

## Just and Merciful God

HN 13/03/05 p

Reading: Deuteronomy 4:23f, II Timothy 2

Study Text: Deuteronomy 4:25-31

Palms : 103l -5, 103:6-12, 111:2-5, 27:7-10

Moses was preaching to the children of Israel assembled by the Jordan. They were ready to cross over and possess the land of Canaan. Moses would not be leading them across because the Lord was angry with him. In the desert these rebellious people frustrated Moses so much that in haste and anger he struck the rock to bring forth water. The Lord swore at that time that Moses would not bring this assembly into the land (Numbers 20:12).

The background to this sermon of Moses' was the exodus from Egypt, especially the events at Mt Sinai. The Lord God came down upon the mountain in an awesome display – the mountain shook as it burned with fire. The people trembled in fear. The Lord spoke out of the midst of the fire on the mountain. They heard his voice but saw no form.

Since they saw no form it was impossible to make an image to depict God and indeed God had expressly forbidden the making of any carved image whatsoever. They were commanded not to make any carved image and not to bow down to them.

The God of Israel is a jealous God. He will not tolerate his people bowing down to other gods, to images or idols of any sort. *God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.* The Lord is also a consuming fire (4:24). He will punish those who break the terms of the covenant he made with his people.

### Danger and Anger

The immediate danger that the Israelites faced was the Canaanites. They had to destroy them before they could settle in the land. This was an external threat – the enemy without. Moses made sure that all the tribes, including Reuben, Gad and Manasseh would cross over to conquer the land.

But in the longer term they would face another danger – an internal threat. With the passing of time and the coming of new generations the people might forget the covenant God had made with them. They might act corruptly and make a carved image contrary to the command given through Moses.

For all we hear and read about the church being persecuted, it is internal strife that the church should be most concerned about. It is the forsaking of our first love, it is the corruption of doctrine, and it is the pride of men that brings the judgment of God upon the church. We often see a church being scattered when this happens. Some churches are

so focused upon defending themselves from the enemy without, that they fail to detect the enemy within.

Moses had already stressed the importance of teaching the children and the grandchildren the words of the Lord (4:9). It was a great responsibility given to parents and to the community. The consequences of failing to do this are outlined here. *Lest you forget the covenant the Lord your God made with you* (4:23). When you forget, when you act corruptly and do evil, the Lord will not remain silent. He will *be provoked to anger*. His righteous jealousy will be aroused. He loves his own people and demands their complete and exclusive devotion.

This was nothing new. Adam broke the covenant God made with him saying you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam broke the command, after listening to his wife who had listened to Satan, and suffered the covenant curse. He was expelled from the Garden of Eden, from the presence of the Lord God.

## Exile

Israel had not yet entered the land but the threat of exile is here explained to them. This is what will happen if you depart from the terms of the covenant. You will be cast out of the land. The land after all was the gift of God under the terms of the covenant – they did not earn it. It was their inheritance from the Lord. By breaking the covenant- and making a carved image amounted to breaking the terms of the covenant – they would forfeit their right to this inheritance.

*Utter destruction*, complete destruction would come upon the people of God when they broke the covenant. They would be cast out of the land and they would *perish*. A few would be left scattered among the Gentiles. A remnant would survive in exile but their life would be terrible. Living among pagans they would worship others gods, they would bow down to idols of wood and stone.

We know that this actually happened to Judah in 587BC and to Israel some years before this. But there is no need to restrict what Moses said to this particular exile. It was general warning of what would happen whenever God's people broke the covenant he made with them.

*God gave them over to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts...who exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever, amen* (Romans 1:24, 25). Paul gave the same warning to the church in the New Testament. What a terrible warning it is! You want to worship idols, you want to give glory to created things, you want to take the glory yourself, then go ahead says the Lord – in effect. Go off and live among the pagans, worship their idols, serve their gods and see how you like it!

God gave them over. They would soon realise the futility of worshipping idols. Man-made things that cannot hear; nor can they speak. They had turned away from the true

God, the God who hears and the God who speaks, to worship these dumb idols. What a disaster. What frustration, what fear, what futility overcame them! *By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remember Zion.*

Take heed to yourselves lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God. Many in our nation, and in Europe, have forgotten the covenant of the Lord – the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. They have turned away from Jesus, and God has given them up. God has given them up to frustration, to futility, and to fear, the evidences of which are seen all around us.

They preferred to worship things and creatures rather than the Creator. They sought truth in other religions. They were proud of our pluralistic society. Now of course they are finding such religions are devoid of truth and indeed are experiencing the ‘sting in the tail’ as it were. The snake charmer will eventually get bitten.

God will not be mocked. Those who reject his grace, those who disregard his covenant in Jesus Christ, will be given over to futility and to emptiness of a life *without hope and without God this world* (Ephesians 2:12).

### **Return of Remnant**

The God of Israel is unique in that he is not only just but also merciful. In wrath God would remember mercy. Any other suzerain or conquering king who made a covenant with a vassal king would not show such mercy. Those who broke the terms of the covenant would be shown no mercy. But here we see a few were left – *you will be left few in number* (4:27).

And when those few turned and cried to the Lord he promised to hear them. When in exile, when cast out of the land for breaking the covenant, God would still have his eye upon them. He would not forget the covenant he made with their fathers, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (4:31). His was ready to listen when in distress they cried out to him.

*If you seek the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul*, if you seek him with your whole being then you will find him. If they sincerely repented and sought the Lord he would restore them, he would take them back under the terms of the covenant.

What a wonderful God we have. *The Lord your God is a merciful God* (4:31). My Bible has these words in parenthesis but they might well be in bold type. Where would be if our God was not a God who is full of mercy, who is slow to anger and abounding in mercy (Psalm 103).

Just as Moses said, so Jesus also said, *everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds and to him who knocks the door shall be opened* (Matthew 7:8). Seek and you will find said Jesus. No matter how far away the people have been scattered, no matter what depths of distress or despair they have reached the Lord promises *seek and you will find*.

Are you living as a covenant child of God? Remember the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. You were bought with a price – a great price. Therefore honour God. In view of God's mercy, offer yourself to him as a living sacrifice. That is a great ask – a living sacrifice – but it is for a great God.

Take heed said Moses lest you forget the Lord and covenant he made with you. Be careful of the passing of time; be careful of the changing world around you. God's covenant remains the same – His covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ will remain until he comes again.

Take comfort also in the words of Moses. Our God will not forget his covenant. *If we are faithless, he remains faithful for he cannot deny himself* (II Timothy 2:13). When we forget him our life will become miserable. But still he will hear when we come to our senses, and turn and seek him, the true and living God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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