

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“IF one be found slain in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee to possess it, lying in the field, and it be not known who hath slain him; then thy elders and thy judges” – the guardians of the claims of truth and righteousness – **“shall come forth, and they shall measure unto the cities that are round about him that is slain; and it shall be, that the city which is next unto the slain man, even the elders of that city shall take a heifer, which hath not been wrought with, and hath not drawn in the yoke; and the elders of that city shall bring down the heifer unto a rough valley which is neither eared nor sown, and shall strike off the heifer’s neck there in the valley. And the priests the sons of Levi – “exponents of grace and mercy – “shall come near; for them the Lord thy God hath chosen to minister unto Him, and to bless in the name of the Lord, and by their word shall every controversy and every stroke be tried;”- blessed, comforting fact! – “and all the elders of that city that are next unto the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer that is beheaded in the valley; and they shall answer and say, Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it. Be merciful, O Lord, unto Thy people Israel, whom Thou hast redeemed, and lay not innocent blood to Thy people of Israel’s charge. And the blood shall be forgiven them. So shalt thou put away the guilt of innocent blood from among you, when thou shalt do that which is right in the sight of the Lord”** (Ver. 1-9).

A very suggestive and interesting passage of Holy Scripture now lies open before us, and claims our attention. A sin is committed – a man is found slain in the land, but no one knows aught about it; no one can tell whether it is murder or manslaughter, or who committed the deed. It lies entirely beyond the range of human knowledge; and yet there it is – an undeniable fact. Sin has been committed, and it lies as a stain on the Lord’s land, and man is wholly incompetent to deal with it.

What, then, is to be done? The glory of God and the purity of His land must be maintained. He knows all about it, and He alone can deal with it; and truly His mode of dealing with it is full of most precious teaching.

First of all, the elders and judges appear on the scene. The claims of truth and righteousness must be duly attended to; justice and judgment must be perfectly maintained. This is a great cardinal truth, running all through the Word of God. Sin must be judged ere sins can be forgiven or the sinner justified. Ere mercy’s heavenly voice can be heard, justice must be perfectly satisfied, the throne of God vindicated, and His name glorified.

Grace must reign through righteousness. Blessed be God that it is so! What a glorious truth for all who have taken their true place as sinners! God has been glorified as to the question of sin, and therefore He can, in perfect righteousness, pardon and justify the sinner.

But we must confine ourselves simply to the interpretation of the passage before us, and in so doing, we shall find in it a very wonderful onlook into Israel's future.

True, the great foundation-truth of atonement is presented, but it is with special reference to Israel. The death of Christ is here seen in its two grand aspects, namely, as the expression of man's guilt, and the display of God's grace. The former, we have in the man found slain in the field; the latter, in the heifer slain in the rough valley. The elders and the judges find out the city nearest to the slain man, and nothing can avail for that city save the blood of a spotless victim – the blood of the One who was slain at the guilty city of Jerusalem.

The reader will note with much interest that the moment the claims of justice were met by the death of the victim, a new element is introduced into the scene. **“The priests the sons of Levi shall come near.”**

This is grace acting on the blessed ground of righteousness. The priests are the channels of grace, as the judges are the guardians of righteousness. How perfect, how beautiful, is Scripture, in every page, every paragraph, every sentence! It was not until the blood was shed that the ministers of grace could present themselves. The heifer beheaded in the valley changed the aspect of things completely. **“The priests the sons of Levi shall come near; for them the Lord thy God hath chosen to minister unto Him, and to bless in the name of the Lord; and by their word”** – blessed fact for Israel! Blessed fact for every true believer! – **“shall every controversy and every stroke be tried.”** All is to be settled on the glorious and eternal principle of grace reigning through righteousness. Thus it is that God will deal with Israel by and by.

We must not attempt to interfere with the primary application of all those striking institutions which come under our notice in this profound and marvelous book of Deuteronomy. No doubt there are lessons for us – precious lessons, but we may rest perfectly assured that the true way in which to understand and appreciate those lessons is to see their true and proper bearing.

For instance, how precious, how full of consolation, the fact that it is by the word of the minister of grace that every controversy and every stroke is to be tried for repentant Israel by and by, and for every repentant soul now! Do we lose aught of the deep blessedness of this by seeing and owning the proper application of the Scripture? Assuredly not. So far from this, the true secret of profiting by any special passage of the Word of God is to understand its true scope and bearing.

- **“And all the elders of that city that are next unto the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer that is beheaded in the valley.”** *

- **“I will wash my hands in innocency, and so will I compass Thine altar.”**

*** How full of suggestive power is the figure of “the rough Valley”! How aptly it sets forth what this world at large, and the land of Israel in particular, was to our blessed Lord and Saviour!**

Truly it was a rough place to Him, a place of humiliation, a dry and thirsty land, a place that had never been eared or sown. But, all homage to His Name! By His death in this rough valley, He has procured for this earth and for the land of Israel a rich harvest of blessing, which shall be reaped throughout the millennial age, to the full praise of redeeming love. And even now, He, from the throne of heaven's majesty, and we, in spirit with Him, can look back to that rough valley as the place where the blessed work was done which forms the imperishable foundation of God's glory, the Church's blessing, Israel's full restoration, the joy of countless nations, and the glorious deliverance of this groaning creation.

The true place to wash the hands is where the blood of atonement has forever expiated our guilt.

“And they shall answer and say, Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it. Be merciful, O Lord, unto Thy people Israel, whom Thou hast redeemed, and lay not innocent blood unto Thy people of Israel's charge. And the blood shall be forgiven them.”

- **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”**

- **“Unto you first, God having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, by turning away everyone of you from his iniquities.”**

Thus all Israel shall be saved and blessed by and by, according to the eternal counsels of God, and in pursuance of His promise and oath to Abraham, ratified and eternally established by the precious blood of Christ, to whom be all homage and praise, world without end!

Verses 10-17 bear in a very special way upon Israel's relationship to the Lord. We shall not dwell upon it here. The reader will find numerous references to this subject throughout the pages of the prophets, in which the Holy Ghost makes the most touching appeals to the conscience of the nation – appeals grounded on the marvelous fact of the relationship into which He had brought them to Himself, but in which they had so signally and grievously failed.

Israel has proved an unfaithful wife, and, in consequence thereof, has been set aside; but the time will come when this long-rejected but never forgotten people shall not only be reinstated, but brought into a condition of blessedness, privilege, and glory beyond any thing ever known in the past.

This must never, for a moment, be lost sight of or interfered with. It runs like a brilliant golden line through the prophetic Scriptures, from Isaiah to Malachi, and the lovely theme is resumed and carried on in the New Testament.

Take the following, glowing passage, which is only one of a hundred;

“For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth.

“And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory; and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name. Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God. Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken, neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate; but thou shalt be called Hephzibah [My delight is in her], and thy land Beulah [married]; for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married. For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee; and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee. I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night; ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give Him no rest, till He establish, and till He make Jerusalem a praise in the earth. The Lord hath sworn by His right hand, and by the arm of His strength” – let men beware how they meddle with this! – “Surely I will no more give thy corn to be meat for thine enemies; and the sons of the stranger shall not drink thy wine, for the which thou hast labored; but they that have gathered it shall eat it and praise the Lord, and they that have brought it together shall drink it in the courts of my holiness . . . Behold, the Lord hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, ‘Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. And they shall call them, The holy people, ‘The redeemed of the Lord; and thou shalt be called, Sought out, A city not forsaken’ “ (Isaiah 42).

To attempt to alienate this sublime and glorious passage from its proper object, and apply it to the Christian Church, either on earth or in Heaven, is to do positive violence to the Word of God, and introduce a system of interpretation utterly destructive of the integrity of Holy Scripture. The passage which we have just transcribed, with intense spiritual delight, applies only to the literal Zion, the literal Jerusalem, the literal land of Israel. Let the reader see that he thoroughly seizes and faithfully holds fast this fact.

As to the Church, her position on earth is that of an espoused virgin, not of a married wife. Her marriage will take place in Heaven. (Revelation 19:7, 8). To apply to her such passages as the above is to falsify her position entirely, and deny the plainest statements of Scripture as to her calling, her portion, and her hope, which are purely heavenly.

Verses 18-21 of our chapter record the case of **“a stubborn and rebellious son.”**

Here again we have Israel viewed from another stand-point. It is the apostate generation, for which there is no forgiveness.

“If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that when they have chastened him will not hearken unto them; then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; and they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him, with stones, that he die; so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear and fear.”

The reader may with much interest contrast the solemn action of law and government in the case of the rebellious son, with the lovely and familiar parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. Our space does not admit of our dwelling upon it here, much as we should delight to do so.

It is marvelous to think that it is the same God who speaks and acts in Deuteronomy 21, and in Luke 15; but oh, how different the action! How different the style! Under the law, the father is called upon to lay hold of his son and bring him forth to be stoned; under grace, the father runs to meet the returning son, falls on his neck and kisses him; clothes him in the best robe, puts a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet, has the fatted calf killed for him, seats him at the table with himself, and makes the house ring with the joy that fills his own heart at getting back the poor wandering spendthrift.

Striking contrast! In Deuteronomy 21, we see *the hand of God*, in righteous government, executing judgment upon the rebellious; in Luke 15, we see *the heart of God* pouring itself out, in soul-subduing tenderness, upon the poor repentant one, giving him the sweet assurance that it is His own deep joy to get back His lost one.

- The persistent rebel meets the stone of judgment;
- The returning penitent meets the kiss of love.

But we must close this section by calling the reader's attention to the last verse of our chapter.

It is referred to in a very remarkable way by the inspired apostle in the third chapter of Galatians. **“Christ hath redeemed us from the Curse of the law, being made a Curse for us; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree.’ “**

This reference is full of interest and value, not only because it presents to us the precious grace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in making Himself a Curse for us, in order that the blessing of Abraham might come on us poor sinners of the Gentiles, but also because it furnishes a very striking illustration of the way in which the Holy Spirit puts His seal upon the writings of Moses in general, and upon Deuteronomy 21 in particular. All Scripture hangs together so perfectly that if one part be touched, you mar the integrity of the whole. The same Spirit breathes in the writings of Moses, in the pages of the Prophets, in the four evangelists, in the Acts, in the apostolic epistles, general and particular, and in that most profound and precious section which closes the divine volume. We deem it our sacred duty – as it is most assuredly our high privilege – to press this weighty fact upon all with whom we come in contact; and we would very earnestly entreat the reader to give it his earnest attention, to hold it fast, and bear a steady testimony to it, in this day of carnal laxity, cold indifference, and positive hostility.

~ end of chapter 21 ~

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