped against it. Get thee behind me, Satan."

Some temptations are so grossly vile that they will not bear a debate, nor may we so much as give them the hearing. What follows (**#De 13:4**), *You shall walk after the Lord*, may be looked upon,

(1.) As prescribing a preservative from the temptation:

"Keep close to your duty, and you keep out of harm's way. God never leaves us till we leave him."

Or,

(2.) As furnishing us with an answer to the temptation; say,

"It is written, Thou shalt walk after the Lord, and cleave unto him; and therefore what have I to do with idols?"

2. Not to spare the tempter, **#De 13:5**. That prophet shall be *put to death*, both to punish him for the attempt he has made (the seducer must die, though none were seduced by him--a design upon the crown is treason) and to prevent his doing further mischief. This is called *putting away the evil*. There is no way of removing the guilt but by removing the guilty; if such a criminal be not punished, those that should punish him make themselves responsible. And thus the *mischief must be put away*; the infection must be kept from spreading by cutting off the gangrened limb, and putting away the mischief-makers. Such Dangerous diseases as these must be taken in time.

Ver. 6. thru Ver. 11.

Further provision is made by this branch of the statute against receiving the infection of idolatry from those that are near and dear to us.

I. It is the policy of the tempter to send his solicitations by the hand of those whom we

love, whom we least suspect of any ill design upon us, and whom we are desirous to please and apt to conform ourselves to. The enticement here is supposed to come from a brother or child that are near by nature, from a wife or friend that are near by choice, and are to us *as our own souls*, #De 13:6. Satan tempted Adam by Eve and Christ by Peter. We are therefore concerned to stand upon our guard against a bad proposal when the person that makes it can pretend to an interest in us, that we may never sin against God in compliment to the best friend we have in the world. The temptation is supposed to be private: he will *entice thee secretly*, implying that idolatry is a work of darkness, which dreads the light and covets to be concealed, and in which the sinner promises himself, and the tempter promises him, secrecy and security. Concerning the false gods proposed to be served,

1. The tempter suggests that the worshipping of these gods was the common practice of the world; and, if they limited their adorations to an invisible Deity, they were singular, and like nobody, for these gods were the *gods of the people round about them*, and indeed of all the nations of the earth, #De 13:7. This suggestion draws many away from religion and godliness, that it is an unfashionable thing; and they make their court to the world and the flesh because these are the *gods of the people that are round about them*.
2. Moses suggests, in opposition to this, that it had not been the practice of their ancestors; they are gods which *thou hast not known, thou nor thy fathers*. Those that are born of godly parents, and have been educated in pious exercises, when they are enticed to a vain, loose, careless way of living, should remember that those are ways which *they have not known, they nor their fathers*. And will they thus degenerate?

II. It is our duty to prefer God and religion before the best friends we have in the world.

1. We must not, in complaisance to our friends, break God's law (#De 13:8):

"Thou shalt not consent to him, nor go with him to his idolatrous worship, no, not for company, or curiosity, or to gain a better interest in his affections."

It is a general rule, *If sinners entice thee, consent thou not*, #Pr 1:10.

2. We must not, in compassion to our friends, obstruct the course of God's justice. He that attempts such a thing must not only be looked upon as an enemy, or dangerous person, whom one should be afraid of, and swear the peace against, but as a criminal or traitor, whom, in zeal for our sovereign Lord, his crown and dignity, we are bound to inform against, and cannot conceal without incurring the guilt of a great misprision (#De 13:9): *Thou shalt surely kill him*. By this law the persons enticed were bound to the seducer, and to give evidence against him before the proper judges, that he might suffer the penalty of the law, and that without delay, which the Jews say is here intended in that phrase, as it is in the Hebrew, *killing thou shalt kill him*. Neither the prosecution nor the execution must be deferred; and he that was first in the former must be first in the latter, to show that he stood to his testimony:

"Thy hand shall be first upon him, to mark him out as an anathema, and then the hands of all the people, to put him away as an accursed thing."

The death he must die was that which was looked upon among the Jews as the severest of all deaths. He must be stoned: and his accusation written is that he has sought to thrust thee away, by a kind of violence, *from the Lord thy God*, #De 13:10. Those are certainly our worst enemies that would *thrust us from God*, our best friend; and whatever draws us

to sin, separates between us and God, is a design upon our life, and to be resented accordingly. And, lastly, here is the good effect of this necessary execution (#De 13:11): *All Israel shall hear and fear. They ought to hear and fear;* for the punishment of crimes committed is designed *in terrorem--to terrify*, and so to prevent their repetition. And it is to be hoped they will hear and fear, and by the severity of the punishment, especially when it is at the prosecution of a father, a brother, or a friend, will be made to conceive a horror of the sin, as exceedingly sinful, and to be afraid of incurring the like punishment themselves. *Smite the scorner* that sins presumptuously, *and the simple*, that is in danger of sinning carelessly, *will beware*.

Ver 12. thru Ver. 18.

Here the case is put of a city revolting from its allegiance to the God of Israel, *and serving other gods*.

I. The crime is supposed to be committed,

1. By one of the cities of Israel, that lay within the jurisdiction of their courts. The church then *judged those only that were within*, #1Co 5:12,13. And, even when they were ordered to preserve their religion in the first principles of it by fire and sword, yet they were not allowed by fire and sword to propagate it. Those that are born within the allegiance of a prince, if they take up arms against him, are dealt with as traitors, but foreign invaders are not so. The city that is here supposed to have become idolatrous is one that formerly worshipped the true God, but had now withdrawn to other gods, which intimates how great the crime is, and how sore the punishment will be, of those that, *after they have known the way of righteousness, turn aside from it*, #2Pe 2:21.
2. It is supposed to be committed by the generality of the inhabitants of the city, for we may conclude that, if a considerable number did retain their integrity, those only that were guilty were to be destroyed, and the city was to be spared for the sake of the righteous in it; for *will not the Judge of all the earth do right?* No doubt he will.
3. They are supposed to be drawn to idolatry by *certain men, the children of Belial*, men that would endure no yoke (so it signifies), that neither fear God nor regard man, but shake off all restraints of law and conscience, and are perfectly lost to all manner of virtue; these are those that say,

"Let us serve other gods,"

that will not only allow, but will countenance and encourage, our immoralities. Belial is put for *the devil* (#2Co 6:15), and the children of Belial are his children. These withdraw the inhabitants of the city; for a little of this old leaven, when it is entertained, soon leavens the whole lump.

II. The cause is ordered to be tried with a great deal of care (#De 13:14): *Thou shalt enquire and make search*. They must not proceed upon common fame, or take the information by hearsay, but must examine the proofs, and not give judgment against them unless the evidence was clear and the charge fully made out. God himself, before he destroyed Sodom, is said to have come down to see whether its crimes were according to the clamour, #Ge 18:21. In judicial processes it is requisite that time, and care, and pains, be taken to find out the truth, and that search be made without any passion, prejudice, or partiality. The Jewish writers say that, though particular persons who were idolaters might be judged by the inferior courts, the defection of a city was to be tried by the great Sanhedrim; and, if it appeared that they were thrust away to idolatry, two learned men were

sent to them to admonish and reclaim them. If they repented, all would be well; if not, then all Israel must go up to war against them, to testify their indignation against idolatry and to stop the spreading of the contagion.

III. If the crime were proved, and the criminals were incorrigible, the city was to be wholly destroyed. If there were a few righteous men in it, no doubt they would remove themselves and their families out of such a dangerous place, and then all the inhabitants, men, women, and children, must be put to the sword (#De 13:15), all the spoil of the city, both shop-goods and the furniture of houses, must be brought into the marketplace and burned, and the city itself must be laid in ashes and never built again, #De 13:16. The soldiers are forbidden, upon pain of death, to convert any of the plunder to their own use, #De 13:17. It was a devoted thing, and dangerous to meddle with, as we find in the case of Achan. Now,

1. God enjoins this severity of show what a jealous God he is in the matters of his worship, and how great a crime it is to serve other gods. Let men know that God will not give his glory to another, nor his praise to graven images.
2. He expects that magistrates, having their honour and power from him, should be concerned for his honour, and use their power for *terror to evil doers*, else they bear the sword in vain.
3. The faithful worshippers of the true God must take all occasions to show their just indignation against idolatry, much more against atheism, infidelity, and irreligion.
4. It is here intimated that the best expedient for the turning away of God's anger from a land is to execute justice upon the *wicked of the land* (#De 13:17), that the Lord may *turn from the fierceness of his anger*, which was ready to break out against the whole nation, for the wickedness of that one apostate city. It is promised that, if they would thus root wickedness out of their land, God would multiply them. They might think it impolitic, and against the interest of their nation, to ruin a whole city for a crime relating purely to religion, and that they should be more sparing of the blood of Israelites:

"Fear not that"

(says Moses),

"God will multiply you the more; the body of your nation will lose nothing by the letting out of this corrupt blood."

Lastly, Though we do not find this law put in execution in all the history of the Jewish church (Gibeah was destroyed, not for idolatry, but immorality), yet for the neglect of the execution of it upon the inferior cities that served idols God himself, by the army of the Chaldeans, put it in execution upon Jerusalem, the head city, which, for its apostasy from God, was utterly destroyed and laid waste, and lay in ruins seventy years. Though idolaters may escape punishment from men (nor is this law in the letter of it binding now, under the gospel), yet the Lord our God will not suffer them to escape his righteous judgements. The New Testament speaks of communion with idolaters as a sin which, above any other, *provokes the Lord to jealousy*, and dares him as if we were *stronger than he*, #1Co 10:21,22.