

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

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CHAPTER TWENTY

“WHEN thou goest out to battle against thine enemies, and seest horses and chariots, and a people more than thou, be not afraid of them; for the Lord thy God is with thee, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people, and shall say unto them, Hear, O Israel! ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies; let not your hearts faint; fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them; for the Lord your God is He that goeth with you to fight for you against your enemies, to save you” (Ver. 1-4).

How wonderful to think of the Lord as a Man of war! Think of His fighting against people! Some find it very hard to take in the idea – hard to understand how a benevolent Being could act in such a character. But the difficulty arises mainly from not distinguishing between the different dispensations.

It was just as consistent with the character of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to fight against His enemies, as it is with the character of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to forgive them. And inasmuch as it is the revealed character of God that furnishes the model on which His people are to be formed – the standard by which they are to act, it was quite as consistent for Israel to cut their enemies in pieces as it is for us to love them, pray for them, and do them good. If this very simple principle were borne in mind, it would remove a quantity of misunderstanding, and save a vast amount of unintelligent discussion.

No doubt it is thoroughly wrong for the Church of God to go to war. No one can read the New Testament with a mind free from bias and not see this. We are positively commanded to love our enemies, to do good to them that hate us, and to pray for them that despitefully use us. **“Put up again thy sword into his place, for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.”** And again, in another Gospel, **“Then said Jesus unto Peter, ‘Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which My Father hath given Me, shall I not drink it?’** Again, our Lord says to Pilate, **“My kingdom is not of this world: if My kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight”** – it would be perfectly consistent for them so to do – **“but now is My kingdom not from hence”** – and therefore it would be wholly out of character, utterly inconsistent, thoroughly wrong, for them to fight.

All this is so plain that we need only say, **“How readest thou?”**

Our blessed Lord did not fight; He meekly and patiently submitted to all manner of abuse and ill-treatment, and in so doing, He left us an example, that we should follow His steps. If we only honestly ask ourselves the question, What would JESUS do? it would close all discussion on this point, as well as upon a thousand other points besides. There is really no use in reasoning – no need of it. If the words and ways of our blessed Lord, and the distinct teaching of His Spirit by His holy apostles, be not sufficient for our guidance, all discussion is utterly vain.

And if we be asked, What does the HOLY GHOST teach on this great practical point? hear His precious, clear, and pointed words – **“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves; but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.’ Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing, thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good”** (Romans 12).

These are the lovely ethics of the Church of God, the principles of that heavenly kingdom to which all true Christians belong. Would they have suited Israel of old? Certainly not. Only conceive Joshua acting toward the Canaanites on the principles of Romans 12! It would have been as flagrant an inconsistency as for us to act on the principle of Deuteronomy 20. How is this? Simply because in Joshua’s day God was executing judgment in righteousness, whereas now He is dealing in unqualified grace. This makes all the difference. The principle of divine action is the grand moral regulator for God’s people in all ages. If this be seen, all difficulty is removed, all discussion definitively closed.

But then, if any feel disposed to ask, What about the world? how could it get on upon the principle of grace? Could it act on the doctrine of Romans 12:20? Not for a moment. The idea is simply absurd. To attempt to amalgamate the principles of grace with the law of nations, or to infuse the spirit of the New Testament into the frame-work of political economy, would instantly plunge civilized society into hopeless confusion.

And here is just where many most excellent and well-meaning people are astray. They want to press the nations of the world into the adoption of a principle which would be destructive of their national existence. The time is not come yet for nations to beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks, and learn war no more. That blessed time will come, thank God, when this groaning earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea; but to seek to get nations now to act upon peace principles is simply to ask them to cease to be – in a word, it is thoroughly hopeless, unintelligent labor. It cannot be. We are not called upon to regulate the world, but to pass through it as pilgrims and strangers.

Jesus did not come to set the world right. He came to seek and to save that which was lost; and as to the world, He testified of it that its deeds were evil. He will, ere long, come to set things right; He will take to Himself His great power and reign. The kingdoms of this world shall most assuredly become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ. He will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them that do iniquity. All this is most blessedly true, but we must wait His time. It can be of no possible use for us, by our ignorant efforts, to seek to bring about a condition of things which all Scripture goes to prove can only be introduced by the personal presence and rule of our beloved and adorable Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

But we must proceed with our chapter.

Israel were called to fight the Lord's battles. The moment they put their foot upon the land of Canaan it was war to the knife with the doomed inhabitants.

“Of the cities of these people which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth.”

This was distinct and emphatic. The seed of Abraham were not only to possess the land of Canaan, but they were to be God's instruments in executing His just judgment upon the guilty inhabitants, whose sins had risen up to Heaven, and become absolutely intolerable.

Does anyone feel called upon to apologize for the divine actings toward the seven nations of Canaan? If so, let him be well assured of this, that his labor is perfectly gratuitous, entirely uncalled for. What folly for any poor worm of the earth to think of entering upon such work! and what folly, too, for anyone to require an apology or an explanation!

It was a high honor put upon Israel to exterminate those guilty nations – an honor of which they proved themselves utterly unworthy, inasmuch as they failed to do as they were commanded. They left alive many of those who ought to have been utterly destroyed; they spared them to be the wretched instruments of their own ultimate ruin, by leading them into the self-same sins which had so loudly called for divine judgment.

But let us look for a moment at the qualifications which were necessary for those who would fight the Lord's battles. We shall find the opening paragraph of our chapter full of most precious instruction for ourselves in the spiritual warfare which we are called to wage.

The reader will observe that the people, on approaching to the battle, were to be addressed, first, by the priest, and secondly, by the officers. This order is very beautiful. The priests came forward to unfold to the people their high privileges; the officers came to remind them of their holy responsibilities, such is the divine order here. Privilege comes first, and then responsibility.

“The priest shall approach and speak unto the people, and shall say unto them, Hear, O Israel! ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies; let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them; for the Lord your God is He that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.”

What blessed words are these! How full of comfort and encouragement! how eminently calculated to banish all fear and depression, and to infuse courage and confidence into the most sinking, fainting heart!

The priest was the very expression of the grace of God, – his ministry a stream of most precious consolation flowing from the loving heart of the God of Israel to each individual warrior. His loving words were designed and fitted to gird up the loins of the mind, and nerve the feeblest arm for fight. He assures them of the divine presence with them.

There is no question, no condition, no “if,” no “but.” It is an unqualified statement. *Jehovah Elohim* was with them. This surely was enough. It mattered not, in the smallest degree, how many, how powerful, or how formidable were their enemies, they would all prove to be as chaff before the whirlwind in the presence of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel.

But then the officer had to be heard as well as the priest – **“And the officers shall speak unto the people, saying, What man is there that hath built a new house and hath not dedicated it? let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. And what man is he that hath planted a vineyard and hath not yet eaten of it? let him also go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man eat of it. And what man is there that hath betrothed a wife and hath not taken her? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her. And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren’s heart faint as well as his heart. And it shall be that when the officers have made an end of speaking unto the people, that they shall make captains of the armies to lead the people”** (Ver. 5-9).

Thus we learn that there were two things absolutely essential to all who would fight the Lord’s battles, namely, a heart thoroughly disentangled from the things of nature and of earth, and a bold unclouded confidence in God. **“No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.”**

There is a very material difference between being engaged in the affairs of this life and being entangled by them. A man might have had a house, a vineyard, and a wife and yet have been fit for the battle. These things were not, in themselves, a hindrance; but it was having them under such conditions as rendered them an entanglement that unfitted a man for the conflict.

Spiritual Warfare

It is well to bear this in mind, we, as Christians, are called to carry on a constant spiritual warfare. We have to fight for every inch of heavenly ground. What the Canaanites were to Israel, the wicked spirits in the heavenlies are to us.

- We are not called to fight for eternal life; we have gotten that as God’s free gift before we begin.
- We are not called to fight for salvation; we are saved before we enter upon the conflict.

It is most needful to know what it is that we have to fight for, and whom we are to fight with. The object for which we fight is, to make good, maintain, and carry out practically our heavenly position and character in the midst of the scenes and circumstances of ordinary human life from day to day. And then as to our spiritual foes, they are wicked spirits, who, during this present time, are permitted to occupy the heavenlies. **“We wrestle not against flesh and blood, [as Israel had to do in Canaan] but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers [χουμοκρατορας] of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”**

Now, the question is, what do we want in carrying on such a conflict as this? Must we abandon our lawful earthly callings? Must we detach ourselves from those relationships founded on nature and sanctioned of God? Is it needful to become an ascetic, a mystic, or a monk in order to carry on the spiritual warfare to which we are called? By no means; indeed, for a Christian to do anyone of these things would, in itself, be a proof that he had completely mistaken his calling, or that he had, at the very outset, fallen in the battle.

We are imperatively called upon to work with our hands the thing which is good, that we may have to give to him that needeth. And not only so, but we have the most ample guidance, in the pages of the New Testament, as to how we are to carry ourselves in the varied natural relationships which God Himself has established, and to which He has affixed the seal of His approval. Hence it is perfectly plain that earthly callings and natural relationships are, in themselves, no hindrance to our waging a successful spiritual warfare.

What, then, is needed by the Christian warrior? – A heart thoroughly disentangled from things earthly and natural, and an unclouded confidence in God.

But how are these things to be maintained? Hear the divine reply: **“Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day”** – that is, the whole time from the Cross to the coming of CHRIST:

“And having done all, to stand. Stand, therefore; having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness, and your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints” (Ephesians 6).

Reader, mark the qualification of a Christian warrior as here set forth by the HOLY GHOST.

It is not the question of a house, a vineyard, or a wife,

- But of having the inward man governed by **“truth,”**
- The outward conduct characterized by real practical **“righteousness,”**
- The moral habits and ways marked by the sweet **“peace”** of the Gospel,
- The whole man covered by the impenetrable shield of **“faith,”**
- The seat of the understanding guarded by the full assurance of **“salvation,”** and
- The heart continually sustained and strengthened by persevering prayer and supplication, and
- Led forth in earnest intercession for all saints, and specially for the Lord’s beloved workmen and their blessed work.

This is the way in which the spiritual Israel of God are to be furnished for the warfare which they are called to wage with wicked spirits in the heavenlies. May the Lord, in His infinite goodness, make all these things very real in our souls’ experience, and in our practical career from day to day. The close of our chapter contains the principles which were to govern Israel in their warfare.

They were most carefully to discriminate between the cities which were very far off from them and those that pertained to the seven judged nations. To the former, they were, in the first place, to make overtures of peace; with the latter, on the contrary, they were to make no terms whatever.

“When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it” – a marvelous method of fighting! – **“And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee, then it shall be that all the people that is found therein shall be tributaries unto thee, and they shall serve thee. And if it will make no peace with thee, but will make war against thee, then thou shalt besiege it; and when the Lord thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof”** as expressing the positive energy of evil – **“with the edge of the sword. But the women, and the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof”** – all that was capable of being turned to account in the service of God and of His people – **“thou shalt take unto thyself; and thou shalt eat the spoil of thine enemies, which the Lord thy God hath given thee. Thus shalt thou do unto all the cities which are very far off from thee, which are not of the cities of these nations.”**

Indiscriminate slaughter and wholesale destruction formed no part of Israel’s business. If any cities were disposed to accept the proffered terms of peace, they were to have the privilege of becoming tributaries to the people of God; and in reference to those cities which would make no peace, all within their walls which could be made use of was to be reserved.

There are things in nature and things of earth which are capable of being used for God – they are sanctified by the Word of God and prayer. We are told to make to ourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that when we fail, they may receive us into everlasting habitations; which simply means that if this world’s riches come into the Christian’s hands, he should diligently and faithfully use them in the service of CHRIST; he should freely distribute them to the poor, and to all the Lord’s needy workmen; in short, he should make them available, in every right and prudent way, for the furtherance of the Lord’s work in every department. In this way, the very riches which else might crumble into dust in their hands, or prove to be as rust on their souls, shall produce precious fruit that shall serve to minister an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour JESUS CHRIST.

Many seem to find considerable difficulty in Luke 16:9, but its teaching is as clear and forcible as it is practically important. We find very similar instruction in I Timothy 6 – **“Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”**

There is not a fraction which we spend directly and simply for CHRIST which will not be before us by and by. The thought of this, though it should not by any means be a motive-spring, may well encourage us to devote all we have and all we are to the service of our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Such is the plain teaching of Luke 16:and I Timothy 6; let us see that we understand it. The expression, **“That they may receive you into everlasting habitations”** simply means that what is spent for CHRIST will be rewarded in the day that is coming. Even a cup of cold water given in His precious name shall have its sure reward in His everlasting kingdom. Oh, to spend and be spent for Him!

But we must close this section by quoting the few last lines of our chapter, in which we have a very beautiful illustration of the way in which our God looks after the smallest matters, and His gracious care that nothing should be lost or injured.

“When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof, by forcing an ax against them; for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field is man’s life) to employ them in the siege; only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat, thou shalt destroy and cut them down; and thou shalt build bulwarks against the city that maketh war with thee, until it be subdued” (Ver. 19, 20).

“Let nothing be lost,” is the Master’s own word to us – a word which should ever be kept in remembrance.

“Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused.”

We should carefully guard against all reckless waste of aught that can be made available for human use. Those who occupy the place of domestic servants should give their special attention to this matter. It is painful, at times, to witness the sinful waste of human food. Many a thing is flung out as offal which might supply a welcome meal for a needy family.

If a Christian servant should read these lines, we would earnestly entreat him or her to weigh this subject in the divine presence, and never to practice or sanction the waste of the smallest atom that is capable of being turned to account for human use. We may depend upon it that to waste any creature of God is displeasing in His sight.

Let us remember that His eye is upon us; and may it be our earnest desire to be agreeable to Him in all our ways.

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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