

Deuteronomy 4:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make you a graven image, or the likeness of any thing, which the LORD thy God hath forbidden thee.

Analysis

Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the LORD your God...

The imperative *hishameru lakem* (הִשְׁמְרֵה לְכֶם, 'take heed to yourselves') signals urgent self-examination. The verb *shamar* means to guard, watch, or keep vigilantly—covenant faithfulness requires active protection against spiritual drift. The danger is not dramatic apostasy but gradual forgetting (*tishkechu*, תִּשְׁקַח), the slow erosion of covenantal memory that makes idolatry seem reasonable.

Moses connects forgetting the covenant directly to making graven images (*pesel*, פְּסֵלָה). The progression is instructive: spiritual amnesia precedes visible idolatry. When believers forget God's past faithfulness and covenant promises, they inevitably seek security and satisfaction in tangible substitutes. The phrase 'which the LORD thy God hath forbidden thee' (*asher tsivveka*) emphasizes that idolatry is not merely unwise but explicitly prohibited—a violation of revealed divine command.

The second commandment (Exodus 20:4-5) forbids any 'likeness of any thing' (*temunat kol*), anticipating the human tendency to domesticate the transcendent God into manageable forms. This warning remains relevant: modern idols may not

be carved from wood, but any created thing elevated to ultimate concern functions as a graven image, competing with God for the heart's allegiance.

Historical Context

Moses warns the generation born in the wilderness against repeating their parents' covenant failures. The Horeb covenant (another name for Sinai) was made 40 years earlier, but this new generation must embrace it personally. With Canaanite idolatry awaiting them across the Jordan, Moses emphasizes covenant faithfulness as essential for survival in the Promised Land.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. What spiritual disciplines help you 'take heed' against forgetting God's covenant faithfulness in your own life?
2. How do modern forms of idolatry—career, relationships, comfort, security—function similarly to ancient graven images in competing for ultimate allegiance?

Interlinear Text

בְּרֵית מְאֹת	תִּשְׁכֹּחַ	לֹא תִּשְׁמַר מֵהַשְׁמָר	לֹא תִּשְׁמַר מֵהַשְׁמָר	לֹא תִּשְׁמַר מֵהַשְׁמָר	לֹא תִּשְׁמַר מֵהַשְׁמָר
Take heed	unto yourselves	lest ye forget	the covenant		
H8104	H6435	H7911	H853		H1285
of the LORD	thy God	which he made	with you and make		
H3068	H430	H3772	H5973		H6213
you a graven image	or the likeness	of any	hath forbidden		
H6459	H8544	H3605	H834		H6680
of the LORD	thy God				
H3068	H430				

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 4:9 (Parallel theme): Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons;

Hebrews 3:12 (References God): Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.

Matthew 24:4 (Parallel theme): And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you.