

**Flee Idolatry (Deuteronomy 4:15-31)****Matthew Williams****January 8, 2022**

Self-awareness is an important thing. It's helpful in the physical realm, to recognize you need a shower, or your clothes don't match, or the person in front of you needs some personal space. It's helpful in the emotional realm, to recognize you feel angry and should not respond to that Facebook post, to notice you've been cared for and should communicate gratitude, or to realize you're spent and should take time to rest.

People who lack self-awareness often have trouble in relationships. You end up offending people or pushing them away and have no idea why. And because you don't know why, it's hard to grow or change. If you lack self-awareness in a physical or emotional sense, the consequences are significant. But they are immeasurably more significant in the spiritual realm. For spiritual self-awareness is a matter of life and death – not just temporally but eternally.

Rom 14:10–12, "For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us will give an account of himself to God." Your eternal life depends on having the spiritual self-awareness to know where you stand before your Creator and King, the one to whom you will give account. Sadly, many are more aware of their physical appearance in the bathroom mirror than of their spiritual condition in the eyes of God.

We need to cry out the psalmist (Ps 139:23-24), "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" As the Apostle Paul exhorts us in 2 Cor 13:5, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves."

I'm not talking about evaluating whether you're a good person. I'm talking about discerning whether you are responding to the salvation from sin and death Jesus won for us at the cross, by trusting and obeying the Lord. Today, are you looking to God to give you life or are you looking to someone or something else? That's the test. And it's a test Israel repeatedly failed in the Old Testament. Why? Because she

kept leaning the weight of their life on idols, on all manner of false gods, instead of the One True God.

Deut 4 is part of a long sermon Moses preached to the people of Israel shortly before she entered the Promised Land of Canaan. It contains both a sober warning and a precious promise. The warning is found in vv. 15-28. Moses answers the question, "Why should we flee idolatry?" The precious promise is found in vv. 29-31. Moses answers the question, "How should we respond to idolatry? What should we do when we recognize we have fallen away from worshiping the One True God and have been chasing an idol?"

He cuts right to the chase with a warning in v. 15. "Therefore watch yourselves very carefully." There are a lot of things I imagine you are prone to watch this year: football, the stock market, your weight, your kids, new movies, your grades, what your friends are posting on social media, the list goes on. Friend, your number one priority in 2023 is to watch yourself, to tend well to the condition of your own soul – not to the selfish exclusion of other priorities, but as your first priority.

And not merely to watch, but to watch carefully. And not merely to watch carefully, but to watch very carefully. The way a new dad watches their toddler around a roaring bonfire, or the way Lionel Messi watches the opposing team. Why? Because the greatest spiritual dangers you will face this year are not around you. They are within you. It's the danger of idolatry.

Look at v. 16. "Beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure..." And then Moses gives a long list of created things, concluding in v. 19, do not "be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them." It's easy to wonder, "Why would anyone worship a wooden statue of an animal?" We think we know better than to do something so foolish, all the while finding our identity in our work, chasing pleasure in sex, and entertaining ourselves with hours of visual media.

We worship our body image. We worship our reputation in the eyes of men. We worship our political tribe. We worship our houses and cars and bank accounts and the success of our children and a thousand other idols that call from the heights, "Live for me, hope in me, find your joy in me, devote yourself to me, I will satisfy your soul."

Good things? In many cases, yes. Able to give you enduring life, joy, and peace? Not in the least. They're false gods. Pretenders all. Yet they remain attractive for the same reason they were attractive to Israel. They feel like something we can control, something we can use or leverage to secure the "good life" in whatever way we define it. So we give more, we pursue more, we sacrifice more, only to find it's never enough.

And yet Moses' objections to idolatry in Deut 4 are not fundamentally therapeutic. He doesn't elevate Israel's felt needs for agricultural prosperity, sexual fertility, or military security and say, "Let's be reasonable. That statue can't help you. God can. So on balance, you should go with him." No. The reasons Moses gives to flee idolatry are gloriously God-centered. I'll briefly highlight four of them.

### **1) Because God has told us who he is (vv. 15-18)**

Follow the logic in v. 15. "Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware let you act corruptly by making a carved image..." What is the fundamental problem with idolatry? It functionally turns God into something he is not instead of embracing him for who he has revealed himself to be.

He didn't reveal himself to Israel on Mt. Sinai in the form of a visible figure. He revealed himself through words. Out of the inscrutable, burning splendor of his holiness, the Lord made himself known by speaking to his people. And the means by which God has chosen to reveal himself is the means we must rely upon to know him for who he is. Otherwise, we will never worship him for who he is. We will worship false gods of our own making that look just like us.

We cannot discover, let alone create, the One True God for ourselves. If we are to know him for who he really is, he must make himself known for who he is. And that's exactly what he has done for us through the gift of his Word. The contrast between Yahweh and the idols of Canaan is fundamentally the difference between false gods who have never spoken because they have no real existence and the Living God who has graciously made himself known through his authoritative Word.

Fashioning idols, false gods, is foolish because the true God, the only God, has already made himself known and distinguished himself from every rival as the God who speaks.

## **2) Because the creature is not the Creator (v. 19)**

Notice how Moses describes all the created things Israel was tempted to worship at the end of v. 19. What are they? “Things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.” Israel was supposed to rule over the created order on God’s behalf. Instead, she placed herself under the created order. That’s what idolatry always does. It thinks and feels and acts as if the creature is the Creator.

When we’re tempted to bow down and serve things or people in the world around us as if they have ultimate power over our life, that’s exactly what we need to remember. That friend, that car, that house, that beach. God made that. God created that. He exists outside the world and apart from the world because he made the world.

You think that created thing is great and awesome and worthy of praise? Well guess who thought of it? Who sustains it? Who fashioned every atom in it? God did. It’s a gift designed to display the smallest part of his glory that our hearts might be drawn to the power and wisdom and majesty of the Giver. Flee idolatry because the creature is not the Creator.

## **3) Because the LORD redeemed us for himself (v. 20)**

In his common grace, God has given all men marvelous, created gifts as expressions of his favor. But there’s something particular the Lord did for Israel and something particular he has done for you, Christian. He has redeemed you. V. 20, “But the LORD has taken *you* and brought *you* out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.”

Moses is describing the exodus, the way the Lord delivered his people out of physical slavery and death in Egypt. It’s a picture of the immeasurably greater deliverance from spiritual slavery and death Jesus won for us through his life, death, and resurrection. Why did he do it? To draw us to himself and offer you a

new identity as an adopted child of God. The redemption price was high, and he paid it willingly, joyfully, that he might have “a people for his own inheritance.” 1 Pe 2:10, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.”

When you turn away from trying to find life by keeping all the rules or breaking all the rules and turn toward trusting and obeying Jesus, who you are fundamentally changes! As Moses says in v. 20, consider who you are, Christian! You are God’s treasured possession. You are his blood-bought inheritance. And he has redeemed you that you might make much of him by enjoying him forever.

He most certainly did not deliver, and rescue, and redeem you so you could wander back to the house of slavery. Yet that is precisely what we are doing when we embrace idolatry. Gal 4:8-9, “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you go back to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?”

Why should we flee idolatry? Because the kingdom God has graciously brought us into through his saving power is exceedingly better than the kingdom of this world! As Moses says twice in vv. 21-22, it is a “good land,” a beautiful land, a glorious land. The contrast in v. 22 between “this land” outside God’s place and “that land” in God’s place is striking. Why should we chase after idols when the place God has brought us into is so much better?

V. 23 reminds us idolatry is a fundamentally a relational offense. “Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image...” The problem isn’t just that we’re loving a created thing too much. The problem is that in so doing we’re forsaking our covenant relationship with God, spurning his promises, denying his faithfulness, and betraying the Lover of your soul. Why flee idolatry? Because the Lord has redeemed us for himself.

#### **4) Because God is jealous for his glory (vv. 24-28)**

In vv. 25-27, Moses describes exactly what will happen if Israel exchanges devotion to Yahweh for an idol. Life in the land will be replaced with exile. A multitude of offspring will become “few in number.” The consequences of are both inevitable

and devastating. And the timing of it all is sobering. When does Moses say it will all go down? “When you father children and children’s children, and have grown old in the land...”

Friends, old age is no guarantee of spiritual maturity. You can have plenty of gray hair on your head and still harbor plenty of foolishness in your heart. Do not assume that because you are getting older you are less susceptible to treasuring physical comfort, convenience, and security instead of treasuring Jesus.

At any age, we are vulnerable to the spiritual trap Moses flags in v. 25. “If you act corruptly by making a carved image...and by doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God...” He’s making a critical connection. Sinful behavior is always rooted in spiritual idolatry. We forget that. In our minds, our problems are purely behavioral issues. These actions are wrong. These actions are right. If you want to grow in godliness, you should stop the wrong behavior and start the right behavior.

That’s not true because that’s not the way people change. I’ll give you an example. Why do I get impatient with my boys when we’re on family vacation in Hawaii and a fight breaks out in the back seat? It’s because I have exchanged worshiping God for worshiping an idol. When I am looking for life in having a peaceful car ride, when I am asking a peaceful car ride to satisfy my soul, what happens when the kids make a ruckus? I become impatient. I get angry.

So how will I grow? Do I need to use more self-control? Do I need to focus on speaking nice words with a quiet voice that effectively hides the seething anger in my soul? That band-aid won’t last very long! Here’s what I really need. I need to stop bowing down in my heart to the idol of a peaceful car ride and start bowing down in my heart to the Lord, trusting him to give me life, not matter how crazy the environment. I need to return to finding my life in him, trusting him, worshiping him.

In v. 25, Moses reminds Israel that the evil we commit against other people on a horizontal level is ultimately sin against God on a vertical level. We stop worshiping him and begin worshiping something else. And it provokes him to anger. Why? Because God is jealous for his glory. If vv. 25-27 are the “what” will happen if Israel embraces idolatry, v. 24 reveals the “why.” “For the LORD your God is a jealous God.”

In general, we don't think of jealousy as a good thing, right? But when Scripture speaks of the jealousy of God it is an exceedingly good thing. It's good for him and it's good for us. Here's what I mean. God's greatest and highest commitment is not to you. It's to himself. It's not to your glory. It's to his glory. And that is both good and right because no one is more glorious than God!

If God were not God-centered, jealous for his glory, he would cease to be God. He would be an idolator. In contrast, it is the God-centeredness of God that upholds the moral universe. Because he is righteously and wholeheartedly committed to his glory he cannot sit idly by while those he created for his glory use the life he gave them to oppose and violate his glory. The jealousy of God compels him to consume all that is opposed to his glory, which is why there are eternal consequences for disobeying God.

If the weight of his glory were a light thing, sin would be no big deal. "Oh well, we all make mistakes. I'm sure God understands." But the weight of his glory is not a light thing. It is a glorious, holy, and precious thing, which is why sin is such a big deal. What we perceive as culturally normal God rightly perceives for what it really is – an assault on his royal majesty. If you set yourself against him by refusing to submit to his Word, he cannot tolerate you or turn a blind eye to you. Holy jealousy demands that he oppose and eventually destroy you.

That's why we must take care to avoid idolatry, friends. Whether you live for Jesus or not isn't a religious option on a menu of moral equals. It's about whether you will give God or deny God the glory due his name. And if you choose the latter, do not console yourself with platitudes like, "I guess we'll see how everything works out in the end." Friend, we know exactly how everything works out in the end because God has told us how everything works out in the end.

His response to idolatry, both now and on the final day, is not ambivalent or neutral. It is decisive. It is overwhelming. It is just. V. 26, you will "utterly perish." You will be "utterly destroyed." Flee idolatry because our God is a consuming fire, jealous for your affections, jealous for your allegiance, because he is jealous for his glory.

## **TRANSITION**

Why should we avoid idolatry? Because God has told us who he is, the creature is not the Creator, the Lord has redeemed us for himself, and God is jealous for his glory.

In v. 28, Moses brings the list of warnings to a close with an image of the futility of idolatry. In the days of your exile, “you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.” They will not answer you, they cannot not save you, because they have no life in themselves. They are impotent statues. Powerless poles.

By the end of v. 28, it feels like the initial warning, “Watch yourselves very carefully,” has been replaced with a foregone conclusion, “You will surely succumb to idolatry.” Moses’ outlook is consistent with the biblical doctrine of sin. Our hearts are idol factories. That’s the bad news.

But here’s the good news, friend. The spiritual consequences of idolatry do not have to be the end of your story. Hope is found in the precious promise of vv. 29-31 where Moses answers our second big question, “What should we do when we recognize we have fallen into idolatry?” We need to respond in two ways.

### **1) Turn to the Lord**

V. 29, “But from there,” from the land of exile, “you will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.” It’s a beautiful picture of repentance, of turning away from worshipping idols and toward worshipping the Lord, our covenant-making, covenant-keeping God. Moses gives us three important lessons about biblical repentance.

**First, repentance is relational.** It means more than not worshipping an idol in a negative sense. It means seeking the Lord in a positive sense. Instead of spurning and ignoring him, you take time listen to him, know him, talk with him, confess your sin, ask for his help, trust him, and obey him. True repentance always begins with relating to God in a new way, moving toward him instead of away from him.

**Second, repentance is possible.** We can sometimes feel like we’ve fallen too far. Our idolatry is too deep. We bypassed the “hope for change” level several floors up and are permanently stuck in the spiritual basement. I guess we’ll just have to deal



with the consequences since it's clearly too late to repent, at least in any sort of meaningful way.

That's not God's perspective, friend. Until Jesus returns, repentance is always possible. There is so much hope in the parallel between the beginning of v. 28 and the beginning of v. 29! "There you will serve gods of wood and stone...But from there you will seek the LORD your God." The very place Israel would come face to face with the pain of idolatry was also the very place she would begin to repent!

Repentance isn't a privilege reserved for people who have climbed out the ditch. Repentance begins in the ditch because it's at the bottom of the ditch where you most need to seek the Lord and when he is most eager to answer your cry! You are never "beyond" the reach of God's grace, friend. Repentance is always possible.

**Third, repentance is never in vain.** What does God promise through Moses in v. 29? If you seek the Lord, you will find him. Here's what that means. It means you must not say, "It didn't work before, so why should I try again?" What didn't work? Do you mean some of your troubles continued? Do you mean the temptation didn't go away? Do you mean you didn't change as quickly as you wanted to? Do you mean God didn't change the circumstances of your life the way you wanted him to or thought he would?

If so, I have a question for you, friend. What were you seeking in the first place? Were you seeking God at all? Or were you simply trying to use God to get the life you wanted or satisfy your idol of choice? Seeking an end of trouble or temptation, seeking personal growth on your timetable, or seeking a change in your circumstances is not the same thing as seeking God.

Our repentance is never in vain when our goal is seeking God for who he is. Jer 29:13-14, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord." Biblical repentance means bringing your whole heart before God and saying, "Lord, I'm yours. Forgive me for spurning you. Forgive me for using you. I surrender. It means making David's prayer in Ps 63:1 your prayer: "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

## **2) Hope in his mercy (vv. 30-31)**

“When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and obey his voice.” How could Moses say that? How is that not wishful thinking? Did he momentarily forget who he was talking about? This is we’ve-never-met-an-idol-we-didn’t-like-to-worship Israel. How could he know a remnant (or anyone for that matter) would turn and repent? His confidence had nothing to do with Israel. It had everything to do with God and what Moses knew of his unchanging character.

V. 31, “For the LORD your God is a merciful God.” He’s not a God who treats us according to our sins. He’s not a God who says, “Fine. You want nothing to do with me. I want nothing to do with you.” No. He’s a compassionate God. A loving God. A God who delights in the greatness of his mercy to take men and women who are completely lost in their idolatry and sin and turn their hearts back to him.

The will to repent isn’t a work of merit or something you have to gin up. A real choice? Yes. Must you decide to turn toward God instead of away from him? Absolutely. But take comfort in this, friend. That turn, that repentance, whether at the beginning of your life, in the middle of your life, and on your death bed, is ultimately a supernatural gift, a gift of mercy from the God who owes us nothing and to whom we owe everything.

He’s a God who remains. “He will not leave you.” He’s a God who pardons. “He will not destroy you.” And he’s a God who remembers. “He will not forget the covenant with your father that he swore to them.” Israel would forget the Lord, but he would not forget her. He is faithful to use our self-inflicted tribulation, then and now, to prompt our hearts to repent and turn back to him. Yes, he’s a God who burns with holy anger. But he’s also a God who burns with fierce compassion.

Were it not for the prevailing mercy of God, not one of us in this room would touch repentance with a 10-foot pole. Our hearts are proud. We cling to our idols, even while they’re destroying our life. But God is greater than your heart, friend! So not despair in your idolatry, fearing you’ve been at it too long or the allure is too strong. Hope in the prevailing mercy of God. He is able to begin, and sustain, and complete the good work of repentance in your life, for your good and his glory.



And that's what makes repentance a joy! Because let's be honest, not one of us has the power to change our hearts. But God does. And he delights to do so when he hears our cry. Are we responsible for choosing to repent? Yes. Is God sovereign over the work of repentance from start to finish? Yes. Therein lies our calling. Therein lies our comfort. **Guard your heart against idolatry, confident in the prevailing mercy of God.**

That's what Moses challenged Israel to do. That's what the Lord is calling us to do. Let's pray and ask for the Spirit's help.