

Watch Yourself

M. W. Bassford, 3-20-11

When the children of Israel reached the banks of the Jordan, they must have thought they had it made. Forty years ago, their existence as an independent nation had begun with such promise. At Mt. Sinai, the people declared as one that they would serve the Lord, and He promised them that He would bless them by giving them the land of Canaan.

However, the optimism of that day quickly crumbled in the face of reality. It soon became apparent that the Israelites were, in fact, not willing to serve the Lord as they had sworn. They failed to trust in His promise of victory over the Canaanites, they whined and complained about His provision for them in the desert, they rebelled against His chosen leader Moses, and most of all, they turned aside to other gods. Because they broke their covenant with Him, God punished them instead of blessing them. Of the 600,000 Israelite men who set out from Egypt, only two of them would actually set foot in the promised land. Everyone else died in the wilderness because of their faithlessness to the Lord.

Now, though, a new day had dawned in Israel. The new generation of Israelites had seen enough of the power and fury of the Lord that they knew better than to mess with Him. They were committed to serving God and conquering the land with His help. However, even at this stage, Moses spends a great deal of time warning them. He knew all too well how today's zeal could become tomorrow's apathy and the next day's apostasy, and so he counseled the people to watch themselves, to be diligently careful in their behavior, so that they could continue to enjoy God's blessings.

This warning is just as applicable to us. Simply because we have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus doesn't mean that we've already punched our tickets to heaven. Every one of us can still fall away, and if we don't pay attention, we certainly will fall away. Let's learn to be vigilant as we consider Moses' admonition to watch yourselves.

Vigilance in Deuteronomy 6

In this series of warnings, the first is "**DO NOT FORGET**". Moses raises this idea in Deuteronomy 6:10, 12. Sure, the Israelites were committed to God now, but part of the reason for their commitment was that all of God's wonders were fresh in their minds, and they were dependent on His miraculous provision for their survival. However, that wasn't going to be true for very much longer. They were about to be given a land in which they could apparently provide for themselves. God wasn't going to be interacting with them in the same dramatic ways. In short, they were going to be entering a phase of their national existence in which it was going to be much easier to forget about the Lord, and if they let themselves forget, they were going to be painfully reminded of God's punishment for the disobedient.

In the same way, friends, we must guard ourselves against forgetfulness. Every single Christian in this room is a Christian because we realized that we needed God's help. We came to the realization that we were dead in our sins, and the only way out of that death sentence was to rely on God. What a relief it was to have our sins washed away by the power of His grace! However, that sense of reliance on God is very easy to forget. Sometimes, Christians become so corrupted by the world that they forget the deadliness of sin. At other times, they get so confident in their own righteousness that they no longer believe they need grace. Both of those illusions are brutally destructive. Instead, we must always recognize that our sins deserve judgment, and that we are dependent on God's mercy to save us.

Likewise, Moses instructs the Israelites, "**DO NOT TEST**". Consider with me Deuteronomy 6:16-17. At Massah, the Israelites had demanded that God produce water to prove that He was with them. In fact, they spent their forty years in the wilderness testing God repeatedly. They always tried to push the boundaries, to see what God would let them get away with, and every time, when God slapped them down, they blamed Him for the calamity they'd earned.

Sadly, a lot of Christians today also make a practice of testing God. They want to see just how much they can get away with spiritually. Christians like this aren't interested in assembling with the saints every chance they get. Instead, they see how many assemblies they can miss before they start getting pushback from the church leadership. They aren't dedicated to dressing in a modest way. Instead, they want to see how low the necklines can go and how high the hemlines can rise before people start pulling them aside and talking to them. Those things, and other things like them, are symptoms of a heart problem. Brethren, discipleship is about seeing how much we can give, not how much we can get away with, and if all we're doing is giving God the least diligent service we think He'll tolerate, we are absolutely making a spiritual practice of putting Him to the test. We're not putting one over on Him. Instead, we're just making Him angry.

We must also be prepared to **EXPLAIN** our faith to our children. Moses returns to this favorite theme of his in Deuteronomy 6:20-21. Here, he's describing an experience that's familiar to anyone who has dealings with small children. They always want to know why. They always want to figure things out. In this case, he's predicting that the children of the Israelites are going to want to know why they keep God's law. When that time comes, the parents have to be ready for it. They have to be able to explain the history behind the law and why their children should keep it.

Likewise, friends, for all of us who are raising children, we must be ready to give the same kind of spiritual explanation. Let's say that one of our children wants to know why we don't use musical instruments in our worship services. Are we prepared, right now, to sit down with a Bible and show them from God's word why He wants us to sing? Are we able to point to specific passages of Scripture that explain God's plan of salvation and why we need to be Christians if we want to go to heaven? We have to be ready for that if we want our children to go to heaven too.

As part of this, we must be able to explain to them why they must **BE CAREFUL** to follow God's law. This is part of Moses' sample explanation to children in Deuteronomy 6:24-25. Basically, these parents are to give their children three main reasons to follow God. First, it will be for their good. Second, it will be for their survival. Third, it will be for their righteousness. Because of those things, the Israelites had all the reason they needed to be careful to obey.

These same three reasons apply to us. We too obey the laws of God for our good, because if we follow God's will in this life, it will keep us from all the miseries that accompany sin, and we will be joyful and blessed for all of our days. Second, if we follow God here, He will bless us with eternal life in the hereafter. Third, if we follow the Bible, we will be righteous, ethical, moral people, able to live a principled existence in a world that's often lacking in principle. Do our children understand that being obedient will secure all of these important things for us? Are we prepared to explain that to them? This is one of the most important messages of all to communicate, with both words and actions.

Vigilance in Deuteronomy 7.

If the children of Israel wanted to obey for their good, for their lives, and for their righteousness, one of the main things they had to learn to do was to **BE PURE**. Moses warns them sternly about this in Deuteronomy 7:1-2. In essence, the Israelites were to have nothing to do with the people of the land that didn't involve killing them. Not only were the Canaanites wicked and deserving of punishment, but they were also a powerfully corrupting influence. Once the Israelites began associating with them, they would inevitably begin intermarrying with them and serving their gods, which would provoke the Lord's wrath. The only way to prevent that contamination was to have nothing to do with them.

Today, we must also be mindful of the dangers of mingling too much with the wicked around us. God intends for us to be a light to the lost around us. That being the case, we can't go through life shunning all non-Christians, but neither should we associate indiscriminately with them. Even as we hope to influence them to come to the Lord, we must also remember their influence on us. As any long-time Christian knows, one of the most common reasons for a brother or sister to leave the Lord is the corrupting effect of ungodly friends. If we aren't careful, that can easily happen to us.

As we work to remain faithful, we must **REMEMBER GOD'S LOVE** for us. Moses raises this crucial point in Deuteronomy 7:7-8. When God rescued Israel from Egypt, it's not like the Israelites were some kind of prize. They were just a mob of slaves ground beneath the heel of their Egyptian oppressors. They didn't deserve to be rescued. They didn't merit being rescued. Instead, God rescued them because of His love and because of His word to Abraham.

We also aren't any kind of prize. It's not like there are supernatural beings lining up to collect us because we're so cool. In fact, we're not very lovable at all, especially when we are stained with the guilt of innumerable sordid sins. God isn't lucky to have us. We're blessed to have God. We have value only because He gave us value, because He priced us with the blood of His Son. We are His people only because of His love, and we should remember that love always.

It's equally important that we **REMEMBER GOD'S FAITHFULNESS**. Moses makes an interesting argument out of this in Deuteronomy 7:9-10. As he makes plain here, God is a faithful God. He will keep His covenant with those who keep His commandments. If a thousand generations in succession are obedient to God, He will bless every single one of them without fail. However, there's a flip side to that. Because God is so faithful, He will just as faithfully stand against those who hate Him and reject His covenant. They can be certain of punishment.

We too must see that the faithfulness of God cuts both ways. Lots of people in the world don't realize this. They want God to be faithful to His promise to bring the righteous to heaven, but they don't think that He will be faithful to His promise to punish the disobedient in hell. Brethren, that doesn't work. Either God is faithful, or He isn't. If He is, the righteous will be saved, but the unrighteous will be condemned, because that's what He has said will happen. If God isn't faithful, then every one of us is vulnerable to His arbitrary whims, no matter what we do. The promises of God are a unit. Either we believe that all of the promises are true, or we must reject all of them together.

Finally, Moses encourages the Israelites by telling them, "**DO NOT FEAR**". Look with me at Deuteronomy 7:17-19. In human terms, the Israelites were about to embark on a hopeless battle. They were a bunch of nomads, without military training or equipment, and yet they were supposed to conquer cities filled with warriors who had the cutting edge of technology. If the Israelites had been on their own, they would have been driven back out into the desert to die. However, because God was with them, their success was guaranteed. Failure wasn't even a possibility.

Our enemies today are also very intimidating. As we look to get to heaven ourselves, bring our families with us, and teach the lost too, there are all kinds of powerful forces arrayed against us. Thankfully, though, the most powerful force of all is working for us. We don't have to be afraid, because we can rely on God to lead us to eternal victory.