

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

By C. H. M.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WE must remember that the division of Scripture into chapters and verses is entirely a human arrangement, often very convenient, no doubt, for reference; but not infrequently it is quite unwarrantable, and interferes with the connection. Thus we can see at a glance that the closing verses of chapter 16 are much more connected with what follows than with what goes before.

“Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the Lord thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes; and they shall judge the people with just judgment. Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift; for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous. That which is altogether just shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live and inherit the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.”

These words teach us a twofold lesson; in the first place, they set forth the even-handed justice and perfect truth which ever characterize the government of God. Every case is dealt with according to its own merits and on the ground of its own facts. The judgment is so plain that there is not a shadow of ground for a question; all dissension is absolutely closed; and if any murmur is raised, the murmurer is at once silenced by **“Friend, I do thee no wrong.”** This holds good every where, and at all times, in the holy government of God, and it makes us long for the time when that government shall be established from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.

But on the other hand, we learn, from the lines just quoted, what man’s judgment is worth if left to himself. It cannot be trusted for a moment. Man is capable, of **“wresting judgment,”** of **“respecting persons,”** of **“taking a gift,”** of attaching importance to a person because of his position and wealth.

That he is capable of all this is evident from the fact of his being told not to do it. We must ever remember this. If God commands man not to steal, it is plain that man has theft in his nature.

Hence, therefore, human judgment and human government are liable to the grossest corruption. Judges and governors, if left to themselves, if not under the direct sway of divine principle, are capable of perverting justice for filthy lucre’s sake – of favoring a wicked man because he is rich, and of condemning a righteous man because he is poor of giving a judgment in flagrant opposition to the plainest facts because of some advantage to be gained, whether in the shape of money or influence or popularity or power.

To prove this, it is not necessary to point to such men as Pilate and Herod and Felix and Festus; we have no need to go beyond the passage just quoted, in order to see what man is, even when clothed in the robes of official dignity, seated on the throne of government, or on the bench of justice.

Some, as they read these lines, may feel disposed to say, in the language of Hazeel, **“Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this thing?”** But let such reflect for a moment on the fact that the human heart is the seed-plot of every sin, and of every vile and abominable and contemptible wickedness that ever was committed in this world; and the unanswerable proof of this is found in the enactments, commandments, and prohibitions which appear on the sacred page of inspiration.

And herein we have an uncommonly fine reply to the oft-repeated question, “What have we to do with many of the laws and institutions set forth in the Mosaic economy? Why are such things set down in the Bible? Can they possibly be inspired?”

Yes, they are inspired, and they appear on the page of inspiration in order that we may see, as reflected in a divinely perfect mirror, the moral material of which we ourselves are made – the thoughts we are capable of thinking, the words we are capable of speaking, and the deeds we are capable of doing.

Is not this something? Is it not good and wholesome to find, for example, in some of the passages of this most profound and beautiful book of Deuteronomy, that human nature is capable, and hence we are capable, of doing things that put us morally below the level of a beast? Assuredly it is; and well would it be for many a one who walks in pharisaic pride and self-complacency – puffed up with false notions of his own dignity and high-toned morality, to learn this deeply humbling lesson.

But how morally lovely, how pure, how refined and elevated, were the divine enactments for Israel!

They were not to wrest judgment, but allow it to flow in its own straight and even channel, irrespective altogether of persons. The poor man in vile raiment was to have the same impartial justice as the man with a gold ring and gay clothing.

The decision of the judgment-seat was not to be warped by partiality or prejudice, or the robe of justice to be defiled by the stain of bribery.

Oh, what will it be for this oppressed and groaning earth to be governed by the admirable laws which are recorded in the inspired pages of the Pentateuch, when a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall decree justice!

“Give the king Thy judgments, O God, and Thy righteousness unto the king’s son. He shall judge Thy people .with righteousness, and Thy poor with judgment” – no wresting, no bribery, no partial judgments then – **“The mountains [or higher dignities] shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills [or lesser dignities], by righteousness.**

“He shall judge [or defend] the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor. They shall fear Thee as long as the sun and moon endure, throughout all generations. He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass; as showers that water the earth. In his days shall the righteous flourish, and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth . . . He shall deliver the needy when he crieth, the poor also, and him that hath no helper. He shall spare the poor and needy, and shall save the souls of the needy. He shall redeem their souls from deceit and violence, and precious shall their blood be in his sight” (Psalm 72).

Well may the heart long for the time – the bright and blessed time when all this shall be made good, when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, when the Lord JESUS shall take to Himself His great power and reign, when the Church in the heavens shall reflect the beams of His glory upon the earth, when Israel’s twelve tribes shall repose beneath the vine and fig tree in their own promised land, and all the nations of the earth shall rejoice beneath the peaceful and beneficent rule of the Son of David. Thanks and praise be to our God, thus it shall be, ere long, as sure as His throne is in the heavens. A little while and all shall be made good, according to the eternal counsels and immutable promise of God.

Till then, beloved Christian reader, be it ours to live in the constant, earnest, believing anticipation of this bright and blessed time, and to pass through this ungodly scene as thorough strangers and pilgrims, having no place or portion down here, but ever breathing forth the prayer, **“Come, Lord Jesus!”**

In the closing lines of chapter 16, Israel is warned against the most distant approach to the religious customs of the nations around. **“Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of any trees near unto the altar of the Lord thy God, which thou shalt make thee. Neither shalt thou set thee up any image which the Lord thy God hateth.”**

They were carefully to avoid everything which might lead them in the direction of the dark and abominable idolatries of the heathen nations around. The altar of God was to stand out in distinct and unmistakable separation from those groves and shady places where false gods were worshiped, and things were done which are not to be named. *

*** It may interest the reader to know that the Holy Ghost, in speaking of the altar of God in the New Testament, does not apply to it the word used to express a heathen altar, but has a comparatively new word – a word unknown in the world’s classics. The heathen altar is βωμον (Acts 17:23): the altar of God is θυσιαστηριον. The former occurs but once; the latter, twenty-three times. So jealously is the worship of the only true God guarded and preserved from the defiling touch of heathen idolatry. Men may feel disposed to inquire why this should be, or how could the altar of God be affected by a name? We reply, The Holy Ghost is wiser than we are; and although the heathen word was before Him – a short and convenient word, too, – He refuses to apply it to the altar of the one true and living God.**

See Trench's "Synonyms of the New Testament," p.242. New edition revised.

In a word, everything was to be most carefully avoided which might in any way draw the heart away from the one living and true God. Nor this only; it was not enough to maintain a correct outward form; images and groves might be abolished, and the nation might profess the dogma of the unity of the Godhead, and all the while there might be an utter want of heart and genuine devotedness in the worship rendered. Hence we read, **"Thou shalt not sacrifice unto the Lord thy God any bullock or sheep wherein is blemish, or any ill-favoredness, for that is an abomination unto the Lord."**

That which was absolutely perfect could alone suit the altar and answer to the heart of God. To offer a blemished thing to Him was simply to prove the absence of all true sense of what became Him, and of all real heart for Him. To attempt to offer an imperfect sacrifice was tantamount to the horrible blasphemy of saying that any thing was good enough for Him. Let us hearken to the indignant pleadings of the Spirit of God, by the mouth of the prophet Malachi.

"Ye offer polluted bread upon Mine altar; and ye say, 'Wherein have we polluted Thee?' In that ye say, 'The table of the Lord is contemptible.' And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the Lord of Hosts. And now, I pray you, beseech God that He will be gracious unto us; this hath been by your means; will He regard your persons? saith the Lord of Hosts. Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for naught? neither do ye kindle fire on Mine altar for naught. I have no pleasure in you, saith the Lord of Hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand. For from the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of Hosts. But ye have profaned it, in that ye say, 'The table of the Lord is polluted, and the fruit thereof, even His meat is contemptible.' Ye said also, 'Behold, what a weariness is it!' and ye have snuffed at it, saith the Lord of Hosts; and ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the Lord. But cursed be the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing; for I am a great King, saith the Lord of Hosts, and My name is dreadful among the heathen" (Malachi 7-14).

Has all this no voice for the professing church? Has it no voice for the writer and the reader of these lines? Assuredly it has.

- is there not in our private and public worship a deplorable lack of heart, of real devotedness, deep-toned earnestness, holy energy, and integrity of purpose?
- is there not much that answers to the offering of the lame and the sick, the blemished and the ill-favored?
- is there not a deplorable amount of cold formality and dead routine in our seasons of worship, both in the closet and in the assembly?
- have we not to judge ourselves for barrenness, distraction, and wandering, even at the very table of our Lord?

- how often are our bodies at the table while our vagrant hearts and volatile minds are at the ends of the earth!
- how often do our lips utter words which are not the true expression of our whole moral being!

We express far more than we feel; we sing beyond our experience.

And then, when we are favored with the blessed opportunity of dropping our offerings in our Lord's treasury, what heartless formality! What an absence of loving, earnest, hearty devotedness! What little reference to the apostolic rule – "**as God hath prospered us**"! What detestable niggardliness! how little of the whole-heartedness of the poor widow who having but two mites in the world, and having the option of at least keeping one for her living, willingly cast in both-cast in her all! Pounds may be spent on ourselves, perhaps on superfluities, during the week, but when the claims of the Lord's work, His poor, and His cause in general are brought before us, how meager is the response!

Christian reader, let us consider these things; let us look at the whole subject of worship and devotedness in the divine presence, and in the presence of the grace that has saved us from everlasting burnings; let us calmly reflect upon the precious and powerful claims of Christ upon us. We are not our own; we are bought with a price. It is not merely our best, but our all, we owe to that blessed One who gave Himself for us. Do we not fully own it? Do not our hearts own it? Then may our lives express it! May we more distinctly declare whose we are and whom we serve. May the heart, the head, the hands, the feet – the whole man be dedicated, in unreserved devotedness, to Him, in the power of the Holy Ghost, and according to the direct teaching of Holy Scripture. God grant it may be so, with us and with all His beloved people!

A very weighty and practical subject now claims our attention.

The Necessity for Two or More Witnesses

We feel it right to adhere as much as possible to the custom of quoting at full length the passages for the reader; we believe it to be profitable to give the very Word of God itself; and moreover, it is convenient to the great majority of readers to be saved the trouble of laying aside the volume and turning to the Bible in order to find the passages for themselves.

"If there be found among you, within any of thy gates which the Lord thy God giveth thee, man or woman that hath wrought wickedness in the sight of the Lord thy God, in transgressing His covenant, and hath gone and served other gods, and worshiped them, either the sun or moon, or any of the hosts of heaven, which I have not commanded; and it be told thee, and thou hast heard of it, and inquired diligently, and, behold, it be true, and the thing certain, that such abomination is wrought in Israel;" – something affecting the whole nation – **"then shalt thou bring forth that man or that woman, which have committed that wicked thing, unto thy gates, even that man or that woman, and shalt stone them with stones till they die. At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death. The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So thou shalt put the evil away from among you"** (Ver. 2-7).

We have already had occasion to refer to the great principle laid down in the foregoing passage. It is one of immense importance, namely, the absolute necessity of having competent testimony ere forming a judgment in any case. It meets us constantly in Scripture; indeed, it is the invariable rule in the divine government, and therefore it claims our earnest attention. We may be sure it is a safe and wholesome rule, the neglect of which must always lead us astray.

We should never allow ourselves to form, much less to express and act upon, a judgment without the testimony of two or three witnesses. However trustworthy and morally reliable anyone witness may be, it is not a sufficient basis for a conclusion. We may feel convinced in our minds that the thing is true because affirmed by one in whom we have confidence; but God is wiser than we. It may be that the one witness is thoroughly upright and truthful, that he would not for worlds tell an untruth or bear false witness against anyone, – all this may be true, but we must adhere to the divine rule – **“In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.”** Would that this were more diligently attended to in the Church of God!

Its value in all cases of discipline, and in all cases affecting the character or reputation of anyone, is simply incalculable. Ere ever an assembly reaches a conclusion or acts on a judgment in any given case, it should insist on adequate evidence. If this be not forthcoming, let all wait on God – wait patiently and confidingly, and He will surely supply what is needed.

For instance, if there be moral evil or doctrinal error in an assembly of Christians, but it is only known to one; that one is perfectly certain – deeply and thoroughly convinced of the fact. What is to be done? Wait on God for further witness. To act without this, is to infringe a divine principle laid down with all possible clearness again and again in the Word of God.

Is the one witness to feel himself aggrieved or insulted because his testimony is not acted upon? Assuredly not; indeed he ought not to expect such a thing, yea, he ought not to come forward as a witness until he can corroborate his testimony by the evidence of one or two more. Is the assembly to be deemed indifferent or supine because it refuses to act on the testimony of a solitary witness? Nay, it would be flying in the face of a divine command were it to do so.

And be it remembered that this great practical principle is not confined in its application to cases of discipline, or questions connected with an assembly of the Lord’s people; it is of universal application.

We should never allow ourselves to form a judgment or come to a conclusion without the divinely appointed measure of evidence; if that be not forthcoming, it is our plain duty to wait, and if it be needful for us to judge in the case, God will, in due time, furnish the needed evidence. We have known a case in which a man was falsely accused because the accuser based his charge upon the evidence of one of his senses; had he taken the trouble of getting the evidence of one or two more of his senses, he would not have made the charge.

Thus the entire subject of evidence claims the serious attention of the reader, let his position be what it may.

We are all prone to rush to hasty conclusions, to take up impressions, to give place to baseless surmisings, and allow our minds to be warped and carried away by prejudice. All these have to be most carefully guarded against. We need more calmness, seriousness, and cool deliberation in forming and expressing our judgment about men and things; but especially about men, inasmuch as we may inflict a grievous wrong upon a friend, a brother, or a neighbor by giving utterance to a false impression or a baseless charge.

We may allow ourselves to be the vehicle of an utterly groundless accusation, whereby the character of another may be seriously damaged. This is very sinful in the sight of God, and should be most jealously watched against in ourselves, and sternly rebuked in others, whenever it comes before us. Whenever anyone brings a charge against another behind his back, we should insist upon his proving or withdrawing his statement. Were this plan adopted, we should be delivered from a vast amount of evil-speaking, which is not only most unprofitable, but positively wicked, and not to be tolerated.

Before turning from the subject of evidence, we may just remark that inspired history supplies us with more than one instance in which a righteous man has been condemned with an appearance of attention to Deuteronomy 17:6, 7.

Witness the case of Naboth, in I Kings 21; and the case of Stephen, in Acts 6 and 7; and above all, the case of the only perfect Man that every trod this earth. Alas! men can, at times, put on the appearance of wonderful attention to the letter of Scripture when it suits their own ungodly ends; they can quote its sacred words in defense of the most flagrant unrighteousness and shocking immorality.

- Two witnesses accused Naboth of blaspheming God and the king, and that faithful Israelite was deprived of his inheritance and of his life on the testimony of two liars, hired by the direction of a godless, cruel woman.

- Stephen, a man full of the Holy Ghost, was stoned to death for blasphemy, on the testimony of false witnesses received and acted upon by the great religious leaders of the day, who could doubtless quote Deuteronomy 17 as their authority.

But all this, while it so sadly and forcibly illustrates what man is, and what mere human religiousness without conscience is, leaves wholly untouched the fine moral rule laid down for our guidance in the opening lines of our chapter.

Religion without conscience or the fear of God is the most degrading, demoralizing, hardening thing beneath the canopy of Heaven; and one of its most terrible features is seen in this, that men under its influence are not ashamed or afraid to make use of the letter of Holy Scripture as a cloak wherewith to cover the most horrible wickedness.

But thanks and praise to our God, His Word stands forth before the vision of our souls in all its heavenly purity, divine virtue, and holy morality, and flings back in the face of the enemy his every attempt to draw from its sacred pages a plea for aught that is not true, venerable, just, pure, lovely, and of good report.

We shall now proceed to quote for the reader the second paragraph of our chapter, in which we shall find instruction of great moral value, and much needed in this day of self-will and independence.

“If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates; then shalt thou arise and get thee up *into the place which the Lord thy God shall choose*; and thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judges that shall be in those days, and inquire; and they shall show thee the sentence of judgment: and thou shalt do according to the sentence which they of that place *which the Lord shall choose shall show thee*; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee; according to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall show thee, to the right hand, nor to the left. and the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the Lord thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die; and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear and *fear and do no more presumptuously*” (Ver. 8-13).

Here we have divine provision made for the perfect settlement of all questions which might arise throughout the congregation of Israel. They were to be settled in the divine presence, at the divinely appointed center, by the divinely appointed authority.

Thus self-will and presumption were effectually guarded against. All matters of controversy were to be definitively settled by the judgment of God as expressed by the priest or the judge appointed by God for the purpose.

In a word, it was absolutely and entirely a matter of divine authority. It was not for one man to set himself up in self-will and presumption against another.

This would never do in the assembly of God. Each one had to submit his cause to a divine tribunal, and bow implicitly to its decision. There was to be no appeal, inasmuch as there was no higher court. The divinely appointed priest or judge spoke as the oracle of God, and both plaintiff and defendant had to bow, without a demur, to the decision.

Now, it must be very evident to the reader that no member of the congregation of Israel would ever have thought of bringing his case before a Gentile tribunal for judgment. This, we may feel assured, would have been utterly foreign to the thoughts and feelings of every true Israelite. It would have involved a positive insult to the Lord Himself, who was in their midst to give judgment in every case which might arise.

Surely He was sufficient. He knew the ins and outs, the pros and cons, the roots and issues, of every controversy, however involved or difficult. All were to look to Him, and to bring their causes to the place which He had chosen, and nowhere else. The idea of two members of the assembly of God appearing before a tribunal of the uncircumcised for judgment would not have been tolerated for a moment. It would be as much as to say that there was a defect in the divine arrangement for the congregation.

Has this any voice for us? How are Christians to have their questions and their controversies settled? Are they to betake themselves to the world for judgment? Is there no provision in the assembly of God for the proper settlement of cases which may arise? Hear what the inspired apostle says on the point to the assembly at Corinth, and **“to all that in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both theirs and ours,”** and therefore to all true Christians now.

“Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life! If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the Church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather be defrauded? Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren. Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived” (I Corinthians 6:1-9).

Here, then, we have divine instruction for the Church of God in all ages. We must never, for a moment, lose sight of the fact that the Bible is the book for every stage of the Church’s earthly career. True it is, alas! the Church is not as it was when the above lines were penned by the inspired apostle; a vast change has taken place in the Church’s practical condition. There was no difficulty in early days in distinguishing between the Church and the world – between **“the saints”** and **“unbelievers”** between **“those within”** and **“those without.”** The line of demarcation was broad, distinct, and unmistakable in those days. Anyone who looked at the face of society in a religious point of view would see three things, namely,

- Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity
- The Gentile, the Jew, and the Church of God
- The heathen temple, the synagogue, and the assembly of God.

There was no confounding these things. The Christian assembly stood out in vivid contrast with all beside. Christianity was strongly and clearly pronounced in those primitive times. It was neither a national, provincial, nor parochial affair, but a personal, practical, living reality. It was not a mere nominal, national, professional creed, but a divinely wrought faith, a living power in the heart flowing out in the life.

But now, things are totally changed. The Church and the world are so mixed up, that the vast majority of professors could hardly understand the real force and proper application of the passage which we have just quoted. Were we to speak to them about **“the saints”** going to law **“before the unbelievers,”** it would seem like a foreign tongue. Indeed, the term **“saint”** is hardly heard in the professing church, save when used with a sneer, or as applied to such as have been canonized by a superstitious reverence.

But has any change come over the Word of God, or over the grand truths which that Word unfolds to our souls?

- Has any change come over the thoughts of God in reference to what His Church is, or what the world is, or as to the proper relation of the one to the other?
- Does He not know who are “**saints**” and who are “**unbelievers**”?
- Has it ceased to be “**a fault**” for “**brother to go to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers**”?

In a word, has Holy Scripture lost its power, its point, its divine application?

- Is it no longer our guide, our authority, our one perfect rule and unerring standard?
- Has the marked change that has come over the Church’s moral condition deprived the Word of God of all power of application to us – “**to all that in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**”?
- Has our Father’s most precious revelation become, in anyone particular, a dead letter – a piece of obsolete writing – a document pertaining to days long gone by?
- Has our altered condition robbed the Word of God of a single one of its moral glories?

Reader, what answer does your heart return to these questions?

Let us most earnestly entreat of you to weigh them honestly, humbly, and prayerfully in the presence of your Lord. We believe your answer will be a wonderfully correct index of your real position and moral state. Do you not clearly see and fully admit that Scripture can never lose its power? Can the principles of I Corinthians 6 ever cease to be binding on the Church of God? It is fully admitted – for who can deny that things are sadly changed? – but “**Scripture cannot be broken,**” and therefore what was “**a fault**” in the first century cannot be right in the nineteenth; there may be more difficulty in carrying out divine principles, but we must never consent to surrender them, or to act on any lower ground. If once we admit the idea that because the whole professing church has gone wrong it is impossible for us to do right, the whole principle of Christian obedience is surrendered. It is as wrong for “**brother to go to law with brother before the unbelievers**” to-day as when the apostle wrote his Epistle to the assembly at Corinth. *

*** It is well for us to bear in mind that wherever there are “two or three” gathered to the Name of the Lord JESUS, in ever such weakness, there will be found, if only they are truly humble and dependent, spiritual ability to judge in any case that may arise between brethren. They can count on divine wisdom being supplied for the settlement of any question, plea, or controversy, so that there need not be any reference to a worldly tribunal.**

No doubt worldly men would smile at such an idea; but we must adhere, with holy decision, to the guidance of Scripture. Brother must not go to law with brother before the unbelievers. This is distinct and emphatic. There are resources available for the assembly in Christ, the Head and Lord, for the settlement of every possible question.

Let the Lord's people seriously apply their hearts to the consideration of this subject. Let them see that they are gathered on the true ground of the Church of God; and then, though ever conscious that things are not as they once were in the Church – though sensible of the greatest weakness, failure, and shortcoming, they will nevertheless find the grace of Christ ever sufficient for them, and the Word of God full of all needed instruction and authority, so that they need never betake themselves to the world for help, counsel, or judgment. "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them."

This surely is enough for every exigence. Is there any question that our Lord Christ cannot settle? Do we want natural cleverness, worldly wisdom, long-headedness, great learning, keen sagacity, if we have Him? Surely not; indeed all such things can only prove like Saul's armor to David. All we want is, simply to use the resources which we have in Christ. We shall assuredly find, "in the place where His name is recorded," priestly wisdom to judge in every case which may arise between brethren.

And further, let the Lord's dear people remember, in all cases of local difficulty which may arise, that there is no need whatever for them to look for extraneous aid, to write to other places to get some wise man to come and help them. No doubt, if the Lord sends any of His beloved servants at the moment, their sympathy, fellowship, counsel, and help will be highly prized. We are not encouraging independence one of the other, but absolute and complete dependence upon Christ, our Head and Lord.

True, the Church's visible unity is gone; she is shorn of many gifts, she has departed from her normal condition; but the principles of the Word of God can no more lose their power than the Blood of Christ can lose its virtue or His priesthood lose its efficacy.

And further, we must bear in mind that there are resources of wisdom, grace, power, and spiritual gift treasured up for the Church in Christ her Head, ever available for those who have faith to use them. We are not straitened in our blessed and adorable Head. We need never expect to see the body restored to its normal condition on the earth, but for all that, it is our privilege to see what the true ground of the body is, and it is our duty to occupy that ground and no other.

Now, it is perfectly wonderful the change that takes place in our whole condition – in our view of things, in our thoughts of ourselves and our surroundings – the moment we plant our foot on the true ground of the Church of God. Everything seems changed; the Bible seems a new book; we see everything in a new light; portions of Scripture which we have been reading for years without interest or profit now sparkle with divine light, and fill us with wonder, love, and praise.

We see everything from a new stand-point; our whole range of vision is changed; we have made our escape from the murky atmosphere which enwraps the whole professing church, and can now look around and see things clearly in the heavenly light of Scripture. In fact, it seems like a new conversion; and we find we can now read Scripture intelligently, because we have the divine key. We see Christ to be the center and object of all the thoughts, purposes, and counsels of God from everlasting to everlasting, and hence we are conducted into that marvelous sphere of grace and glory which the Holy Ghost delights to unfold in the precious Word of God.

May the reader be led into the thorough understanding of all this, by the direct and powerful ministry of the HOLY SPIRIT. May he be enabled to give himself to the study of Scripture, and to surrender himself, unreservedly, to its teaching and authority. Let him not confer with flesh and blood, but cast Himself, like a little child, on the Lord, and seek to be led on in spiritual intelligence and practical conformity to the mind of Christ.

The Fallible Kings

We must now look for a moment at the closing verses of our chapter, in which we have a remarkable onlook into Israel's future, anticipating the moment in which they should seek to set a king over them.

“When thou art come unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me; thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee whom the Lord thy God shall choose; one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee; thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which is not thy brother. But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses; forasmuch as the Lord hath said unto you, ‘Ye shall henceforth return no more that way.’ Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away; neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.”

How very remarkable that the three things which the king was not to do were just the very things which were done – and extensively done by the greatest and wisest of Israel's monarchs.

“King Solomon made a navy of ships in Ezion-geber, which is beside Eloth, on the shore or the Red Sea, in the land of Edom. And Hiram sent in the navy his servants, shipment that had knowledge of the sea, with the servants of Solomon. And they came to Ophir, and fetched from thence gold, four hundred and twenty talents [over two millions], and brought it to king Solomon.” “And Hiram sent to the king sixscore talents of gold.” “And the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred threescore and six talents of gold [nearly three and a half millions], beside that he had of the merchantmen, and of the traffic of the spice merchants, and of all the kings of Arabia, and of the governors of the country.” Again, we read, **“And the king made silver to be in Jerusalem as stones . . . And Solomon had horses brought out of Egypt . . . But king Solomon loved many strange women . . . And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines;. and his wives turned away his heart”** (I Kings 9, 10, 11).

What a tale this tells! what a commentary it furnishes upon man in his very best and highest estate! Here was a man endowed with wisdom beyond all others, surrounded by unexampled blessings, dignities, honors, and privileges; his earthly cup was full to the brim; there was nothing lacking which this world could supply to minister to human happiness. And not only so, but his remarkable prayer at the dedication of the temple might well lead us to cherish the brightest hopes respecting him, both personally and officially. But sad to say, he broke down most deplorably in everyone of the particulars as to which the law of his God had spoken so definitely and so clearly.

- He was told not to multiply silver and gold, and yet he multiplied them;
- He was told not to return to Egypt to multiply horses, and yet to Egypt he went for horses;
- He was told not to multiply wives, and yet he had a thousand of them, and they turned away his heart.

Such is man! Oh, how little is he to be counted upon! **“All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away.”**
“Cease ye from man whose breath is in his nostrils, for wherein is he to be accounted of?”

But we may ask, How are we to account for Solomon’s signal, sorrowful, and humiliating failure? What was the real secret of it? To answer this, we must quote for the reader the closing verses of our chapter.

“And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites; and it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them; that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand or to the left; to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children, in the midst of Israel” (Ver. 18-20).

Had Solomon attended to these most precious and weighty words, his historian would have had a very different task to perform; but he did not. We hear nothing of his having made a copy of the law; and most assuredly, if he did make a copy of it, he did not attend to it – yea, he turned his back upon it, and did the very things which he was told not to do.

In a word, the cause of all the wreck and ruin that so rapidly followed the splendor of Solomon’s reign was the neglect of the plain Word of God.

It is this which makes it all so solemn for us, in this our own day, and which leads us to call the earnest attention of the reader to it. We deeply feel the need of seeking to rouse the attention of the whole Church of God to this great subject.

Neglect of the Word of God is the source of all the failure, all the sin, all the error, all the mischief and confusion, the heresies, sects, and schisms that have ever been or are now in this world. And we may add, with equal confidence, that the only real, sovereign remedy for our present lamentable condition will be found in returning, everyone for himself and herself, to the simple but sadly neglected authority of the Word of God.

Let each one see his own departure, and that of the whole professing body, from the plain and positive teaching of the New Testament – the commandments of our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Let us humble ourselves under the mighty hand of our God, because of our common sin, and let us turn to Him in true self-judgment, and He will graciously restore and heal and bless us, and lead us in that most blessed path of obedience which lies open before every truly humble soul.

May God the Holy Ghost, in His own resistless power, bring home to the heart and conscience of every member of the body of Christ on the face of the earth, the urgent need of an immediate and unreserved surrender to the authority of the Word of God.

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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