



## Deuteronomy - Chapter Thirteen

### **III Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19 - Moses' Second Speech: Specific Covenant Stipulations (continues)**

#### **III.b Deuteronomy 12:29-13:18 - Warning against Idolatry (continues/concludes)**

#### Summary of Chapter Thirteen

Three scenarios (vv.1-5, vv.6-11, and vv.12-18) are addressed in which people are encouraged to worship other gods. The first warning is against false prophets who will try to entice the people away from God as a test to their obedience. Such people are to be put to death.

There is a further instruction against close friends and relatives, including a parent, spouse or child who tries to tempt a person into pagan practices. No mercy is to be shown to such a person, who is also to be put to death.

The chapter concludes with condemnation of whole towns who turn away from God. After a full investigation, the people are to be put to death, the whole town destroyed by fire and never rebuilt.

<sup>1</sup> If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, <sup>2</sup> and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, 'Let us follow other gods' (whom you have not known) 'and let us serve them', <sup>3</sup> you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.

### Deuteronomy 13:1-3

Much of OT law is 'case law,' supposing a particular situation and its right response. Here, each situation is introduced with if (v.1, v.6 and v.12).

If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you. Both prophets and visionaries would lay claim to divine revelatory authority. Dreams can be from God: <<*And he said, 'Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams'>>* (Numbers 12:6), refer also to Genesis 37:5-11, or they can be false prophesies: <<*I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back – those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart?>>* (Jeremiah 23:25-26). Christians must be careful not to put too much stock in dreams, and instead allow God to bring confirmation to any dream they believe brings a message from him. It would be very unusual for God to speak alone through a dream, without other confirmation. As Paul writes: <<*Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil>>* (1 Thessalonians 5:20-22).

Two things must occur in this scenario. First, the omens or the portents declared by them take place. A miracle or sign in itself is not, however, proof of God's direction since these can be performed other than under God's power, such as by the Egyptian magicians, for example: <<*But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said>>* (Exodus 7:22), and Simon the Sorcerer: <<*Now a certain man named Simon had previously practised magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great>>* (Acts 8:9). However, a word that did not come to pass was a clear indication that the Lord did not give it and that its speaker was not the Lord's spokesperson: <<*You may say to yourself, 'How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?' If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it>>* (Deuteronomy 18:21-22). The second condition is that the oracle-monger says, Let us follow other gods. This theological test is essential.

This sobering fact is ignored by many Christians in this age which neglects discernment. The fact is that signs and wonders can never be the evidence of truth or God's hand. Those who are immediately convinced at the sight of supernatural power or reality are in danger of great deception. Second Thessalonians 2:9 is a reminder that the coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders. This is why Jesus said and these signs will follow those who believe (Mark 16:17). Signs are to follow believers, instead of believers following signs.

Another sign to beware of is when people, either inside or outside the church, claim that society has changed and therefore the message and ways of the church need to change in order to reflect that. These are the gods of this world that should be opposed not accommodated, providing that it is done with love, compassion, acceptance of others, grace, mercy and reconciliation.

For the Lord your God is testing you. The Lord is testing faithfulness to himself by allowing false prophets to appear among his people. The warning is that fulfilled signs and wonders can be deceptive, and when accompanied by false teaching, they are not from the Lord.

To know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul. This explains one of God's reasons in allowing such deceivers to exist among his people, to allow the hearts of his people to be tested and proven, to see if they really love the God of truth, or are merely seeking a spiritual sign or experience: <<*But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold*>> (Job 23:10), <<*See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity*>> (Isaiah 48:10), <<*And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The Lord is our God'*>> (Zechariah 13:9), <<*And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons*>> (1 Timothy 3:10), and: <<*In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed*>> (1 Peter 1:6-7).

<sup>4</sup> The Lord your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast.

#### Deuteronomy 13:4

God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear. Israel was first instructed to not let a deceiver succeed in leading them astray. No matter how attractive the deception, they were to keep focused on a faithful walk with God according to his truth: <<*And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning – you must walk in it*>> (2 John 6), and: <<*I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth*>> (3 John 4).

You shall hold fast describes faithfulness to the covenant they have with God.

<sup>5</sup> But those prophets or those who divine by dreams shall be put to death for having spoken treason against the Lord your God – who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery – to turn you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

### Deuteronomy 13:5

Israel must not only refuse to listen to the prophet or visionary, they must put that person to death. He has broken the first commandment, a breach made clearer by the phrase who brought you out of the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:6-7). Even though the prophet or dreamer of dreams is used by God to test Israel, that person is not innocent.

Ancient Israel was a unique situation, where the civil government was also directly appointed by God and charged with maintaining spiritual order as well as civil order. Therefore, such heresy and deception was a capital crime, punishable by execution. For many centuries, when the church held political power, it often exercised this penalty also. Heretics were often given over to the civil government for execution. John Trapp writes in the mid-seventeenth Century, “This power is still in the Christian magistrate, to inflict capital punishment on gross heretics.” While their priorities might be admired by some for they judged it much more serious for a heretic to kill men’s eternal souls than for the church to kill their temporal bodies, they were ignorant of an important principle of Jesus’ Kingdom in contrast to the ancient kingdom of Israel: Jesus declared that his Kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36), while the kingdom of Israel was very much of this world. Never before or since has God appointed such a kingdom as Israel to be his nation in this world as he appointed ancient Israel, so it would be wrong for the church to execute heretics today or even call on the civil or military government to do so on their behalf. However, the church as a community and Christians as individuals should reject and refuse to support such heretics among them. They should use discernment to set aside those who promote themselves as miracle working men and women of anointing and faith, yet who teach heresy in essential doctrines, causing division within the church and stopping others from coming to faith because of the disunity that is portrayed.

Purge the evil from your midst. The death penalty is implied in these cases. Just as Israel is to destroy all pagans from the land, so are they to purge any apostate Israelites, just as they would a contagious infection. Paul’s solution is excommunication: <<*God will judge those outside. ‘Drive out the wicked person from among you’*>> (1 Corinthians 5:13), although Paul also calls for reconciliation: <<*This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be*

*overwhelmed by excessive sorrow*>> (2 Corinthians 2:6-7). Capital punishment therefore is not only retributive but also protective of the community.

<sup>6</sup> If anyone secretly entices you – even if it is your brother, your father’s son or your mother’s son, or your own son or daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your most intimate friend – saying, ‘Let us go and worship other gods’, whom neither you nor your ancestors have known, <sup>7</sup> any of the gods of the peoples that are around you, whether near you or far away from you, from one end of the earth to the other, <sup>8</sup> you must not yield to or heed any such persons. Show them no pity or compassion and do not shield them.

### Deuteronomy 13:6-8

In this second scenario, the stakes are higher in that the rebellious person may be a relative, spouse, or your most intimate friend. Allegiance to the Lord is to take priority even over such close and beloved personal relations as Jesus so clearly states in Luke 14:26-33.

If anyone secretly entices you. This demonstrates how seriously God regards leading someone else into idolatry. Even if a sympathetic person entices another person away from God, and even if they do it in private, enticement to idolatry is not to be tolerated. This brings to mind the words of Jesus: *<<If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea>>* (Matthew 18:6). Anyone who leads one of God’s people astray is greatly offending the heart of God.

The command you must not yield to or heed any such persons suggests strong pressure being exerted by the person inviting to apostasy.

Show them no pity or compassion. As Moses had commanded earlier: *<<and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy>>* (Deuteronomy 7:2), Israel is to show no mercy to Canaanite pagans; treacherous Israelites are to be treated the same way.

And do not shield them. Loving the Lord with all one’s heart and soul precludes protecting even such a loved one as this.

<sup>9</sup> But you shall surely kill them; your own hand shall be first against them to execute them, and afterwards the hand of all the people.

<sup>10</sup> Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of

slavery. <sup>11</sup> Then all Israel shall hear and be afraid, and never again do any such wickedness.

### Deuteronomy 13:9-11

But you shall surely kill them. Capital punishment is also a deterrent so that other Israelites do not act likewise.

In fact, the relative should be one of the main witnesses against the guilty party: your own hand shall be first against them to execute them. This was the ‘casting of the first stone,’ the initiation of execution by one of the witnesses to the capital crime. This also demonstrates that God never puts highest priority on family relationships; if a family member forsakes the Lord, others are never to follow them away from the Lord. Jesus always comes first, as he himself said: <<*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me*>> (Matthew 10:37).

Then all Israel shall hear and be afraid, and never again do any such wickedness. Many modern researchers and pundits say that capital punishment is no deterrent to crime. God says it is a deterrent if properly practiced, of course.

<sup>12</sup> If you hear it said about one of the towns that the Lord your God is giving you to live in, <sup>13</sup> that scoundrels from among you have gone out and led the inhabitants of the town astray, saying, ‘Let us go and worship other gods’, whom you have not known, <sup>14a</sup> then you shall inquire and make a thorough investigation.

### Deuteronomy 13:12-14a

The first two scenarios above assume a lack of success in the attempts to lead Israelites astray. The third scenario is when scoundrels from among you have succeeded in drawing inhabitants of the town astray, away from the Lord.

You shall inquire and make a thorough investigation. The hearsay of v.12 must be checked carefully to ensure it is true and certain, not mere rumour. This guarded against a harsh judgement; perhaps there were a few idolaters in the city whom needed to be punished, but perhaps the city was not given over to idolatry, which was the plea that Abraham made to God over Sodom: <<*Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*>> And the Lord said, ‘*If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake*’>> (Genesis 18:25-26). Punishment can only be applied after due process of law and should be based on witness evidence: <<*But if you are not listened to, take one or two others*

*along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses>> (Matthew 18:16), and: <<This is the third time I am coming to you. 'Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses'>> (2 Corinthians 13:1).*

<sup>14b</sup> If the charge is established that such an abhorrent thing has been done among you, <sup>15</sup> you shall put the inhabitants of that town to the sword, utterly destroying it and everything in it – even putting its livestock to the sword. <sup>16</sup> All of its spoil you shall gather into its public square; then burn the town and all its spoil with fire, as a whole burnt-offering to the Lord your God. It shall remain a perpetual ruin, never to be rebuilt. <sup>17</sup> Do not let anything devoted to destruction stick to your hand, so that the Lord may turn from his fierce anger and show you compassion, and in his compassion multiply you, as he swore to your ancestors, <sup>18</sup> if you obey the voice of the Lord your God by keeping all his commandments that I am commanding you today, doing what is right in the sight of the Lord your God.

#### Deuteronomy 13:14b-18

Such an abhorrent thing. The word abhorrent or abomination here refers to a gross, offensive idolatry. Later in Daniel 9:7 and in the NT (Matthew 24:15), the word is used in the phrase abomination of desolation, which refers to the ultimate idolatry of the Antichrist, the establishing of an idolatrous image of himself in the most holy place: *<<Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God>> (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4).*

Not only the instigator but the whole town must be treated as if it were a Canaanite city within the land, for the city allowed the 'scoundrels' of v.13 to continue leading people astray.

Utterly destroying it and everything in it. It was not just sufficient to kill the people for it seems that an evil spirit may prevail or, more likely, it was to be left in ruins as a sign to others. The city is also to be burned, which in the land-conquest happened only to Hazor: *<<But Israel burned none of the towns that stood on mounds except Hazor, which Joshua did burn>> (Joshua 11:13).* This law was carried out in the case of Gibeah's rebellion: *<<The troops in ambush rushed quickly upon Gibeah. Then they put the whole city to the sword. Now the agreement between the main body of Israel and the men in ambush was that when they sent up a cloud of smoke out of the city the main body of*

*Israel should turn in battle. But Benjamin had begun to inflict casualties on the Israelites, killing about thirty of them; so they thought, 'Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle.' But when the cloud, a column of smoke, began to rise out of the city, the Benjaminites looked behind them – and there was the whole city going up in smoke towards the sky!>> (Judges 20:37-40).*

If the investigation finds that the city is indeed given over to idolatry, it is then to be treated as a Canaanite city. They were to utterly destroy the city, including its valuable possessions. The property was to be given to the Lord by destroying it, a form of 'sacred destruction.' This made certain that no one could profit materially by declaring a city given over to idolatry. If this provision were not in the Law of Moses one could imagine a city being plundered under this pretence.

An open public square or piazza was a common feature in Israelite cities. A good example is at Beersheba (Iron Age II), where the square measured 216 square metres and could have held hundreds of people and tons of material.

It shall remain a perpetual ruin, never to be rebuilt. The destroyed town was to be left as a ruin forever. The word ruin or heap is literally *tell*, and the word *tell* is used in Arabic for any ruined sight. Throughout Israel today, one will see curious mounds rising from a plain. These '*tells*' are the heaped up remains of ancient destroyed cities, covered over with centuries of dust and accumulated dirt.

Do not let anything devoted to destruction stick to your hand. Israel was not to keep any of the spoil for themselves. Failure to comply was seen as opposition to God as in the case of Achan's sin recorded in Joshua 7:10-15.

Doing what is right in the sight of the Lord your God. This demonstrates that Israelites were never to regard ethnic or national bonds greater than the bonds that tied them to the Lord God; if their fellow countrymen were given over to idolatry, they were not to be spared.

This chapter asks an important question: What would it take to lead a Christian away from God? Would signs and wonders do it? What if their mate forsook God, or all of their friends? What if culture, or nationalism, or ethnic ties called them away from Jesus? Each believer must never let such ties to come before their bond to Jesus. They must decide, as the song says, "Though none go with me, still I will follow."