

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

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CHAPTER TWELVE

WE now enter upon a new section of our marvelous book. The discourses contained in the first eleven chapters having established the all-important principle of obedience, we now come to the practical application of the principle to the habits and ways of the people when settled in possession of the land.

“These are the statutes and judgments which ye shall observe to do in the land which the Lord God of thy fathers giveth thee to possess it, all the days that ye live upon the earth.”

It is of the utmost moral importance that the heart and conscience should be brought into their true attitude in reference to divine authority, irrespective altogether of any question as to details. These will find their due place when once the heart is taught to bow down, in complete and absolute submission, to the supreme authority of the Word of God.

Now, as we have seen in our studies on the first eleven chapters, the lawgiver labors, most earnestly and faithfully, to lead the heart of Israel into this all-essential condition. He felt, to speak after the manner of men, it was of no use entering upon practical details until the grand foundation-principle of all morality was fully established in the very deepest depths of the soul.

The principle is this (let us Christians apply our hearts to it): It is man's bounden duty to bow implicitly to the authority of the Word of God. It matters not, in the smallest degree, what that Word may enjoin, or whether we can see the reason of this, that, or the other institution. The One ground, all-important, and conclusive point is this: Has God Spoken? If He has, that is quite enough. There is no room, no need, for any further question.

Until this point is fully established, or rather until the heart is brought directly under its full moral force, we are not in a condition to enter upon details. If self-will be allowed to operate, if blind reason be permitted to speak, the heart will send up its endless questionings; as each divine institution is laid before us, some fresh difficulty will present itself as a stumbling-block in the path of simple obedience. What! it may be said, are we not to use our reason? If not, to what end was it given?

To this we have a twofold reply. In the first place, our reason is not as it was when God gave it. We have to remember that sin has come in; man is a fallen creature; his reason, his judgment, his understanding – his whole moral being is a complete wreck; and moreover, it was the neglect of the Word of God that caused all this wreck and ruin.

And then, in the second place, we must bear in mind that if reason were in a sound condition, it would prove its soundness by bowing to the Word of God. But it is not sound; it is blind, and utterly perverted; it is not to be trusted for a moment in things spiritual, divine, or heavenly.

If this simple fact were thoroughly understood, it would settle a thousand questions and remove a thousand difficulties. It is reason that makes all the infidels. The devil whispers into man's ear, "You are endowed with reason; why not use it? It was given to be used – used in everything; you ought not to give your assent to anything which your reason cannot grasp. It is your chartered right as a man to submit everything to the test of your reason; it is only for a fool or an idiot to receive, in blind credulity, all that is set before him."

What is our answer to such wily and dangerous suggestions?

A very simple and conclusive one; namely, this: The Word of God is above and beyond reason altogether; it is as far above reason as God is above the creature, or Heaven above earth. Hence, when God speaks, all reasonings must be cast down. If it be merely man's word, man's opinion, man's judgment, then verily reason may exert its powers; or rather, to speak more correctly, we must judge what is said by the only perfect standard – the Word of God. But if reason be set to work on the Word of God, the soul must inevitably be plunged in the thick darkness of infidelity, from which the descent to the awful blackness of atheism is but too easy. In a word, then, we have to remember – yea, to cherish in the very deepest depths of our moral being, that the only safe ground for the soul is, divinely wrought faith in the paramount authority, divine majesty, and all-sufficiency of the Word of God. This was the ground which Moses occupied in dealing with the heart and conscience of Israel.

His one grand object was, to lead the people into the attitude of profound, unqualified subjection to divine authority. Without this, all was useless. If every statute, every judgment, every precept, every institution, were to be submitted to the action of human reason, then farewell to divine authority, farewell to Scripture, farewell to certainty, farewell to peace; but, on the other hand, when the soul is led by God's Spirit into the delightful attitude of absolute and unquestioning submission to the authority of God's Word, then every one of His judgments, every one of His commandments, every sentence of His blessed book, is received as coming direct from Himself, and the most simple ordinance or institution stands invested with all the importance which His authority is fitted to impart.

We may not be able to understand the full meaning or exact bearing of each statute and judgment, – that is not the question; it is sufficient for us to know that it comes from God. He has spoken; this is conclusive. Till this great principle is grasped, or rather till it takes full possession of the soul, nothing is done; but when it is fully understood and submitted to, the solid foundation is laid for all true morality.

The foregoing line of thought will enable the reader to seize the connection between the chapter which now lies open before us and the preceding section of this book; and not only will it do this, but we trust it will also help him to understand the special place and bearing of the opening verses of chapter 12.

“Ye shall utterly destroy all the places wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree. And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place” (Ver. 2, 3).

The land was the Lord’s; they were to hold as tenants under Him, and therefore their very first duty on entering upon possession was, to demolish every trace of the old idolatry. This was absolutely indispensable. It might, according to human reason, seem to be very intolerant to act in this way toward other people’s religion.

We reply, without any hesitation, Yes, it was intolerant; for how could the one only true and living God be otherwise than intolerant of all false gods and false worship? To suppose for a moment that He could permit the worship of idols in His land would be to suppose that He could deny Himself, which were simply blasphemy.

Let us not be misunderstood. It is not that God does not bear with the world, in His long-suffering mercy. It seems hardly needful to state this, with the history of well-nigh six thousand years of divine forbearance before our eyes. Blessed forever be His holy name, He has borne with the world most marvelously from the days of Noah, and He still bears with it, though stained with the guilt of crucifying His beloved Son. All this is plain, but it leaves wholly untouched the great principle laid down in our chapter.

Israel had to learn that they were about to take possession of the Lord’s land, and that, as His tenants, their first and indispensable duty was, to obliterate every trace of idolatry. To them there was to be but **“the one God.”** His name was called upon them. They were His people, and He could not permit them to have fellowship with demons. **“Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God; and Him only shalt thou serve.”**

This might, in the judgment of the uncircumcised nations around, seem very intolerant, very narrow, very bigoted. They indeed might boast of their freedom, and glory in the broad platform of their worship which admitted **“gods many and lords many.”**

It might, according to their thinking, argue greater breadth of mind to let everyone think for himself in matters of religion, and choose his own object of worship, and his own mode of worshiping also; or, still further, it might give evidence of a more advanced condition of civilization, greater polish and refinement, to erect, as in Rome, a Pantheon, in which all the gods of heathendom might find a place.

“What did it matter about the form of a man’s religion, or the object of his worship, provided he himself were sincere? All would be sure to come right in the end; the great point for all was, to attend to material progress, to help on national prosperity as the surest means of securing individual interests. Of course, it is all right for every man to have some religion, but as to the form of that religion, it is immaterial. The great question is, what you are yourself, not what your religion is.”

All this, we can well conceive, would admirably suit the carnal mind, and be very popular amongst the uncircumcised nations; but as for Israel, they had to remember that one commanding sentence, **“The Lord thy God is one God;”** and again, **“Thou shalt have none other gods before Me.”**

This was to be their religion; the platform of their worship was to be as wide and as narrow as the one true and living God, their Creator and Redeemer. That, assuredly, was broad enough for every true worshiper – every member of the circumcised assembly – all whose high and holy privilege it was to belong to the Israel of God. They were not to concern themselves with the opinions or observations of the uncircumcised nations around. What were they worth? Not the weight of a feather. What could they know about the claims of the God of Israel upon His circumcised people? Just nothing. Were they competent to decide as to the proper breadth of Israel’s platform? Clearly not; they were wholly ignorant of the subject. Hence their thoughts, reasonings, arguments, and objections were perfectly worthless, not to be listened to for a moment.

It was Israel’s one, simple, bounden duty to bow down to the supreme and absolute authority of the Word of God; and that word insisted upon the complete abolition of every trace of idolatry from that goodly land which they were privileged to hold as tenants under Him.

But not only was it incumbent upon Israel to abolish all the places in which the heathen had worshiped their gods, – this they were solemnly bound to do, most surely; but there was more than this.

The heart might readily conceive the thought of doing away with idolatry in the various places, and setting up the altar of the true God instead, this might seem to be the right course to adopt; but God thought differently.

“Ye shall not do so unto the Lord your God. But unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put His name there, even unto His habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come; and thither ye shall bring your burnt-offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes, and heave-offerings of your hand, and your vows, and your free-will offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and of your flocks; and there ye shall eat before the Lord your God; and ye shall rejoice in all that ye put your hand unto, ye and your households, wherein the Lord thy God hath blessed thee.”

Here a great cardinal truth is unfolded to the congregation of Israel. They were to have one place of worship – a place chosen of God, and not of man. His habitation – the place of His presence was to be Israel’s grand center; thither they were to come with their sacrifices and their offerings, and there they were to offer their worship, and find their common joy. Does this seem exclusive? Of course it was exclusive; how else could it be?

If God was pleased to select a spot in which He would take up His abode in the midst of His redeemed people, surely they were, of necessity, shut up to that spot as their place of worship. This was divine exclusiveness, and every pious soul would delight in it.

Every true lover of the Lord would say, with all his heart, **“Lord, I have loved the habitation of Thy house, and the place where Thine honor dwelleth;”** and again, **“How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God . . . Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house, they will be still praising Thee . . . A day in Thy Courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of My God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness”** (Psalm 26, 84).

Here was the one grand and all-important point.

It was the dwelling-place of the Lord which was dear to the heart of every true Israelite. Restless self-will might desire to run hither and thither, the poor vagrant heart might long for some change, but, for the heart that loved God, any change from the place of His presence, the place where He had recorded His blessed name, could only be a change for the Worse. The truly devout worshiper could find satisfaction and delight, blessing and rest, only in the place of the divine presence; and this, on the double ground, – the authority of His precious Word and the powerful attractions of His presence. Such an one could never think of going any where else. Whither could he go? There Was but one altar, one habitation, one God, – that was the place for every right-minded, every true-hearted Israelite. To think of any other place of worship would, in his judgment, be not only a departure from the word of the Lord, but from His holy habitation.

This great principle is largely insisted upon throughout the whole of our chapter. Moses reminds the people that from the moment they entered the Lord’s land there was to be an end to all the irregularity and self-will that had characterized them in the plains of Moab, or in the wilderness. **“Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes. For ye are not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance, which the Lord your God giveth you. But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the Lord your God giveth you to inherit, and when He giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety; then there shall be a place which the Lord your God shall choose, to cause His name to dwell there; thither shall ye bring all that I command you . . . Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt-offerings in every place that thou seest, but in the place which the Lord shall choose in one of thy tribes, there thou shalt offer thy burnt-offerings, and there thou shalt do all that I command thee”** (Ver. 4-14).

Thus, not only in the object, but also in the place and mode of Israel’s worship, they were absolutely shut up to the commandment of the Lord. Self-pleasing – self-choosing – self-will was to have an end, in reference to the worship of God, the moment they crossed the river of death and, as a redeemed people, planted their foot on their divinely given inheritance.

Once there, in the enjoyment of the Lord’s land, and the rest which the land afforded, obedience to His word was to be their reasonable, their intelligent service. Things might be allowed to pass in the wilderness which could not be tolerated in Canaan. The higher the range of privilege, the higher the responsibility and the standard of action.

Now, it may be that our broad thinkers, and those who Contend for freedom of will and freedom of action, for the right of private judgment in matters of religion, for liberality of mind and catholicity of spirit, will be ready to pronounce all this which has been engaging our attention. extremely narrow, and wholly unsuited to our enlightened age, and to men of intelligence and education.

What is our answer to all who adopt this form of speech? A very simple and conclusive one; it is this: Has not God a right to prescribe the mode in which His people should worship Him? Had He not a perfect right to fix the place where He would meet His people Israel? Surely We must either deny His existence, or admit His absolute and Unquestionable right to set forth His will as to how, when, and where His people should approach Him. Will anyone, however educated and enlightened, deny this? Is it a proof of high culture, refinement, breadth of mind, or catholicity of spirit to deny God His rights?

If then God has a right to command, is it narrowness or bigotry for His people to obey? This is just the point. It is, in our judgment, as simple as anything can be. We are thoroughly convinced that the only true breadth of mind, largeness of heart, and catholicity of spirit is, to obey the commandments of God. Hence, when Israel were commanded to go to one place and there offer their sacrifices, it most assuredly was neither bigotry nor narrowness on their part to go thither, and to refuse, with holy decision, to go anywhere else. Uncircumcised Gentiles might go where they pleased; the Israel of God were to go only to the place of His appointment.

And oh, what an unspeakable privilege for all who loved God and loved one another to assemble themselves at the place where He recorded His name! and what touching grace shines in the fact of His desiring to gather His people around Himself from time to time! Did that fact infringe their personal rights and domestic privileges? Nay, it enhanced them immensely. God, in His infinite goodness, took care of this. It was His delight to minister to the joy and blessing of His people, privately, socially, and publicly. Hence we read, **“When the Lord thy God shall enlarge thy border, as He hath promised thee, and thou shalt say, I will eat flesh, because thy soul longeth to eat flesh, thou mayest eat flesh, whatsoever thy soul lusteth after. If the place which the Lord thy God hath chosen to put His name there be too far from thee, then thou shalt kill of thy herd and of thy flock, which the Lord hath given thee, as I have commanded thee, and thou shalt eat in thy gates whatsoever thy soul lusteth after. Even as the roebuck and the hart is eaten, so thou shalt eat them; the unclean and the clean shall eat of them alike.”**

Here we have, most surely, a broad margin afforded by the goodness and tender mercy of God for the fullest range of personal and family enjoyment. The only restriction was in reference to the blood – **“Only be sure that thou eat not the blood; for the blood is the life, and thou mayest not eat the life with the flesh. Thou shalt not eat it; thou shalt pour it upon the earth as water. Thou shalt not eat it; that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee, when thou shalt do that which is right in the sight of the Lord.”**

This was a great cardinal principle under the law, to which reference has been made in our *“Notes on Leviticus.”*

How far Israel understood it is not the question; they were to obey, that it might go well with them and with their children after them. They were to own, in this matter, the solemn rights of God. Having made this exception in reference to personal and family habits, the lawgiver returns to the all-important subject of their public worship.

“Only thy holy things which thou hast, and thy vows, thou shalt take, and go unto the place which the Lord shall choose; and thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, the flesh and the blood, upon the altar of the Lord thy God; and the blood of the sacrifices shall be poured out upon the altar of the Lord thy God, and thou shalt eat the flesh” (Ver. 26, 27).

If reason, or self-will, were permitted to speak, it might say, Why must we all go to this one place? Can we not have an altar at home? or, at least, an altar in each principal town, or in the center of each tribe? The conclusive answer is, – God has commanded otherwise; this is enough for every true Israelite.

Even though we may not be able, by reason of our ignorance, to see the why or the wherefore, simple obedience is our obvious and bounden duty. It may be, moreover, that, as we cheerfully tread the path of obedience, light will break in upon our souls as to the reason, and we shall find abundant blessing in doing that which is well-pleasing to the Lord our God.

Yes, reader; this is the proper method of answering all the reasonings and questionings of the carnal mind, which is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

Light is sure to break in upon our souls as we tread, with a lowly mind, the sacred path of obedience; and not only so, but untold blessing will flow into the heart in that conscious nearness to God which is only known to those who lovingly keep His most precious commandments. Are we called upon to explain to carnal objectors and infidels our reasons for doing this or that? Most certainly not; that is no part of our business: it would be time and labor lost, inasmuch as objectors and reasoners are wholly incapable of understanding or appreciating our reasons.

For example, in the matter now under our consideration, could a carnal mind – an unbeliever – a mere child of nature understand why Israel’s twelve tribes were commanded to worship at one altar, to gather in one place, to cluster around one center? Not in the smallest degree. The grand moral reason of such a lovely institution lies far away beyond his ken. But to the spiritual mind, all is as plain as it is beautiful.

The Lord would gather His beloved people around Himself, from time to time, that they might rejoice together before Him, and that He might have His own peculiar joy in them. Was not this something most precious? Assuredly it was, to all who really loved the Lord.

No doubt, if the heart were cold and careless toward God, it would matter little about the place of worship, – all places would be alike; but we may set it down as a fixed principle that every loyal, loving heart, from Dan to Beersheba, would rejoice to flock to the place where the Lord had recorded His name, and where He had appointed to meet His people. **“I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go unto the house of the Lord. Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem** [God’s center for Israel).”

Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together, whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord. For there – and no where else – **“are set thrones of judgment, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee. Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions’ sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee. Because of the house of the Lord our God I will seek thy good”** (Psalm 122).

Here we have the lovely breathings of a heart that loved the habitation of the God of Israel – His blessed center – the gathering-place of Israel’s twelve tribes – that hallowed spot which was associated, in the mind of every true Israelite, with all that was bright and joyous in connection with the worship of the Lord and the communion of His people.

We shall have occasion to refer to this most delightful theme again when we come to study the sixteenth chapter of our book, and shall draw this section to a close by quoting for the reader the last paragraph of the chapter before us.

“When the Lord thy God shall cut off the nations from before thee, whither thou goest to possess them, and thou succeedest them, and dwellest in their land; take heed to thyself, that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the Lord thy God: for every abomination to the Lord, which He hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it” (Ver. 29-32).

The precious Word of God was to form a sacred enclosure round about His people, within which they might enjoy His presence, and delight themselves in the abundance of His mercy and loving-kindness, and wherein they were to be entirely apart from all that was offensive to Him whose presence was to be, at once, their glory, their joy, and their grand moral safeguard from every snare and every abomination.

Alas! alas! they did not abide within that enclosure; they speedily broke down the walls thereof, and wandered away from the holy commandment of God. They did the very things they Were told not to do, and they have had to reap the terrible Consequences. But more of this and of their future by and by.

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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