

# NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

**“WHEN the Lord thy God hath cut off the nations whose land the Lord thy God giveth thee, and thou succeedest them, and dwellest in their cities, and in their houses; thou shalt separate three cities for thee in the midst of thy land, which the Lord thy God giveth thee to possess it. Thou shalt prepare thee a way, and divide the coasts of thy land, which the Lord thy God giveth thee to inherit, into three parts, that every slayer may flee thither”** (Ver. 1-3).

What a very striking combination of **“goodness and severity”** we observe in these few lines!

We have the **“cutting off”** of the nations of Canaan because of their consummated wickedness, which had become positively unbearable; and on the other hand, we have a most touching display of divine goodness in the provision made for the poor manslayer in the day of his deep distress, when flying for his life from the avenger of blood. The government and the goodness of God are, we need hardly say, both divinely perfect. There are cases in which goodness would be nothing but a toleration of sheer wickedness and open rebellion, which is utterly impossible under the government of God. If men imagine that because God is good they may go on and sin with a high hand, they will sooner or later find out their woeful mistake.

**“Behold,”** says the inspired apostle, **“the goodness and severity of God!”** \*

\* **The word rendered “severity” is *αποτομία*, which literally means “cutting off.”**

God will most assuredly cut off evil-doers who despise His goodness and long-suffering mercy. He is slow to anger, blessed be His holy name! and of great kindness.

For hundreds of years He bore with the seven nations of Canaan, until their wickedness rose up to the very heavens, and the land itself could bear them no longer. He bore with the enormous wickedness of the guilty cities of the plain; and if He had found even ten righteous people in Sodom, He would have spared it for their sakes. But the day of terrible vengeance came, and they were **“cut off.”**

And so will it be ere long with guilty Christendom. **“Thou also shalt be cut off.”**

The reckoning-time will come, and oh, what a reckoning-time it will be! The heart trembles at the thought of it, while the eye scans and the pen traces the soul-subduing words.

But mark how divine **“goodness”** shines out in the opening lines of our chapter. See the gracious painstaking of our God to make the city of refuge as available as possible for the slayer. The three cities were to be **“in the midst of thy land.”**

It would not do to have them in remote corners, or in places difficult of access. And not only so, but **“thou shalt prepare thee a way,”** and again, **“Thou shalt divide the coasts of thy land . . . into three parts.”**

Everything was to be done to facilitate the slayer’s escape. The gracious Lord thought of the feelings of the distressed one **“flying for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before him.”** The city of refuge was to be **“brought near,”** just as **“the righteousness of God”** is brought near to the poor broken-hearted helpless sinner – so near, that it is **“to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly.”**

There is peculiar sweetness in the expression, **“Thou shalt prepare thee a way.”**

How like our own ever-gracious God – **“the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”!** and yet it was the same God that cut off the nations of Canaan in righteous judgment who thus made such gracious provision for the man-slayer. **“Behold, the goodness and severity of God.”**

**“And this is the case of the slayer, which shall flee thither, that he may live: Whoso killeth his neighbor ignorantly, whom he hated not in time past; as when a man goeth into the wood with his neighbor to hew wood, and his hand fetcheth a stroke with the axe to cut down the tree, and the head slippeth from the helve, and lighteth upon his neighbor, that he die; he shall flee unto one of those cities and live; lest the avenger of the blood pursue the slayer, while his heart is hot, and overtake him, because the way is long.”** – most touching and exquisite grace! – **“and slay him; whereas he was not worthy of death, inasmuch as he hated him not in time past. Wherefore I command thee, saying, ‘Thou shalt separate three cities for thee.’”** (Ver. 4-7).

Who could flee to the city of refuge?

Here we have a most minute description of the man for whom the city of refuge was provided. If he did not answer to this, the city was not for him; but if he did, he might feel the most perfect assurance that a gracious God had thought of him, and found a refuge for him, where he might be as safe as the hand of God could make him. Once the slayer found himself within the precincts of the city of refuge, he might breathe freely, and enjoy calm and sweet repose. No avenging sword could reach him there, not a hair of his head could be touched there.

He was safe – yes, perfectly safe; and not only perfectly safe, but, perfectly certain. He was not hoping to be saved, he was sure of it. He was in the city, and that was enough.

Before he got in, he might have many a struggle deep down in his poor terrified heart, many doubts and fears and painful exercises. He was flying for his life, and this was a serious and an all-absorbing matter for him – a matter that would make all beside seem light and trifling.

We could not imagine the flying slayer stopping to gather flowers by the roadside. Flowers! he would say, What have I to do with flowers just now? My life is at stake. I am flying for my life. What if the avenger should come and find me gathering flowers? No; the city is my one grand and all-engrossing object; nothing else has the smallest interest or charm for me. I want to be saved; that is my exclusive business now.

But the moment he found himself within the blessed gates, he was safe, and he knew it. How did he know it? By his feelings? By his evidences? By experience? Nay; but simply by the Word of God.

No doubt he had the feeling, the evidence, and the experience, and most precious they would be to him after his tremendous struggle and conflict to get in; but these things were by no means the ground of his certainty or the basis of his peace. He knew he was safe because God told him so. The grace of God had made him safe, and the Word of God made him sure.

We cannot conceive a man-slayer within the walls of the city of refuge expressing himself as many of the Lord's dear people do in reference to the question of safety and certainty.

He would not deem it presumption to be sure he was safe. If any one had asked him, Are you sure you are safe? Sure! he would say, "How can I be otherwise than sure? Was I not a slayer? Have I not fled to this city of refuge? Has not the Lord, our covenant-God, pledged His Word for it? Has He not said that '**fleeing thither he may live**'? Yes, thank God, I am perfectly sure. I had a terrible run for it – a fearful struggle. At times, I almost felt as if the avenger had me in his dreaded grasp. I gave myself up for lost; but then, God, in His infinite mercy, made the way so plain, and made the city so easy of access to me, that, spite of all my doubts and fears, here I am, safe and certain. The struggle is all over, the conflict past and gone. I can breathe freely now, and walk up and down in the perfect security of this blessed place, praising our gracious covenant-God for His great goodness in having provided such a sweet retreat for a poor slayer like me."

Can the reader speak thus as to his safety in CHRIST? Is he saved, and does he know it? If not, may the Spirit of God apply to his heart the simple illustration of the man-slayer within the walls of the city of refuge. May he know that "**strong consolation**" which is the sure, because divinely appointed, portion of all those who have "**fled for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before them**" (Hebrews 6:18).

We must now proceed with our chapter; and in so doing, we shall find that there was more to be thought of in the cities of refuge than the question of the slayer's safety. That was provided for perfectly, as we have seen; but the glory of God, the purity of His land, and the integrity of His government had to be duly maintained. If these things were touched, there could be no safety for anyone.

This great principle shines on every page of the history of God's ways with man. Man's true blessing and God's glory are indissolubly bound together, and both the one and the other rest on the same imperishable foundation, namely, Christ and His precious work.

**“And if the Lord thy God enlarge thy coasts, as He hath sworn unto thy fathers, and give thee all the land which He promised to give unto thy fathers; if thou shalt keep all these commandments to do them, which I command thee this day, to love the Lord thy God, and to walk ever in His ways; then shalt thou add three cities more for thee, beside these three; that innocent blood be not shed in thy land, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance, and so blood be upon thee.**

**“But if any man hate his neighbor, and lie in wait for him, and rise up against him, and smite him mortally that he die, and fleeth into one of these cities; then the elders of his city shall send and fetch him thence, and deliver him into the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die. Thine eye shall not pity him, but thou shalt put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with thee” (Ver. 8-13).**

Thus, whether it was grace for the slayer, or judgment for the murderer, the glory of God and the claims of His government had to be duly maintained.

The unwitting man-slayer was met by the provision of mercy; the guilty murderer fell beneath the stern sentence of inflexible justice. We must never forget the solemn reality of divine government. It meets us everywhere; and if it were more fully recognized, it would effectually deliver us from one-sided views of the divine character.

Take such words as these – **“Thine eye shall not pity him.”**

- Who uttered them? The Lord.
- Who penned them? God the Holy Ghost.
- What do they mean? Solemn judgment upon wickedness.

Let men beware how they trifle with these weighty matters. Let the Lord’s people beware how they give place to foolish reasonings in reference to things wholly beyond their range. Let them remember that a false sentimentality may constantly be found in league with an audacious infidelity in calling in question the solemn enactments of divine government.

This is a very serious consideration. Evil doers must look out for the sure judgment of a sin-hating God.

If a willful murderer presumed to avail himself of God’s provision for the ignorant man-slayer, the hand of justice laid hold of him and put him to death, without mercy. Such was the government of God in Israel of old, and such will it be in a day that is rapidly approaching.

Just now, God is dealing in longsuffering mercy with the world; this is the day of salvation – the acceptable time. The day of vengeance is at hand. Oh that man, instead of reasoning about the justice of God’s dealings with evil-doers, would flee for refuge to that precious Saviour who died on the Cross to save us from the flames of an everlasting hell! \*

**\* For other points presented in the cities of refuge we must refer the reader to “Notes on the Book of Numbers,” chapter 35.**

Before quoting for the reader the closing paragraph of our chapter, we would just call his attention to verse 14, in which we have a very beautiful proof of God's tender care for His people, and His most gracious interest in everything which directly or indirectly concerned them. **“Thou shalt not remove thy neighbor's landmark, which they of old time have set in thine inheritance, which thou shalt inherit in the land that the Lord thy God giveth thee to possess it.”**

This passage, taken in its plain import and primary application, is full of sweetness, as presenting the loving heart of our God, and showing us how marvelously He entered into all the circumstances of His beloved people.

- The landmarks were not to be meddled with.
- Each one's portion was to be left intact, according to the boundary-lines set up by those of old time.

The Lord had given the land to Israel, and not only so, but He had assigned to each tribe and to each family their proper portion, marked off with perfect precision, and indicated by landmarks so plain that there could be no confusion, no clashing of interests, no interference one with another, no ground for lawsuit or controversy about property. There stood the ancient landmarks, marking off each one's portion in such a manner as to remove all possible ground of dispute. Each one held as a tenant under the God of Israel, who knew all about his little holding, as we say, and every tenant had the comfort of knowing that the eye of the gracious and almighty Landlord was upon his bit of land, and His hand over it to protect it from every intruder. Thus he could abide in peace under his vine and under his fig-tree, enjoying the portion assigned him by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Thus much as to the obvious sense of this beautiful clause of our chapter; but surely it has a deep spiritual meaning also. Are there not spiritual landmarks for the Church of God, and for each individual member thereof, marking off, with divine accuracy, the boundaries of our heavenly inheritance – those landmarks which they of old time, even the apostles of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, have set up. Assuredly there are, and God has His eye upon them, and He will not permit them to be removed with impunity. Woe be to the man that attempts to touch them; he will have to give account to God for so doing. It is a serious thing for anyone to interfere, in any way, with the place, portion, and prospect of the Church of God; and it is to be feared that many are doing it without being aware of it.

We do not attempt to go into the question of what these landmarks are; we have sought to do this earlier in our *“Notes on Deuteronomy,”* as well as in the other four volumes of the series; but we feel it to be our duty to warn, in the most solemn manner, all whom it may concern against doing that which, in the Church of God, answers to the removal of the landmarks in Israel.

If anyone had come forward in the land of Israel to suggest some new arrangement in the inheritance of the tribes, to adjust the property of each upon some new principle, to set up some new boundary lines, what would have been the reply of the faithful Israelite? A very simple one, we may be sure.

He would have replied in the language of Deuteronomy 19:14. He would have said, We want no novelties here; we are perfectly content with those sacred and time-honored landmarks which they of old time have set in our inheritance. We are determined, by the grace of God, to keep to them, and to resist, with firm purpose, any modern innovation.

Such, we believe, would have been the prompt reply of every true member of the congregation of Israel; and surely the Christian ought not to be less prompt or less decided in his answer to all those who, under the plea of progress and development, would remove the landmarks of the Church of God and, instead of the precious teaching of CHRIST and His apostles, offer us the so-called light of science and the resources of philosophy. Thank God, we want them not.

We have CHRIST and His Word; what can be added to these? What do we want of human progress or development, when we have **“that which was from the beginning”**! What can science or philosophy do for those who possess **“all truth”**! No doubt, we want – yea, long to make progress in the knowledge of CHRIST; long for a fuller, clearer development of the life of CHRIST in our daily history; but science and philosophy cannot help us in these; nay, they could only prove a most serious hindrance.

Christian reader, let us seek to keep close to CHRIST, close to His Word.

This is our only security in this dark and evil day. Apart from Him, we are nothing, have nothing, can do nothing; in Him, we have all. He is the portion of our cup and the lot of our inheritance. May we know what it is not only to be safe in Him, but separated to Him, and satisfied with Him, till that bright day when we shall see Him as He is, and be like Him and with Him forever.

We shall now do little more than quote the few remaining verses of our chapter. They need no exposition. They set forth wholesome truth, to which professing Christians, with all their light and knowledge, may well give attention.

**“One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth; at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established”** (Ver. 15).

This subject has already come before us. It cannot be too strongly insisted upon. We may judge of its importance from the fact that not only does Moses again and again press it upon Israel’s attention, but our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and the Holy Ghost in the apostle Paul, in two of his epistles, insists upon the principle of **“two or three witnesses,”** in every case.

One witness, be he ever so trustworthy, is not sufficient to decide a case.

If this plain fact were more carefully weighed and duly attended to, it would put an end to a vast amount of strife and contention. We, in our fancied wisdom, might imagine that one thoroughly reliable witness ought to be sufficient to settle any question. Let us remember that God is wiser than we are, and that it is ever our truest wisdom, as well as our greatest moral security, to hold fast by His unerring Word.

**“If a false witness rise up against any man, to testify against him that which is wrong; then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges which shall be in those days; and the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and have testified falsely against his brother; then shall ye do unto him as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you. And those which remain shall hear and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you. And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Ver. 16-21).**

We may here see how God hates false witness; and further, we have to bear in mind that though we are not under law, but under grace, false witness is not less hateful to God; and surely the more fully we enter into the grace in which we stand, the more intensely we shall abhor false witness, slander, and evil-speaking, in every shape and form.

The good Lord preserve us from all such.

~ end of chapter 19 ~

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