

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“AT the end of every seven years thou shalt make a release. And this is the manner of the release: Every creditor that lendeth aught unto his neighbor shall release it; he shall not exact it of his neighbor, or of his brother, because it is called the Lord’s release. Of a foreigner thou mayest exact it again; but that which is thine with thy brother thine hand shall release, save when there shall be no poor among you; for the Lord shall greatly bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it; only if thou carefully hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command thee this day. For the Lord thy God blesseth thee, as He promised thee; and thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; and thou shalt reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over thee” (Ver. 1-6).

It is truly edifying to mark the way in which the God of Israel was ever seeking to draw the hearts of His people to Himself by means of the various sacrifices, solemnities, and institutions of the Levitical ceremonial.

- There was the morning and evening lamb every day,
- There was the holy Sabbath every week,
- There was the new moon every month,
- There was the passover every year,
- There was the tithing every three years,
- There was the release every seven years, and
- There was the jubilee every fifty years.

All this is full of deepest interest. It tells its own sweet tale, and teaches its own precious lesson to the heart.

- the morning and evening lamb, as we know, pointed ever to **“the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world;”**
- the Sabbath was the lovely type of the rest that remaineth to the people of God;
- the new moon beautifully prefigured the time when restored Israel shall reflect back the beams of the Sun of Righteousness upon the nations;
- the passover was the standing memorial of the nation’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage;
- the year of tithing set forth the fact of the Lord’s proprietorship of the land, as also the lovely way in which His rents were to be expended in meeting the need of His workmen and of His poor;

- the sabbatic year gave promise of a bright time when all debts would be canceled, all loans disposed of, all burdens removed; and finally,
- the jubilee was the magnificent type of the times of the restitution of all things, when the captive shall be set free, when the exile shall return to his long-lost home and inheritance, and when the land of Israel and the whole earth shall rejoice beneath the beneficent government of the Son of David.

Now, in all these lovely institutions we notice two prominent characteristic features, namely, glory to God, and blessing to man.

These two things are linked together by a divine and everlasting bond. God has so ordained that His full glory and the creature's full blessing should be indissolubly bound up together. This is deep joy to the heart, and it helps us to understand more fully the force and beauty of that familiar sentence – **“We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”**

When that glory shines forth in its full luster, then, assuredly, human blessedness, rest, and felicity shall reach their full and eternal consummation.

We see a lovely pledge and foreshadowing of all this in the seventh year.

It was **“the Lord's release,”** and therefore its blessed influence was to be felt by every poor debtor from Dan to Beersheba. The Lord would grant unto His people the high and holy privilege of having fellowship with Him in causing the debtor's heart to sing for joy. He would teach them, if they would only learn, the deep blessedness of frankly forgiving all. This is what He Himself delights in, blessed forever be His great and glorious name.

But, alas! the poor human heart is not up to this lovely mark. It is not fully prepared to tread this heavenly road. It is sadly cramped and hindered, by a low and miserable selfishness, in grasping and carrying out the divine principle of grace.

It is not quite at home in this heavenly atmosphere; it is but ill-prepared for being the vessel and channel of that royal grace which shines so brightly in all the ways of God. This will only too fully account for the cautionary clauses of the following passage.

“If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates, in thy land, which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother; but thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth. Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him naught; and he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be sin unto thee. Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him; because that for this thing the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou putteth thine hand unto. For the poor shall never cease out of thy land; therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land” (Ver. 7-11).

Here the deep springs of the poor selfish heart are discovered and judged. There is nothing like grace for making manifest the hidden roots of evil in human nature. Man must be renewed in the very deepest springs of his moral being ere he can be the vehicle of divine love; and even those who are thus through grace renewed, have to watch continually against the hideous forms of selfishness in which our fallen nature clothes itself. Nothing but grace can keep the heart open wide to every form of human need. We must abide hard by the fountain of heavenly love if we would be channels of blessing in the midst of a scene of misery and desolation like that in which our lot is cast. How lovely are those words, “**Thou shalt open thine hand wide**”! They breathe the very air of Heaven. An open heart and a wide hand are like God.

“**The Lord loveth a cheerful giver,**” because that is precisely what He is Himself. “**He giveth to all liberally, and upbraideth not.**”

And He would grant unto us the rare and most exquisite privilege of being imitators of Him. Marvelous grace! The very thought of it fills the heart with wonder, love, and praise.

- We are not only saved by grace, but we stand in grace,
- Live under the blessed reign of grace,
- Breathe the very atmosphere of grace, and
- Are called to be the living exponents of grace, not only to our brethren, but to the whole human family.

“**As we therefore have opportunity, let us do good unto all, especially unto them which are of the household of faith.**”

Christian reader, let us diligently apply our hearts to all this divine instruction. It is most precious; but its real preciousness can only be tasted in the practical carrying out of it. We are surrounded by ten thousand forms of human misery, human sorrow, human need.

- There are broken hearts, crushed spirits, desolate homes, around us on every side.
- The widow, the orphan, and the stranger meet us daily in our walks.

How do we carry ourselves in reference to all these? Are we hardening our hearts and closing our hands against them? Or are we seeking to act in the lovely spirit of “**the Lord’s release**”?

We must bear in mind that we are called to be reflectors of the divine nature and character to be direct channels of communication between our Father’s loving heart and every form of human need. We are not to live for ourselves; to do so is a most miserable denial of every feature and principle of that morally glorious Christianity which we profess. It is our high and holy privilege, yea, it is our special mission, to shed around us the blessed light of that Heaven to which we belong. Wherever we are – in the family, in the field, in the mart or the manufactory, in the shop or in the counting-house, all who come in contact with us should see the grace of Jesus shining out in our ways, our words, our very looks. And then, if any object of need come before us, if we can do nothing more, we should drop a soothing word into the ear, or shed a tear or heave a sigh of genuine, heart-felt sympathy.

Reader, is it thus with us? Are we so living near the fountain of divine love, and so breathing the very air of Heaven, that the blessed fragrance of these things shall be diffused around us? or are we displaying the odious selfishness of nature, the unholy tempers and dispositions of our fallen and corrupt humanity? What an unsightly object is a selfish Christian! He is a standing contradiction, a living, moving lie. The Christianity which he professes throws into dark and terrible relief the unholy selfishness which governs his heart and comes out in his life.

The Lord grant that all who profess and call themselves Christians may so carry themselves, in daily life, as to be an unblotted Epistle of Christ, known and read of all men. In this way, infidelity will, at least, be deprived of one of its weightiest arguments, its gravest objections.

Nothing affords a stronger plea to the infidel than the inconsistent lives of professing Christians.

Not that such a plea will stand for a moment, or even be urged, before the judgment-seat of Christ, inasmuch as each one who has within his reach a copy of the Holy Scriptures will be judged by the light of those Scriptures, even though there were not a single consistent Christian on the face of the earth. Nevertheless, Christians are solemnly responsible to let their light so shine before men that they may see their good works and glorify our Father in Heaven. We are solemnly bound to exhibit and illustrate in daily life the heavenly principles unfolded in the Word of God. We should leave the infidel without a shred of a plea or an argument; we are responsible so to do.

May we lay these things to heart, and then we shall have occasion to bless God for our meditation on the delightful institution of the Lord's release.

The Hebrew Servant

We shall now quote for the reader the touching and beautiful institution in reference to the Hebrew servant. We increasingly feel the importance of giving the veritable language of the HOLY GHOST; for albeit it may be said that the reader has his Bible to refer to, yet we know, as a fact, that when passages of Scripture are referred to, there is, in many cases, a reluctance to lay down the volume which we hold in our hand in order to read the reference. And beside, there is nothing like the Word of God; and as to any remarks which we may offer, their object is simply to help the beloved Christian reader to understand and appreciate the Scriptures which we quote.

“If thy brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years, then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee. And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty; thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy wine-press; of that wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him.”

How perfectly beautiful! how like our own ever-gracious God is all this!

He would not have the brother go away empty. Liberty and poverty would not be in moral harmony. The brother was to be sent on his way free and full, emancipated and endowed, not only with his liberty, but with a liberal fortune to start with.

Truly, this is divine. We do not want to be told the school where such exquisite ethics are taught. They have the very ring of Heaven about them; they emit the fragrant odor of the very paradise of God. Is it not in this way that our God has dealt with us? All praise to His glorious name! He has not only given us life and liberty, but He has furnished us liberally with all we can possibly want for time and eternity. He has opened the exhaustless treasury of Heaven for us; yea, He has given the Son of His bosom for us and to us – for us, to save; to us, to satisfy. He has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness; all that pertains to the life that now is, and to that which is to come, is fully and perfectly secured by our Father’s liberal hand.

And is it not deeply affecting to mark how the heart of God expresses itself in the style in which the Hebrew servant was to be treated? **“Thou shalt furnish him liberally.”** Not grudgingly, or of necessity. It was to be done in a manner worthy of God. The actings of His people are to be the reflection of Himself.

We are called to the high and holy dignity of being His moral representatives. It is marvelous; but thus it is, through His infinite grace. He has not only delivered us from the flames of an everlasting hell, but He calls us to act for Him, and to be like Him, in the midst of a world that crucified His Son. And not only has He conferred this lofty dignity upon us, but He has endowed us with a princely fortune to support it. The inexhaustible resources of Heaven are at our disposal. **“All things are ours,”** through His infinite grace. Oh that we may more fully realize our privileges, and thus more faithfully discharge our holy responsibilities!

At verse 15 of our chapter, we have a very touching motive presented to the heart of the people, one eminently calculated to stir their affections and sympathies.

“And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee; therefore I command thee this thing to-day.”

The remembrance of the Lord’s grace in redeeming them out of Egypt was to be the ever-abiding and all-powerful motive-spring of their actings toward the poor brother. This is a never-failing principle and nothing lower than this will ever stand. If we look for our motive-springs anywhere but in God Himself, and in His dealings with us, we shall soon break down in our practical career.

It is only as we keep before our hearts the marvelous grace of God displayed toward us in the redemption which is in Christ JESUS that we shall be able to pursue a course of true, active benevolence, whether toward our brethren or those outside. Mere kindly feelings, bubbling up in our own hearts, or drawn out by the sorrows and distresses and necessities of others, will prove evanescent. It is only in the living God Himself we can find perennial springs.

At verse 16, a case is contemplated in which a servant might prefer remaining with his master.

“And it shall be, if he say unto thee, I will not go away from thee, because he loveth thee and thine house, because he is well with thee, then thou shalt take an awl, and thrust it through his ear unto the door, and he shall be thy servant forever.”

In comparing this passage with Exodus 21:1-6, we observe a marked difference arising, as we might expect, from the distinctive character of each book.

In Exodus, the typical feature is prominent; in Deuteronomy, the moral. Hence, in the latter, the inspired writer omits all about the wife and the children, as foreign to his purpose here, though so essential to the beauty and perfectness of the type in Exodus 21. We merely notice this as one of the many striking proofs that Deuteronomy is very far indeed from being a barren repetition of its predecessors. There is neither repetition on the one hand, nor contradiction on the other, but lovely variety in perfect accordance with the divine object and scope of each book.

So much for the contemptible shallowness and ignorance of those infidel writers who have had the impious temerity to level their shafts at this magnificent portion of the oracles of God.

In our chapter, then, we have the moral aspect of this interesting institution. The servant loved his master, and was happy with him. He preferred perpetual slavery and the mark thereof with a master whom he loved, to liberty and a liberal portion away from him. This, of course, would argue well for both parties. It is ever a good sign for both master and servant when the connection is of long standing. Perpetual changing may, as a general rule, be taken as a proof of moral wrong somewhere. No doubt there are exceptions; and not only so, but in the relation of master and servant, as in everything else, there are two sides to be considered. For instance, we have to consider whether the master is perpetually changing his servants, or the servant perpetually changing his masters. In the former case, appearances would tell against the master; in the latter, against the servant. The fact is, we have all to judge ourselves in this matter.

Those of us who are masters have to consider how far we really seek the comfort, happiness, and solid profit of our servants. We should bear in mind that we have very much more to think of, in reference to our servants, than the amount of work we can get out of them. Even upon the low-level principle of "live and let live," we are bound to seek, in every possible way, to make our servants happy and comfortable; to make them feel that they have a home under our roof; that we are not content merely with the labor of their hands, but that we want the love of their hearts.

We remember once asking the head of a very large establishment, "How many hearts do you employ?" He shook his head, and owned, with real sorrow, how little heart there is in the relation of master and servant. Hence the common, heartless phrase of "employing hands."

But the Christian master is called to stand upon a higher level altogether; he is privileged to be an imitator of his Master – Christ. The remembrance of this will regulate all his actings toward the servant; it will lead him to study, with ever-deepening interest and solid profit, his divine model, in order to reproduce Him in all the practical details of daily life.

So also in reference to the Christian servant, in his position and line of action. He, as well as the master, has to study the great example set before him in the path and ministry of the only true Servant that ever trod this earth. He is called to walk in His blessed footsteps, to drink into His spirit, to study His Word.

It is not a little remarkable that the Holy Ghost has devoted more attention to the instruction of servants than to all the other relationships put together.

This the reader can see at a glance, in the epistles to the Ephesians, Colossians, and Titus. The Christian servant can adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour by not purloining and not answering again. He can serve the Lord Christ in the most common-place duties of domestic life just as effectually as the man who is called to address thousands on the grand realities of eternity.

Thus, when both master and servant are mutually governed by heavenly principles, both seeking to serve and glorify the one Lord, they will get on happily together. The master will not be severe, arbitrary, and exacting; and the servant will not be self-seeking, heady, and high-minded: each will contribute, by the faithful discharge of their relative duties, to the comfort and happiness of the other, and to the peace and happiness of the whole domestic circle. Would that it were more after this heavenly fashion in every Christian household on the face of the earth! Then indeed would the truth of God be vindicated, His Word honored, and His name glorified in our domestic relations and practical ways.

In verse 18, we have an admonitory word which reveals to us, very faithfully, but with great delicacy, a moral root in the poor human heart.

“It shall not seem hard unto thee when thou sendest him away free from thee, for he has been worth a double hired servant to thee in serving thee six years, and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all that thou doest.”

This is very affecting. Only think of the most high God condescending to stand before the human heart – the heart of a master, to plead the cause of a poor servant, and set forth his claims! It is as if He were asking a favor for Himself. He leaves nothing unsaid in order to strengthen the case; He reminds the master of the value of six years’ service, and encourages him by the promise of enlarged blessing as a reward for his generous acting. It is perfectly beautiful.

The Lord would not only have the generous thing done, but done in such a way as to gladden the heart of the one to whom it was done; He thinks not only of the substance of an action, but also of the style.

We may, at times, brace ourselves up to the business of doing a kindness; we do it as a matter of duty, and all the while it may “seem hard” that we should have to do it; thus the act will be robbed of all its charms. It is the generous heart that adorns the generous act. We should so do a kindness as to assure the recipient that our own heart is made glad by the act. This is the divine way:

- **“When they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both.”**
- **“It is meet that we should make merry, and be glad.”**
- **“There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth.”**

Oh, to be a brighter reflection of the precious grace of our Father’s heart!

Ere closing our remarks on this deeply interesting chapter, we shall quote for the reader its last paragraph.

“All the firstling males that come of thy herd and of thy flock thou shalt sanctify unto the Lord thy God; thou shalt do no work with the firstling of thy bullock, nor shear the firstling of thy sheep; thou shalt eat it before the Lord thy God year by year in the place which the Lord shall choose, thou and thy household. And if there be any blemish therein, as if it be lame, or blind, or have any ill blemish, thou shalt not sacrifice it unto the Lord thy God. Thou shalt eat it within thy gates, the unclean and the clean person shall eat it alike, as the roebuck, and as the hart. Only thou shalt not eat the blood thereof; thou shalt pour it upon the ground as water” (Ver. 19-23).

Only that which was perfect was to be offered to God.

The first-born, unblemished male, the apt figure of the spotless Lamb of God, offered upon the Cross for us, the imperishable foundation of our peace, and the precious food of our souls, in the presence of God. This was the divine thing, – the assembly gathered together around the divine center, feasting in the presence of God on that which was the appointed type of Christ, who is at once our sacrifice, our center, and our feast. Eternal and universal homage to His most precious and glorious Name!

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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