

Deuteronomy 13:12-18

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Moses commands the Israelites to destroy an entire city that has succumbed to the enticements of the false prophets and has fallen into idolatry.

The third scenario is different from the previous ones in at least two ways. Whereas the previous sections ([Deuteronomy 13:1-5](#) and [Deuteronomy 13:6-11](#)) prescribed how punishment for an individual traitor should be carried out, this section (verses 12-18) deals with the punishment for an entire city that falls into idolatry. Whereas the previous sections gave the preventive measures to avoid the spread of apostasy, this section prescribes the necessary steps to take when apostasy is successfully spread within an entire city.

The scenario begins with a person hearing that something ominous was happening *in one of your cities, which the LORD your God is giving you to live in* (v. 12). Deuteronomy is Moses' final speech before he dies and turns over leadership to Joshua, who will lead Israel to conquer the Promised Land, with God's help and aid, and possess existing Canaanite cities. This scenario involves an entire city, not a person or group of persons. The Israelites were to act wisely because the rumor concerned one of the *cities which the LORD their God was giving them to live in*.

Moses told the Israelites that if they *hear anyone saying, "Some worthless men have gone out from among you and have seduced the inhabitants of their city* then they were to carefully investigate the charge. The phrase translated as *worthless men* (Heb. "benei beliya'al," "sons of Belial") is used of people without moral worth. It is used similarly to the *wicked man* in [Proverbs 6:12](#). These might be men who have gone out from among the Israelite community *and have seduced the inhabitants of their city, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods."* Just like in v. 2 and v. 6, these are gods *which you have not known*. This is again a reference to the pagan Canaanite gods and the exploitive practices they condone which have not yet been experienced by the Israelites.

If such a rumor is heard, then the people are admonished to *investigate, search out, and inquire thoroughly* in order to determine whether this rumor *is true*. God's people should not act upon rumors, or make assumptions. Rather,

they should make a thorough and complete investigation of the facts prior to taking any actions.

To *investigate* (Heb. “dārash”) can mean to ask the LORD for knowledge or advice ([Genesis 25:22](#); [Jeremiah 21:2](#)), but it is probably used here to refer to a forensic investigation. To *search out* (Heb. “ḥāqar”) can also mean “to investigate” or “to get information” ([Job 5:27](#)), which in this instance appropriately refers to a complete investigation to see if the rumors are true. To *inquire thoroughly* (Heb. “shā’al”) is used often of people asking or not asking God for guidance ([1 Samuel 23:2](#)). Here it may be used in that sense, in that the truth is being sought out—both the truth of whether the allegations are accurate, as well as the truth of God’s ways.

Moses then explained what to do *if it is true and the matter established that this abomination has been done among them*. The term “abomination” (Heb. “tō’ēbâ”) denotes something (or someone) that is morally and religiously detestable or perverse in the eyes of the LORD. It can refer to something that is unclean or impure; in other words, anything that does not meet the demands of God’s holiness ([Deuteronomy 7:25, 14:3](#)).

Once the matter is settled and the abomination has been confirmed, Moses told the people to *surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword* (v. 15). The people are to declare war upon the offending city. This would explain why such a thorough and complete investigation is required—the investigation is a prelude to a civil war.

The phrase *surely strike* is emphatic in the Hebrew text. The LORD (through Moses) was telling His people that “by all means” they should kill the people living in the city that substituted pagan worship for the worship of their Suzerain LORD. Note also that the method of execution here was *with the edge of the sword*, not stoning as earlier in the chapter (v. 10). The Israelites should consider the offending city as an alien invader, seeking to overthrow their country, and eliminate it. As with the other two provisions in this chapter, this is consistent with the covenant the people had agreed to enter with God ([Exodus 19:8; 24:3](#)). Disobedience to the covenant would result in destruction of the entire country, so this act of civil war is taken to preserve the rest of the nation.

Killing all of the inhabitants of the city was only part of the judgment that would end up *utterly destroying it*. The Hebrew word for *utterly destroying* is “ḥērem,” which means “put under a ban.” It refers to complete annihilation because the object of the wrath was under God’s judgment. This word is used

in [Deuteronomy 7:2](#) in reference to what the Israelites were to do to Canaanite cities. So, if a city worships pagan gods, they represent the same threat to Israel as a Canaanite city and are liable to suffer the same divine judgment. This is consistent with God's assertion that if Israel were to follow the Canaanite ways, they would experience the same judgment ([Deuteronomy 8:19-20](#)).

The people were also commanded to destroy *all that is in it and its cattle with the edge of the sword*. Killing the livestock was important because there was to be no connection between the LORD and pagan worship. It also removes incentive to use this provision as a ruse to steal the possessions of a weaker city. Civil war was to be used only as a way to preserve the nation, not as a means to exploit. Livestock was considered a part of someone's wealth, and the LORD did not want the people to enrich themselves when carrying out the LORD's judgment.

In addition to destroying the whole city and its livestock, the Israelites were told to *gather all its booty into the middle of its open square* (v. 16). Once this was done, they were to *burn the city and all its booty with fire as a whole burnt offering to the LORD your God*. Everything, the city and all of its contents, were to be completely incinerated. This was meant to be *a whole burnt offering to the LORD your God*. Not only the possessions of the people, but the city itself was to be destroyed. Again, this removes material incentives to misuse this provision in order to wrap an exploitive civil war in a cloak of morality.

The phrase *as a whole burnt offering* does not appear in the Hebrew text. It reads literally "completely burn with fire" as seen in the New King James translation. However, the sense of this being a burnt offering exists in the fact that the burning was *to the LORD your God*, as was the case with burnt offerings.

This complete destruction of the city and all of its contents was meant to ensure that it would become *a ruin forever* and should *never be rebuilt*.

Moses further told the Israelites to retain nothing from the city, saying, *Nothing from that which is put under the ban shall cling to your hand* (v. 17). The word "ban" (Heb. "ḥērem") is used also in v. 15, and it basically means "a devoted thing," "a proscribed thing," and it carries the idea of complete destruction. Such things were not to *cling* (Heb. "dābaq," "stick to", "cleave") to any Israelite's hand, meaning that no one was supposed to profit off the LORD's judgment and keep any of those objects for themselves.

The reason the Israelites were not to save any of the objects that were to be burned was so *that the LORD may turn from His burning anger*. God's *burning anger* is His attribute whereby He hates sins and deals with it accordingly ([Deuteronomy 9:7-8](#); [2 Kings 22:13](#)). God's anger relates to His covenant, and His anger burned many times against His covenant people when they worshipped other gods ([1 Kings 14:9, 15; 16:3](#); [2 Kings 21:6](#) are just a few examples).

In addition to turning away *His burning anger*, the Suzerain LORD promised to *show mercy* to His covenant people. The verb translated as *show mercy* (Heb. "raḥāmîm") and the verb translated as *have compassion* (Heb. "riḥam") come from the same Hebrew verb "reham," which denotes the quality of showing kindness or favor to someone. Literally, the text reads, "He [God] will give you compassion and will be compassionate toward you." God would show compassion on Israel if they would execute the judgment properly, without seeking gain for themselves. They would be seeking reward from their Suzerain King rather than seeking reward from exploiting their fellow Israelites.

The psalmist David described the Suzerain God as being like a compassionate father to those who fear Him and keep His commandments ([Psalms 103:13](#)). This is the same idea here in [Deuteronomy 13](#). God would show mercy or have compassion on those who obeyed Him by destroying the entire city which committed apostasy. God would also increase those Israelites who obeyed Him, *just as He had sworn to their fathers*. Population growth was (and is) a form of blessing and it was one of the elements of God's promises to the patriarchs ([Genesis 12, 15, and 26](#)).

Verse 18 summarizes this section. Blessings would come to the Israelites if they would *listen to the voice of the Lord their God* (v. 18). Listening here involved obeying what God said. In particular, the LORD declared that it included *keeping all His commandments which I am commanding you today, and doing what is right in the sight of the Lord your God*

The covenant between God and His people, to which they had agreed, specified that any form of worshipping the Canaanite gods was a violation of the second commandment and thus was strictly prohibited. Anyone practicing pagan worship was to be put to death. This would cleanse the Promised Land of a cancer that would lead to judgment, and bring blessing on the people. Obedience to God's word results in His mercy, grace, and compassion. Much of this is very practical. Living in obedience to God's commands to serve and love others leads to a harmonious and productive community. In contrast, the

pagan practices of the Canaanites led to exploitation, which leads to various forms of death.

The New Testament Church also teaches believers to be careful concerning false teaching. It is inevitable that many will enter the Church and try to import pagan concepts into the midst of God's people. In the New Testament, Christians are commanded to separate from false teachers (2 John 9 – 11). Death is separation; exile is a form of death. New Testament believers are not in a national covenant that is of this world, so there are no forms of civil laws as in Deuteronomy. But the principle stands. The New Testament tells us that any teacher (prophet) is to have their "fruits" examined thoroughly. If their fruits are bad, then they are false and should not be listened to. The New Testament's directive to examine fruit is applicable either to teachers or to ourselves. New Testament believers are not directed to examine others to "see if they are saved." [For further reading on examining fruit, visit our commentary on Galatians 5:17-21, 5:22-26.](#)

Biblical Text:

¹² If you hear in one of your cities, which the Lord your God is giving you to live in, *anyone* saying *that* ¹³ some worthless men have gone out from among you and have seduced the inhabitants of their city, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods' (whom you have not known), ¹⁴ then you shall investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly. If it is true *and* the matter established that this abomination has been done among you, ¹⁵ you shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying it and all that is in it and its cattle with the edge of the sword. ¹⁶ Then you shall gather all its booty into the middle of its open square and burn the city and all its booty with fire as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God; and it shall be a ruin forever. It shall never be rebuilt. ¹⁷ Nothing from that which is put under the ban shall cling to your hand, in order that the Lord may turn from His burning anger and show mercy to you, and have compassion on you and make you increase, just as He has sworn to your fathers, ¹⁸ if you will listen to the voice of the Lord your God, keeping all His commandments which I am commanding you today, and doing what is right in the sight of the Lord your God.