

## No Carved Images

HN 17/04/05 p

Reading: Judges 17, I John 5

Study Text: Deuteronomy 5:8-10

Palms : 97:1-7, 78:5-8, 78:56-60, 97:9-12

Thick black clouds enveloped the mountain. Thunder burst forth and lighting flashed all around. Then the mountain began to burn with fire like a furnace and the whole mountain shook. The people also shook as they heard the voice of God. They heard the command – *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.*

With hearts filled with the fear of the Lord the people said ‘we hear and we will do it’. But then what happened? Within a few weeks the people had made a golden calf and started worshipping it. Moses had gone back up on the mountain, leaving Aaron in charge. The people got impatient; they wanted some action and took matters into their own hands. They collected gold jewellery from everyone and made a golden calf and started to worship it. *This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land Egypt* (Exodus 32:4). They disobeyed the clear command given through Moses.

The Lord God was angry with the people and was ready to destroy them, to wipe them out for this disobedience and corruption. But Moses interceded before the Lord – he pleaded with the Lord on their behalf. Yet when he came down from the mountain and called for repentance 3000 refused to repent and were destroyed. And the punishment continued according to the command (Exodus 32).

### Micah

The second commandment was reaffirmed by Moses in his last message to the people. Yet what do we find. In the days of the judges we read of a man called Micah again disobeying the second commandment.

These were dark days in the history of Israel – the word of God was not heard. *There was no king and everyone did what was right in his own eyes* (Judges 17:6). Micah’s parents failed to teach him the word of God. His mother had herself turned to superstition and idolatry. She started to worship God according to the imaginations of her heart.

Briefly Micah stole silver from his mother. He got scared when she uttered a curse and returned it. She then gave less than a quarter of it to a silversmith to make a carved image which Micah set up in the house. He must have been so proud of his little shrine. He took his son and consecrated him as priest – that was until a more genuine priest came along. The story goes on telling how some men from the tribe of Dan dropped in as they went off to battle. They liked Micah idols and his priest also – they might bring success in their battle. So they made off with them. Micah was

terribly upset that his idols had been taken- and his priest. But he was powerless to get them back from this army of Danites.

Worship in Israel became corrupted like this when the word of God was not heard and not obeyed. Micah was no better than another man we read of in the Bible – Laban. Remember how Rachel stole the household gods when she fled with Jacob. Laban was terribly upset and set off to retrieve them. How would he worship without his idols?

People get very attached to their idols. They cannot worship without their idols. Some people can only worship in a certain place, or they must have certain things around them for proper worship. They have not been taught the word of God but only the traditions of men – and those traditions must be adhered to for them to worship God.

Laban was a pagan but Micah was of the covenant people of God. He had the oracles of God but failed to listen and obey.

## **The Church**

The church entered dark days around the time of Constantine (4<sup>th</sup> Century). The cross as a religious symbol goes back to the days of this emperor. ‘De Rossi (Roman Catholic archaeologist) states positively that no monogram of Christ discovered in the Catacombs or other places can be traced to a period anterior to the year 312’ (Boettner). Tradition has it that going into one battle Constantine saw the pattern of a cross in the sky. Fighting under the banner of the cross and was victorious. The church adopted this symbol, and other carved images soon followed.

At the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century the pope approved the uses of images in churches, but insisted they must not be worshipped. Abuse followed with people even kissing the images. The Eastern Church sought to curtail such idolatry – even Muslims were horrified. The iconoclastic debate of 754 at Constantinople led to the Eastern Church banning all use of images or icons. But the Church of Rome fully sanctioned the use of images. The Council of Trent decreed that ‘images of Christ and the Virgin mother of God and of other saints are to be had and kept, especially in church and due honour and veneration are to be given’ (Session 25).

For the early church the cross was a symbol of shame and of death. Jesus endured the cross despising the shame, before being exalted to the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2). When Jesus said ‘take up your cross and follow me’ he did not mean carry a cross or wear a cross around your neck as a charm to keep you from harm. He spoke about suffering for the name of Christ – and the early Christians were called to suffer for his name.

The cross should not be used as a religious symbol. Remember the command – no carved images, no bowing down to them, no kissing them or venerating them. The crucifix, the cross with an image of Jesus hanging on it is especially offensive. To have such things hanging superstitiously in cars or in homes and hospitals is a violation of the second commandment. Consider this:

Firstly, Christ is no longer on the cross. He is not in the tomb but he is risen. He is on the throne in heaven. We do not worship a dead God. *If Christ is not risen your faith is futile: you are still in your sins* (I Corinthians 15). Few of course dare to represent Christ in his heavenly glory, but that is where he is now. That is where we now look and worship him.

Secondly, Jesus told us how to remember his death, and it was not by making crucifixes or crosses and hanging them around the place. We must remember his death but he gave us the sacrament as the means by which we are to remember his death – the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. *Do this in remembrance of me* he commanded as he broke the bread and gave it to them. Some of course turn this very sacrament into idolatry also.

Thirdly, as with pictures which supposedly portray Christ, they are in no way accurate but are false representations and therefore offensive. You would not like a picture being circulated with your name on it when it is not a picture of you. You would be offended. In fact it amounts to blasphemy – misusing your name. Yet men go ahead and produce all manner of pictures to represent God the Son.

In India many Christians had this same picture hanging in their homes. It was the picture of a man with long straight hair. I presumed it was meant to be a picture of Jesus. But no one knows what Jesus looked like. No true pictures are preserved. In divine providence it is his words not his picture that is preserved. All we know is that he was a man, a Jewish man. So any picture you see will be false.

## **The Commandment**

This second commandment must of course be kept in context. It relates to worship and religious symbolism. A relative of mine has a model cow proudly displayed on her cupboard. She won it at the show. But she does not bow down and worship it. It is not a religious symbol. And so it is with much art and sculpture. It is images, pictures and artefacts that are venerated or used supposedly to aid in worship that offend God under the terms of the second commandment.

The commandment comes with a reason. God is a jealous God. He is the true God who has spoken – *you heard a voice but saw no form* said Moses (4:12). Any representation of God would have been false then, and would still be false, even though God did reveal himself in human form in Jesus Christ.

Worship directed to or even though a carved image or any physical image is not true worship. No golden calves, no statues, no crosses, no pictures, no books and no buildings must be venerated. God is spirit and must be worshipped in spirit and truth.

God said he would punish those who bowed down to carved images – to the third and fourth generation. It is a gross violation of the sovereignty and majesty of the Almighty God. It amounts to hating him to represent him by some image that man can manipulate. That is the temptation of course. Man wants to be in control of God. Make us gods the impatient Israelites cried out. Micah made his own idol and the Danites took his god into battle with them – how convenient. Carved

images allow man to think he is control and can manipulate God – how convenient, but how terribly dangerous.

Let us be among those who love God and keep his commandments. He says he will have mercy on such people. He shows mæcy to a thousand generations of those who love and obey him. What a great and wonderful God we have. He made this covenant with us for our benefit and for his glory. Worship him acceptably with reverence and fear, and he will surely bless you – for a thousand generations.

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