

Deuteronomy 4:25-31

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When the Israelites live comfortably in Canaan, they and their children will fall into idolatry. Consequently, they will be removed from the land and will worship deceitful gods. Yet, when they genuinely repent, God will restore them because of His compassion.

Moses begins this section with the conjunction “when” (ki, in Hebrew) to look at the distant future. He said, “*When you become the father of children and children’s children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the LORD your God so as to provoke Him to anger.*”

This warning against making graven images to represent God was relevant not only to Moses’ contemporaries, but also to future generations of Israelites. The reason is because of the LORD’s unconditional covenant with Abram in which He promised him a great nation and a fruitful land ([Genesis 12:1-3](#); [Exodus 3:17](#)). In other words, the LORD chose the nation Israel, not a single generation of Israelites. This truth will be emphasized again and again in the historical books as well as the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible. As Paul emphasizes in Romans, God has never and will never take back any of His promises to Israel ([Romans 11:28-32](#)).

Although the land was given to Israel as a precious and unconditional gift, obedience to God was required in order to live in it and enjoy all its privileges as loyal vassals. That explains why Moses repeatedly commanded the Israelites to “teach” God’s laws “diligently” to their children that they might also experience blessing ([Deuteronomy 4:9-10](#); [6:7](#); [11:19](#)). Now, knowing that the comfort of Canaan could lead the people to idolatry, Moses called “*heaven and earth to witness*” against them, that they would *surely perish quickly from the land where they were going over the Jordan to possess it*.

It was a common practice in the ancient Near Eastern societies to call heaven and earth along with the gods as supreme authorities to punish those who violated the covenant stipulations. In Deuteronomy, however, Moses invoked heaven and earth as witnesses to testify on God’s behalf when He inflicts His just discipline on His disobedient people ([Deuteronomy 31:28](#); [32:1](#)).

God's discipline is clear in verses 26-28. Since the land of Canaan was a precious gift to the Israelites, their disobedience would preclude them from enjoying it. Moses predicted that some of the Israelites would *perish quickly from the land* while others would be removed from it. Moses said, "*You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed.*" In addition, Israel would be scattered *among the peoples*, and they would *be left few in number among the nations where the LORD* was driving them. They would lose the privilege of worshipping the true God. They would instead worship insignificant gods, that is, idols that depend on humans for their existence or their survival. As Moses said, these gods are *the work of man's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell.*

Nevertheless, it is by experiencing the discomfort of discipline that the Israelites will turn back to Yahweh. Moses stated, "*But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul.*" The word "heart" describes the seat of feeling, and of the intellect. The word "soul" refers to the invisible part of man and is the seat of desires and passions. Israel's exit from the Promised Land along with their distress will cause them to seek the covenant LORD with a genuine heart. In the latter days, when the Israelites (in exile) notice that their pagan gods cannot do anything for them, they *will return to the LORD their God and listen to His voice.* Moses gives us the reason why God is going to forgive His people and accept them: "*For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.*"

The word translated as "compassionate" refers to a deep love (usually of a superior for an inferior) rooted in some natural bond. For instance, in [Isaiah 49:15](#), the word is used for a mother's love toward her nursing baby: "*Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb?*" The idea is that a mother who gives birth to a child shows love and care for him/her regardless of what happens. Similarly, God genuinely cares about the Israelites and holds a kind attitude toward them because they are His children. That is why Moses could say that God will never abandon His people, a reassurance that occurs frequently in Scriptures ([Deuteronomy 31:6](#); [Isaiah 41:10](#); [Heb. 13:5](#) etc.).

Biblical Text:

²⁵ When you become the father of children and children's children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of

the Lord your God *so as* to provoke Him to anger, ²⁶ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed. ²⁷ The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord drives you. ²⁸ There you will serve gods, the work of man's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. ²⁹ But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find *Him* if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul. ³⁰ When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days you will return to the Lord your God and listen to His voice. ³¹ For the Lord your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.