

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

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CHAPTER NINE

“HEAR, O Israel: Thou art to pass over Jordan this day, to go in to possess nations greater and mightier than thyself, cities great and fenced up to heaven, a people great and tall, the children of the Anakims, whom thou knowest, and of whom thou hast heard say, ‘Who can stand before the children of Anak!’” (Ver. 1, 2).

This chapter opens with the same grand Deuteronomic sentence, **“Hear, O Israel.”** This, we may say, is the key-note of this most blessed book, and especially of those opening discourses which have been engaging our attention. But the chapter which now lies open before us presents subjects of immense weight and importance.

In the first place, the lawgiver sets before the congregation, in terms of deep solemnity, that which lay before them in their entrance upon the land.

He does not hide from them the fact that there were serious difficulties and formidable enemies to be encountered. This he does, we need hardly say, not to discourage their hearts, but that they might be forewarned, forearmed, and prepared. What that preparation was we shall see presently; but the faithful servant of God felt the rightness, yea, the urgent need of putting the true state of the case before his brethren. There are two ways of looking at difficulties; we may look at them from a human stand-point, or from a divine one; we may look at them in a spirit of unbelief, or we may look at them in the calmness and quietness of confidence in the living God.

- We have an instance of the former in the report of the unbelieving spies in Numbers 13;
- We have an instance of the latter in the opening of our present chapter.

It is not the province, nor the path, of faith to deny that there are difficulties to be encountered by the people of God; it would be the height of folly to do so, inasmuch as there are difficulties, and it would be but fool-hardiness, fanaticism, or fleshly enthusiasm to deny it. It is always well for people to know what they are about, and not to rush blindly into a path for which they are not prepared.

- An unbelieving sluggard may say, There is a lion in the way;
- A blind enthusiast may say, There is no such thing;
- the true man of faith will say, Though there were a thousand lions in the way, God can soon dispose of them.

But, as a great practical principle of general application, it is very important for all the Lord's people to consider, deeply and calmly, what they are about, ere they enter upon any particular path of service or line of action.

If this were more attended to, we should not witness so many moral and spiritual wrecks around us.

What mean those most solemn, searching, and testing words addressed by our blessed Lord to the multitudes that thronged around Him in Luke 15? – **“He turned and said to them, ‘If any man come to Me, and hate not his father and mother, his wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.’”** (Ver. 26-30).

These are solemn and seasonable words for the heart.

How many unfinished buildings meet our view as we look forth over the wide field of Christian profession, giving sad occasion to the beholders for mockery!

How many set out upon a path of discipleship under some sudden impulse, or under the pressure of mere human influence, without a proper understanding, or a due consideration of all that is involved; and then when difficulties arise, when trials come, when the path is found to be narrow, rough, lonely, unpopular, they give it up, thus proving that they had never really counted the cost, never taken the path in communion with God, never understood what they were doing.

Now, such cases are very sorrowful; they bring great reproach on the cause of Christ, give occasion to the adversary to blaspheme, and greatly dishearten those who care for the glory of God and the good of souls. Better far not to take the ground at all than, having taken it, to abandon it in dark unbelief and worldly-mindedness, hence, therefore, we can perceive the wisdom and faithfulness of the opening words of our chapter.

Moses tells the people plainly what was before them; not, surely, to discourage them, but to preserve them from self-confidence, which is sure to give way in the moment of trial, and to cast them upon the living God, who never fails a trusting heart.

“Understand therefore this day, that the Lord thy God is He which goeth over before thee; as a consuming fire He shall destroy them, and He shall bring them down before thy face: so shalt thou drive them out, and destroy them quickly, as the Lord hath said unto thee.”

Here, then, is the divine answer to all difficulties, be they ever so formidable. What were mighty nations, great cities, fenced walls, in the presence of the Lord? Simply as chaff before the whirlwind.

“If God be for us, who can be against us?”

The very things which scare and stumble the Coward heart afford an occasion for the display of God’s power, and the magnificent triumphs of faith.

Faith says, Grant me but this, that God is before me and with me, and I can go anywhere. Thus the only thing in all this world that really glorifies God is the faith that can trust Him and use Him and praise Him; and inasmuch as faith is the only thing that glorifies God, so is it the only thing that gives man his proper place, even the place of complete dependence upon God, and this insures victory and inspires praise – unceasing praise.

But we must never forget that there is moral danger in the very moment of victory – danger arising out of what we are in ourselves.

There is the danger of self-gratulation – a terrible snare to us poor mortals. In the hour of conflict we feel our weakness, our nothingness, our need. This is good and morally safe. It is well to be brought down to the very bottom of self and all that pertains to it, for there We find God, in all the fullness and blessedness of what He is, and this is sure and certain victory and consequent praise.

But our treacherous and deceitful hearts are prone to forget whence the strength and victory come; hence the moral force, value, and seasonableness of the following admonitory words addressed by the faithful minister of God to the hearts and Consciences of his brethren:

“Speak not thou in thine heart” – here is where the mischief always begins – **“after that the Lord hath cast them out from before thee, saying, For my righteousness the Lord hath brought me in to possess this land; but for the wickedness of these nations the Lord doth drive them out from before thee.”**

Alas! What materials there are in us! What ignorance of our own hearts! What a shallow sense of the real character of our ways! How terrible to think that we are capable of saying in our hearts such words as, **“For my righteousness”!**

Yes, reader, we are verily capable of such egregious folly; for as Israel was capable of it, so are we, inasmuch as we are made of the very same material; and that they were capable of it is evident from the fact of their being warned against it; for, most assuredly, the Spirit of God does not warn against phantom dangers or imaginary temptations.

We are verily capable of turning the actings of God on our behalf into an occasion of self-complacency; in. stead of seeing in those gracious actings a ground for heartfelt praise to God, we use them as a ground for self-exaltation.

Hence, therefore, we would do well to ponder the words of faithful admonition addressed by Moses to the hearts and consciences of the people; they furnish a very wholesome antidote for the self-righteousness so natural to us as well as to Israel.

“Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thine heart, dost thou go to possess their land; but for the wickedness of those nations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee, and that He may perform the word which the Lord sware unto thy fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

“Understand, therefore, that the Lord giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness; for thou art a stiff-necked people. Remember, and forget not, how thou provokedst the Lord thy God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that thou didst depart out of the land of Egypt, until ye came unto this place, ye have been rebellious against the Lord” (Ver. 5-7).

This paragraph sets forth two great principles, which, if fully laid hold of, must put the heart into a right moral attitude.

In the first place, the people were reminded that their possession of the land of Canaan was simply in pursuance of God’s promise to their fathers. This was placing the matter on the most solid basis – a basis which nothing could ever disturb.

As to the seven nations which were to be dispossessed, it was on the ground of their wickedness that God, in the exercise of His righteous government, was about to drive them out.

Every landlord has a perfect right to eject bad tenants; and the nations of Canaan had not only failed to pay their rent, as we say, but they had injured and defiled the property to such an extent that God could no longer endure them, and therefore He was going to drive them out, irrespective altogether of the incoming tenants. Whoever was going to get possession of the property, these dreadful tenants must be evicted.

The iniquity of the Amorites had reached its highest point, and nothing remained but that judgment should take its course.

Men might argue and reason as to the moral fitness and consistency of a benevolent Being unroofing the houses of thousands of families and putting the occupants to the sword, but we may depend upon it the government of God will make very short work with all such arguments. God, blessed forever be His holy name, knows how to manage His own affairs, and that, too, without asking man’s opinion.

He had borne with the wickedness of the seven nations to such a degree that it had become absolutely insufferable; the very laud itself could not bear it. Any further exercise of forbearance would have been a sanction of the most terrible abominations; and this, of course, was a moral impossibility.

The glory of God absolutely demanded the expulsion of the Canaanites.

Yes; and we may add, the glory of God demanded the introduction of the seed of Abraham into possession of the property, to hold as tenants forever under the Lord God Almighty – the Most High God, Possessor of Heaven and earth. Thus the matter stood for Israel, had they but seen it.

Their possession of the land of promise and the maintenance of the divine glory were so bound up together that one could not be touched without touching the other. God had promised to give the land of Canaan to the seed of Abraham as an everlasting possession. Had He not a right to do so? Will infidels question God's right to do as He will with His own? Will they refuse to the Creator and Governor of the universe a right which they claim for themselves? The land was the Lord's, and He gave it to Abraham His friend forever; and although this was true, yet were not the Canaanites disturbed in their tenure of the property until their wickedness had become positively unbearable.

Thus we see that in the matter, both of the outgoing and incoming tenants the glory of God was involved. That glory demanded that the Canaanites should be expelled, because of their ways; and that glory demanded that Israel should be put in possession, because of the promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But, in the second place, Israel had no ground for self-complacency, as Moses most plainly and faithfully instructs them.

He rehearses in their ears, in the most touching and impressive manner, all the leading scenes of their history from Horeb to Kadesh-barnea; he refers to the golden calf, to the broken tables of the covenant, to Taberah and Massah, and Kibroth-hattaavah; and sums all up, at verse 24, with these pungent, humbling words, "**Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you.**"

This was plain dealing with heart and conscience. The solemn review of their whole career was eminently calculated to correct all false notions about themselves; every scene and circumstance in their entire history, if viewed from a proper stand-point, only brought to light the humbling fact of what they were, and how near they had been, again and again, to utter destruction.

With what stunning force must the following words have fallen upon their ears? "**And the Lord said unto me, 'Arise, get thee down quickly from hence, for thy people which thou hast brought forth out of Egypt have corrupted themselves; they are quickly turned aside out of the way which I commanded them; they have made them a molten image.' Furthermore, the Lord spake unto me, saying, 'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; let Me alone, that I may destroy them, and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of thee a nation mightier and greater than they'"** (Ver. 12-14).

How withering was all this to their natural vanity, pride, and self-righteousness!

- How should their hearts have been moved to their very deepest depths by those tremendous words, "**Let Me alone, that I may destroy them**"!

- How solemn to reflect upon the fact which these words revealed – their appalling nearness to national ruin and destruction!

- How ignorant they had been of all that passed between the Lord and Moses on the top of Mount Horeb!

They had been on the very brink of an awful precipice. Another moment might have dashed them over.

The intercession of Moses had saved them, the very man whom they had accused of taking too much upon him. Alas! how they had mistaken and misjudged him! How utterly astray they had been in all their thoughts! Why, the very man whom they had accused of self-seeking and desiring to make himself altogether a prince over them, had actually refused a divinely given opportunity of becoming the head of a greater and mightier nation than they!

Yes, and this same man had earnestly requested that if they were not to be forgiven and brought into the land, his name might be blotted out of the book.

How wonderful was all this! What a turning of the tables upon them! How exceedingly small they must have felt, in view of all these wonderful facts!

Surely, as they reviewed all these things, they might well see the utter folly of the words, **“For my righteousness the Lord hath brought me in to possess this land.”**

How could the makers of a molten image use such language! Ought they not rather to see and feel and own themselves to be no better than the nations that were about to be driven out from before them? For what had made them to differ? The sovereign mercy and electing love of their covenant God. And to what did they owe their deliverance out of Egypt, their sustenance in the wilderness, and their entrance into the land? Simply to the eternal stability of the covenant made with their fathers, **“a covenant ordered in all things and sure,”** a covenant ratified and established by the blood of the Lamb, in virtue of which all Israel shall yet be saved and blessed in their own land.

But we must now quote for the reader the splendid paragraph with which our chapter closes – a paragraph eminently fitted to open Israel’s eyes to the utter folly of all their thoughts respecting Moses, their thoughts respecting themselves, and their thoughts respecting that blessed One who had so marvelously borne with all their dark unbelief and daring rebellion.

“Thus I fell down before the Lord forty days and forty nights, as I fell down at the first; because the Lord had said He would destroy you. I prayed therefore unto the Lord, and said, ‘O Lord God, destroy not Thy people and Thine inheritance, which Thou hast redeemed through Thy greatness, which Thou hast brought forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember thy servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; *look not unto the stubbornness of this people, nor to their wickedness, nor to their sin*; lest the land whence thou broughtest us out say, Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land which He promised them, and because He hated them, He hath brought them out to slay them in the wilderness. *Yet they are Thy people, and Thine inheritance, which Thou broughtest out by Thy mighty power, and by Thy stretched-out arm.*’ “

What marvelous words are these to be addressed by a human being to the living God! What powerful pleadings for Israel! what self-renunciation!

Moses refuses the offered dignity of being the founder of a greater and mightier nation than Israel. He only desires that the Lord should be glorified, and Israel pardoned, blessed, and brought into the promised land. He could not endure the thought of any reproach being brought upon that glorious Name so dear to his heart, neither could he bear to witness Israel's destruction. These were the two things he dreaded; and as to his own exaltation, it was just the thing about which he cared nothing at all.

This beloved and honored servant cared only for the glory of God and the salvation of His people; and as to himself, his hopes, his interests, his all, he could rest, with perfect composure, in the assurance that his individual blessing and the divine glory were bound together by a link which could never be snapped.

And, oh, how grateful must all this have been to the heart of God! How refreshing to His spirit were those earnest, loving pleadings of His servant! How much more in harmony with His mind than the intercession of Elias against Israel hundreds of years afterward! How they remind us of the blessed ministry of our great High-Priest, who ever liveth to make intercession for His people, and whose active intervention on our behalf never ceases for a single moment!

And then how very touching and beautiful to mark the way in which Moses insists upon the fact that the people were the Lord's inheritance, and that He had brought them up out of Egypt.

The Lord had said, "**Thy people which thou hast brought forth out of Egypt,**" but Moses says, "**They are Thy people, and Thine inheritance, which Thou broughtest out.**"

This is perfectly exquisite. Indeed this whole scene is full of profound interest.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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