

545 Taking heed

The dealings of the Lord God with His covenant people Israel, in what is for us the Old Testament, provide us with a spiritual and practical treasure-house, of as much relevance as ever today for God-fearing nations, churches, families and individuals.

In Deuteronomy 1.1 we read, “These [be] the words which Moses spake unto all Israel on this side Jordan in the wilderness ...”, shortly before their great crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land, under the human leadership of Joshua (Joshua Chapter 3). The early chapters of Deuteronomy which follow are then a record of Moses’ urgings to the people as to how they are to behave after he is gone from them, for he knows that he himself “shalt not go over this Jordan” (Deuteronomy 3.23-27, KJV).

So we come to some telling verses in Deuteronomy Chapter 4. “Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do [them], that ye may live ...” (from 4.1). The people were not to add to the word commanded, nor to diminish anything from it, for they knew from experience that the Lord God of the covenant “[is] a consuming fire, [even] a jealous God” (4.24), yet who had preserved those who had cleaved to Him (4.4).

Again, in verses 5-6, the Lord’s “statutes and judgments” were to be kept and done, for these would give God’s people “wisdom and understanding in the sight of the nations”; that is, by Israel’s faithfulness those surrounding nations would see the nature of God’s covenant people, and would honour both them and the Lord God Himself who was “[so] nigh unto them” (from 4.6-8). This “keeping and doing” reminds us of Jesus’ words later on, about the “city set on a hill” and the candle placed on its candlestick (from Matthew 5.14-16), and the two house-builders, both of whom heard Jesus’ teachings, but only one actually acted upon them (Matthew 7.24).

Deuteronomy 4.9-13 is a key passage. “Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they (that is, the things they have seen) depart from thy heart all the days of thy life” (from v.9). The passage continues, “but teach them thy sons, and thy sons’ sons; [specially] the day that thou stoodest before the Lord thy God in Horeb ... And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, [even] ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone” (from

vv.10a & 13). Those particular days for Moses, spent on the mountain top in God's presence and receiving from Him the ten commandments (Exodus Chapters 19 and 20), are thus described here as the central lesson which the children of the covenant were to be taught.

We then have two further mentions of "Take heed". "Take heed ... lest ye corrupt [yourselves]", by falling into the idolatry of their neighbours – worshipping home-made graven images and "all the host of heaven" (from vv.15-19). The Israelites were never to forget that "the Lord hath taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, [even] out of Egypt, to be unto him a people of inheritance, as [ye are] this day" (v.20). The final "Take heed" from this chapter (v.23) reads, "Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the Lord your God" and instead choose the path of those graven images.

As members of the new covenant, of grace rather than of law, we do well to "take heed" from such Old Testament passages and precedents. Furthermore, we too have been brought forth from an "iron furnace" of slavery to sin (egs., Isaiah 53.6 / Romans 6.18, 20-22 / II Corinthians 5.21 / Titus 3.4-7 / I Peter 2.24-25). We too have key, mountain-top-like truths to be taught to our children and grandchildren, notably concerning the Person and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, with all the blessings which God the Father has wrought on our behalf through Jesus His Son.

We too take heed of the many attractive but sinful paths around us these days, and keep well clear. We remain, by the gift of faith in the shed blood of Jesus, the Lord God's second "people of inheritance" (Deuteronomy 4.20), the called-out ones of the "ekklesia", "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people" (I Peter 2.9a).

And why have we been granted all these blessings? – "that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light": once we were not a people, now we are the people of God; once, we had not obtained mercy, now we have obtained mercy (based on I Peter 2.9b-10).

As with the children of Israel, our lives are being constantly observed, not just by the Lord Himself but by those around us too. By God's grace may those observers of our lives see in them what the Lord intends them to see.