

DEUTERONOMY

CHAPTER ONE

Introductory remarks:

The New Unger's Bible Dictionary introduces the book of Deuteronomy with: "The last book of the Pentateuch, completing the five books of Moses. The Jews called it 'five-fifths of the law.' It follows logically after Numbers; Numbers carries the history of the nation Israel to the events in the Plains of Moab to the East of Jericho, and Deuteronomy winds up the Mosaic age with three discourses from Moses just before his death and the entrance of the people into the land of Canaan."

In its introduction to the book of Deuteronomy, *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "This book, which ranks as the closing book of the Pentateuch, the Fifth of the Fifths of the Law..., as the Jews designate it, is in the Hebrew canon named from its two initial words, '*Elleh Had-debhârim*, or simply *Debhârim*, according to an ancient usage with the Jews.... The name Deuteronomy it received from the Greek translators, whom the Vulgate follows... Probably this was the name in use among the Hellenistic Jews, for this may be regarded as a fair rendering of the phrase, *Mishneh Hat-torah*, 'Iteration of the Law,' by which some of the rabbins designate this book – a phrase taken from ch. xvi. 18, though there having a different sense... The name 'Deuteronomy' is thus somewhat misleading, as it is apt to suggest that there is in this book either a second code of laws or a recapitulation of laws already delivered, whereas it is rather a summary, in a hortatory manner, of what it most concerned the people to keep in mind, both of the Lord's doings on their behalf, and of what it was his will they should specially observe and do when settled in the Promised Land."

According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, the Greek title is due to a mistranslation by the Septuagint of the clause in <Deut 17:18> rendered, 'and he shall write for himself this repetition of the law.' The Hebrew really means 'and he shall write out for himself a copy of this law.' However, the error on which the English title rests is not serious, as Deuteronomy is in a very true sense a repetition of the law."

The same *Encyclopaedia* gives us a profound introduction to the book by saying: "It possesses an individuality and impressiveness of its own. In Exodus-- Numbers Yahweh is represented as speaking unto Moses, whereas in Deuteronomy, Moses is represented as speaking at Yahweh's command to Israel <Deut 1:1-4; 5:1; 29:1>. It is a hortatory recapitulation of various addresses delivered at various times and places in the desert wanderings-- a sort of homily on the constitution, the essence or gist of Moses' instructions to Israel during the forty years of their desert experience. It is 'a Book of Reviews'; *a translation of Israel's redemptive history into living principles*¹; not so much a history as a commentary. There is much of retrospect in it, but its main outlook is forward. The rabbins speak of it as 'the Book of Reproofs.' It is the text of all prophecy; a manual of evangelical oratory; possessing 'all the warmth of a St. Bernard, the flaming zeal of a Savonarola, and the tender, gracious sympathy of a Francis of Assisi.' The author's interest is entirely moral. His one supreme purpose is to arouse Israel's loyalty to Yahweh and to His revealed law. Taken as a whole the book is an exposition of the great commandment, 'Thou shalt love Yahweh thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.' It was from Deuteronomy that Jesus summarized the whole of the Old Covenant in a single sentence (<Mt 22:37>; compare <Deut 6:5>), and from it He drew His weapons with which to vanquish the tempter (<Mt 4:4,7,10>; compare <Deut 8:3; 6:16,13>)."

Many of Jesus' most famous quotations of the Old Testament are derived from Deuteronomy. Jesus overcame the devil's temptation in the wilderness with three quotes from this book.²

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia further remarks: "The great central thought of Deuteronomy is the unique relation which Yahweh as a unique God sustains to Israel as a unique people. 'Hear O Israel; Yahweh our God is one Yahweh.' The monotheism of Deuteronomy is very explicit. Following from this, as a necessary corollary almost, is the other great teaching of the book, the unity of the sanctuary. The motto of the book might be said to be, 'One God, one sanctuary.'"

We could caption the book of Deuteronomy with the title of one of Francis Schaeffer's books: *How Then Shall We Live?*

Outline of the book:

Nelson's Bible Dictionary gives the following outline of the book:

Part One: Moses' First Speech - "What God Has Done for Israel" (1:1-4:43)

¹ Italics are mine.

² Cf. Matt. 4:4 with Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:7 with Deut. 6:17; Matt. 4:10 with Deut. 6:13,14

- I. The Preamble of the Covenant 1:1-5
- II. The Review of God's Acts for Israel 1:6-4:43
- A. From Mount Sinai to Kadesh Barnea 1:6-18
- B. At Kadesh Barnea 1:19-46
- C. From Kadesh Barnea to Moab 2:1-23
- D. Conquest of East Jordan 2:24-3:20
- E. Change of Leadership 3:21-29
- F. Summary of the Covenant 4:1-43

Part Two: Moses' Second Speech - "What God Expects of Israel" (4:44-26:19)

- I. The Introduction to the Law of God 4:44-49
- II. The Explanation of the Ten Commandments 5:1-11:32
- A. The Covenant of the Great King 5:1-33
- B. The Command to Teach the Law 6:1-25
- C. The Command to Conquer Canaan 7:1-26
- D. The Command to Remember the Lord 8:1-20
- E. The Commands about Self-Righteousness 9:1-10:11
- F. The Commands Regarding Blessings and Cursings 10:12-11:32
- III. The Explanation of the Additional Laws 12:1-26:19
- A. Explanation of the Ceremonial Laws 12:1-16:17
- B. Explanation of the Civil Laws 16:18-20:20
- C. Explanation of the Social Laws 21:1-26:19

Part Three: Moses' Third Speech - "What God Will Do for Israel" (27:1-34:12)

- I. Confirming of the Covenant in Canaan 27:1-28:68
- II. Establishment of the Covenant in Palestine 29:1-30:20
- III. Changing of the Covenant Mediator 31:1-34:12
- A. Moses Charges Joshua and Israel 31:1-13
- B. God Charges Israel 31:14-21
- C. The Book of the Law Is Deposited 31:22-29
- D. The Song of Moses 31:30-32:47
- E. The Death of Moses 32:48-34:12
- 1. Moses Is Ordered to Mount Nebo 32:48-52
- 2. Moses Blesses the Tribes 33:1-29
- 3. Moses Views the Promised Land 34:1-4
- 4. Moses Dies and Is Mourned 34:5-8
- 5. Moses Is Replaced by Joshua 34:9
- 6. Moses Is Praised in Israel 34:10-12

Authorship:

The New Unger's Bible Dictionary says about the authorship of the book: "In the most explicit terms the book itself asserts its authorship by Moses. 'So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel' <Deut. 31:9>. 'And it came about, when Moses finished writing the words of this law in a book until they were complete, that Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying, 'Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you' ' <31:24-26>. No other book of the Pentateuch bears so emphatic a testimony of its Mosaic authorship. It is of unusual interest that critics

most dogmatically reject the Mosaic authorship of this book in the face of these clear assertions. Over against these critical claims conservative scholars see ample evidence to maintain the Mosaic authenticity of this book. The general character of the writing, its code of conquest, its exhortatory nature, its plan as a military law-book of a pilgrim people about to enter Canaan, together with the scope and spirit of the writing are peculiarly suited for the Mosaic era and completely unsuitable for a later age. Moses is mentioned more than forty times in the book, mostly as the authoritative author of the subject matter. The first person predominates. The language purports to come directly from Moses. If Moses is not the actual author, the book can hardly be excused from being a literary forgery, scarcely worthy of canonical Scripture.”

The school of Higher Criticism has identified the book of Deuteronomy with the book of the law that was found in the temple by the high priest Hilkiah, during the restoration under king Josiah.³ Such conclusions can only be arrived at via a road of unscientific prejudice, and denial of the supernatural revelation of God to Israel.

Jesus specifically endorses Moses’ authorship of Deuteronomy in His comment upon the certificate of divorce a man could give to his wife. The law referred to is found in ch. 24, where we read: “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.”⁴ We read in Matthew: “Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?’ ‘Haven’t you read,’ he replied, ‘that at the beginning the Creator ‘ ‘made them male and female,’ ‘ and said, ‘ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’ ‘? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.’ ‘Why then,’ they asked, ‘did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?’ Jesus replied, ‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.’”⁵ This quote should, in our opinion, suffice to close the argument about Moses’ authorship.

The character of the book:

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia proposes the interesting thesis that the book of Deuteronomy was “Spoken Twice.” We read: “Certain literary features exist in Deuteronomy which lead the present writer to think that the bulk of the book was spoken twice; once, to the first generation between Horeb and Kadesh-barnea in the 2nd year of the Exodus wanderings, and a second time to the new generation, in the plains of Moab in the 40th year.” We will return to this thought when we look at the opening verses of the text itself.

Analysis:

Part One: Moses’ First Speech – “What God Has Done for Israel” (1:1-4:43)

I. The Preamble of the Covenant 1:1-5

The simple sounding words with which the book opens: “These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the desert east of the Jordan-- that is, in the Arabah-- opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth and Dizahab,” turn out to be a quagmire of confusion and contention, when one opens various Bible commentaries. It is obvious that Deuteronomy contains Moses’ address to Israel, in contrast with Numbers, in which we read God’s words to Israel through Moses. The latter book concludes with the words: “These are the commands and regulations the LORD gave through Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho.”⁶ The general location was the same, but the content is quite different. Numbers contains the law of the Lord to Israel, Deuteronomy presents us with a series of orations by a human being (a great and inspired man, but still human), to other human beings.

There is, of course, a great difference between God’s direct revelation to man, as given in the books of Exodus, and Numbers, and sermons about this revelation, as we find in Deuteronomy. There is no question as to whether the text is inspired by the Holy Spirit; the fact that the book is included in the canon of Scripture is proof of

³ See II Kings 22:8-10

⁴ Ch. 24:1-4

⁵ Matt. 19:3-8

⁶ Num. 36:13

that, but the difference remains between God speaking, and man speaking. Jesus' use of the book, like in His confrontation with the devil,⁷ indicates that, even when the word comes through the mouth of a man, it can be "living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."⁸

We read that Moses spoke these words "to all Israel." Commentators have found it difficult to conceive that Moses could literally address a whole nation of two million people or more without the help of a modern P.A. system. Some Stone Age tribes in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, would have no trouble understanding this text. When the Gospel first penetrated in some of their areas, and the people came by thousands to listen, the preacher would stand in the middle of the huge crowd, and a number of relay persons would be spaced out in the crowd who would repeat each phrase as it was spoken, so that even those who were at the farthest edge could hear what was said. This system is more time consuming than when microphones and speakers are used, but then, who is in a hurry? It is most likely that Moses used the relay system, rather than addressing only the elders of the people, as some assume.

The location of Moses' addresses is given as: "in the desert east of the Jordan-- that is, in the Arabah-- opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth and Dizahab." Added to this is the parenthesis: "It takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road."

It is partly on the basis of these introductory verses which mention various locations that *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* suggests that the contents of the book of Deuteronomy may have been "spoken twice." We read: "(1) The names of the widely separated geographical places mentioned in the title <Deut 1:1-2>.— These are the words which Moses spake unto all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness, in the Arabah over against Suph, between Paran, and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazeroth, and Di-zahab'; to which is added, 'It is eleven days' journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir unto Kadesh-barnea.' If these statements have any relevancy whatever to the contents of the book which they introduce, they point to a wide area, from Horeb to Moab, as the historico-geographical background of the book. In other words, Deuteronomy, in part at least, seems to have been spoken first on the way between Horeb and Kadesh-barnea, and later again when Israel were encamped on the plains of Moab. And, indeed, what would be more natural than for Moses when marching northward from Horeb expecting to enter Canaan from the south, to exhort the Israel of that day in terms of chapters 5--26? Being baffled, however, by the adverse report of the spies and the faithlessness of the people, and being forced to wait and wander for 38 years, what would be more natural than for Moses in Moab, when about to resign his position as leader, to repeat the exhortations of chapters 5--26, adapting them to the needs of the new desert-trained generation and prefacing the whole by a historical introduction such as that found in chapters 1--4?"

Some of the problem becomes evident when we compare, for instance, the rendering of the NIV with the KJV. The NIV reads: "in the Arabah-- opposite Suph," whereas the KJV translates the words as if they were not names of places East of Jordan, with "in the plain over against the Red Sea." The word "Arabah" literally means "plain," and "Suph" is taken as the abbreviation of "Yam-suph" which means "Sea of Reeds," or "Red Sea."

The NIV indicates the location at which the book opens as: "in the desert east of the Jordan." *The Interlinear Bible* gives the literal text as: "on this side [of] Jordan in the wilderness..." The Hebrew word, translated "east" is *`eber*, which *Strongs* defines with: "a region across; ... on the opposite side (especially of the Jordan; usually meaning the east)." It is obvious that Moses could not have addressed the people from within the land of Canaan before they crossed the Jordan. The words "on this side" confirm that the text of Deuteronomy was written down before the conquest of the Promised Land had begun.

The phrase: "It takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road," conveys more than a measure of distance. It tells the story of Israel's disobedience. It should have taken the people no more than eleven days from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea, but it took them thirty-eight years. The lesson implied is that obedience to the Word of God is the most timesaving device we can imagine. Even waiting on the Lord, an expression that abounds in the Book of Psalm, takes less time than shortcuts of disobedience.

Adam Clarke's Commentary says about the fortieth year: "This was a melancholy year to the Hebrews in different respects; in the first month of this year Miriam died, <Num. 20>; on the first day of the fifth month Aaron died, <Num. 33:38>; and about the conclusion of it, Moses himself died." Moses knew that this would be the last year of his life; he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land with the people he had led for forty years. Even if parts of the book of Deuteronomy were spoken at an earlier date, the bulk of it was evidently uttered at the border of Canaan, shortly before Moses' demise. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* believes that Moses' address was given about one month before his death.

⁷ cf. Matt. 4:4 with Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:7 with Deut. 6:16, and Matt. 4:10 with Deut. 6:13, 14

⁸ Heb. 4:12

The mention of the defeat of the two Trans-Jordanian kings, Sihon, and Og, however, adds a definite note of victory to the introduction of Moses' addresses. It is doubtful that the new generation of Israelites felt that their fortieth year was a melancholy one. They had come to the place their fathers had set out to reach forty years ago, they were about to enter the Promised Land, and God had given them a taste of victory. The book of Deuteronomy wants to connect this spirit of euphoria to the reality of the Word of God. Even when we are about to see the fulfillment of God's promises, we should never lean upon our subjective feelings, but on the objectivity of the Word of God. The key to victory, as Jesus demonstrated, is in the words "It is written."⁹

The NIV reads: "Moses began to expound this law." The word for "law" here is *towrah*, or torah which is defined by *Strongs* as: "a precept or statute, especially the Decalogue or Pentateuch." The Hebrew word translated here by "expound" is *ba'ar*, which is defined by *Strongs* as: "to dig; by analogy, to engrave; figuratively, to explain." *The Pulpit Commentary*, in its Homiletics' section, says about this term: "'On this side Jordan, in the land of Moab, began Moses to declare this law,' literally, to dig it, *i.e.* to go deeply into it, and to turn up again its contents, so that, to all the advantage of a generation of culture, the people might see that there was more meaning, and also more glory in the Law of God than they were able to discern in the first years of their national existence."

II. The Review of God's Acts for Israel 1:6-4:43

A. From Mount Sinai to Kadesh Barnea 1:6-18

Moses' first great address to the people begins with an historical review, beginning at the foot of Mount Sinai. In a way the Old Testament story of God's revelation of Himself at Mount Sinai has never been surpassed. Sinai is the highest peak in the whole Old Testament. The dramatic effects that were seen at this mountain when God came down upon it did not accompany even the dedication of the Solomon's temple. According to the writer to the Hebrews, the approach to Mount Sinai is only surpassed by our coming to Mount Zion. We read: "You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.' The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.' But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."¹⁰

Most of the Israelites Moses addressed East of Jordan, however, had no memory of this most dramatic event in Old Testament history. They had either been too young to remember, or they were born afterwards. Even if they did remember, the Lord had made it clear that there is a time to move on. Even this "Festival to YHWH" in the desert, as it was characterized by Moses in Pharaoh's court,¹¹ was not a lasting experience.

It is interesting to see how Moses, in this first address to the people, paints the picture in broad strokes, and then fills in the details. Those details merit special attention, since they are not the kind of fine points we would expect to find in these broad lines. The line is drawn, in one stroke, from Mount Sinai to the hills of Moab, from the covenant to the inheritance, from the festival of YHWH to the conquest of the Promised Land. The particulars of the picture deal with the judicial system, the establishment of judges to settle disputes. The instruments of God's judgment of the inhabitants of Canaan, the heirs of the land, were people plagued by problems, burdens, and disputes. They were not super heroes who had conquered themselves before conquering others. Their disputes indicate that they often were unable to get along with one another. The verses 16, and 17 show that there existed racial, and social prejudice among the people of God. We read that Moses said: "And I charged your judges at that time: Hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien. Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God." Moses' words even suggest that judges were not immune to prejudice and bribery. These were the people God had chosen to be the wardens of His revelation, the instruments to carry out judgment over the nations of Canaan.

⁹ See Matt. 4:4,7, and 10

¹⁰ Heb. 12:18-24

¹¹ See Ex. 5:1

In similar fashion, God entrusted the charge to “go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation,”¹² to “not many ... wise by human standards; not many ... influential; not many ... of noble birth.” In Paul’s words: “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are.”¹³

Matthew Henry’s Commentary comments on Moses’ introductory words: “The place where they were now encamped was in the plain, in the land of Moab (v. 1,5), where they were just ready to enter Canaan, and engage in a war with the Canaanites. Yet he discourses not to them concerning military affairs, the arts and stratagems of war, but concerning their duty to God; for, if they kept themselves in his fear and favor, he would secure to them the conquest of the land: their religion would be their best policy.”

The fact that God’s people are classified as “the foolish things of this world” does not discharge them from the mandate God has given, and the task put before them. God wants us to be realists. It is a great thing to represent God in this world. It is something that easily could inflate our ego. Public opinion which classifies us as foolish ought to keep things in the right perspective for us. What matters is not what the world thinks about us, but how God evaluates us. “The world may call me a dreamer, a fool, enough if the master I please.”¹⁴

Another lesson we can draw from Moses’ choice of the topic is that justice is of primary importance. Justice is related to God’s righteousness, and righteousness is one of the most fundamental features in all God’s dealings with His creation. The Apostle Paul says: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”¹⁵ What Paul means by the revelation of God’s righteousness in the gospel is that we are saved from our sins, because God punished our sins in His Son, Jesus Christ. The conquest of Canaan was not only the fulfillment of God’s promise to His people, but also the execution of His justice in this world. The sin of the Amorites had reached its full measure.¹⁶ There could be no execution of justice without the justification of those who were to carry out the sentence.

Moses refers to the suggestion made by his father-in-law, even before the arrival of the people at Mount Sinai.¹⁷ *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this by saying: “Jethro, in giving Moses the advice on which he thus acted, described the men who were to be selected as ‘such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness’ (Exod. xviii, 21). Moses here describes them rather by qualities, indicating ability and fitness for such a post as that to which they were to be called; the were to be wise (which, indeed, may be regarded as comprehending all good moral qualities); understanding men, men of discernment and sagacity, as well as intelligence; and known among their tribes, men of good repute in the community.” This reminds us of the qualifications Paul put down for those who were to be elders in the church. He wrote to Timothy: “Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.”¹⁸

With the words: “judgment belongs to God,” Moses links justice to the character of God, thus pointing to the essence of justice. Centuries later king Jehoshaphat would demonstrate the same understanding. When he appointed judges for Judah, we read: “He told them, ‘Consider carefully what you do, because you are not judging for man but for the LORD, who is with you whenever you give a verdict. Now let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Judge carefully, for with the LORD our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery.’”¹⁹ The sum and substance of judgment will ultimately be that man, who is created in the image of God, will stand before the original, and a

¹² Mark 16:15

¹³ I Cor. 1:26-28

¹⁴ “The Regions Beyond” by A. B. Simpson

¹⁵ Rom. 1:16,17

¹⁶ See Gen. 15:16

¹⁷ See Ex. 18:18-22

¹⁸ I Tim. 3:2-7

¹⁹ II Chr. 19:6-7

comparison will take place between God's character and what man made of the image during his life. That is why the Apostle Paul defines sin as "coming short of the glory of God."²⁰

The whole nation of Israel would function as judges in the conquest of Canaan. They were the instruments of the execution of God's judgment upon nations that had perverted themselves, people whose measure of sin had reached the limit. It is nigh to impossible for us to see ourselves, or anybody else in this position in our twenty-first century. We have had too many experiences of genocide and mass massacres that the mention of "a just war" does not have the right ring anymore. Yet, with all their imperfections and frailties, this is the position Israel was in. Moses' mention of their own judicial system is a reminder of the importance of internal justice, before justice can be carried out externally.

B. At Kadesh Barnea 1:19-46

Moses reminds the nation in these verses that they have been at Kadesh Barnea before. Actually, the majority of the people Moses addresses here, had been very young when they first came to Kadesh Barnea, or they had not been born yet. Those under forty years of age were all born in the desert. Moses calls this desert "that vast and dreadful desert." For those born in the desert, the desert had been their home. A child rarely sees the place of his birth and growing up as dreadful; he doesn't know any better. Only those who have seen other places can compare.

The desert had not only been dreadful because of its condition alone, but also because of the condition of the people who had disobeyed, and who were doomed to wander till they died. *The Pulpit Commentary* writes about the phrase "That great and terrible wilderness": "The desert forming the western side of the Stony Arabia. It bears now the name of *Et-Thi*, i.e. The Wandering, a name 'doubtless derived from the wanderings of the Israelites, the tradition of which has been handed down through a period of three thousand years ... It is a pastoral country; unfitted as a whole for cultivation, because of its scanty soil and scarcity of water.' ... In the northern part especially the country is rugged and bare, with vast tracts of sand, over which the scorching simoom often sweeps. ... This wilderness they had seen, had known, and had experience of, and their experience had been such that the district through which they had been doomed to wander appeared to them dreadful." The surrounding corresponded to the condition of the souls of the people who wandered around in the place. Their disobedience had condemned them to an aimless journey that would only end with their deaths. Israel's misery in the desert is best expressed in the words of Moses' Psalm: "We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan."²¹

But the people Moses addressed at this point were a generation of hope. They had faced death for almost forty years, but now the gates of life opened up before them as they were about to enter the Promised Land, the land where God would give them rest.

At this point Moses reminds the people of what happened at this same place almost forty years earlier. Their fathers had stood here, looking and the Promised Land in the same way they were doing at that moment, and fear, mixed with unbelief had gripped their hearts. The way Moses puts it, the suggestion to send out spies, had originated with the people, not with God or Moses. Yet we read in the original account: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders.' So at the LORD's command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran. All of them were leaders of the Israelites."²²

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments here: "The honest and uncompromising language of Moses, in reminding the Israelites of their perverse conduct and outrageous rebellion at the report of the treacherous and faint-hearted scouts, affords a strong evidence of the truth of this history as well as of the divine authority of his mission. There was great reason for his dwelling on this dark passage in their history, as it was their unbelief that excluded them from the privilege of entering the Promised Land <Heb. 3:19>; and that unbelief was a marvelous exhibition of human perversity, considering the miracles which God had performed in their favour, especially in the daily manifestations they had of His presence among them as their leader and protector." Moses intent was obviously to avoid a repeat of the revolt that had caused the forty years' wandering in the desert, and the death of the older generation. The people he addressed were not the ones who had "rebelled against the command of the LORD [their] God, [and] ... grumbled in [their] tents."

²⁰ See Rom. 3:23

²¹ Ps. 90:7-9

²² Num. 13:1-3

Moses depicted to the children the attitude of their parents in order to make them understand why things had gone wrong at that point in history, and to help them make the right choices. The problem of the older generation had been to accept God's love. Their conclusion had been "The LORD hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us." They ascribed to God motives, for delivering them out of Egypt, that were baser than they found in their own hearts.

Those people had grown up in the slavery of Egypt, in an atmosphere of hatred and malice. They had been so long under demonic oppression that the rays of God's love no longer penetrated their hearts. They had lacked role models of love, and so when they saw the love of God demonstrated towards them, they had nothing to compare it with. This did not excuse them, for the evil had not only been a factor that beat upon them from the outside. Their hearts had been a willing sounding board to hatred, so that hate produced hate. Unable to love themselves, they were unable to respond to God's love. This does not mean that God was unable to heal their hearts, but they did not want healing.

The attitude of the Israelites of old has not yet completely died out in the world. Although there are traces of kindness in the hearts of evil people, many people do not believe that God is love, as the Bible reveals Him to be.²³ That is why Jesus says: "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"²⁴

This is what Moses wants to impress upon the younger generation he addresses here. These people would only be able to accept the challenge of entering the Promised Land if they knew themselves to be loved by God. In his introductory words to the blessing of the tribes of Israel, Moses would later say: "The LORD came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir; he shone forth from Mount Paran. He came with myriads of holy ones from the south, from his mountain slopes. Surely it is you who love the people; all the holy ones are in your hand."²⁵

The older generation also had no concept of spiritual realities: this in spite of the fact that they had been witnesses of some of the greatest manifestations of God's presence among them. No one could ever have forgotten the day God descended upon Mount Sinai, and the ever-present cloud and column of fire was before their very eyes. Yet, their hearts had remained closed to the Word of God. They only saw the large cities, with walls up to the sky, and Anakites, who were stronger and taller than they. The hymn writer says:

"Others saw the giants, Caleb saw the Lord;
They were sore disheartened, he believed God's word;
And that word he fully, fearlessly obeyed-
Was it not sufficient that the Lord hath said?
"I will never leave thee;" "Go in this thy might;"
"One shall chase a thousand, Two put ten to flight."²⁶

The miracles of deliverance from Egypt and their safe passage through the desert had failed to leave an impression upon their souls. It is a strange, and rather unusual phenomenon, that this second generation of redeemed was more ready to enter the Promised Land than were their parents. They had not experienced the dramatic passage from darkness to light as their ancestors had. Moses' personal testimony must have made a deep impression on them, and it must have kindled in them a desire to know God as this man obviously did. The fact that Moses had so obviously been in the presence of God must have been one of the greatest factors to influence the spiritual attitude of this younger generation. This is what gives to the book of Deuteronomy such an ethereal hue.

Yet, Moses was also an imperfect human being. He may have been the greatest person in the Old Testament, he was not perfect. Even the fact that he blames others for his failure is proof of this imperfection. Referring to the two incidents at Massa and Meriba, he said: "Because of you the LORD became angry with me also and said, 'You shall not enter it, either.' " This generation could hardly be blamed for the first time the people reacted when they ran out of water.²⁷ But it was the younger generation who rebelled the second time they experienced a shortage of water. This happened shortly after the rebellion of Korah, and the mentality of the people was: "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! Why did you bring the LORD's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible

²³ See I John 4:8

²⁴ Matt. 7:9-11; Luke 11:1-3

²⁵ Ch. 33:2-3

²⁶ "Caleb Saw the Lord." By Anna E. Richards

²⁷ See Ex. 17:1-7

place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!”²⁸ Moses did have good reason to lose his temper; there were extenuating circumstances, but it would have been better if he had taken full responsibility for his own failure. Later the psalmist would say: “By the waters of Meribah they angered the LORD, and trouble came to Moses because of them; for they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses’ lips.”²⁹ The incident was proof of the fact that rebellion had not died out with the older generation. The younger ones were as full of it as their parents had been. Yet, upon the arrival at Canaan, something has changed in the attitude of the people, and they are ready and willing to trust the Lord for the conquest of the land.

The real reason for bringing up this incident was, of course, the fact that the leadership of the nation was about to be transferred to Joshua. The way Moses declares here is that God had indicated Joshua to be the future leader of the people at the time Moses sinned at Massa and Meriba. We read here: “Because of you the LORD became angry with me also and said, ‘You shall not enter it, either. But your assistant, Joshua son of Nun, will enter it. Encourage him, because he will lead Israel to inherit it.’” At the time of Moses’ disobedience, however, we read only: “The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.’”³⁰ There is no mention of Joshua here. Evidently, we are not given the full account in Numbers. We do not know exactly at what point, during the forty years’ wandering, the incident at Massa and Meriba occurred, so we do not know either how long Joshua had been groomed for his future responsibilities. We understand, though, that it must have been an awesome prospect for Joshua to have to, one day, step into Moses’ shoes. Although Scriptures present Joshua to us as a great leader, one who reached the goal that Moses forfeited, and one whose faith brought about the greatest miracles recorded in the Old Testament, the standing still of the sun,³¹ he never came out from under the shadow of Moses who still towers over everyone else in the Old Testament.

We understand, though, that at the moment Moses sinned against the Lord, he knew that Joshua would be Israel’s future leader, and one of the purposes of Moses’ address to the people here is to introduce Joshua to the younger generation. Joshua was no longer a young man at this point. He must have been over forty when he joined the spies to go into Canaan. The fact that he and Caleb were excluded from those condemned to die in the desert means that he was included in that category.

Thus the book of Deuteronomy begins with the mention of Joshua and it ends with him. Toward the end of the book, we read: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Now the day of your death is near. Call Joshua and present yourselves at the Tent of Meeting, where I will commission him.’ So Moses and Joshua came and presented themselves at the Tent of Meeting,” and: “The LORD gave this command to Joshua son of Nun: ‘Be strong and courageous, for you will bring the Israelites into the land I promised them on oath, and I myself will be with you.’”³²

God had said: “And the little ones that you said would be taken captive, your children who do not yet know good from bad-- they will enter the land. I will give it to them and they will take possession of it.” These “little ones” are the people Moses is addressing at this moment. Yet, Moses continues to address that generation, as if they were the ones who had disobeyed. We tend to believe that the guilt of one generation does not carry over to the next one. In a sense this is true. The prophet Ezekiel made this point, when he said: “The word of the LORD came to me: ‘What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: ‘The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son-- both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.”³³ The context of this prophecy seems to indicate that personal repentance cuts the bond of guilt that ties generations together. For an unrepentant generation the words of Jesus apply: “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.”³⁴

The reason Moses addresses the younger generation as if they share the guilt of their parents, is to bring them to repentance, and to have them make a clear cut with the past. It is only through personal repentance, and a clear denouncing of everything that ties us to the sins of the previous generations, that God clears us from their guilt. In the words of the writer to the Hebrews, if we have come “to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, ... the

²⁸ See Num. 20:2-13

²⁹ Ps. 106:32,33

³⁰ Num. 20:12

³¹ See Josh. 10:12-14

³² ch. 31:14,23

³³ Ezek. 18:1-4

³⁴ Matt. 23:35

sprinkled blood ... speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”³⁵ That is why the Apostle Peter can say: “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers...”³⁶ In addressing the younger generation as the one that rebelled against God, Moses wants to make sure that they renounce this rebellion before they set out to enter the Promised Land.

Adam Clarke's Commentary has a noteworthy observation on the purpose of Moses' address here, and in the whole of the book of Deuteronomy. We copy: “As one grand object of the law of God was to instruct the people in those things which were calculated to promote their peace and insure their prosperity; and as they were apt to lose sight of their spiritual interests, without a due attention to which their secular interest could not be promoted; Moses, not only in this chapter, but through the whole book, calls upon them to recollect their former miserable situation, in which they held neither life nor property but at the will of a merciless tyrant, and the great kindness and power of God manifested in their deliverance from a bondage that was as degrading as it was oppressive. These things properly remembered would lead them to prize their blessings, and duly appreciate the mercy of their Maker.

But it was not only this general display of God's kindness, in the grand act of their deliverance from Egypt, that he wished them to keep constantly in view, but also that gracious providence which was manifested in every step they took, which directed all their movements, provided for all their wants, continually showing what they should do, how they should do it, and also the most proper time and place for every act, whether religious or civil. By bringing before them in one point of view the history of almost forty years, in which the strangest and most stupendous occurrences had taken place that had ever been exhibited to the world, he took the readiest way to impress their minds, not only with their deep obligation to God, but also to show them that they were a people on whom their Maker had set his heart to do them good, and that if they feared him they should lack nothing that was good. He lays out also before them a history of their miscarriages and rebellion, and the privations and evils they had suffered in consequence, that this might act as a continual warning, and thus become, in the hands of God, a preventive of crimes.

If every Christian were thus to call his past life into review, he would see equal proofs of God's gracious regards to his body and soul; equal proofs of eternal mercy in providing for his deliverance from the galling yoke and oppressive tyranny of sin, as the Israelites had in their deliverance from Egypt; and equal displays of a most gracious providence, that had also been his incessant companion through all the changes and chances of this mortal life, guiding him by its counsel, that he might be at last received into glory. O reader, remember what God has done for thee during thy forty, fifty, etc., years! He has nourished, fed, clothed, protected, and saved thee. How often and how powerfully has his Spirit striven with thee! How often and how impressively thou hast heard his voice in his Gospel and in his providence! Remember the good resolutions thou hast made, the ingratitude and disobedience that have marked thy life; how his vows are still upon thee, and how his mercy still spares thee! And wilt thou live so as to perish forever? God forbid! He still waits to be gracious, and rejoices over thee to do thee good. Learn from what is before thee how thou shouldst fear, love, believe in, and obey thy God. The Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world, is still before the throne; and whosoever cometh unto God through him shall in nowise be cast out. He who believes these things with an upright heart will soon be enabled to live a sanctified life.”

The chapter ends with the words: “And so you stayed in Kadesh many days-- all the time you spent there.” Not only did Israel stay at Kadesh during the forty days in which the twelve spies crisscrossed Canaan, but also, for a period, after their defeat by the Amorites. Numbers records the incident when, after the people refused to enter the Promised Land, and God sent them back into the desert until the present generation would have died off, they make a futile effort to conquer Canaan in their own strength, without the presence of the Lord going before them.³⁷ How long they stayed at Kadesh Barnea to recover from the shock we do not know. Some commentators believe they spent another forty days there.

It is always a shocking experience for a man to discover that he has nothing in himself that guarantees victory. Even Israel's confession: “We have sinned, ... We will go up to the place the LORD promised,” was the product of their own conceited ego.³⁸ The hardest lesson to learn in life is that we are absolutely dependent upon God for everything. In Jesus' words: “Apart from me you can do nothing.”³⁹ The Apostle Paul introduces in the New Testament the concept of “the old man,” and “the flesh.” The generation of Israel that left Egypt was a clear representation of “the old man.” God sent “the old man” back to the desert to die, before He was ready to lead His people into the Promised Land. We read in Paul's epistles: “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him,

³⁵ Heb. 12:24

³⁶ I Pet. 1:18

³⁷ See Num. 14:40-45

³⁸ Num. 14:40

³⁹ John 15:5

that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.”⁴⁰ And: “That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts...”⁴¹ And again: “Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds.”⁴² The nation of Israel had to “put off the old man with his deeds” before God could lead them to the place of victory. It was after this whole generation of “old men” had died in the wilderness that they returned to the place where they had been defeated before, and that they could appropriate God’s promise of victory. After so many years they were back in Kadesh where their fathers had spent many days.

CHAPTER TWO

II. THE REVIEW OF GOD’S ACTS FOR ISRAEL 1:6-4:43

C. From Kadesh Barnea to Moab 2:1-23

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on the statement “For a long time we made our way around the hill country of Seir,”: In these few words Moses comprised the whole of that wandering nomadic life which they passed during 38 years, shifting from place to place, and regulating their stations by the prospect of pasturage and water. Within the interval they went northward a second time to Kadesh; but being refused a passage through Edom, and opposed by the Canaanites and Amalekites, they again had no alternative but to traverse once more the great Arabah southwards to the Red Sea, where, turning to the left and crossing the long, lofty mountain chain to the eastward of Ezion-gaber <Num. 21:4-5>, they issued into the great and elevated plains which are still traversed by the Syrian pilgrims on their way to Mecca; and appear to have followed northward nearly the same route which is now taken by the Syrian Hadj, along the western skirts of this great desert, near the mountains of Edom (Robinson). It was on entering these plains they received the command, ‘Ye have compassed this mountain (this hilly tract, now Jebel Sherah) long enough, turn you northward.’ ”

It is, in fact, remarkable that the long period of history, which formed the bulk of Israel’s experience between Egypt and Canaan, is dismissed in just one sentence. Those were the years of disobedience, which were not incorporated in God’s diary. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews also jumps over this extended episode in his enumerations of events that placed people in the Hall of Fame of the Heroes of Faith, when he says: “By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.”⁴³ The wandering of Israel in the desert is the darkest page in its history as a nation, but God blots it out with one stroke of His mercy.

All things come to an end. Deuteronomy opens with the words: “The LORD our God said to us at Horeb, ‘You have stayed long enough at this mountain.’ ”⁴⁴ God’s glorious revelation of Himself was not meant to last; it was to be a foretaste of things to come, not a lasting condition. Israel’s goal was the Promised Land, not Mount Sinai. The seemingly endless roaming around in the desert came to an end also. There came a moment at which God said: “You have made your way around this hill country long enough; now turn north.”

The first thing Israel faced, when they were finally given permission to leave the desert and move toward the Promised Land, was the sensitive issue of meeting Esau. More than 400 years earlier Jacob had faced his brother Esau from a position of weakness, and he had feared for his life. The experience of facing death turned out to be his greatest victory. He wrestled with God, and became the prince of God; Jacob died and Israel was born.⁴⁵ Now Israel approached Esau from a position of strength, and Esau trembled. God warned the people to be gentle in their approach, and not to misuse their power. We read in Numbers that Moses sent a personal message to the king of Edom, asking for permission to pass through Edomite territory, and giving, in condensed form the history of their salvation. We read: “Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, saying: ‘This is what your brother Israel says: You know about all the hardships that have come upon us. Our forefathers went down into Egypt, and we lived there many years. The Egyptians mistreated us and our fathers, but when we cried out to the LORD, he heard our cry and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. Now we are here at Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. Please let us pass through your country. We will not go through any field or vineyard, or drink water from

⁴⁰ Rom. 6:6 (KJV)

⁴¹ Eph. 4:22 (KJV)

⁴² Col. 3:9 (KJV)

⁴³ Heb. 11:29,30

⁴⁴ ch. 1:6

⁴⁵ See Gen. 32:3-30

any well. We will travel along the king's highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we have passed through your territory.' ⁴⁶ Edom's king answered this message by mobilizing his army to defend the borders of his country. Yet, some individuals must have disregarded the king's policy, since we read in the Deuteronomy that some Edomites sold food and water to the people.⁴⁷

God warned Israel not to provoke Edom. Some of the older translations render this with "Meddle not with them."⁴⁸ "Provoke" sounds like the better word in this context. Israel faced the danger of being corrupted by its own power. The use of power demands an attitude of humility. Lord Acton's dictum: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" does not have to be true, if one lives in fellowship with the Lord. Mau Dze Dong said: "Power comes from the barrel of a gun," but Jesus warns us: "All who draw the sword will die by the sword."⁴⁹ In practice, however, we see that guns and humility, or the combination of any weapon with humility, seldom go together. Israel had to realize that its power came from God, and that He was the administrator of this power.

Thus far, God had provided for all their needs in the minutest details: they had received manna on a daily basis, water, and meat. Now they are required to pay, and God does not send any pennies from heaven for that purpose. They had been sustained supernaturally, but there is nothing supernatural about the command: "You are to pay them in silver for the food you eat and the water you drink." There is a hidden danger of complacency in supernatural provisions. The majority of mankind is not exposed to this danger, because most people try to build up financial reserves as a surety, as a nest egg. People build walls with money to protect themselves against the evil days to come. Living by faith is a rare phenomenon. But those who do, often consider themselves too poor to pay for the niceties of life, and sometimes even too poor to live a financially responsible life. A Christian can always afford to pay his bills. This seems to be the first lesson God wanted to teach His people, as they were getting ready for the conquest of the Promised Land.

Not only can Christians always afford to pay their bills, they should also be prompt in paying them. If we consider the money we possess as something the Lord has given us to administer, our handling the Lord's money becomes part of our testimony.

Matthew Henry's Commentary observes on this: "They [the Israelites] must trade with them [the Edomites] as neighbors, buy meat and water of them, and pay for what they bought, v. 6. Religion must never be made a cloak for injustice. The reason given (v. 7), is, 'God hath blessed thee, and hitherto thou hast lacked nothing; and therefore,'

(1.) 'Thou needest not beg; scorn to be beholden to Edomites, when thou hast a God all-sufficient to depend upon. Thou hast wherewithal to pay for what thou callest for (thanks to the divine blessing!); use therefore what thou hast, use it cheerfully, and do not sponge upon the Edomites.'

(2.) 'therefore thou must not steal. Thou hast experienced the care of the divine providence concerning thee, in confidence of which for the future, and in a firm belief of its sufficiency, never use any indirect methods for thy supply. Live by the faith and not by thy sword.' "

Also, the fact that there was a blood relationship between Israel and Edom did not give license to one brother to sponge off the other. There is a great cultural difference, in this respect, between East and West. In Asia, and on the African continent, family ties are the strongest rule in society. Individualism, such as is prevalent in a Western society, is practically unknown. Individuals who earn a salary often do so for a whole family, or moiety. Sharing and borrowing are common phenomena. Not so in the West. Even if a family is in dire need, other members may not feel under any obligation to help out. There are, of course, exceptions, as well as excesses in both kinds of society. The East knows, of course, individuals who break loose from this paragon of society, and the West has people whose only source of income is hand-outs. The Biblical patterns seems to be somewhere in between. On the one hand, God wants His children to love their neighbors as themselves,⁵⁰ on the other hand Scripture says: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."⁵¹

The Pulpit Commentary points out that two different words are used for "to pay" in vs. 6. The NIV blurs the difference by using the word only once: "You are to pay them in silver for the food you eat and the water you drink." The RSV maintains the distinction by saying: You shall purchase food from them for money, that you may eat; and you shall also buy water of them for money, that you may drink." The two different Hebrew words are *shabar*, and

⁴⁶ Num. 20:14-17

⁴⁷ See vs. 28,29

⁴⁸ KJV

⁴⁹ Matt. 26:52^b

⁵⁰ Lev. 19:18

⁵¹ II Thess. 3:10

karah. Strong's defines *Shabar* as "to deal in grain," and *karah* literally means: "to dig, or to bore or open." The suggestion is that the Israelites asked for permission to dig wells, not to purchase water from existing wells.

As Israel was about to enter the Promised Land, they had to learn what it meant to be financially and economically independent. As slaves in Egypt, their lives had been hard, but their material needs had been provided for. In a sense, their lack of freedom had been their shelter. Coming out of Egypt, they faced an emotional crisis situation, similar to former communist countries that switch to a free market economy overnight. Learning financial and economical responsibility was part of their growing into nationhood. There would be no more manna or water from the rock for this mature nation. The encounter with Edom was meant to be the first test. But it did not work out that way, since the king of Edom barred the passage through his country, when he mobilized his army. The relationship between Edom and Israel remained strained for centuries, until under the reign of David and Solomon, Edom became subject to Israelite rule.⁵² It seems, though, that Edom took the initiative in these hostilities. In Moses' days, Edom was considered a brother nation, and Israel was not to covet their territory.

The same restrictions are put by God on Israel in relation to Moab as to Edom; they were not to be harassed, this, in spite of the fact that Moab had plotted to destroy Israel by means of an alleged curse Balaam was to put on the people.⁵³ The people of Moab were descendants of Lot, which made them distant relatives to Israel. Strangely enough, the Midianites, who descended from Abraham, by means of Keturah, were not included in the status of privileged nations, although they were directly related to Abraham.

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary writes about the Midianites: "Moses married into a Midianite family (specifically an associated group known as the Kenites) in 'the land of Midian' <Ex. 2:15>. His wife Zipporah and his father-in-law Jethro were Midianites <Ex. 2:21; 3:1>. But this was the last friendly connection the Israelites had with the Midianites... After the time of Moses, the Midianites consistently opposed the Israelites. They joined with the Moabites, in whose territory they had partly settled, in hiring the prophet-magician Balaam to curse Israel <Num. 22:4,7>. At Moab, just before the conquest of Canaan, the Midianites were among those who practiced sexual immorality as part of the ritual of their idolatrous religion. They involved some of the Israelites in this idolatry, causing God's judgment to come upon His people <Num. 25:1-9>. Because of this the Midianites were singled out for destruction <Num. 25:16-18>." This last Scripture reference gives us the key to understand why the Midianites were not included in the group of friendly nations. God had said to Moses: "Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them, because they treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the affair of Peor and their sister Cozbi, the daughter of a Midianite leader, the woman who was killed when the plague came as a result of Peor."

The parenthesis of the verses 10-12 speaks about the Emim, Anakites, and Rephaites. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says about these verses: "[Which also were accounted giants] This is not a fortunate version. The word is not giants, but R^a paa'iym ... the name of a people. It appears that the Emim, the Anakim, and the Rephaim, were probably the same people, called by different names in the different countries where they dwelt; for they appear originally to have been a kind of wandering free-booters, who lived by plunder. ... It must be granted, however, that there were several men of this race of extraordinary stature. And hence, all gigantic men have been called Rephaim... But we well know that fear and public report have often added whole cubits to men's height. It was under this influence that the spies acted, when they brought the disheartening report mentioned <Num. 13:33>." *The Pulpit Commentary* notes about the parenthesis: "The mention of the Moabites gives occasion to the author to introduce some notices of the ancient inhabitants of Edom and Moab. In Moab dwelt, in the earlier times, the Emim, a giant race, potent and numerous, like the 'Anâkim. They were also, like the 'Anâkim reckoned among the Rephâim, but were by the Moabites called Emim. The word Emim means frightful, and was given to these men probably because of their huge stature and fierce aspect." Some of these names seem to point to the people who inhabited the earth before the flood of Noah, and which were called the Nephilim in Genesis.⁵⁴ There probably was an almost mythological fear connected to the mention of those names.

Why this parenthesis was added to the text, and for whose benefit, is not clear. It is very likely, though, that this is a later addition to the text by an editor of the book, and not part of Moses' original speech. *The Pulpit Commentary* does not agree with this. We read there: "There is no sufficient reason for supposing that this paragraph is an interpolation, or gloss, inserted by some later writer. It lay as much in the way of Moses to introduce such ethnographical notices as in that of any writer of a later age." But in our supposition we have the backing of Adam Clarke and other authorities.

The NIV speaks about Israel crossing the Zered Valley. Most translations use the term "the brook Zered." The Hebrew word *nachal* means, according to *Strong's Definitions*: "a stream, especially a winter torrent," but by

⁵² See I Kings 11:15,16

⁵³ See Num. 22-24

⁵⁴ Gen. 6:4

implication it can also mean a narrow valley. The crossing of the brook Zered meant the end of the old period, and the beginning of a new era. In their previous approach of Canaan, Israel had never gone beyond this place. Zered was for Israel what the Rubicon was for Julius Caesar.

Matthew Henry's Commentary sums up the importance of this crossing quite well, by saying: "The advances which Israel made towards Canaan. They passed by the way of the wilderness of Moab (v. 8), and then went over the brook or vale of Zered (v. 13), and there Moses takes notice of the fulfilling of the word which God had spoken concerning them, that none of those that were numbered at Mount Sinai should see the land that God had promised, <Num. 14:23>. According to that sentence, now that they began to set their faces towards Canaan, and to have it in their eye, notice is taken of their being all destroyed and consumed, and not a man of them left, v. 14. Common providence, we may observe, in about thirty-eight years, ordinarily raises a new generation, so that in that time few remain of the old one; but here it was entirely new, and none at all remained but Caleb and Joshua: for indeed the hand of the Lord was against them, v. 15. Those cannot but waste, until they were consumed, who have the hand of God against them. Observe, Israel is not called to engage with the Canaanites till all the men of war, the veteran regiments, that had been used to hardship, and had learned the art of war from the Egyptians, were consumed and dead from among the people (v. 16), that the conquest of Canaan, being effected by a host of new-raised men, trained up in a wilderness, the excellency of the power might the more plainly appear to be of God and not of men."

At this point, another warning is issued that the Israelites were not to harass the Ammonites, since the Lord had given them their territory also, just as He had done for Edom and Moab. Like the Moabites, the Ammonites were distant relatives of Israel, since they were the descendants of Lot.

Verses 20-23 give another parenthesis, recounting the conquest of the country by the present inhabitants.

The Arnon is the next brook to be crossed, marking the actual commencement of the entering into the Promised Land. This crossing, like the one at Zered, was done at the express command of the Lord. Here Israel faces the first enemy to be conquered, Sihon, and the kingdom of Heshbon. The book of Numbers tells us that, initially, Israel approached Sihon in an appropriate way, asking permission to pass through Amorite territory, but the king responded by mobilizing his army. Thus he dug his own grave. We read: "Israel sent messengers to say to Sihon king of the Amorites: 'Let us pass through your country. We will not turn aside into any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king's highway until we have passed through your territory.' But Sihon would not let Israel pass through his territory. He mustered his entire army and marched out into the desert against Israel. When he reached Jahaz, he fought with Israel. Israel, however, put him to the sword and took over his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, but only as far as the Ammonites, because their border was fortified. Israel captured all the cities of the Amorites and occupied them, including Heshbon and all its surrounding settlements. Heshbon was the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and had taken from him all his land as far as the Arnon."⁵⁵ In his speech here, Moses reiterates this state of affairs again. Sihon's reaction demonstrated the character of the enemy, and the power behind him that governed this behavior. The devil does not allow those who are in his power to save their lives by coming to terms with the power of God. He will rather push them to commit suicide than allow them to surrender.

The way Sihon was approached raises all kinds of questions. It sounds as if Israel's request for free passage was not sincere, and that they were intent on Heshbon's destruction, regardless of their response. There is no reason to suspect, though, that the Israelites would not have kept their word, if they had been allowed to pass. The burden of guilt falls completely on King Sihon, when he refuses Israel's passage. The phrase: "For the LORD your God had made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate in order to give him into your hands, as he has now done," does not dismiss Sihon of his responsibility any less than Pharaoh was responsible for the hardening of his heart before God hardened his heart. God does not give stubborn spirits and obstinate hearts to those whose hearts are soft towards Him. Sihon's heart was hardened because he had already surrendered to God's enemy. It is true that God used this obstinacy to glorify Himself, and to achieve His purpose for Israel.

The Pulpit Commentary remarks on the conquest of Sihon: "Sihon, though an Amorite, was not to be unconditionally destroyed. He had, like Pharaoh, an opportunity given him of averting ruin by acceding to a most courteous and reasonable request; but, like Pharaoh in this respect also, he hardened his heart, and took the course which made his destruction inevitable. ... It was not given to him in the hope that he would avail himself of it; for it was foreseen that he would refuse it and be hardened by it. But the sinners' hardness of heart is not a reason why the opportunity of securing his salvation should be withheld from him, or why every gracious means should not be employed to overcome his hardness. It is, indeed, necessary that this should be done, in order that the responsibility of his ruin may rest entirely on himself. It lay in the counsel of God that this king's territory should be given to the Israelites, but only on condition of his refusal of the request made to him. It was otherwise with the gift of Canaan,

⁵⁵ Num. 21:21-26

which was absolute, and permitted of no overtures of peace being made to the inhabitants. Their day of grace was past: to Sihon there still remained this last momentous and decisive opportunity.”

There is no easy answer to the moral problem this passage seems to present to us, just as it is hard to reconcile Pharaoh’s attitude during the exodus with the free will of that king. The problem seems to be that God, not only predicted that this would happen, but that He even takes credit for it, as if He would have been the first cause, and prime mover in the process. When God sent Moses to Egypt, He said to him: ‘When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.’⁵⁶ *The Pulpit Commentary* says about Sihon’s obstinacy: “‘The Lord thy God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate’ (ver. 30); not indeed, by any evil influence exerted on his soul, but by giving him up to his naturally obdurate disposition, and by placing him in circumstances which he knew would have a hardening effect, though in themselves of a character fitted rather to soften. The hardening of the heart, so far as it is a result of evil courses, is *a work of God operating in the laws of our mental and moral nature*. Sin naturally operates to blind the mind, sear the conscience, destroy the generous affections, etc. But these effects are as truly a judicial operation of God in the soul, of a punitive nature, as was the Flood, the destruction of the cities of the plain, or any other outward expression of his wrath.” *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* observes about the problem of Sihon’s hardened heart: “This may illustrate the method of God’s dealing with those to whom he gives his gospel, but does not give grace to believe it.” This comment does not help us any in finding an answer to the problem of God’s predestination, and man’s free will.

The conquest of Heshbon, as well as of Bashan, which is dealt with in the next chapter, became a showcase of Israel’s might. It demoralized all the other nations inhabiting Canaan to the point where Israel acquired an aureole of invincibility, which facilitated the war considerably. As was sung in the song of Moses some forty years earlier, when Israel had passed through the Red Sea: “The nations will hear and tremble; anguish will grip the people of Philistia. The chiefs of Edom will be terrified, the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling, the people of Canaan will melt away; terror and dread will fall upon them. By the power of your arm they will be as still as a stone-- until your people pass by, O LORD, until the people you bought pass by. You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance-- the place, O LORD, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, your hands established.”⁵⁷

There seems to be a contradiction in Moses’ message to Sihon, regarding the treatment Edom gave Israel when free passage was asked. We read that Israel requests from Sihon: “Sell us food to eat and water to drink for their price in silver. Only let us pass through on foot-- *as the descendants of Esau*, who live in Seir, and the Moabites, who live in Ar, did for us-- until we cross the Jordan into the land the LORD our God is giving us.” In the account given in Numbers, however, we read: “But Edom answered: ‘You may not pass through here; if you try, we will march out and attack you with the sword.’ The Israelites replied: ‘We will go along the main road, and if we or our livestock drink any of your water, we will pay for it. We only want to pass through on foot-- nothing else.’ Again they answered: ‘You may not pass through.’ Then Edom came out against them with a large and powerful army. Since Edom refused to let them go through their territory, Israel turned away from them.”⁵⁸

The Adam Clarke Commentary comments on the incident recorded in Numbers: “[Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border] Though every king has a right to refuse passage through his territories to any strangers; yet in a case like this, and in a time also in which emigrations were frequent and universally allowed, it was both cruelty and oppression in Edom to refuse a passage to a comparatively unarmed and inoffensive multitude, who were all their own near kinsmen. It appears, however, that it was only the Edomites of Kadesh that were thus unfriendly and cruel; for from <Deut. 2:29> we learn that the Edomites who dwelt in Mount Seir treated them in a hospitable manner. This cruelty in the Edomites of Kadesh is strongly reprehended, and threatened by the Prophet Obadiah, <Obad. 1:10>, etc.”

The chapter ends with a brief description of Heshbon’s destruction, as a foretaste of victories to come when the Promised Land would be invaded.

CHAPTER THREE

D. Conquest of East Jordan (continued) 3:1-20

⁵⁶ Ex. 4:21

⁵⁷ Ex.15:14-17

⁵⁸ Num. 20:18-21

In this chapter, as in the preceding one, Moses continues the description of what, to the audience, was recent history. They had been involved in the conquest of Bashan, and the defeat of Og. A brief account of the battle is given in Numbers.⁵⁹ Archeological finds have shown that the conquest of Bashan must have been an achievement of considerable importance. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes from the *Cambridge Essays* of Graham: “Over that district are strewn a multitude of towns of various sizes, all constructed after the same remarkable fashion. ‘The streets are perfect, the walls perfect, and, what seems more astonishing, the stone doors are still hanging on their hinges, so little impression has been made during these many centuries on the hard and durable stone of which they are built.’ ... ‘All betoken the workmanship of a race endowed with powers far exceeding those of ordinary men; and give credibility to the supposition that we have in them the dwellings of the giant race that occupied that district before it was invaded by the Israelites.’” The mention of Og’s bed, which measured 13’x6’ would confirm this. His majesty slept in a king size bed.

Og was the last of a race of giants. We read in the parenthesis of vs. 11: “(Only Og king of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaites).”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary presents us with another quotation from “*Cambridge Essays*, ‘ 1858, art. *The Ancient Bashan and the Cities of Og*, ‘ by Cyril Graham.’ ” which says: “[Og the king of Bashan came out against us.] Without provocation, he rushed to attack the Israelites, either disliking the presence of such dangerous neighbors, or burning to avenge the overthrow of his friends and allies.

[At Edrei.] It was in the western side of Argob, and about midway between its northern and southern limits, that the capital city, the city of Edrei, at a distance of scarcely more than 300 yards from the plain, was built, actually among the black basalt rocks, on a promontory which projects from the south west corner of the Lejjah, and thus held a very strong position. The Rephaim, no doubt, considered all their cities to be of such extraordinary strength that none but a very powerful army could take them. But these cities of Argob, above all, were deemed utterly impregnable. The children of Israel, it seems, were permitted to advance a long way across the plain of Bashan before they met with any determined resistance. They may, indeed, have had skirmishes with Og’s people; but, at all events, no account of any pitched battle is given. On the contrary, the Rephaim, probably, like most people who build strong places, liked fighting behind walls, and preferred engaging the invading army within the rocks of Argob, where, if they once became entangled, they might be harassed with impunity, to meeting them in battle in the open field. And, besides, however lightly they may before have been inclined to treat this Hebrew army, now, since the conquest of the Amorites, they must have felt some fear of them.

The Israelites still continued their march northward until they found themselves before the capital, Edrei. Had Og remained within the city, humanly speaking, it would have been impossible for the Israelites to have conquered him. The only hope they would have had of taking the place would be by a long siege, and that would hardly have been possible to maintain, because they could not, without great difficulty, invest the city. The western side, next the plain, they might watch, and cut off all supplies from that quarter-- the most fruitful, indeed, in that part of Bashan; but to reach the eastern side of Edrei they must have penetrated some distance among the rocks; and not only would this have been too dangerous a work to attempt, but, even were they able to watch ever so well on that side, the people of Argob, knowing all the winding ways within the rocks, could always have managed to bring provisions to the city without being seen.

The only real hope of taking the city was by drawing the Rephaim out into the plain. Whether some ruse was employed to entice the people from their stronghold, or whether Og, in full confidence of his great strength and invulnerability, planned a sudden attack, or, as we should now say, a sortie, on the Israelites as they lay before the city, we are not told. Either would be difficult. It would require no small amount of skill to entice these people from behind walls; and it is more improbable that such a people should of their own free will risk a battle in the open plain. There must have been some almost miraculous interference in favor of the Israelites. And, from casual notice in another place <Josh. 24:12>, we find that God sent a special scourge among these Rephaim in the shape of swarms of hornets, which, we may suppose, harassed them so much in their stone houses that they were driven out of their towns, and preferred the alternative of meeting the Israelites to perishing from the stings of these creatures. So, forced from his city, Og met the Israelites in the plain, and in a pitched battle he was defeated, and Edrei taken’.”

It is not hard to imagine with what state of mind the Israelite army would have approached the encounter with Og. Being the last representative of a race of giants, will have given him a fearsome notoriety. It was people like Og, the twelve spies must have spotted during their first expedition thirty-eight years earlier. The absolute victory over Og, therefore, must have been an immense boost to the moral of the Israelite army. Having slain this giant with God’s help, they knew nothing would, henceforth, be impossible to them. They must have become established in their faith in God in an unshakable way. Jesus said to His disciples: “If you have faith as small as a

⁵⁹ Num. 21:33-35

mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."⁶⁰

If the size of Og's bed was any indication of the size of his body, we are looking at a real giant. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* makes the following remarks about the king's body length: "[Nine cubits was the length thereof, and four cubits the breadth] Allowing the bedstead to have been one cubit longer than Og, which is certainly sufficient, and allowing the cubit to be about eighteen inches long, for this is perhaps the average of the cubit of a man, then Og was twelve feet high. This may be deemed extraordinary, and perhaps almost incredible, and therefore many commentators have, according to their fancy, lengthened the bedstead and shortened the man, making the former one-third longer than the person who lay on it, that they might reduce Og to six cubits, but even in this way they make him at least nine feet high."

The following remarks are too amusing to pass up, so we copy them here also: "On this subject the rabbis have trifled most sinfully. I shall give one specimen. In the Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel on <Num. 21:35-36>, it is said that 'Og having observed that the camp of the Israelites extended six miles, he went and tore up a mountain six miles in its base, and put it on his head, and carried it towards the camp, that he might throw it on the Israelites and destroy them; but the word of the Lord prepared a worm, which bored a hole in the mountain over his head, so that it fell down upon his shoulders: at the same time his teeth growing out in all directions, stuck into the mountain, so that he could not cast it off his head. Moses, (who was himself ten cubits high,) seeing Og thus entangled, took an axe ten cubits long, and having leaped ten cubits in height, struck Og on the ankle bone, so that he fell and was slain.' From this account the distance from the sole of Og's foot to his ankle was thirty cubits in length! I give this as a very slight specimen of rabbinical comment. I could quote places in the Talmud in which Og is stated to be several miles high! This relation about Og I suppose to be also an historical note added by a subsequent hand."

Besides providing comical entertainment, the above quote indicates that, in Jewish tradition, the victory over Og acquired mythical dimensions. There is, obviously, no historical accuracy in the legend of Jonathan ben Uzziel, but we understand that the event upon which the fantasy is based, must have been a victory of enormous proportions. We should not underestimate the impact this must have made upon Israel on the eve of their entrance into the Promised Land. God had given them the victory over those giants that had been the cause of their thirty-eight year wandering in the desert. The conquest of Og wiped clean the slate of Israel's disobedience. The spies who had returned from their mission to spy out the land had reported about Og and the like of him: "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."⁶¹ This giant had now been slain by hornets and grasshoppers. The Apostle Paul would say: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."⁶²

In verses 12-20 Moses repeats the story of the parceling out of the territory east of Jordan, but he tells it as if he had taken the initiative in the transaction. In the account in Numbers, however, we read that the Reubenites proposed this settlement, and that Moses opposed it with considerable vigor.⁶³ It almost sounds as if Moses took full credit for what was done. It is true that Moses changed his mind, even during the argument in Numbers. But what came in as a request made to Moses is presented here as proposal initiated by himself. We do not know if Moses' old age had something to do with this. The account, as it comes to us, indicates that Moses was used to speak in terms of authority. He took his order from God, and not from man, which may account for the fact that, in this case at least, he did not give credit where credit was due.

There is another parenthesis in verses 13^b and 14, about which there is some confusion. *The Pulpit Commentary* writes: "The last part of this verse is differently construed and rendered by different translators. By some the clause all the region of Argob is connected with what precedes, while others regard this clause as in apposition with what follows. Targum: 'All the region of Trachona, and all that province was called the land of giants;' LXX.: 'and all the region of Argob, all that Bashan: the land of Rephaim it was reckoned;' Vulgate: 'The whole region of Argob, and all Bashan is called the land of giants.' Modern interpreters for the most part adopt the order of the Targum. The clause may be rendered thus: *The whole region of Argob as respects all Bashan* [i.e. in so far as it formed part of the kingdom of Bashan under Og] *was reputed the land of the Rephaim.*"

Considering the fact that the information contained in the section must have been very recent history at the time Moses addressed the nation, it is logical to suppose that these verses are an addition to the text by a later editor. *The Pulpit Commentary*, however, thinks that Moses himself may have used the expression "unto this day" (KJV),

⁶⁰ Matt. 17:20

⁶¹ Num. 13:33

⁶² I Cor. 1:25

⁶³ See Num. 32:1-33

“in order to give prominence to the capture of the fortified cities of the giant king Og, by the Manassites for the encouragement of the Israelites.”

About vs. 16, where Moses says: “To the Reubenites and the Gadites I gave the territory extending from Gilead down to the Arnon Gorge (the middle of the gorge being the border) and out to the Jabbok River, which is the border of the Ammonites,” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* remarks: “[Even unto the river Arnon half the valley.] The word ‘valley’ signifies a wady, either filled with water or dry, as the Arnon is in summer; and thus the proper rendering of the passage will be—‘even to the half or middle of the river Arnon’ (cf. <Josh. 12:2>). This prudent arrangement of the boundaries was evidently made to prevent all disputes between the adjacent tribes about the exclusive right to the water.”

Also the repetition of the arrangement for the tribes of the territory west of the Jordan to spearhead the conquest of the actual Promised Land is presented as if Moses had initiated it. In Numbers, however, the suggestion clearly came from the tribes themselves, and Moses simply approved the proposal.⁶⁴

It could be that everything said in these verses was repeated mostly for the benefit of Joshua, who is addressed indirectly in verses 21 and 22. The gist of Moses’ address seems to be to coach the people, and bring them into the right spiritual state of mind necessary to commence the actual invasion of the land, and begin the final conquest.

In the last verses of this chapter, (verses 23-29), Moses shares with the nation some of the secrets of his own prayer life, and intimate fellowship with the Lord. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this *Prayer of Moses*: “Moses knew that he was not to enter the Promised Land with the people: but, reluctant to relinquish the enterprise which he had so far conducted until he should see it successfully finished, he besought the Lord that at least he might be permitted to cross the Jordan, and see the goodly land. This prayer was presented probably just before Moses asked God to set a man over the congregation to be their leader to the Promised Land (Numb. xxvii. 15-17); for the command to give a charge to Joshua, in that office, follows immediately, as part of God’s answer to Moses’ request (ver.28), and the expression ‘at that time’ (ver. 23) points back to the charge of Moses to Joshua, as contemporaneous with the offering of his prayer. In this prayer Moses appeals to what he had already experienced of God’s favor to him, in that he had begun to show him his greatness and his mighty power. The reference is to the victories already achieved over the Amorites; these were tokens of the Divine power graciously manifested to Israel, and Moses appeals to them as strengthening his plea for further favors.”

Moses’ prayer is indeed a moving example of a man who has given his life in service to the Lord, and who seems to be denied his reward. It is easy to rob this portion of Scripture of its pungency by opening a window on heaven, and saying that Moses did enter into the real Promised Land. All this is true, of course, but we miss the bitter tears of this moment. The bitterness lies precisely in the sharp contrast between the glory of God, and human failure. Moses had come closer to God than anyone else in the Old Testament. No one had ever stood where Moses stood, in a cleft of the rock, covered by God’s own hand, when God’s glory passed, and the voice was heard proclaiming: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” How could this man be denied to see the completion of his work? All was lost because of one moment in which he had lost his temper.

Interestingly, we read nowhere that Moses ever confessed this weakness as a personal sin. He consistently blamed his own failure on the condition of the people. Even in this context we read: “But because of you the LORD was angry with me and would not listen to me.” In Moses’ mind, he was not punished because of his own sins, but because of the sin of the people. He may have been wrong in this assumption, but in doing so, he presents himself unwittingly, as an image of Him, who “was pierced for our transgressions, [and] was crushed for our iniquities; [because] the punishment that brought us peace was upon him.”⁶⁵

Matthew Henry’s Commentary gives the following reflection on Moses’ prayer: “What he begs: I pray thee let me go over, v. 25. God had said he should not go over; yet he prays that he might, not knowing but that the threatening was conditional, for it was not ratified with an oath, as that concerning the people was, that they should not enter. Thus Hezekiah prayed for his own life, and David for the life of his child, after both had been expressly threatened; and the former prevailed, though the latter did not. Moses remembered the time when he had by prayer prevailed with God to recede from the declarations which he had made of his wrath against Israel, <Exo. 32:14>. And why might he not hope in like manner to prevail for himself? Let me go over and see the good land. Not, ‘Let me go over and be a prince and a ruler there;’ he seeks not his own honor, is content to resign the government to

⁶⁴ See Num. 32:16-24

⁶⁵ Isa. 53:5

Joshua; but, 'Let me go to be a spectator of thy kindness to Israel, to see what I believe concerning the goodness of the land of promise.' How pathetically does he speak of Canaan, that good land, that goodly mountain! Note, Those may hope to obtain and enjoy God's favours that know how to value them. What he means by that goodly mountain we may learn from <Ps. 78:54>, where it is said of God's Israel that he brought them to the border of his sanctuary, even to this mountain which his right hand had purchased, where it is plainly to be understood of the whole land of Canaan, yet with an eye to the sanctuary, the glory of it."

The Adam Clarke Commentary also gives a noteworthy comment on these verses: "The prayer of Moses recorded in these two verses, and his own reflections on it, <Deut. 3:26>, are very affecting. He had suffered much both in body and mind in bringing the people to the borders of the Promised Land; and it was natural enough for him to wish to see them established in it, and to enjoy a portion of that inheritance himself, which he knew was a type of the heavenly country. But notwithstanding his very earnest prayer, and God's especial favour toward him, he was not permitted to go over Jordan! He had grieved the Spirit of God, and he passed a sentence against him of exclusion from the Promised Land. Yet he permitted him to see it, and gave him the fullest assurances that the people whom he had brought out of Egypt should possess it. Thus God may choose to deprive those of earthly possessions to whom he is nevertheless determined to give a heavenly inheritance.... It is very likely that what God speaks here, both concerning Moses and Joshua, was designed to be typical of the procedure of his justice and grace in the salvation of man:

1. The land of Canaan was a type of the kingdom of heaven.
2. The law, which shows the holiness of God and the exceeding sinfulness of sin, could not bring the people to the possession of that kingdom.
3. Moses may probably be considered here as the emblem of that law by which is the knowledge of sin, but not redemption from it.
4. Joshua, the same as Jesus, the name signifying a Saviour, is appointed to bring the people into the rest which God had provided for them; thus it is by Jesus Christ alone that the soul is saved-- fitted for and brought into the possession of the heavenly inheritance, (see <John 1:17; Gal. 2:16; 3:12-13,24>); for he is the end of the law-- the great scope and design of the law, for righteousness-- for justification, to them that believe, <Rom. 10:4>. Such a use as this every pious reader may make of the circumstances recorded here, without the danger of pushing analogy or metaphor beyond their reasonable limits."

Moses' prayer to be allowed to enter the Promised Land is not based upon the confession of his own sin, as we have seen already, but upon the greatness of God's acts. Images of all God had done since the first encounter at the foot of Mount Sinai up to the arrival at the border of Canaan must have flashed through Moses' mind. From the stick that turned into a snake to the crushing of the invincible giants of Bashan, Moses had seen a continuous demonstration of divine power unparalleled in creation. He appeals to this omnipotent God to overturn his sentence. But it is to no avail; as far as Moses is concerned, his life goal would not be reached; his life ends in failure. We should not underestimate the bitterness of this situation.

It is hard to look at God's refusal to Moses, and not to see a parallel with Paul's experience in, what he called "a thorn in the flesh." The Lord said to Moses: "That is enough, do not speak to me anymore about this matter." Paul says: "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me," and then reports God's answer to him as: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."⁶⁶ It is obvious that, although there is in both cases a refusal of the request, there is also a difference between the two that can only be explained in terms of Old and New Testament dispensations. Moses lived with the image of spiritual realities; Paul knew that the invisible was more important than the visible. He could say therefore: "We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."⁶⁷ Paul also knew that human failures are God's greatest victories, as is exemplified in Christ's death on the cross. Moses had not reached this understanding yet. He thought he would die prematurely. That is the reason God gave him this vision from the top of Mount Pisgah. On the top of that mountain he must have seen more than human eyes could observe. God gave him there a view of the eternal which is invisible to the human senses.

Moses' ascent of Mount Pisgah is mentioned three times by Moses. God to Moses first announced it in Numbers;⁶⁸ he repeats it in this address to the nation, and finally we read the actual account of it in the end of Deuteronomy.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ II Cor. 12:8,9

⁶⁷ II Cor. 4:18

⁶⁸ See Num. 27:12-14

⁶⁹ See Deut. 34:1-4

At this point Moses will not have understood that he received the best deal, and that Joshua, who had to lead the nation into Canaan, taking Moses' place, would face an endless string of hard and difficult battles, while Moses entered into the victory. He was going to see God's face, which he could not have seen before and live.⁷⁰ He was entering before the throne of God and of the Lamb, where he would be among the servants who serve God. John says about them in Revelation: "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."⁷¹ Joshua still had a long road ahead of him before he would reach the point Moses reached here. He needed all the encouragement Moses could give him.

E. Change of Leadership 3:21-29

Moses felt that he was the one who needed to be encouraged, but God tells him to encourage Joshua. Healing of depressive moods is often found in the service we do for others. There is nothing as uplifting as the lifting up of other people. The immediate result is that our eyes are taken off our own problems. When the prophet Elijah went into a deep depression after his victorious performance on Mount Carmel, God gave him, first of all nourishment and adequate rest, and then the charge: "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet."⁷² This commission actually reached beyond the scope of Elijah's own life, but it jolted him out of his despondency.

The chapter ends with the phrase: "So we stayed in the valley near Beth Peor." We get the impression that Israel had moved on from that site, when Moses gave his address. The valley of Beth Peor was not a place that would have lifted anybody's spirits. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* remarks on this: "This was a city in the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites, and as beyth ... signifies a house, the place probably had its name from a temple of the god Peor who was worshipped there. Peor was nearly the same among the Moabites that Priapus was among the Romans - the obscene god of an obscene people." To be surrounded by pornography would be enough to let anybody's spirit down.

CHAPTER FOUR

F. Summary of the Covenant 4:1-43

Most of this chapter is of an introductory nature, like the preceding ones. Moses will not come to the actual Ten Commandments until the next chapter. The main thrust of this chapter seems to be to instill in the hearts of the Israelites the right attitude towards the law of God.

The Word of God is the basis for life and victory. "Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land ..." In verses 10-12 Moses does refer to the visible manifestation of God's presence, but this was not to be the foundation upon which their future was built. At the basis of all is the Word of God. Two words are used for the Word of God in the opening verse: *hachuqiyim*, which is derived from *choq*, meaning, according to *Strongs Definitions*, "an enactment; hence, an appointment, often translated in the KJV with: "commandment," or "decree," and *hamishpaaTiym*, coming from *mishpat*, meaning: "a verdict (favorable or unfavorable) pronounced judicially, especially a sentence or formal decree."

The Word of God has to be obeyed, because it commands us, and it pronounces judgment over us. This is our salvation. If we allow ourselves to be judged by the Word of God, we will not stand before the judgment seat. The Apostle Paul says: "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world."⁷³ And the writer to the Hebrews presents to us the Word of God as a sword that brings about healing in its penetrating ministry. He says: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."⁷⁴ The Word of God keeps us from self-deception.

This teaches us an important lesson regarding the importance of the written word. It is a known fact that orally transmitted stories tend to change, sometimes beyond recognition. An old Chinese proverb says: "the weakest

⁷⁰ See Ex. 33:20

⁷¹ Rev. 22:3,4

⁷² I Kings 19:15,16

⁷³ I Cor. 11:31,32

⁷⁴ Heb. 4:12,13

ink is stronger than the strongest memory.” We need the written word in order to correct our course through life; it is our compass and direction finder. It corrects and supersedes even our spiritual experiences. In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus emphasizes, among other points, the importance of the written Word of God. At one point the rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to his father’s house. He says: “ I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”⁷⁵

The fact that, in Jesus’ days, observance of the Word of God had fossilized into a meaningless following of the rules, does not mean that adherence to the law is not of vital importance for life and victory. When Paul said that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,”⁷⁶ he did not mean to say that the Word is not formed by the letter, or that the letter of the law has no importance. He argued against a mentality that had reduced the living Word of God to the stone upon which it had originally been engraved.

In the verses 3-6 Moses shows the importance of our relationship to the Word of God in our testimony to the spirit world, and to the human world. In the incident of Baal Peor, demonic forces had tried to destroy Israel. The Moabite women had seduced a number of Israelite men to participate in religious celebrations that involved idolatry, and sexual immorality. Those men, who had pledged obedience to the law of God, had refused to be drawn into this, thus saving their lives. The incident referred to is described in Numbers.⁷⁷ Those who did not get involved became a testimony to the demons that were behind the plot, indicating that, if the Word of God is written in a man’s heart, it forms a shield of protection around him. Satan found this out himself, when Jesus defeated him with three simple quotations from Scripture: “It is written.”⁷⁸ Those who use the Word of God effectively win victory over the devil. As the Apostle Paul says: “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”⁷⁹

Israel’s obedience to the God’s commandments also set them apart from all the other nations of the world, and would make them a testimony to others. The fact that Israel failed, in most instances, to emit this light, does in no way violate the principle. God intended for Israel to be “a kingdom of priests.” He had said to them at Mount Sinai: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”⁸⁰ The key to this was obedience to the law of God. God’s covenant with Israel was intended to be the means of salvation for the world. Israel’s election was never intended to imply the damnation of all the other nations. God wanted all the peoples of the earth to be drawn to Himself by means of the holy lifestyle of Israel. Obedience would bring about wisdom, and wisdom would draw others. With the exception of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon’s court, this goal was never fully achieved.⁸¹ When Israel had reached the summit of its foolishness, God sent Jesus who superseded Solomon’s wisdom as omniscience supersedes mere knowledge. Using the story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba as an example, Jesus reproached the people of His time, that they themselves did not recognize wisdom when they saw it. We read in Matthew’s Gospel: “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.”⁸²

In many respects, the Ten Commandments were not given exclusively to Israel, since they must have been common knowledge, at least in part, to the rest of the world. We conclude this from discoveries made among some primitive tribes. The Me⁸³ tribe of Irian Jaya, Indonesia had a moral code, which corresponds to the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth commandment. This code can probably be traced back to the days of Noah, when it must have been generally known by all people living at that time. The fact that these laws were pre-existing before the giving of the Ten Commandments does not make them less a part of God’s revelation.

The tragedy of mankind is not the lack of knowledge, but the lack of obedience to what was known. When the Apostle Paul writes: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For

⁷⁵ Luke 16:27-31

⁷⁶ II Cor. 3:6

⁷⁷ See Num. 25:1-9

⁷⁸ See Matt. 4:4, 7, 10

⁷⁹ Eph. 6:17

⁸⁰ Ex. 19:5,6

⁸¹ See I Kings 10:1-10

⁸² Matt. 12:42

⁸³ Also known as Kapauku, or Ekagi

although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools,”⁸⁴ he was not only referring to, what is generally believed to be God’s revelation in nature, but also to the knowledge of truth people possessed.

Even Israel’s obedience in part to the law of God produced dramatic results for them as a nation. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes about the phrase: “This is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations,” “Moses predicted that the faithful observance of the laws given them would raise their national character for intelligence and wisdom: and in point of fact it did do so; because although the pagan world generally ridiculed the Hebrews for what they considered a foolish and absurd exclusiveness, some of the most eminent philosophers expressed the highest admiration of the fundamental principle in the Jewish religion-- the unity of God; and their legislators borrowed some laws from the constitution of the Hebrews.” Even the pagan nations would recognize that Israel’s outstanding average IQ, which is probably still the highest in the world, was somehow connected to the presence of God among them. When, during one of the wars between Israel and the Philistines, for instance, the ark was taken to the battlefield, the Philistine army recognized the supremacy of the God of Israel, and decided to double their effort of war.⁸⁵ And no other nation has produced so many top scientists, artists, not to mention financial wizards, than the Jewish race.

The most outstanding feature of Israel, however, is its monotheism. In the days of Abraham, we see that there were still pockets of worship of the true and only God left. But the knowledge of truth, which must have been a common good of the people living after the flood, eroded rapidly to the point where nothing was left of it among the nations of Canaan when Israel left Egypt. Israel’s monotheism was not a evolutionary process that took centuries to develop, as some theologians want us to believe; it was a revival of what had been common knowledge a millennium earlier. God wanted Israel to be a beacon of truth and light in this world to make the nations understand what their ancestors had possessed, and what they had lost over the centuries.

There is a direct correlation between the gods or God we serve, and the laws we obey. The law of God is an expression of His character. God’s laws are just, because God is righteous. Idols are manmade gods, which means that the idol worshipper makes up his own rules. And since idols are backed up by demons, those laws have no relationship with God’s righteousness. When a person worships God, he obeys laws that are higher than himself. An idol worshipper bows to that which is lower than he is, and adheres to laws that are even less than the dictates of his own conscience. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes Keil, by saying: “True right has its roots in God; and with the obscuration of the knowledge of God, law and right, with their divinely established foundations, are also shaken and obscured.”

The NIV renders vs. 7 with: “What other nation is so great as to have *their gods* near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?” The KJV reads: “For what nation is there so great, who hath *God* so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for?” The problem in the diversity of translations is that the Hebrew word *Elohiym* can be differently translated as God, gods, or even angels. The essence of God’s election of Israel was not that God wanted to impart Himself to Israel but not to the other nations of the world, but that He wanted to reveal Himself to the other nations through Israel. This, on the one hand elevated Israel above the other nations, but on the other hand, it made Israel the servant of the rest of the world. They were to be the stewards of God’s revelation on earth. If, for example, the queen of England would decide to spend the night in my home, it would mark that place, and me in history forever. How much more would the presence of the Lord elevate a nation! But God not only loved Israel, He loved the world.

The presence of God had been an observable reality that was verifiable by the senses. The cloud and the column of fire had been above the tabernacle, and God had vowed to be present above the cover of the ark.⁸⁶ But in this verse, God’s presence is specifically linked to prayer. “The LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to Him.” The last clause gives even greater depth to the concept of God’s presence. Not only was God among them, but He was accessible to them, and His presence was evinced in prayer, that is, by communion. What set Israel apart from the rest of the world is that they could talk to God, and He listened. It does make a difference in life if we have a hotline to heaven! As the Apostle Paul said: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?”⁸⁷

In these verses, Moses wants the people to understand who they are, in the light of God’s revelation of Himself, and what their place is in history. The search for man’s identity is one of the greatest tasks each individual

⁸⁴ Rom. 1:20-22

⁸⁵ See I Sam. 4:5-9

⁸⁶ See Ex. 25:22

⁸⁷ Rom. 8:31

has in this world. Many people pass through life without ever even coming to the point of asking the right questions. The questions: “Who am I? Where do I come from, and where do I go?” are all answered if we come to ask the question of God: “Who are you?” We will never discover our own identity without searching for God’s. The Apostle Paul defined this quest in a very clear way in his address to the Greek philosophers, when he said: “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”⁸⁸

What the logo says is true: “Jesus is the answer!” but someone very astutely asked: “What is the question?” Asking the right questions, as the Bible proves, is a life changing experience. Moses asked God, and he received the answer: “I AM WHO I AM.”⁸⁹ After this, Moses was never the same. And when Saul of Tarsus asked Jesus: “Who are you, Lord?”⁹⁰ he became Paul, the Apostle.

One of the amazing features of Moses’ address here is that he speaks as if the whole generation of those who hear him were present at Mount Sinai when God first revealed Himself. But the majority would not even have been born yet. We have seen before that *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* suggests that the contents of the book of Deuteronomy may have been “spoken twice,” meaning that what we read in these chapters could be a compilation of two different speeches which Moses gave at two different occasions. If we affirm the fact that what we read is the text of only one address, then the implication seems to be that the Word of God links this generation to events that they never witnessed themselves. Obedience to the law erases the limitations of time and space, so that the facts of the history of salvation become relevant for us. This is probably nowhere better expressed than in the beautiful Negro Spiritual: “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Those, to whose heart the blood of Calvary is applied, can truly say, “yes” to this question. Moses knew that his congregation for the greater part had not been eyewitnesses at Horeb, but he wants them to understand that what happened there is the foundation of their lives. Without making God’s revelation of Himself on Mount Sinai a personal experience, there would be no victorious entrance into Canaan.

The keywords in these verses are “do not forget” and “remember.” God’s revelation had come to their fathers via their ears. They had not seen any form or shape of God. To the Apostle Paul, this is the key to faith. In his epistle to the Romans he writes: “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”⁹¹ So it was with the Israelites in Moses’ days; the way God’s revelation came to them was meant to induce faith in God. On the basis of the Word of God, they could put their trust in Him for what lay ahead, since they had proof that God had shown Himself trustworthy in the past.

Visible experiences cannot be transferred from generation to generation, but the written Word can. The children of these people could just as well participate in the experience as their parents and grandparents, because of the Word that had documented the facts. We can still be there, at the place where they crucified our Lord. The Word is the key to victory.

It is also the protection against the idolatry that was rampant in the place of which they were going to take possession. In a way the idol images were harmless, being merely objects of wood, metal, and stone. But the confusion these statues could cause would be lethal. The problem at Sinai, when the people had made the Golden Calf, had not been the erection of an icon, but the fact that they confused the image of a calf with the God who had led them out of Egypt. “They said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.’”⁹²

Satan has sly ways to divert our attentions from the reality of God’s revelation. The first statutes he introduces are not representations of idols or evil deities; they are visual aids which are supposed to help people fix their attention upon God. What he tried to do unsuccessfully at Sinai, he did with great success after Solomon’s kingdom was split up in the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel. When Jeroboam became the first king of the Northern kingdom of Israel, he was afraid that the kingdom would eventually revert back to the house of David, because the temple was situated in Jerusalem, in the kingdom of Judah. So we read: “After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, ‘It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’”⁹³ He did not dive headlong into idolatry; he only detached the worship of God from

⁸⁸ Acts 17:26-28

⁸⁹ Ex. 3:14

⁹⁰ See Acts 9:4-6

⁹¹ Rom. 10:17

⁹² Ex. 32:4 (NAS)

⁹³ I Kings 12:28

the place of God's revelation. Once the connection between religion and revelation is gone, the door is open for all kinds of devilish influences.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on the phrase: "Lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, ..." the following: "The things are here specified of which God prohibited any image or representation to be made for the purposes of worship; and, from the variety of details entered into, an idea may be formed of the extensive prevalence of idolatry in that age. In whatever way idolatry originated, whether from an intention to worship the true God through those things which seemed to afford the strongest evidences of His power, or whether a divine principle was supposed to reside in the things themselves, there was scarcely an element or object of nature but was deified. This was particularly the case with the Canaanites and Egyptians, against whose superstitious practices the caution, no doubt, was chiefly directed. The former worshipped Baal and Astarte, the latter Osiris and Isis, under the figure of a male and a female.

It was in Egypt that animal worship most prevailed; because the natives of that country deified, among beasts, the ox, the heifer, the sheep, and the goat, the dog, the cat, and the ape; among birds, the ibis, the hawk, and the crane; among reptiles, the crocodile, the frog, and the beetle; among fish, all the fish of the Nile. Some of these deities, as Osiris and Isis, were worshipped over all Egypt, the others only in particular provinces; in addition to which they embraced the Zabian superstition, the adoration of the Egyptians, in common with that of many other people, extending to the whole starry host. The very circumstantial details here given of the Canaanite and Egyptian idolatry were owing to the past and prospective familiarity of the Israelites with it in all these forms."

There is a specific warning against astrology, that which the KJV calls the worship of "all the host of heaven." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* says about this: "Star-worship seems to have been an enticement to Israel from the first (<Deut 4:19; 17:3; Amos 5:26>; compare <Acts 7:42-43>), but attained special prominence in the days of the later kings of Judah. The name of Manasseh is particularly connected with it. This king built altars for 'all the host of heaven' in the courts of the temple <2 Kin 21:3,5>. Josiah destroyed these altars, and cleansed the temple from the idolatry by putting down the priests and burning the vessels associated with it <2 Kin 23:4-5,12>." Some of this tendency may have to do with Israel's roots. After all, Abraham came from the land that specialized in astrology, as well as astronomy.

From *Matthew Henry's Commentary* we copy: "The worship of the sun, moon, and stars, is another sort of idolatry which they were cautioned against, v. 19. This was the most ancient species of idolatry and the most plausible, drawing the adoration to those creatures that not only are in a situation above us, but are most sensibly glorious in themselves and most generally serviceable to the world. And the plausibleness of it made it the more dangerous. It is intimated here, First, How strong the temptation is to sense; for the caution is, Lest thou shouldest be driven to worship them by the strong impulse of a vain imagination and the impetuous torrent of the customs of the nations. The heart is supposed to walk after the eye, which, in our corrupt and degenerate state, it is very apt to do. 'When thou seest the sun, moon, and stars, thou wilt so admire their height and brightness, their regular motion and powerful influence, that thou wilt be strongly tempted to give that glory to them which is due to him that made them, and made them what they are to us-- gave them their beings, and made them blessings to the world.' It seems there was need of a great deal of resolution to arm them against this temptation, so weak was their faith in an invisible God and an invisible world. Secondly, Yet he shows how weak the temptation would be to those that would use their reason; for these pretended deities, the sun, moon, and stars, were only blessings which the Lord their God, whom they were obliged to worship, had imparted to all nations. It is absurd to worship them, for they are man's servants, were made and ordained to give light on earth; and shall we serve those that were made to serve us? The sun, in Hebrew is called *shemesh*, which signifies a servant, for it is the minister-general of this visible world, and holds the candle to all mankind; let it not then be worshipped as a lord. Moreover, they are God's gifts; he has imparted them; whatever benefit we have by them, we owe it to him; it is therefore highly injurious to him to give that honor and praise to them which is due to him only."

Astrology seems to open the door to all kinds of demonic influences in the lives of people who pay attention to this so called science. There is no logical ground for the supposition that the correspondence between one's day of birth and the position of certain stars has any bearing upon a persons life and destiny. The constellations are not the personified personal entities the devil wants us to believe they are. They are part of God's creation, the work of His fingers. It is obvious that, our planet being part of a large constellation, other heavenly bodies do exercise a certain influence upon the earth upon which we live. But their influence is physical, and not metaphysical. We do well, therefore, to follow David's example, when he looked up into the night sky and wrote those magnificent words:

"O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise

because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.
 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
 what is man that you are mindful of him,
 the son of man that you care for him?"⁹⁴

If we look at the starry sky with the eyes of a child of God, the enemy and foe of God is silenced. Satan only speaks through the stars to those who do not know God as their Creator and Father.

In the light of this temptation says Moses to the Israelite: "But as for you, the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are." The Israelites could say: "We don't believe in horoscopes. Our lives are led by our Redeemer."

For the second time in his discourse, Moses comes back to the point that God would not allow him to cross the Jordan, and he still does not seem to take full personal responsibility for his failure. As in the beginning of his address⁹⁵, he says: "The LORD was angry with me because of you...." *Adam Clarke* seems to see this as a warning for the people, in the sense of "And if with me, so as to debar me from entering into the Promised Land, can you think to escape if guilty of greater provocations?" There is a world of sadness in the words: "I will die in this land; I will not cross the Jordan; but you are about to cross over and take possession of that good land." Little did Moses realize that in "dying in this land," he got the better deal. He would be among those of whom the writer of the Hebrew epistle would say centuries later: "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."⁹⁶ Moses was not allowed to enter the land, but God was not ashamed to be called his God, for He had prepared a city for him. In spite of the great preaching Moses did at this point, he missed the heavenly perspective for himself.

And great preaching it is: the verses 23-40 contain a powerful argument for the supremacy of God, as a compelling reason to worship and obey Him. Man has the strange ability to adapt himself to his surroundings to the point where he can forget where he came from. People can have personal encounters with God that change their lives, and yet live on as if nothing had ever happened. Even in inter-human relations we can exchange marriage vows, pledging to cherish, and protect, love, and obey "till death do us part," and throw our vows to the wind at a later date, as if they had no meaning whatsoever. God has entered into a relationship with His people that surpasses any human vows or pledges, and we are prone to forget. For those who do, Moses depicts the God who was spurned as "a consuming fire, a jealous God." The writer to the Hebrews uses the same words in his powerful admonition to the Jews who hesitated to accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ, saying: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.'"⁹⁷

This picture is in no way a contradiction to the one that presents God as a loving father. Jesus assured His disciples: "He who loves me will be loved by my Father," and "The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God."⁹⁸

The word "jealous" seems a strange word to us, as used in connection with God. The Hebrew word is *qanna'*. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says about this word: "This adjective occurs 6 times in the Old Testament. The word refers directly to the attributes of God's justice and holiness, as He is the sole object of human worship and does not tolerate man's sin. One appearance is in <Exod. 20:5>: '...for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.'"

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word "jealous" as: "1 : demanding complete devotion 2 : suspicious of a rival or of one believed to enjoy an advantage 3 : VIGILANT." The most common use in everyday language is the second definition: "suspicious of a rival." This places the word in the context of a love relationship, which is also the best way to interpret it in connection with God. When Moses depicts God as being "a consuming

⁹⁴ Ps. 8:1-4

⁹⁵ See 1:37

⁹⁶ Heb. 11:13-16

⁹⁷ Heb. 12:28,29

⁹⁸ John 14:21; 16:27

fire, a jealous God,” he does not speak about the fires of hell, but about the intensity of God’s passion for the ones He loves. Even the strongest amorous feelings that exist between humans are a thin vapor in comparison with the eternal love of God for His creatures. We ought to be completely devoted to God, because He loves us with a consuming passion that cannot be expressed in words. The prophet Jeremiah says: “The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.’”⁹⁹

In the following verses, beginning with vs. 25, Moses’ powerful prophetic message increases in intensity. If in the previous verses, he addressed the present generation as if they had been eyewitnesses of things that happened before they were born, so in these verses he speaks to them as if they will be present at events that will take place long after they have passed on from this world. There is in Moses’ vision something of the way God looks upon the whole human race, as contained in one single person: Adam. As far as He is concerned, we are all included in “the man” He created, even to the point where we are held responsible for the acts of our forefather. After all, we are sinners in Adam. From a theological point of view this is a very important principle, because it also enables God to look at us in Christ, in the same way, bestowing upon us all the benefits of His obedience, and substitutionary death, and resurrection. But this thought is, obviously, outside the scope of Moses’ message here. There is something of the principle here that obedience to the law of God by one generation, may ensure peace and prosperity for a nation for centuries that follow. The history of the United States of America speaks to this, as does the record of some of the smaller countries of Western Europe, where a handful of people literally risked their lives centuries earlier to read the Bible, and honor God, thus ensuring centuries of liberty for their country.

So, what Moses is saying to the people who are about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land, is that their obedience to the Word of God will ensure centuries of blessing for the future generations. And if the posterity had continued to be faithful to God’s laws, there would never have occurred a Diaspora.

Very few people in this world have risen to the level where they could say: “I call heaven and earth as witnesses.” This presupposes a deep and intimate knowledge of the Creator of heaven and earth, as well as a profound understanding of the principles that govern the universe. *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: “Moses speaks in the name of the Lord of all, and so calls to witness the whole created universe to attest to his words; the heavens and earth are witnesses for God, and when evil comes on those who transgress his Law, they declare his righteousness (Ps. 1. 4, 6), in that what has befallen the sinner is only what was announced beforehand as the penalty of transgression.”

Adam Clarke’s Commentary demonstrates that Moses’ words are “a most solemn adjuration, in use among all nations in the world.” And he quotes from Virgil, *Aen*:

“Then the great Trojan prince unsheathed his sword,
And thus, with lifted hands, the gods adored:
Thou land for which I wage this war, and thou
Great source of day, be witness to my vow!--
Almighty king of heaven and queen of air,
Propitious now and reconciled by prayer,--
Ye springs, ye floods, ye various powers who lie
Beneath the deep, or tread the golden sky,--
HEAR and ATTEST!”

God and man being called upon to bear testimony to the truth of what was spoken, that if there was any flaw or insincerity, it might be detected and if any crime, it might not go unpunished. Such appeals to God, for such purposes, show at once both the origin and use of oaths. See the note at <Deut. 6:13>.” Adam Clarke may see here “a most solemn adjuration, in use among all nations in the world,” but Virgil’s quote can hardly be put on the same level with Moses’ calling upon the living God. There is quite a difference between true and counterfeit.

Moses’ prophetic eye looks far into the future. In his last address to the nation at the end of this book, Moses will come back to the same theme of Israel’s expulsion from the Promised Land.¹⁰⁰ It was as if he could see it happen in front of his eyes. Yet, when he says: “You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed,” he is talking about an event that did not happen immediately. The “not long” stands for almost one millennium. This is an indication of God’s grace and forbearance. God did not reject His people at the first sign of infidelity. There was a 120-year period of grace before the flood finally came, and those years were marked by the testimony of Noah, while building the ark.¹⁰¹ And the Apostle Peter says to the scoffers of his time: “But do not forget this one thing, dear

⁹⁹ Jer. 31:3

¹⁰⁰ See ch. 29:18-28

¹⁰¹ Gen. 6:3, 5-7

friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."¹⁰² It wasn't until the sixth century B.C. that the Northern Kingdom was taken into captivity to Assyria, never to return, and about one century later, a full millennium after Moses pronounced these words, that the kingdom of Judah, the house of David was taken to Babylon, from which a remnant returned. To put this in perspective: it would mean that the present day world would be punished on the basis of a prophecy that was pronounced in the days before the Middle Ages began.

The reference to the idolatry is rather concise, but sufficiently vivid. God will finally abandon those who abandon Him, and allow them to debase themselves to the point where they will worship things that are lower than they are: "man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell." Later prophets will pick up this theme. Isaiah gives a most biting sarcastic description of the stupidity of idolatry. "The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.' From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, 'Save me; you are my god.' They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, 'Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?' He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?' "¹⁰³ The ultimate verdict of Scripture is: "Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them."¹⁰⁴

But this is not the Bible's last word. The eternal mercy of the Lord is expressed in the words: "But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the LORD your God and obey him. For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath."¹⁰⁵ Even in Deuteronomy, among all the severe warnings and threats, God comes through like the father of the Prodigal, of whom we read in Luke's Gospel: But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."¹⁰⁶

In the Bible and in world history Israel has played a major role in all the events that took place. They have been, throughout the ages, the stewards of the records of God's revelation of Himself in this world. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."¹⁰⁷ And, apparently, world history will end with the rehabilitation, and reconciliation of God's chosen race. Because Paul also says: "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.' "¹⁰⁸

In the last part of this magnificent speech, from the verses 32-40, Moses' eloquence reaches cosmic proportions. He goes back to the beginning of time, to the first chapter of Genesis, "from the day God created man on the earth," and he spans out his arms "from one end of the heavens to the other." All this serves to impress upon the Israelites the magnitude of God's revelation to them. God's revelation to Israel is unique, not only in world history, but in the history of the universe. Otherwise the phrase, "from one end of the heavens to the other" would make no sense. The limitations imposed upon us by our horizon make it hard for us to understand the magnitude of God's revelation to us. Moses tried to impress upon this generation that they were eyewitnesses to events that were unparalleled in any setting. If they understood this, they would be protected from the temptations of idolatry that

¹⁰² II Pet. 3:8,9

¹⁰³ Isa. 44:13-20

¹⁰⁴ Ps. 115:8

¹⁰⁵ Deut. 4:29-31

¹⁰⁶ Luke 15:20

¹⁰⁷ Rom. 9:4,5

¹⁰⁸ Rom. 11:25,26

would befall them in Canaan. Nobody in his right mind trades precious jewels for trinkets. And that is what idolatry would amount to for a child of the Almighty God.

Once again, this generation had no personal memory of the things God did in Egypt, or of many of the great manifestations immediately following the exodus, but they had the records that were trustworthy. We, who possess the biblical records of the facts of salvation are, in a way, in the same position as these people; the difference is that God's revelation to us in Christ surpasses everything Israel had ever experienced. As the writer of the Hebrew epistle sums it up: "You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.' The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.' But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."¹⁰⁹ God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ may be less spectacular and sensational, but it is far greater than what Israel had ever encountered. For them everything was outwardly; we have Christ in us, the hope of glory.¹¹⁰

For Israel, the ultimate reason for their obedience to the law was that God gave it to them because He loved them. In Moses' words: "Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them...." And this God has no rivals. He is the only one to whom, ultimately, we will have to give account of our obedience or the lack of it. The proof of God's love for Israel was that He gave them Canaan to live in. For us, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."¹¹¹ Israel was promised victory over enemies that were stronger than they were, and this blessing we share with them, although on a level that is not the same. But we also owe God our complete obedience on the basis of His love for us. Jesus says to us: "If you love me, you will obey what I command."¹¹²

Moses sums up this part of his address by saying: "Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other." Strangely enough, those very same words will come from the mouth of a prostitute, Rahab, who hid the two spies on the roof of her house. She said: "When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."¹¹³ Those words contain more profound truth than appears on the surface. They find their ultimate fulfillment in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."¹¹⁴ Even before the time that Immanuel literally meant "God with us," the power of the omnipotent God, whose rule is incontestable in heaven, demonstrated His power on earth. It is this line that is drawn from heaven to earth which makes these words so powerful. A few days later Moses would say: "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."¹¹⁵ It is the power that rules heaven which surrounds us while we are living on this planet. Jesus said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."¹¹⁶ This is the assurance of victory, whether it be the conquest of Canaan, or the mandate to preach the Gospel in all the world.

The Pulpit Commentary says about this 40th verse: "The sum of this whole exhortation is (1) to acknowledge and lay to heart that God is the alone God of the universe, in heaven and on earth; hence (2) to be obedient to his laws; and so (3) to have, as a recompense, a happy continuance in the beloved land."

There are two interesting thoughts in the concluding phrase of this part of Moses' address: "and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time." I shall begin with the last part, the clause "for all time." The Hebrew uses a combination of two words in *hayaamiym kaal-*, which is derived from the words *yowm* and *kol*, which according to *Strongs Definitions* mean "from sunrise to sunset, or from one sunset to the next, or figurative a space of time defined by an associated term," and "the whole; hence, all, any or every." So the translation "for all time" is quite appropriate. Yet, it is obvious that, since this world will eventually come to an end, the dwelling of Israel in Canaan is a picture of more than the occupation of a physical territory on earth.

¹⁰⁹ Heb. 12:18-24

¹¹⁰ See Col. 1:27^b

¹¹¹ Rom. 5:8

¹¹² John 14:15

¹¹³ Josh. 2:11

¹¹⁴ John 1:14

¹¹⁵ Deut. 33:27

¹¹⁶ Matt. 28:18

The second thought is expressed in the words “that you may live long in the land.” The words are spoken in connection with obedience to God. There is one other instance in which the same phrase is used in connection with the honoring of parents. The fifth of the Ten commandments reads: “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.”¹¹⁷ The Apostle Paul quotes this commandment in his Ephesian epistle, where he says: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’-- which is the first commandment with a promise-- that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’”¹¹⁸ This links obedience to God to obedience to parents, or to any human authority for that matter. The established principle is that all human relationships go in a vertical and a horizontal direction at the same time. We cannot love God and hate our brother, as the Apostle John says.¹¹⁹ And we do not love God if we do not submit to human authority, with certain exceptions, as when it is a matter of obeying man and disobeying God.¹²⁰

The verses 41-43 deal with the appointment of three cities of refuge beyond Jordan. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: “A short historical notice is here inserted, probably because it was during the interval between the first and second addresses of Moses that he carried into effect the Divine command to appoint cities of refuge for the manslayer (Num. xxxv. 9, etc.; cf. Exod. xxi. 13). This notice, therefore, is here in its proper place in the order of the narrative. That Moses should, just at this stage, have made this appointment was fitting and proper, seeing he had been urging on the people obedience to the Divine statutes and commandments, and had represented their conquest of the territory of Sihon and Og as an earnest of their ultimate possession of the whole land of the Amorites. By appointing these cities, Moses gave an example of obedience to God’s injunction, and at the same time, not only asserted on the part of Israel a right of proprietorship in this trans-Jordanic territory, but assumed as certain that, on the other side of Jordan also, the same right of proprietorship should be possessed and exercised by Israel in the fulfilling of the whole law concerning cities of refuge (cf. ch. xix. 1, etc.). That this section belongs properly to Numb. xxxv., xxxvi., and has been interpolated here by some later hand, is a pure assumption, for which there is no ground.”

It seems that the appointment of the three cities was Moses’ last legislative act. It was also the ruling that confirmed the allotments of the trans-Jordanic territory to tribes of Reuben, half the tribe of Manasseh, and the tribe of Gad. Bezer was specifically set aside for the Reubenites; Ramoth in Gilead, for the Gadites; and Golan in Bashan, for the Manassites. The fact that a provision of grace was made among each of those tribes, not only made it safe for the people to live in those places, but it also confirmed their ownership. All three of these cities were eventually assigned to the Levites as places to live, and as a compensation for the lack of physical inheritance that was withheld from them.

It is generally taken for granted that Moses’ second address to the nation begins in vs. 44. Whether the appointment of the cities of refuge concluded the first address, or opened the second, is debatable. The significance of the act is equally important, regardless of our division of the book. The principle evinced is that the tribes could not take possession of their inheritance without the appointment of the cities of refuge.

Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary gives the following spiritual application to the cities of refuge: “In the New Testament, the cities of refuge apparently became a type, or symbolic illustration, of the salvation that is found in Christ: ‘We... have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us’ <Heb. 6:18>. In other words, when the sinner flees to Christ Jesus for refuge he is safe from the divine Avenger of Blood. The apostle Paul wrote, ‘Having now been justified by his [Christ’s] blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him’ <Rom. 5:9> and ‘There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus’ <Rom. 8:1>. Regardless of his sin, the sinner may find asylum and sanctuary in Christ; all who flee to Him find refuge ‘The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out’ <John 6:37>. The believer is safe forever in the heavenly city of refuge because the great High Priest, Jesus Christ, will never die: ‘He ever lives to make intercession for him’ <Heb. 7:25>.” Our salvation also is closely linked to our inheritance.

Part Two: Moses’ Second Speech - “What God Expects of Israel” (4:44-26:19)

I. The Introduction to the Law of God 4:44-49

¹¹⁷ Ex. 20:12

¹¹⁸ Eph. 6:1-3

¹¹⁹ I John 4:20

¹²⁰ See Acts 4:19

The last six verses of this chapter, obviously, belong to the next chapter. The line between the chapters is drawn quite arbitrarily here. Four different words are used to describe the content of Moses' address: "the law," "the stipulations," "decrees," and "laws." The Hebrew words are: *towrah*, or *torah*, meaning "a precept or statute," *edah*, which means "testimony," *choq*, "an enactment," and *mishpat*, "a verdict." A people's vocabulary demonstrates the emphases that are put on things that are important in their lives and thinking. The Mè tribe in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, for instances, does not have a single word for wood or timbre, but a variety of names for the wood that is derived from different kinds of trees. The riches of the Israelite vocabulary for the single word "law" we have in the English language indicates the important position the law of God occupied in their society.

Matthew Henry's Commentary observes the following about this introduction: "The introduction to another sermon that Moses preached to Israel, which we have in the following chapters. Probably it was preached the next Sabbath day after, when the congregation attended to receive instruction. He had in general exhorted them to obedience in the former chapter; here he comes to repeat the law which they were to observe, for he demands a universal but not an implicit obedience. How can we do our duty if we do not know it? Here therefore he sets the law before them as the rule they were to work by, the way they were to walk in, sets it before them as the glass in which they were to see their natural face, that, looking into this perfect law of liberty, they might continue therein. These are the testimonies, the statutes, and the judgments, the moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws, which had been enacted before, when Israel had newly come out of Egypt, and were now repeated, on this side Jordan, v. 44-46. The place where Moses gave them these laws in charge is here particularly described. (1.) it was over-against Beth-Peor, an idol-temple of the Moabites, which perhaps Moses sometimes looked towards, with a particular caution to them against the infection of that and other such like dangerous places. (2.) it was upon their new conquests, in the very land which they had got out of the hands of Sihon and Og, and were now actually in possession of, v. 47. Their present triumphs herein were a powerful argument for obedience."

CHAPTER FIVE

Part Two: Moses' Second Speech - "What God Expects of Israel" (Continued) (5: 1-26:19)

II. The Explanation of the Ten Commandments 5:1-11:32

A. The Covenant of the Great King 5:1-33

The surprising verse in this introduction to the Ten Commandments is vs. 3: "It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today." Obviously, Moses did not deny the historical fact that the previous generation was present at the foot of Mount Sinai, and heard the voice of God. The same principle, which we observed in the previous chapters, is found here, that God's revelation always applies to the present generation, even though the moment in the history of salvation took place centuries earlier. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" To suppose here that the wording proves that Moses' words were "spoken twice" as *The International Bible Standard Encyclopedia* suggested, would make little sense in this context. *The Pulpit Commentary* approaches the verse from another angle. On the words: Not with our fathers, we read: "Not with our fathers, the patriarchs (cf. ch. iv. 37.) The covenant to which Moses refers is not that made with Abraham, but that made at Sinai, with Israel as a people; and though the individuals who were then present had all perished with the exception of Moses, Joshua, and Caleb, the nation survived, and as it was with the nation as an organic whole that the covenant had been made, it might be with propriety said that it was made with those whom Moses addressed at this time, inasmuch as they constituted the nation." I prefer the first interpretation.

The description of the way in which the people received the Ten Commandments is much more detailed here than it is in Exodus. There we read that the people observed the phenomena of fire, smoke, and the loud sound of the trumpet, and then we read: "And God spoke all these words."¹²¹ Here we read: "At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain." It seems that Moses relayed the words, because although the people heard the sound, they did not understand what was being said. Whether the voice of God was not intelligible to the people, and only Moses understood what was being said, is not clear. It could very well be that fear of the awesomeness of the phenomenon prevented the people to hear what was being said, although they heard the sound of the voice. We find a similar situation, although on a smaller and less spectacular scale, when the Father spoke to the Son on earth. When Jesus called to the Father: "Father, glorify your name!" we read: "Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to

¹²¹ Ex. 20:1

him.”¹²² We get the impression that most of the people only heard the sound, but could not understand what was being said.

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's Commentary believes that “To show you the word of the Lord” does not refer to the Ten Commandments. We read: “Not the Ten Commandments, because they were proclaimed directly by the Divine Speaker Himself, but the statutes and judgments which are repeated in the subsequent portion of this book.”

Most commentators agree that Moses stood between God and the people as a type of our Lord Jesus Christ, the great mediator of God's covenant with man. In Moses' words: “At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD.” Paul confirms this by saying: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all men-- the testimony given in its proper time.”¹²³ Moses, of course, was not a mediator in the sense that he gave himself as a ransom. Jesus was not only a mediator in His sacrifice, but also in the way He declared to us the Word of the Lord. The Bible would have remained a closed book for us, if Jesus had not come and broken the code in which it was written. Jesus' own relationship with the written Word of the Father was unique. It must have dawned on Him, at an early age, that the Old Testament was written about Him. “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come-- it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart,’ ”¹²⁴ must have been at the core of His messianic consciousness. His eagerness to be in His Father's house, asking questions of the teachers of the law, indicates that His youthful preoccupation was with the Scriptures. To the scribes of His time He said: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.”¹²⁵ He defeated Satan with: “It is written.”¹²⁶ That is why He could give the key of the Scriptures to His disciples. We read in Luke's Gospel: “ ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”¹²⁷ After His ascension, this ministry is carried on by the Holy Spirit. On the eve of His crucifixion, He told His disciples: “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.”¹²⁸ In this sense, Moses stood between the LORD and the people to declare to them the word of the LORD, pointing to Him who would come as the incarnation of the Word.

The verses 6-21 repeat almost verbally the Decalogue, as we find it recorded in Exodus.¹²⁹ *The Pulpit Commentary* says on this: “Some differences appear between the statement of the ‘ten words,’ as given here and as given in Exod. xx. It is chiefly in the fourth commandment that these are to be found. It begins here with ‘remember’ for ‘keep;’ reference is made to the command of God as sanctioning the sabbath (ver. 12), which is omitted in Exodus; a fuller description of the animals to be exempted from work on that day is given (ver. 14); the words, “that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou,” are added (ver. 14); and in place of a reference to the resting of God after the creation as the ground of the sabbath institute, as in Exodus, there is here a reference to the deliverance of the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt as a reason why the Lord commanded them to keep the sabbath day (ver. 15). In the fifth commandment there are two additions here – the one of the words, ‘as Jehovah thy God hath commanded thee,’ and the other of the words, ‘that it may go well with thee’ (ver. 16). In the tenth commandment, the first two clauses are transposed, ‘desire’ appears in place of ‘covet’ in relation to ‘wife,’ and ‘field’ is added to the specification of objects (ver. 21). These differences are of little moment. The only one demanding notice is that in the fourth commandment, where different reasons are assigned for the ordinance of the sabbath. The two reasons assigned, however, are perfectly compatible; the one is fundamental and universally applicable, the other is subsidiary and special in its application; the one is a reason why the sabbath was originally instituted and is for all men, the other is a reason why it was specially and formally instituted in Israel and was especially memorable to that people. In a popular address to them it seems fitting that the latter rather than the former

¹²² John 12:28-29

¹²³ I Tim. 2:5,6

¹²⁴ Ps. 40:6-8

¹²⁵ John 5:39

¹²⁶ See Matt. 4:4,7,10

¹²⁷ Luke 24:44,45

¹²⁸ John 16:12-15

¹²⁹ Ex. 20:2-17

should be the one adduced. As a memorial of their deliverance from Egypt, the sabbath was all important to them, for by it they were constantly reminded that 'they were thereby freed from the dominion of the world to be a peculiar possession of Jehovah, and so amid the toil and trouble of the world had part in the holy rest of their God' (Baumgarten). It was also fitting in a recapitulatory address that special emphasis should be laid on the fact that what the Law enunciated was what 'the Lord had commanded.' The addition of 'field' in the tenth commandment is probably due to the fact that now, the occupation and division of the land having begun, the people were about to have what they had not before – each his own property in land. In the tenth commandment, also, there is a difference in the two accounts worthy of notice. In Deuteronomy 'field' is added to the enumeration of objects not to be coveted, and the 'wife' is put first and apart, while in Exodus the 'house' precedes the 'wife' and the latter ranks with the rest. In Deuteronomy also this separation of the wife is emphasized by a change of verb: *'Neither shalt thou desire [chamad] thy neighbor's wife, neither shalt thou covet [‘avah] thy neighbor's house,'* etc.”

The first important point that demands our attention in the discrepancy between the two texts of the Decalogue is the fact that Moses took a certain liberty in quoting the words. Obviously, he was not holding the stone tablets on which the law was written, reading them to the public. The tablets had been put inside the ark.¹³⁰ Moses quoted from memory. For us who hold to the doctrine of verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, there is a disturbing feature in what Moses did here. It is true that both versions of the Ten Commandments complement each other. It is also true that both are the inspired Word of God. In a sense, it was not Moses who altered the text, it was the Holy Spirit. But this conclusion does not alter the problem that Moses did not stick to the words that were written in stone. The real issue goes much deeper than the different meaning of words. After all, words are only vehicles of thought, and those vehicles are not perfect, as the human mind is not perfect. The confusion of the Tower of Babel complicates the issue in that, since that time, each person tends to add his own interpretation to words. The same word does not mean the same thing to different people.

The problem in connection with the fourth commandment is not the use of different words, but the introduction of a new thought. In Exodus, the reason for the Sabbath celebration is given as: “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”¹³¹ In Deuteronomy we read: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” The accent shifts from creation to salvation.

In a way, Moses' liberty in changing the text foreshadows Paul's explanation about the difference between the word in stone and the living word of the Holy Spirit. Paul compares the glory of the ministry of the old covenant with that of a “new covenant-- not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”¹³²

The Sabbath is one of the most difficult issues to define in the whole Bible. Higher Criticism has attacked the subject of the Sabbath as we find it in Scripture, and has tried to pull it to threads. It has been connected to Babylonian celebrations, and it has been attributed to the post-exilic period. All of which, according to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, ought to be taken with “several grams of salt.” The Encyclopaedia comments on these critical efforts with: “The wealth of learning and ingenuity expended in the search for the origin of the Sabbath has up to the present yielded small returns.”

If the Sabbath is first mentioned in the context of the account of creation: “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done,”¹³³ it is to be expected that traces of an observation of the seventh day would be found in the archeological discoveries of ancient nations, such as the Babylonians, and Assyrians. The fact that the observation of the Sabbath is not mentioned in Scripture until the appearance of the manna¹³⁴ does not prove that the Sabbath had not been observed before that time, but rather that it had been common practice among Israel to rest on that day. The keeping of the Sabbath was, obviously, not invented at Mount Sinai.

In the first reading of the Ten Commandments, God reaches back to before the fall, and forward to the end of times, when all of creation will enter into His rest. This is nowhere expressed so beautifully as in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the author says: “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but

¹³⁰ See Ex. 25:16

¹³¹ Ex. 20:11

¹³² II Cor. 3:6

¹³³ Gen. 2:2,3

¹³⁴ See Ex. 16:23

the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, 'So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.' And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.' And again in the passage above he says, 'They shall never enter my rest.' It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.' For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience."¹³⁵

It is also obvious that, after the fall, God Himself did not keep the Sabbath. We gather this from Jesus' words: "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."¹³⁶ In that sense, the mention of the Sabbath command in Exodus is the setting of an ideal; going back to the time before sin entered the world, and reaching forward to the time when sin will be no more. If the Father, in Jesus' words, is working on the Sabbath it is to abolish the effects of sin. This is the feature introduced in the Deuteronomy version of the Sabbath command. Between the first Sabbath that followed creation, and the ultimate Sabbath as a result of atonement, lies the deliverance from bondage. The Sabbath for us is a reminder that God abolished slavery.

The Adam Clarke Commentary remarks on this: "In this and the latter clause of the preceding verse Moses adds another reason why one day in seven should be sanctified, namely, that the servants might rest, and this is urged upon them on the consideration of their having been servants in the land of Egypt. We see therefore that God had three grand purposes in view by appointing a Sabbath. 1. To commemorate the creation. 2. To give a due proportion of rest to man and beast. When in Egypt they had no rest; their cruel task-masters caused them to labour without intermission; now God had given rest, and as he had showed them mercy he teaches them to show mercy to their servants: Remember that thou wast a servant. 3. To afford peculiar spiritual advantages to the soul, that it might be kept in remembrance of the rest which remains at the right hand of God."

The implication of the Sabbath command version of Deuteronomy is clearly that salvation changes human relationships. The Israelites were ordered to allow their slaves to rest on the Sabbath. "So that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do." If we call the Exodus version a vertical relationship, because the keeping of the Sabbath is linked with God's keeping of the Sabbath, in the Deuteronomy version we see a horizontal one. The subject of slavery is not really touched upon in these verses. There is only a hint that the Sabbath somehow lifts the curse sin placed upon man and upon the earth. God had said to Adam, immediately after the fall: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."¹³⁷ The Sabbath is not a day of painful toil but of rest. And since the curse links toil, sweat, death, and dust together, there is in the Sabbath also a ring of life and resurrection. That is the reason why the Apostle Paul, in the New Testament, does not treat the Sabbath as a day, but as a condition. He wrote to the Colossians: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. . . . Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."¹³⁸

There remains the problem of the man who was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day, who was put to death because of breaking the Sabbath.¹³⁹ The incident seems to make a curse out of the Sabbath instead of the lifting of a curse. In our commentary on Numbers, we wrote about this incident: "Gathering wood on the Sabbath seems a trivial offence to us; certainly nothing that would warrant the death penalty. But then, eating a fruit from a tree seems an even lesser offence, and that caused death to enter the whole of creation. The magnitude of the act is in the defiance of it. The man who did this despised God's creation, which was commemorated in the Sabbath, and he belittled his deliverance from the slavery in Egypt. He demonstrated in a small and puny way that God's creation,

¹³⁵ Heb. 4:1-11

¹³⁶ John 5:17

¹³⁷ Gen. 3:17-19

¹³⁸ Col. 2:16,17; 3:1-4

¹³⁹ See Num. 15:32-36

and, to use the New Testament concept, God's new creation in Christ were of no consequence to him. By rejecting the Sabbath he withdrew from the protection God had provided for Israel in the blood of the Passover lamb, and consequently, he bore the responsibility for his sin."

The person who broke the Sabbath in the Old Testament rejected God's plan of salvation for his life. The writer to the Hebrews says about those people, in New Testament terms: "They are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace," and "Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?"¹⁴⁰

For the remainder of the differences in the text of the Ten Commandments, we can say that the changes or additions of some words are too trivial to speak of any discrepancy.

More clearly than in the Exodus' record, the reaction of the people to the giving of the Ten Commandments, directly by the voice of God Himself, is retold here. Once again, we have to remind ourselves that the people addressed here were not the ones who heard the voice of God personally. Forty years had passed, and a whole generation had gone by. Even if some of them may have been alive when God descended upon Mount Sinai, they may have been too young to remember, or to understand. So it is for their benefit that Moses goes over the details of the reaction their fathers had, when they heard the voice of God speaking to them.

In his defense before the Sanhedrin, Stephen expressed the concept, held by the rabbis of his time, that the voice of God was, in reality, the voice of an angel. We read in Acts: "He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us."¹⁴¹ *The Adam Clarke Commentary* uses the word "archangel" here, indicating that the One who spoke was "the Angel of the Lord," meaning Jesus in His pre-incarnate existence.

The actual location of the giving of the law has been widely debated over the centuries. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* gives several of the theories, among which are the following: "Many Jewish scholars identify Mt. Sinai with volcanic Mt. Seir in southern Palestine, a region near enough to Midian for Moses to have led his flocks <Exo. 3:1>. George Ernest Wright says...: 'A number of scholars today hold that Mount Sinai is to be located in Midian SE of Edom. The chief evidence for this view is a belief that <Exodus 19> reflects volcanic activity and that the sacred mountain must be located in a volcanic region.' But Wright shows that in a theophany volcanic phenomena are not necessary. Wright thus summarizes the latest evidence: 'Consequently, we are left with the traditional location of Mount Sinai as still the most probable.' " It is undeniable, of course, as mentioned above "that in a theophany volcanic phenomena are not necessary," the fact remains that God's revelation of Himself on top of Mount Sinai showed all the symptoms of a volcanic eruption. If we imagine the several million people of Israel standing at the foot of an active volcano that is in the process of erupting, we can understand their fear and trembling. Even modern atheists would be easily persuaded under such circumstances.

Added to the awesome display of natural phenomena, there must have been the realization of a supernatural presence. The combination of these two elements must have been more than overwhelming. In spite of this sensual experience, however, the overwhelming majority of those who saw God's glory, and heard His voice, never made it into the holy land; they died on the way because of their disobedience.

Seeing is not synonymous with believing. Peter says: "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."¹⁴² He speaks about his personal experience, as eyewitness of Jesus' glory but then, immediately, links this testimony to the written words of the prophets, and admonishes us to pay attention to the written word of the Scriptures.

The Israelites Moses addressed were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Their victory would depend, not upon what they had seen, but upon their relationship to the Word of God. Obedience to the written Word is the key to victory. The Bible does not exclude sensual experiences, but the main emphasis is upon the written Word. Abraham said to the rich man in hell: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be

¹⁴⁰ Heb. 6:6;10:28,29

¹⁴¹ Acts 7:38

¹⁴² II Pet. 1:16-19

convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”¹⁴³ And Jesus pronounces His blessing on “those who have not seen and yet have believed.”¹⁴⁴ Faith and obedience are inseparably linked together. Faith without works is dead, says James.¹⁴⁵

Moses reduces the problem of entering the land by means of obedience to the simple image of following an existing path. He says: “Do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in ... the way.” Israel was not required to invent their own roads; God had already traced the path for them. All they had to do was follow. The Apostle Paul says this about the Christian life: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”¹⁴⁶

Everything depends upon the condition of the human heart. When sin entered the world, it was not merely a matter of a piece of fruit entering the human body, but of evil entering the human heart. Jeremiah said: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? ‘I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.’”¹⁴⁷ Sin left man with an incurable heart disease. The long record of human failure in the Old Testament can all be attributed to the condition of the human heart. Jesus said: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”¹⁴⁸ Man has to be born again by the Holy Spirit; he has to receive a new heart. God promised this operation in Ezekiel’s prophecy: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.”¹⁴⁹ God, wistfully, looked forward to that time: “Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!” This is what the Apostle Paul speaks about when he writes: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

Once we have received an undivided heart and a new spirit, it is easy to walk in the way and not to turn aside. The primitive tribes people of Irian Jaya who have accepted the Gospel express it beautifully when they say that they want to “walk in the Jesus’ way.”

CHAPTER SIX

Part Two: Moses’ Second Speech - “What God Expects of Israel” (continued) (4:44-26:19)

II. The Explanation of the Ten Commandments (continued) 5:1-11:32

B. The Command to Teach the Law 6:1-25

There has been some discussion among scholars as to whether the first two verses of this chapter belong to the preceding chapter or to this one. The most logical conclusion seems to be that the words form a link between the two chapters.

Moses uses three different words for the law in the opening verse of this chapter: *mitsvah*, meaning “command,” *choq*, which can be translated with “ordinance,” and *mishpat*, rendered with “verdict.” *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: “These are the commandments. In the Hebrew it is, *This is the commandment*, i.e., the sum and substance of the Divine enactment; equivalent to ‘the Law’ (ch. iv. 44). ‘The statutes and judgments’ (rights) are in apposition to ‘the commandment,’ and explain it.”

The fear of the Lord, as elsewhere in Scripture has no relationship with fright or alarm with which we usually associate it. The Hebrew word *yare’* is defined by Strongs as: “to fear; morally, to revere.”

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia makes some interesting remarks about godly fear: “ ‘Fear’ is certainly a prominent element in Old Testament religion; the ‘fear of God’ or of Yahweh, ‘the fear of the Lord,’ is indeed synonymous with religion itself ... (Eccl 12:13>, ‘the whole duty of man,’ the Revised Version, margin ‘the duty of all men’). But although the element of dread, or of ‘fear’ in its lower sense, is not always absent and is sometimes prominent in the earlier stages especially, though not exclusively ... it is more the feeling of reverent

¹⁴³ Luke 16:31

¹⁴⁴ John 20:29

¹⁴⁵ James 2:17

¹⁴⁶ Eph. 2:10

¹⁴⁷ Jer. 17:9,10

¹⁴⁸ Matt. 15:19

¹⁴⁹ Ezek. 11:19

regard for their God, tempered with awe and fear of the punishment of disobedience. As such it is a sentiment commanded and to be cherished toward Yahweh ... It is an essential element in the worship and service of Yahweh...; it is a Divine qualification of the Messiah <Isa 11:2-3>. This ‘fear of Yahweh’ is manifested in keeping God’s commandments, walking in His ways, doing His will, avoiding sin, etc.”

The Old Testament promise as a reward of obedience was prosperity, both in the material as well as in the spiritual realm. It is obvious that physical well-being, and material prosperity were meant to be images of a spiritual reality, although this may not always have been understood that way by the nation of Israel. If Canaan was represented as “a land flowing with milk and honey,” the people took this to mean that life would be free of sickness and material want. In spite of what the “Green Power Theology” may preach, this is not the overall message of the Bible, and certainly not of the New Testament Gospel. Paul and Barnabas went around the young churches, “strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. ‘We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,’ they said.”¹⁵⁰ Although Jesus gives us assurances about provision for our basic needs in life, (“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well),¹⁵¹ the real blessings that are promised to us are spiritual. The Apostle Paul says: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”¹⁵²

The center of this chapter is vs. 4, what the Jews call “The Shema” : “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* writes about “The Shema:” (hear thou)-- the Jewish confession of faith which begins, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!’ <Deut. 6:4>. The complete Shema is found in three passages from the Old Testament: <Numbers 15:37-41; Deuteronomy 6:4-9> and <Deuteronomy 11:13-21>.

The first of these passages stresses the unity of God and the importance of loving Him and valuing His commands. The second passage promises blessing or punishment according to a person’s obedience of God’s will. The third passage commands that a fringe be worn on the edge of one’s garments as a continual reminder of God’s laws. This collection of verses makes up one of the most ancient features of worship among the Jewish people. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus quoted from the Shema during a dispute with the scribes <Mark 12:28-30>.”

The Pulpit Commentary says about the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. This is an affirmation not so much of the *monety* as of the *unity* and *simplicity* of Jehovah, the alone God. Though Elohim (pl.), he is one. The speaker does not say, ‘Jehovah is alone God,’ but ‘Jehovah our Elohim is one Jehovah. ...’ Among the heathen there were many Baals and many Jupiters; and it was believed that the deity might be divided and communicated to many. But the God of Israel, Jehovah, is one, indivisible and incommunicable. He is the Absolute and the Infinite One, who alone is to be worshipped, on whom all depend, and to whose command all must yield (cf. Zech. xiv. 9). Not only to polytheism, but to pantheism, and to the conception of a localized or national deity, is this declaration of the unity of Jehovah opposed. With these words the Jews begin their daily liturgy, morning and evening; the sentence expresses the essence of their religious belief; and so familiar is it to their thought and speech that, it is said, they were often, during the persecution in Spain, betrayed to their enemies by the involuntary utterance of it.”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary differs in opinion with *The Pulpit Commentary* by saying: “[Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord]-- or, as the words may perhaps be better translated, ‘Hear, O Israel: Yahweh ... is our God (‘Elohiym ..., plural), Yahweh alone.’ ” And then the Septuagint is quoted which gives that rendering of the verse.

From *The Adam Clarke Commentary*, we copy: “On this verse the Jews lay great stress; it is one of the four passages which they write on their phylacteries, and they write the last letter in the first and last words very large, for the purpose of exciting attention to the weighty truth it contains.”

Vs. 5 of this chapter is the core of the whole message of the Bible: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Jesus quotes these words, in His discussions with the scribes, and He adds: “This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”¹⁵³ The essence of all God’s commandments is love.

¹⁵⁰ Acts 14:22

¹⁵¹ Matt. 6:31-33

¹⁵² Eph. 1:3

¹⁵³ Matt. 22:38-40

This in itself is a paradox, because love cannot be legislated; it is closely linked to our freedom of choice. We love a person because we choose to do so. This seems to have been at the heart of what happened to the first human beings in paradise. Adam chose to accept his Eve as his wife, because she was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.¹⁵⁴ Then there was the matter of the two trees. We read: “In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,”¹⁵⁵ which clearly represents an opportunity for choice. God warned man not to eat from the tree of knowledge, because death would be the result, but there was no prohibition against eating from the tree of life. There is even a strong suggestion that God wanted man to eat from that tree, which, evidently, he never did. We are not told what would have happened, had Adam and Eve eaten from the tree of life first. After man fell into sin, God removed him from the tree of life, saying: “He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.”¹⁵⁶ It seems that eating from that tree would have meant an act of surrender to God’s love, and act Adam, and Eve, evidently, never made. If Adam and Eve had eaten from the tree of life, they would, probably, have been immune to the temptation by the serpent.

It is because of the presence of sin that God made love an act of obedience instead of choice. Obedience to this commandment is our only hope of salvation. Refusal to love God means staying under the wrath of God, which means death. Loving God means life. It is only possible for us to love God, if we accept Jesus as our Savior. In the words of John the Baptist: “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”¹⁵⁷ And the Apostle John writes: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . . We love because he first loved us.”¹⁵⁸ If we love God, we simply react to God’s love for us; we reciprocate His love.

So, love means obedience to a command, but love is also the key to obedience; it is a circle. Jesus says: “If you love me, you will obey what I command.”¹⁵⁹ Obedience generates love, and love promotes obedience. It is obvious that, since love is a matter of the heart, we cannot love God without receiving a new heart, that is without regeneration. God commands us to love Him, and love is a matter of choice, but sin has robbed us of our freedom to choose. This is also a circle, but a vicious one. Our only hope is if God pulls us out of our circle of death, and transposes us into His circle of life. This He does for our asking. His promise to us is: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”¹⁶⁰

We cannot live without love, that is without receiving it, and without giving it. Yet, by nature we are not disposed to receive love, because of sin; by the same sin we are unable to give love also. The whole of Old Testament history proves that man is unable to “love the LORD [his] God with all [his] heart and with all [his] soul and with all [his] strength.” Unless, in Augustine’s words, God gives us what He demands of us, we are hopelessly lost.

On a deeper level, however, love *is* an act of obedience. The Apostle John says: “God is love.”¹⁶¹ It would be impossible for God not to love. In loving, God obeys His own character. John, furthermore says: “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.”¹⁶² Love and obedience are identical twins: “This is love for God: to obey his commands.”¹⁶³

The Hebrew word *’ahab* has a wide variety of meanings. *Strongs Definitions* defines it with “to have affection for (sexually or otherwise).” For those who are familiar with the Greek tendency to distinguish among at least four different kinds of love, it may come as a shock that the Hebrew knows only one word. The Hebrew covers all the various meanings of love: from sexual love, to parental love, affection between friends, loyalty of a subject to his master, and love for God. It is not until the New Testament, that the word *agape* became specifically designated for the love of God. In a way the Hebrew is right in suggesting that there is only one love, even if it is expressed differently in the different aspects of our human life. Putting love in different and separate categories, may be helpful to our understanding, but it is not what God originally meant love to be. God’s love embraces every aspect of love from sexual attraction to the love that sacrifices its own life.

¹⁵⁴ See Gen. 2:23

¹⁵⁵ Gen. 2:9

¹⁵⁶ Gen. 3:22

¹⁵⁷ John 3:36 (NKJ)

¹⁵⁸ I John 4:10,19

¹⁵⁹ John 14:15

¹⁶⁰ Ezek. 36:26,27

¹⁶¹ I John 4:8

¹⁶² I John 4:16

¹⁶³ I John 5:3

On the other hand, the New Testament use of the word *agape* has helped us to understand God's love for us in a way we could not have understood otherwise. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says about the Greek word *agape*: "[Agape is] the characteristic word of Christianity, and since the Spirit of revelation has used it to express ideas previously unknown, inquiry into its use, whether in Greek literature or in the Septuagint, throws but little light upon its distinctive meaning in the NT. cf. however, <Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5>. Agape and agapao are used in the NT (a) to describe the attitude of God toward His Son, <John 17:26>; the human race, generally, <John 3:16; Rom. 5:8>, and to such as believe on the Lord Jesus Christ particularly <John 14:21>; (b) to convey His will to His children concerning their attitude one toward another, <John 13:34>, and toward all men, <1 Thes. 3:12; 1 Cor. 16:14; 2 Pet. 1:7>; (c) to express the essential nature of God, <1 John 4:8>. Love can be known only from the actions it prompts. God's love is seen in the gift of His Son, <1 John 4:9,10>. But obviously this is not the love of complacency, or affection, that is, it was not drawn out by any excellency in its objects, <Rom. 5:8>. It was an exercise of the divine will in deliberate choice, made without assignable cause save that which lies in the nature of God Himself, Cf. <Deut. 7:7,8>."

The Adam Clarke Commentary says some beautiful things about this verse, in connection with Jesus' quote of it in Matt. 22:37. We copy: "Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. ... This is a subject of the greatest importance, and should be well understood, as our Lord shows that the whole of true religion is comprised in thus loving God and our neighbour. It may not be unnecessary to inquire into the literal meaning of the word love. *Agapee*¹⁶⁴ from *agapao*, I love, is supposed to be compounded either of *agan* and *poiein* to act vehemently or intensely; or, from *agein kata pan*, because love is always active, and will act in every possible way; for he who loves is, with all his affection and desire, carried forward to the beloved object, in order to possess and enjoy it. Some derive it from *agan* and *pauesthai*, to be completely at rest, or, to be intensely satisfied; because he who loves is supremely contented with, and rests completely satisfied in, that which he loves. Others, from *agan* and *paoo*, because a person eagerly embraces, and vigorously holds fast, that which is the object of his love. Lastly, others suppose it to be compounded of *agaoo*, I admire, and *pauomai*, I rest, because that which a man loves intensely he rests in, with fixed admiration and contemplation. So that genuine love changes not, but always abides steadily attached to that which is loved. Whatever may be thought of these etymologies, as being either just or probable, one thing will be evident to all those who know what love means, that they throw much light upon the subject, and manifest it in a variety of striking points of view. The ancient author of a manuscript Lexicon in the late French king's library, under the word *agapee*, has the following definition:... 'A pleasing surrender of friendship to a friend:-- an identity or sameness of soul.' A sovereign preference given to one above all others, present or absent: a concentration of all the thoughts and desires in a single object, which a man prefers to all others.' Apply this definition to the love which God requires of his creatures, and you will have the most correct view of the subject. Hence, it appears that, by this love, the soul eagerly cleaves to, affectionately admires, and constantly rests in God, supremely pleased and satisfied with him as its portion: that it acts from him, as its author; for him, as its master; and to him, as its end. That, by it, all the powers and faculties of the mind are concentrated in the Lord of the universe. That, by it, the whole man is willingly surrendered to the Most High: and that, through it, an identity, or sameness of spirit with the Lord is acquired-- the man being made a partaker of the divine nature, having the mind in him which was in Christ, and thus dwelling in God, and God in him.

But what is implied in loving God with all the heart, soul, mind, strength, etc., and when may a man be said to do this?

1. He loves God with all his heart who loves nothing in comparison of him, and nothing but in reference to him:-- who is ready to give up, do, or suffer anything in order to please and glorify him:-- who has in his heart neither love nor hatred, hope nor fear, inclination, nor aversion, desire, nor delight, but as they relate to God, and are regulated by him.

2. He loves God with all his soul, or rather, ... with all his life, who is ready to give up life for his sake-- to endure all sorts of torments, and to be deprived of all kinds of comforts, rather than dishonor God:-- who employs life with all its comforts, and conveniences, to glorify God in, by, and through all:-- to whom life and death are nothing, but as they come from and lead to God. From this Divine principle sprang the blood of the martyrs, which became the seed of the church. They overcame through the blood of the Lamb, and loved not their lives unto the death. See <Rev. 12:11>

3. He loves God with all his strength <Mark 12:30; Luke 10:97> who exerts all the powers of his body and soul in the service of God:-- who, for the glory of his Maker, spares neither labour nor cost-- who sacrifices his time,

¹⁶⁴ All italics in this quote are mine

body, health, ease, for the honor of God his divine Master:-- who employs in his service all his goods, his talents, his power, credit, authority, and influence.

4. He loves God with all his mind (intellect-- *dianoia*) who applies himself only to know God, and His holy will:-- who receives with submission, gratitude, and pleasure, the sacred truths which God has revealed to man:-- who studies no art nor science but as far as it is necessary for the service of God, and uses it at all times to promote his glory-- who forms no projects nor designs but in reference to God and the interests of mankind:-- who banishes from his understanding and memory every useless, foolish, and dangerous thought, together with every idea which has any tendency to defile his soul, or turn it for a moment from the center of eternal repose. In a word, he who sees God in all things-- thinks of him at all times-- having his mind continually fixed upon God, acknowledging him in all his ways-- who begins, continues, and ends all his thoughts, words, and works, to the glory of his name:-- this is the person who loves God with all his heart, life, strength, and intellect. He is crucified to the world, and the world to him: he lives, yet not he, but Christ lives in him. He beholds as in a glass the glory of the Lord, and is changed into the same image from glory to glory. Simply and constantly looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of his faith, he receives continual supplies of enlightening and sanctifying grace, and is thus fitted for every good word and work. O glorious state! far, far, beyond this description! which comprises an ineffable communion between the ever-blessed Trinity and the soul of man!"

Little can be added to this magnificent exposition of the verse, apart from the fact that no human being that has ever lived, or is alive at present has been able to love God so completely and perfectly, as described in this commentary, with the exception of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only one who obeyed this "first and greatest commandment." The only possible way for us to love God perfectly, with our body, soul, and spirit, is if we are in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul says: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."¹⁶⁵ This includes us in His obedience to this "first and greatest commandment" also.

What does the Hebrew say of "all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength?" The word translated with "heart" is *lebab*, which *Strongs* defines as "the heart (as the most interior organ)." It is the seat of emotions. The word for "soul" is *nephesh*, which has a wide variety of meanings, and is defined in this context as "a breathing creature." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* writes the following about the word *nephesh*: "The basic meaning is apparently related to the rare verbal form, *napash*. The noun refers to the essence of life, the act of breathing, taking breath. However, from that concrete concept, a number of more abstract meanings were developed. In its primary sense the noun appears in its first occurrence in <Gen. 1:20>: 'the moving creature that hath life,' and in its second occurrence in <Gen. 2:7>: 'living soul.' However, in over 400 later occurrences it is translated 'soul.' While this serves to make sense in most passages, it is an unfortunate mistranslation of the term. The real difficulty of the term is seen in the inability of almost all English translations to find a consistent equivalent or even a small group of high-frequency equivalents for the term. The KJV alone uses over 28 different English terms for this one Hebrew word. The problem with the English term 'soul' is that no actual equivalent of the term or the idea behind it is represented in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew system of thought does not include the combination or opposition of the terms 'body' and 'soul,' which are really Greek and Latin in origin. The Hebrew contrasts two other concepts which are not found in the Greek and Latin tradition: 'the inner self' and 'the outer appearance' or, as viewed in a different context, 'what one is to oneself' as opposed to 'what one appears to be to one's observers.' The inner person is *nepesh*, while the outer person, or reputation, is *shem*, most commonly translated 'name.' In narrative or historical passages of the Old Testament, *nepesh* can be translated as 'life' or 'self,' as in <Lev. 17:11>: 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for [yourselves]....' Needless to say, the reading 'soul' is meaningless in such a text." A closer modern equivalent to *nephesh* may be "me," or the word Freud coined: "id."

The Hebrew word translated with "strength" is *me'od*, which in *Strongs Definitions* is described with "vehemence." The KJV uses it mostly as an adverb. It is usually found in the combination of "heart, soul, and strength," as in this verse. Strength speaks, in this context, of the intensity of the love that God requires. "Passionately" may translate the concept better than anything else.

In quoting the command in Mark's Gospel, Jesus adds the word "strength." The meaning of the Greek equivalents of the Hebrew words is more or less identical, and the Greek word for "strength" is *ischus*, which is derived from the word *echo*, the English spelling of which is "ego."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary has a beautiful comment on this commandment which wraps up the essence of it concisely. We copy: " 'And thou shalt' shows here the language of law, expressive of God's claims. What then are we here bound down to do? One word is made to express it. And what a word! Had the essence of the divine law consisted in deeds, it could not possibly have been expressed in a single word; because no

¹⁶⁵ Rom. 10:4 (NKJ)

one deed is comprehensive of all others embraced in the law. But as it consists in an affection of the soul, one word suffices to express it-- but only one. Fear, though due to God and enjoined by Him, is limited in its sphere and distant in character. Trust, Hope, and the like, though essential features of a right state of heart toward God, are called into action only by personal necessity, and so are-- in a good sense, it is true, but still are properly-- selfish, affections; that is to say, they have respect to our own well-being. But LOVE is an all-inclusive affection, embracing not only every other affection proper to its Object, but all that is proper to be done to its Object; for as love spontaneously seeks to please its Object, so, in the case of men to God, it is the native well-spring of a voluntary obedience. It is, besides, the most personal of all affections. One may fear an event, one may hope for an event, one may rejoice in an event; but one can love only a Person. It is the tenderest, the most unselfish, the most divine of all affections. Such, then, is the affection in which the essence of the divine law is declared to consist." How true: the essence of the law is "love." The law, being the expression of God's character, to obey the law means to love the lawmaker, and to love God means obeying Him.

Moses advises the Israelites to do four things with the commandments that were given to them:

1. They should be upon their hearts, meaning that they should fill their whole inner being;
2. They should be impressed upon their children;
3. They should be their outward ornaments, and
4. They should mark their homes.

The love of God should fill their whole being. If such were the case, it would govern the family relationships, their social intercourse and their position in society. The children in the home should know that their father and mother loved God more than they loved them. If this was demonstrated in their whole behavior, the children would experience an uninterrupted flow of affection coming toward them. It would mean that their parents would love them with the love of God that flowed to them via their parents. This would not only give to them the security they needed for a healthy, personal development, but also direct their thoughts to the only source from which love can be obtained: God Himself.

"Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." We should not confuse this with the habit of some people whose conversation consists mainly in the quoting of Scripture. There should be ample space for small talk, and trivia. Some people cannot speak a normal word without letting the Bible verses fly through the air. This is often done more in an effort to make an impression of piety, a hiding of a real living relationship with the Lord behind a series of verses, than an expression of the fullness of the heart. The book of Proverbs advises us: "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver."¹⁶⁶ And the Apostle Paul says: "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."¹⁶⁷ The Living Word should not be used to throw the Book at people. The Bible in our lives should, first of all, be a "Wordless Book" before it becomes "the sword of the Spirit."

On the other hand, our testimony should also be spoken out loud. The Apostle Paul says: "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess *with your mouth*,¹⁶⁸ 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and *it is with your mouth* that you confess and are saved."¹⁶⁹

Regarding the command: "Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads," *The Pulpit Commentary* writes: "The words of God were to be bound for a sign [a memorial or directory] upon thine hand, the instrument of acting, and to be as frontlets [fillets or bands] between thine eyes, the organs of direction in walking or moving, and so on the forehead, the chamber of thought and purpose..." There is little doubt that God intended this to be an inner ornament of the soul, and certainly not merely an outward decoration. The Apostle Peter catches the spirit of this command when he says, in his admonition to believing women: "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Prov. 25:11

¹⁶⁷ Col. 4:6

¹⁶⁸ Italics are mine

¹⁶⁹ Rom. 10:8-10

¹⁷⁰ I Pet. 3:1-4

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary remarks here: “[Thou shalt bind them for a sign], ... for a token, a memorial. Rings were and are used on the wrists and the fingers, with seals containing some moral or religious sentiment or precept <John 3:33; 2 Tim. 2:19>. [And ... frontlets between thine eyes], ... for bands or fillets, particularly strips of parchment, containing sentences from the Mosaic law, which the Israelites wound round the forehead. ... Perhaps Moses meant the metaphorical language in the eighth verse to be taken in the same sense also. But as the Israelites interpreted it literally many writers suppose that a reference was made to a superstitious custom borrowed from the Egyptians, who wore jewels and ornamental trinkets on the forehead and arm, inscribed with certain words and sentences, as amulets to protect them from danger. These, it has been conjectured, Moses intended to supersede by substituting sentences of the law: and so the Hebrews understood him, because they have always considered the wearing of the Tephilim, or frontlets, a permanent obligation.”

A modern equivalent to the above would be a wedding band, as an outward symbol of a binding relationship between husband and wife. The danger of the wearing of the outward tokens of the law is, of course, that they can be merely outward ornaments, and not even tokens of an inner reality. Just as a wedding band in itself has no intrinsic value if it does not represent a marriage relationship, so have the phylacteries and Tephilim no value if the heart is not filled with the love of God.

In practice both the wearing of tokens on the body, and the writing of Scripture verses on the door posts and gates became like a use of fetishes. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says about this: “The Jews, forgetting the spirit and design of this precept, used these things as superstitious people do amulets and charms, and supposed, if they had these passages of Scripture written upon slips of pure parchment, wrapped round their foreheads, tied to their arm, or nailed to their door posts, that they should then be delivered from every evil! And how much better are many Christians, who keep a Bible in their house merely that it may keep the devil out; and will have it in their rooms, or under their pillows, to ward off spirits and ghosts in the night? How ingenious is the heart of man to find out every wrong way, and to miss the right!”

The fourth part of the admonition was: “Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” In the land of Canaan, where Israel was going to live as the first theocracy, this kind of testimony to the outside world would have very little effect or value. It would be like distributing “The Four Spiritual Laws” in a Christian retirement village. Where everyone is converted and is living for the Lord the urgency to testify dies out. There is, therefore, in this advice a hint that theocracy in its pure form will not survive. And, in fact, Israel's history is one of unfaithfulness and apostasy. There would be a dire need for this kind of testimony in a nation where people abandoned the service to YHWH left and right. Only a few years after Moses gave these directions, Joshua felt the need to say: “But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”¹⁷¹ Here again, the intent must have been the testimony of a family that demonstrated the fear and love of the Lord to their community, rather than the literal application of Bible verses on doors and gates. I have nothing against portions of Scripture on doors or on bumper stickers, but the effect of this kind of demonstration is doubtful, and sometimes negative. A car with a bumper sticker that proclaims the grace of the Lord and breaks the speed limit is a poor testimony. But in a home where “brothers live together in unity, ... the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.”¹⁷² A home that is a warm haven of rest, where husband and wife love each other and pray together, and with their children, and show affection is a place where the Word of God is written on the doorframes and on the gates. The more the world around us becomes secularized, the more we need those homes.

The verses 10-12 explain the dangers of affluence. Being rich is a very dangerous position in life. The Bible gives ample warnings to the rich. The Apostle Paul writes to Timothy: “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”¹⁷³ In the Book of Proverbs, Agur, son of Jakeh, prays this profound prayer: “Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”¹⁷⁴ Agur put poverty and riches under the same heading, as things that can endanger our fellowship with God. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus represents both extremes with the same image of “thorns.” We read: “The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it,

¹⁷¹ Josh. 24:15

¹⁷² See Ps. 133:1,3

¹⁷³ I Tim. 6:6-10

¹⁷⁴ Prov. 30:8,9

making it unfruitful.” The big difference between poverty and riches is not the amount of property involved, but the credit given. Poor people will seldom blame themselves for their condition, but the rich tend to take all the credit for themselves.

Moses’ stern warning was certainly appropriate. A blessing can easily turn into a curse. God was about to give the Israelites “flourishing cities [they] did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things [they] did not provide, wells [they] did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves [they] did not plant.” How easily could they talk themselves into believing that their position in life was the fruit of their own initiative and hard labor, instead of the grace of God. It is grace to live in a city, and a house with a well, a vineyard and an olive grove, in a place of rest the Lord provides. We need good memories in order to live by grace. We have to remember where we came from, and who brought us to the place where we are.

Gratitude and grace also go together. For Israel, God was “the LORD, who brought [them] out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Forgetting the past can be disastrous for the present. It is true that the generation Moses addressed did not remember Egypt. To them this was ancient history. It is important to remember one’s history, and heritage. In this world we are links in a chain of generations, and not unattached, independent entities. And personally, if we are saved by God’s grace, we have all “come out of Egypt.” To forget this, would be a terrible mistake. I do not mean that we should keep on remembering our sin and guilt, but without remembering the past, we lack the ability to compare it with the present. The one who dominated our lives in the past is not dead, and if we forget who the devil is, we are in just as great a danger as when we forget who God is. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey-- whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”¹⁷⁵

Matthew Henry’s Commentary remarks here: “A caution is here given not to forget God in a day of prosperity and plenty, v. 10-12. Here, He raises their expectations of the goodness of their God, taking it for granted that he would bring them into the good land that he had promised (v. 10), that they should no longer dwell in tents as shepherds and poor travelers, but should settle in great and goodly cities, should no longer wander in a barren wilderness, but should enjoy houses well furnished and gardens well planted (v. 11), and all this without any care and expense of their own, which he here lays a great stress upon-- Cities which thou buildest not, houses which thou filledst not, etc., both because it made the mercy really much more valuable than what they had come to them so cheaply, and yet, if they did not actually consider it, the mercy would be the less esteemed, for we are most sensible of the value of that which has cost us dear. When they came so easily by the gift they would be apt to grow secure, and unmindful of the giver. He engages their watchfulness against the badness of their own hearts: Then beware, when thou liest safe and soft, lest thou forget the Lord, v. 12. Note, in a day of prosperity we are in great danger of forgetting God, our dependence upon him, our need of him, and our obligations to him. When the world smiles we are apt to make our court to it, and expect our happiness in it, and so we forget him that is our only portion and rest.”

The admonition, as the NIV renders it, reads: “Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.” The word “only” is not found in any other translation, or in any of the known manuscripts. It does appear, however, in the Septuagint, and Jesus uses it in His quote to Satan, during the temptation in the desert: “For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”¹⁷⁶ It is, therefore, likely that it was in the original manuscript. Since the phrase is found in the context of a warning against idolatry, it is logical that the uniqueness of the worship of YHWH was emphasized.

Fearing God, and serving Him, obviously, refers to our relationship with the Person of God. But taking oaths in His name points to social intercourse: that is inter-human relationships. The KJV reads: “And [thou] shalt swear by his name.” The verb “to swear” is the translation of the Hebrew *shaba*, which literally means “to be complete, ... to seven oneself, i.e. swear (as if by repeating a declaration seven times).” The word is derived from *sheba*, seven, the sacred number. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says about this: “The root for ‘to

¹⁷⁵ Rom. 6:15-23

¹⁷⁶ Matt. 4:10

swear' and the root for 'seven' are the same in Hebrew, and since the number seven is the 'perfect number,' some have conjectured that 'to swear' is to somehow 'seven oneself,' thus to bind oneself with seven things. Perhaps this is paralleled by the use of 'seven' in Samson's allowing himself to be bound by seven fresh bowstrings <Judg. 16:7> and weaving the seven locks of his head <Judg. 16:13>. The relationship between 'to swear' and 'seven' is inconclusive." The use is obviously idiomatic, which makes it difficult to translate and to explain. The fact that there is a spiritual dimension to the number seven, however, seems to be a primitive universal concept. The Mè tribe of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, has an idiom, "to put down seven" for the payment of a fine in cases of pre-marital sex, fornication, or adultery. The payment has no numerical value, but is a form of spirit appeasement. It would probably be an intriguing study, if one could trace the use of the number seven in various cultures and languages.

It is obvious that there is more involved in the taking of an oath in the Name of YHWH than the use of a certain formula. The oath is mentioned as the third part in a series of three in vs. 13: "Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name." It complements respect for God, and service to Him. It also stands for more than truth in our speaking, but is an expression of living truth. It stands over against the third commandment about not using the Name of the Lord in vain.¹⁷⁷ Swearing, as we know it in modern times, that is, the use of sacrilegious or vulgar language, is not the topic here. The use of sacrilegious words was probably unknown in the Old Testament, although there are some examples of vulgarity. In the context of this chapter, taking an oath in the Name of YHWH is in opposition to the practice of swearing by the name of some idol. The intent here is the same as in the command in Exodus: "Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips."¹⁷⁸

Human speech is one of the unsolved mysteries of life on earth. The fact that we can express our thoughts and emotions in sound, or even hide them behind words, has eluded definition. We may not be able to express ourselves completely, or truly, but this does in no way reduce the miracle.

Ever since sin entered the world, truth has been an illusive matter. Truth corresponds to God's reality, which makes sinning and lying identical as deviations of this reality. The oath represents an effort to connect human speech to truth. Since human language is inaccurate at the best, even if no lie is intended, the oath was introduced to express the fact that what is said, is as reliable as if God had spoken the word Himself.

In a way, the use of oaths contains a hidden insult to the integrity of the human race. It means that man cannot be trusted. The Apostle Paul puts it correctly when he says: "Let God be true, and every man a liar."¹⁷⁹ In other words, God is true and we are not. This fact is reflected in our speaking. Only our Lord Jesus Christ could say: "I am ... the truth"¹⁸⁰ And, therefore, Jesus' words are true also. He introduced many of His statements with the words "amen, amen,"¹⁸¹ translated in the KJV with "verily," and in the NIV with: "I tell you the truth."

There are times when it is especially important that the truth be revealed, and when an oath is an appropriate way bringing truth closer. In courts of justice, witnesses are placed under oath, and rightly so. Some duties require the ceremony of an oath of office. There are pledges of allegiance. None of these are foolproof, because devious human nature has always found a way to circumvent the truth. It is against this abuse of the oath that Jesus reacted in His accusations against the people of His time. We read in Matthew's Gospel: "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it."¹⁸² And in the Sermon on the Mount, He says: "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." James confirms this, when he writes: Above all, my brothers, do not swear-- not by heaven

¹⁷⁷ See Ex. 20:7

¹⁷⁸ Ex. 23:13

¹⁷⁹ Rom. 3:4

¹⁸⁰ John 14:6

¹⁸¹ John uses the double "amen, amen" 25 times in his Gospel. The other Gospels only use the single form. John's version, probably renders Jesus' way of speaking more faithfully than do the Synoptics.

¹⁸² Matt. 23:16-22

or by earth or by anything else. Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned."¹⁸³ The gist of these last two admonitions is that our lives ought to be truthful, and that this will be reflected in our words.

For some reason, in Old Testament times, the breaking of a promise was considered to be the unpardonable sin. Some people preferred committing sins of greater gravity in order to be known as men who kept their promises. Jephthah and king Herod are examples of people who rather committed murder than break their word.¹⁸⁴

Finally, the suggestion that one would swear by the name of an idol, that is a representative of demonic powers, is in itself ridiculous. To say: "I swear by a lie that I tell the truth" is clearly a contradiction in terms. (Shakespeare pokes fun at a knight who swore by his honor about something that was not true, and yet was not forsworn, because he had no honor to start with).¹⁸⁵ The human tendency to use a resemblance of justice to cover up injustice is as old as man's sinful nature. Thus "Kangaroo Courts" came into existence, so the innocent could be executed legally. Human speech does the same on a lower level.

In the verses 14-19, Moses placed the people of Israel within the confines of the Promised Land, in which idolatry is prevalent. The people will be under a great amount of pressure to conform to the custom of the land. They would be living as healthy people in a spiritually polluted atmosphere. The first thing to remember is God's love for them. Vs. 15 speaks again of God's jealousy. The Hebrew word is *qanna'*, meaning "jealous." We should remember that the word appears in the same chapter in which we find the command: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." God's jealousy is inspired by His love. He commands us to love Him with all our heart, soul, and strength, because He loves us with all that is within Him. Real love is jealous if the object of its love turns away. Idols cannot love. The first thing Israel has to remember upon entering the Promised Land is God's love for them.

Also the phrase: "his anger will burn against you" has a deeper meaning than appears at the surface. The Hebrew word for "anger" is *'aph*, which comes from the word for the nose or nostril, and can be rendered as "rapid breathing in passion." God is Israel's passionate lover. His reaction to rejection is worse than a Latin lover who is ready to commit murder for the object of His love. God knows not phlegmatic feelings.

The second thing Israel should remember when entering the Promised Land is trust. Reference is made to the incident at Massah. We read in the account of the incident in Exodus: "And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'"¹⁸⁶ The issue at Massah was not whether there was water, but whether God had left them, or not. Israel had opted for the former. They had, several times, voiced feelings that the whole exodus, and the promise of entering Canaan had been a ploy to lead the nation to a deserted place where God could kill them without the presence of witnesses. They had attributed to God motives that were baser than those found in the darkest recesses of an evil human soul. "Do not test the LORD your God as you did at Massah" means: "Never doubt God's goodness again." God cannot be a mixture of good and evil, as human beings are. If He is good, He is perfectly good, because if He were not perfect, He would not be God. And if He is not perfectly good, He is perfectly evil, which would make Him like Satan.

The third matter Israel should remember is obedience. In the context of this chapter, this means obedience based upon love. It is impossible to love God and not obey Him. Doing good, means doing what God does. That is the meaning of the phrase: "Do what is right and good in the LORD's sight." This stands in sharp contrast to what Israel turned out to do, once they began living in the Promised Land. A reoccurring phrase in the book of Judges is: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."¹⁸⁷ God is the standard of all that is good. Our lives will be measured with the measuring stick of His perfect glory. That is why Paul says: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."¹⁸⁸

The promise of God for victory and blessing would not be fulfilled automatically for the people of Israel; fulfillment would depend upon their love, faith, and obedience. Victory over the enemy, and the blessing that flows from that is always dependent upon these factors. Satan is only conquered by our love, faith, and obedience to the Word of God. John says in Revelation: "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."¹⁸⁹

In the last verses of this chapter, 20-25, lies a key for bridging the generation gap: "In the future, when your son asks you, 'What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?'"

¹⁸³ James 5:12

¹⁸⁴ See Judges 11:30,31,34,35 and Mark 6:21-28

¹⁸⁵ As You Like It. (Act. I; Scene II).

¹⁸⁶ Ex. 17:7

¹⁸⁷ Judg. 17:6; 21:25

¹⁸⁸ Rom. 3:23

¹⁸⁹ Rev. 12:11

A son sees that his father lives a life of obedience to the law of God, and being in search for meaning of his own life, he asks: “why?” Our relationship with God is never a personal matter alone; it affects all who are around us, especially the members of our family. There is a blessing hidden in the fact that a son would ask his father: “why?” Fathers should make their sons and daughter jealous, and make them wish to know the secret of their father’s life.

Note the importance of the question. The initiative, here, lies with the child. The question is born out of what he sees. Moses did not want to imply, of course, that we should not begin teaching our children until they ask to be taught. We read that God says about Abraham: “For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.”¹⁹⁰ But commanding our children to keep the way of the Lord, without this being backed up by a living example, will, more often than not, end in alienation. The child’s question is an indication that there is something in the life of the father that intrigues and attracts him.

The answer the father gives is both historical, and personal. He begins by saying: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.” This was the historical fact that made Israel into a nation. But the father who says this, had never been a slave in Egypt himself. He quotes ancient history, or does he? The way the answer is put makes both the father and the son slaves in Egypt, redeemed by God’s mighty hand. Most people have a tendency to forget their past, especially if it is not a laudatory one. The Jews in Jesus’ day, conveniently forgot their past, and they brazenly answered Jesus: “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”¹⁹¹ Denial of the past can prevent redemption of the present.

If the act of redemption is not taken into consideration, there is no basis for loving the Lord, and obeying His commandments. This is even more urgent for us, who live in the New Testament dispensation, who have not been slaves in the physical sense of the word, but who have been rescued from a much more serious condition: sin. Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”¹⁹² We, also, have a better comprehension of the price that was paid for our liberty, and consequently we have more reason to love God with all that is within us, than the Old Testament Jew had.

In a way Israel’s redemption from Egypt did not cost God anything, unless we see it as part of the history of salvation, which culminated in the cross of Golgotha. The exodus was a prepayment based on Jesus’ death on the cross. God knew what it would cost Him when He brought Israel out of Egypt. But none of this can have entered the human mind at that time; the price of salvation lay still beyond the horizon of that time. Israel cannot have understood the full depth of God’s love for them, and for the whole world. And, in a way, their obedience to the law was a blind obedience; their love for God may have been there, but it was not yet based on an undeniable proof, such as we possess at present. Yet, unless we see the larger picture, the last verse of this chapter would not make any logical sense. “And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be *our righteousness*.” If it would be literally true that man could obtain righteousness by keeping the law, the Bible, as a whole, would contradict itself. The Apostle Paul built a strong argument against this, especially in his epistle to the Romans. We read: “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”¹⁹³ The problem with obtaining righteousness by means of obeying the law, he says, is that our very nature is sinful, which made the law powerless to do us any good. Elsewhere he writes: “For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”¹⁹⁴

When the Jewish father tells his son that obedience will result in righteousness, he touches upon the whole compound of God’s love, which resulted in redemption, man’s response to this by returning love with obedience, and the principle of substitutionary death for the sinner, which brought about righteousness. None of the elements can be eliminated from the whole complex of truth. But finite man has to concentrate on the part for which he is responsible, which in this case is obedience. To believe that obedience results in righteousness, as most Jews did, shows a lack of understanding of the whole complex reality. For example, we may go to an ATM banker, insert our card and withdraw money, without understanding the whole process involved. No money will be produced by the machine if the card does not represent an account upon which money has been deposited. Only a child will believe

¹⁹⁰ Gen. 18:19 (NKJ)

¹⁹¹ John 8:22

¹⁹² John 8:34

¹⁹³ Rom. 3:20

¹⁹⁴ Rom. 8:3,4

that cards can produce money magically. No righteousness will be credited to our account, merely on the basis of our obeying certain rules. The only righteousness which is valid before God is the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Hebrew word, translated in this chapter with “righteousness” is *tsedaqah*. It is a rather complicated word, about which *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* writes the following: “In Phoenician and Old Aramaic it carries the sense of ‘loyalty’ demonstrated by a king or priest as a servant of his own god. In these languages a form of the root is combined with other words or names, particularly with the name of a deity, in royal names. In the Old Testament we meet the name Melchizedek (‘king of righteousness’). A more limited meaning of the root is found in Arabic (a South Semitic language): ‘truthfulness’ (of propositions). In rabbinic Hebrew the noun *tsedaqah* signifies ‘alms’ or ‘demonstrations of mercy.’ ... Translators have found it difficult to translate these two words. The older translations base their understanding on the Septuagint with the translation *dikaosune*¹⁹⁵ (‘righteousness’) and on the Vulgate *iustitia* (‘justice’). In these translations the legal relationship of humans is transferred to God in an absolute sense as the Lawgiver and with the perfections of justice and ‘righteousness.’ Exegetes have spilled much ink in an attempt to understand contextually the words *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah*. The conclusions of the researchers indicate a twofold significance. On the one hand, the relationships among people and of a man to his God can be described as *tsedeq*, supposing the parties are faithful to each other’s expectations. It is a relational word. In Jacob’s proposal to Laban, Jacob used the word *tsedaqah* to indicate the relationship. The KJV gives the following translation of *tsedaqah*: ‘So shall my righteousness answer for me in time to come, when it shall come for my hire before thy face...’ <Gen. 30:33>. The NASB gives the word ‘righteousness’ in a marginal note, but prefers the word ‘honesty’ in the text itself. The NEB reads ‘fair offer’ instead. Finally, the NIV has: ‘And my honesty [*tsedaqah*] will testify for me in the future, whenever you check on the wages you have paid me.’ On the other hand, ‘righteousness’ as an abstract or as the legal status of a relationship is also present in the Old Testament. The locus classicus is <Gen. 15:6>: ‘...and he [the Lord] counted it to him [Abraham] for righteousness.’ *Tsedeq* and *tsedaqah* are legal terms signifying justice in conformity with the legal corpus (the Law; <Deut. 16:20>), the judicial process <Jer. 22:3>, the justice of the king as judge <1 Kings 10:9; Ps. 119:121; Prov. 8:15>, and also the source of justice, God Himself: ‘Judge me, O Lord my God, according to thy righteousness; and let them not rejoice over me.... And my tongue shall speak of thy righteousness and of thy praise all the day long’ <Ps. 35:24,28>. The word ‘righteousness’ also embodies all that God expects of His people. The verbs associated with ‘righteousness’ indicate the practicality of this concept. One judges, deals, sacrifices, and speaks righteously; and one learns, teaches, and pursues after righteousness. Based upon a special relationship with God, the Old Testament saint asked God to deal righteously with him: ‘Give the king thy judgments, O God, and thy righteousness unto the king’s son’ <Ps. 72:1>.”

There is in the word *tsedaqah* even the shade of meaning of giving alms. This meaning is carried over from the Hebrew, via the Arabic of the Koran, into the Indonesian language, which knows the word *sedekah*, meaning “alms.” It could be, therefore, that the phrase: “And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness,” carries the meaning of a right response from the side of man to the love of God. In that case, righteousness would not have the theological meaning it has acquired through its New Testament use. It would rather approach what Paul expresses, when he says: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is *your reasonable service*.”¹⁹⁶

CHAPTER SEVEN

II. The Explanation of the Ten Commandments 5:1-11:32

C. The Command to Conquer Canaan 7:1-26

This chapter is an extended commentary on the first, and second of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ All italics on this page and on the following are mine

¹⁹⁶ Rom. 12:1 (NKJ)

¹⁹⁷ Ex. 20:3-6

The iniquity of the inhabitants of Canaan was their relationship with Satan. Idol worship is a complicated affair. On the one hand is man's effort to make a god he can manipulate: something lesser than himself. On the other hand it means opening a door to a world of spiritual evil over which man has no control. Paul puts his finger on the dilemma of idolatry by saying: "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords') ..."¹⁹⁸

It is difficult for us, from our twenty-first century vantage point, to read a chapter like this objectively, and not feel horror and repulsion. To our modern ears, Moses' instructions to the people sound like a program of "ethnic cleansing," of which we have seen too many horrible demonstrations in recent history. Without an eye on the historical perspective, and some understanding of the difference between the Old Testament dispensation, and the dispensation of grace in which we live, we cannot come to an acceptable conclusion about the apparent cruelty of genocide that is propagated here. In modern times, Moses and Joshua would have had to stand trial for crimes against humanity. Unless we see the matter against the cosmic background of the struggle between God and Satan, and understand that Israel was ordered to act as an instrument of God's judgment, we will not be able to come to terms with this part of the Word of God. What Israel was required to do was, in the most literal sense "An Act Of God."

We also have to allow for the fact that exceptions were made for individuals who turned away from idol worship, and made a clear confession of faith in YHWH as the only God. We have Rahab's outstanding confession to the spies she hid in her house: "I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."¹⁹⁹ Not only was her life saved, but Scripture incorporated her in God's Hall of Fame.²⁰⁰ She also became a vital link in God's plan of salvation of the world, in that God used her to bring the Messiah into the world.²⁰¹ Obviously, God rewarded generously those among the Canaanites who broke links with Satan and turned to Him for salvation.

Matthew Henry's Commentary gives an outline of this chapter, of which we copy the following: "Moses in this chapter exhorts Israel,

I. In general, to keep God's commandments <v. 11-12>.

II. In particular, and in order to that, to keep themselves pure from all communion with idolaters.

1. They must utterly destroy the seven devoted nations, and not spare them, or make leagues with them <v. 1-2, 16, 24>.

2. They must by no means marry with the remainders of them <v. 3-4>.

3. They must deface and consume their altars and images, and not so much as take the silver and gold of them to their own use <v. 5, 25-26>."

Matthew Henry is correct in making the verses 11 and 12 the core of this chapter, around which all the other verses revolve. "Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today. If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers." The human response to God's covenant of love is obedience. Without obedience love is meaningless. There is again in this phrase the Hebrew word *chesed*, or *hesed*, which is the core of God's relationship with His people. It may sound strange to find this word in the context of a chapter that deals with the extermination of tribes and people. At the basis of the command to destroy the nations of Canaan is God's love for mankind. God's hatred of all that deviates from the standard of His holiness is just as perfect and eternal as His eternal love and mercy.

In the days of Abraham, there were still several pockets of people who worshipped YHWH. The presence of people like Melchizedek, and, most likely some of Abraham's friends like Aner, Eshcol and Mamre represented a faithful remnant.²⁰² And God's word to Abraham at that time was: "The sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."²⁰³ This suggests that idol worship with strong ties to demonic powers was present, but pockets of true

¹⁹⁸ I Cor. 8:4,5

¹⁹⁹ Josh. 2:9-11

²⁰⁰ See Heb. 11:31; James 2:25

²⁰¹ See Matt. 1:5

²⁰² See Gen. 14:18-20,24

²⁰³ Gen. 15:16

worshippers still kept the powers of evil checked. When Israel arrived at the borders of Canaan, some four centuries later, those checks had long disappeared.

The Bible is, in general, very sober in reporting the idolatrous life style of the inhabitants of Canaan. Archeology has thrown new light upon the depravity of the religious practices of the Canaanites at the time of Israel's invasion. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* writes: "New vistas of knowledge of Canaanite cults and their degrading character and debilitating effect have been opened up by the discovery of the Ras Shamra religious epic literature from Ugarit in N. Syria. Thousands of clay tablets stored in what seems to be a library between two great Canaanite temples dating from c. fifteenth-fourteenth century B.C. give a full description of the Canaanite pantheon. Canaanite fertility cults are seen to be more base than elsewhere in the ancient world. The virile monotheistic faith of the Hebrews was continually in peril of contamination from the lewd nature worship with immoral gods, prostitute goddesses, serpents, cultic doves, and bulls. El, the head of the pantheon, was the hero of sordid escapades and crimes. ... These Canaanite cults were utterly immoral, decadent, and corrupt, dangerously contaminating and thoroughly justifying the divine command to destroy their devotees <Deut. 20:17>."

It should be noticed also that what sounded like an order to take the country in a "blitz campaign" was meant to be an expedition that would be carried out over decades, leaving the original inhabitants of the country an opportunity for conversion from their immoral religious practices. Vs. 22 reads: "The LORD your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you."

It seems to have been mainly because of the danger involved in a protracted plan of extermination of evil, that Moses painted this picture of absolute intolerance. For this reason, the chapter is full of warnings to the Israelites, to beware of their own sinful nature. They would be even more in danger of contamination by evil, than the Canaanites were of extermination.

The first command contains the words "no mercy." This is the device in dealing with the powers of evil, which may come in human form, but which is ultimately inspired by Satan and his demons. The conquest of Canaan was to be directed as a campaign against God's archenemy. It was Satan who encouraged the nations of Canaan to murder their own children, and to let themselves go in immoral forms of worship.

Israel had to realize, first of all, that they were no match for the enemy. God speaks about: "seven nations larger and stronger than you." *The Pulpit Commentary* writes about these tribes: "Of the ten nations named by God in his promise to Abraham, only six are mentioned here, those omitted being the Kenites, the Kennizites, the Kadmonites, and the Rephaim. The Rephaim were by this time extinct as a tribe, Og, 'the last of the Rephaim,' having been conquered, and he and his people destroyed by the Israelites. The three other tribes lay probably beyond the confines of Canaan, in that region promised to Abraham, but which was not included in the territory conquered by the people under Joshua. This may account for their not being mentioned here. One nation, the Hivites, appears here which is not in the enumeration in Genesis. This name seems to have been borne by more tribes than one, or by a tribe existing in divisions widely scattered, for we find the Hivite in the center of Palestine (Gen. xxxiv. 2), in the Shephelah (Josh. ix. 7; xi. 19), in the land of Mizpeh under Hermon (Josh. xi. 3), 'in Lebanon, from mount Baal-hermon to the entering in of Hamath' (Judg. iii. 3), and among tribes in the north of Canaan (Gen. x. 17; 1 Chron. i. 15). Their principal settlement was probably in that part of the country where the Antilibanus range terminates in Mount Hermon."

God wanted to impress upon Israel that no compromise was allowed in their dealing with the nations of Canaan. An agreement with those nations would amount to making a pact with the devil. God's standards are absolute, and so are Satan's. There is no common ground between the two upon which an understanding can be reached. As the Apostle Paul puts it: "For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?"²⁰⁴

The verses 3 and 4 give a warning against intermarriage between Israel and the tribes of Canaan. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* comments on this: "The heart being naturally inclined to evil there is more likelihood that the idolatrous wife should draw aside the believing husband, than that the believing husband should be able to bring over his idolatrous wife to the true faith." This brings us to the heart of the problem: the Israelites were people with a sinful nature, just as much as the Canaanites they were supposed to exterminate. God did not assign the task to be the tools of His wrath to holy and perfect angels but to imperfect human beings who had themselves a natural inclination towards evil. The intent was to defeat Satan through people in whose heart the seed of satanic insurrection had been planted. It is hard for us to imagine, from our vantage point in history, and from within the limited scope of our understanding, what the impact of God's strategy must be upon Satan. He may have corrupted the human race, but

²⁰⁴ II Cor. 6:14-16

they are not his. There is still in every human heart a trace of a will, a spark of desire that can sway a person to the Lord's side. In his plan to crush the enemy, God plays, so to speak, the riskiest game possible. The powers of darkness are ultimately overcome by the lame, the blind, and the impotent, by those whose hands and feet are nailed to a cross. The scheme is brilliant but extremely risky, and the victory depends on our choice of the side of the fence we want to be on. The more we are aware of our vulnerability, the safer we will be.

Israel had the occurrence of their failure at Baal-Peor²⁰⁵ before their eyes, as an eternal reminder that the enemy will always attack at the weakest point. Love within marriage and sexual desires can be wonderful, and fulfilling elements in a person's life, but unless they are subordinated to fellowship with God, they will be a target of enemy attack.

Moses' warning is not only directed to the single man who sees a girl and wants to marry her, but also to the father of the family: "Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons." The father had to be the moral head of the family, both in example and authority. He could not let his son or daughter marry whomever they wanted. In order to be such a moral head of family, a man has to win the battle before it begins. The atmosphere of a household should be such that the children would consider it inconceivable to enter into intimate relationships that would not match the spirit of the family. If a child grows up with a deep sense of God's presence in the home, and if he or she will surrender his or her life to the Lord, not at the end of a rebellious protest, but as a natural outcome of growing up, the desire to marry someone who belongs to the enemy camp will not even enter the mind. The best way to assure good marriages for our children is to hedge them in with prayer, even from before the day they are born.

This warning against intermarriages is, in itself, proof of the fact that extermination of the nations of Canaan would not be the ruthless genocide it sounded to be.

The third warning is against the symbols of idolatry, that is the statutes of idols, the fetishes, and altars, and all the peripherals connected with it. Some of this may have been pieces of art. The anthropologist of our day would have howled at Moses' order to destroy the culture of the people. In God's eyes it was a perversion of culture. Silver, gold, and artistic abilities are only valuable in as much as they are related to the character of God. God is the creator and the source of all beauty. Some artists may create artworks without consciously acknowledging the source of their inspiration. Not every composer, poet, or sculptor created "Soli Deo Gloria." This does not make their creations unacceptable to God or to us. All real beauty glorifies God, whether it is produced wittingly, or unwittingly. But creations that are produced for the specific purpose of glorifying God's enemy should be regarded as detestable. There is a fine line between the representation of a nude figure and pornography, but the line is there, and it is found in the source and direction of the creation.

In our experience as missionaries among the tribes people of Irian Jaya, the converts to Christianity unusually recognized immediately the fact that the objects of their former animistic religion were incompatible with the "Jesus Way." They were the ones who took the initiative to burn fetishes and dispose of items that connected them to their old way of life. The coming from darkness to light was often a very dramatic experience for them.

The stone altars were mainly dedicated to Baal, the god of thunder and lightning, and the Asherah pole was a wooden symbol of the goddess of fertility, which accompanied the Baal worship. The reason for this order is a rather moving one: "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession." Every sacrifice was an act of dedication of oneself to the god to whom the sacrifice was made. All the killings of animals were substitutionary; they indicated that the person who brought the sacrifice gave his life to the god to whom the altar was dedicated. The sacrifices to YHWH expressed a relationship that was unique, and that could never be duplicated. The ultimate meaning of every sacrifice to YHWH was the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Every time an animal was offered, it represented the fact that God sacrificed Himself to man. The difference between the sacrifice to idols and the sacrifice to the Lord is in the direction. Baal and Asherah demanded the lives of their subjects, and Satan, who stood in the background of this form of worship, rejoiced in every murder that was committed. Baal would never consider giving his life for human beings. In Jesus Christ, God came "to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."²⁰⁶ There was no love between Baal and the people who served him, but God considered Israel "His treasured possession." He had paid for them when He brought them out of Egypt. That is the claim God had upon Israel. In Paul's words to us: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."²⁰⁷ Israel could, of course, not have understood this, but that does not change the reality.

²⁰⁵ See Num. 25:1-3

²⁰⁶ Matt. 20:28

²⁰⁷ I Cor. 6:19,20

This brings us to the point of God's election of Israel. God's love for Israel did not mean the rejection of the rest of the world. It was not as if God only loved Israel, and hated everyone else. God's love is eternal and all encompassing. "God so loved the world..."²⁰⁸ God had already said to Moses at the foot of Mount Sinai: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."²⁰⁹ The long range plan behind Israel's election was the salvation of the whole world.

But Israel was meant to be more than a means to an end. God wanted them to be His "treasured possession." The Hebrew word is *cegullah*, which means something that is kept under lock and key because of its great value. The KJV translates it sometimes: "jewel." Israel was God's "treasure hidden in a field," and "the pearl of great value" in Jesus' parables.²¹⁰

It is hard for us to understand what God's emotional reaction must have been when man fell into sin. We are often too preoccupied with our side of the story to try to "walk in God's moccasins." God was betrayed by His best friend, and for centuries He suffered the loneliness of this betrayal. We may object to this kind of anthropomorphic projection of sentiments upon God, but if our emotions are part of the image of God in us, they are reflections of God's character. Why would we think that God would not feel and react as we do? God's feelings are, no doubt perfect and eternal, but they are not unlike ours. If, in the words of the writer of the Hebrew epistle: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin," why would the Father of this High Priest be different from the Son? Throughout eternity God has looked for human beings upon whom He could pour out His love, who could be His treasured possession. Such was Israel; such are we.

The warning against conceit in vs. 7 emphasizes the fact of our distorted value system. We put a price on things that are worthless, and we disregard that which has real value. We believe in numbers: numbers of money, and of people; especially money. We say, for instance, that so-and-so is worth five million, as if that amount would express the value of a soul. Jesus says: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"²¹¹ This means that a man's soul weighs heavier in God's scale than all the riches of this world. Saying that someone is worth five million makes him the poorest person on earth! The same with numbers of people. Stalin's famous disparaging words to Churchill about the Pope: "How many divisions does he have?" rank as one of the most shortsighted remarks on record. The Roman Catholic Church is still there, but the Red Army does not exist anylonger, neither does the communist empire over which Stalin once presided.

God does not choose people on the basis of their importance in this world, but on the basis of their importance to Him. God's choice often mocks human standards. The magi were fooled when they went to Herod's palace in Jerusalem to look for the king, the coming of which the heavens had proclaimed. The star pointed to a stable.²¹² Paul says: "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."²¹³ God entrusts His Kingdom to little flocks, as Jesus said to His disciples: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom."²¹⁴ We have no reason to be intimidated, if we know we belong to God's chosen ones. God is richer than any human being on earth, and is capable of providing for every need we may have, and there are more than twelve legions of angels at the disposal of anyone who calls upon the Father.²¹⁵

The only danger we face is the one from the inside, the one that makes us use a value system that is topsy-turvy. God loves us because we are the bearers of His image, not because of the image we project. He also loves us because of the oath of redemption He swore. This is what the writer to the Hebrews means when he says: "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor

²⁰⁸ John 3:16

²⁰⁹ Ex. 19:4-6

²¹⁰ See Matt. 13:44-46

²¹¹ Matt. 16:26

²¹² Matt. 2:1-11

²¹³ I Cor. 1:27-29

²¹⁴ Luke 12:32

²¹⁵ See Matt. 26:53

for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”²¹⁶

It will probably always remain incomprehensible to us why God loves us, and chooses us. If we are realistic, we will always wonder about the “amazing grace, . . . that saved a wretch like me.”

Moses mentions two factors that determined God’s choice of Israel: God’s love, and God’s oath. He connects the generation of his time to the previous generations, the forefathers, and to “a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands,” that is to future generations. The short period of time we spend on this earth prevents us from looking back and forward far enough to see our place in history. We occupy a place in time and space for which we are singularly ill equipped for our lack of wisdom. To rest in God’s promises, which is the oath to the forefathers, and to rest in His love for us, will provide us with enough insight to occupy that place in history God wants us to fill. Also, the realization that God has redeemed us from a power that is much stronger than we are, and that He will equip us to oppose and subdue that power in the days to come, will be a stimulus to face the task ahead. We have the promise: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”²¹⁷

God wanted Israel to see themselves armed by the love of God, and assured by His promises, coming out of Egypt, out of the power of slavery, and going into Canaan, eradicating that same power, and evicting it from its strongholds. All it would take was to respond to His love with love in return.

The blessings enumerated are all in terms of fruitfulness, abundance, and health: “the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land . . . the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks . . . free from every disease.” These promises cannot be transferred indiscriminately from the old covenant to the new. Not that God is unwilling to bless us with children, harvests, flocks, and health, but they are not automatically part of our inheritance in Jesus Christ. We are recipients of “every spiritual blessing in Christ.”²¹⁸ All the other things are fringe benefits.

“The horrible diseases you knew in Egypt” refers, probably, to more than the ten plagues we know from Exodus. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* writes: “Egypt has always been dreadfully scourged with diseases; and the testimony of Moses is confirmed by the reports of many modern writers, who tell us that, notwithstanding its equal temperature and serenity, that country has some indigenous maladies which are very malignant, such as ophthalmia, dysentery, small-pox, and the plague.” And in *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* we read: “It seems to refer not only to those plagues of Egypt by the force of which they were delivered, but to some other epidemical country disease (as we call it), which they remembered the prevalency of among the Egyptians, and by which God had chastised them for their national sins. Diseases are God’s servants; they go where he sends them, and do what he bids them. It is therefore good for the health of our bodies to mortify the sin of our souls.”

The conditions of human life are more complex than *Matthew Henry* seems to suggest, by saying that good physical health is connected to the absence of sin in our souls. Without sin in the world, there would, of course, be no sickness or death, but that belief is simplistic, and it can be disastrous to the peace of our souls, if we try to tie every attack upon our health to some specific, often illusive, sin. We are, after all, in the midst of a war, and when the bullets fly, people are wounded. That God uses sickness to get our attention is beyond doubt. In the words of C. S. Lewis: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, He speaks to us in our circumstances, but He shouts to us in our pain.” This does in no way reduce the value of the doctrine of “God for the body.” It remains true: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.”²¹⁹ God is *Yahweh Rapha`*, “The Lord Who Heals You.”²²⁰

In vs. 16 we find a repetition of the command given in vs. 2. There is the same command to destroy, and the same admonition not to show mercy, and not to have pity. As we have observed already, this seems hard to reconcile with the concept of a God who loves the world. The emphasis in the latter part of the chapter puts the order for extermination in a different perspective. Strategically seen, the overwhelming odds were against Israel. From a human viewpoint it seemed as if Israel should count herself lucky if it she could even maintain her presence in Canaan. The people inhabiting the country, living in their fortified cities, and having well-armed armies at their disposal, were more intimidating than an easy prey. The order to destroy, seen in this light, seems ridiculous. “Do not look on them with pity” sounds out of place. A reassurance not to fear would seem more appropriate. Since we know the outcome of the battle, we have a hard time evaluating the picture of David, as he approaches Goliath. But the human odds of a young unarmed shepherd boy, killing an accomplished and fully armed giant with a stone and a slingshot were too overwhelming to even take seriously. Jesus told His disciples: “I am sending you out like sheep

²¹⁶ Heb. 6:17-20

²¹⁷ Rom. 16:20

²¹⁸ Eph. 1:3

²¹⁹ Isa. 53:4

²²⁰ Ex. 15:26^b

among wolves.”²²¹ God’s command to Israel here is paramount to Jesus saying to His disciples: “Do not have pity on the wolves.” The obvious thing at this stage was that the Canaanites would have no pity on Israel. Israel’s pity on the people had not entered the people’s mind yet. The command shows the inversion of human values. The word is prophetically spoken from a position of victory.

Israel would also have the problem of not being able to see through the disguise of the enemy, as God saw through it. God knows His opponent. Behind these nations and their idolatry was the one about whom Jesus would say: “He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”²²² Idolatry would be presented to the Israelites as enticing. It would come to the men of Israel in the form of pretty girls who offered themselves to them.

To the question: “These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out?” God answers: “Remember your history, remember Egypt.” One episode in the history of Western Europe is a good illustration of this. When, in the sixteenth century, king Philip II of Spain sent his Armada to the Netherlands to subdue the Dutch and wipe out any trace of the Reformation, saying that he would rather reign over dead Dutchmen than over Protestants, the Dutch encountered his fleet with their little fishing boats. Philip’s heavy artillery could only shoot over their heads. But what brought about the decision in the battle on the North Sea was a huge windstorm, which forced the Armada to return to Spain. The Dutch coined a medal with the inscription: “God’s breath dispersed them.” If only Holland could remember its history!

For us, the main lesson is, of course, spiritual. Our enemy is not of flesh and blood. We face the power of sin in our society, and in our personal lives. This power seems more absolute and overwhelming than any physical army could be. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* says about these verses: “Thus we are commanded not to let sin reign, not to indulge ourselves in it nor give countenance to it, but to hate it and strive against it; and then God has promised that sin shall not have dominion over us <Rom. 6:12,14>, but that we shall be more than conquerors over it. The difficulty and doubtfulness of the conquest of Canaan having been a stone of stumbling to their fathers, Moses here animates them against those things which were most likely to discourage them, bidding them not to be afraid of them, v. 18, and again, v. 21.”

Regarding the “hornets” in vs. 20, *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “Instances are on record of armies being obliged to give way before swarms of insects by which they were attacked (as in the case of Julian, who was compelled by a host of flies and gnats to change his route in retreating from Parthia ...); but it may be doubted if the statement here is to be understood literally, and not rather figuratively, as expressive of many and varied evils with which the fugitive Canaanites were to be visited until they were extirpated.”

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia says the following about the “hornets”: “Hornets are mentioned only in <Exo 23:28; Deut 7:20; Josh 24:12>. All three references are to the miraculous interposition of God in driving out before the Israelites the original inhabitants of the Promised Land. There has been much speculation as to whether hornets are literally meant. The following seems to throw some light on this question <Exo 23:20,27-28>: ‘Behold, I send an angel before thee, to keep thee by the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared. I will send my terror before thee, and will discomfit all the people to whom thou shalt come, and I will make all thine enemies turn their backs unto thee, and I will send the hornet before thee, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite, from before thee.’ The ‘terror’ of vs. 27 may well be considered to be typified by the ‘hornet’ of verse 28, the care for the Israelites (verse 20) being thrown into marked contrast with the confusion of their enemies. Compare <Isa 7:18>, where the fly and the bee symbolize the military forces of Egypt and Assyria: ‘And it shall come to pass in that day, that Yahweh will hiss for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.’ Hornets and wasps belong to the family Vespidae of the order Hymenoptera. Both belong to the genus *Vespa*, the hornets being distinguished by their large size. Both hornets and wasps are abundant in Palestine (compare *Zorah*, which may mean ‘town of hornets’). a large kind is called in Arabic *debbur*, which recalls the Hebrew *deborah*, ‘bee.’ They sting fiercely, but not unless molested.”

Commenting on the parallel passage in Exodus,²²³ *The Adam Clarke Commentary* writes: “[I will send hornets before thee] *hatsir`aar*. The root is not found in Hebrew, but it may be the same with the Arabic *sarua*, ‘to lay prostrate, to strike down’; the hornet, probably so called from the destruction occasioned by the violence of its sting. The hornet, in natural history, belongs to the species *crabro*, of the genus *vespa* or wasp. It is a most voracious insect, and is exceedingly strong for its size, which is generally an inch in length, though I have seen some an inch and a half long, and so strong that, having caught one in a small pair of forceps, it repeatedly escaped by using violent contortions, so that at last I was obliged to abandon all hopes of securing it alive, which I wished to have done. How

²²¹ Matt. 10:16

²²² John 8:44

²²³ Ex. 23:28

distressing and destructive a multitude of these might be, any person may conjecture; even the bees of one hive would be sufficient to sting a thousand men to madness, but how much worse must wasps and hornets be! No armor, no weapons, could avail against these. A few thousands of them would be quite sufficient to throw the best disciplined army into confusion and rout. From <Josh. 24:12>, we find that two kings of the Amorites were actually driven out of the land by these hornets, so that the Israelites were not obliged to use either sword or bow in the conquest.”

There seems to be no reason not to think of literal insects in this context. God’s secret weapon may have been a wasp. It is one thing for a military power to be defeated by an army of superior strength, but to have to concede defeat because of the sting of a wasp is too embarrassing to live down. It would be a typical illustration of what Paul says: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”²²⁴ The hornet, which tend to reside in crack of rocks and places that are hard to penetrate, would be especially effective to wipe out the “survivors who hide from you.”

Vs. 21 does not specify the object of fear. The context would allow “Do not be terrified by them” to apply either to the Canaanites or to the hornets. If the hornets could send a Canaanite army on flight, what guarantee would there be that Israel would be protected from their sting? God’s great and awesome presence would be an equal protection against the wrath of men, and the sting of wasps.

Animals are also the topic of the next verse. No specifics are given. The Bible indicates that Canaan was the habitat of animals like the bear, jackal, leopard, lion, and wolf. This verse sheds an interesting light on the ecological problem we are facing in our day. In God’s agenda priority is given to man over beast. I am against the thoughtless extermination of species, and all for saving the whale, of course, but there is a point where the animal world has to cede its place to the kingdom of man. God does not want his creation to be inhabited by wild animals at the cost of human lives. Fallen nature is still, basically, man’s enemy. The time for the wolf to live with the lamb, and the leopard to lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; while a little child leads them, had not yet come.²²⁵ God even gave priority to a debased human race over a safari of wild animals; the Canaanites would serve for the time being, to keep the wild animal population down. Vs. 22 is a repetition of what Moses had said earlier, which is recorded in Exodus.²²⁶

Reading the last four verses of this chapter, one gets, again, the impression that the enemy that is targeted is not to population of Canaan but the demonic powers that govern them. They are the kings whose names would be wiped out from under heaven. The human beings who wore the crown were mere puppets of the kingdom of darkness. That is why the images of idols were to be burned and the precious metal was to be destroyed. God wanted Israel to eliminate the stench of demonism from the land of Canaan. The struggle was not against flesh and blood, but between light and darkness. Some of the idol statues may have been masterpieces of art, and the temptation to preserve them would be strong. Added to this was the value of the precious metal. But God wanted everything that would remind His children of the kingdom of darkness to be removed from their midst.

Some Christians believe that objects that have been dedicated to demons are actually inhabited by them, and that the presence of an idol image in the house of a Christian exercises a negative spiritual influence upon the home. This sounds like an animistic fear of inanimate objects, which I do not share. But I do not want pictures that remind me of God’s archenemy in my home either.

Among a nation that had lived for centuries in Egypt, a land where idol worship was rampant, and where idols could be seen at the corner of every street, the pull toward idolatry must still have been rather strong. God wanted them to be protected against this kind of danger. He also knew the future of the people He had chosen, and loved. He knew that idol worship would be their undoing, and He wanted to postpone the disintegration of the nation as long as possible.

CHAPTER EIGHT

II. The Explanation of the Ten Commandments 5:1-11:32

D. The Command to Remember the Lord 8:1-20

Matthew Henry’s Commentary remarks on this chapter : “The wilderness was the school in which they had been for forty years boarded and taught, under tutors and governors; and this was a time to bring it all to

²²⁴ I Cor. 1:25

²²⁵ See Isa. 11:6

²²⁶ See Ex. 23:28-30

remembrance. The occurrences of these last forty years were very memorable and well worthy to be remembered, very useful and profitable to be remembered, as yielding a complication of arguments for obedience; and they were recorded on purpose that they might be remembered. As the Feast of the Passover was a memorial of their deliverance out of Egypt, so was the Feast of Tabernacles of their passage through the wilderness. Note, it is very good for us to remember all the ways both of God's providence and grace, by which he has led us hitherto through this wilderness, that we may be prevailed with cheerfully to serve him and trust in him. Here let us set up our Ebenezer."

In this chapter Moses encourages the Israelites to look back, to look forward, and to look up. The nation stood on a threshold. They had just come out of the desert, and they were about to enter the Promised Land. Moses wanted them to pause and to meditate upon the meaning of their past experiences, in order to understand the meaning of what they would experience in the future.

Moses says that the purpose of the prolonged journey through the wilderness was "to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands." God knew, of course, what was in their hearts. We read about Jesus: "But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man."²²⁷ The test results were not for God's benefit but for man's.

The key verse in this chapter is, beyond doubt, vs. 3: "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." The key words are "to humble," and "to teach." Man needs humility to understand the meaning of life, as it presents itself to him. Life has a meaning beyond that which is visible. We need humility in order to understand what our real needs are. God wants us to be satisfied with the real thing, not with the surrogates and substitutes that are offered to us.

We also need humility to live victoriously. The greatest danger is ultimately not the enemy outside but the enemy inside us. The key to victory is the Word of God. "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." The most important organ in our body is not our stomach but our heart. The most important part of our life is not our body but our spirit. God is more interested in our heart than in anything else about us. He said to Samuel: "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."²²⁸ And Solomon's advice is: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."²²⁹

When we begin to pay attention to what is in our heart, we come to the shocking discovery that "the wellspring of life" is polluted. Jesus says: "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."²³⁰ And Jeremiah tells us: "The heart is the most deceitful thing there is and desperately wicked. No one can really know how bad it is!"²³¹ This discovery ought to make one humble. The antonym of humility is pride, which is at the core of all sin. It was pride that caused the fall of Lucifer, and pride causes us to lose sight of God's reality. Only humble people are realists. No one can stand before the throne of God, and see His glory, and at the same time be proud of himself.

Moses does not use the word "humble" here in the sense of being humiliated. God did not want to crush His children, or rub their faces in the dirt; He wants them to hunger and thirst for the real thing. Isaiah expresses this best of all when he says: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live."²³²

The words "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD," are quoted by Jesus during His temptation in the desert by Satan. This simple quote gave Christ the victory. Jesus did not mention the part about God's humbling of man, but in the light of the fact that Satan appealed to Jesus' pride in all three of the temptations, the context from which the quote was taken acquired significance.

The words not only emphasize man's need, but also the character of the Word of God. "Every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" is life giving. The Word of God is the key to creation. "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."²³³ And: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the

²²⁷ John 2:24,25

²²⁸ I Sam. 16:7

²²⁹ Prov. 4:23

²³⁰ Matt. 15:19

²³¹ Jer. 17:9 (TLB)

²³² Isa. 55:1-3

²³³ Gen. 1:3

Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."²³⁴ In comparison with the Word of God, the human use of words in a language is barely more than sounds with meaning. Our ability to speak is derived from the Word of God, but it has little or no connection with the complex of creative power and salvation that comes out of the mouth of the LORD. God's Word is awesome!

In making a comparison between bread and the Word of God, God demonstrates that one is a picture of the other. In one of His great sermons in John's Gospel, Jesus calls bread, "food that spoils," and the Word of God "food that endures to eternal life."²³⁵ Referring to the manna, He said: "It is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."²³⁶ Our life on earth is filled with pictures and illustration of eternal life. The moment of conception, the relationship of children to parents, and of parents to children, the love between husband and wife, the elements that sustain our physical life, all point to a reality of the life God wants us to share with Him in eternity. As a matter of fact, the whole journey through the desert, which linked Egypt to Canaan, illustrates our pilgrimage to our eternal destiny. God delivers us from slavery, and leads us through this life, made barren by sin, to the Promised Land. The guide is His Word, that is the record of His dealings with man in the past, the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the voice of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

We may go through times of physical hardship. The Israelites suffered from hunger and thirst in the desert. There was food rationing. Each person received "one omer" of manna per day, which TLB paraphrases as "about two quarts."²³⁷ Water was, occasionally, only provided after they had experienced thirst.²³⁸ The only times there was an abundance of food, it was given by way of punishment.²³⁹ Sometimes God punishes man by giving him too much.

God kept His children on short rations in order to teach them discipline. He did not want them to go through life just eating and drinking, but knowing why they lived. He wanted them to live consciously, and existentially. "Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you." All this was necessary because they would be entering a land of plenty, "a land flowing with milk and honey." This expression is used fifteen times in the Pentateuch to describe the Promised Land. God never intends His children to live on a shoestring, but He wants them to deal responsibly with the blessings He bestows upon them. For most people abundance is their undoing. It takes strong legs to be able to bear wealth. Only those who have known want are equipped to deal with plenty, and even that is not always the case. The best insurance, both in need and abundance, is praise. The Apostle Paul writes: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."²⁴⁰ And: "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."²⁴¹ It is tragic to see how some people, all of a sudden, come into possession of wealth, and they have no idea what to do with it. They can only think how to spend it on themselves, and consequently they end up falling under God's judgment.

God wanted to bless and spare Israel at the same time, but, as history proved, in spite of the way God had prepared them, they were not ready. They never learned that the God, who had led them through want, could lead them through prosperity also.

The provision of food and drink during the journey through the wilderness had often been miraculous. "Men ate the bread of angels."²⁴² When Adam fell in sin, and had to be expelled from Paradise, God told him: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground."²⁴³ This curse was miraculously suspended during the forty years' trek through the desert. But another law was suspended also, the law of diminishing returns. "Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not

²³⁴ John 1:1-4, 14

²³⁵ See John 6:27

²³⁶ John 6:32,33

²³⁷ Ex. 16:16

²³⁸ Ex. 17:1,2

²³⁹ See Num. 11:4-6, 10, 18-21, 31-34

²⁴⁰ Phil. 4:11-13

²⁴¹ I Thes. 5:16-18

²⁴² Ps. 78:25

²⁴³ Gen. 3:17-19

swell during these forty years.” It may not be fashionable, but it is supernatural if one can wear the same clothing for forty year and not wear them out, and it is marvelous to walk for forty years through scorching hot sand and not develop any foot problems. Yet, Israel had to admit that neither they, nor their clothing was any worse for this extended travel. But the miracles of the past, and their lessons did not carry over in the future. The next generation never looked back; no younger generation ever does.

Some commentators believe that the reference to the clothing does not necessarily point to a miraculous intervention, but that there was such an abundance of wool, and so many skilled tailors among the people, that new clothing was always available. *The Pulpit Commentary* says that the Hebrew rather indicates that the clothes upon them were not worn out nor fell from them in rags, because God gave them a marvelous durability. The commentary also mentions other extreme interpretations, saying: “Still less need we resort to such fanciful suppositions as that the garments of the Israelitish children expanded as they grew up, like the shells of snails—which is the notion of some of the Jewish rabbins, and adopted by some of the Christian Fathers.” The meaning of the Hebrew word for “swell” in the phrase “your feet did not swell during these forty years,” seems to be unclear. *The Pulpit Commentary* points to a parallel passage in which says: “During the forty years that I led you through the desert, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet,”²⁴⁴ and suggests that probably the same is meant here.

The Adam Clarke Commentary says here: “The plain meaning of this much-tortured text appears to me to be this: ‘God so amply provided for them all the necessities of life, that they never were obliged to wear tattered garments, nor were their feet injured for lack of shoes or sandals.’ If they had carvers, engravers, silversmiths, and jewelers among them, as plainly appears from the account we have of the tabernacle and its utensils, is it to be wondered at if they also had habit and sandal makers, etc., etc., as we are certain they had weavers, embroiderers, and such like? And the traffic which we may suppose they carried on with the Moabites, or with traveling hordes of Arabians, doubtless supplied them with the materials, though, as they had abundance of sheep and neat cattle, they must have had much of the materials within themselves. It is generally supposed that God, by a miracle, preserved their clothes from wearing out: but if this sense be admitted, it will require, not one miracle, but a chain of the most successive and astonishing miracles ever wrought, to account for the thing; for as there were not less than 600,000 males born in the wilderness, it would imply that the clothes of the infant grew up with the increase of his body to manhood, which would require a miracle to be continually wrought on every thread, and on every particle of matter of which that thread was composed. And this is not all; it would imply that the clothes of the parent became miraculously lessened to fit the body of the child, with whose growth they were again to stretch and grow, etc. No such miraculous interference was necessary.”

It is not unreasonable to suppose that the preservation of the clothing and sandals was not so much a touch of magic, as well as a blend of human ingenuity, and industry, and divine intervention. This would be sufficient to recognize the hand of God in the matter.

The purpose of the experience was discipline. This word is placed in the context of a relationship between father and son. “Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.” The purpose of this discipline, which was meted out in a context of love, was to prepare the people for the life that awaited them. God did not teach them a lesson in the punitive sense of the word, but in a preparatory and educational way, embedded in fatherly affection.

This may be the first time in Scripture where the concept of God as our heavenly Father is introduced. The name Father is not used in this verse, but the idea is there. Later, Moses will say to the people: “Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?”²⁴⁵ It is not until the New Testament, however, that Jesus presents God to us as “*The Father*,” the archetype of all parenthood. To the Samaritan woman, for instance, He says: “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.”²⁴⁶

In the previous chapter, Moses indicated that the basis for obedience to the law of God is love. Here, this thought is further worked out in the setting of this intimate relationship between a father and his son. This sounds like good New Testament theology, doesn’t it?

In the verses 8 through 10, Moses describes the land of Canaan as a good land, a land of abundance. Egypt had always depended for its survival on the flooding of the Nile, which meant that it benefited from rain that fell in other parts of their continent. Canaan would have its own rainfall, which made it “a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills.” Most biblical commentaries, and Bible Encyclopedias speak

²⁴⁴ Ch. 29:5

²⁴⁵ Ch. 32:6

²⁴⁶ John 4:23

about the climate in the Middle East in terms of the present conditions, overlooking the fact that there may have been considerable climatic changes over the centuries.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, writes about the water-supply in Egypt and Palestine: "In Egypt there is little or no rainfall, the water for vegetation being supplied in great abundance by the river Nile; but in Syria and Palestine there are no large rivers, and the people have to depend entirely on the fall of rain for water for themselves, their animals and their fields. The children of Israel when in Egypt were promised by Yahweh a land which 'drinketh water of the rain of heaven' <Deut 11:11>. Springs and fountains are found in most of the valleys, but the flow of the springs depends directly on the fall of rain or snow in the mountains." The commentary then proceeds to describe the climate and cultivation of Palestine, based upon the present conditions. We read: "The amount of rainfall in ancient times was probably about the same as in present times, though it may have been distributed somewhat differently through the year, as suggested by Huntington. Conder maintains that the present amount would have been sufficient to support the ancient cities. ... Trees are without doubt fewer now, but meteorologists agree that trees do not produce rain." This reasoning seems flawed. It is true that trees do not produce rain immediately, and directly, but the results of deforestation are disastrous for a land, and ultimately turn large sections of well watered ground into deserts. There appears to have been definite rainy seasons, though, as is evident from Biblical phrases such as: "The winter is past; the rain is over."²⁴⁷ Also, Joel's prophecy seems to indicate that there was rain in the spring, as well as in the fall. "Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before."²⁴⁸ But those verses were written more than a millennium after the Israelites entered Canaan. There is no way of knowing what climate changes may have taken place in a thousand years.

The gist of Moses' remarks here is that the land will produce an abundance of food, and that there would be enough iron and copper ore to set up a thriving industry. There was no reason for Israel not to become a very prosperous nation, a nation blessed by God. Their prosperity would even lead them to believe that blessing and prosperity were identical.

Moses issued a severe warning of the danger of prosperity. Abundance tends to make people spiritually lazy, disobedient and proud. Moses said: "You will lack nothing." This ought to result in praise of the Lord, but in practice it ended in disastrous idolatry. When praise of God diminishes, man begins to praise himself, and he becomes manipulative. Since God cannot be manipulated, he turns to idols. Man thinks he can make an idol do what he wants it to do, not realizing that behind every idol is a demon that wants to manipulate man.

All corruption begins with a lack of praise, and the next step is disobedience of God's law, finally ending in a self-conceited attitude, as if the abundance is merely the fruit of man's ingenuity and labor. When the picture of where we came from blurs, when we forget what we were like before God saved us, we lose the vision of where we are going, and we live in the present without knowing where we are. The Apostle Paul expresses the same thought in his Epistle to the Romans: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles."²⁴⁹

When Israel trekked through the desert, they were kept alive by miracles. In Canaan, miracles would become obsolete. There would be no need from manna from heaven, or water from the rock. Bread would come from full granaries, and water straight from a full well. If a person depends on a miracle to stay alive, he needs faith. When miracles cease, faith becomes obsolete also; or so we think. In reality, there is little difference between the way in which God keeps us alive in this world: miraculous, or natural. In a way, Israel lived in spiritual abundance in the desert, and they came to a spiritual desert when they entered Canaan. After all, "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." This warning will be heard again in Moses' later addresses to the nation.

Besides praise for God, another safeguard against deterioration is the knowledge and memory of history. Whether on a national level, or as individuals, we always have to remember where we came from, and who it was who brought us where we are. It was Gideon's knowledge of history that made him say to the Angel of the Lord: "Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."²⁵⁰ This kind of remembrance

²⁴⁷ Cant. 2:11

²⁴⁸ Joel 2:23

²⁴⁹ Rom. 1:21-23

²⁵⁰ Judg. 6:13

would keep the people from saying to themselves: “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” There is a place for pride in our achievements, as long as we remember who gave us the ability.

Moses made it sound that the punishment for idolatry and unfaithfulness to God would be prompt and swift. In practice such is rarely the case. The psalmist Asaph struggled with this, when he wrote: “But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills...”²⁵¹ Israel spent more than a millennium in the Promised Land before God evicted them as a punishment for their sins. Swift punishment would have been the easiest solution. God’s mercy and compassion, which should have wooed His children back to Him, made apostasy root more deeply.

CHAPTER NINE

II. The Explanation of the Ten Commandments 5:1-11:32

E. The Commands about Self-Righteousness 9:1-10:11

An even greater danger than pride in their affluence, as if it was achieved by their own accomplishments, would be to attribute their victories to their own strength. God promised them victory over an enemy that was stronger than they were. If, for one moment, they would believe that the strength was theirs, instead of the power of God, they would be in grave danger. Moses does not directly mention the enemy behind the enemy, but in the enumeration of their moral failures we can see the allusion that their own sinful nature made them highly susceptible to demonic manipulations.

This is the reason why Moses, in a painfully detailed manner, rehearses their past failures as a nation. Now, this generation had not committed the acts that Moses mentioned. The sins of the fathers were imputed to the children, unless they acknowledged their previous history as guilt before the Lord, and distanced themselves from the sins of the former generation by living in obedience to the law of God.

Moses, therefore, went over the instances of disobedience “from the day you left Egypt until you arrived here.” The first major failure was at Horeb, where the people made the Golden Calf. Then there is mention of incidences at Taberah, at Massah and at Kibroth Hattaavah. At Taberah the people complained about their hardship, and by way of punishment a fire broke out in the camp.²⁵² The incident at Massah (and Meriba) pertained to the people complaining about a lack of water.²⁵³ At Kibroth Hattaavah the people craved for meat, and were fed such an abundance of quail, that it lasted them for a whole month.²⁵⁴

The enemy they faced was a formidable one. Moses uses a proverb about the Anakim: “You know about them and have heard it said: ‘Who can stand up against the Anakites?’ ” The context suggests that this saying had been coined before Israel even came to the borders of Canaan.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia says the following about the Anakites: “Ahiman - One of the names given as those of the three ‘children of the Anak’ (<Num 13:22; Josh 15:14>; of <Num 13:28; 2 Sam 21:16,18>), or the three ‘sons of the Anak’ <Josh 15:14; Judg 1:20>. The three names (Ahiman, Sheshai, Talmai) also occur together in <Judg 1:10>. The word Anak in the Hebrew Bible has the definite article except in <Num 13:33> and <Deut 9:2>. Its use is that of a common noun denoting a certain type of man, rather than as the proper name of a person or a clan, though this need not prevent our thinking of the Anakim as a clan or group of clans, who regarded Arba as their founder. The question is raised whether Ahiman and Sheshai and Talmai are to be thought of as persons or as clans. The most natural understanding of the Bible statements is certainly to the effect that they were personal leaders among the Anakim of Kiriath-arba (Hebron). They were smitten and dispossessed by the tribe of Judah, with Caleb for leader.”

God would permit them to conquer the invincible. There was a danger that this kind of victory would go to their heads, and that they would believe that the source of their strength was in themselves. We have a classic illustration in the tragic story of Samson and Delilah. After Delilah had cut off Samson’s hair, we read: “He awoke from his sleep and thought, ‘I’ll go out as before and shake myself free.’ But he did not know that the LORD had left

²⁵¹ Ps. 73:2-5

²⁵² See Num. 11:1-3

²⁵³ See Ex. 17:1-7

²⁵⁴ See Num. 11:4-6, 18-23, 31-34

him.”²⁵⁵ The Apostle Paul recognized the danger. He understood who he could become, but for the grace of God, and so he wrote to the Corinthians: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great Revelation, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” And elsewhere he says: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”²⁵⁶ Man’s greatest enemy is man himself, and the greatest hindrance in our relationship with God is our own sinful nature. Blessed is the man who recognizes this, and who reckons with it. We are in grave danger if we come to the point where we believe that we are what we are not.

In the previous chapter, Moses had emphasized the fact that God loved Israel; in this chapter it becomes clear that this love is not based on what they were in themselves. The reason for their victories was not their own perfection, but the perfidy of the enemy. “It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity ... but on account of the wickedness of these nations.” One of the unsolved mysteries of the Bible is that God uses imperfect men to accomplish His purpose. The Apostle Paul touches on this “foolishness” when he says: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”²⁵⁷ It is good advice to “think of what we were when we were called.” It will help us not to boast in what is not ours.

It is for the reason of making Israel understand the dangers of their own sinful nature that Moses enumerates in such detail the failures of the past. Generally speaking, it is unhealthy to dwell on past sins after the Lord has forgiven them. David testified: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us,”²⁵⁸ implying that we should not try to recover them. And the prophet Micah wrote: “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”²⁵⁹ The Dutch lady, Corrie ten Boom, used to say, in connection with this verse, that God had placed a sign on the beach: “No Fishing!” There are, however, instances when a reminder of past sins is in order, especially if grace has not done its work in a person’s heart.

We have to remember, though, that it was not this generation that had made the Golden Calf, or done any of the things that Moses recapitulates here. Most of these people were not even born yet when Israel left Egypt; yet Moses says: “Remember this and never forget how you provoked the LORD your God to anger in the desert. From the day you left Egypt until you arrived here, you have been rebellious against the LORD.” He speaks of several generations as one. This also seems to be a principle in Jesus’ attack upon the Scribes and Pharisees of His time. In Matthew’s Gospel, He says: “So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.”²⁶⁰ This must be the way God looks at humanity; He treats us as either in Adam, or in Christ. As Israel stood at the border of Canaan, they were still very much “in Adam.”

The main purpose of Moses’ rehearsal of the incident of apostasy was, undoubtedly, to impress upon the people the fact that, if their ancestors almost forfeited God’s election of them as “a kingdom of priests” there would be no reason not to believe that the same could happen to them. Moses went to quite some length in his narrative to demonstrate how close the nation had come to annihilation.

The vividness of Moses’ own recollections is another reason for the detailed description. For Moses, the forty-day encounter with God, when the Ten Commandments were received, was, in more than one sense, a mountain top experience. Never before had any human being thus communed with God. A more striking contrast between the presence of the Almighty on top of the mountain in the midst of what appears to have been a volcanic eruption, and the riotous idol worship at the foot of the mountain, can hardly be imagined. More than mere common anger must have gripped Moses when he smashed the two stone tablets.

²⁵⁵ Judges 16:20

²⁵⁶ II Cor. 4:7

²⁵⁷ I Cor. 1:25-29

²⁵⁸ Ps. 103:12

²⁵⁹ Micah 7:19

²⁶⁰ Matt. 23:31, 35,36

The reference to Aaron's guilt in the worship of the Golden Calf is not mentioned explicitly in the Exodus account of the event. Aaron's excuse sounds rather lame to us. When Moses said to Aaron: "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?" we read Aaron's answer that really does not explain his role: "Do not be angry, my lord. . . . You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"²⁶¹ We do not get the impression there that Aaron was in danger of forfeiting his life. It is clear, though, that both the nation, and their high priest, owed their lives to Moses' intercession. It may sound strange to us that Moses would bring up the subject of Aaron's sin, after his death. This generation had only known Aaron as the high priest of the people, the man who brought about atonement for their sins; the only man who was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies. To hear, maybe for the first time, that Aaron himself had fallen into sin, and faced death because of it, must have come as a severe shock to these people. They must have realized that soon Moses would no longer be there to intercede for them, and they would be like sinners in the hands of an angry God.

The amazing part is that, after Aaron's guilt and narrow escape, he was made high priest of God's people. Aaron was not appointed high priest on the basis of his own merits, but on the basis of God's grace and pardon. In foreshadowing the high priestly office of Jesus Christ, Aaron does not appear to us as a strong character, but as a rather weak man, who was easily swayed by pressure put upon him. The writer to the Hebrews says therefore: "For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever."²⁶²

Matthew Henry's Commentary summarizes vs. 22 by saying: "Even after this fair escape that they had, in many other instances they provoked the Lord again and again. He needed only to name the places, for they carried the memorials either of the sin or of the punishment in their names (v. 22): at Taberah, burning, where God set fire to them for their murmuring,-- at Massah, the temptation, where they challenged almighty power to help them,-- and at Kibroth-hattaavah, the graves of lusts, where the dainties they coveted were their poison; and, after these, their unbelief and distrust at Kadesh-barnea, of which he had already told them (ch. 1), and which he here mentions again (v. 23), would certainly have completed their ruin if they had been dealt with according to their own merits. Now let them lay all this together, and it will appear that whatever favour God should hereafter show them, in subduing their enemies and putting them in possession of the land of Canaan, it was not for their righteousness. It is good for us often to remember against ourselves, with sorrow and shame, our former sins, and to review the records conscience keeps of them, that we may see how much we are indebted to free grace, and may humbly own that we never merited at God's hand any thing but wrath and the curse."

In vs. 25 Moses returns to the scene at Mount Sinai. As *The Pulpit Commentary* points out, Moses' prayer of intercession, mentioned here, is the one before he descended from the top of the mountain.²⁶³ It is obvious that there is no chronological order in Moses' reminiscences. It is understandable, though, why his thoughts would return to Mount Sinai, which was not only the place of Israel's most serious moral lapse, but also the summit of Moses' personal experience with the Lord, the mountaintop of the whole Old Testament. It was not only the place of Israel's survival, due to Moses' intercession, but also the place where Israel did, in fact, become the guardians of God's revelation in this world. There they received the law, and erected the tabernacle, the place of atonement for their sins, and for fellowship with God. Looking back into history, the Apostle Paul would say about Israel: "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."²⁶⁴ It began at Mount Sinai, it would be fulfilled in Bethlehem, and on Golgotha.

CHAPTER TEN

- II. The Explanation of the Ten Commandments** 5:1-11:32
- E. The Commands about Self-Righteousness** (continued) 9:1-10:11
- F. The Commands Regarding Blessings and Cursings** 10:12-22

²⁶¹ See Ex. 32:21-24

²⁶² Heb. 7:28

²⁶³ See Ex. 32:11-13

²⁶⁴ Rom. 9:4,5

The chronology of Moses' account does not coincide with the record in Exodus. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: "When Moses thus interceded, God commanded him to prepare two new tables of stone, and to construct an ark in which to keep them (cf. Exod. xxxiv, 1, etc.). Directions had been given for the construction of the ark before the apostasy of the people, and it was not made till after the tabernacle had been erected, nor were the tables placed in it till the tabernacle had been consecrated (cf. Exod. xxv, 10, etc.; xl. 20). But as the things themselves were closely connected, Moses mentions them here together, without regard to chronological order."

Obviously, the point Moses wants to impress upon the people at this time is that the Ten Commandments, which were written on the tablets of stone by God Himself, were among them, stored inside the ark of the covenant. These commandments had been given to them three times: once orally, when God descended on Mount Sinai, once on the first set of tablets which Moses smashed when he saw the Golden Calf, and, finally, on the tablets that were inside the ark.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary says about the writing of the commandments: "[He wrote on the tables, according to the first writing]-- i. e., not Moses, acting under the divine direction, as the amanuensis (copyist), but God Himself, who made this inscription a second time with His own hand, to testify the importance He attached to the Ten Commandments. Different from other stone monuments of antiquity, which were made to stand upright, and in the open air, those on which the divine law was engraven were portable, and designed to be kept as a treasure." Other religions have traditions of objects that are believed to be of divine origin. The Kaaba in Mecca is supposed to be a stone that fell from heaven. Also, the image of Artemis in Ephesus, about which we read in The Book of Acts: "The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: 'Men of Ephesus, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven?'"²⁶⁵ Both objects were probably meteorites. They became objects to which popular belief attributed supernatural qualities. None of these communicate a divine message, like the two stone tablets. And, as *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* points out, they were all on public display, not hidden from the human eye like the Ten Commandments.

This hiding of the tablets had a deep symbolic meaning. It did not imply that the commandments would not have to be obeyed since they were out of sight. It rather signified that the breaking of the commandments had to be atoned for in order to save the lives of the offenders. The tablets were kept safe inside the ark, but the people were protected from the law's demand for perfection. The Apostle Paul understood this clearly, when he wrote to the Roman Christians: "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. ... We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin."²⁶⁶ The tablets of the law were covered by the "mercy seat," that is the place where the blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. Although the Israelites whom Moses addressed knew about the ritual of the Day of Atonement, it is doubtful they would have understood the implications for their own lives.

There seems to be a rather strange parenthesis in the verses 6-9. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* makes the following lengthy observation about this: "On a very important subject in this chapter Dr. Kennicott has the following judicious observations: 'The book of Deuteronomy contains the several speeches made to the Israelites by Moses just before his death, recapitulating the chief circumstances of their history, from their deliverance out of Egypt to their arrival on the banks of Jordan. What in this book he has recorded as spoken will be best understood by comparing it with what he has recorded as done in the previous history; and this, which is very useful as to the other parts of this book, is absolutely necessary as to the part of the tenth chapter here to be considered. The previous circumstances of the history necessary to be here attended to are these: In <Exo. 20>, God speaks the Ten Commandments; in <Exo. 24> Moses, on Mount Sinai, receives the two tables, and is there forty days and nights; in <Exo. 25-27>, God appoints the service of the tabernacle; in <Exo. 28> separates Aaron and his sons for the priest's office, by a statute forever, to him and his seed after him; in <Exo. 32> Moses, incensed at the golden calf, breaks the tables; yet he prays for the people, and God orders him to lead them toward Canaan; in <Exo. 34> Moses carries up two other tables, and stays again forty days and nights. In <Num. 3>, the tribe of Levi is selected; <Num. 8>, consecrated; <Num. 10> and 11 the Israelites march from Sinai on the twentieth day of the second month in the second year; in <Num. 13> spies sent; in <Num. 14> the men are sentenced to die in the wilderness during the forty years; in <Num. 18> the Levites are to have no lot nor large district in Canaan, but to be the Lord's inheritance; in <Num. 20> Aaron dies on Mount Hor; lastly, in the complete catalogue of the whole march <Num. 33> we are told that they went from Moseroth to Bene-jaakan, thence to Hor-hagidgad, to Jotbathah, to Ebronah, to Ezion-gaber, to Zin, (which is Kadesh,) and thence to Mount Hor, where Aaron died in the fortieth and last year. In Deuteronomy, <Deut. 9>, Moses tells the Israelites, <Deut. 9:7>, that they had been rebels, from Egypt even to Jordan, particularly

²⁶⁵ Acts 19:35

²⁶⁶ Rom. 7:12,14

at Horeb, <Deut. 9:8-29>, whilst he was with God, and received the tables at the end of forty days and nights; and that, after breaking the tables, he fasted and interceded for his brethren during a second period of forty days and nights; and this ninth chapter ends with the prayer which he then made. <Deut. 10> begins thus: ‘ ‘At that time the Lord said unto me, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first, and come up,’ ’ etc. And from <Deut. 10:1> to the end of <Deut. 10:5> he describes the second copy of the Ten Commandments, as written also by God, and deposited by himself in the ark.

After this we have now four verses, (6, 7, 8, and 9,) which not only have no kind of connection with the verses before and after them, but also, as they stand in the present Hebrew text, directly contradict that very text; and the two first of these verses have not, in our Hebrew text, the least connection with the two last of them. Our Hebrew text, <Deut. 10:6>, says that Israel journeyed from Bene-jaakan to Mosera. Whereas that very text in the complete catalogue, <Num. 33:31>, says they journeyed from Moseroth to Bene-jaakan. Again: Aaron is here said to have died at Mosera, whereas he died on Mount Hor, the seventh station afterward; see <Num. 33:38>. And again: they are here said to go from Bene-jaakan to Mosera, thence to Gudgodah, and thence to Jotbath; whereas the complete catalogue says, Moseroth to Bene-jaakan, thence to Hor-hagidgad, and thence to Jotbathah. But if the marches could possibly be true as they now stand in these two verses, yet what connection can there be between JOTBATH and the SEPARATION OF THE TRIBE OF LEVI? It is very happy that these several difficulties in the Hebrew text are removed by the SAMARITAN Pentateuch: for that text tells us here rightly that the march was from Moseroth to Bene-jaakan; to Hagidgad, to Jotbathah, to Ebronah, to Ezion-gaber, to Zin, (which is Kadesh,) and thence to Mount Hor, where Aaron died. Again: as the regular deduction of these stations ends with Mount Hor and Aaron’s death, we have then what we had not before, a regular connection with the two next verses, and the connection is this: That when Aaron, the son of Amram, the son of Kohath, the son of LEVI, died, neither the tribe of Levi nor the priesthood was deserted, but God still supported the latter by maintaining the former; and this, not by allotting that tribe any one large part of Canaan, but separate cities among the other tribes, and by allowing them to live upon those offerings which were made by the other tribes to God himself. These four verses therefore, (6, 7, 8 and 9,) in the same text, stand thus: (<Deut. 10:6>.; WHEN the children of Israel journeyed from Moseroth, and encamped in Bene-jaakan; from thence they journeyed and encamped at Hagidgad; from thence they journeyed and encamped in Jotbathah, a land of rivers of water: (7) From thence they journeyed and encamped in Ebronah; in Ezion-gaber; in the wilderness of Zin, which is Kadesh; and then at Mount Hor; And AARON DIED THERE, and there he was buried; and Eleazar his son ministered as priest in his stead. (8) at that time the Lord HAD separated the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord, to minister unto him, and to bless in his name unto this day. (9) wherefore Levi hath no part nor inheritance with his brethren; the Lord is his inheritance, according as the Lord thy God promised him.

But however consistent these four verses are now with themselves, it will be still demanded, What connection have they with the fifth verse before them, and with the tenth verse after them? I confess I cannot discover their least pertinence here, because AARON’S DEATH and LEVI’S SEPARATION seem totally foreign to the speech of Moses in this place. And this speech without these four verses is a regularly connected admonition from Moses to this purpose: that his brethren were forever to consider themselves as indebted to him, under God, for the renewal of the two tables, and also to his intercession for rescuing them from destruction. The words are these: <Deut. 10:4>, ‘ ‘The Lord wrote again the Ten Commandments, and gave them unto me. (5) and I came down from the mount, and put the tables in the ark, which I HAD made:-- (10) Thus, I stayed in the mount according to the first time, forty days and forty nights: and the Lord hearkened unto me at that time also; the Lord would not destroy thee. (11) and the Lord said unto me, Arise, take thy journey before the people, that they may go in and possess the land,’ ’ etc. But then, if these four verses were not at first a part of this chapter, but are evidently interpolated, there arises another inquiry, Whether they are an insertion entirely spurious, or a genuine part of the sacred text, though removed hither out of some other chapter? As they contain nothing singular or peculiar, are of no particular importance, and relate to no subject of disputation, they are not likely to have arisen from fraud or design; but, perfectly coinciding in sense with other passages, they may safely be considered as another instance of a large transposition (86 words) in the present text, arising from accident and want of care. And the only remaining question therefore is, Whether we can discover, though not to demonstration, yet with any considerable degree of probability, the original place of these four verses, that so they may be at last restored to that neighborhood and connection from which they have been, for so many ages, separated?

It was natural for Moses, in the course of these several speeches to his brethren in Deuteronomy, to embrace the first opportunity of impressing on their memories a matter of such particular importance as the continuation of the priesthood among the Levites after Aaron’s death. And the first proper place seems to be in the second chapter, after the first verse. At <Deut. 1:19> he speaks of their march from Horeb to Kadesh-barnea, whence they sent the spies into Canaan. He then sets forth their murmurings, and God’s sentence that they should die in the wilderness,

and he ends the first chapter with their being defeated by the Amorites, their weeping before the Lord, and abiding many days in KADESH, which is KADESH-BARNEA, near Canaan.

Deut. 2 begins thus: Then we turned, and took our journey into the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea, as the Lord spake unto me: and WE COMPASSED MOUNT SEIR MANY DAYS. Now, the many days, or long time, which they spent in compassing Mount Seir, that is, going round on the southwest coasts of Edom in order to proceed north-east from Edom through Moab to Arnon, must include several of their stations, besides that eminent one at Mount Hor, where Aaron died. And as part of their road, during this long compass, lay through Ezion-gaber, (which was on the eastern tongue of the Red Sea, and the south boundary of Edom,) thence to Zin, (which is KADESH, that is, MERIBAH KADESH,) and thence to Mount Hor, as they marched to the north-east; so it is probable that the five stations preceding that of Ezion-gaber were on the extremity of Mount Seir, to the south-west. And it their first station at entering the south-west borders of Edom, and beginning to compass Mount Seir, was Moseroth, this gives the reason wanted why Moses begins this passage at Moseroth, and ends it with Aaron's death at Mount Hor. And this will discover a proper connection between the four dislocated verses and the context here.-- <Deut. 1:46>: 'So ye abode in Kadesh (Barnea) many days.' ' <Deut. 2:1>: 'Then we turned, and took our journey into the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea, as the Lord spake unto me; and WE COMPASSED MOUNT SEIR MANY DAYS.'

For the children of Israel journeyed from Moseroth, and pitched in Bene-jaakan: from thence they journeyed and pitched in Hagidgad: from thence they journeyed and pitched in Jotbathah, a land of rivers of water: from thence they journeyed and pitched in Ebronah: from thence they journeyed and pitched in Ezion-gaber: from thence they journeyed and pitched in the wilderness of Zin, which is Kadesh: from thence they journeyed and pitched in Mount Hor, and Aaron died there, and there he was buried; and Eleazar his son ministered as priest in his stead. At that time the Lord had separated the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister unto him, and to bless in his name unto this day. Wherefore, Levi hath no part nor inheritance with his brethren; the Lord is his inheritance, according as the Lord thy God promised him.

And this paragraph being thus inserted at the end of the first verse, the second begins a new paragraph, thus: And the Lord spake unto me, saying, Ye have compassed this mountain long enough; turn you northward-- through the east side of Seir (or Edom) toward Moab on the north. See <Deut. 10:4-8>.'-- These remarks should not be hastily rejected." The gist of Kennicott's lengthy remarks then is that the verses 6-9 in this chapter should be placed between the verses 1 and 2 of chapter 2.

In verses 10 and 11, Moses concludes the story of his second intercession on Mount Sinai, which resulted in the Lord's forgiveness of His people, and to which the generation he was addressing owed their lives.

Having said this, Moses puts the choice before the nation: "to fear the Lord, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees." He tells them that obedience is for their own good. The fear of the Lord makes us realists. The realization of who God is cannot but make us stand in awe before Him. It is impossible for mortal man to catch a glimpse of the one who sits on the throne of heaven, who has the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and whose throne is encircled by a rainbow, resembling an emerald.²⁶⁷ The more we become aware of the measureless universe in which we live, and of the fact that, in Moses' words: "To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today," the more each of us should marvel at the depth of God's grace.

We talk about superpowers in this world, but Isaiah says: "Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales."²⁶⁸ Superpowers are not heavy enough to tip God's scales. God's presence goes beyond the stars that are millions of light-years away from us, yet He loves us! In looking for powerful, influential people to help us move up in life, we set our goals far too low. David expressed this so beautifully, when he wrote: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"²⁶⁹

F. The Commands Regarding Blessings and Cursings 10:12-22

The second admonition Moses gives to the people is "to walk in His ways." The image of a path is often used in the Bible. It speaks of the fact that we progress through time toward a certain goal in life. Jesus speaks of two gates, and two roads: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to

²⁶⁷ See Rev. 4:3

²⁶⁸ Isa. 40:15

²⁶⁹ Ps. 8:3,4

destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."²⁷⁰ The gate speaks of a moment of entry, and the road of progress. The gate is the place of discovery, the realization of who God is, and the determination to follow and obey Him. We pass through the gate only once, but we walk daily on the road. The road is small, but it leads to life. The gate stands for the choice, the road for the application of that which we have chosen.

Walking in God's ways, means walking where He walks. We read in Revelation about the ones who are gathered with Jesus on Mount Zion: "They follow the Lamb wherever he goes."²⁷¹ It means following His example. The Apostle Peter says: "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."²⁷² Because of the Incarnation, walking in His ways has become much easier for us, than it was for the Israelites of old.

As we have seen already, love for God is at the core of all obedience. The only motivation for following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ is the discovery of God's love for us, and our returning that love. It seems like an irreconcilable contrast, when we consider the eternal greatness of God, that evokes awe in our hearts, and the requirement to love the Almighty Creator. Awe and intimacy do not seem to grow on the same stock; yet they do. Love without some form of admiration is not genuine love. As our admiration grows into adoration, our love will grow accordingly. Love elevates us above ourselves, and at the same time it enslaves us. He who loves becomes the slaves of the object of his love. A most beautiful illustration of this is found in the words of the bond slave, who declares: "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free."²⁷³ Who wants freedom, if freedom means separation from the one we love?

Without this love for God, the commands and decrees of the law become a series of stipulations that have to be observed for fear of punishment. The Talmud, with its Mishna and Gemara demonstrate some of this lack of love, which made for a cataloguing and sifting of the commandments into ridiculous detail. It is this lack of a burning passion for God, that made Jesus call the Pharisees, "hypocrites." He said of them: "You give a tenth of your spices-- mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."²⁷⁴

The way the NIV puts it, there is a contrast between God's rule over the universe, and His love for the patriarchs and Israel. The use of the little word "yet" emphasizes this. It is a human tendency to think that greatness entails a lack of interest in smallness. We picture God as being too great to be bothered by details, because that is the way we would act if we became great. Jesus gives us a clearer pictures of God's greatness, when He tells His disciples: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered."²⁷⁵ The God who created the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it, is also the God who created the atoms. He is the God of the infinite great, and the infinite small. As human beings we are, probably, somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. God is not too great to love, and we are not too small to be loved by Him.

Moses' advice to the people, therefore, is "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer." *The Adam Clarke Commentary* observes: "A plain proof from God himself that this precept pointed out spiritual things, and that it was not the cutting away a part of the flesh that was the object of the divine commandment, but the purification of the soul, without which all forms and ceremonies are of no avail. Loving God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength, the heart being circumcised to enable them to do it, was, from the beginning, the end, design, and fulfillment of the whole law." The Apostle Paul clarifies this further by saying: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."²⁷⁶

As *The Adam Clarke Commentary* points out, Moses brings out the real meaning of circumcision. God had, for the first time, made an allusion to this when He said that the Israelites had "uncircumcised hearts."²⁷⁷ In the physical sense, circumcision pertains to the love relationship between husband and wife. In the spiritual sense the meaning is the same, in that it refers to a relationship of intimacy with God.

²⁷⁰ Matt. 7:13,14

²⁷¹ Rev. 14:4

²⁷² I Pet. 2:21

²⁷³ Ex. 21:5

²⁷⁴ Matt. 23:23

²⁷⁵ Matt. 10:29,30

²⁷⁶ Rom. 2:28,29

²⁷⁷ See Lev. 26:41

The question as to how one circumcises one's heart is answered at another place in Deuteronomy, where Moses says: "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."²⁷⁸ This verse also emphasizes the fact that circumcision and love are closely related. The prophet Jeremiah takes up the expression again, when he says: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done-- burn with no one to quench it."²⁷⁹ The Apostle Paul has the final word, when he writes to the Colossians: "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ,"²⁸⁰ and: "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh."²⁸¹ We cannot circumcise ourselves, either in the physical or the spiritual sense. God will condition our hearts, if we allow Him to do so, so that we can love Him with all that is in us.

Moses uses some very powerful rhetoric in these verses. We can imagine him standing in front of the people, proclaiming the greatness of God in a loud voice, with others standing at various strategic places to relay his words to the edge of the crowd. Here is a man who, more than anyone in the Old Testament, has seen the glory of God. He speaks from experience.

He also knows his audience very well. He is acquainted with the human tendency to make deals in inter-human relations. So he warns the people not to transpose the tactics they use with one another on God. The verses 17-20 suggests that corruption was rampant among the people, and that social injustice and racism were strong. The use of bribes must have been a common practice, and orphans, and widows were not cared for sufficiently; foreigners were treated as foreigners, especially in judicial affairs. Those practices were incompatible with the presence of God among them. "[God] defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing."

These verses also emphasize the fact that, not only are love for God and love for our neighbor inseparable, but also that our love for God is demonstrated in a practical way in love for our neighbor. This is what the Apostle John meant when he wrote: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."²⁸² James corroborates this by saying: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."²⁸³ The Lord comes to us in the disguise of our neighbor. On the day of judgment, in Jesus' words: "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me,' " and "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"²⁸⁴

Especially the love for aliens is an important point in Moses' address. Israel was on the verge of entering Canaan, and of exterminating the nations that occupied the land. This mandate seems hard to reconcile with the command to love aliens. It proves, however, that the conquest of Canaan was not a matter of racial prejudice, or ethnic cleansing but of a moral cleansing. People were not eliminated on the basis of their race, but of their crimes against God and humanity.

Finally, a positive reaction to suffering is implied in this command. Israel had been aliens in Egypt, where they had been treated, and humiliated as slaves. God wanted them to remember this without bearing grudges. They had to remember what it felt like, and decide that they would never lower themselves to the level of their Egyptian slave drivers. Jesus says: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."²⁸⁵

The taking of oaths in the Name of YHWH, in vs. 21 is a repeat of ch. 6:13. It re-emphasizes that our relationship with God rules our inter-human relations. Swearing by the Name of the Lord pertains specifically to commerce, and justice.

The phrase "He is your praise" says more than that Israel ought to praise God. It suggests that Israel should be praised, on account of God. *The Pulpit Commentary* interprets this as: "He is thy praise, i.e. the Object of thy

²⁷⁸ Ch. 30:6

²⁷⁹ Jer. 4:4

²⁸⁰ Col. 2:11

²⁸¹ Phil. 3:3

²⁸² I John 4:20,21

²⁸³ James 1:27

²⁸⁴ Matt. 25:40, 45

²⁸⁵ Matt. 7:12

praise; the Being who had given them abundant cause to praise him, and whom they were bound continually to praise.” But that is not what the text says. God’s revelation, and God’s presence elevates us as human beings. Jesus refers to this, although rather cryptically, when He says to the Jews, who accuse Him of blasphemy: “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods’? If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came-- and the Scripture cannot be broken...”²⁸⁶ And Paul says about Israel: “... the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.”²⁸⁷ Israel occupies such a high position in this world because of the fact that God entrusted His revelation to them.

Matthew Henry’s Commentary remarks here: “ ‘He is thy praise, and he is thy God, v. 21. Therefore love him and serve him, because of the relation wherein he stands to thee. He is thy God, a God in covenant with thee, and as such he is thy praise,’ that is [1.] ‘He puts honor upon thee; he is the God in whom, all the day long, thou mayest boast that thou knowest him, and art known of him. If he is thy God, he is thy glory.’ [2.] ‘he expects honor from thee. He is thy praise,’ that is ‘he is the God whom thou art bound to praise; if he has not praise from thee, whence may he expect it?’ He inhabits the praises of Israel. Consider, First, The gracious choice he made of Israel, v. 15. ‘He had a delight in thy fathers, and therefore chose their seed.’ Not that there was any thing in them to merit his favour, or to recommend them to it, but so it seemed good in his eyes. He would be kind to them, though he had no need of them. Secondly, The great things he had done for Israel, v. 21, 22. He reminds them not only of what they had heard with their ears, and which their fathers had told them of, but of what they had seen with their eyes, and which they must tell their children of, particularly that within a few generations seventy souls (for they were no more when Jacob went down into Egypt) increased to a great nation, as the stars of heaven for multitude. And the more they were in number the more praise and service God expected from them; yet it proved, as in the old world, that when they began to multiply they corrupted themselves.”

We may also see in the phrase “He is your praise” an indication of man’s depravity. We have nothing we can bring to God that would have any value as a sacrifice of praise. The only sacrifice the Israelites could bring was a substitution, an animal that took their place, and lost its life in behalf of the bringer. Our praise is the Lord Jesus Christ; He is the only expression of our worship that is acceptable to the Almighty.

“Those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes” were, of course, more than the tremendous population growth within about four centuries. The phrase stands for all the miracles that took place during the exodus and the journey through the wilderness. The great increase of population is also part of this. *The Pulpit Commentary* emphasizes the fact that, in the last verse the miracle consisted in the growth of the nation against all odds. We read: “Among other marvelous acts toward Israel, was one done in Israel itself; they, whose fathers went down to Egypt only seventy in number (Gen. xlv. 26, 27), had, notwithstanding the cruel oppression to which they were subjected there, grown to a nation numberless as the stars (cf. Gen. xxii. 17; ch. i. 10; Neh. ix. 23).”

There is a discrepancy between the number 70 quoted here, and also in Genesis record, and Stephen’s address, in Acts²⁸⁸, in which he mentions the number 75, which was a quote from the Septuagint. We can only assume that the scholars who worked on the latter translation made a copying mistake, or that they did not have access to the same sources as we do now.

The LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky refers to the original promise God made to Abraham. When Abraham drew God’s attention to the fact that he and Sarah had no children, we read: “He [God] took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars-- if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”²⁸⁹ Encapsulated in God’s promise to Abraham was the resurrection of the dead. Abraham and Sarah did not conceive Isaac until their bodies had died, and concept and birth had become impossible. God created life out of death when He gave Isaac to Abraham.

The Apostle Paul captures the real sense of this miracle when he says: “Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring-- not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’ He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed-- the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead-- since he was about a hundred years old-- and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in

²⁸⁶ John 10:34,35

²⁸⁷ Rom. 9: 4,5

²⁸⁸ See Acts 7:14

²⁸⁹ Gen. 15:5

his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.' The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness-- for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."²⁹⁰

The fulfillment of the promise to Abraham goes far beyond the miracle of Israel's numerical growth. God chose one man, who miraculously brought into the world one boy. Some time later a relatively small group of people, only seventy in all, went down to Egypt. When Moses addressed them they had grown into a nation of several million. When Jesus died on the cross, one grain of wheat fell into the ground of death. In Jesus' own words: "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."²⁹¹ The Apostle John received a vision of that harvest when, in Revelation, he wrote: "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"²⁹²

CHAPTER ELEVEN

II. The Explanation of the Ten Commandments 5:1-11:32

F. The Commands Regarding Blessings and Cursings (continued) 11:1-32

The outline is based on the section that begins with vs. 26: "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse..." Further instructions regarding this blessing and curse are found in ch. 27:12-26, where the nation is divided into two camps, with six of the tribes standing on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, and the other six on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses.

One strange phenomenon in this chapter is that in vs. 14 the text changes from the third person singular (the Lord your God) to the first person singular (I): "Then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and oil." The NIV is consistent with the KJV, but the RSV renders this verse, and others to "he will give the rain for your land..." The reading of the NIV would change the person speaking in this whole chapter from Moses to God, speaking directly through Moses' mouth.

The chapter picks up the theme that runs through the whole book of Deuteronomy, that love for God and obedience to the law are inseparable.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary states: "Because God has made thee as the stars of heaven for multitude (so the preceding chapter concludes), therefore thou shalt love the Lord thy God (so this begins). Those whom God has built up into families, whose beginning was small, but whose latter end greatly increases, should use that as an argument with themselves why they should serve God. Thou shalt keep his charge, that is, the oracles of his word and ordinances of his worship, with which they were entrusted and for which they were accountable. It is a phrase often used concerning the office of the priests and Levites, for all Israel was a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Observe the connection of these two: Thou shalt love the Lord and keep his charge, since love will work in obedience, and that only is acceptable obedience which flows from a principle of love. <1 Jn. 5:3>."

Again, the factor of the difference in generations comes up. We saw before that *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* proposed the interesting thesis that the book of Deuteronomy was "Spoken Twice," once to the first generation between Horeb and Kadesh-barnea in the 2nd year of the Exodus wanderings, and a second time to the new generation, in the plains of Moab in the 40th year. This thesis would explain the problem as to why Moses addresses the generation that experienced the exodus, but it does not solve the problem that, as a result of the forty-years wandering through the desert, the generation that Moses, supposedly, was addressing in Deuteronomy was no longer alive. Those who were at the verge of the Promised Land, themselves only knew of the exodus by hearsay. A certain number may have remembered the insurrection of Dathan and Abiram. It could be that some would remember the historical exodus, but those could not have been more than teenagers at the time of its occurrence. At the time of this address they were all people in their sixties. The majority of the nation that stood at the edge of the Promised Land will have been under forty, which means that most of the facts of salvation were for them part of an

²⁹⁰ Rom. 4:16-24

²⁹¹ John 12:24

²⁹² Rev. 7:9-10

oral tradition. I remember my father speaking about World War I when I was a kid; to me this was ancient history. Yet, I was born only twelve years after the end of that war. This is what forty-year-old history must have been to most of those people who heard Moses' words.

What Moses probably wanted to impress upon the people was the fact that what they were going through now in the conquest of Canaan would be ancient history to their children, just as the experiences of their parents was ancient history to them. Thus the importance of the written law is emphasized. The law was not only their moral code, it was also their record of history. The reading of the events that took place in the foregone decades would be as the living experience for the present. This principle may be one of the keys for understanding the book Deuteronomy. Jesus makes the same point in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, when He lets Abraham say to the rich man, who wanted a warning to be sent to his brothers: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. ... If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."²⁹³ For us also, the Gospel is not a set of rules, a code of moral behavior, it is a record of the facts of salvation, the application of which upon our lives will result in a correct moral behavior.

In his address to the nation, Moses places them, figuratively, on top of a mountain from where they can see the panorama of the past, and the future. He wanted to impart a vision to the people. This much-misused word "vision" means nothing more than the ability to look back, and to look forward, with the result that we know where we are in the present. After all, the present is the most crucial time in our lives. By it we determine the future and we digest the past. God wants us to live in the present, and to live it to the full. Any other kind of vision is merely a form of myopia.

The NIV uses the word "discipline" to translate the Hebrew *mucar*; the KJV translates it with "chastisement." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* writes: "Mucar is discipline, but more. As 'discipline' it teaches how to live correctly in the fear of the Lord, so that the wise man learns his lesson before temptation and testing: 'Then I saw, and considered it well: I looked upon it, and received instruction' <Prov. 24:32>. This 'discipline' is training for life; hence, paying attention to mucar is important."

The examples of *mucar*, Moses gives are the Ten Plagues in Egypt, although he does not spell them out, and the annihilation of the Egyptian army. From the journey through the desert, only the insurrection of Korah, Dathan and Abiram is mentioned. Although Korah was the main instigator, his name is not put on record here. These negative examples are punishments for disobedience of the law of God, and as such they are placed before the people. But, as *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* explains, *mucar* implies more than only negative examples of punishment. The writer to the Hebrews emphasizes the positive side of the concept of discipline, when he writes: "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."²⁹⁴

The way the NIV renders vs. 2, by placing a colon after "the discipline of the LORD your God," the phrase: "his majesty, his mighty hand, his outstretched arm" is meant to define the discipline. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines majesty as: "1 : sovereign power, authority, or dignity; also : the person of a sovereign — used as a title 2 : grandeur, splendor."

The image of God's mighty hand is often used in connection with a demonstration of His power. When God called Moses, He said: "But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go."²⁹⁵ The arm of God is an image used in connection with God's plan of salvation. God charged Moses to say to Israel: "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment."²⁹⁶ All this is included in the "discipline," meaning that it is part of Israel's education, part of their forming into a kingdom of priests, a nation in which God's glory is revealed in this world.

²⁹³ Luke 16:29,31

²⁹⁴ Heb. 12:5-11

²⁹⁵ Ex. 3:19,20

²⁹⁶ Ex. 6:6

Israel's heritage is unimaginably great. The Jews are the only people in this world to whom, and through whom God has revealed Himself. They are the link between sin and pardon, between perdition and salvation, between time and eternity. It is a frightful thought that a whole generation was growing up that had no notion of their position in this world.

The two examples of God's dealing with the nation of Israel Moses gives, pertain to their redemption from Egypt and their birth as a nation, and the insurrection against Moses, which accentuates the principle of authority. It cannot have been Moses' intention to put himself on a pedestal. We read in Numbers God's comment on Moses' ambitions: "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth."²⁹⁷ But the person of Moses including the role he played was of pivotal importance in the history of Israel's salvation. For us, this is a pointer to the position our Lord Jesus Christ occupies in our redemption and our victories. In Peter's words: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."²⁹⁸

Strangely enough, Korah's name is not mentioned here in Moses' address to the nation. *The Pulpit Commentary* states about this: "Moses does not mention Korah himself here, but only his accomplices Dathan and Abiram, probably, as Keil suggests, 'from regard to his sons, who were not swallowed up by the earth among with their father, but had lived to perpetuate the family of Korah;' perhaps also because, though Korah was at the head of the insurrection, Dathan and Abiram were the more determined, audacious and obdurate in their rebellion (cf. Numb. xiv. 12-15, 25,26), so that it came to be named from them."

The insurrection of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram represented on a smaller scale, what the nations of the earth endeavor to do in a larger degree. The psalmist says about this: "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One."²⁹⁹ This mutiny is demonically inspired, and it stretches out over the centuries. Every age has its own demonstrations. This is the reason why Moses warns his people not to be swept away by "the spirit of the age" which demonstrates itself in different forms, but always has the same goal.

If we connect the verses 2 and 8, we understand that, not only obedience was the requirement for victory in the conquest of Canaan, as far as the fathers were concerned, but also that love and obedience were to be an example the fathers give to their children. Fathers are supposed to be role models to their children, so that fellowship with God for a child becomes a natural thing to practice.

Moses emphasized the results of obedience as: strength to conquer, and permanence of possession. The phrase: "that you may live long in the land ..." pertains, no doubt both to personal longevity as well as to the perpetuity of Israel as a nation. The length of one's life was interpreted in the Old Testament as an indication of God's blessing. Isaiah depicts the Lord's blessing with the words: "Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed."³⁰⁰ For us, as New Testament Christians, the number of years we spend on earth is irrelevant. The Apostle John assures us: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."³⁰¹

In verses 10-12, Moses compared the land of Canaan with Egypt. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* comments on the phrase: "For the land, whither thou goest in to possess it, is not as the land of Egypt, from whence ye came out, where thou sowedst thy seed, and wateredst it with thy foot, as a garden of herbs: [Wateredst it with thy foot] Rain scarcely ever falls in Egypt, and God supplies the lack of it by the inundations of the Nile. In order to water the grounds where the inundations do not extend, water is collected in ponds, and directed in streamlets to different parts of the field where irrigation is necessary. It is no unusual thing in the East to see a man, with a small mattock, making a little trench for the water to run by, and as he opens the passage, the water following, he uses his foot to raise up the mould against the side of this little channel, to prevent the water from being shed unnecessarily before it reaches the place of its destination. Thus, he may be said to water the ground with his foot. See several useful observations on this subject in Mr. Harmer, ... 'For watering land an instrument called janta is often used in the north of Bengal: it consists of a wooden trough, about fifteen feet long, six inches wide, and ten inches deep, which is placed on a horizontal beam lying on bamboos fixed in the bank of a pond or river in the form of a gallows. One end of the trough rests upon the bank, where a gutter is prepared to carry off the water, and the other is dipped into the water by a man standing on a stage near that end, and plunging it in with his foot. A long bamboo, with a large

²⁹⁷ Num. 12:3

²⁹⁸ Acts 4:12

²⁹⁹ Ps. 2:1,2

³⁰⁰ Isa. 65:20

³⁰¹ I John 2:17

weight of earth at the further end of it, is fastened to that end of the janta near the river, and passing over the gallows, poises up the janta full of water, and causes it to empty itself into the gutter.' This, Mr. Ward supposes, illustrates this passage. ... But after all, the expression, wateredst it with thy foot, may mean no more than doing it by labour; for, as in the land of Egypt there is scarcely any rain, the watering of gardens, etc., must have been all artificial. But in Judea it was different, as there they had their proper seasons of rain. The compound word *b^a regel* ..., with, under, or by the foot, is used to signify anything under the power, authority, etc., of a person; and this very meaning it has in the sixth verse, all the substance that was in their possession, is, literally, all the substance that was under their feet, *b^a ragleyhem* ..., that is, in their power, possession, or what they had acquired by their labour."

On "The rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain," *The Adam Clarke Commentary* remarks: "By the first or former rain we are to understand that which fell in Judea about November, when they sowed their seed, and this served to moisten and prepare the ground for the vegetation of the seed. The latter rain fell about April, when the corn was well grown up, and served to fill the ears, and render them plump and perfect. Rain rarely fell in Judea at any other seasons than these. If the former rain were withheld, or not sent in due season, there could be no vegetation: if the latter rain were withheld, or not sent in its due season, there could be no full corn (grain) in the ear, and consequently no harvest. Of what consequence then was it that they should have their rain in due season! God, by promising this provided they were obedient, and threatening to withhold it should they be disobedient, shows that it is not a general providence that directs these things, but that the very rain of heaven falls by particular direction, and the showers are often regulated by an especial providence." Although, due to deforestation and other factors, some climatic changes have, undoubtedly, occurred over the centuries, it appears that little has changed in the pattern of precipitation, both in Egypt and Israel throughout the ages.

Modern man has lost the notion to see the hand of God in the weather. A farmer may still pray for rain, or for the rain to stop, but, generally speaking, we see little connection between God in heaven and meteorology. The only indication that, in times past, the fact that people linked weather to God is preserved in some archaic use of the expression by insurance companies: "an act of God," when lightning strikes or a tornado causes destruction. Obviously, this does not mean that insurance companies are more religious than other secular enterprises.

During the centuries of Israel's occupation of the Promised Land, there were very few instances recorded of an extended drought. The most famous one was during the reign of King Ahab, when God closed the heavens for three years and six months, in answer to Elijah's prayer.³⁰² The prophet Jeremiah prophesied during a drought, of which we have no historical record.³⁰³ The absence of historical records about droughts is, of course, no proof that they did not occur more frequently. In both instances we know of, a clear connection is established between the drought and people's apostasy.

Moses warned against the enticement of Canaanite idolatry. The irony of it all is that the Canaanites looked to their idols for favorable weather. If Israel would be drawn into this kind of idol worship for the purpose of assuring periodic rainfall, the opposite would take place: God would shut the heavens. In spite of Moses' severe warnings, Israel did fall into idolatry; yet they did not perish by means of hunger caused by extensive droughts.

Whether Moses intended his admonition to tie his words as symbols on their hands and bind them on their foreheads to be taken literally is not clear. Jewish custom has interpreted the intention in this way, which gave ground to the practice of wearing phylacteries. Whatever the interpretation may be, the purpose was obviously that the people would remember. "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds" can hardly be given another meaning. The wearing of phylacteries has proven to be ineffective for the purpose of remembering. Making word-pictures into visible symbols frequently tends to blur the message. And the message is: "Do not forget!" Moses used this word-picture often. As Israel was in the process of leaving Egypt, he said: "And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the LORD brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand."³⁰⁴ And in ch. 6:8 we read: "Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads." The Mè tribespeople of Irian Jaya, Indonesia use similar word-pictures. To pursue something vigorously is expressed with the word: "Carry it on the tip of your nose." This may have been the way Moses intended his words to be interpreted. Tying phylacteries on the forehead and on the arms, without the thought remaining alive in the head and the heart, has no value whatsoever.

The same idea is expressed, of course, in the writing on doorframes and gates of houses. The point is that the next generation will learn the lessons of history. The sad reality is that no generation, so far, has learned lessons from history. Every generation believes that they are the first inhabitants of the world, without any tie to what

³⁰² See I Kings 17,18; James 5:17

³⁰³ See Jer. 14:1

³⁰⁴ Ex. 13:16

preceded or what follows. Barely fifty years after the conquest of the Promised Land, we read: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.”³⁰⁵

The two instances in which Moses used the word-picture are the two main points that should never be forgotten: the deliverance from Egypt, and the love for God. Those two facts form the basis for all obedience of the law. This is the message the fathers should pass on to their children, not merely by preaching it to them, but by living it before their eyes. The theme of this chapter is that the children have not seen God’s acts of salvation with their own eyes, as their fathers have. Therefore, the fathers have to be role models to their children of men who know they are saved from slavery, and who love the Lord their God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. If this reality is lived out in the lives of God’s children, from generation to generation, God will subdue the enemy before them.

When the twelve spies went through Canaan the first time, they came back with the report that the people of the country were like giants and the cities were invincible. They said: “The people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. . . . We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.”³⁰⁶ They were correct. Their problem was not in their observation, but in their understanding of the structure of power. They made the same mistake Mao Dze Dung would make centuries later: they believed, so to speak, that power comes from the barrel of a gun. The LORD Almighty says: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit.”³⁰⁷

The boundaries of the land God indicates in this chapter are “from the desert to Lebanon, and from the Euphrates River to the western sea.” This concurs with the promise given to Abraham: “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates-- the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”³⁰⁸ The promise was repeated to Joshua after Moses’ death: “I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates-- all the Hittite country-- to the Great Sea on the west.”³⁰⁹ The phrase “every place where you set your foot” is a graphic description of the joy of victory. Israel would literally be standing on God’s promises.

The Adam Clarke Commentary says about this: “[From the river] Euphrates, which was on the east, to the uttermost sea-- the Mediterranean which lay westward of the Promised Land. This promise, notwithstanding the many provocations of the Israelites, was fulfilled in the time of Solomon, for ‘he reigned over all the kings from the river (Euphrates) even unto the land of the Philistines, and to the border of Egypt.’ See <2 Chr. 9:26>, and the note at <Num. 34:12>.”

Vs. 25 states that God will give to the people who obey Him a reputation of being invincible, which will put terror upon the enemy. Rahab’s testimony is proof of this prophecy. She said to the spies she hid: “I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.”³¹⁰ The psychological effect of a reputation can be a powerful weapon. If our reputation is a pointer to the presence of the Lord in our lives, we are on safe ground. Often, though, people will be put on a pedestal which has no connection to a testimony for God. This creates an illusion that can be very detrimental. In some cases it can be fatal. We read about Samson: “He awoke from his sleep and thought, ‘I’ll go out as before and shake myself free.’ But he did not know that the LORD had left him.”³¹¹ There is a world of difference between assumption and reality, also between feeling strong and being strong. The Apostle Paul makes the profound observation: “For when I am weak, then I am strong.”³¹²

In verses 26-32, Moses concludes the chapter by putting before the people a blessing and a curse, leaving it up to them to choose. Both blessing and curse would later be uttered from the top of two mountains: Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, as an object lesson. Being blessed or cursed, therefore, would be a matter of choice for the Israelites. It will ultimately depend on our choice whether we will go to heaven and be blessed eternally, or suffer the eternal consequences of our rebellion. The German evangelist Herman Zaiss put it graphically this way: “Only

³⁰⁵ Judg. 21:25

³⁰⁶ Num. 13:28,31

³⁰⁷ Zech. 4:6^b

³⁰⁸ Gen. 15:18-21

³⁰⁹ Josh. 1:3,4

³¹⁰ Josh. 2:9-11

³¹¹ Judg. 16:20

³¹² II Cor. 12:10

volunteers go to heaven, as well as to hell.” The problem is that it does not seem to be that way. Nobody wants to go to hell. We could say that people perish because the desire not to is not strong enough. But, at the end, this amounts to choosing. The meaning of this is that God does not designate us for hell. The Bible teaches clearly: “[God] wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”³¹³ And: “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”³¹⁴

The Pulpit Commentary observes about the location: “The two mountains named stand opposite to each other, with a valley between, about two hundred yards broad at the widest part, in which stood the town of Shechem, now Nablûs. They were selected for the purpose mentioned, doubtless, because of their relative position, and probably also because they stand in the center of the land both from north to south, and from east to west. It has been suggested that Ebal was appointed for the uttering of the curse, and Gerizim for the uttering of the blessing, because the former was barren and rugged, the latter fertile and smooth; but this is not borne out by the actual appearance of the two hills, both being equally barren-looking, though neither is wholly destitute of culture and vegetation. That Gerizim was selected for the blessing because of its position on the south side of the valley ‘towards the region of light,’ while Ebal was appointed for the curse because it was on the north side, can be regarded only as an ingenious fancy.” We should not overlook the possibility that a mountain that is barren in the twentieth century may have had a luscious vegetation centuries earlier. But that is of very little consequence for our understanding of this chapter. The obvious intent of Moses’ words is that the proclamation of the blessing and curse should be given in the form of an object lesson, in order to impress both upon people’s minds as deeply as possible.

The details of these instructions regarding the curses are worked out in ch. 27:12-26.

CHAPTER TWELVE

III. The Explanation of the Additional Laws 12:1-26:19

A. Explanation of the Ceremonial Laws 12:1-16:17

This third address to the nation is the lengthiest Moses has given, and covers almost half of the whole book Deuteronomy. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about it: “Moses, having in his first address cast a glance at the events which had transpired between Sinai and the plains of Moab, and in his second recapitulated what had happened at Sinai, repeated the Decalogue, and urgently counseled the people to be obedient to the Divine commandments, and steadfast in their adherence to Jehovah as their God and King; proceeds now to set forth certain laws which it specially behooved them to observe. These are for the most part the same as those already recorded in the previous books; but a few are new, and are to be found only here. No special order or plan of exposition is here observed; the speaker uses that freedom of discourse which was fitting in a popular address. One or two historical narratives are interpolated; but the address as a whole is hortatory, and is designed to direct to the proper regulation of the ecclesiastical, social, and domestic life of the Israelites when they should be settled in Canaan.”

Matthew Henry’s Commentary gives the following outline of Deuteronomy 12: “Moses at this chapter comes to the particular statutes which he had to give in charge to Israel, and he begins with those which relate to the worship of God, and particularly those which explain the second commandment, about which God is in a special manner jealous.

I. They must utterly destroy all relics and remains of idolatry <v. 1-3>.

II. They must keep close to the tabernacle <v. 4-5>. The former precept was intended to prevent all false worship, the latter to preserve the worship God had instituted. By this latter law,

1. They are commanded to bring all their offerings to the altar of God, and all their holy things to the place which he should choose <v. 6-7, 11-12, 14, 18, 26-28>.

2. They are forbidden, in general, to do as they now did in the wilderness <v. 8-11>, and as the Canaanites had done <v. 29-32>, and, in particular, to eat the hallowed things at their own houses <v. 13, 17-18>, or to forsake the instituted ministry <v. 19>.

3. They are permitted to eat flesh as common food at their own houses, provided they do not eat the blood <v. 15-16, and again, v. 20-26>.

The theme of this chapter is stated concisely in vs.4: “You must not worship the LORD your God in their way,” that is in the way the Canaanites worshipped their idols. One of the differences in style of worship was to be that the service of YHWH would be centralized. God would reveal to His place a certain place where the ceremonies

³¹³ I Tim. 2:4

³¹⁴ II Pet. 3:9

had to take place. Vs. 11 reads: “Then to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name--there you are to bring everything I command you....”

But the greatest difference was in the effect the worship of God had upon the Israelites, and the consequence of idol worship upon the spirit of the Canaanites. This is expressed in the words: “And there rejoice before the LORD your God.” The Canaanites certainly knew no joy in their practice of religion. Vs. 31 expresses this clearly: “You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.” It is not hard to imagine what influence the sacrifice of a son or a daughter would have upon the emotions of a parent. The Bible does not detail the horror of Canaan’s idolatry, but the fallout must have been a cloud of depression that constantly hung over the whole country. This was, undoubtedly, the foremost reason why Moses told the people to utterly destroy all reminders of idol worship. The sight of those places where little children were murdered in service to Baal would be too depressing a shadow for the people to live under. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* explains: “On a fragment of the Baal Epic, Anath (‘Anat) appears in an incredibly bloody orgy of destruction. For some unknown reason she fiendishly butchers mankind, young as well as old, in a most horrible and wholesale fashion, wading ecstatically in human gore up to her knees-- even up to her throat-- all the while exulting sadistically.” Such pictures are a clear indication of the demonic origin of all idol worship.

The first command, therefore, is to clear the land of all reminders of cruelty and sadism. No emblems of darkness were to remain in the kingdom of light. For people who have never been directly involved in spiritualism, or who have had no other kinds of intercourse with demonism, it is hard to understand the spiritual oppression that emanates from those associations. When the Stone Age tribes in Irian Jaya, Indonesia heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ, their first reaction conclusion was that they had to burn their charms and fetishes, before they could commit themselves to the “Jesus Way.” The sternness of Moses’ admonition left no place for anthropological empathy that would want to preserve the culture of a threatened race. If we love the Lord, we will hate what He hates.

The second command involved a warning against worshipping God outside the realm of His revelation. This also may be hard for us to understand. We live in a dispensation where the place of worship is no longer an issue. When the Samaritan woman said to Jesus: “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus declared, ‘Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.’³¹⁵ When Israel entered the Promised Land, that time had not come yet.

Moses prophesied several times that God would choose a special place for His revelation. The Ark of the Covenant had been indicated as such, but it was mobile. During the journey through the wilderness it had gone before Israel to show the way. Once Israel had entered Canaan, the placement of the ark seems to have been left to chance. The first place we read about is Shiloh.³¹⁶ After having been captured by the Philistine army and returned to Israel, the ark went to Kiriath-jearim, where it remained till David brought it over to Jerusalem.³¹⁷ It was not until David sinned in ordering the census of Israel, and he saw the angel of death at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, that a permanent place for the ark was found. At that time, David said: “The house of the LORD God is to be here, and also the altar of burnt offering for Israel.”³¹⁸ By that time Israel had lived in Canaan for about half a millennium. The question as to why it took so long for Moses’ prophecy to be fulfilled is probably answered by: “Nobody cared enough to find out.” David was the first and only one in Israel who took Moses’ prophecy seriously enough to do something about it, and the placement of the ark became the overriding passion of his life. When, finally, the temple was built, God confirmed to Solomon that it was, in fact, the place He had chosen. We read: “the LORD appeared to him at night and said: ‘I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.’”³¹⁹

The place of the ark was the place of God’s revelation of Himself. God had said to Moses: “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.”³²⁰ After the death of Solomon, when Israel split up into two nations, King Jeroboam

³¹⁵ John 4:20-24

³¹⁶ See I Sam. 1:3;3:3

³¹⁷ See I Sam. 7:1; II Sam. 6; I Chr. 13 and 15

³¹⁸ I Chr. 22:1

³¹⁹ II Chr. 7:12

³²⁰ Ex. 25:22

decided that God could be worshipped at the place of man's choosing. We read: "Jeroboam thought to himself, 'The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam.' After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. And this thing became a sin; the people went even as far as Dan to worship the one there."³²¹ Jeroboam separated the worship of God from the revelation of God. This came to be known as "the sin of Jeroboam."

The sin of Jeroboam has gained universal acceptance. All over the world religion has been made subservient to political priorities. One of the classical examples is found in the book Amos. Amos prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel, where he was considered an enemy of the state. One of the king's ministers reports him to the palace. We read: "Then Amaziah said to Amos, 'Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.'" ³²² The house of the Lord had become the temple of the kingdom.

All efforts to reduce religion to the level of the subjective can be classified under "the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat."³²³ If we serve God where we want, and in the way we want, we are children of Jeroboam, because we separate religion from revelation. It is not true that "all ways lead to Rome." Jesus said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."³²⁴ And Peter testifies: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."³²⁵

Moses impressed upon the people of Israel the importance of celebrating the service of the Lord at the place of His choosing. The essence of all service is to please the master. No master can be happy with a servant who engages himself in the master's service for the purpose of carrying out his own program. If we do not go to the right place, and if we do not approach God through the right person, we miss the point. And, according to the Greek definition of the word, missing the point is sin.³²⁶

As we have seen before, one of the differences between the idol worship of the Canaanites and the worship of YHWH is in the effect either has upon the people. For those who obey the Lord because they love Him there is joy in service. We read in vs. 7: "There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and *shall rejoice* in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you." There is joy in the presence of the Lord, and only in His presence. David says: "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."³²⁷ There are many surrogates of this joy in life, but there is no substitute. Nehemiah said: "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."³²⁸ *Matthew Henry's Commentary* remarks: "See what a good Master we serve, who has made it our duty to sing at our work."

All sacrifices had to be brought to the central place of worship. This command was not given only to draw Israel away from temptations to idolatry. The inhabitants of Canaan had sacrificed at various places to local deities and territorial spirits. Unity of worship was of the utmost importance for Israel. For us Christians who know about Jesus' death on the cross, this makes perfect sense. All the sacrifices in the Old Testament pointed to the one and only sacrifice that counts for God. All prophetic lines converge at Calvary. Had the Israelites been allowed to bring their sacrifices at various places of their own choosing, the image would have been blurred, if not destroyed. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes that: "The Messiah and the glories of his kingdom could not have been seen through the medium of the Jewish ritual."

The one place of worship accentuated the unity and uniqueness of the God of Israel. The words of the Shema were: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."³²⁹ God had revealed Himself to Israel as the One who owned the universe, but who had chosen Israel as His treasured possession. He had said to Moses: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the

³²¹ I Kings 12:26-30

³²² Amos 7:12,13

³²³ This expression is used repeated in I Kings to evaluate the reign of Israel's kings.

³²⁴ John 14:6

³²⁵ Acts 4:12

³²⁶ The Greek word for "to sin" is *hamartano*, which means "to miss the mark."

³²⁷ Ps. 16:11

³²⁸ Neh. 8:10

³²⁹ See Ch. 6:4

whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”³³⁰ The one place of worship emphasized this truth.

Another result of having a central place of worship for the whole nation would be the promotion of a sense of national unity. A family that prays together stays together. As far as this is concerned, Jeroboam’s fear had not been completely unfounded. The blood bond among the tribes of Israel would eventually wear thinner. But the common bond of fellowship in Jehovah would strengthen the nation considerably.

A clear distinction is made between the bringing of sacrifices and the slaughtering of animals merely for the sake of eating meat. God had already stipulated before that any killing of animals in the form of a sacrifice, had to be done at the proper place. We read: “Any Israelite who sacrifices an ox, a lamb or a goat in the camp or outside of it instead of bringing it to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting to present it as an offering to the LORD in front of the tabernacle of the LORD-- that man shall be considered guilty of bloodshed; he has shed blood and must be cut off from his people. This is so the Israelites will bring to the LORD the sacrifices they are now making in the open fields. They must bring them to the priest, that is, to the LORD, at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and sacrifice them as fellowship offerings.”³³¹ But God had also said to Noah: “Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.”³³² Before sin and death entered the world, there was no killing of animals. The human consumption of meat is an obvious accommodation by God to man’s sinful condition. In a way, this allowance is a reminder of sin. It makes eating of meat into a strange mixture of pleasure and shame. Although we can appreciate the attitude of a vegetarian, it is obvious that God does not want us to be vegetarians.

The distinction between eating part of a sacrificial animal and a meat dish seems to divide life into two parts: spiritual and mundane. But the stipulation about the pouring out of the blood of slaughtered animals binds the two together. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* writes the following about the subject of consumption of blood: “When permission was given Noah to partake of animal food <Gen. 9:4>, the use of blood was strictly forbidden. In the Mosaic law this prohibition was repeated with emphasis, though generally in connection with sacrifices <Lev. 3:8; 7:26>. ‘The prohibition of the use of blood has a twofold ground: blood has the soul in itself, and in accordance with the gracious ordinance of God it is the means of expiation for human souls, because of the soul contained in it. The one ground is found in the nature of blood and the other in its destination to a holy purpose, which, even apart from that other reason, withdraws it from a common use.’”³³³ The main reason for the prohibition to eat blood was the fact that it was the substitutionary means by which atonement was achieved. The blood of sacrificial animals that was poured out at the foot of the altar pointed to the ultimate sacrifice, that is the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. The coming of reality has robbed the shadow of its significance. Whether a Christian should eat blood in any form is still a hotly debated issue. The New Testament has very little to say about the topic, apart from the mention by James during the Jerusalem Council. James formulated the conclusion of the council by saying: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them *to abstain* from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and *from blood*. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”³³⁴ The last phrase seems to place the restriction in a context of a Christian witness to a Jewish community, which was particular for that day. James may not have intended to declare a universal principle.

The verses 17-19 must be seen in the light of the celebration of the required festivals. All the men were obligated to appear before the Lord three times a year during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year.³³⁵ From our text we deduct that the men were not to come alone to these festivals, but that the whole family, including servants and the Levites of the city were to come along. These feasts were expressions of joy and gratitude. Promises made during the time between the feasts were carried out during the feasts.

“Be careful not to neglect the Levites as long as you live in your land.” The Levites lived dispersed throughout the land, and were mainly dependant upon charity. They occupied a unique position among the whole

³³⁰ Ex. 19:5,6

³³¹ Lev. 17:3-5

³³² Gen. 9:3

³³³ The last phrase is a quote from Delitzsch, *Bib. Psychology*, p. 283

³³⁴ Acts 15:19-21 (Italics are mine)

³³⁵ See Ex. 23:14-17

nation of Israel. God Himself had set them apart as representatives of the people, in the place of all the firstborn sons of all the tribes.³³⁶

The New Unger's Bible Dictionary writes the following about them: "Chosen from among the whole people to be Jehovah's peculiar possession, the Levites did not obtain, like the rest of the tribes, any inheritance in the land of Canaan. Their portion was to be Jehovah Himself (<Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9>; etc.), who ordained that they should have set apart for them four cities out of every tribe, along with the necessary pasture for their cattle <Num. 35:1-8>. Besides this they received the tithes due to Jehovah from the fruits of the fields, from the flocks and herds <Lev. 27:30-33; cf. Num. 18:21-24>, of the firstfruits (<Ex. 23:19; Lev. 2:14; 23:17>; etc.), of the firstborn <Ex. 13:12-13; Lev. 27:26; Num. 18:15-17; Deut. 15:19>, as well as certain portions of the sacrificial offerings of the people <Num. 18:8-11,19>. Of the tithes the Levites had to turn over a tithe to the priests <18:26-32>. The Levites lived for the greater part of the year in their own cities and came up at fixed periods to take their turn of work <1 Chr. 25-26>."

Once Israel was established in Canaan, there would, evidently, be a danger that the presence of the Levites was taken for granted. In a way, the Levites were the Old Testament equivalent of those who are, in our present day, serving the Lord, and who are "living by faith." The latter concept usually describes a class of clergy or missionaries whose support waxes and wanes with the tide of spiritual enthusiasm in the churches. Moses' injunction could be seen as a warning not to let support for spiritual ministries be dependent upon the changing mood of the laity. The Apostle Paul directed Timothy to see to it that spiritual leaders would not be neglected financially in the church. We read: "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'"³³⁷

In vs. 29, Moses says: "The LORD your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess." The Hebrew word *karath* means "to cut" or "to destroy," but it is also used to describe the ritual of making a covenant by cutting flesh and passing between the pieces. In the context of this chapter it means, obviously, that the nations of Canaan would be severed from their roots like a tree or a plant and, consequently, would wither away. God would cut off their lifeline. In a sense there had never been a lifeline, since there was no relationship between those nations and their Creator. God merely exposes an existing condition. The difference between Israel's position and that of the Canaanites was, that in His relationship with Israel, the sacrificial animal, the emblem of the covenant was cut up.

The warning in vs. 30 not to study the modes of idol worship with the intent to emulate them, seems rather superfluous to us. After all, a god who had not been powerful enough to prevent the take-over of Canaan by the Israelites would, in our opinion, not be worth worshipping. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on this: "The Israelites, influenced by superstitious fear, too often endeavored to propitiate the deities of Canaan. Their Egyptian education had early impressed upon their minds the bug-bear notion of a set of local deities, who expected their dues of all who came to inhabit the country which they honored with their protection and severely resented the neglect of payment in all new comers.... Taking into consideration the prevalence of this idea among them, we see that against the seductive influences both of Egyptian and of Canaanite idolatry was directed the full force of the wholesome caution with which this chapter closes (cf. <Deut. 18:10; 19:10; Ps. 106:38>)." There may have been among Israel the notion of territorial spirits, which it would be wise to pacify. Man has to learn that he is no match for demonic powers, and that the only way to deal with them is to have no dealings with them at all. Our responsibility is to obey the Lord, and to avoid curiosity toward anything that does not belong to Him.

Regarding the phrase: "They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods," *The Pulpit Commentary* writes: "Elsewhere the phrase used is 'make to pass through the fire' (ch. xviii. 10), or simply 'make to pass through to Molech' (Lev. xviii. 21; Jer. xxxii. 35). This has led some to maintain that the ceremony described was merely a februation, a lustration by fire, and not an actual burning alive of these victims; but there can be no doubt that both among the Ammonites and the Phoenicians, and indeed wherever the worship of Baal or Molech was followed, the offering of children in sacrifice by burning prevailed...."

And *The Adam Clarke Commentary* remarks: "Almost all the nations in the world agreed in offering human victims to their gods on extraordinary occasions, by which it is evident that none of those nations had any right notion of the divine nature." By this time Israel should be sufficiently convinced that the service of YHWH had nothing in common with the gruesome practices of Canaanite idolatry. How people who had known the love of God could ever switch sides and serve sadistic idols, as became the practice of Israel in later centuries, is quite incomprehensible. Yet, even the generation that conquered the land began to be tempted into idol worship.

³³⁶ See Num. 8:18

³³⁷ I Tim. 5:17,18

Otherwise, Joshua's summons would make little sense. We read in his farewell speech: "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."³³⁸

The closing verse of this chapter reminds us of the last verses of Revelation: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book."³³⁹ They also form the bridge to the next chapter.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

III. The Explanation of the Additional Laws 12:1-26:19

A. Explanation of the Ceremonial Laws (continued) 13:1-16:17

This chapter hardly fits in the category of an "Explanation of the Ceremonial Laws," as our outline suggests. It describes, in a graphic way, actions that should be taken when a tendency toward idolatry among the people of Israel occurs. The punishment for idolatry among the Israelites was death. We cannot take this chapter out of the context of theocracy, and judge it in the light of the twentieth century, from the viewpoint of a representative of a secular pluralistic society, without getting in trouble.

The clearest understanding is probably maintained if one compares the crime of which the offenders are accused to high treason, to which, even in our time, often the death penalty is applied. One of the problems that face us is not the principle involved: betraying God in order to go over to the enemy, but the application of it. Throughout the ages the principle has been used as a pretext for persecution and prejudice. The Inquisition is an example. But the misuse of a principle does not invalidate the principle itself. If injustice is done in the Name of the Lord, it does not reflect upon God's Name, but upon those who use it in vain. Yet, capital punishment seems to us too extreme a response to a religious offense. We object against such reactions when we hear about them in an Islamic state, and we think that this kind of justice ought not to be carried out in a twentieth century society. But then, where do we find theocracies in our time?

Moses gives three illustrations in this chapter to emphasize that allegiance to God ranks above all other relationships. The examples show the extreme contrast between idolatry and the love we owe to God with all our hearts, mind, and strength.

The first example pertains to a false prophet. Implied in this illustration is the truth that not everything that is supernatural comes from God. The man in question predicts the future correctly, and performs miraculous signs, but that does not qualify him as a servant of the living God. Jesus gives the warning: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"³⁴⁰

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary states: "It is evident the sign or wonder supposed was not a true and genuine miracle, but some counterfeit appearance of supernatural power, which either human artifice or diabolical agency might suffice to produce." The commentary seems to imply that God is the only source of supernatural power. Scripture teaches clearly, however, that Satan can perform genuine miracles. We read about the assistant of the Antichrist, the false prophet: "And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men."³⁴¹ It is true that the Apostle Paul calls those signs "counterfeit miracles," but that seems to indicate more that the sign does not show the way to the truth of God, more than that it would not in essence be a suspension or overruling of a law of nature. Paul says: "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders."³⁴²

³³⁸ Josh. 24:14,15

³³⁹ Rev. 22:18,19

³⁴⁰ Matt. 7:21-23

³⁴¹ Rev. 13:13

³⁴² II Thess. 2:9

The point Moses makes is that miracles are not necessarily proof of the truth. That Satan is able to perform miracles, and that he can transfer this power to human beings is beyond dispute. The prophecies about the Antichrist prove this, but there are other examples in the Bible that support this truth. We read about the miracles the Egyptian magicians performed: “So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs.”³⁴³ Simon of Samaria is another example. We read about him: “Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, ‘This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.’ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic.”³⁴⁴

The place of miracles in the proclaiming of the truth has been a complicated matter throughout the ages. There is no doubt about it that the God who created the universe and established the laws that govern it, is able to alter or suspend those law as He sees fit. He will sometimes do this to impress upon us, not the greatness of the miracle, but the miraculous aspect of the natural. The man who was born blind, and who was healed by Christ, testified: “One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”³⁴⁵ To this man, sight which was enjoyed by millions of people all over the earth, was the greatest miracle of all. In a sense the prophet Mohammed was right when he said that Mohammed’s going to the mountain was as great a miracle as the mountain coming to Mohammed. Our problem is that we get used to most of the miracles that surround us. Most of life is “déjà vu.” The miracle catches our attention because we have not seen it before, and we are susceptible to that which is sensational. The devil know this, and he uses our weakness. Moses says: “The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul.” Only those who love God will not be deceived. Love of God is the key to the knowledge of truth, and will help us to see through deception.

The Apostle Paul impresses this upon the hearts of the Galatians when he writes: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!”³⁴⁶ The prophet Isaiah demonstrates the relationship between God’s revealed Word and other supernatural venues of acquiring knowledge. In powerful words laced with sarcasm he says: “When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.”³⁴⁷ In other words, if what is prophesied does not concur with God’s law and testimony, they originate from the darkness of the devil.

Another criterion for testing the word of the false prophet is the personal experience of salvation. Moses calls God the “God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery.” Leaving the Word of God would mean a return to slavery. Paul writes the same to the Galatians: “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God-- or rather are known by God-- how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?”³⁴⁸

False prophets were to receive capital punishment in Israel. As far as we know this sentence was never passed on anyone in Israel’s history, except, ironically, on our Lord Jesus Christ. What would our world and the church of Jesus Christ look like if everyone who did not preach the Gospel would be executed? Imagine a world without liberal theologians! The only comparable instance of the sentence of death Moses propagates here is in the book of Acts, where Ananias and Sapphira died when they lied to the Holy Spirit.³⁴⁹ We live in a world where human justice has modified the justice of God. The fact that this kind of justice is not practiced on earth, does not mean that the standard of God’s judgments in heaven has changed. And the Apostle Paul reminds us that: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” For those of us who are preachers, it is important to remain faithful to the truth of Scripture.

³⁴³ Ex. 7:10-12

³⁴⁴ Acts 8:9-11

³⁴⁵ John 9:25

³⁴⁶ Gal. 1:8

³⁴⁷ Isa. 8:19,20

³⁴⁸ Gal. 4:8,9

³⁴⁹ See Acts 5:1-11

The second example Moses uses brings the matter even closer to home: “If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you....” This places the truth of God in situations where blood is thicker than water. Again, there are no known examples of instances where this law was ever put into practice. Jesus uses the principle in reverse by warning His disciples: “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.”³⁵⁰ But in that context, those who stand for the truth of God are the ones that will be executed.

We tend to consider Moses’ admonition extremely harsh. We can hardly imagine a father putting his own child to death because he or she abandoned the father’s religion. In our modern pluralistic society there is no place for this kind of justice. The danger of arbitrary judgment alone would plead against it. The number of children in Christian families, in the Western World, who have given up living for the Lord runs into the millions. Executing each wayward member would be unimaginable, and would lead to genocide. It is obvious that this law, if it can be classified as such, could never be applied to our present age. But the principle behind it can.

The first and great command of the Bible is to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”³⁵¹ If we turn again to the New Testament, we see how our Lord Jesus Christ puts this all in the right perspective when He says: “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”³⁵² The basis of Moses’ exhortation was not a cruel enforcement of the religious views of the fathers upon the children, but the preeminence of the love of God over all other intimate relationships. We, indeed, we give to our children the love we owe to God alone, we are not worthy of Him. We can only really love our spouses and children, if we love God more than we love them.

In the context of Moses’ remarks, we see the danger of enticement of the parent by the behavior of the child. Moses warns the Israelites that the apostasy of the children can endanger the parents’ relationship with God. We have to be watchful that family affections do not affect our priorities of love: first the Lord and then the other loved ones, whether they be members of the family or neighbors. It is true that in Moses’ days the lines were clearly drawn and easily observable. Love and obedience to YHWH was clearly expressed in the observance of the law and the ritual of sacrifices. Idolatry was marked by the use of idols and immoral practices. The cessation of the outward rituals has almost erased the dividing lines. Modern man does not lose himself in devotion to statues, but in vaguer realms of materialism and atheistic philosophies and situational ethics. Such deviations are much harder to trace. Worshipping the Father in spirit and in truth alone has made life much more complex.

Moses’ third example pertains to a whole city that has gone astray. Verses 12-18. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says about this section: “[Certain men, the children of Belial], [b^a neey ... B^a liya`al ...]. ‘Belial,’ always moral worthlessness: ‘sons of Belial,’ they are wicked men-- lawless, designing demagogues <Judg. 19:22; 1 Sam. 1:16; 25:25>, who abused their influence to withdraw the inhabitants of the city to idol-worship. [The Septuagint has: ... perverse men, transgressors of the law.] Verse 14. [Then shalt thou inquire]-- i. e., the magistrate, to whom it officially belonged to make the necessary investigation; and in the event of the report proving true, the most summary proceedings were to be commenced against the apostate inhabitants, who had placed themselves beyond the pale of protection. The law in this chapter has been represented as stern and sanguinary; but it was in accordance with the national constitution of Israel. God being their King, idolatry was treason; and a city turned to idols put itself into a state, and incurred the punishment, of rebellion.”

Again, there is no record in Scripture of any such action ever taken against a city. But this does not make Moses’ injunction a merely academic pronouncement. It does not mean either that instances of religious rebellion never occurred in Israel. At some points in their history, the whole country fell prey to the temptation, which must have started at one particular part of the land. Had Moses’ command been obeyed, Israel’s history would have been different.

The Adam Clarke Commentary says the following about the ban on the spoil: “As God did not permit them to take the spoils of these idolatrous cities they could be under no temptation to make war upon them. It could only be done through a merely religious motive, in obedience to the command of God, as they could have no profit by the subversion of such places. How few religious wars would there ever have been in the world had they been regulated by this principle: ‘Thou shalt neither extend thy territory nor take any spoils!’ ”

The command to exterminate an idolatrous city was also a safeguard against the breaking up of national unity. As we have seen before, Israel’s identity as a nation was linked to God’s revelation to them, and through them to the world. We mentioned before that Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, understood the

³⁵⁰ Mark 13:12

³⁵¹ ch. 6:5

³⁵² Matt. 10:37

importance of religious unity, and succeeded in separating religion from God's revelation. He said: "The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam."³⁵³ Subsequent kings of Israel were judged on the criterion that they walked "in the ways of Jeroboam and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit." Those words are frequently recurring in the annals of Israel's kings.

The fall-away city is a "town[s] the LORD your God is giving you to live in." The city is still God's property; it is merely given on loan for people to live in. It could be seen as a rental house, in which the tenants not only do not take care of the property, but are positively in the process of destroying it. The owner of the house would certainly have the right to evict the inhabitants.

The apostasy is treated like a contagious disease, like the plague. If a city or a region were to be sanitized, the whole place would have to be burned down, with everything that is in it, in order to prevent the sickness spreading. We do not read what was to be done with the corpses of the slain populace; it could be that they were cremated in the fire that destroyed their property. This blaze is called "a whole burnt offering to the LORD your God." This seems a strange designation for such a tragedy, because burnt offerings are usually called: "an aroma pleasing to the LORD."³⁵⁴ And we can hardly image that God would take pleasure in such a holocaust.

The whole tenor of this chapter is a warning to people who love and serve the Lord that no one is immune to temptation. Our enemy knows our vulnerability, and he is clever in manipulating us at our weakest points. This is the main lesson we can draw from this severe chapter. We live no longer in a world where truth is easily distinguished from the lie. Most of life comes to us in shades of gray. "One nation under God" is nowhere to be found on this earth, so maintaining spiritual purity is impossible on a national scale. The only thing one can hope for is for a good number of people who make it their primary goal to love the Lord with all their heart, mind, and strength. Imposing this love on the unconverted is out of the question. Jude's advice is pertinent: "Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear-- hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh."³⁵⁵ We should be watchful that the stained clothing would not entice us away from a pure dedication to the Lord.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

III. The Explanation of the Additional Laws 12:1-26:19

A. Explanation of the Ceremonial Laws (continued) 14:1-16:17

Matthew Henry's Commentary gives the following outline of Deuteronomy 14: "Moses in this chapter teaches them,

I. To distinguish themselves from their neighbors by a singularity,

1. In their mourning <v. 1-2>.

2. In their meat <v. 3-21>.

II. To devote themselves unto God, and, in token of that, to give him his dues out of their estates, the yearly tithe, and that every third year, for the maintenance of their religious feasts, the Levites, and the poor <v. 22, etc.>."

The key to understand the intent of this chapter is in vs. 2: "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession." God created man in His image and likeness, and He does not want this picture of Himself to be mutilated or defiled. Israel in particular was the picture of Himself God loved.

The commandments in this chapter pertain to the body of man, but the implications are spiritual. The mutilation of the body as a sign of mourning a departed loved-one was related to spirit worship, and an animistic worldview. It was the practice of the tribes-people of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, at the death of a relative to cut off finger joints. The underlying idea was that the pain and wailing caused by this mutilation would be heard by the spirit of the departed one, and interpreted as a sign of mourning for his death, and that this would satisfy him on his way to the underworld, instead of making him turn back to his village and take revenge upon those who did not express

³⁵³ I Kings 12:26,27

³⁵⁴ Lev. 1:9

³⁵⁵ Jude vs. 21,23

sufficient grief. Such mutilations are not only demonically inspired, they also connect man's soul to the spirit world, and make him vulnerable to manipulation by evil spirits.

Our bodies are not our own. The Apostle Paul formulates clearly the role our bodies play in the New Testament dispensation: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."³⁵⁶ Since our bodies belong to the Lord, we are not free to do with them as we wish. They are subject to the will of God, and meant for His glory. God loves our bodies more than we do ourselves. Our bodies are included in the process of sanctification.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary remarks here: "They are forbidden to disturb and afflict their own minds with inordinate grief for the loss of near and dear relations: 'You shall not express or exasperate you sorrow, even upon the most mournful occasions, by cutting yourselves, and making baldness between your eyes, like men enraged, or resolutely hardened in sorrow for the dead, as those that have no hope,' <1 Thes. 4:13>. It is an excellent passage which Mr. Ainsworth here quotes from one of the Jewish writers, who understands this as a law against immoderate grief for the death of our relations. If your father (for instance) die, you shall not cut yourselves, that is, you shall not sorrow more than is meet, for you are not fatherless, you have a Father, who is great, living, and permanent, even the holy blessed God, whose children you are, v. 1. But an infidel (says he), when his father dies, hath no father that can help him in time of need; for he hath said to a stock, Thou art my father, and to a stone, Thou hast brought me forth <Jer. 2:27>; therefore he weeps, cuts himself, and makes himself bald. We that have a God to hope in, and a heaven to hope for, must bear up ourselves with that hope under every burden of this kind."

The verses 3 through 21 deal with the eating of meat, and the animals which are ritually clean and those that are not.

About the dietary restrictions, *The Pulpit Commentary* writes the following: "The regulations here concerning food, and the animals the use of which is forbidden, are substantially the same as in Lev. ii. There are, however, some differences between the two accounts which may be noticed. 1. In Deuteronomy, the mammals which may be used for food are severally specified as well as described by the general characteristic of the class; in Leviticus, only the latter description is given. 2. In the list of fowls which may not be eaten, the *ra'ah* (glede) is mentioned in Deuteronomy, but not in Leviticus; and the bird which in the one is called *da'ah* is in the other called *dayyah* (vulture). 3. The class of reptiles which is carefully described in Leviticus is wholly omitted in Deuteronomy. 4. Winged insects are forbidden without exception in Deuteronomy; in Leviticus, the locust and certain other insects of the same kind are excepted. 5. Some slight differences in the order of enumeration appear."

The prohibition to eat an animal that died by itself, which was not killed in such a way that its blood was poured out on the ground, is interesting. The owner, or finder could sell it to an alien or a foreigner. The alien was, evidently, someone who had settled among the Israelites but had not become an Israelite through the rite of circumcision. A foreigner was a non-resident, who was merely passing through. The prohibition to eat blood, obviously, did not pertain to him. This commandment takes the Israelites a step further than the one given to the previous generation. In Leviticus we read that a person who ate meat of an animal that was not slaughtered in a kosher way, became impure for a limited period. The passage reads: "Anyone, whether native-born or alien, who eats anything found dead or torn by wild animals must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be ceremonially unclean till evening; then he will be clean. But if he does not wash his clothes and bathe himself, he will be held responsible."³⁵⁷ The phrase "will be held responsible" suggests that the meat was eaten unwittingly. The person who ate was probably not the same as the one who found the carcass.

As in a parallel passage in Exodus,³⁵⁸ the mention of cooking a young goat in the milk of his mother is puzzling. Jewish tradition has speculated about the meaning of this. In practice it means that beef cannot be consumed together with dairy products. You cannot order a roast beef sandwich and a glass of milk in a kosher restaurant in Jerusalem. (I tried it once). There must be more involved than compassion for the mother goat who provides the milk. She wouldn't know about it anyhow. So, why is this prohibition given? Some commentaries presume that the reasons are humanitarian. But a more logical explanation seems to be that it was a heathen custom to cook a young goat in the milk of his mother and sprinkle the milk on the land to implore the blessing of the god of fertility upon the fields. So, this commandment would be directed against idolatry, linking it with the opening verses of this chapter.

³⁵⁶ I Cor. 6:19,20

³⁵⁷ Lev. 17:15,16

³⁵⁸ See Ex. 23:19

The Pulpit Commentary takes the view that it is a prohibition against cruelty. It is “protest against cruelty, and outraging the order of nature, more especially that peculiarly sacred portion of nature’s order, the tender relation between parent and child, mother and suckling.” But, as we said above, the goat would not be any the wiser.

The Adam Clarke Commentary seems to be more logical in its comment: “ ‘Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk.’ This passage has greatly perplexed commentators; but Dr. Cudworth is supposed to have given it its true meaning by quoting a MS. comment of a Karaite Jew, which he met with, on this passage. ‘It was a custom of the ancient heathens, when they had gathered in all their fruits, to take a kid and boil it in the milk of its dam; and then, in a magical way, to go about gardens and orchards; thinking by these means to make them fruitful, that they might bring forth more abundantly in the following year.’ After all the learned labor which critics have bestowed on this passage, the simple object of the precept seems to be this: ‘thou shalt do nothing that may have any tendency to blunt thy moral feelings, or teach thee hardness of heart.’ Even human nature shudders at the thought of causing the mother to lend her milk to seethe the flesh of her young one!”

The last part of this chapter, verses 22-29, deal with the subject of tithes. The matter of tithes is not as easily understood, as it seems from superficial reading. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* has a lengthy article about the subject of which we copy the following: “The tenth of all produce, flocks, and cattle was declared to be sacred to Jehovah by way, so to speak, of rent to Him who was, strictly speaking, the Owner of the land, and in return for the produce of the ground; though, if so disposed, a man was at liberty to redeem the tithes of the fruits of his field and his trees by paying the value of them with a fifth part added <Lev. 27:30-33>. The law did not specify the various fruits of the field and of the trees that were to be tithed. The Mishna ... includes everything eatable, everything that was stored up or that grew out of the earth. The Pharisees, as early as the time of Jesus, made the law to include the minutest kitchen herbs, such as mint and cummin <Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42>. With regard to animal tithes, the law prescribed that every tenth beast that passed under the staff, i.e., under which the shepherd made them pass when he counted his flock, was to be sacred to the Lord, good and bad alike. It forbade any attempt to substitute one beast for another on pain of both animals-- the tenth as well as the one exchanged for it-- being required to be redeemed <Lev. 27:32-33>. This tenth, called Terumoth, was ordered to be assigned to the Levites as the reward of their service, and it was ordered further that they were themselves to dedicate to the Lord a tenth of these receipts, which were to be devoted to the maintenance of the high priest <Num. 18:21-28>.

This legislation is modified or extended in the book of Deuteronomy, i.e., from thirty-eight to forty years later. Commands are given to the people: (1) They were to bring their tithes, together with their votive and other offerings and firstfruits, to the chosen center of worship, there to be eaten in celebration in company with their children, their servants, and the Levites <Deut. 12:5-18>. (2) All the produce of the soil was to be tithed every year, and these tithes with the firstlings of the flock and herd were to be eaten in the metropolis. (3) But in case of distance, permission was given to convert the produce into money, which was to be taken to the appointed place and there spent for food for a festal celebration, in which the Levite was to be included <14:22-27>. (4) Then follows the direction that at the end of three years all the tithe of that year was to be gathered and laid up within the ‘gates’ and that a festival was to be held in which the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, together with the Levite, were to partake (5) Last, it was ordered that after taking the tithe in each third year, ‘the year of tithing,’ every Israelite had to declare that he had done his best to fulfill the divine command <26:12-14>.

From all this we gather (1) that one-tenth of the whole produce of the soil was to be assigned for the maintenance of the Levites; (2) that out of this the Levites were to dedicate a tenth to God for the use of the high priest; (3) that a tithe, in all probability a second tithe, was to be applied to festival purposes; and (4) that in every third year either this festival tithe or a third tenth was to be eaten in company with the poor and the Levites. The question arises, were there three tithes taken in this third year; or is the third tithe only the second under a different description? It must be allowed that the third tithe is not without support. Josephus distinctly says that one-tenth was to be given to the priests and Levites, one-tenth was to be applied to feasts in the metropolis, and that a tenth besides these was every third year to be given to the poor (cf. Tob. 1:7-8). On the other hand, Maimonides says the third and sixth years’ second tithe was shared between the poor and the Levites, i.e., that there was no third tithe. Of these opinions, that which maintains three separate and complete tithings seems improbable. It is plain that under the kings the tithe system partook of the general neglect into which the observance of the law declined, and that Hezekiah, among his other reforms, took effectual means to revive its use <2 Chr. 31:5,12,19>. Similar measures were taken after the captivity by Nehemiah <Neh. 12:44>, and in both these cases special officers were appointed to take charge of the stores and storehouses for the purpose. Yet, notwithstanding partial evasion or omission, the system itself was continued to a late period in Jewish history <Heb. 7:5-8; Matt. 23:23; Luke 18:12>.

The firstborn, the firstlings, and of the tenth of the flocks and herds and produce of the soil were offered to Jehovah as being sacred to Him. Tithes and offerings, along with the firstborn, were intended, therefore, to represent the entire produce of the land and the whole of property generally. Being paid over as they were to Jehovah, they

constituted a practical confession and acknowledgment that the whole land and all possessions in general belonged to Him and that it was He alone who conferred them upon those who enjoyed them.”

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia adds to this: “There is thus an obvious apparent discrepancy between the legislation in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. It is harmonized in Jewish tradition, not only theoretically but in practice, by considering the tithes as three different tithes, which are named the First Tithe, the Second Tithe, and the Poor Tithe, which is called also the Third Tithe (Pe’ah, Ma’aseroth, Ma’ser Sheni, Dema’i, Ro’sh ha-shanah; compare Tob 1:7,8; Ant, IV, iv, 3; viii, 8; viii, 22). According to this explanation, after the tithe (the First Tithe) was given to the Levites (of which they had to give the tithe to the priests), a Second Tithe of the remaining nine-tenths had to be set apart and consumed in Jerusalem. Those who lived far from Jerusalem could change this Second Tithe into money with the addition of a 5th part of its value. Only food, drink or ointment could be bought for the money (Ma’aser Sheni 2:1; compare <Deut 14:26>). The tithe of cattle belonged to the Second Tithe, and was to be used for the feast in Jerusalem...). In the 3rd year the Second Tithe was to be given entirely to the Levites and the poor. But according to Josephus ... the ‘Poor Tithe’ was actually a third one. The priests and the Levites, if landowners, were also obliged to give the Poor Tithe”

The interesting part, which seems to make the Old Testament tithing different from the New Testament practice as observed by Christians in our day, is that the person who tithed benefited most from his tithing. He himself and his family ate part of the tithe. The point to be made in tithing is formulated in vs. 23: “So that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always.” There was the part, which was, in the words of *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*: “by way, so to speak, of rent to Him who was, strictly speaking, the Owner of the land, and in return for the produce of the ground.” The main point, however, was the recognition of the lordship of God over everything.

In the movie *Shenandoah Valley*, the actor Jimmy Stewart plays the role of a farmer who, when saying grace before the meal, thanks God for the food, but reminds Him, at the same time, of the fact that it was his own hard labor that brought it on the table. Tithing teaches us that, not only our sustenance comes from God, but the very breath we breathe belongs to Him. As the Apostle Paul reminded the Athenians: “For in him we live and move and have our being.”³⁵⁹ And the psalmist says: “These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.”³⁶⁰

Another striking feature of the Jewish tithing was the joy that accompanied it. Vs. 26 reads: “Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice.” The meal in the courts of the temple was to be a time of celebration. God wants man to share in His joy. In this demonic world in which we live, amidst the gloom and suffering of mankind, God wants to impart some of the joy of heaven to us. David expresses this in the twenty-third psalm with: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”³⁶¹ In the midst of their mourning, Nehemiah admonished the people: “Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”³⁶² And in Jesus’ parable of the talents, the lord says to his faithful servant: “Enter into the joy of your lord.”³⁶³ This may be for us one of the hardest lessons to learn from tithing.

The use of “wine or other fermented drink” was not prohibited either. This statement cannot be explained away by any evangelical. There are, of course, ample warnings in the Old Testament against excessive use of alcohol, but use in moderation was not forbidden. The Apostle Paul gives us the spiritual application of this controversial verse, when he writes: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.”³⁶⁴ But, evidently, debauchery was far from Moses’ mind when he gave this command.

At this point, the Levites are mentioned as a class not to be forgotten in this celebration. They are grouped together with the aliens, the fatherless and the widows, which is the underprivileged, or “economically challenged,” to use a more politically correct expression. This clearly places the Levites in a position in which they are dependent upon people’s charity. It is not clear why the aliens are placed in this category. The fact that they did not officially belong to the nation of Israel, or that they were not permanent residents in the country does not mean that they would, necessarily, have been prejudiced against economically. But the implication seems to be that such a prejudice existed.

³⁵⁹ Acts 17:28

³⁶⁰ Ps. 104:27-29

³⁶¹ Ps. 23:5

³⁶² Neh. 8:10

³⁶³ Matt. 25:21(NKJ)

³⁶⁴ Eph. 5:18

The main thrust of vs. 29, however, is not so much to catalogue the underprivileged, but to impress upon the people that God wants them to be charitable and generous. The Apostle Paul says: "God loves a cheerful giver."³⁶⁵ God blesses the blessing hand. It has been said and proved that no one can ever "outgive" God. The blessings we give usually return upon our own heads.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

III. The Explanation of the Additional Laws 12:1-26:19

A. Explanation of the Ceremonial Laws (continued) 15:1-16:17

Matthew Henry's Commentary gives the following outline of Deuteronomy 15: "In this chapter Moses gives orders,

- I. Concerning the release of debts, every seventh year <v. 1-6>, with a caution that this should be no hindrance to charitable lending <v. 7-11>.
- II. Concerning the release of servants after seven years' service <v. 12-18>.
- III. Concerning the sanctification of the firstlings of cattle to God <v. 19, etc.>."

The topic of the first eighteen verses of this chapter is the sabbath year. The principle of the sabbath year had already been introduced in Exodus and Leviticus.³⁶⁶ Whether the law regarding the sabbath year was kept or not is a subject of debate. Some commentators believe that the sabbath year was observed until the time of Solomon, and neglected afterward. One of the reasons for the captivity was that the land had not been given the rest prescribed by the Lord. When Israel was led away to Babylon, we read: "The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah."³⁶⁷ The law was religiously obeyed after the return of Israel to Canaan. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* says: "During Maccabean and Asmonean times the law regarding the Sabbatical year was strictly observed, although it frequently weakened the cause of the Jews (1 Macc 6:49,53; Josephus, Ant, XIII, viii, 1....The words of Tacitus show the proud Roman's estimate of the Jewish character and customs: 'For the 7th day they are said to have prescribed rest because this day ended their labors; then, in addition, being allured by their lack of energy, they also spend the 7th year in laziness).'"

The first two sections, from the verses 1-11, and 12-18 deal with the economic conditions of Israel in the Promised Land. This part hinges on two, seemingly, contrasting pronouncements: In vs. 4: "There should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you," and in vs. 11: "There will always be poor people in the land." The implication seems to be that, although God blesses equally, not every man uses the blessing to its full advantage. Jesus likewise teaches this in the parable of the talents.³⁶⁸ He also quotes the verse: "The poor you will always have with you,"³⁶⁹ when Mary anointed His head and His feet in preparation for His burial.

From *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, we copy the following: "Here is, I. A law for the relief of poor debtors, such (we may suppose) as were insolvent. Every seventh year was a year of release, in which the ground rested from being tilled and servants were discharged from their services; and, among other acts of grace, this was one, that those who had borrowed money, and had not been able to pay it before, should this year be released from it; and though, if they were able, they were afterwards bound in conscience to repay it, yet thenceforth the creditor should never recover it by law. Many good expositors think it only forbids the exacting of the debt in the year of release, because, no harvest being gathered in that year, it could not be expected that men should pay their debts then, but that afterwards it might be sued for and recovered: so that the release did not extinguish the debt, but only stayed the process for a time. But others think it was a release of the debt for ever, and this seems more probable, yet under certain limitations expressed or implied. It is supposed (v. 3) that the debtor was an Israelite (an alien could not take the benefit of this law) and that he was poor (v. 4), that he did not borrow for trade or purchase, but for the subsistence of his family, and that now he could not pay it without reducing himself to poverty and coming under a

³⁶⁵ II Cor. 9:7

³⁶⁶ See Ex. 23:10,11; Lev. 25:2-4

³⁶⁷ II Chr. 36:21

³⁶⁸ See Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-29

³⁶⁹ Matt. 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8

necessity of seeking relief in other countries, which might be his temptation to revolt from God. The law is not that the creditor shall not receive the debt if the debtor, or his friends for him, can pay it; but he shall not exact it by a legal process.”

As in Jesus’ parable, mentioned above, this chapter highlights the difference in human response to the challenges of life. Some people easily borrow and go into debt above their heads, others take pride in staying within their budget. In the parable, however, the two servants who doubled their trust received high commendations, while the one who had done nothing was called a wicked and lazy servant. It is true that the point of the parable is not poverty but responsibility. Moses does not specify the reason why some people would become poor. But the assurance of God’s blessing upon the land in response to people’s obedience, seems to imply that those who are poor are poor because of their own mishandling of finances and resources. Yet, unlike the point of the parable, the Lord does not reproach the poor, but He protects them. We can say that the difference between the parable and this chapter is that this chapter speaks to the affluent, and that it does not deal with man’s failure to use his God given talents, but with concern and compassion for the underprivileged.

Another interesting lesson can be drawn from Jesus’ quote of the words: “There will always be poor people in the land,” or: “The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me.”³⁷⁰ Jesus’ intention cannot have been that we should not show compassion, because elsewhere He says: “I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me... I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”³⁷¹ Jesus comes to us in the form of the underprivileged. The commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” cannot be separated from: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”³⁷²

Poverty is not always the result of one’s personal neglect or mismanagement, just as much as, in most cases, sickness is not the result of personal sin. But without sin, poverty and sickness would not exist in this world. In saying: “There will always be poor people in the land,” God reminds the people that Canaan, although it is the Promised Land, is not heaven. God’s people will be blessed, but they are not perfect. God wants us to live pragmatically in a sinful world, countering evidences of the presence of the enemy with demonstrations of God’s grace. This is the essence of the Sabbath in its different forms: the Sabbath day, the Sabbath year, the Sabbath we enter when we are in Christ, and the eternal Sabbath that awaits us. Jesus demonstrated the real meaning of the Sabbath by “healing the whole man.”³⁷³ And the writer to the Hebrews explains: “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.”³⁷⁴

The real debt is not the money we owe, but the debt of sin that no one can pay. And this command to cancel outstanding debts during the Sabbath year is a shadow of the cancellation of our debt to God. “God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.”³⁷⁵ God has torn up our IOUs.

The sabbath year is an object lesson in forgiveness. Moses says that outstanding debts should be cancelled “because the LORD’s time for canceling debts has been proclaimed.” That means that our cancellation of the debts of others is based upon God’s cancellation of our debts. Jesus makes the forgiveness of our sins conditional upon our forgiveness of the sins of others. In The Lord’s Prayer, He teaches us to say: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”³⁷⁶ We do not owe God any money. Monetary debts are merely an image of the real moral debt, which we are never able to pay back. Jesus made this clear to Simon, the Pharisee, in the little parable He told. He said: “Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. *Neither of them had the money to pay him back*, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”³⁷⁷ We owe God our very souls. And, as Jesus

³⁷⁰ Matt. 26:11

³⁷¹ Matt. 25:42,43,45

³⁷² See Mark 12:30,31

³⁷³ See John 7:23

³⁷⁴ Heb. 4:9-11

³⁷⁵ Col. 2:13,14

³⁷⁶ Matt. 6:12,14, 15

³⁷⁷ Luke 7:40-42

reminds us: “What can a man give in exchange for his soul?”³⁷⁸ If we compare the value of our own soul, which has been paid for by Jesus Christ, with the puny amount of money others may owe us, or the slight insult by others we have been hurt with, forgiveness will no longer be an insurmountable obstacle. We forgive “because the LORD’s time for canceling debts has been proclaimed.”

A foreigner could not benefit from this law on the cancellation of debts. *The Pulpit Commentary* defines the foreigner as: “a stranger of another nation, having no internal social relation to Israel (*nokriy*), as distinguished from the stranger who lived among them and had claims on their benevolence (*ger*). Of such they might exact a debt, without regard to the year of release. ‘This rule breathes no hatred of foreigners, but simply allows the Israelites the right of every creditor to demand his debts and enforce the demand upon foreigners, even in the sabbatical year. There was no severity in this, because foreigners could get their ordinary income in the seventh year as well as in any other’ (Keil).” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* adds to this: “Admission to all the religious privileges of the Israelites was freely granted to pagan proselytes, though this spiritual incorporation did not always imply an equal participation of civil rights and privileges (<Lev. 25:44; Jer. 34:14>: cf. <1 Chr. 22:2; 2 Chr. 2:17>).” The question, however, is whether the law pertains to proselytes or only to foreigners who had shown no inclination to convert to Judaism. The key is probably in vs. 6, where we read: “You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none.” This presumes that monetary transactions would take place over the borders of the land of Canaan. Such international business deals would not be subject to cancellation during the sabbath year.

This verse also clarifies that the dominion of Israel over its surrounding nations would, not necessarily, consist of a colonial rule or a military presence. “You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you” is a statement connected to the financial transactions Israel will carry out with its neighbors. History has borne out the truth of this prophecy. Jewish acumen in financial matters has given to the descendants of Jacob a certain hegemony of the world. There is no better protection of the borders of a country than financial stability and independence.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Moses foresees also the danger of international supremacy that would threaten the state nationally. A nation cannot be a real world power if it does not have its own house in order. Poverty at home will have its bearing upon riches abroad. A nation that does not take care of its poor but yet aspires to rule in world economy will have the strength of a tree with a rotten core. It would make sense from a pure financial standpoint to clean up slums and help the downtrodden, even without humane considerations. The reverse is even more true: if we practice brotherly love, we carry out sound business principles. Generosity pays good dividends. The more we love money the poorer we will get overall.

It would seem very poor business practice to loan out money to anyone just prior to the sabbath year, since the debt would be immediately cancelled when the year was entered. It is understood that the debtor was aware of this, and that he would not ask for a loan, unless his circumstances were so bad that he would not survive without help.

Vs. 11 does not deal with loans but with gifts to the poor, with the giving of alms. This practice was, of course, not limited to the sabbath year, but alms were an important part of the celebration. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* writes about the giving of alms: “The general distribution of property in Israel, and the precautions taken to prevent the alienation of inheritances on the one hand, as well as the undue accumulation of wealth on the other, with the promised blessing of Jehovah in case of obedience, tended to make extreme poverty rare. Still there would arise cases of need. Moses imposed for all time the obligation ‘Therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land’ ’ <Deut. 15:11>. Specific provisions were made for the regular distribution of alms on a large scale among the poorer members of the commonwealth-- the Sabbatical year—‘so that the needy of your people may eat’ <Exo. 23:11>; the gleanings of field and fruit and the forgotten sheaf <Lev. 23:22; Deut. 24:19-22>; the tithings laid up in store every third year for the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow <Deut. 14:28-29>; the freeing at Jubilee of the poor <Lev. 25:39-54>; the law giving the poor the right to enter a field or vineyard and satisfy hunger <Deut. 23:24-25>; interest forbidden on loans to the poor <Exo. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-36>; the command to entertain at the annual festivals the Levite, stranger, orphan, and poor <Deut. 16:11-14>. It is only as we remember these laws that we can understand the expression righteousness, which the OT uses to express the idea of charity <Deut. 24:13; Prov. 10:2; 11:4>. Literally meaning ‘right’ or ‘acts of right,’ or ‘justice,’ *sedaqa* came to mean ‘charity,’ because according to the Mosaic law the poor had an inalienable right to certain produce of the soil. Hence it does not exactly correspond to our term alms but occupies a midway position between deeds of right and love.”

When Moses gave this command, Israel was still one large family. The erosion of family values that is typical in our time in the western hemisphere did not yet exist. Giving alms was not a handout to a stranger, but

³⁷⁸ Matt. 16:26

financial support of a family member. There was also the heritage factor, alluded to by *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* which is unknown in our age.

The matter of how people became poor, and to what extent their own obligations had to be taken into account, is not brought up in this context. It is a known fact that some people rather live off the wealth of others than make an effort to work for their own support. We cannot draw any conclusions from this, beside the fact that the givers, not the receivers, are addressed in this chapter. In another context, the Apostle Paul warns the church against those whom he considers to be social parasites. He writes to the Thessalonians: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."³⁷⁹ There must, obviously, be a balance between generosity and encouraging loafing. On the other hand, the Bible seems to say to us that we should rather err on the side of generosity, even if it pertains to unscrupulous receivers, than be tightfisted. Charity, in all the shades of its meaning, should be the trademark of a Christian.

The topic of the verses 12-18 is the setting free of a Hebrew slave. This has no relationship with the sabbath year, except for the fact that there are similarities between the two commandments. Both deal with a period of seven years, and both share a spirit of generosity. This law seems a repeat of the one already given in Exodus.³⁸⁰ The two sections seem to be identical, except for an addition in Deuteronomy, which prescribes that the freed slave be furnished with the means to begin his own life over again. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* says about this: "Here is an addition to this law, requiring them to put some small stock into their servants' hands to set up with for themselves, when they sent them out of their service, v. 13, 14. It was to be supposed that they had nothing of their own, and that their friends had little or nothing for them, else they would have been redeemed before they were discharged by law; they had no wages for their service, and all they got by their labor was their masters', so that their liberty would do them little good, having nothing to begin the world with; therefore, their masters are here commanded to furnish them liberally with corn and cattle. No certain measure is prescribed: that is left to the generosity of the master, who probably would have respect to the servant's merit and necessity; but the Jewish writers say, 'He could not give less than the value of thirty shekels of silver, but as much more as he pleased.' The maid-servants, though they were not to have their ears bored if they were disposed to stay, yet, if they went out free, they were to have a gratuity given them; for to this those words refer, Unto thy maid-servant thou shalt do likewise, v. 17. The reasons for this are taken from the law of gratitude."

The difference between the law in Exodus and the one in Deuteronomy is in the racial background of the person involved. In Exodus, most likely, a genuine Israelite is meant, but Deuteronomy speaks about "a fellow Hebrew," or "your brother, a Hebrew man," as the NKJV puts it. The Hebrew words *'ach 'Ibriy* do not particularly refer to a pure blood Israelite but to any descendant of Eber. Eber was a descendant of Shem.³⁸¹

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary remarks on this: "The terms, 'thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman,' are special. 'Thy brother' is applied to a stranger <Lev. 25:35>. Hebrew man and Hebrew woman indicates a person of foreign origin, not native Israelite-- one who, by long residence in Canaan, was admitted to the ordinary rights and privileges of Hebrews, but belonged to a special and distinct class of servants-- not connected with pagandom, and yet not to be regarded as proper Israelites; but born in a state of servitude, and constituting a middle class between the impoverished Israelites and the proper servants bought of pagan-- the class to which would belong those descended from a maid-servant given in marriage by the master to his servant <Exo. 31:5>."

If the interpretation given in *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* is correct (*The Pulpit Commentary* does not seem to make a difference between the Israelite slave in Exodus and the Hebrew man in this chapter), this commandment throws a new light upon Israel's status as a kingdom of priests in this world. This generous treatment of persons who are no blood relatives must be seen as a testimony to the world of the genuineness of God's revelation which was entrusted to them. There are traces of a missionary spirit in this law.

The reference to Israel's own slavery in Egypt also places this command in a broader light. Their own experience of bondage and the subsequent delivery, which made them into free individuals with human dignity, should give them a passion for the souls of those who were still enslaved. God wanted Israel to strive for freedom for all of creation. If we see slavery as a symbol of sin (after all, the New Testament emphasizes that sin is slavery), then this admonition: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you," contains a beautiful lesson. As people who have been redeemed from sin, we should relate to others, not as saints but as redeemed sinners. Jesus makes this clear in the parable of the slave who had been pardoned, but refused to pardon his fellow man.³⁸²

³⁷⁹ II Thes. 3:10

³⁸⁰ See Ex. 21:2-6

³⁸¹ See Gen. 10:21

³⁸² See Matt. 18:23-31

The ear piercing ceremony contains a wealth of spiritual lessons. Most of this was commented on in our notes on the same passage in Exodus, and in order to avoid vain repetition we will refrain from any further comment on the love that makes the bond slave serve for the rest of his life.

The remainder of this chapter, from vs. 19-23 deals with the consecration of the firstborn animals and the eating of meat in general.

The setting apart of the firstborn animals had been introduced earlier. In connection with the first Passover and the exodus from Egypt, the Lord had said to Moses: "Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal."³⁸³ The consecration of the firstborn was symbolic for the consecration of the whole race, both human and animal. God wanted to remind Israel that every living being belongs to Him. The essence of the Passover celebration was the fact that the lives of humans were spared because an animal had been substituted for them. The Israelites in Egypt were protected by the blood of the lamb that had been applied to the doorpost of their houses. The dedication of every firstborn to the Lord was a reminder of Israel's salvation.

All this had already been made clear in previous commandments. What is new in this particular command is that the consecrated animals were exempt from use for economic purposes: oxen were not to be put to work and sheep were not allowed to be shorn. In other words, they were not to be subjected to the consequences of the curse of sin that had been pronounced over the earth. When God told Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return,"³⁸⁴ the ox was also condemned to plow and the sheep to be shorn. All domestic animals participate in the painful toil and sweat of the human brow. In this law, God lifted the curse for the firstborn animals that were consecrated to Him. God hates painful toil and sweat. In Ezekiel's prophecy God forbade the priests to wear woolen undergarment, saying: "They must not wear anything that makes them perspire."³⁸⁵ In being exempt, the firstborn enter into the Sabbath, in the rest God had prepared when He finished His creation, before sin entered the world.

This exemption presents us with a rather complicated and paradoxical situation. After all, the main reason for the exemption of the firstborn animals was their dedication to the Lord, which meant that they were to be sacrificed. They entered God's sabbath rest through death. Obviously, death was not part of God's original Sabbath. When death entered creation through the sin of man, the Sabbath was broken. But it is also through death that the Sabbath is restored. It is through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ that we enter into the Sabbath rest of God. The author of the Hebrew epistle explains that it is through faith in the Gospel that we enter into God's rest. He says: "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."³⁸⁶ And the Gospel is the message of Jesus' death and resurrection, of which the sacrifice of the firstborn animals was an image. And since the sacrificial animal substituted for the person who brought the sacrifice, we may conclude that we all, by identification with Jesus' death and resurrection, enter into God's rest. For us who believe in Christ, the curse is lifted. In Christ we are all firstborn, the first fruits of God's new creation, as James says: "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."³⁸⁷

Vs. 21 states that any animal brought as a sacrifice had to be without blemish or defect; this is, obviously, to portray the Lord Jesus Christ as the perfect Lamb of God. The verse does not say what ought to be done in case a firstborn animal could not be sacrificed because of an imperfection. Blemished animals could be eaten at home, but a firstborn animal could not be substituted. The equivalent in money for the blemished firstborn was probably taken to the temple, since allowances were made for people who were separated from the sanctuary by a great distance which made travel with animals cumbersome.

The prohibition to eat blood had already been given by God to Noah. We read that after the flood, God said to Noah: "You must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it."³⁸⁸ The pouring out of the blood on the ground must have been symbolic of the dedication of the animal to the Lord. Blood was never to be used for human consumption, since it was the means of atonement for man's sin.

³⁸³ Ex. 13:2

³⁸⁴ Gen. 3:17-19

³⁸⁵ Ezekiel 44:18

³⁸⁶ Heb. 4:9,10

³⁸⁷ James 1:18

³⁸⁸ Gen. 9:4

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

III. The Explanation of the Additional Laws 12:1-26:19**A. Explanation of the Ceremonial Laws (continued) 16:1-17**

This section deals with three feasts the Israelites had to observe and for the celebration of which they were to gather at the place the Lord would choose, the place of the tabernacle, and later of the temple. In vs. 16 we read: “Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles.” The implication is that God wanted the Israelites to take three weeks of vacation during the year, and spend it in His presence. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: “The other great festivals of the Israelites, the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement, are not here referred to, because on these no assembling of the whole people at the sanctuary was required, and such assembling is the point of view under which the feasts are mainly regarded here.”

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia writes: “The three pilgrimage festivals were known by that name because on them the Israelites gathered at Jerusalem to give thanks for their doubly joyful character. They were of agricultural significance as well as commemorative of national events. Thus, the Passover is connected with the barley harvest; at the same time it is the zeman cheruth, recalling the Exodus from Egypt <Exo 12:6; Lev. 23:5,8; Num. 28:16-25; Deut 16:1-8>.”

The first celebration that would require the presence of all of Israel at the shrine of worship is the Passover (vs. 1-8). Thus far only the original Passover had been observed on the night Israel left Egypt. Evidently, it had not been commemorated during the desert journey. The regulations Moses spells out here are, therefore, to direct the future observances. The next celebration would take place after Israel had crossed the Jordan river, at the eve of the conquest of Canaan. We read in Joshua: “On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover.”³⁸⁹

The Passover was the first feast to be observed in the Jewish religious calendar, which began with the month Abib. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* says about the name of the month: “Abib is not properly a name of a month, but part of a descriptive phrase, ‘the month of young ears of grain.’ This may indicate the Israelitish way of determining the new year <Exo 12:2>, the year beginning with the new moon nearest or next preceding this stage of the growth of the barley. The year thus indicated was practically the same with the old Babylonian year, and presumably came in with Abraham.”

The original Passover which marked the exodus of Israel from Egypt, their birth as a nation, and the beginning of their history, as well as their calendar was unusual in that it celebrated the event before it actually took place. As such it is one of the most unique feasts in human history. Most commemorations of historical incidents look back; the Passover looked forward. This gives clear evidence of its supernatural character. God knew what would happen; He made it happen, and He instructed Israel to celebrate their deliverance from evil powers before it became a reality, and while it was taking place.

Now the time had come when the original event became a monument. The thrust of the whole book Exodus was a festival to the LORD, the God of Israel in the desert. As such it was announced to Pharaoh. We read: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.’”³⁹⁰ This was the way God’s revelation of Himself at Mount Sinai had been announced. Then God declared that His presence would be revealed above the cover on the ark, between the two cherubim. God had said to Moses: “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.”³⁹¹ This place of God’s revelation had always been the focus of the Passover celebration. It was, therefore, natural that future observances of the Passover were not allowed to take place at people’s homes, but at the place where God revealed Himself. The feast is a festival of communion with God.

The first Passover in Egypt had been a family affair. The meal was eaten in the home, and the blood of the animal had been applied to the doorpost of the house. The new regulations for the celebration of the feast made it into a national event. The meal was no longer eaten at home, and the blood did not serve anymore as a protection for the family; it was poured out at the base of the altar. At its birth as a nation, Israel became an entity constituted of

³⁸⁹ Josh. 5:10

³⁹⁰ Ex. 5:1

³⁹¹ Ex. 25:22

families who had been protected by the blood of the lamb. There was no need for a symbolic repetition of this birth. They were no longer separate families, but members of the same body.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread actually began simultaneously with the Passover. The Passover was to be celebrated on the fourteenth of the month, and in some instances the Feast of Unleavened Bread is referred to as beginning on the next day, but according to other instructions unleavened bread was to be eaten with the Passover meal also. We read in Numbers: "They are to celebrate it on the fourteenth day of the second month at twilight. They are to eat the lamb, together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs."³⁹² The terms Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread are sometimes used interchangeably. We read in Mark's Gospel, for instance: "On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb...."³⁹³

The reason given here for the use of unleavened bread was the haste with which Israel departed from Egypt. There simply was no time to bake bread with yeast. There is no reference here to yeast as a symbol of corruption. Yet, it was clearly understood in the symbolic search for yeast in the house that yeast stood for pollution. The same thought was expressed in the command that none of the leftover of the Passover lamb could be eaten the next day. The Apostle Paul clearly sees the symbolism of the yeast when he admonishes the Christians in Corinth by saying: "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast-- as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth."³⁹⁴ At the same time the unleavened bread is called "the bread of affliction."

Matthew Henry's Commentary comments on this point: "They must eat unleavened bread for seven days, and no leavened bread must be seen in all their coasts, v. 3, 4, 8. The bread they were confined to is here called bread of affliction, because neither grateful to the taste nor easy of digestion, and therefore proper to signify the heaviness of their spirits in their bondage and to keep in remembrance the haste in which they came out, the case being so urgent that they could not stay for the leavening of the bread they took with them for their march. The Jewish writers tell us that the custom at the Passover supper was that the master of the family broke this unleavened bread, and gave to every one a piece of it, saying, This is (that is, this signifies, represents, or commemorates, which explains that saying of our Savior, This is my body) the bread of affliction which your fathers did eat in the land of Egypt."

So we find the strange implication that the unleavened bread represented two completely opposite matters: the affliction and hardship of the slavery of Egypt, and the sincerity and truth of a life dedicated to the service of the Lord. Very few, if any, of the Israelites who lived in slavery in Egypt would have concluded that they endured their hardship because they were God's elect. Yet, seen against the background of the cosmic struggle between light and darkness, between God and Satan, the suffering of God's children in this world can only be accounted for by the fact that they are the representatives of heaven in a sin-stained world. This is the reason Paul wrote: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."³⁹⁵ Christ Himself, who is the antitype of the unleavened bread, is the best example of affliction and holiness. The very reason for His crucifixion was the fact that He was the Son of God in a world that is under the dominion of the prince of darkness.

This combination of good and evil in one single element is the hardest lesson for a child of God to learn. We are always amazed when we are afflicted. We are like soldiers who enter a battle to find out that the enemy is actually out to kill them, and that they are being shot at with real bullets. The Apostle Peter catches this element of surprise, when he writes: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."³⁹⁶ It is, of course, true that painful trials are the complete opposite of the glory of Christ. We are right when we think it foolish that two incongruent entities be fused into one. Yet, the core of the Gospel is the foolishness of the cross. The unleavened bread embodies this paradox quite well. The Apostle Paul sublimated his suffering by, not only, accepting it positively, but by taking what men did to him as done to him by Jesus Christ Himself. Thus he calls himself "the prisoner of Jesus Christ."³⁹⁷ In the same vein, Joni Erickson, the lady who was paralyzed as a teenager, considers her wheelchair to be part of God's grace to her, which she would not want to give up.

³⁹² Num. 9:11

³⁹³ Mark 14:12

³⁹⁴ I Cor. 5:6-8

³⁹⁵ II Tim. 3:12

³⁹⁶ I Pet. 4:12,13

³⁹⁷ See Eph. 3:1; Philemon vs. 1

The second event to be celebrated was “The Feast of Weeks” (vs. 9-12). This is the Feast of Pentecost, celebrated fifty days after the Passover. Both feasts were related to the harvest: Passover to the barley harvest and Pentecost to wheat. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* remarks here: “As on the second day of the Passover, a sheaf of new barley, reaped on purpose, was brought into the sanctuary and presented as a thank offering to God, so on the second day of Pentecost a sheaf of new wheat was presented as first-fruits <Exo. 23:16; Num. 28:26>-- a free-will spontaneous tribute of gratitude to God for his temporal bounties. This feast was instituted in memory of the giving of the law-- that spiritual food by which man’s soul is nourished <Deut. 8:3>.”

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It should be noted that the harvest celebration, the commemoration of the giving of the law, and the coming of the Holy Spirit have a deep spiritual significance. Jesus’ resurrection was the first fruit of God’s spiritual harvest, and the coming of the Spirit upon men, which meant the birth of the church, was the ingathering of the harvest. The law in the Old Testament had been the expression of God’s will and character which brought to light the corruption of the human heart. The Apostle Paul sums this up by saying: “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”³⁹⁸ But the coming of the Holy Spirit in man’s heart lifted the ban of disobedience. Paul, again, expresses this beautifully by saying: “For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”³⁹⁹ At Pentecost we celebrate the fact that “the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us” through the Holy Spirit who is in us. This should give us ample reason to rejoice before the Lord and to make every effort to get all those we are associated with involved in the celebration: “[our] sons and daughters, [our] menservants and maidservants, the Levites in [our] towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among [us].”

The joy of the heart is to be translated into freewill offerings. The generous way in which we contribute to the Lord’s work is a good thermometer of the genuineness of our conversion. If the wallet does not keep up with the heart, the heart will keep up with the wallet, which is the wrong way around. If our joy does not influence our giving, our giving will dampen our joy. Paul gives this glowing testimony about the Macedonian churches: “And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.”⁴⁰⁰ The gauge of gratitude is not the amount given but the percentage. Rich generosity can well up from extreme poverty. Luke records the following incident at the treasury of the temple in Jerusalem: “As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ‘I tell you the truth,’ he said, ‘this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’”⁴⁰¹

In the midst of these stipulations, we find the admonition: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and follow carefully these decrees.” The previous reference to generosity towards the manservants and maidservants only partially accounts for this verse. There is the general inference to remember one’s past. In this context, it means Israel’s past as a nation. The generation Moses addressed in this chapter had not been slaves themselves. Most of them were not even born when the exodus took place. God did not want them to forget their national history. The intent was not that they should perpetuate an inferiority complex, but that they should not lose the joy of their salvation.

There are two dangers facing people who have been slaves in the past: one is that they eradicate the fact from their memory, and the other is that they keep it alive too much. The Black population of the United States has not, generally, been able to rid themselves of a sense of inferiority. Not many are rightfully proud of the fact that they are black. The Jew of Jesus’ days, on the other hand, proclaimed proudly: “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”⁴⁰² We have all been slaves! Jesus

³⁹⁸ Rom. 3:19,20

³⁹⁹ Rom. 8:3,4

⁴⁰⁰ II Cor. 8:1-5

⁴⁰¹ Luke 21:1-4

⁴⁰² John 8:33

says: “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”⁴⁰³ Slavery to sin is the real slavery. Slavery as a social phenomenon is abhorrent, but it is not detrimental to human dignity. The indignity in slavery is upon the masters, not upon the servants. The Apostle Paul analyses the matter profoundly when he says: “He who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.”⁴⁰⁴

Matthew Henry’s Commentary remarks about the feast—that it was also a celebration of the giving of the law. We read: “And, it should seem, those general words, thou shalt observe and do these statutes, are added here for a particular reason, because this feast was kept in remembrance of the giving of the law upon Mount Sinai, fifty days after they came out of Egypt; now the best way of expressing our thankfulness to God for his favor to us in giving us his law is to observe and do according to the precepts of it.”

The third feast mentioned is the Feast of Tabernacles. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* says about this feast: “The Feast of Tabernacles is at once the general harvest festival, *chagh he-’ saciph*, and the anniversary of the beginnings of the wanderings in the wilderness (<Exo 23:16; Lev 23:33> ff.; <Deut 16:13-15>).”

The Feast of Tabernacles was the most exuberant celebration of the year. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says about it: “This third feast, called also the feast of Tabernacles, commencing on the 15th day of the seventh month, and lasting seven days ... was appointed as a season of thanksgiving for the bountiful supply of the various and valuable fruits of the earth; and as it was a most joyous season, accompanied with the liveliest demonstrations of hilarity and merriment, it was designated by Rabbinical writers as, par excellence, ‘the feast.’ It lasted, like the first, for seven days ... This festival, which was instituted in grateful commemoration of the Israelites having securely dwelt in booths or tabernacles in the wilderness, was the third of the three great annual festivals; and, like the other two, it lasted a week. It began on the fifteenth day of the month Tisri, corresponding to the end of our September and beginning of October, which was observed as a Sabbath; and it could be celebrated only at the place of the sanctuary, offerings being made on the altar every day of its continuance.” *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* adds to this: “The Israelites were also commanded to live in booths made of palm and willow trees during the festival to commemorate their period of wilderness wandering when they lived in temporary shelters. This feast is also known as the Feast of Booths.”

The Feast of Tabernacles strangely combined elements of hardship and privation with abundance and rejoicing. It was the Jewish Thanksgiving Day, but also a commemoration of the journey through the wilderness when the people lived in makeshift tents instead of in solid stone dwellings. It emphasized the transience of life on earth as well as the provision of the Lord. It is at the same time a reminder that life on earth is not our final destination, but a half-way house, and that we are heading for eternity, and it also reminds us of the fact that God provides for our needs in a most generous way while we are on the road.

The Feast of Tabernacles acquires special meaning in the light of the Incarnation. John’s Gospel says: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory.”⁴⁰⁵ The Greek word translated “made his dwelling” is *skenoo* which, according to *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, literally means: “to pitch a tent” or “to tabernacle.” Jesus’ coming to earth combines the same elements as are manifested in the Feast of Tabernacles: the transience and the glory of human life on earth. Sin has turned God’s creation into a desert, and death makes life on earth a fleeting experience. But the presence of the Lord gives glory and exuberance to life. It makes life on earth something to be celebrated, in spite of hardship and sorrow.

We are trekking to the place of God’s abode, heaven, to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles eternally. In Revelation we see those who came out of the great tribulation celebrating this feast. We read how the Apostle John is interviewed by one of the elders: “Then one of the elders asked me, ‘These in white robes-- who are they, and where did they come from?’ I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”⁴⁰⁶ The phrase: “He who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them” is rendered differently in other versions. The NKJ says: “And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them.” The Greek word again is *skenoo*.

⁴⁰³ John 8:34

⁴⁰⁴ I Cor. 7:22,23

⁴⁰⁵ John 1:14

⁴⁰⁶ Rev. 7:13-17

So we find in the feasts in this chapter a series of contrasting features combined into one. There is the paradox of affliction and holiness in the unleavened bread, and transience and exuberant joy in the Feast of Tabernacles. Life is a contradictory experience. Our choosing the Lord's side does not alleviate affliction, sorrow and death, but it elevates the quality of life to the level of a victory and a joy that is supernatural. It makes us blessed people. Moses says: "For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete." This expresses heavenly realities in terms of material blessings. We have no guarantee that we will always be successful one hundred percent on an earthly level, but we can be on a spiritual plane of which the physical elements are the image. Jesus captures this truth in His last words to His disciples before His death on the cross: "I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."⁴⁰⁷ Moses used the exact same words: "Your joy will be complete." We need this joy in order to be able to face the hardships of life. As Nehemiah said: "The joy of the LORD is your strength."⁴⁰⁸ Why would one need strength if there were no storms of life to face?

The law prescribed that the people should make a pilgrimage to the place of God's revelation three times a year. Only the men are mentioned here, but it is obvious that the women were not excluded. The story of Hanna indicates that the whole family went up to the place where the ark was when the husband went.⁴⁰⁹ We get the impression, in the case of Elkanah, that the family only made one pilgrimage a year, but the Hebrew is not clear at this point. It is quite possible that the law which required a triple appearance before the Lord was not fully adhered to. People still tend to neglect their vacations in modern times. The Bible teaches, though, that the Lord wants us to take adequate periods of rest, at least three weeks a year. It also emphasizes that our vacations should be religious experiences. We are to relax before the Lord, get out of the rat-race of life, and practice generosity. Our hectic lifestyle tends to make us self-centered, stingy, and lacking in love. Vacations should correct this. We should use our vacations, not only to get away from the hustle and bustle of our daily occupations but to get away from ourselves also.

How religiously the command to appear before the Lord three times during the year was observed is not clear in the Scriptures. Obviously, during periods of apostasy the feasts were neglected also. But it seems that even the faithful did not always feel under obligation to fulfill this law to the letter. Even Jesus hesitated attending the Feast of Tabernacles, and when He attended He did not spend the whole prescribed week in Jerusalem. When His brothers taunted Him, He answered: " 'You go to the Feast. I am not yet going up to this Feast, because for me the right time has not yet come.' Having said this, he stayed in Galilee. However, after his brothers had left for the Feast, he went also, not publicly, but in secret."⁴¹⁰

The accent in this stipulation seems to be, not in the first place, upon faithful attendance, but upon the attitude of generosity. "No man should appear before the LORD empty-handed: Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you." This command did not only apply to the Feast of Pentecost, when thanksgiving for the harvest was celebrated, but to all three of the feasts. God wants men to respond to their salvation, as commemorated in the Passover, to the hope of the resurrection, of which the Feast of Weeks is the symbol, and to the joy of their existence, that is the pilgrimage through life towards glory. We are to express our gratitude sacrificially.

Generally speaking, God is portrayed in the Bible as the Giver. Only rarely are we called upon to be givers. And what we can give to God cannot stand the comparison with God's gifts to us. Speaking about the churches that were planted by him, Paul explains that the converts had an obligation to repay some of their spiritual debt to those who had brought them the message of salvation. We read in Romans: "For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings."⁴¹¹ In the case of the Jews, their giving was a recognition that God had blessed them. Their affluence was not the result of their own efforts or ingenuity; it was a gift of God.

⁴⁰⁷ John 16:20-22,24

⁴⁰⁸ Neh. 8:10^b

⁴⁰⁹ See I Sam. 1

⁴¹⁰ John 7:8-10

⁴¹¹ Rom. 15:26,27^a

B. Explanation of the Civil Laws 16:18-20:20**1. Administration of Justice** 16:18-20

The Pulpit Commentary comments here: “Moses had at an earlier period appointed judges to settle disputes among the people, and had given instructions to them for the discharge of their duty (Exod. xviii.; Deut. i 12-18). Whilst the people were in the wilderness, united as one body and under the leadership of Moses, this arrangement was sufficient; but a more extended arrangement would be required when they came to be settled in Canaan and dispersed in towns and villages over the whole land. In prospect of this, Moses here enacts that judges and officers were to be appointed by the people in all their gates, in all their places of residence, which the Lord should give them.”

It is not specified how the appointment of judges is to take place, or who would be in charge of the appointing. The impression given is that prominent people would be put into office by a general election.

Adam Clarke's Commentary clarifies the distinction between judges as officials by saying: “Judges ... among the Hebrews, were probably the same as our magistrates or justices of the peace. Officers ... seem to have been the same as our inquest sergeants, beadles, etc., whose office it was to go into the houses, shops, etc. and examine weights, measures, and the civil conduct of the people. When they found anything amiss, they brought the person offending before the magistrate, and the officer punished him on the spot. They seem also to have acted as heralds in the army, <Deut. 20:5>.”

From *Matthew Henry's Commentary* we copy: “While they were encamped in the wilderness, they had judges and officers according to their numbers, rulers of thousands and hundreds, <Exo. 17:25>. When they came to Canaan, they must have them according to their towns and cities, in all their gates; for the courts of judgment sat in the gates. ... Here is a commission given to these inferior magistrates: ‘Judges to try and pass sentence, and officers to execute their sentences, shalt thou make thee.’ However the persons were pitched upon, whether by the nomination of their sovereign or by the election of the people, the power were ordained of God, <Rom. 13:1>. And it was a great mercy to the people thus to have justice brought to their doors, that it might be more expeditious and less expensive, a blessing which we of this nation ought to be very thankful for. Pursuant to this law, besides the great Sanhedrin that sat at the sanctuary, consisting of seventy elders and a president, there was in the larger cities, such as had in them above 120 families, a court of twenty-three judges, in the smaller cities a court of three judges. See this law revived by Jehoshaphat, <2 Chr. 19:5,8>.”

The mention of Jehoshaphat's revival of this law is an indication that the system had been corrupted over the centuries. Evidently, the law was meant to regulate civil suits. Although Israel was a theocracy and not a secular society, the judicial system was separated from religion. From the Scripture reference in *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, however, one could infer that there was no clear line of separation between “state and church,” at least not in Jerusalem. We read: “In Jerusalem also, Jehoshaphat appointed some of the Levites, priests and heads of Israelite families to administer the law of the LORD and to settle disputes. And they lived in Jerusalem.”⁴¹²

The main thrust of these verses, however, is not the logistics of the judicial system but the quality of it. God issued the law for the appointment of the judges and He is also the standard and measure of justice Himself. The righteousness of God is an eternal attribute according to which all human behavior is judged. Judges had to judge in accordance with the character of God. The judges are given the order to “judge the people fairly.” The KJV uses the term “with just judgment.” The Hebrew word translated with “fairly” is *tsedeq*, which is related to the word *tsedaqah* meaning “righteousness.” *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says about these terms: “These nouns come from a Semitic root which occurs in Hebrew, Phoenician, and Aramaic with a juristic sense. In Phoenician and Old Aramaic it carries the sense of ‘loyalty’ demonstrated by a king or priest as a servant of his own god. In these languages a form of the root is combined with other words or names, particularly with the name of a deity, in royal names. In the Old Testament we meet the name Melchizedek (‘king of righteousness’).” This definition is very fitting in this context. The judges had to demonstrate their loyalty to YHWH in the way they carried out their judicious duties. Their judgments had to reflect the righteousness of God's character.

A judge who accepted a bribe lost the ability to judge matters that were presented to him in the light of God's righteousness. The bribe placed his own interests in the center of his attention. His focus was no longer on God but on himself.

According to Moses' instructions, once Israel had entered the Promised Land, the tribes that were standing on Mount Ebal had to pronounce a curse upon those who accepted bribes, by saying: “Cursed is the man who accepts

⁴¹² II Chr. 19:8

a bribe to kill an innocent person.” All the people had to say, “Amen!” to this.⁴¹³ The book of Proverbs has several things to say about the danger of accepting bribes: “A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the course of justice,”⁴¹⁴ and: “By justice a king gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down.”⁴¹⁵ Bribery promotes shortsightedness. The gain of a bribe is short-lived. The corruption of this life will be the essence of suffering in the life to come. Speaking about the gehenna, Jesus says that it is the place: “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”⁴¹⁶ Some people will spend eternity tormenting themselves with remorse about the bribes they have taken.

“Living in the land” acquires a new meaning in this context. In Psalm 37, David, writing several centuries after the conquest of Canaan, speaks about the Promised Land as something still to be obtained. We read, for instance: “Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.” “For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.” “But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.”⁴¹⁷ And the writer to the Hebrews reminds the Christians: “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest.”⁴¹⁸ Standing on the side of justice is a prerequisite for obtaining the promises of God.

It seems as if the last two verses of this chapter are not connected to the topic of justice. But if we see the carrying out of justice as connected with the character of God, the mention of idols, in the form of a tree trunk and a stone, may also be seen as a warning against the corruption of justice practiced by those who serve those idols. The planting of a tree and the placing of a stone next to an altar dedicated to YHWH would give mixed signals to those who came to worship God. The Bible does not give us any clear explanations of the practices mentioned, but there must have been a tendency to syncretism among the Israelites, which would later lead into pure idolatry. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes: “The trunk of the tree was often provided with branches, and assumed the form of the tree of life. It was as a trunk, however, that it was forbidden to be erected by the side of ‘the altar of Jehovah’ (<Deut 16:21>; see <Judg 6:25,28,30; 2 Kin 23:6>). Accordingly the symbol made for Asherah by his mother was ‘cut down’ by Asa <1 Kin 15:13>.” Asa’s deed is recorded in the book of Kings: “He even deposed his grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother, because she had made a repulsive Asherah pole. Asa cut the pole down and burned it in the Kidron Valley.”⁴¹⁹ The stone, probably, represented Baal as the male companion of the goddess Asherah. The commencement of idolatry would be a sure way of perversion of justice. It would mean the abandoning of the character of God, which is the rule by which all justice is measured.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

B. Explanation of the Civil Laws (Continued) 17:1-20:20

2. Punishment for idolatry 17:1-7

Vs. 1 does not seem to fit the context of this chapter which, initially, deals with idolatry. The quality of the sacrificial animal chosen, however, is an indication of the spiritual condition of the one who brings the sacrifice. Idolatry begins with the abandoning of the standard of God’s perfection. The bringer of the sacrifice had to identify himself with the sacrifice that was brought, but the sacrifice itself represented more than the man who brought it. All sacrifices in the Old Testament were pictures of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Bringing a defective animal meant a deviation from the original. The implications of sacrificing an animal that had any defect can only be understood in retrospect, but that does not change the meaning of it. For the Israelite in the Old Testament it was a simple act of obedience to choose animals that had no defect. This law had already been given in Exodus. “The

⁴¹³ Ch. 27:25

⁴¹⁴ Prov. 17:23

⁴¹⁵ Prov. 29:4

⁴¹⁶ Mark 9:48

⁴¹⁷ Ps 37:3, 9, 11

⁴¹⁸ Heb. 4:1-3

⁴¹⁹ I Kings 15:13

animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats.”⁴²⁰ God said later through the mouth of Malachi: “ ‘You place defiled food on my altar. But you ask, ‘ ‘How have we defiled you?’ ‘By saying that the LORD’s table is contemptible. When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?’ says the LORD Almighty.”⁴²¹

Matthew Henry’s Commentary agrees with the above by saying: “God is the best of beings, and therefore whatsoever he is served with ought to be the best in its kind. And the Old-Testament sacrifices in a special manner must be so, because they were types of Christ, who is a Lamb without blemish or spot <1 Pet. 1:19>, perfectly pure from all sin and all appearance of it.”

The fact that a sacrificial animal represented the person who brought the sacrifice who was himself blemished by sin and death could lead to the supposition that an imperfect animal would better serve the purpose of the sacrifice. But God requires perfection. Jesus says: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁴²² This requirement would lead to despair if it were not for the fact that the sacrificial animal is also an image of the perfect Lamb of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. God’s demand for perfection in our lives is met by the sacrifice of Christ in our behalf. Bringing an animal that has a defect as a sacrifice to God is an insult to God’s plan of salvation.

Our problem is that we tend to see the sacrifice as something we give to God, which is the opposite of the reality. God is the one who brings the sacrifice. God is the creator of all life. How then can we give to Him what is not ours, what already belongs to Him? We are the receivers, not the givers! David says to God: “Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.”⁴²³

The link between this requirement for perfection and the following passage about idolatry lies in man’s tendency to manipulate. Idolatry is based on the mistaken notion that gods can be manipulated. An idol is a representation of a being of a lower level than man. Paul says about the idol worshippers: “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”⁴²⁴ With biting sarcasm Isaiah describes the maker of idols: “The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man’s fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, ‘Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.’ From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, ‘Save me; you are my god.’”⁴²⁵ Even if the idol worshipper is aware of the fact that the idols are backed up by demonic powers, he is dealing with beings that are on a lower level in order of creation than man. The author of Hebrews says about angels: “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?”⁴²⁶ thus placing man on a higher level than the angels. Sin has obscured the picture but it has not changed God’s order of creation. Satan and his demons are fallen angels, and as such they rank below man. When man bows down to an angel, whether fallen or good, he lowers himself. As he bows before God, he is elevated.

Thus the stern warning against idolatry was, in a sense, a measure to protect man from falling below the rank God had envisioned for him. The punishment seems unreasonably harsh when we look at it from our twentieth century perspective. We remember the witch hunts from the past, and this can prevent us from understanding that the measure was meant to protect the nation of Israel as a whole to lose its dignity as a society of human beings.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary says about these verses: “The grand object contemplated by God in choosing Israel was to preserve the knowledge and worship of Himself; and hence, idolatry of any kind, whether of the heavenly bodies or in some grosser form, is called ‘a transgression of his covenant.’ No rank nor sex could palliate this crime. Every reported case, even a flying rumor of the perpetration of so heinous an offence, was to be judicially examined; and if proved by the testimony of competent witnesses-- not a single witness, however, for

⁴²⁰ Ex. 12:5

⁴²¹ Mal. 1:7,8

⁴²² Matt. 5:48

⁴²³ I Chr. 29:14

⁴²⁴ Rom. 1:22,23

⁴²⁵ Isa. 44:12-17

⁴²⁶ Heb. 1:14

this provision against a hasty and unjust verdict, deemed one of the wisest arrangements of modern legislation, was incorporated in the statutes of the Mosaic code-- the offender was to be taken without the gates and stoned to death, the witnesses casting the first stone at him. The object of this special arrangement was partly to deter the witnesses from making a rash-accusation, by the prominent part they had to act as executioners, and partly to give a public assurance that the crime had met its due punishment.”

Matthew Henry's Commentary observes: “It was made a capital crime to seduce others to idolatry (ch. 13), here it is made no less to be seduced. If the blind thus mislead the blind, both must fall into the ditch. Thus God would possess them with a dread of that sin, which they must conclude exceedingly sinful when so many sanguinary laws were made against it, and would deter those from it that would not otherwise be persuaded against it; and yet the law, which works death, proved ineffectual.” In committing the sin of idolatry, the people sinned against the first of the Ten Commandments, which read: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.”⁴²⁷

The sin was particularly heinous for Israel which had been chosen to be the custodian of God’s revelation on earth. They were the only nation on earth God had chosen for the purpose of bringing about the salvation of the world. If they would run over to the enemy, the whole world would be lost.

The philosophy behind the announcement of capital punishment was that it would be a deterrent. The issue of deterrence is still hotly debated in our time. Evidently, God says that capital punishment should be administered for certain crimes, and that it would deter future criminals.

As noted above, the law prescribed that no person could be taken to court and be condemned on the basis of a single testimony. This had been made into law earlier. We read in Numbers: “No one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.”⁴²⁸ Moses would enlarge the scope of this command later to any crime: “One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”⁴²⁹ In the New Testament Paul applies the principle of this law to the administration of discipline in the church. To Timothy he writes: “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.”⁴³⁰ Ironically, the Sanhedrin used this law unsuccessfully in the case against Jesus.⁴³¹

The Pulpit Commentary remarks here: “Only on the testimony of more than one witness could the accused be condemned (cf. Numb. xxxv. 30); and the hand of the witnesses was to be first against him to put him to death – a rule which would tend to prevent accusations being lightly adduced, as none would venture to witness against any one unless so deeply convinced of his guilt that they were willing to assume the responsibility of inflicting on him the last penalty with their own hands.”

The phrase “a man shall be put to death” reads literally “the dead man shall die.” The thought behind the expression is that spiritual death had already preceded the execution of the criminal. Jesus expresses the same thought when He advises a would-be disciple: “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”⁴³²

We can imagine the trauma to the witnesses that could evolve in cases when a close relative was caught in acts of idolatry. The witnesses would be under moral obligation to report the crime, which meant taking a leading role in the execution following condemnation. A case in point in modern times is the “una-bomber” who was reported to the police by his own brother. The brother agonized about the implication that his brother could be condemned to death and executed. The question as to whether a man should let his allegiance to his family take precedence over his allegiance to God becomes very urgent in such cases.

Included in the idolatrous practices that were forbidden was astrology. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says: “Astrology and astrologers were widespread in the ancient world, being documented as early as 2000 B. C. in Mesopotamia. From there it spread to Egypt, Greece, China, India, and throughout the ancient world. The Bible clearly warns against astrologers <Deut. 4:19; 17:2-7; Is. 47:13-15>. Many scholars believe the ‘magi’ who came to honor Jesus were astrologers.” This form of idolatry is probably still the most prevalent superstition of our time. There is not only no proof to substantiate the belief that the course of the stars and planets has any bearing upon

⁴²⁷ Ex. 20:3-6

⁴²⁸ Num. 35:30

⁴²⁹ Deut. 19:15

⁴³⁰ I Tim. 5:19

⁴³¹ See Mark 14:55-59

⁴³² Matt. 8:22

human destiny, but the belief itself is often used as a substitute for faith in God and surrender to His will. The essence of idolatry, in any form, is substitution of a relationship with God by another relationship which, man believes, leaves him in control of his future.

The execution of the idolater had to be carried out outside the gate. The Hebrew words do not actually indicate that the execution was to take place outside the city walls. *El-sh^aaareykaa* means literally “unto thy gates.” But *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks about this: “Unto thy gates; judicial proceedings were conducted at the gates of the city, and in some place outside the walls the sentence was executed on the condemned criminal (Neh. viii. 1,3; Job xxix. 7; ch. xxii. 24; Acts vii. 58; Heb. xiii.12), just as, during the journey through the wilderness, it had been outside the camp that transgressors were punished (Lev. xxiv. 14; Numb. xv. 36).” The place of execution emphasized the fact that there was no place in the society of Israel for those who had denounced the God of Israel.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews turns the tables by saying: “We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.”⁴³³ Jesus’ execution took place “outside the city gate”; He identified Himself with the criminal and the outcast by becoming an outcast Himself. Paul even goes so far as to say that Christ became a curse for us. We read: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”⁴³⁴ This fact does not diminish the horror of the execution, nor the abomination of idolatry, but the scene is changed when we find God Himself being executed in the same way as the idolaters were. It shows who the God is whom the people abandoned: not the severe, inflexible judge, but the one who takes the place of the condemned. Which idol would do such a thing for the ones that worshipped it? Behind every idol stands “the murderer from the beginning.”⁴³⁵

3. Establishment of a Supreme Court of Justice Vs. 8-13

The commands in these verses are, obviously, addressed to the local magistrates. There is no indication that a plaintiff or an accused had the right to appeal a decision made by a lower court. It was the judge who referred the matter to the religious leaders, who would have access to the divine oracle by means of the Urim and the Thummim. It was part of the duties of the high priest to consult God. We read in Exodus: “Also put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece, so they may be over Aaron’s heart whenever he enters the presence of the LORD. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD.”⁴³⁶ The meaning of the Urim and the Thummim, as well as the use of both, is still one of the unsolved mysteries of the Bible.

From *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* we copy: “[If there arise a matter too hard for thee] (cf. <Deut. 1:16-17; Exo. 18:22>). [In] civil or criminal cases, where there was any doubt or difficulty in giving a decision, the local magistrates were to submit them by reference to the tribunal of the Sanhedrin-- the supreme council, which was composed partly of civil and partly of ecclesiastical persons. The principal of these officers were to be ‘the priests, the Levites’-- i. e., the Levitical priests, a select number of them, including the high priest, who were members of the legislative assembly, and who, along with a proportion of brethren from the other tribes, are called ... ‘the judge.’ ... Their sittings were held in the neighborhood of the sanctuary, because in great emergencies the high priest had to consult God by Urim <Num. 27:21>.”

The NIV speaks of “whether bloodshed, lawsuits or assaults.” The KJV, following the Hebrew literally, uses the more archaic expressions: “between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke.” *The Pulpit Commentary* explains this as: “In cases where blood had been shed and death had ensued, either accidentally or from murderous intent (cf. Exod. xxi. 13, etc.; Numb. xxxv. 9, etc.); in cases of disputed rights and claims (cf. 2 Chron. xix.10); and in cases where corporeal injury had been suffered, whether in strife or from assault (Exod. xxi. 18, etc.); and, in general, wherever matters of controversy – disputes as to what was lawful and right, might arise in their towns and villages.” The commentary continues: “In all such cases recourse was to be had to the court at the sanctuary – ‘to the priests the Levites,’ i.e. the priests who were of the tribe of Levi, and to the judge presiding there – the lay judge associated with the high priest as president... It is not intended by this that an appeal was to lie from the lower court to the higher, or that the parties in a suit might carry it at once to the supreme judge;

⁴³³ Heb. 13:10-13

⁴³⁴ Gal. 3:13,14

⁴³⁵ See John 8:44

⁴³⁶ Ex. 28:30

the meaning rather is that, when the ordinary judges found a case too difficult for them to deal with, they were themselves to transmit it to the supreme court for decision.”

Two points are important in these verses: the place God will choose, and the mention of the law. Difficult issues have to be judged in the light of God’s revelation, and according to the law God had given. In a civil court case, those factors may not have entered the picture, but once a matter was referred to the Sanhedrin, the light of God’s revelation fell upon it. The matter was, so to speak, judged in a different light. In the lower court the question “what should man do?” was asked. In the higher court it was “what would God do?” was the issue.

This made contempt of court a capital offense. The man who showed contempt for the verdict or the person of the priest showed contempt for God and forfeited his life. It is obvious that this placed an awesome responsibility on the shoulders of the priest. It was important, especially for this court, that verdicts were passed on with absolute impartiality and justice. Corruption on this level would mean the end of the theocracy. This makes the role the Sanhedrin played in the condemnation of Jesus such a heinous crime. David asked: “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?”⁴³⁷

4. Requirements for the Establishment of a Kingdom 17:14-20

The stipulations regarding the establishment of a monarchy were not contradictory to the fact that Israel was a theocracy. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* observes: “According to the Mosaic charter for the kingship, the monarchy when established must be brought into consonance with the fact that Yahweh was Israel’s king. ... That it was not the monarchy as such that was objectionable to Yahweh and His prophet is evidenced by the fact that to the patriarchs the promise had been given: ‘Kings shall come out of thy loins’ <Gen. 17:6; 35:11>. In view of this Moses had made provision for a kingship <Deut 17:14-20>.”

The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary writes: “An earthly kingdom was not incompatible with the theocracy... if the kings submitted unconditionally to the will of Jehovah and, as earthly representatives of His sovereignty, wished only to execute His laws and judgments. It was not the original intention of Jehovah to leave His people as sheep without a shepherd, but to set over them a man who should lead them <Num. 27:16-17>, as He gave them Moses and Joshua and afterward judges from Othniel to Samuel. Knowing that Israel would long for a king, God gave a promise to the patriarchs that ‘kings shall come forth from you’ <Gen. 17:6,16; 35:11>; this promise was renewed by Moses <Deut. 28:36>, along with a law given relating to the king <17:14-20>, whereby the earthly kingdom was incorporated in the theocracy.”

Without the establishment of a monarchy, the promise of the coming of the Messiah could not be fulfilled. The angel Gabriel said to Mary at the annunciation of the birth of Christ: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”⁴³⁸ So, obviously, the establishment of the kingdom of Israel was an integral part of God’s plan for this world.

Matthew Henry’s Commentary adds to this: “It is here supposed that the people would, in process of time, be desirous of a king, whose royal pomp and power would be thought to make their nation look great among their neighbors. Their having a king is neither promised as a mercy nor commanded as a duty (nothing could be better for them than the divine regimen they were under), but it is permitted them if they desired it. If they would but take care to have the ends of government answered, and God’s laws duly observed and put in execution, they should not be tied to any one form of government, but should be welcome to have a king. Though something irregular is supposed to be the principle of the desire, that they might be like the nations (whereas God in many ways distinguished them from the nations), yet God would indulge them in it, because he intended to serve his own purposes by it, in making the regal government typical of the kingdom of the Messiah.”

It was with the theocratic form of government as with the law of God, both were good but human nature made them ineffective. What Paul says about the law, that it “was powerless to do (bringing about man’s salvation) in that it was weakened by the sinful nature...” applies to Israel’s theocracy also. In God’s original order of creation the only form of government was man’s rule over the beasts of the earth. It was not until sin entered the world that God said to Eve, speaking about Adam: “he will rule over you.”⁴³⁹ If sin had not come in, theocracy would have been the only form of government the world would ever know. Man having power over man is an accommodation to the present situation.

⁴³⁷ Ps. 11:3

⁴³⁸ Luke 1:32,33

⁴³⁹ Gen. 3:16^b

Even the coming kingdom of the Messiah will not be the last word in world history. Paul says about Christ's rule: "For he must reign *until* he has put all his enemies under his feet. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all."⁴⁴⁰ That is the ultimate form of theocracy: "God all in all." The Bible also does not teach that Christ will rule over us, but that we will rule with Him. The Apostle John writes in Revelation: "And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years."⁴⁴¹

As far as concerns the present situation, Paul advises us to accept the government under which we live, as ordained by God. We read: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience."⁴⁴² Scripture does not give us a choice of government. The only rebellion allowed is when government edicts oppose the laws of God. When the Apostles were ordered by the Sanhedrin to stop proclaiming the Gospel, they answered: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in Gods sight to obey you rather than God."⁴⁴³

When Israel did get settled in the Promised Land, they asked for a king for the wrong reasons. It was not so much the fact that they took the nations that surrounded them as an example. Even Moses mentions this point without condemning it. He says that they might say: "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us." When, finally, the time for the appointment of a king arrived, the Israelites did not want to have a king who governed them under God, but instead of God. When Samuel resisted the people's demand God told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king."⁴⁴⁴ The people voted for conformity with the world. They were willing to exchange their treasure for a tinsel. They were not interested in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The first requirement for the appointment of the king is that he is the one God chooses and that he be "a brother Israelite." At this point the monarchies of Western Europe have gone astray. Historically, foreigners have been asked to rule over countries, simply because they were of royal blood. The Constitution of the United States of America remains closer to the biblical principle than some monarchies in requiring that the president be born in the United States. Only in recent history, marriages with commoners have been allowed. God made the stipulation that the king be a brother Israelite in order to preserve the image of the coming kingdom of the Messiah. The writer to the Hebrews says about Jesus: "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.'⁴⁴⁵

The second requirement is that the king must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself. This seems strange to us. The stipulation envisions, probably, a two-fold danger: that of the building up of a strong cavalry, and of their establishing close ties with Egypt, the main provider of horses in the ancient world. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* remarks: "The multiplication of horses would inevitably lead to many evils, to increased contact with foreign nations, especially with Egypt, to the importation of an animal to which the character of the country was not suited, to the establishment of an Oriental military despotism, to proud and pompous parade in peace, to a dependence upon Egypt in time of war, and a consequent withdrawal of trust and confidence in God."

The Book of Psalms warns against the danger of trusting in military power, as embodied in the use of horses and chariots. We read: "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God."⁴⁴⁶ Or: "A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailling love, to deliver them from death and keep

⁴⁴⁰ I Cor. 15:25,28

⁴⁴¹ Rev. 20:4

⁴⁴² Rom. 13:1-5

⁴⁴³ Acts 4:19

⁴⁴⁴ I Sam. 8:7

⁴⁴⁵ Heb. 2:11,12

⁴⁴⁶ Ps. 20:7

them alive in famine.”⁴⁴⁷ And: “His [God’s] pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of a man; the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.”⁴⁴⁸

The reason Moses gives for this warning against the acquisition of horses is that Israel was not allowed to go back to Egypt. “The LORD has told you, ‘You are not to go back that way again.’ ” We cannot find those very words in Scripture. Moses may have been referring more to the spirit than to the actual words of the command. He may have thought of Abraham’s admonition to his servant who was sent to find a bride of Isaac: “Make sure that you do not take my son back there. ...The LORD, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father’s household and my native land and who spoke to me and promised me on oath, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give this land ...do not take my son back there.’”⁴⁴⁹ When the Lord brings us out of slavery, He wants us to burn our bridges behind us. Buying a horse is not a sin, but going back to Egypt would be.

The next prohibition is for polygamy. Generally speaking, polygamy is a gray area in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God disapproved of polygamy in strong terms; which does not imply that He approved of it either. But Abraham, or David, for instance, was never chided for his multiple marriages. In the case of David, God seemingly condoned. We read, after his sin with Bathsheba, that God says: “I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more.”⁴⁵⁰ This could be interpreted though as if God wanted to say that David would have had other venues to satisfy his uncontrolled passion. At other times the warnings seem more intended to limit the damage of polygamy than to propagate it. The following verse is meant more for the protection of the first wife than as an apology for polygamy: “If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights.”⁴⁵¹ Jesus’ words about divorce could be applied to polygamy also: “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.”⁴⁵² The New Testament states the will of God regarding marriage, divorce, and polygamy much more clearly. The Apostle Paul, wanting people who are leaders in the church to be a living example of what all the members of the church should be, states three times in his epistles that overseers and deacons must be “the husband of but one wife.”⁴⁵³

The law on kingship, however, does not forbid polygamy for reasons of controlling sexual licentiousness, but for avoiding the dangers of temptation into idolatry. At least that seems to be the portent of the words: “his heart will be led astray.” A broader meaning may also be intended, however. If a monarch gave in to his sexual desires by keeping a harem, his general sense of accountability could suffer to the point that he felt he was completely above the law. Power has always had the tendency to corrupt. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* comments on this: “This would necessarily lead to foreign alliances, and be the means of introducing the manners and customs of other nations, and their idolatry also. Solomon sinned against this precept, and brought ruin on himself and on the land by it, see <1 Kings 11:4>.” The Holy Spirit may have given Moses a vision of what would happen when Israel’s monarchy reached its peak under Solomon. We read that: “As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.”⁴⁵⁴

Power and love of money always seem to go together. Accumulation of riches warps our sense of value. Love of money has nothing to do with the desire to provide for our needs. It goes far beyond that point to a means of self-protection. Money, seemingly, gives independence and independence means power. We believe we need this power to safeguard ourselves against “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” The writer of the Hebrew epistle puts his finger on the problem when he says: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’ ”⁴⁵⁵ The basis for the desire for money is, ultimately, fear: fear of man, and fear of death. Those who fear the Lord have nothing else to fear, and money is given its proper place in their lives.

Solomon went overboard, even more in his accumulation of riches than in the size of his harem. Initially, the Lord gave him riches. God said to him: “I will give you what you have not asked for-- both riches and honor-- so

⁴⁴⁷ Ps. 33:17-19

⁴⁴⁸ Ps. 147:10,11

⁴⁴⁹ See Gen. 24:6-8

⁴⁵⁰ II Sam. 12:8

⁴⁵¹ Ex. 21:10

⁴⁵² Matt. 19:8

⁴⁵³ See I Tim. 3:2,12; Titus 1:6

⁴⁵⁴ I Kings 11:4

⁴⁵⁵ Heb. 13:5,6

that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.”⁴⁵⁶ But when Solomon ceased to walk with the Lord, he began to bleed his people to death in order to protect his cash flow. After Solomon’s death the people said to his son: “Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you.”⁴⁵⁷ Solomon must have taxed the nation heavily in order to maintain his sumptuous lifestyle. Being rich entails heavy responsibilities and great accountability. Rich people often overlook especially this last fact.

God’s prerequisites for the monarchy are meant to protect the future king, not to limit him. Adherence to this law would make the king a good monarch. The greatest king who ever trod this earth, the once and future king, said: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”⁴⁵⁸ In order to make His royal entry in Jerusalem, He had to borrow a donkey.⁴⁵⁹

The most important requirement for the king of Israel would be that he would possess a Bible and that he read it every day. There is no record of any of the kings of Israel that they ever obeyed this order. One cannot be a king without having daily devotional Bible readings. Actually, there is no record that any of the kings of Israel obeyed any of the points of Moses’ law on the monarchy. Solomon, who is considered as having ushered in Israel’s golden age, was the greatest offender. The closest reference of a king who read the Word of God is Josiah. Shaphan, the king’s secretary read from the newly discovered copy of the law.⁴⁶⁰ This could imply that the king himself was not even literate, but that we do not know.

We know that the King of kings maintained a close relationship with the written Word of God. Ever since his staying behind in the temple as a twelve-year-old lad, in order “to be in my Father’s house,” He became versed in the Scriptures, frequently quoting passages by heart. Not even David, Israel’s greatest king, is known to have ever quoted any portion of the Pentateuch. The written Word was never taken seriously until after Israel returned from its Babylonian captivity. Israel’s history would, probably, have been quite different had the kings obeyed this law.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

B. Explanation of the Civil Laws (Continued) 17:1-20:20

1. The Rights of the Priests and Levites 18:1-8

This section repeats most of what had already been ordained in Numbers.⁴⁶¹ The tribe of Levi would not receive any inheritance in Canaan. God had said to Aaron: “I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.” >From an earthly perspective this would make the Levites the poorest among the tribes of Israel. Seen in the light of eternity, it made them the tribe that possessed the only riches that count in life. In telling the story of the rich man who stored up supplies for an early retirement, but who died the night before he began to draw from it, Jesus says: “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”⁴⁶² Earthly possessions are merely images of a heavenly reality. The real gold is only found in heaven.

Jacob had put a curse on Levi and his brother Simeon. On his deathbed he said: “Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.”⁴⁶³ The tribe of Simeon was eventually absorbed into Judah. But the scattering of Levi throughout Israel was meant to be a spiritual blessing for the whole nation, and not a curse. God ordained that the Levites should be rewarded for their spiritual ministry to the people with certain parts of the sacrifices.

The Pulpit Commentary says about these contributions: “ ‘This right was probably accorded to the priests as a compensation for the falling off which would take place in their incomes in consequence of the repeal of the law that every animal was to be slaughtered at the sanctuary as a sacrifice (Lev. xvii.; *vide* ch. xii 15, *sqq.*)’ (Keil). According to Josephus... Philo... the Talmud, etc., this injunction relates to the slaying of animals at home for private use, and not such as were killed for sacrifice. But the use here of the sacrificial phraseology, WHO OFFER A SACRIFICE, (...who slay victims for sacrifice – a phrase nowhere found except in connection with sacrificial rites) is

⁴⁵⁶ I Kings 3:13

⁴⁵⁷ II Chr. 10:4

⁴⁵⁸ Matt. 8:20

⁴⁵⁹ See Matt. 21:1-5

⁴⁶⁰ See II Chr. 34:18,19

⁴⁶¹ See Num. 18:20,23,24

⁴⁶² Luke 12:21

⁴⁶³ Gen. 49:7

adverse to this; and besides, how could such an enactment be carried out? How could people, residing at a distance, convey to the priests the portions due to them every time they slaughtered an animal for domestic use? At the same time, the sacrifices here referred to do not seem to be included in the offerings by fire above mentioned; and these gifts to the priest seem to have been something over and above his ordinary dues. There is probability, therefore, in the suggestion that ‘the reference is to the slaughtering of oxen, sheep, or goats, which were not intended for *shelamim*⁴⁶⁴ in the more limited sense, i.e. for one of the three species of peace offerings (Lev. vii, 15,16), but for festal meals in the broader sense, which were held in connection with the sacrificial meals prepared from *shelamim*’ (Keil).”

The most plausible solution to the problem of distance seems to be to read the verses 1 and 2 as a general introduction to the subject of the sustenance of the priests and Levites, and to take the verses 3-5 as connected with the following verses, dealing with those Levites who had given up their allotted place of residence to move to the place where the tabernacle, and later the temple, would be. This section seems to deal, primarily, with the desire of some Levites to dwell in close vicinity to the place of God’s revelation. In order to do this they gave up their normal means of support and they threw themselves upon the benevolence of others. In these verses God assures their sustenance by this legislation. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* remarks: “Though God, who is a Spirit, is their inheritance, it does not therefore follow that they must live upon the air; no, the people must provide for them. They must have their due from the people, v. 3. Their maintenance must not depend upon the generosity of the people, but they must be by law entitled to it. He that is taught in the word ought in justice to communicate to him that teaches him; and he that has the benefit of solemn religious assemblies ought to contribute to the comfortable support of those that preside in such assemblies.”

The word that catches our attention in this section is “in all earnestness,” in vs. 6: literally “with all the desire of his heart.” God left a door open for Levites who felt themselves drawn in a particular manner to serve Him full-time and wholeheartedly. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on this point: “It appears that the Levites served in rotation from the earliest times; but, from their great numbers, it was only at distant intervals they could be called into actual service. Should any Levite, however, under the influence of eminent piety, resolve to devote himself wholly and continually to the sacred duties of the sanctuary, he was allowed to realize his ardent wishes; and as he was admitted to a share of the work, so also to a share of the remuneration. Though he might have a private property, that was to form no ground for withholding or even diminishing his claim to maintenance like the other ministering priests.”

In our fallen world, natural piety is a rare phenomenon. If it is encountered it is usually viewed with suspicion. It is true that a natural inclination towards the things of the Lord would draw a line of separation between those who have it and those who do not, leaving the ones without with little hope of salvation. We rightfully maintain that salvation is by grace and that natural penchants have no bearing upon it. Yet, some people are drawn more strongly than others. Joshua seems to have felt that pull more strongly than any other of the Israelites. We read: “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.”⁴⁶⁵ The psalmist says: “Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.”⁴⁶⁶ So there are those who respond more spontaneously to the love of God than others. Jesus must have loved all of His disciples, but the Apostle John calls himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

So there were Levites who had a burning desire to “dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”⁴⁶⁷ They were not satisfied to stay at home and wait their turn. The Apostle Paul expresses this kind of passion when he says: “I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”⁴⁶⁸

The Lord says about the Levites, both the ones that serve according to a timetable, and those that serve on a voluntary basis, that they minister in the Name of the Lord, their God. The phrase describes the position of those people in a unique way. As priests, or assistants to the priests, they represented the people before the Lord, and the Lord before the people. They formed a living bridge between heaven and earth. The Name of the Lord was upon them. The Apostle John, in Revelation, mentions several times that God gives His Name to people who serve Him. We read that Jesus says to the church in Philadelphia: “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the

⁴⁶⁴ Peace offerings

⁴⁶⁵ Ex. 33:11

⁴⁶⁶ Ps. 84:4

⁴⁶⁷ Ps. 23:6^b

⁴⁶⁸ I Cor. 9:16

new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”⁴⁶⁹ And: “Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.”⁴⁷⁰ “His servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”⁴⁷¹ This does not refer to the use of a formula, but to the imparting of qualities, of the character of God to people who are created in His image.

The blessings and privileges God bestowed upon the tribe of Levi were symbolic of His plan with the whole nation of Israel. The Levites took the place of all the firstborn Israelites. We read: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Count all the firstborn Israelite males who are a month old or more and make a list of their names. Take the Levites for me in place of all the firstborn of the Israelites.’”⁴⁷² The principle behind God’s claim upon the firstborn is the same as the one regarding the tithes: The whole nation and all earthly possessions belong to God. Giving one tenth of all to the Lord implies an acknowledgment that He has a right to all of it. So when God says about the Levites: “The LORD is their inheritance,” He wants the whole nation to know that He wishes to be every man’s inheritance.

2. Warning against imitating heathen practices 8:9-14

The Bible reveals very few details about what the detestable ways of the inhabitants of Canaan were. The first one mentioned in these verses is the sacrifice of children to an idol. In some places there is mention of the passing through the fire of a child, but other Scripture references are clearly about human sacrifices made to idols, such as Molech. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* observes: “There are several opinions concerning the meaning of passing through the fire to Molech:

1. Some think that the semen humanum was offered on the fire to this idol.
2. Others think that the children were actually made a burnt-offering to him.
3. But others suppose the children were not burnt, but only passed through the fire, or between two fires, by way of consecration to him.

That some were actually burnt alive to this idol several scriptures, according to the opinion of commentators, seem strongly to intimate; see among others, <Psa. 106:38; Jer. 7:31>; and <Ezek. 23:37-39>. That others were only consecrated to his service by passing between two fires the rabbis strongly assert; and if Ahaz had but one son, Hezekiah (though it is probable he had others, see <2 Chr. 28:3>), he is said to have passed through the fire to Molech, <2 Kings 16:3>, yet he succeeded his father in the kingdom.”

Whatever may have been involved in the practice, it was called an abomination by God because it was demonically inspired and it opened the door to demonic influences in the lives of anyone who got himself involved in it. This kind of dedication to idols, whether it resulted in the death of the one dedicated or not, can only be explained against a background of complete spiritual blindness. The person who sacrificed his own child to an idol cannot have possessed any knowledge of YHWH who revealed Himself to Moses as “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”⁴⁷³ He also must not have understood that he was dealing with the arch murderer of man, Satan. We have the example of Hiel who rebuilt Jericho “at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub.”⁴⁷⁴ Commentators are not sure whether this text proves that Hiel actually sacrificed his two sons or whether they died from natural causes at the moment of the beginning and the end of the rebuilding. In archeological excavations, however, remains of bodies of infants have been found cemented in foundations and walls of houses, proving that human sacrifices were performed.

It is quite incomprehensible how people who were the guardians of a revelation of the only God, the creator of heaven and earth, could fall so deeply and end up being more corrupted than the original inhabitants of Canaan that had to be exterminated because of their sins. We read about one of Judah’s last kings: “But Manasseh led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites.”⁴⁷⁵

The bringing of human sacrifices was the immediate result of Israel’s trespassing of the first of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me.”⁴⁷⁶ All the other practices like divination or sorcery, the

⁴⁶⁹ Rev. 3:12

⁴⁷⁰ Rev. 14:1

⁴⁷¹ Rev. 22:3,4

⁴⁷² Num. 3:40,41

⁴⁷³ Ex. 34:6,7

⁴⁷⁴ See I Kings 16:34

⁴⁷⁵ II Chr. 33:9

⁴⁷⁶ Ex. 20:3

interpretation of omens, engaging in witchcraft, casting spells, or consulting the dead were all forms of idol worship which established contact between human beings and demons.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia says about such occultism: “The occult arts, either supposedly or pretentiously supernatural, were common to all oriental races. They included enchantment, sorcery, witchcraft, sooth-saying, augury, necromancy, divination in numberless forms, and all kinds of magic art. Nine varieties are mentioned in one single passage in the Pentateuch <Deut 18:10-11>. ... These secret arts were prohibited by the laws of Moses <Deut 18:9-12>, inasmuch as they constituted a peculiar temptation to Israel to apostatize. They were a constant incentive to idolatry, clouded the mind with superstition, tended and were closely allied to imposture <Mt 24:24>.”

God qualifies these practices as detestable. Yet, in our modern times, people often engage in spiritualism from the noble motive to keep in touch with departed loved ones. Demons are very clever in manipulating the grief of people who lost relatives and in luring them into a net of deception from which escape is very difficult. It is amazing to see that the old forms of deceit which formed a danger for man centuries ago have never died over the centuries and are still tempting modern man in order to prevent him from knowing the living God.

Moses says: “You must be blameless before the LORD your God.” The Hebrew word used is *tamim*, which also means “complete” or “without blemish” is in the requirement for a sacrificial animal. In the same sense Peter calls Christ: “a lamb without blemish or defect.”⁴⁷⁷ God wants us to bear the image of His Son, and getting ourselves involved with demons will seriously mar and distort that image. Sin makes man incomplete. We understand from Jesus’ remark to the Jews of His time that circumcision symbolized the completion that God required. He says: “Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?”⁴⁷⁸ Jesus’ miracles of healing on the Sabbath, in turn, stand for the healing of the whole man, not only the removal of physical frailties but the whole complex of salvation and sanctification.

3. The coming of the prophet predicted 8:15-22

It is obvious that the people Moses addressed were not blameless before the Lord. Even without their involvement in spiritualism, the image of God in them remained marred. They were awaiting the complete redemption of the Messiah. The transition to the next topic in this chapter is, therefore, a logical one.

Adam Clarke’s Commentary says about Moses’ prophecy: “[The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet] Instead of diviners, observers of times, etc., God here promises to give them an infallible guide, who should tell them all things that make for their peace, so that his declarations should completely answer the end of all the knowledge that was pretended to be gained by the persons already specified. [Like unto me] Viz., a prophet, a legislator, a king, a mediator, and the head or chief of the people of God. This was the very person of whom Moses was the type, and who should accomplish all the great purposes of the divine Being. Such a prophet as had never before appeared, and who should have no equal till the consummation of the world.”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary adds the following significant comments: “The Messiah alone was like unto Moses ... in His mediatorial character, in the special excellence of His ministry, in the number, variety, and magnitude of His miracles, in His close and direct communion with God, in His inaugurating a new dispensation, in His legislative capacity, and in many other points of resemblance, the full enumeration of which would extend our comment to an undue length. It is, however, to be observed, that while Moses introduced the Old dispensation, Christ brought in the New, of which the former was a type as it is written. ‘When that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away.’ Thus, Christ completed the revelation of the divine will which Moses had left imperfect; and none shall now come of whom it can be said that he is a prophet like Christ. He is still performing His prophetic office in the Church. He did so after His ascension, by sending the promised Spirit upon His apostles to guide them into all truth, and to qualify them for proclaiming and confirming the Gospel to the world <Acts 2:32-33; 4:20,31; Rom. 15:19>; and it is as a prophet that He is represented as opening the sealed book, and disclosing what was to befall His Church and its enemies unto the end of time <Rev. 5>. Though revelation has been long completed, and the whole counsel of God committed to writing, yet Christ still continues to exercise His prophetic office by the Spirit, giving gifts unto men for the work of the ministry and the edification of His body; opening the understanding of men, that they may understand the Scriptures, as well as perceive the truth and excellence of what is revealed in them; and so making the Gospel come to them, not in word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance <Luke 24:45; Eph. 4:8-12; 1 Thes 1:5>. Thus, this prediction, then, which

⁴⁷⁷ I Pet. 1:19

⁴⁷⁸ John 7:23

was fulfilled 1,500 years after it was uttered, is expressly applied by Peter <Acts 3:22-23> and by Stephen <Acts 7:37> to Jesus Christ, as fully answering the description given of Him.”

In New Testament times the popular thought identified the prophet, correctly, with the person of the Messiah. The Apostle John reports: “After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’”⁴⁷⁹ And: “On hearing his words, some of the people said, ‘Surely this man is the Prophet.’”⁴⁸⁰ Both Peter and Stephen applied Moses’ prophecy to Christ. Peter said to the people who had come to see the miracle of the healing of the lame man at the temple: “For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you.’”⁴⁸¹ And Stephen said in his defense before the Sanhedrin: “This is that Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.’”⁴⁸² The Islam builds its claim of its supremacy over Judaism and Christianity upon Moses’ prophecy.

The Hebrew word for prophet is *nabi*. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says about the word: “It is clear that the word ‘prophet’ is equal to one who speaks for another, or his mouth. This basic meaning of *nabi* is supported by other passages. In the classical passage <Deut. 18:14-22>, God promised to raise up another ‘prophet’ like Moses who would be God’s spokesman <v. 18>. They were held responsible for what he told them and were admonished to obey him <Deut. 18:19>. However, if what the ‘prophet’ said proved to be wrong, he was to be killed <Deut. 18:20>. Immediately, this constitutes a promise and definition of the long succession of Israel’s prophets. Ultimately, it is a promise of the Great Prophet, Jesus Christ (cf. <Acts 3:22-23>). The ‘prophet’ or dreamer of dreams might perform miracles to demonstrate that he was God’s man, but the people were to look to the message rather than the miracle before they heeded his message <Deut. 13:1-5>.”

The introductory verse of this section states: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him,” it is clear that Moses, first of all, addressed the generation of his time. He speaks about his own successor, not just about some future person who would appear to fulfill this prophecy. The fact that the prophecy is applied to our Lord Jesus Christ is typical of the fulfillment of almost all prophecy in the Bible. Fulfillment shows the ripple effect as of a stone that is thrown in the middle of a pond; it often has more than one instance that can be seen as the fulfillment of the words spoken. When Isaiah, for example, announced to king Ahaz: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel,” he, undoubtedly, referred, first of all, to the king’s daughter. The fact that the prophecy acquired greater depth and meaning in later centuries would not have given proof of God’s intervention to King Ahaz.

So Moses will have thought, primarily, of Joshua, his successor. But being the prophet he was, he reached over the boundaries of his own life toward the fullness of time, of which the Apostle Paul says: “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman....”⁴⁸³ We have to see this prophecy, therefore, in the two beams of light that shine upon it from two directions: the presence in which Moses and his audience lived, and the future coming of the Messiah.

The prophecy dates back forty years to the day God came down upon Mount Sinai and the people were afraid. In the Exodus account there is no record of this prophecy. We read that the people were afraid. The record tells us: “When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.’”⁴⁸⁴ From that time on, Moses was the prophet who passed on God’s Word to the people. But, according to the account in this chapter, God saw beyond that point and, clearly with the coming of the Messiah in mind, He said: “What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.”

At the moment the law was given, God made provisions for a mediator. Not only were the people not able to hear the voice of God without fear of death, but they were unable to obey the law, because of death within them. The Apostle Paul analyzed the problem correctly when he said: “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”⁴⁸⁵ But he also said: “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁷⁹ John 6:14

⁴⁸⁰ John 7:40

⁴⁸¹ Acts 3:22

⁴⁸² Acts 7:37

⁴⁸³ Gal. 4:4 (NKJ)

⁴⁸⁴ Ex. 20:18,19

⁴⁸⁵ Rom. 3:20

⁴⁸⁶ Rom. 10:4

Like the king, mentioned in the previous chapter, God's prophet also was "from among your own brothers." The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews expresses this so beautifully when he says: "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers."⁴⁸⁷ The word "ashamed" acquires great depth in this context. It is comparatively easy for us to claim Jesus as our own. But for Him not to be ashamed of people who are sinners by birth, and who breathe in and exhale the pollution of sin, requires more than mere pity. It required the sacrifice of the life of the prophet in order to allow the brothers to be made holy by the Father. The Word of God which became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ creates in us the holiness which takes away all shame. Jesus said: "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."⁴⁸⁸ God speaks to us through Jesus, and His Word cleanses us. What a prophecy!

Jesus faithfully proclaimed the word of the Father. He explained the essence of His ministry on earth to the Jews in these words: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."⁴⁸⁹ And to the disciples He said: "These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me."⁴⁹⁰

Vs. 19: "If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account" puts the burden on everyone who does not pay attention to the words of Christ. God will not only call to account the people of Israel who have rejected their Messiah, but people all over the world who have heard the Gospel and have not paid attention to it.

Some may find it hard to believe the Gospel, but merely paying attention to it will render benefits and generate faith. The Apostle Paul says: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."⁴⁹¹

Adam Clarke's Commentary has a rather lengthy section on the concluding verses of this chapter which is worth copying: " 'When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.' [If the thing follow not] It is worthy of remark that the prophets in general predicted those things which were shortly to come to pass, that the people might have the fullest proof of their divine mission, and of the existence of God's providence in the administration of the affairs of men. The promise contained in the 15th and 18th verses of this chapter has long been considered of the first importance in the controversies between the Christians and Jews. 'Christ,' says Ainsworth, 'was to be a man, and of the stock of the Jews, by promise, because the people could not endure to hear the voice of GOD, <Deut. 18:16>. And as in respect of his prophecy, so of the priesthood: for every high priest is taken from among men, <Heb. 5:1>; and also of his kingdom, as in <Deut. 17:15>: From among thy brethren shalt thou set a king over thee like unto me.

1. Christ alone was like unto Moses as a PROPHET; for it is written, There arose not a prophet in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, in all the signs and wonders which the Lord sent him to do, <Deut. 34:10-12>. This therefore cannot be understood of the ordinary prophets which were raised up in Israel, but of Christ only, as the apostles expound it <Acts 2:22-26>

2. Christ was like unto Moses in respect to his office of mediation between God and his people, <Deut. 5:6; 1 Tim. 2:6>; but greater than Moses as being the mediator of a better covenant, (or testament,) which was established upon better promises, <Heb. 8:6>

3. Christ was like unto Moses in excellency; for as Moses excelled all the prophets in speaking to God mouth to mouth, <Num. 12:6-8>, so Christ excelled him and all men in that being in the bosom of the Father, he hath come down from heaven and declared God unto us, <John 1:18; 3:13>

4. Christ was like to Moses in faithfulness, but therein also excelling; for Moses was faithful in God's house as a servant, but Christ as the son over his own house, <Heb. 3:2,5-6>

5. Christ was like to Moses in signs and wonders, wherein he also excelled Moses, as the history of the Gospel shows; for he was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <Luke 24:19>. A man approved of God among them, by miracles, signs, and wonders, which God did by him in the midst of them, <Acts 2:22>. For he did among them the works which no other man did, <John 15:24>. Unto him, that is, not unto the diviners, wizards, or any such like, but unto him, and him only, as Him thou shalt serve, <Deut. 6:13>, is expounded, Him only, <Matt. 4:10>. And though this is principally meant of Christ in person, of whom God said, Hear him,

⁴⁸⁷ Heb. 2:11

⁴⁸⁸ John 15:3

⁴⁸⁹ John 5:19

⁴⁹⁰ John 14:24

⁴⁹¹ Rom. 10:17

<Matt. 17:5>; yet it implies also his ministers, as himself said, He that heareth you heareth me, <Luke 10:16>. To these may be added,

6. As Moses was king among his people, in this respect Christ is like to him, but infinitely greater; for he is King of kings and Lord of lords, <Rev. 19:16; 1 Tim. 6:16>. And,

7. He was like to Moses as a legislator. Moses gave laws to Israel by the authority and commandment of God, which the Jews have ever acknowledged as coming from the immediate inspiration of the Almighty: these are contained in the Pentateuch. Christ gave a new law, the Gospel contained in the four Evangelists and Acts of the Apostles, on which the Christian church is founded, and by which all genuine Christians are governed both in heart and life. To all which may be added,

8. That God never commissioned any human beings to give laws to mankind but Moses and Christ; and therefore, as a lawgiver, Christ alone resembles Moses; for to the present hour none but themselves have given laws in the name of God, which he has ratified and confirmed by the most indubitable and infallible signs, proofs, and miracles.'

Dr. Jortin, in his Remarks on Ecclesiastical History, has drawn a parallel between Moses and Christ in a great number of particulars, which he concludes thus: 'Let us search all the records of universal history, and see if we can find a man who was so like to Moses as Christ was, and so like to Christ as Moses was. If we cannot find such a one, then have we found HIM of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write to be Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God.'

In the last three verses of this chapter, the topic goes from the specific to the general. The text deals no longer with the coming Messiah, but with imposters. The Apostle John writes in his first epistle: "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."⁴⁹² World history will end with the coming of the antichrist. But before the end time arrives there will be many counterfeits, people who claim to have divine Revelation, but who are inspired by demons. The message those false prophets bring will be more easily accepted by the people than the Word of God; the reason being that people do not love God and, consequently, have no discernment regarding the spirit that inspires the prophets. Jesus said to the people of His time: "I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him."⁴⁹³

According to what Moses declared in this chapter, there are two ways to discern the spirit of a prophet: one is his credentials, and the other is the result of his message. A person who does not acknowledge Jesus Christ as the one whom God the Father sent in this world, does not speak in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the foundation for all spiritual gifts as laid down by the Apostle Paul, when he says: "Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."⁴⁹⁴

It is obvious that, if a prophet says he is sent by another god, he either suggests that God and Satan are not dichotomies, or that God is not the supreme being He claims to be. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* could only have been written by an atheist like Nietzsche.

The second criterion is that if a prophecy is not fulfilled it is not from God. This poses a problem in that there are many prophecies that have no immediate fulfillment, but that are meant to be fulfilled in a distant future. The criterion, in that case, cannot serve as a reference for judgment about the spirit of the prophet. We will have to look at this criterion in the context of the dispensation in which it was given. In the words of Adam Clarke, already quoted above: "It is worthy of remark that the prophets in general predicted those things which were shortly to come to pass, that the people might have the fullest proof of their divine mission, and of the existence of God's providence in the administration of the affairs of men."

In most instances, the predictions of a prophet were the only demonstrations a person had to see that God was actively involved in the lives of men. There was hardly any Scripture that could serve as a reference for faith, and if there was, most people would probably have been unable to read it. The Word of God was the spoken Word. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews states correctly: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways..."⁴⁹⁵ The birth of the written page brought about a dramatic change in

⁴⁹² I John 4:1-3

⁴⁹³ John 5:42,43

⁴⁹⁴ I Cor. 12:3

⁴⁹⁵ Heb. 1:1

the way God's Word is communicated to man. In the early days of the young church, we see some instances of people becoming prophetically inspired. Luke recounts the incident of Agabus' prophecy regarding Paul's imprisonment, which, incidentally, Paul disregarded. We read: "After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, 'The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.' " ⁴⁹⁶ But in Jesus' parable about Lazarus and the rich man, the conclusion is that faith in God should rest upon the written Word. When the rich man wants Lazarus, who was dead, to return to his parental house to warn his brothers, Abraham replied: " 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham, he [the rich man] said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' " ⁴⁹⁷

In the New Testament dispensation in which we live, the acquisition and transmission of knowledge by supernatural means, which was the essence of prophecy in the Old Testament has virtually disappeared. Paul's definition of prophecy, in his letter to the Corinthian church, sounds more like a preacher preaching a sermon than of a supernaturally inspired person transmitting a divine message. We read: "Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort." ⁴⁹⁸ What we would call prophecy falls more in the category of the transmission of a revelation which superceded prophecy Paul speaks about in the same epistle. "Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop." ⁴⁹⁹ In the twentieth century church such Revelation appear to have ceased. The completion of the Canon of Scripture has, undoubtedly, something to do with this.

Matthew Henry's Commentary explains some of the functions a prophet could have in the daily life of the Israelites in the olden days. We read: "They need not use divinations, nor consult with familiar spirits, for they might inquire of God's prophets even concerning their private affairs, as Saul did when he was in quest of his father's asses, <1 Sam. 9:6>. They could not miss the way of their duty through ignorance or mistake, nor differ in their opinions about it, having prophets among them, whom, in every difficult doubtful case, they might advise with and appeal to. These prophets were like unto Moses in some respects, though far inferior to him, <Deut. 34:10>."

It is clear that we can no longer go to a person in our time to consult about matters of trivial pursuit of our daily lives, such as Saul and his servants did regarding the loss of their donkeys. The only person who would fulfill such a function in our day would be a spiritualist, which we are clearly to avoid. So, we may safely conclude that the office of prophet, in the context of Moses' address, was particular to the dispensation of the Old Testament.

The only prophetic office we can discern in our time is the preaching of the written Word of God, to which, in a way, we may apply some of the rules Moses lays down in this chapter. A preacher's duty is to expound the Word of God to men. In the words of Charles Finney: "A preacher has to know his Bible, he has to know human nature, and he has to be able to apply one to the other." Knowing the Bible without personal and intimate fellowship with God does not make a preacher into a prophet. There is, in our modern day, something which Jeremiah called "standing in the council of the Lord." Speaking about the false prophets of his time, he said: " But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?" ⁵⁰⁰ Although we may no longer receive direct Revelation as the speakers in the church of Corinth did, there is the possibility of knowing the Lord's will and understanding some of His character. David proclaims: "The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant." ⁵⁰¹ If we use the Word of God without having placed ourselves under the authority of that Word, and if we do not have the sense that we are dealing with great matters or things too wonderful for us, we are in danger of speaking presumptuously, as did the false prophets in this chapter.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

B. Explanation of the Civil Laws (continued) 19:1-20:20

⁴⁹⁶ Acts 21:10,11

⁴⁹⁷ Luke 16:29-31

⁴⁹⁸ I Cor. 14:3

⁴⁹⁹ I Cor. 14:29,30

⁵⁰⁰ Jer. 23:18

⁵⁰¹ Ps. 25:14 (NKJ)

1. Of manslaughter, murder and the process of justice 19:1-21

The Pulpit Commentary says about the first part of this chapter: “Moses had before this enunciated the law concerning cities of refuge for manslayers, and had already pointed out the cities on the east of the Jordan that were to be set apart for this (Numb. xxxv. 11, etc.; ch. iv. 41, etc.). He here repeats the law with special reference to the appointment of such cities ‘in the midst of the land,’ on the west of the Jordan, in Canaan itself; and he supplements the instructions formerly given with directions as to the maintenance of roads to the cities of refuge, and as to the division of the land, so that there should be a city of refuge in every third of the land.”

The first thing that comes to mind when we read this chapter is that Canaan, the Promised Land, the rest into which God was leading His people, was not heaven; it was a place on earth, part of the world that lies under the curse of sin. There would be death, accidents, murder, and revenge in the Promised Land. The appointment of the cities of refuge is an accommodation to the condition of sin which is part of the existence of the people. The fact that the sinful nations that inhabited Canaan had been evicted by Israel did not bring about their own perfection.

God does not tolerate sin, but He is willing to help us accommodate to the point where we can live an acceptable life while we are on the road to glory. God is a God of absolutes, but He is also pragmatic. God would not let sin be. The daily sacrifices brought in the Old Testament testified to the fact that sin would eventually be dealt with in a complete and final way. When the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes about Christ: “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven,”⁵⁰² he infers that the atonement of sin is now an accomplished fact. But in the meantime God wants us to live with the reality of sin in such a way that we are free from its power without denying its power.

Commenting on the parallel passage of Numbers, *The Adam Clarke Commentary* says: “The cities of refuge among the Israelites were widely different from the asylums among the Greeks and Romans, as also from the privileged altars among the Roman Catholics. Those among the Hebrews were for the protection of such only as had slain a person involuntarily. The temples and altars among the latter often served for the protection of the most profligate characters. Cities of refuge among the Hebrews were necessary, because the old patriarchal law still remained in force, viz., that the nearest akin had a right to avenge the death of his relation by slaying the murderer; for the original law enacted that whosoever shed man’s blood, by man should his blood be shed, <Gen. 9:6>, and none was judged so proper to execute this law as the man who was nearest akin to the deceased. As many rash executions of this law might take place, from the very nature of the thing, it was deemed necessary to qualify its claims, and prevent injustice, and the cities of refuge were judged proper for this purpose. Nor do we ever read that they were ever found inefficient, or that they were ever abused.”

In ch. 4:41-43, we read that Moses had already set aside three cities west of the Jordan River for the same purpose. “The cities were these: Bezer in the desert plateau, for the Reubenites; Ramoth in Gilead, for the Gadites; and Golan in Bashan, for the Manassites.” The additions mentioned in this chapter are meant for Canaan, east of the Jordan River. Eventually, there would be a total of nine cities when the boundaries of Israel were enlarged. The people had to take particular care for the accessibility of those cities. The roads had to be kept in good repair. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* remarks: “The Jews inform us that the roads to the cities of refuge were made very broad, thirty-two cubits; and even, so that there should be no impediments in the way; and were constantly kept in good repair.” And *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* adds to this: “The Jews say that the magistrates of Israel, upon one certain day in the year, sent out messengers to see that those roads were in good repair, and they were to remove stumbling-blocks, mend bridges that were broken, and, where two ways met, they were to set up a Mercurial post, with a finger to point the right way, on which was engraven in great letters, Miklat, Miklat-- Refuge, Refuge.” The same commentary sees in these cities of refuge an image of Christ to which the guilty sinner may flee for salvation. It remarks: “The gospel brings salvation to our door, and there it knocks for admission.”

The purpose of these cities of refuge was to protect the offender from the revenge of the family of the person who was killed accidentally. These stipulations endeavor to create order and justice in situations in which grief gets out of hand. The type of revenge that forms the background of this law, may be strange to us in our western culture, but it is easily understood in a Latin or Asian setting. Westerners in Asia or Latin America who are involved in fatal accidents are often advised not to stop to check up on the victim but to go straight to the police, because their own lives would be in danger if they could get out of their car.

In case of a fatal accident the one to fear would be the avenger of blood. The Hebrew word is *goel*, which is derived from *ga'al*, which is defined by *Strongs Definitions* as “to redeem (according to the Oriental law of kinship), i.e. to be the next of kin (and as such to buy back a relative’s property, marry his widow, etc.)” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes about this: “Goel is the participle of the Hebrew word *gal'al* (‘to deliver,’ ‘to

⁵⁰² Heb. 1:3

redeem') which aside from its common usage is frequently employed in connection with Hebrew law, where it is the technical term applied to a person who as the nearest relative of another is placed under certain obligations to him." Most of the obligations of the *goel* were redemptive in the positive sense of the word: helping a relative who had incurred debts, buying back property, fulfilling marital obligations, etc. It also involved revenge in case of murder. This sounds strange to us who are used to seeing the carrying out of justice in the hands of the state. Under the theocratic government under which Israel lived at that time, much of what is nowadays relegated to the state was still in the hands of the family, included the execution of the murderer of a family member.

The encyclopedia quoted above remarks about this facet of law: "The law of blood-revenge ... made it the sacred duty of the nearest relative to avenge the blood of his kinsman. He was called the *go'el ha-dam*, 'the avenger of blood.' This law was based upon the command given in <Gen. 9:5> f: 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed,' and was carried out even if an animal had killed a man; in this case, however, the payment of a ransom was permitted (<Exo 21:28> ff)."

Commenting on the passage in Exodus 21, *The Adam Clarke Commentary* says: ">From the earliest times the nearest akin had a right to revenge the murder of his relation, and as this right was universally acknowledged, no law was ever made on the subject, but as this might be abused, and a person who had killed another accidentally, having had no previous malice against him, might be put to death by the avenger of blood, as the nearest kinsman was termed, therefore God provided the cities of refuge to which the accidental manslayer might flee till the affair was inquired into, and settled by the civil magistrate."

We find, in deed, nowhere in Scripture a direct command for an avenger to kill the murderer of a relative on the spur of the moment, although one text in Numbers seems to imply this. We read there: "The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death; *when he meets him*, he shall put him to death."⁵⁰³ But the prerequisite that two or more witnesses are required to condemn a person modifies the situation. If the avenger killed the murderer before due process of justice was given, it was because of the blind rage of the avenger. We read in vs. 6: "Otherwise, the avenger of blood might pursue him in a rage, overtake him if the distance is too great, and kill him even though he is not deserving of death."

The appointment of the cities of refuge, therefore, is an accommodation to the passions of man. God does not forbid the rage of the avenger, He does not authorize it either but He wants to limit its effects. If an avenger would kill a man who is not guilty of murder but of manslaughter only, he spilled innocent blood, and he would be declared guilty himself. This seems to be implied in vs. 10: "Do this so that innocent blood will not be shed in your land, which the LORD your God is giving you as your inheritance, and so that you will not be guilty of bloodshed."

The problem of this situation is not that the *goel* has to be the chief executor of a convicted murderer, but that the act of personal revenge before due justice is done. In the New Testament Paul speaks out against this: "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."⁵⁰⁴ Paul quotes from Deuteronomy,⁵⁰⁵ but the context there is quite different from the personal revenge of this chapter. In Leviticus we find the admonition: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD."⁵⁰⁶ But there too, the warning seems to pertain to paying back injustice which does not involve the shedding blood.

The problem of our text seems to be that the rage of the avenger is not being bridled directly. God seems to be sympathetic to the one who rages and whose blood boils because he has just lost a loved one. The message conveyed seems to be that God hates death as much as the avenger does. Jesus exemplified this attitude at Lazarus' tomb, where we read that Jesus "was deeply moved in spirit and troubled."⁵⁰⁷ The Greek word is *brimaomai*, which literally means, "to snort with anger, to have indignation." In a sense, the hot anger of the avenger reflects the anger of God about an accidental killing.

This presents us with another problem that may be even more puzzling: does God have no control over flying axe heads? Even more, does He not determine man's life span? What do we mean when we say that with God there are no accidents? Those questions draw us into the mystery of senseless suffering in this world. One example is the massacre of infants in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus. We read: "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her

⁵⁰³ Num. 35:19

⁵⁰⁴ Rom. 12:19

⁵⁰⁵ See Deut. 32:35

⁵⁰⁶ Lev. 19:18

⁵⁰⁷ John 11:33

children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.’⁵⁰⁸ God in heaven did not interfere with Herod’s demonic act. He foresaw it five centuries before and the Holy Spirit put into the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah words that expressed God’s grief about what was going to happen. This may give us a key to understand some of the mystery, but who knows what door to open with that key?

Maybe, if we look at apparent accidents against the background of Job’s terrible experience, we can see some light being shed upon the problem of pain and death. Everybody’s life, especially the life of a child of God, unfolds against the background of the eternal confrontation between God and Satan. We may not understand why freak accidents happen and axe heads claim the lives of loved ones, but the realization that factors on a level beyond our understanding influence events bring us to the conclusion that God has not lost control, nor is He powerless to help. It may not seem that way, but Paul’s pronouncement remains true: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”⁵⁰⁹ “All things” includes every circumstance and event, and the modifying factor is in the words “those who love Him.”

Seen against the larger problem of the presence of evil in this world, the cities of refuge become symbolic of the salvation any sinner can find in the Lord Jesus Christ. *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* emphasizes this truth: “In the New Testament, the cities of refuge apparently became a type, or symbolic illustration, of the salvation that is found in Christ: ‘We... have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us’ <Heb. 6:18>. In other words, when the sinner flees to Christ Jesus for refuge he is safe from the divine Avenger of Blood. The apostle Paul wrote, ‘Having now been justified by his [Christ’s] blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him’ <Rom. 5:9> and ‘There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus’ <Rom. 8:1>. Regardless of his sin, the sinner may find asylum and sanctuary in Christ; all who flee to Him find refuge ‘The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out’ <John 6:37>. The believer is safe forever in the heavenly city of refuge because the great High Priest, Jesus Christ, will never die: ‘He ever lives to make intercession for him’ <Heb. 7:25>.”

In the Old Testament setting asylum was necessary “until the death of the high priest, who was anointed with the holy oil.”⁵¹⁰ Apparently, the death of the high priest provided pardon for the offender. In the New Testament dispensation the order is reversed: Jesus has become our High Priest through death. We conclude this from the explanation given by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. In linking together two separate quotations from Ps. 2 and Ps. 110, he emphasizes that Christ became High Priest on the day of His resurrection. We read: “So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’ As He also says in another place: ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.’”⁵¹¹ That the phrase “today I have begotten you” refers to Christ’s resurrection is clear from Paul’s interpretation of the verse in his sermon in the synagogue of Antioch, where he said: “We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’”⁵¹² Those who flee to Jesus for asylum are not confined to a certain place but are immediately given their full freedom, on the basis of the death of Him who has become the High Priest. The only confinement, if we may use the term, is that, at all times, we be found in Christ. But those who have fled to Him will experience this rather as freedom than a restriction.

As the size of Israel’s territory increased, the number of the cities of refuge had to increase also. The way this is worded is worthy of careful study. God vouched that He would enlarge Israel’s territory; this was part of the oath He had made with Abraham. We read: “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates-- the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.’”⁵¹³ But this oath would not be fulfilled automatically. The promise of God depended upon the obedience and love of the people. As the land grew larger, so were the symbols of salvation multiplied. We could say that in the same manner spiritual growth is dependent upon our obedience and love, and that the opportunities for salvation of others will increase as we grow in our fellowship with the Lord.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary remarks here: “It was obscurely hinted that this last provision would never be carried into effect, as the Israelites could not fulfill the conditions-- namely, ‘that of keeping the commandments, to love the Lord, and walk ever in his ways.’ In point of fact, although that region was brought into subjection by David and Solomon, we do not find that cities of refuge were established, because those

⁵⁰⁸ Matt. 2:16-18

⁵⁰⁹ Rom. 8:28

⁵¹⁰ Num. 35:25

⁵¹¹ Heb. 5:5,6 (NKJ)

⁵¹² Acts 13:32,33

⁵¹³ Gen. 15:18-21

sovereigns only made the ancient inhabitants tributary, instead of sending a colony of Israelites to possess it. The privilege of sanctuary cities, however, was given only for Israelites; and besides, that conquered territory did not remain long under the power of the Hebrew kings. One of the arguments of the modern Jews for concluding that Messiah is yet to come is founded on this passage-- that as there was an addition of three cities of refuge in ancient times, the promise still remains to be fulfilled; because God never commanded a thing in vain (extract from Treatise of Maimonides in Wolff's `Journal, ' p. 58)."

Matthew Henry's Commentary adds to this: "The learned Ainsworth observes that the Jewish writers themselves own that, the condition not being performed, the promise of the enlarging of their coast was never fulfilled; so that there was no occasion for ever adding these three cities of refuge; yet the holy blessed God (say they) did not command it in vain, for in the days of Messiah the prince three other cities shall be added to these six: they expect it to be fulfilled in the letter, but we know that in Christ it has its spiritual accomplishment, for the borders of the gospel Israel are enlarged according to the promise, and in Christ, the Lord our righteousness, refuge is provided for those that by faith flee to him."

There was no place in the city of refuge for people who had committed premeditated murder. The criterion was intent and the use of a weapon, such as iron, stone, or wood. In Numbers, Moses had given the following explanations: "If a man strikes someone with an iron object so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. Or if anyone has a stone in his hand that could kill, and he strikes someone so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. Or if anyone has a wooden object in his hand that could kill, and he hits someone so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death."⁵¹⁴ In cases of obvious murder, the perpetrator who had fled to one of the cities of refuge had to be extradited and executed. Although this is not specified in any of the texts, it is obvious that, somewhere along the line, an investigation must have taken place and a verdict reached before there could be question of extradition and execution. It is also doubtful that the avenger of blood would be the only one to carry out the execution. When we read in Numbers: "The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death; *when he meets him*, he shall put him to death" it sounds as if the execution would take place during a chance encounter. The words: "when he meets him" are better taken in the sense that the avenger of blood had to be present and take part in the execution.

Matthew Henry's Commentary makes a spiritual application to this by saying: "It may be alluded to to show that in Jesus Christ there is no refuge for presumptuous sinners, that go on still in their trespasses. If we thus sin willfully, sin and go on in it, there remains no sacrifice, <Heb. 10:26>. Those that flee to Christ from their sins shall be safe in him, but not those that expect to be sheltered by him in their sins. Salvation itself cannot save such: divine justice will fetch them even from the city of refuge, the protection of which they are not entitled to." Although the reference to the verse in Hebrews may be misleading in this context, the principle stated is certainly correct. The Apostle Paul writes to Timothy: "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."⁵¹⁵

Commenting on the parallel passage in Exodus,⁵¹⁶ *The Adam Clarke Commentary* remarks: "Before the cities of refuge were assigned, the altar of God was the common asylum." There is, however, very little Biblical basis for this assumption. The only two known cases of people holding the horns of the altar as a protection against execution were Adonijah and Joab. We read about the former: "But Adonijah, in fear of Solomon, went and took hold of the horns of the altar,"⁵¹⁷ and about the latter: "When the news reached Joab, who had conspired with Adonijah though not with Absalom, he fled to the tent of the LORD and took hold of the horns of the altar."⁵¹⁸ In Joab's case, it did not save his life, but Adonijah was pardoned, at least for the time being. Those two examples occurred several centuries after the cities of refuge had been designated. The Scriptures do not furnish us with any instances in which people availed themselves of the protection the cities of refuges provided. This does not mean of course that they were never used for the purpose.

It was no coincidence that all the cities of refuge were, at the same time, cities that were set apart for the Levites. When a man fled to such a city, he could be sure to find there a representative of the Lord, someone whose life was dedicated to the service of the Lord.

The Pulpit Commentary, in its homiletics sections, remarks first of all, on the double meaning of the word *goel*, one as "next of kin" in the redemptive sense of the word, and one as "avenger of blood." The commentary then proceeds to point out the paradox of this double meaning in the light of the typical significance of the cities of refuge

⁵¹⁴ Num. 35:16-18

⁵¹⁵ II Tim. 2:19

⁵¹⁶ Ex. 21:14

⁵¹⁷ I Kings 1:50

⁵¹⁸ I Kings 2:28

to the New Testament audience. We read: “There are some related truths in the government of God which are not foreshadowed in these cities of refuge. Two of these there are, and those so remarkable, that it is not surprising if some do not regard the cities of refuge as being typical at all. 1. Though the manslayer was to flee *to* the city, yet he was to flee *from* the goel. The opposite is the case under the gospel. We said that the word ‘goel’ had two meanings, viz. that of ‘nearest of kin’ and ‘avenger of blood. But as the student traces the Bible use of this word, lo it has a third meaning, even that of *redeemer* (Isa. xli. 14; xliii.14; xlv.24; xlvi. 17; liv. 5,8; lx. 16). *Jehovah is the goel*. The Lord Jesus Christ is our next of kin, the avenger of wrong, the Redeemer. He has vindicated the majesty of Law by bearing the stroke, that it may not be inflicted on the penitent. He is at once our City of Refuge and our Göel. We flee to him, not from him. 2. The refuge was provided for the delay of judgment till the case was examined. Here, refuge is for the penitent, that he may never come into judgment at all.”

In the midst of this chapter which deals with matters of life and death, it seems strange to find a stipulation regarding the moving of a marker. We read: “Do not move your neighbor’s boundary stone set up by your predecessors in the inheritance you receive in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess.” Yet, the offense is considered serious enough to be included in the ceremony that had to take place on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, where two antiphonal choirs chanted curses and blessings. It is mentioned as the third curse in a sequence of curses upon idolatry, immorality, etc. We read: “ ‘Cursed is the man who moves his neighbor’s boundary stone.’ Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’ ”⁵¹⁹

In the previous section, blood was shed upon the land. This seems to us a minor detail; we hardly give it any thought, but it must be very important to God since He mentions it as the first thing when the first murder is committed. We read that God said to Cain: “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.”⁵²⁰ Earlier, He had said to Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you.”⁵²¹ Evidently, part of the curse of the ground is that it sucks up the blood that is spilled on it.

The Bible seems to expound an, almost animistic, relationship between living creatures and the earth, between man and the ground from which he was taken. Modern man has lost this sense of belonging. The people who reverently speak of “Mother Earth” usually do not fit into the framework of a Christian philosophy. It may be difficult for us to rediscover what Scripture wants to teach us here, and at the same time avoid the influence of some “New Age” thinking.

God has never forgotten where man came from. The miracle of man’s creation is described as follows: “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”⁵²² When sin entered the world, this miracle was, in a sense, reversed. God pronounced the sad verdict upon the sinner: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”⁵²³ It is obvious that, even in his sinful condition, man is more than mere dust. But there is an undeniable link between the atoms that constitute our bodies and the dust of the earth. We are related to the earth materially, but not materially only. As God said to Cain, the ground opened its mouth to receive his brother’s blood. Evidently, this is not merely a poetic expression. It is true that man is formed from the dust of the earth, but when God created him, the Spirit of God fused spirit to the matter. Sin has split apart this fusion. Blood soaks the earth and defiles it. I do not understand this mystery of evil, but I recognize its existence.

Another mystery is that God uses the same process that pollutes the earth for its cleansing. The blood of the sacrificial animals was poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.⁵²⁴ In other instances where animals are killed for food, we read: “But you must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water.”⁵²⁵ These symbolic acts pointed to the way God would break the bonds of death through the death of the Lord of Glory Himself.

Man’s moral misconduct defiles the ground on which he lives to the point where, eventually, the very ground from which he was taken will reject him. When Israel was about to enter the Promised Land, God said to them: “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its

⁵¹⁹ Deut. 27:17

⁵²⁰ Gen. 4:10,11

⁵²¹ Gen. 3:17

⁵²² Gen. 2:7

⁵²³ Gen. 3:19

⁵²⁴ See Lev. 4:7

⁵²⁵ ch. 12:24

inhabitants.”⁵²⁶ We all live on blood soaked ground. Jesus expounded a universal principle when He held the generation of His time responsible for all the murders committed over the centuries. He said: “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.”⁵²⁷ In our natural state, God looks upon us as people who are accessories to murder. The only means to be cleansed of this reputation is the blood of Jesus Christ. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrew says that we have come “to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel;”⁵²⁸ or, in the more powerful language of TLB,: “... to Jesus himself, who has brought us his wonderful new agreement; and to the sprinkled blood, which graciously forgives instead of crying out for vengeance as the blood of Abel did.” The blood of Christ shouts down the voice of Abel’s blood.

The people of Israel who were entering Canaan were protected by the blood of the sacrificial animals, as a figure of the protection we enjoy by the blood of Christ. God gave them a place in the land that He had cleansed for them. They were to keep it clean by their way of life. Any immoral act would pollute the land again, whether it was the spilling of innocent blood or the moving of boundary stones. This principle, I believe, establishes the logic of vs. 14 in the context of this chapter. Canaan should be a land of purity; it was the land where God had chosen to live Himself, and the ground on which God stands is always holy ground.

Each Israelite would receive part of the land as an inheritance, as a gift of God to man. This inheritance has to be kept as a sacred trust. Changing the markers in order to stealthily increase the property would indicate that the owner had lost sight of the meaning of God’s gift to him.

Matthew Henry’s Commentary writes about this verse: “1. Here is an implicit direction given to the first planters of Canaan to fix land-marks, according to the distribution of the land to the several tribes and families by lot. Note, It is the will of God that every one should know his own, and that all good means should be used to prevent encroachments and the doing and suffering of wrong. When right is settled, care must be taken that it be not afterwards unsettled, and that, if possible, no occasion of dispute may arise.

2. An express law to posterity not to remove those land-marks which were thus fixed at first, by which a man secretly got that to himself which was his neighbor’s. This, without doubt, is a moral precept, and still binding, and to us it forbids,

(1.) The invading of any man’s right, and taking to ourselves that which is not our own, by any fraudulent arts or practices, as by forging, concealing, destroying, or altering deeds and writings (which are our land-marks, to which appeals are made), or by shifting hedges, meer-stones, and boundaries. Though the land-marks were set by the hand of man, yet he was a thief and a robber by the law of God that removed them. Let every man be content with his own lot, and just to his neighbors, and then we shall have no land-marks removed.

(2.) it forbids the sowing of discord among neighbors, and doing any thing to occasion strife and law-suits, which is done (and it is very ill done) by confounding those things which should determine disputes and decide controversies. And,

(3.) It forbids breaking in upon the settled order and constitution of civil government, and the altering of ancient usages without just cause. This law supports the honor of prescriptions. ... Custom is to be held as law.”

In the verses 15-20 we are clearly back in the realm of criminal justice, this time on the side of the witnesses. The witness in court cases served simultaneously as the prosecutor. The law on witnesses does not pertain to capital crimes only. The phrase “One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed” covers everything from theft to murder. This is an enlargement upon the law that was formulated in Numbers, which applied to cases of murder only. We read there: “Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.”⁵²⁹ The Apostle Paul carried this law over into church administration, when advised Timothy: “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.”⁵³⁰

In the carrying out of justice in the Old Testament, the requirement of multiple witnesses was set up as a safeguard to assure justice. The principle was excellent but it was not foolproof. No perfect method has ever been found to assure that truth be revealed and justice prevail in every instance. Even the placing of a witness under oath is no guarantee. Evil people in this world can appeal to the Name of the God of Truth in order to promote a lie. The ultimate example of perversion of justice, in which the testimony of two witnesses was judiciously adhered to, was

⁵²⁶ Lev. 18:24,25

⁵²⁷ Matt. 23:35

⁵²⁸ Heb. 12:24

⁵²⁹ Num. 35:30

⁵³⁰ I Tim. 5:19

the meeting of the Sanhedrin in which Jesus was condemned to death. Mark records: "The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree. Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: 'We heard him say, 'I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man.' ' Yet even then their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, 'Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?' But Jesus remained silent."⁵³¹ It is a bitter irony that elements that were introduced to promote justice can be used to pervert it. It remains a question as to why evil governments would even take pains to maintain a front of justice while carrying out demonic policies. Why did Stalin bother to take people to court in order to carry out his purges of government ranks? Why did the Nazis convict people publicly before exterminating them?

Human nature, evil as it is, has never been curbed by laws that said: "Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness. Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd, and do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit."⁵³² Or: "Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the LORD."⁵³³ Only if man realizes who it is who says: "I am the LORD" will perjury cease.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia writes about this false witnessing: "The Hebrew idiom is 'edh sheqer, 'witness of a falsehood,' 'lie' <Exo 20:16; Deut 19:16,18; Prov 6:19; 14:5,25; 19:5,9>; Greek pseudomartureo, 'to bring false testimony';- marturia, 'bearing of false testimony' <Mk 10:19; 14:56-57>. It goes without saying that the law was emphatic in its denunciation of this practice, and in order that the innocent might be protected against the lying accuser, a criminal was to be convicted only on the testimony of at least two or three witnesses, testifying to the same facts <Num. 35:30>. If one be found testifying falsely, he was to be punished by suffering the penalty which would have been inflicted on him against whom he testified, had he been convicted <Deut 19:16-19>."

The requirement of multiple witnesses was meant to lessen the likelihood of false accusations, and in most cases it would probably be a sufficient deterrent. There are examples of perjury in the Bible, besides in the case against Christ, one of the most blatant ones being the evil scheme of Queen Jezebel to acquire the vineyard of Naboth.⁵³⁴

God will make false accusations boomerang. In the case of Naboth, both Jezebel and her husband Ahab met a violent death. Jezebel was thrown out of an upstairs window⁵³⁵ and Ahab was killed during the battle at Ramoth Gilead, and his blood was licked up by the dogs at the same place where Naboth's blood had been spilt.⁵³⁶ We are not told what happened to the two false witnesses or to the elders of the city that carried out Jezebel's orders but they will have met their judgment also.

The law on retribution had already been formulated in Exodus. We read: "If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise." The context there, however, is not false witnessing but injuries sustained in quarrels. Jesus picks up on this in the Sermon on the Mount. He says: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."⁵³⁷

Behind the scenes of the cases of false witnessing in this chapter stands the shadow of the ultimate false witness, Satan. The prophet Zechariah describes a vision in which Satan tries to accuse one of God's servants. We read: "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The LORD said to Satan, 'The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you!' "⁵³⁸ Jesus did not intend to take away the basis for retribution, but He rather penetrated it in such a way that the cause of righteousness would be made perfect. After all, Satan does speak the truth when he accuses man of sinning. In Zechariah's vision "Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel."⁵³⁹ The falseness of Satan's witness lies in the fact that he invented sin and is the source of man's evil conduct. The problem of sin is not solved by retribution, but by atonement. And atonement could only be achieved by the blood of

⁵³¹ Mark 14:55-61^a

⁵³² Ex. 23:1-3

⁵³³ Lev. 19:16

⁵³⁴ See I Kings 21:7-14

⁵³⁵ See II Kings 9:30-37

⁵³⁶ See I Kings 22:37,38

⁵³⁷ Matt. 5:38,39

⁵³⁸ Zech. 3:1,2

⁵³⁹ Zech. 3:3

the Lamb of God. In the words of the Apostle Peter: “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous.”⁵⁴⁰ And: “You were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers ... with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”⁵⁴¹ It was by “turning the other cheek” and much more than that, that Christ not only rebuked Satan but completely triumphed over him. Paul says that when Christ was crucified, He “disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”⁵⁴²

Since Satan has been rebuked in such a way, and for those who are in Christ, the filthy clothes have been removed and replaced by rich garments, like what happened to Joshua in Zechariah’s vision, we are released from the obligation to require eye for eye and tooth for tooth, even life for life.

CHAPTER TWENTY

B. Explanation of the Civil Laws (continued) 20:1-20

1. Of the army, war, and conquests

This chapter presents us with a strange mixture of stipulations, exemptions, and policies that pertain, partly to the conquest of Canaan, and partly to the time after the conquest, when Israel had settled and established itself in the land. The verses 1-15, obviously, refer to the time after the conquest of Canaan, when the people were provoked to war by other nations outside the borders of Canaan, or when war was inevitable for some other reasons. The verses 16-20 speak about the immediate conquest of the Promised Land. In the latter case, all males were conscripted in the army.

The Pulpit Commentary introduces this chapter by saying: “The instructions in this chapter are peculiar to Deuteronomy. As the people of God, Israel was not a warlike nation; they were rather to abstain from warfare, and as a general rule to cultivate the arts of peace. But they had before them at this time the prospect of a serious and protracted conflict before they could occupy the land which God had assigned to them; and they might in future years have to go to war to maintain their independence and repel aggression. In view of this, instructions are here given regarding the conducting of military service.”

The verses 1-4, and 8 deal with the matter of fear. The fear that comes through in the first four verses is not necessarily the trembling of the coward. He who knows no fear in the face of overwhelming odds is a fool. These verses can be applied, both to the conquest of the Promised Land, as to subsequent wars.

The Adam Clarke Commentary believes that the conquest of Canaan is meant in the first verse, but his argument does not sound very strong. We read: “[When thou goest out to battle] This refers chiefly to the battles they were to have with the Canaanites, in order to get possession of the Promised Land; for it cannot be considered to apply to any wars which they might have with the surrounding nations for political reasons, as the divine assistance could not be expected in wars which were not undertaken by the divine command.” Jehoshaphat’s battle against the Moabites and Ammonites at the desert of Tekoa was certainly a war that had God’s approval.⁵⁴³

Matthew Henry’s Commentary remarks: “The Jewish writers agree that this liberty to return was allowed only in those wars which they made voluntarily (as bishop Patrick expresses it), not those which were made by the divine command against Amalek and the Canaanites, in which every man was bound to fight.”

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia informs us that: “Every male in Israel at the age of twenty, according to the ancient law, became liable for military service <Num 1:3; 26:2; 2 Chr 25:5>, just as at a later time every male of that age became liable for the half-shekel of Temple dues. Josephus is our authority for believing that no one was called upon to serve after the age of fifty (Ant, III, xii, 4). From military service the Levites were exempt <Num 2:33>. In Deuteronomic law exemption was allowed to persons betrothed but not married, to persons who had built a house but had not dedicated it, or who had planted a vineyard but had not eaten of the fruit of it, and to persons faint-hearted and fearful whose timidity might spread throughout the ranks <Deut 20:1-9>. These exemptions no doubt reach back to a high antiquity and in the Maccabean period they still held good (1 Macc 3:56).”

War is a terrible thing and, in most circumstances, unjustifiable. Nevil Chamberlain, the British prime minister at the onset of World War II tried to avoid war, almost at all cost, when he signed his pact with Hitler at

⁵⁴⁰ I Pet. 3:18

⁵⁴¹ I Pet. 1:18,19

⁵⁴² Col. 2:15

⁵⁴³ See II Chr. 20:1-29

Munich in 1938, and announced that it meant “Peace in our time.” The fact that he supremely underestimated the evil character of the Nazi regime never spoke in his favor, mainly because of the terrible aftermath of the war. People who rush into wars either do not know what they are doing, or they are evil.

The fact is that some people are so intrinsically evil that, under certain circumstances, war is inevitable. The Second World War is an example in case. There are no instances of wars in which madness did not play a major role. This makes it impossible for us to imagine the existence of a “just war,” or “a righteous war.” Yet, the example Moses uses in this chapter all fall into the category of righteous wars. How could a war not be righteous if “the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory?” When I read this, I see before my eyes the belts of the soldiers in Hitler’s army with the words written on them: “God With Us.” We live in a world where Satan himself wears a belt with that inscription. This makes it so hard for us to get into the spirit of this chapter.

Yet, here it is in black and white: Israel, the people of God, are being attacked by enemies who do not know God. As long as Israel was a small nation, fighting for its survival against unimaginable odds, we can make some sense out of the fact that they want to fight back. But then, how does one allow for people to stay home for reasons that do not really hold water? 1. Staying home because one just built a new house! 2. Because one just made a new garden! 3. Because one got engaged to be married! 4. Because one is afraid to fight! Who then would go? We almost wonder if Moses could have been serious.

Yet, in the example of Gideon’s army, we see that God specifically ordered Gideon to send home anyone who was afraid to fight, thus reducing his troops from 32,000 to 10,000.⁵⁴⁴ In the rest of the story, that army is decreased to a mere 300 men, who are armed with trumpets, torches, and clay pots. It is an arms race in reverse, indicating that God mocks the display of human might.

Some of this mocking spirit may be present in Moses’ admonition here also. It is as if God wants to say that it does not matter how many troops march to war, as long as He goes in front, Israel will be victorious. The emphasis of Moses’ address is more on the presence of the Lord than on the number of enlisted men.

There is also a reference to what normal human life ought to be. If a man builds a house for himself and his family and dedicates it to the Lord, he ought to be able to live in it and enjoy it. If someone has planted a vineyard, he ought to be able to enjoy the fruit and drink his own wine. And more than the preceding cases, a young married couple ought to have a nice extended honeymoon and enjoy years of married bliss together. That is the kind of life God wants us to have.

It is also the kind of life that is destroyed by human wars. We live in a world that is constantly being torn to pieces, and most people live lives that are being torn to pieces. God came to this world and became man, and He was torn to pieces. But in His resurrection He put the pieces back together and brought life out of death. He gave the promise to those who hope for His coming: “Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”⁵⁴⁵

The fact that God is with Israel’s army and that He goes with them to fight and give them the victory does not mean that Israelite soldiers will not be killed. There will be casualties in Israel’s army also. About the man who builds a new house, the priest says: “he may die in battle and someone else may dedicate it.” About the one who planted a new vineyard, God says: “he may die in battle and someone else enjoy it.” And about the new bridegroom who goes to war, we read: “he may die in battle and someone else marry her.” This implies that, among those who do march to war, some will be killed also, regardless of the fact that God marches up front and victory is secure.

Those who serve the Lord may be killed in action. For some reason we believe that if we dedicate our lives to God we will be protected against the attacks of the enemy. God’s servants are often subjected to hardship, some are killed in action, others die of cancer. The presence of God does not mean that this will not happen. The only guarantee God gives us is that victory is sure. This may not mean what we want it to mean.

This brings us to the vast subject of fear. No one is completely exempt of fear. *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines fear as: “An unpleasant often strong emotion caused by expectation of awareness of danger...” The first time fear is mentioned in the Bible is after Adam and Eve have sinned. Adam said to God: “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”⁵⁴⁶ This establishes the relationship between fear and sin. This can be extended to what the Bible calls “the fear of death.” We read in Hebrews about Jesus: “He too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- and free

⁵⁴⁴ See Judges 7:3

⁵⁴⁵ Rev. 7:16,17

⁵⁴⁶ Gen. 3:10

those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”⁵⁴⁷ Since death is the wages of sin, it is clear that the object of fear is the same.

God’s reaction to human fear has always been reassuring. Almost every time God reveals Himself to man we read: “Fear not!” The examples are too numerous to mention. Our chapter states: “Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic...” Fear is the weapon of the enemy to enslave people. God does not want us to fear. His presence is the antidote against our fears. By the mouth of Isaiah, He says: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”⁵⁴⁸

Fear of death is ultimately the root of all fears. The Israelite soldier who was afraid because he saw that the army of the enemy was larger and that the weapons were more powerful was, in reality, afraid to die. It is impossible to overcome such fear without the hope of resurrection. That is the reason victory over fear has to be sought in the spiritual realm. The person who is not afraid to die cannot be manipulated. It is true what the author of Hebrews writes that the devil held the power of death and that he used the fear of death to keep people in slavery. The depth of Jesus’ victory can be seen in the fact that the key of death is presently in Jesus’ hand. Jesus says to His beloved disciple John: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”⁵⁴⁹

We may not be engaged in the same kind of physical war the Israelites faced, but in the war that is behind all wars, the one that is fought out in the heavenly places with the powers of darkness, we have the same assurance that God is marching ahead of us to assure the victory. When Israel defeated the Amalekites in the desert, Moses invented a new name for God: *Jehovah Nissi*, “The LORD is my Banner.”⁵⁵⁰ We are allowed to stay home and have a house warming party, or enjoy the fruit of our gardens, or go on a honeymoon, but unless we enlist in the Lord’s army and give ourselves to the battle, we will end up without a house, a garden, or a bride/bridegroom.

The whole point of these verses, however, is to impress upon us that in final analysis, the war is not ours. The actual fight is between God and Satan, and we are caught in between. Since we are in-between because of “human error” we better get actively involved, although we would not have a chance to win if God would not win for us. And that He has done already. God wants us to look at our fears in the light of His victory, and He wants us to be sure that we have our priorities straight.

There is also a lesson implied in this that teaches us to take time off. Our war is a full-time job, a lifetime engagement. Unless we take time to dedicate our home to the Lord, to plant our garden and to enjoy life with our spouse and family, we will win one war while we are losing another.

The Adam Clarke Commentary has the following astute remarks about this part of the chapter: “There are several curious particulars in these verses: 1. The people had the most positive assurances from God that their enemies should not be able to prevail against them by strength, numbers, nor stratagem, because God should go with them to lead and direct them, and should fight for them; and against his might none could prevail. 2. All such interferences were standing proofs of the being of God, of his especial providence, and of the truth of their religion. 3. Though God promised them such protection, yet they were to expect it in the diligent use of their own prudence and industry. The priests, the officers, and the people, had their respective parts to act in this business; if they did their duty respectively, God would take care that they should be successful. Those who will not help themselves with the strength which God has already given them, shall not have any further assistance from him. In all such cases, the parable of the talents affords an accurate rule. 4. Their going to war against their enemies must not deprive them of mercy and tenderness toward their brethren. He who had built a house and had not yet dwelt in it, who had planted a vineyard and had not eaten of its fruits, who had betrothed a wife and had not yet taken her to his house, was not obliged to go to battle, lest he should fall in the war, and the fruits of his industry and affection be enjoyed by others. He who was faint-hearted was also permitted to return, lest he should give way in the heat of battle, and his example have a fatal influence on others.”

The role of the priest in preparing the army for a war merits a closer look. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* remarks on this: “Jewish writers say that there was a war-priest appointed by a special ceremonial to attend the army. It was natural that the solemn objects and motives of religion should have been applied to animate patriotism, and give additional impulse to valor; other people have done this, but in the case of Israel the regular attendance of a priest on the battlefield was in accordance with their Theocratic government, in

⁵⁴⁷ Heb. 2:14,15

⁵⁴⁸ Isa. 41:10

⁵⁴⁹ Rev. 1:17,18

⁵⁵⁰ Ex. 17:15

which everything was done directly by God through his delegated ministers. It was the province of this priest to sound the trumpets <Num. 10:9; 31:6>, and he had others under him who repeated at the head of each battalion the exhortations which he addressed to the warriors in general. The speech <Deut. 20:3-4> is marked by a brevity and expressiveness admirably suited to the occasion-- namely, when the men were drawn up in line."

There is some similarity between the role of the priest in this context and of a chaplain in a modern army. They both try to stimulate the faith of the soldiers. Yet, from the perspective of our secular background, we cannot fully understand the position of the priest, because we cannot visualize a "holy war" such as the wars Israel was supposed to fight. In our age holy wars are obsolete, and those that are called "holy" are farthest from being so. King David may have been the last person in world history who fought wars that came even close to being approved by God. Even if the enemy that is fought in modern wars is the enemy of God, the opposing army is never stimulated by motives that are completely pure. The flow of oil, protection of trade, and other self-serving interests are generally the main reason for the battles fought.

The verses 10-15 outline the policy to be followed with territories outside the boundaries of the Promised Land. Every conquest has to be introduced by an offer for peace on the basis of surrender and acceptance of terms. The question as to whether this policy of offering peace was meant for the nations that inhabited Canaan has never been answered satisfactorily. Vs. 15 seems to narrow it to places beyond the borders of the Promised Land. We read: "This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby." But this clause could pertain to measures Israel had to take after terms of surrender had been rejected; a proposition for peaceful surrender is not mentioned in this context, but that does not exclude the possibility. In the history of the conquest of Canaan, there is no instance of a peace settlement, except in the matter of the Gibeonites. But the Gibeonites used a ruse to enter into an alliance with Israel. In all other instances the inhabitants of the country attacked Israel.

Matthew Henry's Commentary says about this question: "Some think that even the seven nations of Canaan were to have this offer of peace made to them; and the offer was no jest or mockery, though it was of the Lord to harden their hearts that they should not accept it, <Josh. 11:20>. Others think that they are excluded (v. 16) not only from the benefit of that law (v. 13) which confines military execution to the males only, but from the benefit of this also, which allows not to make war till peace was refused. And I see not how they could proclaim peace to those who by the law were to be utterly rooted out, and to whom they were to show no mercy, <Deut 7:2>. But for any other nation which they made war upon, for the enlarging of their coast, the avenging of any wrong done, or the recovery of any right denied, they must first proclaim peace to them."

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary agrees with Matthew Henry's view about the strategy to conquer Canaan. We read: "According to <Deuteronomy 20:10-20>, three outcomes of a holy war were possible. If the besieged city surrendered, the occupants' lives were spared, but all were enslaved. If the city refused to agree to peace terms and had to be taken by force, all males were killed by the sword. An exception to both these policies occurred when the captured city lay within Israel's boundaries. Then all occupants and their possessions were utterly destroyed. Known as the ban, this custom was intended to keep Israel free of any heathen influence <Josh. 6:17; 1 Sam. 15:3>."

There seems to be some concern for the ecological balance of the country in vs. 19 in the prohibition to cut down trees. But a closer look shows that only the fruit trees were to be spared, and that out of concern for man, not for "mother nature." There are, however, more problems involved than appear on the surface, as *The Adam Clarke Commentary* makes clear. We read: "The original is exceedingly obscure, and has been variously translated.... The following are the chief versions: For, O man, the trees of the field are for thee to employ THEM in the siege-- or, For it is man, and the tree of the field, that must go before thee for a bulwark-- or, For it is a tree, and not men, to increase the number of those who come against thee to the siege-- or, lastly, The tree of the field (is as) a man, to go before thy face for a bulwark. The sense is sufficiently clear, though the strict grammatical meaning of the words cannot be easily ascertained: it was a merciful provision to spare all fruit-bearing trees, because they yielded the fruit which supported man's life; and it was sound policy also, for even the conquerors must perish if the means of life were cut off. It is diabolic cruelty to add to the miseries of war the horrors of famine; and this is done where the trees of the field are cut down, the dykes broken to drown the land, the villages burnt, and the crops willfully spoiled. O execrable war! subversive of all the charities of life!"

The verse seems to stress some ecological awareness that God wanted His people to have. As a child of God we should treat nature with respect. Willful destruction, littering, pollution of the world around us dishonors us. God created the trees before He created us, and the same God who created the trees created us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

C. Explanation of the Social Laws 21:1-26:19

1. Of human life and dignity 21:1-23

The Pulpit Commentary summarizes the subjects of this chapter as: “Expiation of uncertain murder. Treatment of a captive taken as a wife.⁵⁵¹ Rights of the firstborn. A rebellious, refractory son to be judged and punished. A malefactor who has been hanged to be buried ere nightfall.”

The chapter begins and ends with a dead body, and the subjects in between describe instances that would be considered unacceptable, and even immoral in a western society that has known the influence of the Gospel.

The Pulpit Commentary introduces the chapter by saying: “One general idea, viz. The sacredness of human life and of personal rights, connects the laws in this chapter together, as well as connects them with the laws in the two preceding chapters.”

In *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* we find the following “Outline of Deuteronomy 21: - In this chapter provision is made,

I. For the putting away of the guilt of blood from the land, when he that shed it had fled from justice <v. 1-9>.

II. For the preserving of the honor of a captive maid <v. 10-14>.

III. For the securing of the right of a first-born son, though he were not a favorite <v. 15-17>.

IV. For the restraining and punishing of a rebellious son <v. 18-21>.

V. For the maintaining of the honor of human bodies, which must not be hanged in chains, but decently buried, even the bodies of the worst malefactors <v. 22-23>.”

We have no problem with the first and the last incidents mentioned in this chapter. In the second and third instance the question of polygamy looms behind the scene without being dealt with, and in the fourth, it seems inconceivable to us that parents would report their sons rebellion to the authorities for the purpose of having him executed. We will have a closer look at those problems at their proper place.

a. Unsolved murders vs. 1-9

When a body was found in the vicinity of a town, the inhabitants of that town were under suspicion. This surmise amounted to legal guilt in the sight of the Lord which had to be atoned for. The principle upon which this carrying out of justice is built is, evidently, that people are presumed guilty unless proven innocent. That is the reverse of the premise of justice in most countries in western civilization. The way the citizens prove their innocence is by literally washing their hands of the affair. This is the first instance in which the ritual of hand washing to prove innocence is prescribed in Scripture. A closer look, however, will reveal that the ritual was not only intended to prove innocence, but also to remove implicit guilt.

The ceremony emphasizes the fact that when a crime is committed people get involved, whether they want to or not. In the crime-ridden world in which we live, we are all involved, unless we clearly and deliberately distance ourselves from it. Historically, we are all descendants of criminals. Jesus emphasizes this fact in his accusation against the religious leaders of His day. He said to them: “And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.”⁵⁵¹ Being the descendants of those who murdered the prophets made them partakers in the guilt of their ancestors. Albert Schweitzer may not have been the evangelical missionary we would have liked him to be, but he understood the principle of imputed guilt when he went to Gabon to atone for the sins of the slave handlers of Western Europe. God looks upon humanity as one single person, and He holds us responsible for the blood of Abel. To God we are all included in Adam. Jesus therefore said: “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.”⁵⁵² We are only absolved of the guilt of the crimes others committed if we are included in the person of Jesus Christ. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says: “[You have come] to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”⁵⁵³ If we clearly identify ourselves with the person of Jesus Christ and confess Him as the Lord of our life, we will wash our hands of the crimes of the world in which we live.

The expression “to wash one’s hands of something” has acquired a negative meaning in modern language based on the misuse Pilate made of this ritual during the court case against Jesus. It was within Pilate’s power to

⁵⁵¹ Matt. 23:30,31

⁵⁵² Matt. 23:35

⁵⁵³ Heb. 12:24

release Jesus, but we read: “He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.”⁵⁵⁴ Yet, he denied responsibility. We read in Matthew’s Gospel: “When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood,’ he said. ‘It is your responsibility!’”⁵⁵⁵ Blood cannot be washed away with water. Only the blood of Christ can cleanse us from the blood we have on our hands.

The ritual of the washing of hands, or ablution, attained a prominent place in Jewish religious life in later centuries. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* writes the following about the subject: “Ablution. A ceremonial washing, it might be of the person (or part thereof), clothing, vessels, or furniture, as a symbol of purification. ... Declaration of freedom from guilt of a particular action. An instance of this is the expiation for the murder of a man by unknown hands, when the elders of the nearest village washed their hands over a slain heifer, saying, ‘Our hands have not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it’ <Deut. 21:1-9>. The Pharisees carried the practice of ablution to such excess, from the affectation of purity while the heart was left unclean, that our Lord severely rebuked them for their hypocrisy <Matt. 23:25>. All these practices come under the head of purification from uncleanness; the acts involved were made so numerous that persons of the stricter sect could scarcely move without contracting some involuntary pollution. Therefore, they never entered their houses without ablution, from the strong probability that they had unknowingly contracted some defilement on the streets. They were especially careful never to eat without washing their hands <Mark 7:1-5>. A distinction must be made between this ceremonial washing and ordinary cleansing of the hands as a matter of decency. When the charge was made against our Lord’s disciples that they ate with unwashed hands, it was not meant that they did not wash their hands at all, but that they did not do it ceremonially. These ceremonial washings were prescribed with such minute details as to be not only burdensome but sometimes impossible. Before the ceremony one had to decide the kind of food to be partaken of-- whether it was prepared firstfruits, common food, or holy, i.e., sacrificial food. ‘The water was poured on both hands, which must be free from anything covering them, such as gravel, mortar, etc. The hands were lifted up, so as to make the water run to the wrist, in order to insure that the whole hand was washed and that the water polluted by the hand did not again run down the fingers. Similarly, each hand was rubbed with the other (the fist), provided the hand that rubbed had been effused; otherwise the rubbing might be done against the head, or even against a wall. But there was one point on which special stress was laid. In the ‘first effusion,’ which was all that originally was required when the hands were not Levitically ‘defiled,’ the water had to run down to the wrist. If the water remained short of the wrist, the hands were not clean. Accordingly, the words of St. Mark can only mean that the Pharisees eat not ‘except they wash their hands to the wrist.’ If the hands were ‘defiled’ two effusions were required: the first to remove the defilement, and the second to wash away the waters that had contracted the defilement of the hands. Accordingly, on the effusion of the first waters the hands were elevated, and the water made to run down at the wrist, while at the second waters the hands were depressed, so that the water might run off by the finger joints and tips’ (Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus*, 2:11).”

In the ceremony of purification, the crime is, in a sense, reenacted in effigy. A heifer that has never known a burden represents the victim. The animal is not sacrificed in a way that drains the blood from the body, but it is killed in a violent way: its neck is broken. In the ceremony the animal identifies the victim. The difference between this identification and that of a person with a sacrificial animal in regular sacrifices is that the person puts his hand on the animal’s head to indicate that what happens to the animal should have happened to him. The animal’s blood substitutes for his blood. In this case, though, the victim is already dead and the identification is done posthumously. The killing of a sacrificial animal was done humanely by the cutting of the jugular vein. The killing of the heifer was brutal, like the murder that was committed. The fact that the heifer had never been worked and had never worn a yoke and that the place of the ceremony was to be a valley that has not been plowed or planted and where there is a flowing stream speak of an absence of the curse that was incurred at the sin of Adam. God had said to Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food.”⁵⁵⁶ The elements of this ritual give a pristine character to the ceremony, which makes us think of the One who would come into the world without the stain of Adam’s sin upon His soul. He would be murdered brutally also, and that murder, as we have already seen, would be accompanied by the ritual of the washing of hands. God, obviously, had the death of His Son in mind when He gave these orders to Moses.

The ceremony was to be carried out in the presence of the Levites who, in this case, acted as the judges. It is interesting that the qualifications of the Levites are mentioned in connection with the ritual. Moses says about them:

⁵⁵⁴ Matt. 27:26

⁵⁵⁵ Matt. 27:24

⁵⁵⁶ Gen. 3:17-19

“The LORD your God has chosen them to minister and to pronounce blessings in the name of the LORD and to decide all cases of dispute and assault.” Their power to pronounce judgment is based upon their ministry of blessing in behalf of YHWH Elohim. The purpose of the ritual is not condemnation but cleansing of guilt. This is a picture of the Gospel, which Jesus summed up in the words: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”⁵⁵⁷ In a world that stands condemned because of Abel’s blood, and all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, God shows a way out in a judgment of blessing. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁵⁸

We said earlier that the victim was identified with the heifer, but there is also a sense in which the elders of the town identify themselves with the animal that is murdered. They themselves are victims, since they stand accused of a murder they did not commit. We are all guilty before God because of a sin that Adam committed in our behalf. We are born into this world as victims of Adam’s sin. The only way in which we can proclaim our innocence is by identifying ourselves with our Lord Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection. God placed us in Christ at the cross. Therefore, Paul can say: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”⁵⁵⁹ Or: “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”⁵⁶⁰ In Christ we are no longer guilty because we are dead.

b. War Brides vs. 10-24

If we look at this section from the angle of a man who takes a girl, we arrive at conclusions that are objectionable to the extreme to our Western mindset. But if we approach it from the female side, it sheds some light on this passage. The Scriptures here intend to create some order in the chaos of ancient war practices. God takes the side of the girl in these verses, not of the man. What we read here does not imply that God approves of what is done in a war.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary gives the following comment on these verses: “According to the war customs of all ancient nations, a female captive became the slave of the victor, who had the sole and unchallengeable control of right to her person. Moses improved this existing usage by special regulations on the subject. He enacted that, in the event of her master being captivated by her beauty and contemplating a marriage with her, a month should be allowed to elapse, during which her perturbed feelings might be calmed, her mind reconciled to her altered condition, and she might bewail the loss of her parents, now to her the same as dead. A month was the usual period of mourning with the Jews; and the circumstances mentioned here were the signs of grief-- the shaving of the head, the (not paring, but literally, doing, i. e.,) allowing the nails to grow uncut, the putting off her gorgeous dress, in which ladies on the eve of being captured arrayed themselves, to be the more attractive to their captors (Ovid, *Remed. Amor.*, p. 343).”

Matthew Henry’s Commentary strongly condemns the background of this law on war brides. We read: “By this law a soldier is allowed to marry his captive if he pleased. For the hardness of their hearts Moses gave them this permission, lest, if they had not had liberty given them to marry such, they should have taken liberty to defile themselves with them, and by such wickedness the camp would have been troubled. The man is supposed to have a wife already, and to take this wife for a secondary wife, as the Jews called them. This indulgence of men’s inordinate desires, in which their hearts walked after their eyes, is by no means agreeable to the law of Christ, which therefore in this respect, among others, far exceeds in glory the law of Moses. The gospel permits not him that has one wife to take another, for from the beginning it was not so. The gospel forbids looking upon a woman, though a beautiful one, to lust after her, and commands the mortifying and denying of all irregular desires, though it be as uneasy as the cutting off of a right hand; so much does our holy religion, more than that of the Jews, advance the honor and support the dominion of the soul over the body, the spirit over the flesh, consonant to the glorious discovery it makes of life and immortality, and the better hope.”

We may see in this law the same principle at work which, ultimately, caused the message of the Gospel to abolish slavery. Slavery is not condemned in the Scriptures, it certainly is not commended either. The Apostle Paul applies the core of the Gospel message to the conditions of slavery when he writes to the Corinthians: “Were you a

⁵⁵⁷ John 3:17,18

⁵⁵⁸ Rom. 8:1

⁵⁵⁹ Gal. 2:20

⁵⁶⁰ Rom. 6:3,4

slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you-- although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men."⁵⁶¹ It took almost twenty centuries before this Gospel seed bore fruit in a society that claimed to be a Christian nation but, eventually, it did. Such a seed is present also in the text that is before us. God shows Himself here as the protector of the abducted girl. It is passages like these that have given us the moral conscience that revolts against this kinds of situation, as is evinced in Matthew Henry's comments.

There is no unanimity among the commentators about the meaning of the recommended shaving of the head and the paring of the fingernails. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes: "With the Israelites, shaving the head was a sign of mourning <Deut 21:12; Job 1:20>; ordinarily the hair was allowed to grow long, and was only cut at intervals." But *The Adam Clarke Commentary* states: "This was in token of her renouncing her religion, and becoming a proselyte to that of the Jews. This is still a custom in the East; when a Christian turns Mohammedan his head is shaven, and he is carried through the city crying, la alahila allah we Mohammed resooli Allah, 'There is no God but God, and Mohammed is the prophet of God.'"

On the subject of the paring of the nails, the same commentary writes: "[Pare her nails] W^a `aas^a taah ... 'et... tsipaara^a neyhaa ..., 'she shall make her nails.' Now whether this signifies paring or letting them grow, is greatly doubted among learned men. Possibly it means neither, but coloring the nails, staining them red with the henna, which is much practiced in India to the present day, and which was undoubtedly practiced among the ancient Egyptians, as is evident from the nails of mummies which are found thus stained. The henna, according to Hasselquist, grows in India, and in Upper and Lower Egypt; it flowers from May to August. The manner of using it is this: the leaves are powdered, and made into a paste with water: they bind this paste on the nails of their fingers and toes, and let it stand on all night, in the morning they are found to be of a beautiful reddish yellow, and this lasts three weeks or a month, after which they renew the application. They often stain the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet in the same way, as appears from many paintings of eastern ladies done in India and Persia, which now lie before me. This staining the soles of the feet with the henna is probably meant in <2 Sam. 19:24>: Mephibosheth had not dressed (literally made) his feet-- they had not been thus colored."

Although, from the distance that separates us over the centuries, we will not be able to determine the exact meaning of acts the girl was allowed to perform, it is clear that they were meant to give her time to recuperate emotionally. God protected her by law from being raped by the man who had captured her. She was not to be treated as a slave and would not be subjected to the whims of her new husband. If she was not treated with honor and respect, she would be free to go. Moses did not specify any procedure to which the girl could take recourse, but the law did promise her some measure of protection. Although this is not states specifically, it is understood that, if these measures were not taken, the woman would have the right to depart as a free woman.

c. **The Oldest Son's Heritage** vs. 15-17

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia points out that there is a strong similarity between some of the laws handed down by Moses and the Code of Hammurabi. We read: "The resemblances between the other parts of the Pentateuch and the Code are not so striking as those between the Code and the Book of the Covenant; nevertheless, one may compare... especially <Deut 21:15> ff. 18 ff., with the Code of Hammurabi, sections 167, 168 f, where, in both cases, there is a transition from regulations concerning the property left by a man, married several times, to provisions referring to the punishment of a disobedient son, certainly a remarkable agreement in sequence."

These verses present us again with a condition that goes against the grain of our Christian philosophy of life. Since bigamy is outlawed in most western countries, the situation described is unfamiliar and irrelevant to us. But favoritism of parents towards some of their children is a phenomenon that has remained modern throughout the ages.

The founding father of the nation of Israel had been a clear example of the family situation Moses described here. Jacob had loved Rachel to the expense of Lea and her children. His preference for Joseph and Benjamin, as the children of Rachel had been the main reason why his family had been so dysfunctional.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary remarks here: "The law in this case is still binding on parents; they must give their children their right without partiality. In the case supposed, the eldest son, though the son of the less-beloved wife, must have his birthright privilege, which was a double portion of the father's estate.... Jacob had indeed deprived Reuben of his birthright, and given it to Joseph, but it was because Reuben had forfeited the birthright by his incest, not because he was the son of the hated; now, lest that which Jacob did justly should be drawn into a precedent for others to do the same thing unjustly, it is here provided that when the father makes his

⁵⁶¹ I Cor. 7:21-23

will, or otherwise settled his estate, the child shall not fare the worse for the mother's unhappiness in having less of her husband's love, for that was not the child's fault. Note, parents ought to make no other difference in dispensing their affections among their children than what they see plainly God makes in dispensing his grace among them. Since it is the providence of God that makes heirs, the disposal of providence in that matter must be acquiesced in and not opposed. No son should be abandoned by his father till he manifestly appear to be abandoned of God, which is hard to say of any while there is life."

The law emphasizes the root of the problem, namely that there is a link between conjugal love and parental love. The relationship of spouses affects the relationships with children. In cases of divorce, the children are always the main victims. If a father deprives his son of the lawful share of his inheritance, he punishes the child for his own failure. Husbands ought to love their wives. The Apostle Paul writes: "In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself."⁵⁶² But the Old Testament situation is complicated here by polygamy, which the New Testament forbids. The principle remains, however, that a husband has an obligation to love his wife. If he fails to do so he stands guilty before the Lord. A lack of love can always be traced to a failure to receive God's love. The Apostle John states clearly: "We love because he first loved us."⁵⁶³ The husband who does not love his wife has no excuse. The transition of love for the wife to love for the child is a natural one. In a healthy marriage relationship there will be a flow of love from the father to the children his wife has born him. Even Jacob had no problem with this. Favoritism toward the children is an indication that the love from the father to the mother is flawed also. The law forbids favoritism.

The law also prescribes in an indirect way that love has to be expressed in a tangible way. In the directives given, there is a customary share of the heritage that is the right of the oldest son. In practice, the inheritance is sometimes more important to the child than the father's affection, but this is the result of the fact that sin warped natural relationships. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father was overflowing with affection, but neither of his sons valued anything but the inheritance. A child has as much responsibility to receive love as the parent to give it.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary approaches this section from a different angle by supposing that it does not involve polygamy. We read: "In the original, and in all translations but ours, the words are rendered 'have had,' referring to events that have already taken place. [Septuagint,... If there have been to a man two wives, and they have born him sons... That the 'had' has, by some mistake, been omitted in our version, seems highly probable, from other verbs being in the past tense—'hers that was hated,' not 'hers that is hated,' evidently intimating that she (the first wife) was dead at the time referred to. Moses, therefore, does not here legislate upon the case of a man who has two wives at the same time, but on that of a man who has married twice in succession, the second wife after the decease of the first; and there was an obvious necessity for legislation in these circumstances; for the first wife, who was hated, was dead, and the second wife, the favorite, was alive: and with the feelings of a stepmother, she would urge her husband to make her own son the heir. This case has no bearing upon polygamy, which there is no evidence that the Mosaic code legalized (see Dwight's 'Hebrew Wife,' pp. 17, 18)." It seems, however, that the worthy commentary stretches the point too much, trying to accommodate facts of the ancient world to a sense of propriety that is particular to our concept of morality, since, obviously, polygamy was tolerated in the Old Testament, although it was never legalized. The Hebrew grammar also does not seem to bear out the commentators' conclusion.

Vs. 17 has the strange expression that the firstborn "son is the first sign of his father's strength." The Hebrew word translated with strength is *'own* of which *Strongs Definitions* says that it means probably the same as *'aven* which is defined as "to pant, to exert oneself" (in the sense of effort, but successful); ability, power, (figuratively) wealth." Jacob uses the word in his address to Reuben: "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power."⁵⁶⁴ The word may have a sexual connotation, referring to the first conjugal intercourse and the pride of the father at the birth of his first child.

d. **Death Sentence upon a Rebellious Son** vs. 18-21

These verses present us with one of the most baffling incidents of the Mosaic law. It is hard for us to imagine that any parent would bring himself or herself to the point of handing over their own child to justice with the intent to have him executed. Such a thing would be unimaginable in our modern society, even in case a capital crime was committed. Not only is blood thicker than water, but we would consider it immoral to have anyone put to death for profligacy. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* remarks here: "Not a single instance of this law, having been put in execution, occurs in the whole history of Israel; and the warranted inference is, that the legislator

⁵⁶² Eph. 5:28

⁵⁶³ I John 4:19

⁵⁶⁴ Gen. 49:3

evinced his wisdom by the establishment of a statute which exercised an indirect but powerful influence in remedying the evil, by either leading parents to take particular care in the upbringing of their children, or else in prompting natural affection to carry long-suffering to the utmost extreme, ere a public tribunal was appealed to.”

Most parents have a tendency to blame themselves when their child fails in life. In the same way as the parents’ success is wrapped up in the achievements of the children, so a child’s failure is felt to reflect on the parents. Parents ask themselves the question: “What did I do wrong?” No upbringing is perfect in the fallen world in which we live. A happy family is a family in which the failures are offset by victories, and in most cases, the balance is rather fragile. We also tend to cover up our failures. There are few families, if any, who do not have a skeleton in the closet.

In our modern society, where families are falling apart almost faster than they are formed, the casualties among the children are so overwhelmingly great that any attempt to apply even the principle of this law would be a sheer impossibility. Even though we cannot imagine that a child would be executed because of the reasons mentioned here, there are important lessons to be drawn from this part of Scripture.

The first one is that the family in these verses is a nucleus where the Word of God occupies the central place. Israel could only be a theocracy if God was the head of every household. A child cannot be a backslider if there is nothing to slide back from. The child’s rebellion was not merely a protest against parental authority in search of a puberty identity, but a declaration of war against God. The Hebrew word translated with “stubborn” is *carar* which *Strong’s Definitions* defines with “to turn away, i.e. (morally) be refractory.” The word rebellious comes from the Hebrew *marah* which means “to make bitter.” The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews uses the same word in Greek when he says: “See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.”⁵⁶⁵ *Adam Clarke Commentary* comments on this: “A root of bitterness signifies a poisonous plant. The Hebrews call every species of poison a bitter, and with considerable propriety, as most plants are poisonous in proportion to the quantum of the bitter principle they possess. The root of bitterness is here used metaphorically for a bad man, or a man holding unsound doctrines, and endeavoring to spread them in the church.”

The word translated with “obey” is *shama`*, which has the root meaning of “to hear intelligently.” “Profligate” is the translation of the Hebrew word *zalal* which literally means, “to shake,” figuratively, “to be loose morally.” The KJV translates it with “glutton.” In old English this word may have had a broader meaning than merely pertaining to the consumption of food. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines profligate with: “completely given up to dissipation and licentiousness.” *The Pulpit Commentary* adds here: “The word rendered by ‘glutton’... (to shake, to shake out, to squander), includes other kinds of excess besides eating. It designates one who is prodigal, who wastes his means or wastes his person by indulgence. In Prov. xxiii. 30, the whole phrase... is given – squanderers of flesh, i.e. wasters of their own body, debauchees. In Prov. xxxviii. 7 the word is translated ‘riotous men’ in the authorized Version. Disobedience to parents was deemed an offence which struck at the roots of the whole social institute.”

“He is a drunkard.” Alcoholism is almost as old as sin itself. It was the sin Noah defiled himself with after God had washed the world clean in the flood. We read in Genesis: “When he [Noah] drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent.”⁵⁶⁶ This was followed by the first curse pronounced in the new world. Modern psychology and the medical science has found various reasons for addiction to alcohol, blaming it on a person’s genes instead of making it a matter of choice. It is true that the use of alcohol and drugs weakens man’s will and eventually annihilate it, but the initial choice is always there. The Bible does not advocate teetotalism, but it does warn against drunkenness. God wants us to be master of our desires and He wants our spirit to control our bodies.

The boy whose parents reported him to the authorities had given himself over to sin and, obviously, he rather died in his sin than turned away from it. He had given up on family values, and so the family gave up on him. The term “family values” has acquired a connotation of hypocrisy. In our day it has become a slogan that substitutes for the holiness of life which is the result of fellowship with God by the members of a family. But this does not mean that God has not installed intrinsic values in a family, which members of the family ought to obey.

This is the second lesson hidden in this portion of Scripture: children owe obedience to their parents, and parents are under obligation to teach their children obedience, not necessarily to the will of the parents but to the will of God. Obedience of children to their parents is just as much a matter of choice as the decision not to defile oneself with alcohol or drugs. God wants parents to be in command of a child’s life. God says about Abraham: “I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing

⁵⁶⁵ Heb. 12:15,16

⁵⁶⁶ Gen. 9:21

what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”⁵⁶⁷ But obedience remains a person’s choice.

The Holy Spirit keeps the balance of Scripture by providing us with a counter weight in Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger of the two sons did exactly what is condemned in these verses. We read that he “squandered his wealth in wild living.”⁵⁶⁸ According to Old Testament standards the father would have had to right to hand him over to justice for capital punishment. But the attitude of the father in the parable is described in one of the most moving statements of the whole Bible: “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” Jesus could tell this story without violating the cause of justice, because He took the punishment of the prodigal upon Himself. It is not without reason that in this chapter in Deuteronomy this section is followed immediately by the one about the man who was cursed by God and whose body hung on a tree.

e. The Desecration of the Land vs. 22,23

The point of these verses is not primarily the curse upon the person who had committed a certain crime, but the defilement of the land. We read the reason given in the words: “You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.” There is a direct link between the sin of man and the rest of God’s creation. When Adam sinned, God announced: “Cursed is the ground because of you.”⁵⁶⁹ Adam’s punishment had, in a way, been indirect; he was never cursed directly.

In these verses the criminal is cursed, and the curse is limited to the person while the land is protected. The hidden blessing of this law does not become apparent until the New Testament, where it is applied to the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul quotes these verses when he says: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”⁵⁷⁰ Christ lifted the curse from the earth by putting it upon Himself. The redemption of the sinner will, ultimately, affect the whole of creation. Therefore, Paul can prophecy: “The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”⁵⁷¹ All this was, of course, hidden from view when Moses gave this decree for the burial of executed criminals.

Capital punishment in Israel consisted mostly of stoning a person to death. There is no law that ordered that the carcass of the executed had to be exposed publicly by hanging them on a tree or a pole. This must have been an addition by public demand or the carryover of a tradition learned from other nations. Crucifixion, which is the context in which Paul quotes these verses, had not been invented yet. People in Old Testament times probably knew impalement, and it is generally supposed that crucifixion evolved from this form of execution in later times. The hanging of the criminal’s body, during this period of history, was not part of the execution. The person was not killed by hanging; it was the dead body that was put on public display, either as a deterrent or to add insult to execution by shaming the executed person posthumously. This robbing a person of his ultimate dignity was not provided for in the law of Moses.

There is, however, one instance in Jewish history where God demanded a public display of the bodies of people executed after the sin of idolatry, but the Hebrew text seems to be ambiguous. We read in Numbers: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD’s fierce anger may turn away from Israel.’”⁵⁷² The Hebrew word translated with “expose” is *yaqa’*, which is defined by *Strong’s* as: “to sever oneself, i.e. (by implication) to be dislocated; figuratively, to abandon; causatively, to impale (and thus allow to drop to pieces by rotting).” It could be that, in the particular instance of the execution of the people involved in the idolatry-fornication sin with the women of Moab, the bodies were in fact left to decompose. But then this must be seen as the exception, which was overruled by the law Moses dictated here. It also occurred in the desert, not within the borders of the Promised Land.

The Pulpit Commentary suggests that the hanging actually refers to impaling, but other commentators do not share this thought. Whatever form of exposure is meant, the point is that the person who was executed and whose body was afterwards put on display was the object of a particular curse by God. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*

⁵⁶⁷ Gen. 18:19

⁵⁶⁸ Luke 15:13

⁵⁶⁹ Gen. 3:17

⁵⁷⁰ Gal. 3:13,14

⁵⁷¹ Rom. 8:21

⁵⁷² Num. 25:4

observes: “Those that see him thus hang between heaven and earth will conclude him abandoned of both and unworthy of either.”

In the case of the men convicted of participating in the idolatry rites with the women of Moab, God’s curse was attached to that particular kind of sin. What those men did went far beyond the sin of a casual sexual relationship with other women; it was an expression of an abandonment of God and of surrender to the devil, which explains the vehement reaction of God toward those people. It could very well be that the hanging of executed criminals was only done in this case or in similar cases.

This background sheds an even more heartrending light upon the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His crucifixion the Father actually cursed the Son while He carried away the sin of the world. Christ literally became the scapegoat for all the evil in the world. Jesus knew this verse of Scripture and it must have added a significant weight to His suffering. It was voiced in the most pathetic cry ever heard on earth: “ ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ -- which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ ”⁵⁷³

What does it mean to be under God’s curse? The Hebrew word *qelalah* means “vilification.” It is derived from *qalal* which means “to be made light or trifling, vile.” The Bible speaks about “eternal weight of glory.”⁵⁷⁴ Being made light suggests a lack of this weight of glory. This is expressed in the image that is sometimes used for the wicked: “Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.”⁵⁷⁵ In the crucifixion of the Lord of glory, God blew into the sin of the world like the wind blows away the chaff. The curse of God leaves us with an empty hull.

As we mentioned above, the desecration of the land is the main topic of these verses. Originally, it was the ground that was cursed by God after Adam sinned. God had said to Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you.”⁵⁷⁶ If God had considered the Promised Land to be under this curse, it could not be desecrated. As the Sabbath became the symbol of the lifting of the curse of eating the food by the sweat of the brow, so Canaan became the emblem of God’s rest for His people. It was the image of heaven itself. Curse and blessing do not mix. But it is because of the curse of Christ that the blessing of the Holy Spirit has come upon us. Paul’s words, already quoted above, form a fitting ending to this chapter: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”⁵⁷⁷

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

C. Explanation of the Social Laws 22:1-26:19

This chapter illustrates the testimony of the life of a child of God. This is expressed mostly in examples of pairs that do not mix. *The Pulpit Commentary* sums up the topics as: “Regulations regarding cattle strayed or things lost, the apparel of the sexes, the taking of birds, and the construction of houses. Confusions to be avoided. Fringes to be made on vestments. Punishment of wife-slander, adultery, rape, fornication, incest.”

1. On being a Good Neighbor vs. 1-4

Matthew Henry’s Commentary calls this “the preservation of charity and good neighborhood.” Earlier, Moses had commanded: “If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.”⁵⁷⁸ It would seem self-explanatory that one would do naturally for a brother what was commanded to be done for an enemy. In practice, however, it turns out that brotherly love and law-keeping do not always mix. We have a tendency to relax the laws of justice and decency when relationships become more intimate. The law orders us to “love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵⁷⁹ The sinfulness of our human nature tends to put the stress more on ourselves than on our neighbor in our social intercourse. Relaxation in the keeping of the law usually lets our focus drift toward our own interests. We are warned, maybe jokingly, never to buy a car from a Christian car dealer.

⁵⁷³ Matt. 27:46

⁵⁷⁴ II Cor. 4:17 (NKJ)

⁵⁷⁵ Ps. 1:4

⁵⁷⁶ Gen. 3:17

⁵⁷⁷ Gal. 3:13,14

⁵⁷⁸ Ex. 23:4,5

⁵⁷⁹ Lev. 19:18

Moses' warning makes us realize that what should be natural to the point where it ought not even to be necessary to mention it, namely that we should treat our brother justly, is not natural at all. Underneath it, we harbor the unspoken conviction, that our brother should make allowances for us, instead of our showing love to him. Jesus explains that our egocentric tendencies go against the grain of everything the law of God stands for. The Golden Rule is: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."⁵⁸⁰ God has given us a built-in measuring stick to determine what our behavior toward our fellowmen should be. Think how you want to be loved, and give that love to others. If we lose our ox, our sheep, our donkey, or our shirt, and someone else finds it, what would we want that person to do?

Finders are not to be keepers. There is a fine line between stealing and finding that results in safekeeping. The devil plays on our cupidity by wanting us to believe that we have a right to the possessions of our brother if those possessions happen to wander our way. Only if our conviction about our riches in Christ are firm enough, will we be able to see earthly possessions in the right perspective. Possession of our brother's ox or sheep will not make us any richer, it will actually impoverish our life.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary states: "The Jews say, 'He that found the lost goods was to give public notice of them by the common crier three or four times,' according to the usage with us; if the owner could not be found, he that found the goods might convert them to his own use; but (say some learned writers in this case) he would do very well to give the value of the goods to the poor."

Another lesson in these verses is that brotherly loves expresses itself in practical things. The Apostle John puts it very realistically by saying: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."⁵⁸¹

Vs. 4 encourages us to give roadside help. The modern equivalent to stopping to help a fallen donkey or an ox that buckled under the load is to pull over and help with a stalled car. But God wants us to go much farther and get involved in the financial and social struggles of our fellowmen. The stumbling of the donkey and the ox represent a complex of problems, some of which may be attributed to human error. The Apostle Paul tells us to get involved, realizing that it may be our donkey next time. We read: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."⁵⁸²

2. **The Distinction of the Sexes** vs. 5

The Matthew Henry Commentary links this verse with the verses 9-11 and calls it "the preservation of order and distinction, that men and women should not wear one another's clothes <v. 5>, and that other needless mixtures should be avoided <v. 9-11>." It is obvious that more is involved in this prohibition than an exchange of garments. The use of the word "abomination" would be unwarranted if it were only a matter of exchanging slacks or outward apparel. This verse speaks about the eradication of the distinctive features between the sexes. The Bible record states clearly: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."⁵⁸³ Any effort to erase the difference between the sexes affects the image of our Creator. God harbors the characteristics of both sexes in His own character. He wants men to be proud of their masculinity and women of their femininity. The distinction has nothing to do with inequality, only with distinctiveness. There is no distinction of value between male and female; a man is not worth more than a woman, or a woman than a man. The Apostle Paul clarifies that not the distinctions are eradicated but that they are united in Christ. He says: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁵⁸⁴

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary explains that this law may contain a prohibition against idolatry. We read: "Disguises were assumed at certain times in pagan temples. Maimonides... mentions that a man attired in a coloured female dress, in honor of Venus, Ashtaroth, or Astarte, and a woman equipped in armor, worshipped at the shrine of the statue of Mars,... The old Asiatics, when they engaged in the worship of Ashtaroth, were accustomed, according to Philocorus, quoted by Townley..., to exchange the male and female dresses. In fact, all idolaters confounded the sexes of their deities-- representing them sometimes as male, at other times as female; and hence, their worshippers, male and female, fell gradually into the custom, which became extensively prevalent, of changing their attire in adaptation to the sex of a particular divinity."

⁵⁸⁰ Matt. 7:12

⁵⁸¹ I John 3:17,18

⁵⁸² Gal. 6:1,2

⁵⁸³ Gen. 1:27

⁵⁸⁴ Gal. 3:28

A prohibition of existing heathen practices is probably at the basis of this verse. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* states: "It certainly cannot mean a simple change in dress, whereby the men might pass for women, and vice versa. This would have been impossible in those countries where the dress of the sexes had but little to distinguish it, and where every man wore a long beard. It is, however a very good general precept understood literally, and applies particularly to those countries where the dress alone distinguishes between the male and the female. The close-shaved gentleman may at any time appear like a woman in the female dress, and the woman appear as a man in the male's attire. Were this to be tolerated in society, it would produce the greatest confusion. Clodius, who dressed himself like a woman that he might mingle with the Roman ladies in the feast of the Bona Dea, was universally execrated."

For an application of this verse to our day, we can state that God wants men to be male and women to be female, and that any deviation from this distinction is an abomination to Him, and should be to us also.

3. For the Preservation of Birds vs. 6,7

Most commentaries interpret these verses in the sense of "be kind to your fine-feathered friends." *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "These precepts are designed to foster humane feeling towards the lower animals, and not less to preserve regard to that affectionate relation between parents and their young which God has established as a law in the animal world." The question is how humane is it to take the eggs and leave the mother? I do not think that humane feelings have anything to do with this prohibition. It expresses probably more a concern for the preservation of the ecological balance that could be disturbed if bird mother hens were exterminated. The fact that people would be interested to eat eggs that had been hatched for some time and that probably contained young points to people who were not well fed. In a well-nourished society like ours nobody would think of going after eggs that are not absolutely fresh.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary has the lengthiest comment on this verse. We read: "This is a beautiful instance of the humanizing spirit of the Mosaic law in checking a tendency to wanton destructiveness, and encouraging a spirit of kind and compassionate tenderness to the tiniest creatures. But there was wisdom as well as humanity in the precept; for, as birds are well known to serve important uses in the economy of nature, the extirpation of a species, whether of edible or ravenous birds, must in any country be productive of serious evils. Palestine, in particular, was situated in a climate which produced poisonous snakes and scorpions, and between deserts and mountains from which it would have been overrun with them, as well as immense swarms of flies, locusts, mice, and vermin of various kinds, if the birds which fed upon them were extirpated (Michaelis).

Accordingly, the counsel given in this passage was wise as well as humane, to leave the hen undisturbed, as the privation of her young would be affliction enough without the additional calamity of the loss of her liberty. Besides, left in her native haunts, she might have the pleasure of rearing another family in their stead; while the taking of the brood occasionally was permitted as a check to too rapid an increase.

Harmer ('Observations,' iv., p. 31) institutes an inquiry into the reasons that might have induced Moses to issue this prohibition to the Israelites while encamped on the confines of the Promised Land, and made no previous mention of the subject, although birds were and are undoubtedly inhabitants of the desert. Quails, partridges, pigeons, ostriches, are met with by travelers in that part of the wilderness through which the Israelites passed. As to the ostrich, he answers that their eggs, deposited in the sand, are hatched by the heat of the ground alone, without incubation <Job 39:13>; and as to the other birds which are found in the desert, and sit on their eggs, 'they were too few, perhaps to require a law, and of too wild and shy a disposition to run any considerable of being taken by those that might find their nests; or had their nests out of reach, as the dove, which builds in crevices of the rocks, when in a wild state <Jer. 48:28>-- not to say the old ones are unfit to be eaten, being too tough for food.

This may sufficiently account for the silence of Moses on this point in the first years of their wandering in the desert. But what occasion, it may be asked, was there to mention it at all? What eggs were they likely to meet with, when residing in Canaan, of use to human life? Or young birds whose dams were in danger of being taken through their attachment to their eggs or to their young? Some eggs might possibly be useful for food, and esteemed among the Jews, which were laid by wild fowl or birds; but the beauty of the shell might make many of the younger people fond of taking the eggs of many of the birds of that country, which are numerous.' Then there is the providential reason assigned by Michaelis, and already quoted."

The Matthew Henry's Commentary makes some observations about these verses that are worth mentioning: "In taking a bird's-nest, the dam must be let go, v. 6, 7. The Jews say, 'This is the least of all the commandments of the law of Moses,' and yet the same promise is here made to the observance of it that is made to the keeping of the fifth commandment, which is one of the greatest, that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days; for, as disobedience in a small matter shows a very great contempt of the law, so obedience in a small matter shows a very great regard to it. He that let go a bird out of his hand (which was worth two in the bush) purely

because God bade him, in that made it to appear that he esteemed all God's precepts concerning all things to be right, and that he could deny himself rather than sin against God. But doth God take care for birds? <1 Cor. 9:9>. Yes, certainly; and perhaps to this law our Saviour alludes. <Luke 12:6>, are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?"

The phrase which is suffixed to this command: "so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life" may give us the key to understand the main purpose for the giving of it. It connects the command to the one given in the Decalogue: "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you."⁵⁸⁵ This suggests that God wants us to understand the unity of His creation. There is a strong similarity between God's relationship to us and ours to our parents, which is also reflected in the bird and its young. Recognizing God as our Father will have bearing upon the way we look at the other relationships that reflect the one upon which all relationships are modeled. Luther was right when he said that, if we know God our cat and our dog should be aware of this. Our love for God should not only make us love our brother, but also the other "creatures great and small." After all, the whole of creation is an expression of the character of God.

4. Responsibility for Accidents vs. 8

The Pulpit Commentary explains: "The houses in Palestine, as in other parts of the East, had flat roofs, and, as these were much frequented by the inhabitants for various purposes (cf. Josh. ii. 6; 2 Sam. xi. 2; xviii. 24; Neh. viii. 16; Matt. x. 27; Acts x. 9), it was necessary that a battlement or balustrade should surround the roof, in order to prevent persons falling over."

The intent of this law goes, obviously, beyond the need for building houses with a railing. It speaks about the sense of responsibility God wants us to have in the prevention of accidents. In our modern society, we are liable for all kinds of lawsuits in case of negligence. In this verse God says that *He* will sue us if we are negligent. We are called upon to prevent accidents.

This thought opens the door to an entire range of questions. The Muslim philosophy of life is that everything is subject to the will of Allah. If accidents happen, it is called God's will. This results in a very fatalistic approach to life. The Bible does not sanction such an attitude. God holds us responsible if we fail to prevent things from going wrong, when it was in our power to do so. Being responsible is part of our human dignity. We do not go through life following a pre-recorded script. We live in a world in which things can and will go wrong. God wants us to be realistic and live pragmatically. God put Adam in charge of a perfect creation. In the broken world in which we live, this mandate has not been revoked: we are called upon to prevent accidents. This means careful planning and consideration of possibilities of things going wrong and taking measures to prevent that. It means building houses with a railing on the flat roof, covering wells, keeping medicine out of the reach of children, covering up electrical outlets, etc. God hates negligence. And He hates bloodshed.

It strikes us as strange that the law speaks about the guilt of bloodshed on the house instead of on the persons in the house. The Hebrew word for house is *bayith*, of which *Strongs Definitions* says that it means "a house (in the greatest variation of applications, especially family, etc.)" *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* gives as one of the meanings of the word the following clarification: "Bayit is often used of those who live in a house, i. e., a 'household': 'Come thou and all thy house into the ark...' <Gen. 7:1>. In passages such as <Josh. 7:14> this word means 'family': '...and it shall be, that the tribe which the Lord taketh shall come according to the families thereof; and the family which the Lord shall take shall come by households [literally, by house or by those who live in a single dwelling]....' In a similar nuance this noun means 'descendants': 'And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi' <Exod. 2:1>. This word can be used of one's extended family and even of everyone who lives in a given area: 'And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah' <2 Sam. 2:4>." Obviously, the guilt would, in this instance, not be upon the building but upon the people who dwell in it. The use of the word "house" would make it then a collective guilt instead of one individual's. It speaks of a joint responsibility to see to it that life is made as safe as possible, and it excludes the possibility of laying the blame on others.

Matthew Henry's Commentary furthermore observes: "How precious men's lives are to God, who protects them, not only by his providence, but by his law. How precious, therefore, they ought to be to us, and what care we should take to prevent hurt from coming to any person. The Jews say that by the equity of this law they were obliged (and so are we too) to fence, or remove, every thing by which life may be endangered, as to cover draw-wells, keep bridges in repair, and the like, lest, if any perish through our omission, their blood be required at our hand."

5. Mixed Crops vs. 9

⁵⁸⁵ Ex. 20:12

In Leviticus this law is put together into one verse with two other ones, obviously of the same character: “Keep my decrees. Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.”⁵⁸⁶ Most commentators have little to contribute to the insight into the meaning of these commands. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes about the injunction “Thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed,” “This also was directed against an idolatrous practice-- namely, that of the ancient Zabians, or fire-worshippers, who sowed different seeds, accompanying the act with magical rites and invocations; and commentators have generally thought the design of this and the preceding law was to put an end to the unnatural lusts and foolish superstitions which were prevalent among the pagan.”

This observation is undoubtedly valid, but I believe that there is a deeper truth behind the commandments that forbid the mixing of entities. The core of the Shema consists of the words: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”⁵⁸⁷ This unity of the godhead is denied in pagan religions, and the use of seed mixtures may have been an expression of this denial. It is not by accident that Jesus presents the Kingdom of Heaven with the image of a field that is sown with seed. The Parable of the Sower portrays how the Word of God bears fruit in the heart of man.⁵⁸⁸ But the corrupting elements within the kingdom are represented in the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat.⁵⁸⁹ The sowing of two kinds of seed on a field blurs the picture of the oneness of God’s character and points to the efforts of God’s enemy to destroy His work of salvation. God want the picture to be clear. God wants us to reflect His character in our daily activities.

In our day, it is of little consequence whether we put radishes in the same bed with carrots. As far as that is concerned this law does not apply to us. But we are under obligation to express the unity of God’s character in our daily walk. God wants us to be holy because He is holy.⁵⁹⁰

6. The Unequal Yoke vs. 10

An application of this law is much easier to make than of the previous ones. It is obvious that yoking together two animals that are of unequal size and temperament is not advantageous to the farmer. No man in his right mind would try to work with such a team. The Israelites at the time of Moses probably took this injunction as an object lesson. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* observes here: “[Thou shalt not plough with an ox and an ass] It is generally supposed that mixtures of different sorts in seed, breed, etc., were employed for superstitious purposes, and therefore prohibited in this law. It is more likely, however, that there was a physical reason for this; two beasts of a different species cannot associate comfortably together, and on this ground never pull pleasantly either in cart or plough; and every farmer knows that it is of considerable consequence to the comfort of the cattle to put those together that have an affection for each other. This may be very frequently remarked in certain cattle, which, on this account, are termed true yoke-fellows. After all, it is very probable that the general design was to prevent improper alliances in civil and religious life. And to this Paul seems evidently to refer, <2 Cor. 6:14>: Be ye not unequally yoked with unbelievers; which is simply to be understood as prohibiting all intercourse between Christians and idolaters in social, matrimonial, and religious life. And to teach the Jews the propriety of this, a variety of precepts relative to improper and heterogeneous mixtures were interspersed through their law, so that in civil and domestic life they might have them ever before their eyes.”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary adds to this: “Maimonides, following the generality of Jewish writers, considers the reason of this interdict to have been, that the ox was a clean, while the donkey was an unclean animal.”

Paul’s indirect quote of this verse, already referred to above, seems to be the best application of this commandment to the daily lives of believers: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.’”⁵⁹¹ Paul’s words are often quoted in regards to marriages of partners that belong to different faiths. This limitation is, however, not warranted in the context of Paul’s epistle. Paul seems to be

⁵⁸⁶ Lev. 19:19

⁵⁸⁷ ch. 6:4

⁵⁸⁸ See Matt. 13:3-9, 18-23

⁵⁸⁹ See Matt. 13:24-30, 37-43

⁵⁹⁰ Lev. 19:2

⁵⁹¹ II Cor. 6:14-18

speaking primarily about the fellowship of believers within the confines of a local church, and particularly about a case of discipline in the Corinthian church. The fellowship referred to is the intimate, spiritual bond between people who belong to the Lord, not casual social contacts in daily life. In his first epistle to that church, the Apostle wrote: "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside."⁵⁹²

Then there is also Paul's admonition to Timothy: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."⁵⁹³ The KJV uses the phrase "rightly dividing the word of truth." The Greek word is *orthotomeo*, which literally means "to make a straight cut." The Dutch Bible sees this as the picture of a farmer at his plough who makes straight furrows when ploughing his field. It would be very difficult to make straight cuts with a team consisting of two mismatched animals. The practical application seems to be that the work of the Lord ought to be teamwork and that the partners that form the team should be well suited to the task and to each other. Jesus gave us the paradigm as to how evangelization should be done. Mark reports: "Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits."⁵⁹⁴ We are not called upon to be alone.

7. **Wearing Garments made with Mixed Material** vs. 11,12

Most of the applications made in connection with the preceding injunction are applicable here also. In the Levitical law already mentioned above, we read the same warning: "Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material."⁵⁹⁵ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on this: "This precept, like the other two with which it is associated, was in all probability designed to root out some superstition; and accordingly Maimonides... informs us that he found it enjoined in old magical books that the idolatrous priests should clothe themselves in garments of linen and woolen mixed together, for the purpose of performing their ceremonies. A secret virtue was attributed to this mixture. But it seems to have had a further meaning. The law, it is to be observed, did not prohibit the Israelites wearing many different kinds of cloths together, but only the two specified; and the observations and researches of modern science have proved that 'wool, when combined with linen, increases its power of passing off the electricity from the body. In hot climates it brings on malignant fevers, and exhausts the strength, and when passing off from the body, it meets with the heated air, inflames and excoriates like a blister'... (see <Ezek. 44:17-18>)." The reference in Ezekiel reads: "When they [the priests], enter the gates of the inner court, they are to wear linen clothes; they must not wear any woolen garment while ministering at the gates of the inner court or inside the temple. They are to wear linen turbans on their heads and linen undergarments around their waists. They must not wear anything that makes them perspire."⁵⁹⁶ The British evangelist, Major Ian Thomas, interpreted this to mean that we have to learn to rest in the Lord, because "God hates sweat."

Whether it is true that this regulation has anything to do with a discharge of the electricity of the body, I don't know. The fact that only wool and linen are mentioned in combination may be due to the fact that those were the only materials known at that time; cotton had not yet been discovered, and synthetic materials like nylon lay still beyond the horizon.

God wanted His children to express their identity in their clothing. This is the reason why the warning against wearing material of mixed origin is immediately followed by the command to "make tassels on the four corners of the cloak." The tassels were already prescribed earlier. In Numbers we read: "Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD your God."⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹² I Cor. 5:9-13

⁵⁹³ II Tim. 2:15

⁵⁹⁴ Mark 6:7

⁵⁹⁵ Lev. 19:19

⁵⁹⁶ Ezek. 44:17,18

⁵⁹⁷ Num. 15:38-41

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia gives a detailed explanation about the tassel or fringes the Jews were required to make. We read: "Tassels worn by the Israelites on the four corners of their garments as reminders of 'all the commandments of Yahweh,' in accordance with the law set out in <Num 15:37-41> and <Deut 22:12>. These tassels originally contained a thread of tekheleth, 'violet.' Jewish tradition, however, has failed to retain the tekheleth, because of doubt as to the exact meaning of the term, and instead dark blue lines were dyed on the borders of the Tallith or garment in which the fringes were placed. According to tradition any garment having four corners required the mnemonic fringes, the importance of which was weighed against 'all the commandments of the Lord.' In New Testament times such garments were still worn (compare <Mt 9:20; 14:36; 23:5>). The later Jews, after adopting the garments of the Diaspora, in order to observe the tsitsith commandment began to use two extra four-cornered fringed garments: the large Tallith while at prayer, and the small Tallith, or 'arba' kanephoth, as an undergarment during the day. Their tradition prescribes the exact manner in which each tassel shall be made, and gives a symbolic meaning to the numbers of windings and knots, somewhat after the manner of the string-writing of several early civilizations (compare the Peruvian quipus). Thus in the tsitsith a long cord is wrapped around seven shorter cords first seven times, then eight, then eleven, and finally thirteen, each series being separated from the others by two knots. The numbers seven and eight constituting fifteen together suggest YH, and the number eleven, WH. Together they make up the holy name YaHWeH. The number thirteen stands for echadh, the letters of which taken as numerals equal thirteen. The sentence Yahweh 'echadh means 'Yahweh is one.' Many other suggestions, more or less fanciful, have been worked out, all tending to associate the fringes with the Law in the mind of the wearer."

About these tassels or fringes, *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says: "These were narrow strips, in a wing-like form, wrapped over the shoulders, and on various parts of the attire. 'Fringe,' however, is the English rendering of two distinct Hebrew words-- the one meaning a narrow lappet or edging, called the 'hem or border' <Matt. 23:5; Luke 8:44> which, in order to make it more attractive to the eye, and consequently more serviceable to the purpose described, was covered with a ribbon of a blue, or rather purple color; the other term signifies strings with tassels at the end, fastened to the corners of the garment. Both of these are seen on the Egyptian... and Assyrian frocks; and as the Jewish people were commanded by express and repeated ordinances to have them, the fashion was rendered subservient, in their case, to awaken high and religious associations-- to keep them in habitual remembrance of the divine commandments."

The Matthew Henry's Commentary adds to this: "The Jews being a peculiar people, they were thus distinguished from their neighbors in their dress, as well as in their diet, and taught by such little instances of singularity not to be conformed to the way of the heathen in greater things. Thus likewise they proclaimed themselves Jews wherever they were, as those that were not ashamed of God and his law. Our Saviour, being made under the law, wore these fringes; hence we read of the hem or border, of his garment, <Mt. 9:20>. These borders the Pharisees enlarged, that they might be thought more holy and devout than other people. The phylacteries were different things; these were their own invention, the fringes were a divine institution. The Jews at this day wear them, saying, when they put them on, Blessed be he who has sanctified us unto himself, and commanded us to wear fringes."

The need to be reminded of God's commandments points to a poor memory. And poor memories often speak of a lack of interest. Most people have no trouble remembering things that interest them most. It is the less interesting matters we tend to forget. Intelligent people with poor memories keep themselves alert by using memory aids: stick-on notes on refrigerator doors, or strings tied on their finger. For the Jews it was the tassel.

The tassel expressed at the same time hope for the future when outward reminders would no longer be needed. Jeremiah prophesied about this, saying: " 'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ' 'Know the LORD,' ' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.' "⁵⁹⁸ It is the new heart in which the Word of God is hidden, in which Christ lives that makes the tassel redundant.

8. Of Chastity, Rape, and Incest vs. 13-30

The last eighteen verses of this chapter deal with the subject of sexual relations, within marriage and outside, highlighting the needs for purity. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "The laws in this section have the design of fostering purity and fidelity in the relation of the sexes, and also of protecting the female against the malice of sated lust and the violence of brutal lust."

⁵⁹⁸ Jer. 31:33,34

a. The first instance is that of the reputation of an abused wife who is innocent or guilty (vs. 13-21).

This passage presents various problems because of a use of language that may seem vague to us, but obviously was not so to the people to whom the law was given. The phrase “dislikes her” is open to multiple interpretations, and the proof of virginity of a girl would be an illusive burden in a modern court of law. The context suggests that the dislike of the man may be a feeling that has no foundation in the condition of the bride, and that the accusation against the woman is used as a pretext to cover up the real reason for his dissatisfaction. Since this is not elaborated on, we can hardly go into detail. The accusation, however, portrays the husband as a virtuous man, who expected his bride to be a virgin, only to find out that she had hidden her lack of morality from him before the marriage was consummated. The question that had to be decided was whether the accusation was true or not.

The implication is that purity in marriage was a given in Israelite society. Looseness of morals was condemned in the strongest terms. In the older Bible commentaries we find a certain embarrassment by the writers and a tendency to discard the details of the text, especially as far as the proof of virginity is concerned. The custom in Israel was that the sheet upon which the consummation of the marriage was performed which showed the drops of blood which were the result of the defloration of the virgin, was kept by the parents as proof of virginity. This consummation is, even now among orthodox Jews, performed during the actual wedding ceremony. The frankness of such a procedure is offensive to people with a Victorian heritage, but it shows an uninhibited attitude toward normal sexual relations. In our modern day of sexual licentiousness it would be considered irrelevant.

The punishment prescribed in these verses indicates how serious purity in marriage was considered. The NIV reads: “The elders shall take the man and punish him. They shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver.” This suggests that the man who falsely accused his bride of immorality received both a corporal punishment as well as a stiff fine. “Punish him” is rendered in the KJV with “chastise him.” The RSV reads: “whip him.” One hundred shekels of silver was a sizeable amount of money to pay. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* puts the shekel at \$10,00 in 1915. One thousand dollars in 1915 would indeed be considerable payment in our days of rising inflation. But the first two punishments inflicted upon the man would seem small in comparison to the third one which was that he was condemned to live for the rest of his life with the woman he disliked. A man who accused his new bride of lose moral had better have good grounds for his accusation.

If, however, the girl was found to have had sexual relations with another man while still living at home, the punishment was death. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* reflects on this part by saying: “It is intimated to parents that they must by all means possible preserve their children’s chastity, by giving them god advice and admonition, setting them good examples, keeping them from bad company, praying for them, and laying them under needful restraints, because, if the children committed lewdness, the parents must have the grief and shame of the execution at their own door.” Scripture does not furnish us with any instance in which this law was applied. The punishment for licentiousness was so severe that it may have been a sufficient deterrent. On the other hand, no law has been invented yet that leads to the eradication of fornication and adultery. In the tribal setting in which we worked in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, before the western colonial government stepped in, people who were caught in adultery were put to death. But the severity of the punishment never completely eradicated the sin.

In Jewish society, it seems that the man was treated more leniently than the woman. In the case of the woman who was caught in the act and brought to Jesus for judgment, the man who was part of the act is never mentioned.⁵⁹⁹ The fact that the incident was meant to trap Jesus, more than to execute the woman, would indicate that the law was not applied indiscriminately.

That the law was still remembered in Jesus’ day is also obvious from Joseph’s dilemma when he discovered that Mary, his fiancée, was pregnant. Joseph decided not to bring in official accusations against her, which would condemn her to death. We read: “Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”⁶⁰⁰ The law would, in Joseph’s eyes, certainly have applied to Mary since she presumably had had an affair with another man, while she was engaged to be married to Joseph. Since the place was within the city walls, and she obviously had not cried for help, she had been a consenting party.

In all the instances mentioned in these verses, the consent or resistance of the girl plays a part of decisive importance. It is up to her to decide to maintain her purity and defend it. If rape took place in a city, the possibility that the man might have threatened her life if she screamed is not considered. It could be that the phenomenon of the killer rapist did not yet exist at that time.

It strikes us as a cruel punishment to the girl who was raped that she is forced to enter into a marriage relationship with the man who violated her. It is, of course, possible that she had the choice to refuse such a marriage, although this is not mentioned in this chapter. The emphasis in this case is on the responsibility of the man.

⁵⁹⁹ See John 8:3-5

⁶⁰⁰ Matt. 1:19

Considering the last verse of this chapter, “A man is not to marry his father’s wife; he must not dishonor his father’s bed,” *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests: “This is to be understood as referring to the case of a stepmother. A man in his old age may have married a young wife, and on his dying, his son by a former wife may desire to espouse her: this the law prohibits. It was probably on presence of having broken this law, that Solomon put his brother Adonijah to death, because he had desired to have his father’s concubine to wife, <1 Kings 2:13-25>.” Clarke’s suggestion seems to be flawed though, because the Bible tells us about Abishag, the virgin that kept old king David warm: “The king had no intimate relations with her.”⁶⁰¹ The law probably had in mind the example of Reuben’s affair with Bilhah, his father Jacob’s concubine.⁶⁰² Strangely enough, this kind of sin was not even common among the heathen nations, at least not in Paul’s time. We read in his epistle to the Corinthians: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife.”⁶⁰³ This sin points to a complete breakdown of father-son relations, as was obviously the case with Reuben, who seemed to have wanted revenge upon his father for the favoritism he showed to his children.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

C. Explanation of the Social Laws (continued) 23:1-26:19

The Pulpit Commentary lists the following topics in this chapter: “Civil rights. Who may and who may not enter the congregation. Uncleaness in the camp to be avoided. Reception of fugitive slaves. Licentious persons to be removed, and gifts the price of impurity to be refused. Laws regarding usury, vows, and certain duties of citizenship.”

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary outlines this chapter as follows: “The laws of this chapter provide,

- I. For the preserving of the purity and honor of the families of Israel, by excluding such as would be a disgrace to them <v. 1-8>.
- II. For the preserving of the purity and honor of the camp of Israel when it was abroad <v. 9-14>.
- III. For the encouraging and entertaining of slaves who fled to them <v. 15-16>.
- IV. Against whoredom <v. 17-18>.
- V. Against usury <v. 19-20>.
- IV. Against the breach of vows <v. 21-23>.
- VII. What liberty a man might take in his neighbor’s field and vineyard, and what not <v. 23, 25>.”

1. Specifications regarding who may enter the Assembly vs. 1-8

The ones barred from entering the assembly are: the eunuchs, illegitimate children, Ammonites and Moabites, and Edomites (with certain restrictions). There is a wide difference of opinion among scholars regarding the meaning of certain words used in these verses.

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary explains: “Interpreters are not agreed what is here meant by entering into the congregation of the Lord, which is here forbidden to eunuchs and to bastards, Ammonites and Moabites, for ever, but to Edomites and Egyptians only till the third generation. 1. Some think they are hereby excluded from communicating with the people of God in their religious services. Though eunuchs and bastards were owned as members of the church, and the Ammonites and Moabites might be circumcised and proselyted to the Jewish religion, yet they and their families must lie for some time under marks of disgrace, remembering the rock whence they were hewn, and must not come so near the sanctuary as others might, nor have so free a communion with Israelites. 2. Others think they are hereby excluded from bearing office in the congregation: none of these must be elders or judges, lest the honor of the magistracy should thereby be stained. 3. Others think they are excluded only from marrying with Israelites. Thus the learned bishop Patrick inclines to understand it; yet we find that when this law was put in execution after the captivity they separated from Israel, not only the strange wives, but all the mixed multitude, see <Neh. 13:1-- 2>. With the daughters of these nations (though out of the nations of Canaan), it should seem, the men of Israel might marry, if they were completely proselyted to the Jewish religion; but with the men of these nations the daughters of Israel might not marry, nor could the men be naturalized otherwise than as here provided.”

⁶⁰¹ I Kings 1:4

⁶⁰² See Gen. 35:22

⁶⁰³ I Cor. 5:1

In the Book Nehemiah quoted above, we read: ‘On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.) When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.’⁶⁰⁴ The phrase “they excluded from Israel” seems to constitute more than just barring people from holding certain offices.

The first ones to be excluded were the eunuchs. In Leviticus, animals that had been mutilated could not be used as a sacrifice, since they substituted for human beings. We read: “You must not offer to the LORD an animal whose testicles are bruised, crushed, torn or cut. You must not do this in your own land, and you must not accept such animals from the hand of a foreigner and offer them as the food of your God. They will not be accepted on your behalf, because they are deformed and have defects.”⁶⁰⁵ If the creature that substituted for man could not be mutilated, neither could be the person in whose place it was sacrificed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* clarifies: “The law excluded eunuchs from public worship, partly because self-mutilation was often performed in honor of a heathen god, and partly because a maimed creature of any sort was deemed unfit for the service of Yahweh (<Lev 21:16> ff.; <22:24>).” There must have been instances, however, where the mutilation had been caused by an accident, or where it was a birth defect.

The main reason seems to be that, since Israel lived in the hope of the coming of the Messiah, emasculation would cut off a man of the hope of being part of the fulfillment of the promise. His inability to have offspring himself placed him outside the mainstream of the expectation of salvation.

Jesus spiritualizes this condition and sublimates it in the context of the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Since the promise was fulfilled in Him, the physical ability to produce offspring was no longer essential to Israel’s hope. Jesus Himself, although being a complete man, considered Himself to be a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom. He said, therefore, to His disciples: “For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”⁶⁰⁶ Paul’s controversial advice: “The person who marries does well, and the person who doesn’t marry does even better,”⁶⁰⁷ seems to say the same thing.

Seen in this light, God’s promise in Isaiah, which reverses the prohibition in these verses, makes more sense: “Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’ For this is what the LORD says: ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant-- to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.’”⁶⁰⁸

In modern Western society, where discrimination because of physical handicaps is condemned in the strongest terms, this law would be considered an example of prejudice and discrimination. According to modern, politically correct use of language, people are no longer “handicapped,” they are “physically challenged.” But to God any kind of handicap is an insult. He is the Creator of a perfect universe in which sickness and death were unknown. In refusing the handicapped from approaching Him, God protests the damage sin has done to His creation. We should understand, however, that physical handicaps are only exterior demonstrations of a graver problem. We are all “handicapped” and fall short of the glory of God. People who are physically fit are often the most handicapped of all because they tend to fail to recognize their real problem. If we use the term “being challenged,” we have to be careful that our challenge is not against God. Sin has made monsters of us all. We should place ourselves on the Lord’s side and protest with Him against this. Then God will place Himself on our side, as He does in Isaiah’s prophecy. Only in Jesus Christ we have a memorial in God’s temple and a better name than any physical offspring can give us. Jesus promises: “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”⁶⁰⁹

The second category of people who are excluded are the ones “born of a forbidden marriage.” The KJV uses the word “bastard.” The Hebrew word is *mamzeer*. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* explains: “Mamzeer which is here rendered ‘bastard,’ should be understood as implying the offspring of an illegitimate or incestuous mixture.” *The*

⁶⁰⁴ Neh. 13:1-3

⁶⁰⁵ Lev. 22:24,25

⁶⁰⁶ Matt. 19:12

⁶⁰⁷ I Cor. 7:38 (TLB)

⁶⁰⁸ Isa. 56:3-5

⁶⁰⁹ Rev. 3:12

New Unger's Bible Dictionary adds to this: "Its etymology is obscure, but it appears to denote anyone to whose birth a serious stain is attached. The rabbis applied the term not to any illegitimate offspring but to the issue of any connection within the degrees prohibited by the law.... A very probable conjecture is that which applies the term to the offspring of heathen prostitutes in the neighborhood of Palestine who were priestesses of a sort to the Syrian goddess Astarte."

Even if the law is taken in a stricter sense, it appears that exceptions were made. Perez and Zerah are the only sons of Judah mentioned in the Scriptures, and they were his illegitimate children, the result of his fornication with Tamar, his daughter-in-law.⁶¹⁰ It was through Perez that the Messiah came into the world!

On the prohibition for the Ammonites and Moabites to enter the congregation of Israel, *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* writes: "Many eminent writers think that this law of exclusion was applicable only to males; at all events, that a definite is used for an indefinite number <Neh. 13:1>. Since God cannot do evil, the declaration must be considered not to foster enmity against the people (<Ruth 4:10; 2 Ki. 10:2>), but against their crime; and it was the more necessary to make it at this time, as many of the Israelites being established on the east side of Jordan, in the immediate neighborhood of those people; God raised this partition wall between them, to prevent the consequences of evil communications.

But it must not be supposed that in this case, anymore than in the former, an Ammonite or Moabite proselyte was debarred from the enjoyment of religious privileges. All that the interdict amounts to is, that an individual belonging to either of these two nations was incapable, by marriage, adoption, or purchase, of passing the barriers of Hebrew clanship-- of acquiring a status, so as to entitle him to the rights and privileges of a citizen, or have his name registered in the genealogical roll of any tribe in Israel; and these civil disabilities were not removable."

The Moabites and Ammonites were both descendants of Lot through his incestuous relationship with his daughters. Their exclusion from Israel's congregation, therefore, fits the same category as the expulsion of the bastards in the preceding verse. The reason given, however, is their refusal to help Israel with victuals as they passed by their territory, and even more their scheme to put a spell on the people by means of a curse by the prophet Balaam. There is no record in Scripture of a request by Moses to the Moabites and Ammonites for a free passage through their territory, or for a purchase of food. Such a request had only been made to the Amorites. The Book of Numbers records: "Israel sent messengers to say to Sihon king of the Amorites: 'Let us pass through your country. We will not turn aside into any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king's highway until we have passed through your territory.'"⁶¹¹ This is also the only instance Moses mentioned earlier in Deuteronomy.⁶¹² It could very well be, of course, that similar requests had been made to other nations, which are not recorded. It seems, however, in the case of Moab and Ammon, that those countries closed their border before Israel even had a chance to petition for help. The more serious accusation, however, is that Moab tried to have Israel cursed by hiring the services of Balaam, and that they succeeded in incurring heavy damage by the seduction of a group of Israelite men by Moabite women.⁶¹³ In Moab's attack upon Israel, the enemy targeted the weakest point of the nation. The Book of Ruth shows how the faith of one woman not only broke through the injunction given here, but as in the case of Perez, brought beauty out of ashes. Ruth, the Moabite woman, became a vital link in the bringing of the Messiah into this world.

Vs. 7 presents a complete change of attitude toward other nations. Edom and Egypt are singled out peoples to whom Israel was to show kindness. We discern a descending line of severity in the way God wants His people to treat other nations. Amalek was considered to be Israel's archenemy. After the battle at Rephidim, Moses declared: "The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."⁶¹⁴ In connection with the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother, this lenient attitude is more easily understood. But the command to show kindness toward the Egyptians opens a completely new perspective. The centuries of slavery and oppression Israel suffered were simply wiped off the slate. Israel thanked Egypt for the hospitality they had received for several centuries. The whole of Egypt is not held responsible for the crimes against humanity committed by two or three Pharaohs.

As far as Edom is concerned, they did not treat Israel with more kindness than the Ammonites and Moabites had done, at least not as far as giving passage and providing nourishment is concerned. We read in the account of Numbers: "Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, saying: 'This is what your brother Israel says:

⁶¹⁰ See Gen. 38

⁶¹¹ Num. 21:21,22

⁶¹² See ch. 2:28,29

⁶¹³ See Num. 22-25

⁶¹⁴ Ex. 17:16

You know about all the hardships that have come upon us. Our forefathers went down into Egypt, and we lived there many years. The Egyptians mistreated us and our fathers, but when we cried out to the LORD, he heard our cry and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. Now we are here at Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. Please let us pass through your country. We will not go through any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king's highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we have passed through your territory.' But Edom answered: 'You may not pass through here; if you try, we will march out and attack you with the sword.' The Israelites replied: 'We will go along the main road, and if we or our livestock drink any of your water, we will pay for it. We only want to pass through on foot-- nothing else.' Again they answered: 'You may not pass through.' Then Edom came out against them with a large and powerful army. Since Edom refused to let them go through their territory, Israel turned away from them."⁶¹⁵

God did not want Israel to hold this incident against the nation of Edom, as he did not want Israel to despise the Egyptians for what they had done to them. It is difficult to determine which factors made the difference in God's judgment over the nations that opposed the chosen people. We may assume that God had good reasons for making these distinctions. After all: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"⁶¹⁶ But what those reasons were is not revealed to us. The lesson for us is that we need spiritual discernment in our relationship with people who are against us. The advice of Jude is certainly pertinent: "Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear-- hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh."⁶¹⁷

2. Sanitary Rules during Military Campaigns vs. 9-14

These regulations were meant to be transitory. Some commentators believe that they did not even refer to the conditions of the desert crossing. After the arrival of Israel in Canaan and the settling into the cities and towns a different kind of arrangement for such intimate needs as are mentioned here would be needed. The regulations probably apply to the Israelite army in the field after the conquest of Canaan.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary observes here: "Israel was now encamped, and this vast army was just entering upon action, which was likely to keep them together for a long time, and therefore it was fit to give them particular directions for the good ordering of their camp. And the charge is in one word to be clean. They must take care to keep their camp pure from moral, ceremonial, and natural pollution. From moral pollution (v. 9): When the host goes forth against thy enemy then look upon thyself as in a special manner engaged to keep thyself from every evil thing. The soldiers themselves must take heed of sin, for sin takes off the edge of valor; guilt makes men cowards. Those that put their lives in their hands are concerned to make and keep their peace with God, and preserve a conscience void of offence; then may they look death in the face without terror. Soldiers, in executing their commission, must keep themselves from gratifying the lusts of malice, covetousness, or uncleanness, for these are wicked things-- must keep themselves from the idols, or accursed things, they found in the camps they plundered."

The general rule is formulated in rather broad terms: "keep away from everything impure." The more detailed specification is not very elucidating, at least when read in Hebrew as the Interlinear Bible renders it: "If there be among you {any} man that not is clean by reason of uncleanness that chances him by night..." The NIV interprets this as "a nocturnal emission." The Good News Bible uses the expression "a wet dream," but the older translations remain close to the vague wording of the original. The interpretations are based on the connection between this verse and what is stated in Leviticus: "When a man has an emission of semen, he must bathe his whole body with water, and he will be unclean till evening."⁶¹⁸ It is not clear whether the verse refers to normal sexual intercourse or involuntary seminal emission. We learn from David's conversation with Ahimelech that soldiers were forbidden to have sexual relations while on a military campaign. We read: "The priest answered David, 'I don't have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here-- provided the men have kept themselves from women.' David replied, 'Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever I set out. The men's things are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!'"⁶¹⁹

It is difficult for us to see the reason for this regulation. In our *Commentary on Leviticus*, I explained: "I am convinced that this condition [of the human body this section deals with] is good and holy in itself. The devil tries to tell us that the functioning of a gland that God has created, makes us impure. Sin makes a man impure, not the ejaculation of his semen. The ejaculation only symbolizes a sinful condition. In the same way, normal sexual intercourse between husband and wife... is not impure. Obviously, the regulations do not deal with an extra-marital

⁶¹⁵ Num. 20:14-21

⁶¹⁶ Gen. 18:25

⁶¹⁷ Jude vs. 22,23

⁶¹⁸ Lev. 15:16

⁶¹⁹ I Sam. 21:4,5

affair or fornication. It would be hard to imagine that God would wash away this kind of immorality with some water and declare the delinquents pure after twenty-four hours. It was, after all, God who created man and woman so that they could have a love relationship and He commanded them to procreate children. In these verses, however, the Holy Spirit makes clear to us how deeply the corruption has penetrated, to the point where a female egg cell and male sperm have become unclean. Sin has affected the normal functions of the human body, both for the man and the woman.”

On this point *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments: “[To keep clean] from ceremonial pollution, which might befall a person when unconscious of it, for which he was bound to wash his flesh in water, and look upon himself as unclean until the evening, <Lev. 15:16>. A soldier, notwithstanding the constant service and duty he had to do in the camp, must be so far from looking upon himself as discharged from the observance of this ceremony that more was required from him than at another time; had he been at his own house, he needed only to wash his flesh, but, being in the army, he must go abroad out of the camp, as one concerned to keep it pure and ashamed of his own impurity, and not return till after sunset, v. 10, 11. By this trouble and reproach, which even involuntary pollutions exposed men to, they were taught to keep up a very great dread of all fleshly lusts. It were well if military men would consider this.”

In studying Israel's journey through the wilderness, it is easy to overlook the logistics of the sanitary arrangements needed to maintain hygienic condition for a crowd numbering into the millions. What should strike us as strange is not the mention of this particular facet of sanitary engineering, but the fact that it is mentioned only at the end of a forty-year's journey. The problem had to be confronted on the first day of the exodus from Egypt. There can be no doubt about it but that stringent instructions had been given at the time of departure. For this reason we may suppose that Moses merely refers to regulations that are already observed, and that he repeats them in view of the upcoming campaign for the conquest of Canaan.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes that: “The directions here given, it will be observed, relate not to the Israelite encampment in the wilderness, or in the Arboth Moab, where, it may be presumed, though no details are given, that places convenient for relieving the necessities of nature would be accessible, adequate to the requirements of the population. These instructions point to a special occasion-- to some future war after the Israelite settlement in Canaan, and to small detachments of soldiers composing the camp, as is evident from <Deut. 23:9-12> of the context.”

The verses 12-14 have been an object of ridicule to Bible scholars over the centuries. The renowned linguist Dr. Pike once remarked that the verses were rarely used in Scripture memorization! *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* continues to say: “Viewed in this light, how ridiculously misplaced are the witticisms thrown out by Colenso on this passage, as compelling every individual of the 2,000,000 of Israelites to go more than six miles daily for natural purposes! And how simple, as well as proper, do those instructions appear when it is considered that they were intended for military parties, who are apt during a campaign to become negligent or sordid in their personal habits.”

The first and foremost application of these instructions, apart from spiritualizing them, is that the presence of God is reflected in the ecology of a place. If we proclaim that God is the head of our home, orderliness and cleanliness should testify to the fact. People who are so spiritually minded that they don't clean their bathrooms, do their dishes, and make their beds may be less spiritual than they want us to believe.

3. Providing Asylum for Runaway Slaves vs. 15,16

The Pulpit Commentary remarks here: “The reference is to a foreign slave who had fled from the harsh treatment of his master to seek refuge in Israel, as is evident from the expression... ‘in one of thy gates,’ *i.e.* in any part of thy land.” This stipulation made the whole Promised Land into a place of asylum and freedom.

Some forms of slavery were known in Israel, but not in the sense in which they were common among other nations. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* says about slavery in Israel: “The slavery of Judaism was not the cruel system of Greece, Rome, and later nations.” Israelites also could not be bought and sold in the same way as in the pagan nations where a certain class of human beings was treated like cattle. In most cases in Israel, slavery was a form of payment of debts. A person could be sold for a certain period of time to get himself out of debt, or to make restitution for theft. Even if a foreigner became a slave in Israel because he or she was captured during a war, the law provided for certain rights that were more enlightened than in other nations. Outside of Israel, slaves had no rights.

Most commentators agree that the runaway slave is a non-Hebrew who has run for protection to Israel from another country. Only *The Adam Clarke Commentary* writes: “[Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee] That is, a servant who left an idolatrous master that he might join himself to God and to his people. In any other case, it would have been injustice to have harbored the runaway.” This

leaves open the possibility that the slave's master would be an Israelite given to idolatry. But *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* believes that the case refers to: "evidently a servant of the Canaanites, or of some of the neighboring people, who was driven by tyrannical oppression, or induced with a view of embracing the true religion, to take refuge in Israel. Such a one was not to be surrendered by the inhabitants of the place where he had fled for protection."

One of the reasons, apart from humanitarian, for giving asylum to a runaway foreign slave was evangelistic. Extending protection and providing dignity for a slave could induce the person to look into the reason for such tokens of brotherly love and cause him to turn to the God of Israel. The Apostle Paul took the opportunity to introduce the runaway slave Onesimus to Jesus Christ. To this we owe the exquisite Epistle to Philemon. The way Paul handled this matter is the most beautiful application of this law we find in the whole Bible. Paul sent the slave back to his master, but not as a slave, rather as a brother in Christ. And he was willing to pay for the expenses.

4. **Prohibition of Prostitution** vs. 17,18

The NIV uses the term "shrine prostitute." The older versions only use the word "harlot" or "prostitute." The Hebrew word is *qedeshah*, which is the feminine of *qadesh* which literally means "a sacred person." In the Old Testament, prostitution was only practiced as a religious observance in connection with the worship of certain deities. *The Pulpit Commentary* writes: "Amongst idolatrous nations prostitution was in certain cases regarded as an act of religious service... and both males and females prostituted themselves especially in the worship of Astarte. All such abominations were to be unknown in Israel (cf. Micah i. 7)."

Money earned in prostitution was tainted and could not be accepted as an offering in the temple. The NIV reads: "You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of the LORD." The NKJ, like most other translations, stick to the literal Hebrew text which says: "You shall not bring the wages of a harlot or *the price of a dog* to the house of the LORD your God." The dog was the emblem of all impurity.

5. **Against Charging of Interest** vs. 19,20

When we consider the important role Jews have played in the financial world throughout the centuries, it is amazing to read that they were forbidden to charge interest to their kinsmen. The picture we get from these verses is one of an almost complete disinterest in money matters. The fact that we find this law three times in the Pentateuch⁶²⁰ indicates that the basic structure of Jewish society was not of a money hungry pack of wolves, but of a community of compassionate people who loved their neighbor.

The Hebrew word is *nashak* which *Strongs Definitions* defines as "to strike with a sting (as a serpent); figuratively, to oppress with interest on a loan." *The Adam Clarke Commentary* explains: [Neither shalt thou lay upon him usury.] neshek..., from naashak..., 'to bite, cut, or pierce with the teeth; biting usury.' So the Latins call it usura vorax, 'devouring usury.' 'The increase of usury (heavy interest on a debt) is called neshek, because it resembles the biting of a serpent; for as this is so small as scarcely to be perceptible at first, but the venom soon spreads and diffuses itself till it reaches the vitals? So the increase of usury, which at first is not perceived nor felt, at length grows so much as by degrees to devour another's substance.'-- Leigh. It is evident that what is here said must be understood of accumulated usury? Or what we call compound interest only; and accordingly neshek... is mentioned with and distinguished from tarbiyt... and marbiyt..., 'interest or simple interest,' <Lev. 25:36-37; Prov. 28:8; Ezek. 18:8,13,17; 22:12>.-- Parkhurst. Perhaps usury may be more properly defined unlawful interest, receiving more for the loan of money than it is really worth, and more than the law allows.... Against such an oppressive practice the wisdom of God saw it essentially necessary to make a law to prevent a people, who were naturally what our Lord calls the Pharisees, filarguroi... 'lovers of money' <Luke 16:14>, from oppressing each other; and who, notwithstanding the law in the text, practice usury in all places of their dispersion to the present day." It seems that Mr. Clarke made the mistake of confusing the Pharisees, who were "lovers of money" with the people who lived more than one millennium earlier, at the time of Moses, insinuating at the same time that the whole Jewish race is guilty of that particular vice.

From *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* we copy: "(1) In the Old Testament period loans were not of a commercial nature, i.e. they were not granted to enable a man to start or run a business. They were really a form of charity, and were made by the lender only to meet the pressure of poverty. To the borrower they were esteemed a form of misfortune (<Deut 28:12> f), and by the lender a form of beneficence. Hence, the tone of the Mosaic legislation on the subject. (2) Laying interest upon the poor of Israel was forbidden in all the codes (see <Exo 22:25> (JE); <Deut 23:19; Lev 25:36> H), because it was looked upon as making unwarranted profit out of a brother's distress: 'If thou lend money to any of my people with thee that is poor, thou shalt not be to him as a

⁶²⁰ See Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:36,37

creditor; neither shall ye lay upon him interest and it shall come to pass, when he crieth unto me, that I will hear; for I am gracious.’ (3) The Law, however, allowed interest to be taken of a foreigner, or non-Jew (<Deut 23:20>: ‘Unto a foreigner thou mayest lend upon interest’; compare <Deut 15:3>); and even among Jews pledges were allowed under limitations, or taken against the law (<Deut 24:10>; compare <Job 24:2-3>: ‘There are that remove the landmarks.... they take the widow’s ox for a pledge’).”

The main intent of the law was, probably as the above quoted Encyclopedia suggests, to regulate “a form of charity, made by the lender only to meet the pressure of poverty.” To take advantage of the misfortune of a brother at that time, would be the equivalent in modern times of playing the “black market” during a famine, or looting a store after an earthquake.

The Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary puts the law in the right perspective by applying it to the relationship between followers of Christ. We read: “Although Christ did not condemn investments to earn money <Matt. 25:27; Luke 19:23>, he emphasized the need for every person to show love and grace toward his fellow human beings <Matt. 5:25-26; Luke 12:58-59>. He taught us to pray, ‘Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors’ <Matt. 6:12>. God has offered His grace in the form of his Son to pay the price for our debts <Heb. 7:22>. Out of gratitude, we should show that love to others <Luke 7:36-50>.” We tend to interpret the phrase from The Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” in a spiritual sense as forgiving of moral failures. There is no reason not to put a price tag to it and take a debt literally as meaning a financial obligation. The whole law can be summarized with the words “be generous, be compassionate.”

6. **Against the Breach of Vows** vs. 21-23

The matter of making vows is dealt with in detail in the Books of Leviticus and Numbers.⁶²¹ From those references it is clear that the vow went beyond the making of a mere oral promise to do something; it was an act of consecration of oneself and one’s property. The value of a person’s soul was symbolically expressed in monetary units which were presented to the Lord. It was the Old Testament equivalent of what Paul calls offering our bodies as a living sacrifice. In his Epistle to the Romans, he writes: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.”⁶²²

The vow was based upon the recognition of God’s mercy. It was considered to be a logical response to the experience of God’s grace. It was the means of transformation and reformation of one’s life, and it was the way to understand God’s will. Since such important matters were at stake, breaking of a vow was considered an offense of the most serious kind.

The law emphasizes that the making of a vow was absolutely voluntary. God does not want any bodies on His altar that are not placed there as freewill offering. This kind of commitment was to be deeply and seriously considered before it was ever made. Solomon, who wrote Ecclesiastes, calls people fools who make vows to God and do not follow them up. Those people demonstrate clearly that they do not understand with whom they are dealing. The Almighty God is not the kind of person you can make deals with. We read: “When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it.”⁶²³

In the context of the Mosaic law, the vow was identical with the freewill offering. The freewill offering went beyond the bare necessities of atonement. Forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God were at the basis of this kind of sacrifice. A person whose sin had not yet been atoned for could not make a vow. Vows were not made instead of atonement sacrifices. Yet, it is a human tendency to try to pacify God by giving Him something of ourselves instead of personally surrendering to Him. The vow presupposes personal surrender. If we give ourselves, we make the ultimate surrender. Why then would we withhold the lesser, the things we claim to be ours?

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary makes the following practical observation about these verses: “We are here left at our liberty whether we will make vows or no: If thou shalt forbear to vow (some particular sacrifice and offering, more than was commanded by the law), it shall be no sin to thee. God had already signified his readiness to accept a free-will offering thus vowed, though it were but a little fine flour (<Lev. 2:4>, etc.), which was encouragement enough to those who were so inclined. But lest the priests, who had the largest share of those vows and voluntary offerings, should sponge upon the people, by pressing it upon them as their duty to make such vows, beyond their ability and inclination, they are here expressly told that it should not be reckoned a sin in them if they

⁶²¹ See Lev. ch. 27, and Num. ch. 30

⁶²² Rom. 12:1,2

⁶²³ Eccl. 5:4,5

did not make any such vows, as it would be if they omitted any of the sacrifices that God had particularly required. For (as bishop Patrick well expresses it) God would have men to be easy in his service, and all their offerings to be free and cheerful.”

7. **Liberties and Limitations** vs. 24,25

These last verses seem to be unconnected with the theme of the chapter. The law could not be applied, of course, to the conditions of Israel at the time Moses addressed them with these words. They were meant for life in the Promised Land. But, with the exception of section 2, everything in this chapter was only applicable to conditions after the conquest of Canaan. And, as we saw above, the second section also probably deals with military campaigns after the settling in of the people in Canaan.

The previous verses dealt with that which was given to the Lord. We could say that this one concerns with that which we take from the Lord. It is true that the vineyard and the cornfield belong to a neighbor, but, as David says: “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.”⁶²⁴ The suggestion is that God’s blessing rests on the land to the point that there is such an abundance of grapes and grain that the owner can easily spare some of it. The section speaks of hospitality, of the giving of it and the taking of it. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* remarks here: “The old English proverb, Eat thy fill but pocket none, seems to have been founded on this law.”

There is a fine line between availing oneself of people’s generosity and stealing. A servant of the Lord may be supported by freewill offerings, but modern church history is also full of financial scandals of people who enriched themselves with gifts that were not designated to support them. There is a relationship between the stipulation in these verses and what Moses will say later in this book: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.”⁶²⁵

Although the word “neighbor” is used in these verses, we may interpret this in a wider sense than the person living next door. It would not make much sense for a farmer who has his own vineyard and cornfield to go next door and eat of his neighbor’s harvest. It is more logical to see these stipulations as pertaining to a passing traveler who is hungry and eats on the roadside.

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary remarks: “The Jews say, ‘This law was chiefly intended in favor of laborers, who were employed in gathering in their harvest and vintage; their mouths must not be muzzled any more than that of the ox when he treads out the corn.’ ” The same commentary continues: “It used them to hospitality, and teaches us to be ready to distribute, willing to communicate, and not to think every thing lost that is given away. Yet, it forbids us to abuse the kindness of our friends, and to take the advantage of fair concessions to make unreasonable encroachments: we must not draw an ell from those that give but an inch. They may eat of their neighbor’s grapes; but it does not therefore follow that they may carry away.”

The law endorses both generosity and restraint. In dealing with this subject in his epistle to the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of our testimony as Christians in the way we give and accept generosity. He explains that he refused support, (at least from the Corinthian church), saying: “But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.”⁶²⁶

In the Gospels, we read the incident about the disciples eating kernels of grain while passing through a cornfield. Mark records: “One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.”⁶²⁷ The Pharisees objected to this, not on the basis of the action but because it was done on the Sabbath, and picking one or two ears of wheat was considered labor. Jesus refuted the accusation with the words: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”⁶²⁸ Seen in this light, we may say that picking a few grapes, and a few ears of corn gives us a foretaste of

⁶²⁴ Ps. 24:1

⁶²⁵ Ch. 25:4

⁶²⁶ I Cor. 9:12,15-18

⁶²⁷ Mark 2:23

⁶²⁸ Mark 2:27,28

the real Sabbath. Sin has condemned man to eat bread by the sweat of his brow. On the Sabbath the curse is lifted, and we may eat that for which we have not labored.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

C. Explanation of the Social Laws (continued) 21:1-26:19

The Pulpit Commentary lists the simple outline for this chapter as: “Laws respecting divorce, against man-stealing and injustice.”

Matthew Henry's Commentary gives the following outline of ch. 24 with:

- I. The toleration of divorce <v. 1-4>.
- II. A discharge of new-married men from the war <v. 5>.
- III. Laws concerning pledges <v. 6, 10-13, 17>.
- IV. Against man-stealing <v. 7>.
- V. Concerning the leprosy <v. 8-9>.
- VI. Against the injustice of masters towards their servants <v. 14-15>. Judges in capital causes <v. 16>, and civil concerns <v. 17-18>.
- VII. Of charity to the poor <v. 19, etc.>.

The impression given in this chapter is again that there is very little if any connection among the topics Moses mentions. The binding factor is that they all pertain to conditions in the Promised Land. They govern life after the conquest. They are part of victorious living.

1. Remarriage after Divorce vs. 1-4

The Pulpit Commentary observes here: “This is not a law sanctioning or regulating divorce; that is simply assumed as what might occur, and what is here regulated is the treatment by the first husband of a woman who has been divorced a second time.”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary quotes *Black's Exegetical Study of the Original Scriptures*: “The first three verses contain a series of hypothetical statements respecting certain supposed successive divorces, and the apodosis does not occur until the fourth verse, which contains so stringent a prohibition of the possibility of a reunion of the original parties as to impose a powerful and salutary restraint on the caprice that might otherwise impel to a step which, in the case supposed, was declared to be irremediable.”

This is the only instance known in Scripture where divorce is legalized but, at the same time it is placed in a very unfavorable light. Vs. 4 states clearly that a divorced woman has been “defiled.” Reinstatement of the first marriage would “bring sin upon the land.” That is the point of the directive given here. The verses contain no endorsement of divorce. Moses bases his words on the existing conditions, which he could have condemned, but may have considered beyond repair.

This is the portion of Scripture referred to by Matthew when he records: “Some Pharisees came to him [Jesus] to test him. They asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?’ ‘Haven’t you read,’ he replied, ‘that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.’ ‘Why then,’ they asked, ‘did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?’ Jesus replied, ‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.’”⁶²⁹

The possible reason for a divorce given in this chapter has, over the centuries, given cause to endless speculations. The term “something indecent” has been analyzed in great detail. The Hebrew word used is *’erwat*, or *’ervah* which is defined by *Strongs Definitions* with “nudity, literally (especially the pudenda) or figuratively (disgrace, blemish).” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* writes about this: “[Because he hath found some uncleanness in her],... any blemish (cf. <Deut. 23:15>), something foul or corrupt; but whether a latent deformity and loathsome distemper of body, or a moral delinquency, was much debated among the later Jews, though, from want of data in the early books of the sacred history, it is impossible to determine the precise nature of the ‘uncleanness’ referred to.”

⁶²⁹ Matt. 19:3-9

The Matthew Henry's Commentary states: "It was not sufficient to say that he did not like her, or that he liked another better, but he must show cause for his dislike; something that made her disagreeable and unpleasant to him, though it might not make her so to another. This uncleanness must mean something less than adultery; for, for that, she was to die; and less than the suspicion of it, for in that case he might give her the waters of jealousy; but it means either a light carriage, or a cross froward disposition, or some loathsome sore or disease; nay, some of the Jewish writers suppose that an offensive breath might be a just ground for divorce. Whatever is meant by it, doubtless it was something considerable; so that their modern doctors erred who allowed divorce for every cause, though ever so trivial, <Mt. 19:3>."

We may draw the conclusion from Jesus' words that adultery is the only valid reason for the dissolution of a bond of marriage. The disciples' reaction to Jesus' pronouncement at that time seems to indicate that in Jesus' days divorce was rampant, and that it was not considered to be a sin. We read in Matthew's Gospel: " 'I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.' The disciples said to him, 'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.' "⁶³⁰ It also appears that the woman in Jesus' days could take the initiative for a divorce just as much as a man. In Mark's Gospel we read: "And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."⁶³¹ We also conclude from the above that, in Jesus' day, adultery was no longer considered a capital crime. In the incident where the woman caught in adultery was brought before Jesus, the Pharisees only intended to trap Jesus by forcing Him to say something that would contradict the law of Moses. If the law on adultery were still applied at that time, they would have executed her immediately.⁶³²

Reinstallation of the first marriage would be detestable in the sight of the Lord and would bring sin upon the land. Yet, God commanded the prophet Hosea to commit the very act that is forbidden by this law. We read in Hosea's prophecy: "When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, 'Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.' " And: "The LORD said to me, 'Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.' "⁶³³ It seems that this law was put in the book in order to establish how illegal Israel's broken relationship with God actually was. In Hosea's prophecy, marriage is clearly an image of the spiritual relationship between God and the people of Israel. All marriages express this spiritual relationship. Paul writes in his Epistle to the Ephesians: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church."⁶³⁴ In giving this law, the Holy Spirit pointed to the spiritual relationship of which marriage is a physical and emotional expression. This is the reason the author of the Hebrew Epistle writes: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace."⁶³⁵ People who tear up the picture defile the original. Burning God in effigy is an expression of hatred toward God.

2. Privileges of the Newlywed vs. 5

This verse prescribes a one-year honeymoon! In most cases it would mean that a father would be at his wife's side at the birth of their first baby. A marriage relation has a better chance to grown into a bond of solid and lasting affection if it starts out on the right foot. A man should not be away from his newlywed wife for extended periods of time. Growing together requires closeness. Even non-religious people know this. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* writes: "It is somewhat remarkable that the same rule was put in practice by Alexander the Great in his expedition against Persia. For, after the battle of the Granicus, and previously to his retiring into winter quarters, he proclaimed to all of his soldiers who had married that year, that liberty was granted them to return home to Macedonia, and pass the winter in the society of their wives, appointing the officers to conduct this homeward-bound party, and to bring them back to the army when their furlough was expired."

It is quite remarkable that Moses issued such a command on the eve of the conquest of Canaan. It is true, of course, that in order for a newlywed to stay at home, there has to be a home to start with. And without an initial

⁶³⁰ Matt. 19:9,10

⁶³¹ Mark 10:12

⁶³² See John 8:3-11

⁶³³ Hosea 1:2; 3:1

⁶³⁴ Eph. 5:31,32

⁶³⁵ Heb. 6:4-6

conquest there would be no place for a young couple to live. So this law may have been applied with some discretion. The intention, however, is clear: God wants love between husband and wife to grow into maturity.

The law also says something about priorities in life. A man who sets his work above his family, obviously, misreads the will of God. Even in a spiritual ministry, it is wrong when the family suffers from the absence of the father who is doing “the Lord’s work.” Yet, in Jesus’ Parable of the Banquet, one of the excuses given is: “I just got married, so I can’t come.”⁶³⁶ In the context of that story, the excuse is unacceptable. Jesus also states that discipleship involves giving priority to following Him above anything else. “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life-- he cannot be my disciple.”⁶³⁷ A close look at these words, however, reveals that it is our relationship to the Lord that takes priority over all other relationships, not necessarily that we spend more time “in the work” than with our family. The wife of one famous preacher in the United States uttered the bitter words that her husband had to divide his attention between his ministry and her, and that he chose his ministry.

A country is not made safe by the strength of its army but by the solidity of its families. In the same way is a church not made strong by the ministry of its pastors but by the marital love and fidelity of its members. The breaking apart of families is the undoing of a nation, and particularly of the church of Jesus Christ.

3. Collateral vs. 6

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia has the following interesting paragraph about the payment of debts in Jewish society: “Quite extensive legislation is provided in the Old Testament governing the matter of debt and debtors. Indebtedness and loaning had not, however, the commercial aspect among the Jews so characteristic of the nations surrounding Palestine. Indeed the Mosaic legislation was seemingly intended to guard against just such commercialism. It was looked upon as a misfortune to be in debt; it indicated poverty brought on probably by blighted harvests; consequently those in debt were to be looked upon with pity and dealt with in leniency. There must be no oppression of the poor under such circumstances <Exo 22:25; Deut 23:19-20; Ezek 18:18>. Even where a pledge is given and received, certain restrictions are thrown around it, e.g. the creditor must not take a mill, nor a necessary garment, nor a widow’s ox, etc., in pledge <Exo 22:25-27; Deut 24:6,10-13; Job 22:6; Amos 2:8>. And further, the pledge is to be restored in some instances ‘before the sun goeth down’ <Exo 22:26-27>, and in all cases full redemption in the seventh and jubilee years (<Neh 10:31>, etc.). The Jews were strictly exhorted to take no interest at all from their own nation <Exo 22:25; Deut 23:19-20>. Strangers, however, might be charged interest. A devout Jew would not lend money to another Jew on interest.

It would seem that as Israel came into contact with the surrounding nations, debt became increasingly a commercial matter. The Mosaic laws regarding clemency toward the poor who were compelled for the time being to become debtors were utterly disregarded, and the poor were oppressed by the rich. An illustration of the severity with which debtors came to be dealt with is to be found in <2 Kin 4:1-7>, in which, because of the inability of a widow to pay a small debt contracted by her dead husband, the woman complains to the prophet that the creditors have come to sell her two children in order that the debt might be paid. Strangely the prophet, while helping the widow by miraculously multiplying the oil in order that the debt might be paid, says nothing by way of condemnation of such conduct on the part of the creditors. Are we to understand by this that commercialism had already so powerful a grip upon Israel that even to a prophet the practice had come to seem proper, or at least expected? The debtor himself or his family might be sold for debt, or the debtor might become a slave for a certain length of time until the debt was paid <Lev 25:39,47; Isa 50:1>. So oppressive had the commercial system in Israel become that the debtor cursed the creditor and the creditor the debtor <Jer 15:10>. Sometimes debtors were outlawed, as in the case of the men who came to David in the cave of Adullam <1 Sam 22:2>. That the matter of borrowing and lending had assumed very grievous proportions is evident from the very sharp warnings concerning the matter in the Book of <Prov 6:1; 11:15; 20:16>, etc.).”

The collateral taken in this verse is the millstone. Limitation of the lender’s rights is further elaborated on in the verses 10-13. The millstone was considered to be vital to man’s survival. A person deprived of his millstone was unable to bake bread.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary explains: “The ‘upper’ stone, being concave, covers the ‘nether’ like a lid; and it has a small aperture through which the grain is poured, as well as a handle by which it is turned. The propriety of the law prohibiting either being taken was founded on the custom of grinding grain every morning for daily consumption. If either of the stones, therefore, which composed the hand mill was wanting, a person would be deprived of his necessary provision; and as there was no other means of preparing it, all rational

⁶³⁶ See Luke 14:16-24

⁶³⁷ Luke 14:26

prospect of subsistence, no less than of paying his debts, was taken away.” The intent of the law was to further an attitude of generosity in society, a willingness to help those in need, not a spirit of greed and materialism that wants to make a “fast buck.”

4. **Kidnapping** vs. 7

Kidnapping was considered a capital crime. *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* remarks about this: “It was not death by the law of Moses to steal cattle or goods; but to steal a child, or a weak and simple man, or one that a man had in his power, and to make merchandize of him, this was a capital crime, and could not be expiated, as other thefts, by restitution-- so much is a man better than a sheep, <Mt. 12:12>. It was a very heinous offence, for, 1. It was robbing the public of one of its members. 2. It was taking away a man's liberty, the liberty of a free-born Israelite, which was next in value to his life. 3. It was driving a man out from the inheritance of the land, to the privileges of which he was entitled, and bidding him go serve other gods, as David complains against Saul, <1 Sam. 26:19>.”

This law strikes at the root of slavery. It may seem that the Bible has little to say against slavery, but if a slave trader is condemned to death it means that his whole trade is condemned. This law condemns the Christian population of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe and America that put a blight on the testimony of the Gospel.

This law is a repeat of the one given in Exodus. But there it was used in the widest possible sense, not only limiting it to fellow Israelites. We read: “Anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death.”⁶³⁸ In selling Joseph into slavery, the founding fathers of the nation of Israel forfeited their lives. The crucifixion of Jesus brought the same guilt upon the whole nation of Israel. The fact that God, in His grace, reverses the verdict does not diminish the gravity of the crime. In Joseph's words: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”⁶³⁹

5. **A Reminder of the Dangers of Leprosy** vs. 8,9

The law referred to is given in detail in Leviticus.⁶⁴⁰ The fact that Miriam is mentioned as a reminder suggests that leprosy was not common among the Israelites at this time. Moses had had a brush with the sickness himself during his first encounter with God at the burning bush. It came to him as a sign of the Lord, not as an infection. We read: “Then the LORD said, ‘Put your hand inside your cloak.’ So Moses put his hand into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was leprous, like snow. ‘Now put it back into your cloak,’ he said. So Moses put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored, like the rest of his flesh.”⁶⁴¹

In Miriam's case it was a warning against insurrection. The warning had its immediate effect, and Miriam was healed instantly in answer to Moses' prayer. We read the story in Numbers: “When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam-- leprous, like snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had leprosy; and he said to Moses, ‘Please, my lord, do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away.’ So Moses cried out to the LORD, ‘O God, please heal her!’ The LORD replied to Moses, ‘If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back.’ So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back.”⁶⁴²

The only instance mentioned in the Old Testament of people who had been infected with the disease is of the four lepers outside the gate of the city of Samaria.⁶⁴³ There is no record that the law of Leviticus was ever applied to people who came down with the disease, probably because the disease was incurable. The only exception may have been when the sickness had runs its complete course and was no longer contagious. We read in Leviticus: “If the disease breaks out all over his skin and, so far as the priest can see, it covers all the skin of the infected person from head to foot, the priest is to examine him, and if the disease has covered his whole body, he shall pronounce that person clean. Since it has all turned white, he is clean.”⁶⁴⁴ But this can hardly be construed as the healing of a disease.

From Jesus' remark in His sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth, we gather that the sickness was widespread. He said: “And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of

⁶³⁸ Ex. 21:16

⁶³⁹ Gen. 50:20

⁶⁴⁰ See Lev. ch. 13 and 14

⁶⁴¹ Ex. 4:6,7

⁶⁴² Num. 12:10-15

⁶⁴³ See II Kings 7:3-16

⁶⁴⁴ Lev. 13:12,13

them was cleansed-- only Naaman the Syrian."⁶⁴⁵ Jesus' healing of the leper in Galilee was meant to be a testimony to the priests. It would probably have been the only time in biblical history where a priest was called upon to apply the Levitical law regarding leprosy. We read in Mark's Gospel: "A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.' Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere."⁶⁴⁶ This man's disobedience may have meant that the Levitical law was never applied, and the priests never received the testimony Jesus wanted them to have.

The reference to Miriam in Moses' address implies that the sickness was considered to be a punishment for sin.

6. Treatment of the Disadvantaged vs. 10-15

The Matthew Henry's Commentary links the verses 10-13 and 17 with vs. 6 regarding the taking of pledges. And the verses 14, 15 are grouped under the heading of civil concerns, together with the verses 16-18. The apparent haphazard arrangement of the subjects in Moses' speech allows for various approaches.

The people involved in this commandment are obviously poor. The loan they take out or the labor they perform are efforts to survive. The tendency of the affluent is to presume that they have power over the disadvantaged. In a capitalistic society, money means power. Under absolutism, power comes from the barrel of a gun, to quote the late Chinese Communist leader Mao Dze Dung. The principle is the same, that man would have the right to rule over his fellowman, even if he is not specifically put in a position of power by divine decree. But Jesus said to the Roman governor: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."⁶⁴⁷

The fact that a poor man has to borrow from a rich man does in no way change his intrinsic value before God. As a matter of fact, the rich man who forces an entry into the poor man's home to take the security for his loan lowers himself. We owe honor and respect to every human being who is created in the image of God. The one who allows himself to be corrupted by his power defaces the image of his Creator in himself. Powerful people, whatever the source of their power (money or guns), have to tread cautiously through life. The Bible's objection against wealth has nothing to do with the amount of money involved but with the influence it has on a man's soul. That is the reason for Jesus' warning, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."⁶⁴⁸

The key thought in the vs. 10 and 11 is respect. In the verses 11 and 12 it is spite. A rich man does not need a poor man's blanket to go to sleep. If he intends to do so it is because of an unhealthy desire to relish his feeling of power over the other. This law forbids such indulgence. Lust for power is a sure symptom of a diseased and sinful mind.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary observes here: "The borrower (says Solomon) is servant to the lender; therefore lest the lender should abuse the advantage he has against him, and improve it for his own interest, it is provided that he shall take not what he pleases, but what the borrower can best spare. A man's house is his castle, even the poor man's house is so, and is here taken under the protection of the law."

If a cloak is used as a collateral in a loan it is an indication that either the borrower is extremely poor or the lender a very harsh man. If a loan needed a security it would be substantial enough that it could not be paid off in one or two days. The return of the cloak by sunset would have to be a daily act which would, undoubtedly, be very bothersome to the harsh moneylender, who would soon decide that it wasn't worth the bother. Generosity is always easier on the human mind.

Moses draws a very vivid word picture in these verses. We can see the lender standing in front of the door, waiting for the collateral to be brought to him, and returning the cloak every evening. On the other hand, we can see the hired laborer stand in front of his employer's door, waiting for his daily wages, which may, or may not be paid out to him. The mention of the brother Israelite or an alien adds a vivid touch to the commandment.

Vs. 13 does not mention prayer specifically, but it is implied. The borrower who thanks his creditor for an act, which God considers righteousness, would mention the name of his lender before the Lord. Vs. 15 mentions another prayer, that of the day-laborer who cries to God for wages withheld. The phrase: "Then he will thank you,

⁶⁴⁵ Luke 4:27

⁶⁴⁶ Mark 1:40-45

⁶⁴⁷ John 19:11

⁶⁴⁸ Matt. 19:24

and it will be regarded as a righteous act in the sight of the LORD your God” is very interesting in Hebrew. The Hebrew reads literally: “...and bless thee and unto thee it shall be righteousness before the LORD thy God.” The word “righteous act,” or “righteousness” is *tsedaqah*, which is, in the New Testament, rendered with “alms” by the KJV. It is the same word used to describe the result of Abraham’s faith in God. “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” The concept conveys the thought that our acts towards our fellowmen are governed by our faith in God. It does not mean that God declares us free of sin when we treat our fellowmen right, but that our acts are based on our fellowship with God.

In New Testament times this law was obviously not obeyed at all, causing James, the president of the first Christian church, the brother of Jesus, to cry out: “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you. Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.”⁶⁴⁹ Unless we take James’ words to be a politically motivated harangue, we must conclude that the sin of the capitalists was widespread in his days. Social injustice weighs heavily in God’s scales.

7. **Capital Punishment and its Limitations** vs. 16

The crime deserving the death penalty is not specified here. At first glance, this commandment seems to contradict the second of the Ten Commandments, where God had said: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.”⁶⁵⁰ That commandment does not explicitly specify the death penalty though. We interpret this to mean that, when a parent involves himself in intercourse with demons, God will allow demonic influences to keep harassing the family for three or four generations.

There are some examples in the Old Testament of whole families that were executed because of a crime committed, but they are highly exceptional and the crime was a direct defiance of the authority of God. Korah⁶⁵¹ is one example and another is Achan.⁶⁵² In both instances it may be presumed that the family members of those men were aware of the crimes committed and had consented to it. Rebellion against God’s sovereignty in any shape or form always affects the whole family.

The crime intended here is on the level of inter-human relations. The young King Amaziah who ordered the execution of the persons who had assassinated his father, but ruled against the death penalty for their children gives an example of the application of this law. We are told specifically: “He did not put the sons of the assassins to death, in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses where the LORD commanded: ‘Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sins.’”⁶⁵³ David did not obey this law when he handed the sons of Saul over to the Gibeonites who executed them for the sins Saul had committed against them.⁶⁵⁴ That case is difficult to understand. It is true that the Lord revealed to David that Saul’s sin against the Gibeonites was the reason for the famine in the land, but there is no indication that David’s solution of the problem had the divine sanction. *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks: “Among heathen nations it was common for a whole family to be involved in the penalty incurred by the head of the family, and to be put to death along with him.” As a biblical example the execution of Haman’s ten sons is mentioned.⁶⁵⁵ That is, however, not a

⁶⁴⁹ James 5:1-11

⁶⁵⁰ Ex. 20:4,5

⁶⁵¹ Num. 16:24-33

⁶⁵² Josh 7:24-26

⁶⁵³ II Kings 14:6

⁶⁵⁴ II Sam. 21:1-9

⁶⁵⁵ Esther 9:12,13

clear case; the sons of Haman may have perished in the revolt and their bodies were hung on gallows after their death. And the incident occurred in a heathen nation.

Both the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel quote a proverb that was common in their time: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Jeremiah comments on this: “In those days people will no longer say, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes-- his own teeth will be set on edge.”⁶⁵⁶ The saying suggests that Israel had adopted the heathen practice of wiping out whole families for a crime committed by one of the members.

8. **Charity to the Poor** vs. 17-22

The “under-privileged” in these verses are identified as aliens, fatherless, and widows. And the first admonition is about the availability of justice for that class of people. The underlying thought, of course, is that they would not have the means to “pay for a good lawyer.” The keyword in these verses is compassion based on the memory of Israel’s own history. God wanted Israel to remember where they came from and what the Egyptian slavery had done to them as a nation and as individuals. It appears that the inferiority complex that is instilled in the mind of a slave is carried over to the following generations for centuries. The American Blacks, or African Americans, to use the politically correct term, are still struggling to free themselves emotionally, more than a century after the abolition became a reality. For the generation Moses addressed here, it was less than half a century since they had been redeemed. God’s antidote to their complex of inferiority was compassion and generosity.

The spiritual application of this command is obvious. The healing of our sin-scarred souls should transform us into people who are compelled by Christ’s love. This can be translated into generosity with left sheaves of grain, or olives and grapes, but also in deeper ways of sacrificial living. The Apostle John writes: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”⁶⁵⁷

God comes to us in the form of an alien, an orphan and a widow. According to Jesus’ words about the Day of Judgment, people will be judged on the basis of how they treated their fellowmen. We read: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”⁶⁵⁸ The righteous did their good deeds unwittingly for Christ’s sake. To their amazed reactions: “When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” Jesus will answer: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”⁶⁵⁹ We should never forget where we came from. This is an order!

In the “Homilies by various authors” section of *The Pulpit Commentary*, this section is called “Autumn generosity.” We read: “If a man is not generous towards his poorer neighbors in time of harvest, he will never be generous. If the profuse generosity of God be lavished upon him in vain, his moral nature must be hard indeed. As men ‘make hay while the sun shines,’ so should we yield to benevolent impulses while God surrounds us with sunshine of kindness. As we are undeserving recipients, we should share our un-purchased bounty with others.” The commentary then proceeds to give the following outline of these verses:

- I. We have here a fitting occasion for generosity.
- II. Fitting objects for generosity are provided.
- III. Delicate plans for conveying generosity.
- IV. The potent motive to generosity.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

C. **Explanation of the Social Laws (continued)** 25:1-26:19

Matthew Henry’s Commentary gives the following Outline of Deuteronomy 25:

- I. A law to moderate the scourging of malefactors <v. 1-3>.

⁶⁵⁶ Jer. 31:29,30; Ezek. 18:2-4

⁶⁵⁷ I John 3:16,17

⁶⁵⁸ Matt. 25:34-36

⁶⁵⁹ Matt. 25:38-40

- II. A law in favor of the ox that treads out the corn <v. 4>.
- III. For the disgracing of him that refused to marry his brother's widow <v. 5-10>.
- IV. For the punishment of an immodest woman <v. 11-12>.
- V. For just weights and measures <v. 13-16>.
- VI. For the destroying of Amalek <v. 17, etc.>.

1. **Corporal Punishment and its Limitations** vs. 1-3

The Pulpit Commentary introduces these verses with the remark: "The first and second verses should be read as one sentence, of which the protasis is in ver. 1 and the apodosis in ver. 2, thus: If there be a strife between men, and they come to judgment, and they (*i.e.* the judges) give judgment on them, and justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked, then it shall be, if the wicked deserve to be beaten (literally, *be the son of blows*), that the judge, etc. It is assumed that the judges shall pronounce just judgment and apportion to the guilty party his due punishment; and then it is prescribed how that is to be inflicted."

This law is the first one in this chapter of a series of laws that would, in our time, be considered to be cruel and unusual punishment. The only one that would be acceptable to the modern mind would be the one that forbids the muzzling of oxen. But the Organization for Animal Rights would probably consider that the law doesn't go far enough!

Corporal punishment is associated with violence. We have come to the point where parents can be prosecuted for child abuse when they spank their children at home.

Our modern forms of punishment have strayed far from principles of retribution found in the Bible. The main penalty in our time is incarceration which was completely unknown in biblical times. Israel knew only four forms of punishment: The death penalty, fines, flogging, and restitution. Imprisonment was only practiced in cases where judgment was delayed. Whether our modern way of applying justice is any improvement on the biblical paradigm is a matter of debate. Most people agree that the American judicial system can stand improvement, but the matter seems to have passed the point of debate. The main concern is not whether corporal punishment should be applied, or whether sex offenders ought to be castrated, but what to do about the overcrowding of prisons.

The purpose of imprisonment has never been clearly defined; whether it is to be correctional or retributive is not clear. Some prisons are called "Correctional Institutions" but practice has proved this the term is a misnomer. Concern for the application of the death penalty to people who have been wrongly convicted has led to the cruel phenomenon of a ten- or fifteen-year wait for execution of the guilty. A comparison with the biblical method of swift executions seems preferable, even though, occasionally, it may claim some innocent victims.

But the question here is whether flogging is an acceptable form of punishment. The fact that it is incorporated in Scripture gives it a divine fiat, which ought to close the argument for us. From a practical viewpoint it is probably the best deterrent and a very economical form of punishment.

Some years ago, the case of a young man who was caught spray painting automobiles in Singapore made the headlines throughout the world, because the youth was condemned to flogging with a bamboo cane. I believe he received seven strokes. Even the President of the United States meddled in the affair. To the Old Testament saints, such a thing would have seemed ludicrous.

The Book of Proverbs advises: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him." "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death." "The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother."⁶⁶⁰ These references all pertain to parental punishment of their own children, but the text in Deuteronomy puts the rod in the hands of the state.

Corporal punishment as an instrument of applied justice is a corrective measure. It has nothing to do with restitution. Nobody profits from it other than the convicted felon. It is a deterrent. The message conveyed is one of hope, none of which comes through in the application of modern justice.

Corporal punishment also does not destroy human dignity. This is the meaning of the restriction of the number of lashes to be given. "He must not give him more than forty lashes. If he is flogged more than that, your brother will be degraded in your eyes," meaning that a limited number of strokes preserves the image of God in man. The text tells us that a person has value because God created him in His own image. His punishable act was the outcome of his sinful nature but did not diminish his value as a human being; he remained the recipient of God's love and grace. The lesson of the punishment was that it was expected of him that he would not fall into the same sin again.

⁶⁶⁰ Prov. 13:24; 22:15; 23:13,14; 29:15

Ironically, the Apostle Paul boasted in the fact that he was flogged and beaten unjustly. We read: “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned.”⁶⁶¹ All the apostles were flogged at one time to which they reacted with joy. We read in Acts: “They [the Sanhedrin] called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”⁶⁶² In some instances punishment convicts the state and honors the convict, but that is not the case in the law that is before us. Israel was still a theocracy and the judges who meted out the punishment were seated in the judgment seat of God.

About the number of lashes, no more than forty, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* says: “The execution was usually done with a whip of three lashes, so that thirteen stripes (each one being counted for three) made up thirty-nine, but one more by that reckoning would have been forty-two.”

2. Allowance to the Ox that treads out Grain vs. 4

The same principle of generosity evinced in the previous chapter in connection with the harvest of grain, olives, and grapes is carried over here from man to beast. In the background looms the same promise of blessing and abundance which ought to make us generous. Looking at this law, the Apostle Paul asked himself the question: “Is it about oxen that God is concerned?”⁶⁶³ The answer is, probably, “Yes!”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary writes about this verse: “In Judea, as in modern Syria and Egypt, the larger grains, wheat, barley, and rice, were not threshed, but beaten out by the feet of oxen, which, yoked together, trod round day after day the wide open spaces which form the threshing-floors. These flat open spaces or floors are formed of clay hardened with cow’s dung, as the barn-floors are with a small mixture lime in this country. A pole or pillar is raised in the center, and by a halter attached to it on the one end, and to the neck of the oxen on the other, the patient animals are made to perambulate in circular courses at their daily work. The ancient paintings in Egypt represent oxen as commonly used in treading out the grain from the ear in harvest time-- rarely donkeys. Swine, not being sufficiently heavy for the purpose, are not likely to have been employed in this work, although Herodotus asserts it. Horses and mules are sometimes driven over threshing-floors in Spain and other countries of Southern Europe. The Israelites used oxen alone. The animals were allowed freely to pick up a mouthful when they chose to do so-- a wise as well as humane regulation introduced by the law of Moses, as it would have been not only great cruelty, but have produced a dispiriting effect on the cattle, to be trampling, as was the primitive practice, with a bag on their mouths, or their necks bound up a whole day, amid heaps of grain, while they were under irksome restraint from touching the grain or the straw.”

The Pulpit Commentary observes here: “The leaving the ox unmuzzled when treading out the corn was in order that the animal might be free to eat of the grains which its labor severed from the husks. This prohibition, therefore, was dictated by a regard to the rights and claims of animals employed in labor; but there is involved in it the general principle that all labor is to be duly requited, and hence it seems to have passed into a proverb, and was applied to men as well as the lower animals.” Actually, the ox would probably prefer the straw to the grain. Muzzling the animal would prevent it from even eating that which has less value to man.

The Adam Clarke Commentary believes that the real issue here is spiritual. We read: “While the oxen were at work some muzzled their mouths to hinder them from eating the corn, which Moses here forbids, instructing the people by this symbolical precept to be kind to their servants and laborers, but especially to those who ministered to them in holy things.” There seems to be little ground, though, for the supposition that Moses was not primarily speaking about the treatment of animals. The Bible connects elsewhere human righteousness with the treatment of animals. We read in Proverbs: “A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.”⁶⁶⁴

The fact that the Apostle Paul draws spiritual applications from this commandment does not mean that the text should not be taken literally in first instance. When Jesus tells His disciples that He would make them “fishers of men,”⁶⁶⁵ He did not mean that fishing is not done primarily in water for the purpose of catching fish. And when Paul writes: “It is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’ Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest,” he did not mean

⁶⁶¹ II Cor. 11:24,25

⁶⁶² Acts 5:40,41

⁶⁶³ I Cor. 9:9

⁶⁶⁴ Prov. 12:10

⁶⁶⁵ Matt. 4:19

that plowmen do not plough fields and threshers do not thresh grain. The underlying thought of the command, however, is that man surpasses the ox in worth, and that, if animals are to be treated in this way, how much more human beings!

That such is not always a foregone conclusion is obvious from Jesus' reproach to the Pharisees at the occasion of the healing of a man's shriveled hand. We read: "Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' He said to them, 'If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'"⁶⁶⁶ We are presently living in a society where animals are protected and babies are aborted.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to Timothy, connects the verse with one taken from the Gospels, "The worker deserves his wages." When Jesus sent out the seventy-two evangelists, He said to them: "Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house."⁶⁶⁷ Paul uses it as a guideline for the payment of the salaries of the preachers in the first-century church. "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'"⁶⁶⁸

3. The Levirate Marriage vs. 5-10

The topic of this section is the preservation of the family name and of its inheritance through the birth of children. To our Western mind, the stipulations of these verses are difficult to understand or even to justify, since our family values have changed and we no longer live in a world that expects salvation through the coming of the Messiah. It also seems to deny the matter of love in marriage.

The New Unger's Bible Dictionary writes about the Levirate marriage: "Levirate marriage: (from Lat. levir, a 'brother-in-law'). The marriage of a man with his deceased brother's widow, in the event of the brother's dying childless. The first instance of this custom occurs in the patriarchal period, where Onan is called upon to marry his brother Er's widow <Gen. 38:8>. The Levirate marriage was not peculiar to the Jews; it has been found to exist in many Eastern countries, particularly in Arabia and among the tribes of the Caucasus. The Mosaic provision was as follows: If brothers (on the father's side) lived together, that is, in the same place, and one of them died childless, the wife was not to go outside and marry a stranger; but the surviving brother was to take her as his wife. The firstborn son by her took the name of the deceased, thus continuing his name in the family register, that it might not perish out of Israel. In case the brother-in-law did not wish to marry the widow, she might cite him legally before the elders of the place. If, after conference with them, he still persisted in declaring his unwillingness, he was not compelled to do the duty of a brother-in-law. But he was obliged to submit to the humiliation of having his sandal pulled off by his sister-in-law in the presence of the elders and of having his face spat upon. The one act denoted that he thus gave up all claim to his deceased brother's estate; the other was an act expressive of contempt <Deut. 25:5-10>. >From <Ruth 4:1-10> it would appear that in the case of the refusal of the brother-in-law to take the widow, then the next male relative had the right to do so. The divine sanction that the Mosaic law gave to Levirate marriage is not to be regarded as merely an accommodation to a popular prejudice. Such marriage was not strictly commanded, but it was considered a duty of love, the non-fulfillment of which brought reproach and ridicule on the man and his house. It did not abolish the general prohibition of marriage with a brother's wife but proceeded from one and the same principle with it. By the prohibition the brother's house was preserved in its integrity; by this command it was raised to a permanent condition. In both cases the dead brother was honored and fraternal love preserved as the moral foundation of his house. Based upon such a marriage as this was the ground for the question asked of our Lord by the Sadducees <Matt. 22:23-30>. The rabbis taught that in the next world a widow who had been taken by her brother-in-law reverted to her first husband at the resurrection. Christ answered both parties by the declaration that 'in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage.'" "

Our main problem with this section is that it allows for bigamy or polygamy. Polygamy is one of the gray areas in the Old Testament. From a New Testament perspective, it is clear that polygamy was not God's original plan for man.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary tries to bypass the problem of the polygamous implications of the text by saying: "The case put is a case that often happens, of a man's dying without issue, it may be in the prime of his time, soon after his marriage, and while his brethren were yet so young as to be unmarried." This suggestion is a

⁶⁶⁶ Matt. 12:10-12

⁶⁶⁷ Luke 10:7

⁶⁶⁸ I Tim. 5:17,18

sample of wishful exegetical thinking in order to preserve morality in modern times. The text, however, does not stipulate that the brother of the deceased had to be unmarried. It is true though that in the first recorded case of a planned Levirate marriage, Shelah, who was to marry Tamar after both Er and Onan had died, was still too young to be married.⁶⁶⁹ But we have no such proof as far as Onan was concerned.

The main concern and underlying principle in this command is the concept of eternal life. About this point, *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes correctly: "Under that dispensation we have reason to think men had not so clear and certain a prospect of living themselves on the other side of death as we have now, to whom life and immortality are brought to light by the gospel; and therefore they could not but be the more desirous to live in their posterity, which innocent desire was in some measure gratified by this law, an expedient being found out that, though a man had no child by his wife, yet his name should not be put out of Israel, that is, out of the pedigree, or, which is equivalent, remain there under the brand of childlessness. The Sadducees put a case to our Savior upon this law, with a design to perplex the doctrine of the resurrection by it (<Mt. 22:24>, etc.), perhaps insinuating that there was no need of maintaining the immortality of the soul and a future state, since the law had so well provided for the perpetuating of men's names and families in the world."

Even more prominent than the concept of life after death is the thought of perpetuating the heritage in the Promised Land. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* observes: "The purpose of the law was to provide an heir for the dead brother, thereby preserving his name and estate. The law also was designed to provide for the welfare of the widows." The matter of estate and the fate of the widow may have been the more important reason for this regulation. How important these things were to the Israelites is clear from the treatment of the man who refused to oblige his widowed sister-in-law. No one could be forced into a levirate marriage, but refusal was met with public disgrace.

The Adam Clarke Commentary remarks: "It is difficult to find the reason of these ceremonies of degradation. Perhaps the shoe was the emblem of power; and by stripping it off, deprivation of that power and authority was represented. Spitting in the face was a mark of the utmost ignominy; but the Jews, who are legitimate judges in this case, say that the spitting was not in his face, but before his face on the ground.... The act of spitting, whether in or before the face, marked the strong contempt the woman felt for the man who had slighted her. And it appears that the man was ever after disgraced in Israel; for so much is certainly implied in the saying, <Deut. 25:10>: And his name shall be called in Israel, The house of him that hath his shoe loosed."

From the story of Ruth, it seems that refusal to enter upon a levirate marriage was no longer considered an insult, although the symbolic gesture of removing the sandal was preserved. In Ruth's case, however, it was not the widow, but the husband-not-to-be who voluntarily removed his sandal, and the spitting part of the ceremony was no longer observed. The very fact that the writer of the book had to explain the meaning of the ritual indicates that it had become of folkloric rite. We read: "(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.) So the kinsman-redeemer said to Boaz, 'Buy it yourself.' And he removed his sandal."⁶⁷⁰

In the time of Ruth and Boaz, the expression "The Family of the Unsandaled" obviously was no longer recognized. Originally, it must have been understood that the wearing of sandals was part of the conquest of the Land of Promise. It emphasized God's promise to Israel, as they entered Canaan: "I will give you every place where you set your foot."⁶⁷¹ The man who lost his sandal had lost the victory which had brought him into his inheritance. More than a sandal was involved. In modern language we would say: "He no longer had a leg to stand on."

The law also implies that sexual intercourse in marriage among the Israelites was considered primarily for the purpose of producing offspring, and not merely as an expression of love. The relationship of the brother of the deceased with his sister-in-law was a duty. Such a concept is far removed from our modern thinking about marriage relationships. It certainly would not fit into any category of marriage counseling.

4. Punishment of Immodesty by a Woman vs. 11-12

The situation is a rather unusual one, not in the sense that two men are fighting together, but that the wife of one of them is trying to interfere by physically interposing herself and by intentionally grabbing the testicles of the attacker of her husband, inflicting such pain that he has to let go. We assume that the woman's act was in fact intentional. We cannot imagine that such a severe punishment would be meted out for an inadvertent touch. There is no biblical record of any such incident ever taking place and any such punishment ever being executed. *The Pulpit*

⁶⁶⁹ See Gen. 38:6-11

⁶⁷⁰ Ruth 4:7,8

⁶⁷¹ Josh. 1:3

Commentary writes: “The severe sentence here prescribed was by the rabbins commuted into a fine of the value of the hand.”

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary compares this command to similar ones found in *The Code of Hammurabi*. The conclusion is: “The two laws are radically different in their origins and morality. The Babylonian laws are alleged to have been received by Hammurabi from the sun god, Shamash. Moses received his laws directly from the Lord. Hammurabi's laws list at least ten varieties of bodily mutilation prescribed for various offenses. For example, if a physician performed an operation that was unsuccessful, his hand was to be cut off. By contrast, in the Mosaic legislation, only one instance of mutilation occurs, where a wife's hand is to be severed <Deut. 25:11-12>. Also in the Hebrew laws a greater value is placed upon human life. A stricter regard for the honor of womanhood is evident and masters are ordered to treat their slaves more humanely.”

The Matthew Henry's Commentary adds: “The punishment was that her hand should be cut off; and the magistrates must not pretend to be more merciful than God: Thy eye shall not pity her. Perhaps our Saviour alludes to this law when he commands us to cut off the right hand that offends us, or is an occasion of sin to us. Better put the greatest hardships that can be upon the body than ruin the soul for ever. Modesty is the hedge of chastity, and therefore ought to be very carefully preserved and kept up by both sexes.” The reference to Jesus' use of the phrase “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell,”⁶⁷² may give us the key to understanding this command. The incident of the woman's intervention in a fight between men serves more as an illustration than a case study. The intent is the prevention of immorality and perversion. Jesus makes the offender the executioner. And in Jesus' use of the law the cutting off of the offending hand, or the gouging out of the offending eye can hardly be taken literally. The intent is clear: “better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” The Apostle Paul brings this even closer to home for us by saying: “If we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.”⁶⁷³

5. Just Weights and Measures vs. 13-16

This commandment deals with “sharp business deals.” God wants us to be honest in our dealings with fellow humans. Vs. 16 tells us: “The LORD your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly.”

The Hebrew text reads literally “a stone and a stone.” The word *'eben* is “stone” and stones were used for weight. The reference to the practice of using stones for weight is preserved in the British use of the term. A person is said to weigh “twelve stone,” “a stone” being 14 lbs.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia writes about the usage weights: “Though the ‘balances’ in ancient times were rudely constructed, the weighing could be done quite accurately, as may be seen in the use of equally primitive balances in the East today. But the system was liable to fraud. A ‘false balance’ might be literally one so constructed that the arms were of unequal length, when the longer arm would be intended, of course, for the article to be weighed. The system was liable, however, to various other subtle abuses then as now; hence the importance in God's sight of ‘true weights’ and a ‘just balance’ is enforced again and again.” The actual contents of a weight is hard to determine. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, for instance, says that “the common talent weighed about 3000 shekels or the full weight that a man could carry.” Since this ability varies from person to person, some law of averages must have applied in the determination of a standard weight. From the context we conclude that people knew rather accurately what the standard weight was. If no rule applied, deviation from the rule would also be impossible.

In Leviticus, God relates honesty in trade to the fact of their redemption. We read: “Use honest scales and honest weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt.”⁶⁷⁴ God is the standard against whom man's moral behavior is measured. The Apostle Paul defines sin with the words: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”⁶⁷⁵ We cannot say, of course, that God would be the standard of all weights and measures in a physical sense. God leaves men liberty to determine a standard. This standard will not be absolute, but it is the agreed upon standard for people belonging to the same culture and clan. Every individual cannot set his own standards; this is done in consultation with the widest possible number of people, and each individual is held to follow this standard. Every merchant and buyer knows it and is supposed to adhere to it. Jesus'

⁶⁷² Matt. 5:30

⁶⁷³ I Cor. 11:31,32

⁶⁷⁴ Lev. 19:36

⁶⁷⁵ Rom. 3:23

Golden Rule certainly applies here: “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”⁶⁷⁶

6. **Revenge upon Amalek** vs. 17-19

The record of Amalek’s attack upon Israel is found in Exodus.⁶⁷⁷ At that time an official document was drawn up for the purpose of preserving the people’s indignation over Amalek’s devious behavior. We read: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.’ Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. He said, ‘For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD. The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.’”⁶⁷⁸

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia writes about the Amalekites: “A tribe dwelling originally in the region south of Judah, the wilderness of et-Tih where the Israelites came into conflict with them. They were nomads as a people dwelling in that tract would naturally be. When they joined the Midianites to invade Israel they came ‘with their cattle and their tents’ <Judg 6:3-5>. They are not to be identified with the descendants of Esau <Gen 36:12,16> because they are mentioned earlier, in the account of the invasion of Chedorlaomer <Gen 14:7> and in Balaam’s prophecy <Num 24:20> Amalek is called ‘the first of the nations,’ which seems to refer to an early existence. We are uncertain of their origin, for they do not appear in the list of nations found in <Gen 10>. They do not seem to have had any relationship with the tribes of Israel, save as, we may surmise, some of the descendants of Esau were incorporated into the tribe. It is probable that they were of Semitic stock though we have no proof of it.

The first contact with Israel was at Rephidim, in the wilderness of Sinai, where they made an unprovoked attack and were defeated after a desperate conflict <Exo 17:8-13; Deut 25:17-18>. On account of this they were placed under the ban and Israel was commanded to exterminate them <Deut 25:19; 1 Sam 15:2:3>. The next encounter of the two peoples was when the Israelites attempted to enter Canaan from the west of the Dead Sea. The spies had reported that the Amalekites were to be found in the south, in connection with the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites <Num 13:29>. The Israelites at first refused to advance, but later determined to do so contrary to the will of God and the command of Moses. They were met by Amalek and the Canaanites and completely defeated <Num 14:39-45>. Amalek is next found among the allies of Moab in their attack upon Israel in the days of Eglon <Judg 3:13>. They were also associated with the Midianites in their raids upon Israel <Judg 6:3>, and they seemed to have gained a foothold in Ephraim, or at least a branch of them, in the hill country <Judg 5:14; 12:15>, but it is evident that the great body of them still remained in their old habitat, for when Saul made war upon them he drove them toward Shur in the wilderness toward Egypt <1 Sam 15:1-9>. David also found them in the same region <1 Sam 27:8; 30:1>. After this they seem to have declined, and we find, in the days of Hezekiah, only a remnant of them who were smitten by the Simeonites at Mount Seir <1 Chr 4:41-43>. They are once mentioned in Pss in connection with other inveterate enemies of Israel <Ps 83:7>. The hatred inspired by the Amalekites is reflected in the passages already mentioned which required their utter destruction. Their attack upon them when they were just escaped from Egypt and while they were struggling through the wilderness made a deep impression upon the Israelites which they never forgot, and the wrath of David upon the messenger who brought him news of the death of Saul and Jonathan, declaring himself to be the slayer of Saul, was no doubt accentuated by his being an Amalekite <2 Sam 1:1-16>.”

The circumstances of Israel’s condition at the time of Amalek’s attack upon them are not elaborated on in Exodus; we read of them here for the first time. It was important for Moses to impress the facts upon this generation, since most of them were not born yet when the attack took place, and the older ones were under twenty years of age. This accounts for the words: “When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God.”

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary calls Amalek’s attack “very barbarous and cruel; for they smote those that were more feeble, whom they should have succored.” The commentary adds: “The greatest cowards are commonly the most cruel; while those that have the courage of a man will have the compassion of a man.”

Amalek’s attack upon Israel was considered an attack upon God. Amalek must have know under what circumstance Israel had left Egypt. They countered God’s miracles with a cold-blooded and dastardly atrocity. The same commentary remarks: “If they had had any reverence for the majesty of the God of Israel, which they saw a token of in the cloud, or any dread of his wrath, which they lately heard of the power of over Pharaoh, they durst not have made this assault upon Israel. Well, here was the ground of the quarrel: and it shows how God takes what is done against his people as done against himself, and that he will particularly reckon with those that discourage and

⁶⁷⁶ Matt. 7:12

⁶⁷⁷ See Ex. 17:8-16

⁶⁷⁸ Ex. 17:14-16

hinder young beginners in religion, that (as Satan's agents) set upon the weak and feeble, either to divert them or to disquiet them, and offend his little ones."

King Saul's downfall was that he did not obey this command for the extermination of Amalek to the letter. We find the record of this event in the Book of First Samuel.⁶⁷⁹ That Saul was quite familiar with the history that formed the background for this command is clear from his message to the Kenites: "Go away, leave the Amalekites so that I do not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt."⁶⁸⁰ Yet, Saul compromised with the enemy under the pretext of wanting to use the captured herds for sacrifices to the Lord. Saul also spared the life of the king of Amalek. At that occasion Samuel pronounced the famous words: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king." Because of Saul's disobedience, Amalek would continue to be a threat to Israel for several centuries.

The Adam Clarke Commentary observes: "It is supposed that this command had its final accomplishment in the death of Haman and his ten sons, <Esther 3,7,9>, as from this time the memory and name of Amalek was blotted out from under heaven, for through every period of their history it might be truly said, They feared not God."

Amalek occupied a peculiar place in Old Testament history. Their roots were pre-historic, as we have seen. Their opposition to Israel was taken by God as an opposition against His own person. As Israel embodied God's revelation of Himself in this world, so Amalek stood for all that was opposed to God. Amalek personified Satan's revolt against God's supremacy. This is the main reason why the Scriptures state so emphatically: "The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."⁶⁸¹ Other nations in and around Canaan opposed Israel because of fear for their personal safety. Amalek had deeper reasons to hate God and His people.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

C. Explanation of the Social Laws (continued) 26:1-19

This chapter concludes Moses' second discourse to the nation of Israel.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary gives the following outline of Deuteronomy 26:

- I. Moses gives them a form of confession to be made by him that offered the basket of his first-fruits <v. 1-11>.
- II. The protestation and prayer to be made after the disposal of the third year's tithe <v. 12-15>.
- III. He binds on all the precepts he had given them,
 1. By the divine authority: "Not I, but the Lord thy God has commanded thee to do these statutes" <v. 16>.
 2. By the mutual covenant between God and them <v. 17, etc.>.

1. The presentation of the Thanksgiving Basket vs. 1-11

We have to remind ourselves that all that is said in this chapter was pronounced before Israel had entered the Promised Land and before even one square foot of it had been taken possession of. Moses' discourse, therefore, presents us with a forward look to victory and a celebration of a victory that had not yet been realized. There is in this address to the nation no shadow of doubt about the outcome. Victory, although as yet unseen, is assured because it is the Lord's victory. Moses stands in this victory by faith and his words are pronounced from a position that is, physically, still beyond the horizon, a horizon that he will personally never reach.

The spiritual implications of this chapter for us are obvious. God wants us to reach beyond the boundaries of our life on earth to a reality that is greater than the actuality of life on earth and celebrate a victory that has been won for us in heaven. *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* calls this chapter a confession, but it is actually more a celebration. Moses gives instructions regarding the celebration of Israel's first Thanksgiving Day. Like the Pilgrims who entered North America and celebrated their survival of their first winter on this continent, so Israel had to memorialize their arrival and survival in the Promised Land. Whether this celebration was intended to be repeated yearly, or whether it was to mark the complete conquest of the Promised Land once and for all, is not clear from the text. It does cover at least a three-year period, because vs. 12 speaks of the third year as "the year of the tithe."

⁶⁷⁹ See I Sam. 15:1-9

⁶⁸⁰ I Sam. 15:6

⁶⁸¹ Ex. 17:16

The purpose of the celebration was not merely the presentation of the tithes but the establishing of the right perspective. In general, the presentation of the first fruit and of the tithes expressed the thought that God was the owner of it all. "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it,"⁶⁸² as David said. But this basket symbolized more than this simple recognition. God didn't want His children's fruit, but He wanted them to realize where they had come from and where they had arrived. The fruit symbolized the whole road by which God had led His people. The fruit was the fruit of salvation. David expressed this principle when he wrote: "He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD."⁶⁸³

The ritual also reminded man of the importance of the place of God's revelation. The basket had to be taken "to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name." It would take several centuries before David discovered where this place was. Out of the terrible plague that chastised David and Israel because of the unauthorized census that had been taken, came this great revelation. David saw the angel of death standing on the threshing floor of Araunah and he went to offer a sacrifice there. We read: "At that time, when David saw that the LORD had answered him on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, he offered sacrifices there. The tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses had made in the desert, and the altar of burnt offering were at that time on the high place at Gibeon. But David could not go before it to inquire of God, because he was afraid of the sword of the angel of the LORD. Then David said, 'The house of the LORD God is to be here, and also the altar of burnt offering for Israel.'⁶⁸⁴ David did not break with God's revelation, as King Jeroboam would do later; he did not lightly change the place of revelation, but he recognized that this was the place God had chosen centuries earlier. He discovered the presence of the Lord at that place because that is where God answered his prayer.

In the presence of the Lord, and in front of the priest who stood between God and man, the person who brought the thanksgiving basket was to make this confession: "I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us." We can hardly overestimate the magnitude of this confession. The man confessed that he had arrived at the place God had intended for him and for his forefathers, the long link of people from whom he descended from the days of Abraham to his day. Had the man known the Four Spiritual Laws, he would have said: "God had a wonderful plan for my life, and He has accomplished it."

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews links the entering into Canaan to the observance of the Sabbath and puts this in the right perspective for us by saying: "If Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."⁶⁸⁵ The greatest confession a person can make is to say: "Jesus, I am resting in the joy of what thou art," and then present the fruits of this rest to God.

The text of vs. 5 seems straightforward enough in the rendering of the NIV: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous." The "wandering Aramean" is, obviously, Jacob. Another version reads: "My father was a Syrian, about to perish, and he went down to Egypt and dwelt there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous."⁶⁸⁶ *The Adam Clarke Commentary* presents us with a whole array of possible translations, of which we copy the following: "This passage has been variously understood, both by the ancient versions and by modern commentators. The Vulgate renders it thus... 'A Syrian persecuted my father.' The Septuagint thus:... 'My father abandoned Syria.' The Targum thus... 'Laban the Syrian endeavored to destroy my father.' The Syriac: 'My father was led out of Syria into Egypt.' The Arabic: 'Surely, Laban the Syrian had almost destroyed my father.' The Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel: 'Our father Jacob went at first into Syria of Mesopotamia, and Laban sought to destroy him.' Houbigant dissents from all, and renders the original thus:... 'Famine oppressed my father, who went down into Egypt.' This interpretation Houbigant gives the text, by taking the yod ('y' in Hebrew) from the word 'Aramiy, which signifies an Aramite or Syrian, and joining it to 'obeed, it becomes y^a 'obeed, the future for the perfect, which is common enough in Hebrew, and which may signify constrained; and seeking for the meaning of 'aram in the Arabic arama, which signifies famine, dearth, etc., he thus makes out his version, and this version he defends at large in his notes. It is pretty evident, from the text, that by a Syrian we are to understand Jacob, so called from his long residence in Syria with his father-in-law Laban. And his being ready to perish may signify the hard

⁶⁸² Ps. 24:1

⁶⁸³ Ps. 40:2,3

⁶⁸⁴ I Chr. 21:28-22:1

⁶⁸⁵ Heb. 4:8-10

⁶⁸⁶ NKJ

usage and severe labor he had in Laban's service, by which, as his health was much impaired, so his life might have often been in imminent danger."

The main point of the confession is to indicate the humble beginnings of the nation of Israel. The fact that much of Jacob's suffering and destitution was of his own making does not enter the text here. God had identified Himself with Jacob, the man who tried to deceive others, and ended up being deceived himself. God had made him into Israel, a prince of God, the victorious heir of the promise. The whole history of the second part of Genesis and the first part of Exodus is put in a nutshell in the statement: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders."

Once again, the people to whom Moses commanded to say those words had not personally experienced the famine that brought Jacob to Egypt, nor the centuries of slavery, and they had not entered the Promised Land yet. They stood between the past and the future; for them these words were the epitome of faith. The confession elevated the personal experience by placing it in the context of a long line of descendants. It also traced the line of promise which had begun with Abraham. The Israelite professed to have received what God had promised to his ancestors. The Apostle Paul draws a similar analogy when he writes to the Galatians: "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."⁶⁸⁷ We may see ourselves standing in a similar way in God's presence with our "basket of thanksgiving," and say: "I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land [the place of God's rest] the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us." The confession is a strange mixture of the personal pronouns "I" and "we." God brought Israel as a nation out of Egypt, not merely a certain number of individuals.

There is an implicit danger in the use of the unbiblical term "accepting Christ as one's personal savior." I am not arguing against personal decisions, but against the loss of the historic perspective. Nobody is merely saved personally without reference to the body of believers. We are links in a chain; we received the blessing from those that preceded us and we are passing it on to those who follow.

Yet, God treated Israel as one single person. He puts the words in Hosea's mouth: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."⁶⁸⁸ Matthew applies Hosea's prophecy to Jesus' flight to Egypt and His return to Palestine. We read: "And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'"⁶⁸⁹ This quote almost seems a forced and inappropriate application of the prophecy. But Matthew understood the fact that, in all God's dealings with man, He only has two men in mind: Adam and Jesus. Those two individuals represent the whole human race. The Israelite who presented his basket of first fruit before the Lord was, so to speak, "in Christ."

This is also the reason the basket was placed before the altar, the place of all sacrifices, the shadow of the cross. The cross is the only way to enter the place of rest God has prepared for us. We, who are in Christ, are all where we are because of His death on the cross and His resurrection. And, in Christ, we have more than entered Canaan; in Paul's words: "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."⁶⁹⁰

2. Prayer at the Presentation of the Third-Year Tithe vs. 12-15

The little ceremony prescribed in these verses is probably different from the presentation of the thanksgiving basket in the previous ones. Although we may assume that it would take more than one year after the completion of the conquest of Canaan before the first harvest would be gathered in.

The Pulpit Commentary says about the phrase "The third year, which is the year of tithing": "As each week ended with a sabbath, so a sabbatical year ended each cycle or week of years; and as on it no tithes were levied, "the year of tithing" here specified would be the third and the sixth year in each septennial period." This third-year tithe was first mention in ch. 14:28, where we read: "At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary explains: "Among the Hebrews there were two tithings. The first was appropriated to the Levites <Num. 18:21>; the second, being the tenth of what remained, was brought to Jerusalem in kind; or if that was found inconvenient, it was converted into money, and the owner, on arriving in

⁶⁸⁷ Gal. 3:14

⁶⁸⁸ Hos. 11:1

⁶⁸⁹ Matt. 2:15

⁶⁹⁰ Eph. 2:6

the capital, purchased sheep, bread, and oil, which afforded a feast to his family and the Levites <Deut. 14:22-23>. This was done for two years together. But this second tithing was eaten at home; and lest the poor-law provisions during the harvest <Deut. 24:10> should not be sufficient, it was distributed among the poor, 'the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow' of the place, at discretion."

The tithing mentioned in these verses had been regulated earlier when God told Moses: "I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tent of Meeting."⁶⁹¹ In the declaration that accompanied the presentation of this tithe, it is called "the sacred portion," or, as the NKJV calls it, "the holy tithe," indicating how important the Lord considered this kind of giving to be. Supporting those who did the work at the tabernacle was not an act of philanthropy but a holy duty that was part of the believer's relationship with God. It is true that we cannot express spiritual blessings in terms of financial figures, but if our fellowship with God has no bearing on the way we handle our finances we have a spiritual problem.

Paul emphasizes this holy duty in writing to the church in Rome about the offering the believers in Macedonia took up for the poor in Jerusalem. We read: "For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed *they owe it to them*. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings."⁶⁹² Even clearer is his injunction to Timothy about the support of the pastor of the local church. We read: "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'⁶⁹³ About this "double honor," *The Adam Clarke Commentary* says: "Almost every critic of note allows that *timee*... here signifies reward, stipend, wages. Let him have a double or a larger salary who rules well; and why? Because in the discharge of his office he must be at expense, in proportion to his diligence, in visiting and relieving the sick, in lodging and providing for strangers; in a word, in his being given to hospitality, which was required of every bishop or presbyter." If a pastor is underpaid, the church does not meet God's standards. On the other hand, if the pastor does it for the money, he does not direct the affairs of the church as he is supposed to do.

It may be true that spiritual blessing cannot be expressed in dollar figures, but God uses the way we handle our finances as a measuring stick of our spiritual health. According to the words of the confession the Israelite had to utter before the Lord when he presented his third-year tithe, holding back any of the holy tithe or using part of it for himself would have been considered a grave sin.

Vs. 14 refers to the provision that part of the tithe was meant to be consumed by the giver and his family. In ch. 14:22-27 we read: "Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always. But if that place is too distant and you have been blessed by the LORD your God and cannot carry your tithe (because the place where the LORD will choose to put his Name is so far away), then exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the LORD your God will choose. Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice. And do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own."

The Matthew Henry's Commentary states: "The Jews say that this protestation of their integrity was to be made with a low voice, because it looked like a self-commendation, but that the foregoing confession of God's goodness was to be made with a loud voice to his glory. He that durst not make this protestation must bring his trespass-offering, <Lev. 5:15>."

The importance of this ceremony is also expressed in the fact that the person who brought of the tithes had to be ritually clean and free of any contamination that comes from idolatry. The pledge of obedience was meant to be more than a ritual; it expressed a relationship of love to the Lord. In the words of Jesus: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."⁶⁹⁴ Tithing is not merely an act of obedience, it is an expression of our love for God who made us, saved us, and blessed us.

⁶⁹¹ Num. 18:21

⁶⁹² Rom. 15:26,27

⁶⁹³ I Tim. 5:17,18

⁶⁹⁴ Matt. 22:37-40

Vs. 14 covers the three faces of the tithing: 1. The eating of the portion that was to be eaten by the person who tithed. This was to be a celebration of the family in the presence of the Lord. Any reference to death, which is contained in the word mourning, would have spoiled the character of the feast. The eating of the tithes was to be an image of the ultimate experience of entering into the joy of the Lord.⁶⁹⁵ 2. Even the handling of the tithes had to be done without any ritual defilement. Only those who were ritually pure were qualified to gather the goods that were to be distributed. 3. The part that was to be sacrificed to YHWH was to be entirely consecrated to Him, and to Him alone. Any suspicion of idolatry or demonic involvement would make the sacrifice invalid. All this indicates the great value God attached to the giving of these tithes. It was not a matter to be taken lightly.

The prayer in vs. 15 seems to be redundant. If God had sworn an oath to the ancestors of the Israelites, and if He was eager to bless His people, why was it necessary to ask for a blessing? The point is not God's willingness to bless but our unwillingness to receive the blessing. God wanted to bless Jacob, but Jacob was a most unwilling recipient of God's blessing. It would take him years of suffering before he cried out: "I will not let you go unless you bless me."⁶⁹⁶

Another remarkable point is that this prayer for blessing was uttered in front of the tabernacle or the temple, a few feet from the ark of the covenant upon which rested the Shekinah, and yet, the person who prays doesn't speak as if God is present right in front of him. "Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place..." This speaks of the clear realization that what is on earth is only a shadow of the heavenly reality, not reality itself. Solomon would express the same awareness at the consecration of the temple. In his prayer for the dedication of the temple, he said: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"⁶⁹⁷

The last four verses of this chapter, which also bring Moses' address to the nation to a conclusion, restate the contents of the covenant in a wonderful and glorious way. It is true that God's love is unconditional, but the experience of His blessing depends upon our obedience. The covenant consists of two declarations: The Israelite declared that YHWH is his Elohim, and the Lord declared that Israel is His people. The Israelite's confession implies walking in His way, keeping His decrees, and obeying Him. The walk speaks of a lifestyle that is consistent with the confession. The keeping of God's decrees is the acknowledgment of God's right to rule and of the veracity of His commands. The obedience is the practical application of it all.

God considers the people who make this pledge to Him to be His "treasured possession." It may be hard for man who is conceived in sin, and whose life is daily polluted by iniquity to see himself as one of God's treasures. It requires an act of faith, as well as a sound theological understanding of God's relationship with us. Submission and obedience are the key to greatness. Israel's greatness consists in the fact that God revealed Himself to them. This is what places them above all other nations of the world. When the Word of God comes to man it elevates him to a level that is far above everyday human existence. This is implied in Jesus' profound words: "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came-- and the Scripture cannot be broken..."⁶⁹⁸ And God pledges to us that obedience will have a life changing effect for us. "Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the LORD, who makes you holy."⁶⁹⁹ God makes us saints of we obey Him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Part Three: Moses' Third Speech – "What God Will Do for Israel" (27:1-34:12)

I. Confirming of the Covenant in Canaan 27:1-28:68

Three matters are introduced in this chapter:

1. The writing of the law upon stones erected on Mount Ebal vs. 1-4, 8-10
2. The building of an altar of stone upon the same mountain, and vs. 5-7
3. The pronouncing of a curse (and a blessing) on Mount Ebal and Gerizim vs. 11-26

1. The Writing of the Law upon Stones erected on Mount Ebal vs. 1-4, 8-10

⁶⁹⁵ Cf. Matt. 25:23

⁶⁹⁶ Gen. 32:26

⁶⁹⁷ I Kings 8:27

⁶⁹⁸ John 10:34,35

⁶⁹⁹ Lev. 20:8

Moses' main concern in this third address to the nation is the preservation of the law. Loss of knowledge of the law would, inevitably, lead to apostasy and moral ruin. The first thing Israel had to do after crossing the Jordan River was to make a copy of the law in the form of a large, clearly visible monument. The Ten Commandments were engraved upon the two tablets Moses had received from God on top of Mount Sinai. But they were not available for public use; they were kept inside the ark, hidden from the public eye. The Word of God had to be available to everyone. Oral tradition does not guarantee transmission of revelation. The facts of salvation are put in writing so that future generations may know and understand the basis of their redemption. For this reason Peter wrote his Second Epistle, in which he said: "So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things."⁷⁰⁰ If we write down what we say, our words will live even after we are gone. Moses realized the importance of the written Word over the transience of our experiences. The written Word of God is the key to our salvation. For this reason Abraham said to the rich man in hell, who was concerned about the fate of his five brothers: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. . . . If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."⁷⁰¹

The Adam Clarke's Commentary notes about "Mount Ebal" the following: "So the present Hebrew text, but the Samaritan has Mount Gerizim. . . . Many still. . . have no doubt that the Jews have here corrupted the text through their enmity to the Samaritans. On all hands it is allowed that Gerizim abounds with springs, gardens, and orchards, and that it is covered with a beautiful verdure, while Ebal is as naked and as barren as a rock. On this very account the former was highly proper for the ceremony of blessing, and the latter for the ceremony of cursing."

It is not specified how many stones had to be erected on Mount Ebal (or Mount Gerizim), nor how detailed the written law had to be. Some commentators believe that only the Decalogue was to be written out. Others think it may be the blessings and the curses, as is mentioned in Joshua: "Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law-- the blessings and the curses-- just as it is written in the Book of the Law."⁷⁰² It is the general consensus that the instructions Moses gave her regarding the way the stones had to be treated and inscribed would produce monuments that would last throughout the centuries. Archeology has discovered similar stones which are thousands of years old on which the writing is still clearly noticeable.

It seems as if the instructions regarding the building of an altar, in the verses 5-7, are a parenthesis in the directions regarding the writing of the law upon the stones, as if the flow of Moses' thought is interrupted. We have to understand, though, that the altar is an integral part of the law. Without the altar, the law would only condemn man. The law confronts man with his sin and lost condition; the altar stands for atonement and salvation. It is also significant that the altar is there, even before the law is written on the stones. Pardon precedes condemnation.

The altar is not manmade. The stones that were used for its construction were the way God made them. No cutting or chiseling was allowed. The word "burnt offerings" probably covers all the sacrifices that are brought, including the ones that were made for the forgiveness of sins. It is unlikely that only the burnt offering that is described under that name in Leviticus⁷⁰³ is meant here.

Vs. 9 indicates that the nation of Israel has come to a point of immense historical significance. Some forty years earlier God had spoken and said: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."⁷⁰⁴ Here Moses indicates that the great moment has arrived, and he proclaims: "Be silent, O Israel, and listen! You have now become the people of the LORD your God."

The main idea of the introductory words "be silent," and "listen" is to pay close attention. Silence is a necessary factor in our relationship with God. Silence implies that we cease to speak in order to hear. The Hebrew word *shama*, translated with "listen" has the implication of obeying. *Strong's Definitions* defines it as "to hear intelligently (often with implication of attention, obedience)." Being "the people of the Lord" is conditional upon our obedience. That is why Jesus says to us: "You are my friends if you do what I command."⁷⁰⁵

The Matthew Henry's Commentary observes about the solemnity of Moses address that it was: "A particular direction to them with great solemnity to register the words of this law, as soon as they came into Canaan. It was to

⁷⁰⁰ II Pet. 1:12-15

⁷⁰¹ Luke 16:29,31

⁷⁰² Josh. 8:34

⁷⁰³ See Lev. 1:1-17; 6:8-13

⁷⁰⁴ Ex. 19:5,6

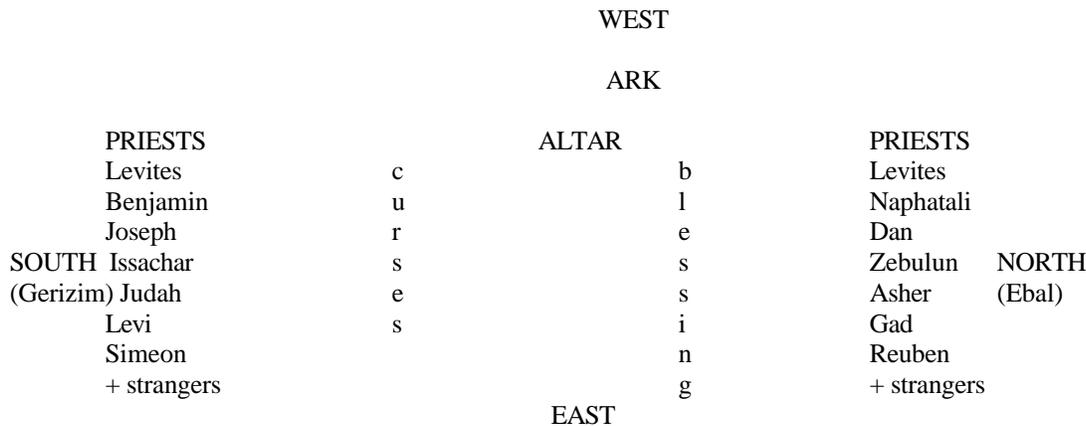
⁷⁰⁵ John 15:14

be done but once, and at their entrance into the land of promise, in token of their taking possession of it under the several provisos and conditions contained in this law. There was a solemn ratification of the covenant between God and Israel at Mount Sinai, when an altar was erected, with twelve pillars, and the book of the covenant was produced, <Ex. 24:4>. That which is here appointed is a somewhat similar solemnity.’

Vs. 11 suggests that, at this point, Moses’ speech may have been interrupted. There may have been a morning and evening session, in which case the gathering was a daylong affair. Precise instructions are given, not only concerning what has to be done and spoken, but also where each tribe was to be positioned and which task they had to perform. As soon as Israel had obtained a solid bridgehead in the Promised Land, Moses’ instructions were carried out by Joshua. We read that Joshua built the altar and that the blessing and curses were called out over Israel from the appointed sites.⁷⁰⁶

The Adam Clarke Commentary states: “In pronouncing these blessings and curses, the Talmud says, six tribes went up toward the top of Mount Gerizim, and six toward the top of Mount Ebal, and the priests and the Levites, and the ark stood beneath in the midst. The priests encompassed the ark, and the Levites stood around about the priests; and all Israel on this side and on that; see <Josh. 8:33>. Then they turned their faces toward Mount Gerizim and pronounced the blessings, Blessed be the man, etc., and those on each side answered AMEN! then they turned their faces toward Mount Ebal, and pronounced the curse, Cursed be the man, etc., and those on each side answered AMEN! till they had finished the blessings and the curses, and afterward they brought stones and built an altar. Some suppose that the Levites were divided into two grand bodies, part standing at or on Mount Gerizim, and part on Mount Ebal, and that with each division were some of the priests.”

According to a diagram in the above mentioned commentary, the arrangement of Israel at the Mounts.



The Adam Clarke Commentary further observes: “Dr. Kennicott, who contends that it was the Decalogue that was written on the stones mentioned in this chapter, says, ‘If we examine these twelve curses, they will appear to contain a strong enforcement of the ten commands; and it is highly probable that the curses were here proclaimed principally to secure obedience to the commandments, as will be made more clear by the following table:

The First, Second, Third, and Fourth Commandments

<Deut. 27:15>. Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image, an abomination to the Lord, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and putteth it in a secret place. And all the people shall answer and say, Amen.

The Fifth Commandment

<Deut. 27:16>. Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother.

The Sixth Commandment

<Deut. 27:25>. Cursed be he that taketh reward to slay an innocent person. <Deut. 27:24>. Cursed be he that smiteth his neighbor secretly. <Deut. 27:18>. Cursed be he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way.

The Seventh Commandment

<Deut. 27:20>. Cursed be he that lieth with his father’s wife. <Deut. 27:21>. Cursed be he that lieth with any beast. <Deut. 27:22>. Cursed be he that lieth with his sister. <Deut. 27:23>. Cursed be he that lieth with his mother-in-law.

The Eighth Commandment

⁷⁰⁶ See Josh. 8:30-35

<Deut. 27:17>. Cursed be he that removeth his neighbor's landmark.

The Ninth Commandment

<Deut. 27:19>. Cursed be he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, fatherless, and widow.

The Tenth Commandment

<Deut. 27:26>. Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them.' ”

The amphitheater formed by the two mountains was a perfect place for the performance Moses prescribed here. The voices of both groups would be clearly heard across the valley of approximately 300 ft. that separates the mountains. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* tells of a rather amusing experiment made by three gentlemen in the nineteenth century that proved the accuracy of Moses' directions, which we quote here: “The experiment was actually made in 1860 by Mr. Mills. ‘We had pitched our tent in the valley, near the foot of Gerizim, on the line between the two mountains, where I have supposed the ark stood. I clambered up Gerizim, and Mr. Williams up Ebal-- preferring that he should have all the cursings, and I all the blessings-- Mr. Edwards remaining with the men at the tent. Having reached the lower spur, I found myself just as if I stood upon a lofty pulpit, and my friend found himself on a similar one on Ebal. Having rested ourselves a little, I opened my Bible and read the blessings in Hebrew; and every word was heard distinctly by those at the tent, as well as by Mr. Edwards on Ebal. My friend then read the cursings in Welsh; and we all heard every word and syllable.’ ”

It seems strange to us that in this chapter the curses are enumerated first and the blessings follow afterward in the next chapter. From a psychological viewpoint, we would favor the reverse. It is true, though, that the Old Testament in general emphasizes man's fallen condition. This is what makes Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which He opens with the Beatitudes, so revolutionary. Man will never be able to understand God's blessings if he is not conscious of his sins and if he doesn't ask for forgiveness.

James compares the observance of the law with our looking into a mirror. God wants us to have a good look at ourselves, but we don't like what we see, and so we turn away and forget, or try to forget. James says that looking closely will give us freedom and blessing. We read: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it-- he will be blessed in what he does.”⁷⁰⁷ It may initially not sound like it, but acknowledgment of the fact that the curse is meant for us will make us understand the essence of grace. In Paul's words: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”⁷⁰⁸

Twelve times the verdict is shouted out: “Cursed is the man...” The people would respond to this by shouting “Amen.” The Hebrew word translated with “cursed” is *'arar*, which is defined by *Strongs Definitions* with “to execrate.” Like the body execrates that which is useless and harmful to it, so sin is to God like excrement. The image is repulsive to us but it clarifies sufficiently what our sins look like in the eyes of a holy God. The “Amen” pronounced by the people confirm the correctness of God's view.

Initially, when man fell into sin, God did not curse him. In the Genesis account we read that God says to Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you.”⁷⁰⁹ When Adam broke the bond with God, he lost his crown as lord of the earth. From that point on, he and his offspring entered into a life that was utterly repulsive to God. As sinful human being we fall as short of the glory of God as excrement compares to delicious food. Only if we discern something of God's glory can we come to the point to pronounce an “Amen” to this. There is in the “Amen” no throwing of stones. Amen stands for a confession of sin, for a pleading guilty before God.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Part Three: Moses' Third Speech – “What God Will Do for Israel” (Continued 27:1-34:12)

I. Confirming of the Covenant in Canaan 28:1-68

1 – The Blessing - verses 1-14

2 – The Curse - verses 15-68

⁷⁰⁷ James 1:22-25

⁷⁰⁸ Gal. 3:13,14

⁷⁰⁹ Gen. 3:17

1 – The Blessing - verses 1-14

The Pulpit Commentary introduces this chapter with: “Having enjoined the proclamations of the blessing and the curse on their entering into possession of Canaan, Moses, for the sake of impressing on the minds of the people both the blessing and the curse, proceeds here to dilate upon both, dwelling especially upon the latter as that which the people the more needed to have brought home to them. As he proceeds, the language of terrible denunciation passes into that of no less terrible prediction, in which the calamities that should come upon the nation because of their apostasy and rebellion are clearly and pointedly foretold.”

The striking feature of this chapter, and of the whole of Moses’ third address to the nation, is indeed the massive emphasis upon the curse. In the previous chapter, the blessings are not even mentioned in the antiphonal ritual that was prescribed to be carried out upon arrival in Canaan although, obviously, the blessing were included in the procedure when Joshua carried out Moses’ instruction.⁷¹⁰ We can only conclude from Joshua’s actions that he incorporated the blessings of the first 14 verses of this chapter in the instructions that are stipulated in the previous chapter.

The question remains, however, why is such emphasis placed upon the curse at the expense of the blessing? Modern psychology teaches that the blessings would be more of an enticement into good moral behavior than the fear of a curse. Moses’ approach confirms Paul’s statements about the character and purpose of the law. Some examples of Paul’s thoughts about the purpose of the law are: “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”⁷¹¹

“For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath.”⁷¹² “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’”⁷¹³ Paul explains what not to expect from the law with the words: “If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.”⁷¹⁴ And what to expect from it: “The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”⁷¹⁵

Matthew Henry’s Commentary states the conditions upon which the blessing of God will descend upon the people: “1. It is upon condition that they diligently hearken to the voice of God (v. 1-2), that they hear God speaking to them by his word, and use their utmost endeavors to acquaint themselves with his will, v. 13. 2. Upon condition that they observe and do all his commandments (and in order to obedience there is need of observation) and that they keep the commandments of God (v. 9) and walk in his ways. Not only do them for once, but keep them for ever; not only set out in his ways, but walk in them to the end. 3. Upon condition that they should not go aside either to the right hand or to the left, either to superstition on the one hand, or profanity on the other; and particularly that they should not go after other gods (v. 14), which was the sin that of all others they were most prone to, and God would be most displeased with. Let them take care to keep up religion, both the form and power of it, in their families and nation, and God would not fail to bless them.”

The first blessing God wanted to bestow upon His people is related to their status in this world: “the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth.” At the foot of Mount Sinai, God had said to Israel: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”⁷¹⁶ The difference between Israel and the rest of the world lies in the fact that God had spoken to them, and that God speaks to the world through them.

The very fact that one is addressed by God produces a dramatic change in man’s status. In His argument with the Jews, Jesus remarked: “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods’? If he called them gods,’ to whom the word of God came-- and the Scripture cannot be broken-- what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’?”⁷¹⁷ The implication of those words is that God calls us gods when He speaks to us. As guardians of God’s revelation on earth, Israel was meant to be a theocracy of priests.

God’s Word elevates man to a position that is far beyond what he would be able to ever reach by himself. God told Israel in this verse that there were privileges and honors connected to the office of their priesthood that

⁷¹⁰ See Josh. 8:34

⁷¹¹ Rom. 3:20

⁷¹² Rom. 4:14,15^a

⁷¹³ Gal. 3:10

⁷¹⁴ Gal. 3:21

⁷¹⁵ Gal. 3:24

⁷¹⁶ Ex. 19:5,6

⁷¹⁷ John 10:34-36

would distinguish them from the rest of the world. Even in times when Israel played no significant role in world history, they were the most important nation in the world. After all, it is God and God alone who is the judge of what is important. Man's opinion, even Israel's opinion about herself carries no weight. The very fact that Israel was, at one point, the sole guardian of God's truth in this world still sets the Jewish race apart in modern times. Anti-Semitism is, in principle, more directed to God's revelation through Israel, than to the fact that Israel rejected her Messiah.

Regrettably, Israel completely misunderstood their God-given status in this world, giving a slanted and self-serving explanation to it. Paul's biting judgment upon his own people was: "You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'"⁷¹⁸ Israel assumed that God had chosen them on the basis of their outstanding qualities which distinguished them from other nations. They did not recognize the fact that their outstanding qualities were the result of God's choice of them, not the reason for it.

God's benediction of Israel is expressed in a seven-fold blessing, all put in terms of earthly prosperity.

The first blessing refers to life in the city or in the country. The first city mentioned in the Bible is the one built by Cain which he named it after his son Enoch.⁷¹⁹ From that time on cities were built to give the inhabitants a sense of security. After the flood, the tendency to build cities became a paranoia. Nimrod, of whom the Bible says: "He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, 'Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD,'"⁷²⁰ constructed a whole empire. The city wall became a human substitute for divine protection. The culmination of it all was the construction of the Tower of Babel. More than anything else, the city became the emblem of sin and rebellion in the Bible. In this blessing, God becomes Himself the protecting wall around human life. The distinction between life in the city and life in the country is erased. All God's children become city-dwellers. David expresses this in the words: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. ... There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day."⁷²¹

The second blessing pertains to fruitfulness: the fruit of the womb, the fruit of the land, the fruit of the herd. God blesses the family. This blessing refers, of course, in the first place to children born in a home. Modern man no longer views the large family as a token of God's blessing. In our complex modern society the large family is, generally speaking, condemned to poverty. In our day, prosperity is, not necessarily, a sign of God's approval either. The "Green Power" Gospel is not a true expression of Old Testament truth.

Although God guarantees that He will provide for our needs in the material realm, the real blessings cannot be expressed in terms of children, harvests, and herds. The essence of God's blessings is spiritual. The gold on earth is not the same material that is used for the streets of the New Jerusalem. We acquire the right perspective if we place this chapter next to the first chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, where we read: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."⁷²²

Paul speaks elsewhere about people "who think that godliness is a means to financial gain." He adds: "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness."⁷²³ God's blessing far surpasses any earthly gain. The essence of it is the intimacy of His love and the sharing of His glory. This may happen even if we lose a loved one or face bankruptcy.

Vs. 5 "Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed" has puzzled interpreters for centuries. The KJV reads: "Blessed shall be thy basket and thy store." *The Adam Clarke Commentary* makes the following observation: "[Store.] Mish'eret..., kneading-trough, or remainder; all that is laid up for future use as well as what is prepared for present consumption. Some think that by basket all their property abroad may be meant, and by store all that they have at home, i. e., all that is in the fields and all that is in the houses. The following note of Mr. Harmer is important: 'Commentators seem to be at a great loss how to explain the basket and the store mentioned <Deut.

⁷¹⁸ Rom. 2:23,24

⁷¹⁹ See Gen. 4:17

⁷²⁰ Gen. 10:9

⁷²¹ Ps. 46:1-5

⁷²² Eph. 1:3

⁷²³ I Tim. 6:5-11

28:5,17>. Why Moses, who in the other verses mentions things in general, should in this case be so minute as to mention baskets seems strange; and they that interpret either the first or the second of these words of the repositories of their corn, etc., forget that their barns or storehouses are spoken of presently after this in <Deut. 28:8>. Might I be permitted to give my opinion here, I should say that the basket, tene'..., in this place means their traveling baskets, and the other word mish'eret... (their store), signifies their leather bags, in both which they were wont to carry things in traveling. The first of these words occurs nowhere else in the Scriptures but in the account that is given us of the conveyance in which they were to carry their first-fruits to Jerusalem; the other nowhere but in the description of the hurrying journey of Israel out of Egypt, where it means the utensils in which they then carried their dough, which I have shown elsewhere in these papers means a piece of leather drawn together by rings, and forming a kind of bag. Agreeably to this, Hasselquist informs us that the Eastern people use baskets in traveling; for, speaking of that species of the palm tree which produces dates, and its great usefulness to the people of those countries, he tells us that of the leaves of this tree they make baskets, or rather a kind of short bags, which are used in Turkey on journeys and in their houses, pages 261, 262. Hampers and panniers are English terms denoting traveling baskets, as tene seems to be a Hebrew word of the same general import, though their forms might very much differ, as it is certain that of the traveling baskets mentioned by Hasselquist now does.' " The solution to the problem may be found if we consider the words "basket" and "trough" to be figures of speech that stand for certain actions, not for objects. If a member of a mountain tribe in Irian Jaya, Indonesia would have said to me: "God bless your net bag," I would have understood him to mean that he wished me God's blessing on my journey.

There is a reference to dough and kneading troughs during the exodus from Egypt. We read, when the people were leaving: "So the people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing."⁷²⁴ The dough and the kneading trough may have become symbols of the exodus, in the same way as, to us, the cross has become the emblem of our salvation. This would give to the mention of the basket and the trough a much deeper meaning, as it stands for the whole of the pilgrimage of God's people. This makes vs. 6: "You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out" into much more than merely "journeying mercies." Moses' words cover our whole passage through life: our coming into this world and our leaving it for our eternal home. Obedience to God's law amounts to a life of blessing.

For Israel, the confrontation with the enemy was, in the first place, related to their conquest of Canaan. God promised to Joshua regarding the nations that inhabited the Promised Land: "No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life."⁷²⁵ For us the implication of God's blessing in relation to our enemies is mainly spiritual. It may be that God will sometimes give military victories, but our real enemy is never a fellow human being. Paul says clearly: "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."⁷²⁶ Obedience to the Word of God assures us of victory over Satan. The devil and his demons will never be able to stand against us if we are under the protection of the power of our Lord Jesus Christ. This does not necessarily mean that we will not sustain any damage or suffer injuries. Satan never conquered our Lord, but Jesus did die on the cross. Jesus warns His disciples: "It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."⁷²⁷ We may lose loved ones, or even our own lives, but the battle has been won. Luther caught the rapture of this when he wrote: "Let goods and kindred go, This mortal life also; The body they may kill..."⁷²⁸

Vs. 8 contains a promise of success. "The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to." Psalm One says of the person whose "delight is in the law of the LORD," "He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers." There are two aspects to God's blessings: Man can cultivate the land but he has no control over the growing of his crop. Without God's blessing there is no harvest. The tree planted by streams of water can take no credit for the fruit it produces. But the things we "put our hand to" and the "whatever he does..." refer to our initiative, our energy, and our ingenuity. It is required of man to plan and work, and God promises success. It is important to understand the framework in which these promises of blessing are made. Our "delight is in the law of the LORD" will set the boundaries of our endeavors. All prayers that are made according to the will of God will be answered. The Apostle John writes: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything

⁷²⁴ Ex. 12:34

⁷²⁵ Josh. 1:5

⁷²⁶ Eph. 6:12

⁷²⁷ Matt. 10:25,28

⁷²⁸ From Martin Luther – "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us-- whatever we ask-- we know that we have what we asked of him."⁷²⁹ It was God's will for Israel to occupy the land, to live in it, and to make it a testimony for the rest of the world. It is within the framework of this design that God promised unlimited blessing to those who remained obedient to the task. Personal satisfaction is not excluded but it is a byproduct of the accomplishment of the task. Those who work only for their own gratification will never reach their goal. Fulfillment is for those who do not seek it.

The peak of blessing is reached in the verses 9 and 10 – “The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath.” Holiness can never be produced by human effort; it is an exclusively divine attribute. The Hebrew word translated with “holy” is *qadosh*. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* writes about the holiness of Israel: “They are ‘holy’ by their relationship to the ‘holy’ God.... Based on the intimate nature of the relationship, God expected His people to live up to His ‘holy’ expectations and, thus, to demonstrate that they were a ‘holy nation’.”

God takes responsibility for our holiness. We read in connection with the consecration of the priests: “Consider them holy, because I the LORD am holy-- I who make you holy.”⁷³⁰ And addressing the nation as a whole, God said: “Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the LORD, who makes you holy.”⁷³¹

Our understanding of the word “holy” is usually in terms of absence of sin. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “holy” as “1 : worthy of absolute devotion 2 : SACRED 3 : having a divine quality synonymously: hallowed, blessed, sanctified, consecrated.” In the Biblical sense, holy also has a relational connotation. Besides being the sum of eternal divine attributes, holiness means belonging to God who is holy. This is expressed in the definition “consecrated.” It is a logical conclusion that God requires purity. He will never associate Himself with things or persons polluted. Purification is part of the relationship. Man may be responsible to perform certain rituals, as the Israelites were required, but the blood of animals, nor the sprinkling with water could produce moral integrity. Only God can produce purity in us. This is clear from Jesus' words to His disciples: “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”⁷³²

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia writes about Israel's relationship with God: “The relation between Yahweh and Israel a unique relation.-- Other nations feared their deities; Israel was expected not only to fear Yahweh but to love Him and cleave to Him <Deut 4:10; 5:29; 6:5; 10:12,20; 11:1,13,22; 13:3-4; 17:19; 19:9; 28:58; 30:6,16,20; 31:12-13>. The highest privileges are theirs because they are partakers of the covenant blessings; all others are strangers and foreigners, except they be admitted into Israel by special permission <23:1-8>.”

The sanctification of Israel intended to be much more than a process of purification of one nation; it was meant to be a testimony for the world. God wanted Israel to be a model for the nations which would draw their attention to the fact that there was a people made up of human beings like everyone else in the world, who lived a life that could not be explained in terms of natural phenomena. Israel's priesthood in the world could only draw other people to the truth of God's revelation if they lived out that truth in their daily existence.

God had promised Israel's status in the world “under oath.” This did not mean, however, that they would automatically be promoted. Without obedience the oath would be powerless. The writer to the Hebrews points this out in speaking about God's oath about and the importance of our faith in order to make the oath effective. We read: “Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”⁷³³ In the New Testament dispensation in which we live, the effectiveness of our priesthood depends upon Christ's priesthood in our behalf in heaven.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary writes about Israel's status in this world: “They should have honor among their neighbors (v. 1): The Lord thy God will set thee on high above all nations. He made them so, by taking them into covenant with himself, Deut 26:19. And he would make them more and more so by their outward prosperity, if they would not by sin disparage themselves. Two things should help to make them great among the nations:-First, Their wealth (v. 12): ‘Thou shalt lend to many nations upon interest’ (which they were allowed to take

⁷²⁹ I John 5:14,15

⁷³⁰ Lev. 21:8

⁷³¹ Lev. 20:7,8

⁷³² John 15:3

⁷³³ Heb. 6:17-20

from the neighboring nations), 'but thou shalt not have occasion to borrow.' This would give them great influence with all about them; for the borrower is servant to the lender. It may be meant of trade and commerce, that they should export abundantly more than they should import, which would keep the balance on their side. Secondly, Their power (v. 13): 'The Lord shall make thee the head, to give law to all about thee, to exact tribute, and to arbitrate all controversies.' Every sheaf should bow to theirs, which would make them so considerable that all the people of the earth would be afraid of them (v. 10), that is, would reverence their true grandeur, and dread making them their enemies. The flourishing of religion among them, and the blessing of God upon them, would make them formidable to all their neighbors, terrible as an army with banners."

According to Matthew Henry's astute analysis, God wanted Israel to have a position of power from which they would give their testimony of God's revelation in this world. This philosophy reached its peak under the reign of King Solomon. The queen of Sheba testified to Solomon: "I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness."⁷³⁴ She was convinced of the reality of God when she saw the power, wealth, and wisdom of Solomon.

In the dispensation in which we live, the Gospel has changed this philosophy. The church of Jesus Christ does not play the role in this world that Israel was meant to play in the Old Testament. The nations of the world will not be convinced of God's reality by the church's display of power and wealth, even if those would exist. In Paul's words: "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-and the things that are not-to nullify the things that are."⁷³⁵ The Gospel of "Green Power" that is preached by some has no foundation in Biblical truth.

In the light of the New Testament revelation, we understand that Israel's position in this world under the old dispensation was an image of the real balance of power that exists in the heavenly places. Behind the great nations of this world stand the princes of the spiritual realms. The angel who spoke with Daniel mentioned "the prince of the Persian kingdom," and "the prince of Greece," who were obviously demonic beings in charge of the rise and fall of those nations.⁷³⁶ The power of the church of Jesus Christ does not lie in her ability to defend herself against military invasions, or in her monetary power to extend loans, but in the influence she exercises in the heavenly places. Jesus promised Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."⁷³⁷

During the historic meeting between Stalin and Churchill, the two leaders took an inventory of the nations that were at their side. Churchill mentioned the Pope, to which Stalin, mockingly, replied: "The Pope! How many divisions does he have?" In the meantime, communism in Russia is fallen from power, but the church is still alive and well. As a matter of fact, the Berlin Wall came down as a result of a prayer vigil in some cities in East Germany.

The power of the Gospel is, probably best illustrated in Peter's words to the crippled man at the temple gate: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."⁷³⁸

God introduced a new dispensation, long before the cross where Christ would die was erected, as He said to Zerubbabel: " 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty. 'What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of 'God bless it! God bless it!' "⁷³⁹ The temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt and God's revelation on earth was reestablished, not by means of military power and affluence, but through the efforts of a small group of returned refugees, who were "not many ... wise by human standards; not many ... influential; not many ... of noble birth." God speaks to people of every dispensation in a language they can understand. In the Old Testament, the power of the cross would have seemed to be even a greater foolishness than some considers it now. We know now that "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength,"⁷⁴⁰ or do we?

⁷³⁴ I Kings 10:7-9

⁷³⁵ I Cor. 1:26-28

⁷³⁶ See Dan. 10:13,20

⁷³⁷ Matt. 16:19

⁷³⁸ Acts 3:6

⁷³⁹ Zech. 4:6,7

⁷⁴⁰ I Cor. 1:25,26

2 – The Curse - verses 15-68

The reason for the curse described in the following verses is Israel's refusal to pay attention to God's commands. The Hebrew words translated with "commands and decrees" are *mitzvah* and *chuqqah*. Both words have basically the same meaning; they demand obedience. Obedience is the most basic factor in our relationship with God. As our bodies live because of obedience to the laws of nature, so our souls depend upon the moral precepts God has laid down for us. If we refuse to eat, or drink, or breathe we will die physically. If we lay aside God's moral law, which is the expression of His character and the statement of His love for us, our souls will wither. For Israel, these principles were expressed in terms of a physical presence of God at a geographical location. God revealed Himself to the people of Israel in the land of Israel. To be evicted from the Promised Land would mean the ultimate death. This eviction forms the central part of the enumeration of curses.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary introduces this section by saying: "Banishment from the promised inheritance was the extreme of malediction. It signified the loss of God's special presence and favor, loss of the appointed sacramental access to him on his holy hill of Zion, and loss of status as the people of God's kingdom. In this long section of curses, therefore, siege and exile repeatedly appear as the climax of woe. There is a series of parallel pictures of the disastrous future looming before this nation so prone to unfaithfulness (vv. 20-26,27-37,38-48,49-57,58-68). The first three and the last of these pictures culminate in the doom of conquest by the enemy, with its dreadful sequel (vv. 25,26; 36,37; 48; 63-68); the fourth is completely devoted to that accursed event (vv. 49-57). This extended description of particular evils follows an introductory, ritualistic formulation of the covenant's curse sanctions (vv. 15-19)."

The curses in the verses 16-19 correspond, with only slight variations, in sequence and content to the blessings pronounced in the first part of the chapter. The curses are the exact opposite of the blessings. They describe the negative effects on life because of the absence of God's grace. C. S. Lewis once told how he went about writing his book *Screwtape Letters*. He took the positive aspects of life in fellowship with God and turned them into negatives, demonstrating how Satan would try to disrupt the relationship of a child of God with his heavenly Father. He admitted that the writing had been a tedious job.

The curses in these verses are only an introduction to the horrors that are described further down. Israel's abandonment of her relationship with God, and her involvement with demonic powers would bring her to the lowest level of degradation a human being could sink. Daily life would be sheer terror, and people who, under normal circumstances, would be tender and civilized would become worse than the lowest cannibal this earth has produced. Women would become murderers and eat their own children in secret.

There are some instances in Israel's history where cannibalism is recorded. During the reign of King Joram and Samaria was besieged, we read the following incident: "As the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried to him, 'Help me, my lord the king!' The king replied, 'If the LORD does not help you, where can I get help for you? From the threshing floor? From the winepress? Then he asked her, 'What's the matter?' She answered, 'This woman said to me, 'Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we'll eat my son.' So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, 'Give up your son so we may eat him,' but she had hidden him.'"⁷⁴¹ There are, however, no records that the curse that was predicted in this chapter ever took effect in its gruesome details.

When we read predictions like these, we wonder how a human being could fall to such a level. Even most animals never reach such depth of depravity. And the kind of people Moses describes are the ones of whom this kind of behavior would be considered to be impossible. The people who would commit such crimes are, in Moses' words, "the most gentle and sensitive man among you" (vs. 54), and "the most gentle and sensitive woman among you--so sensitive and gentle that she would not venture to touch the ground with the sole of her foot..."(vs. 56). We tend to think that such degradation would be impossible, but the Bible shows us what can happen to "normal, civilized people" who disregard God's rule of life. But for the grace of God, I could be such a person.

All other curses mentioned in this chapter seem to be mild in comparison with this curse of the change of character that can occur in everyone who decides not to obey the law of God. Paul's words are appropriate in this context: "Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts..."⁷⁴² The curse consists in God leaving man to himself and his own devices.

⁷⁴¹ II Kings 6:26-29

⁷⁴² Rom. 1:21-24

The curse in the verses 20-24 seems to be due to climatological changes of the area in which Palestine is located. The diseases that are mentioned are the result of blight, and mildew, and of prolonged droughts. We don't know how much the climate of that part of the world has changed over the centuries. The Bible mentions a few instances of famine in the land. But, generally speaking, the land "flowing with milk and honey" must have had stable and favorable weather which promoted health for man and beast.

The Fausset's Bible Dictionary writes about the Climate of Palestine: "The temperature and seasons resemble California. A sea breeze from the N.W. from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. mitigates the four months' midsummer heat. The khamsin or sirocco blows in February, March, and April. When it comes from the E. it darkens the air and fills everything with fine dust.... The average fall of rain at Jerusalem is 61.6 inches; whereas the London mean is only 25. Rain comes most from S. or S.W. (Luke 12:54) It begins in October or early in November, and continues to the end of February or middle of March, rarely to the end of April. Not a continuous rain, but a succession of showers or storms with intervals of fine weather for a few weeks in December and January. A drought of three months before harvest is fatal to the crops (Amos 4:7). None falls from April to October or November. Thus but two seasons are specified, 'winter and summer,' 'cold and heat,' 'seedtime and harvest.' But heavy saturating dews fall in summer, and thick fogs often prevail at night. In Jericho and the Ghor, sunk so deep below the sea level, the heat is much greater, owing to the absence of breeze, the enclosure by heights, the sandy soil, and the earth's internal heat; the harvest is a month in advance of that of the highland. The seacoast lowland has the heat mitigated by sea breeze, but it is hotter than the uplands." This description, however, is based on the present, twentieth century conditions. There are indications that the climate has changed over the millennia. Some changes may be the result of man's unwise meddling which upset the ecological balance, some must have been caused by "an act of God" as suggested in this passage.

The afflictions described in the verses 25-29 are of a political nature. The suffering of the people in those verses is due to enemy invasions. The "boils of Egypt and ... tumors, festering sores and the itch, ... the madness, blindness and confusion of mind" can all be attributed to conditions of the battlefield where the carcasses were left to rot, causing widespread epidemics.

Actually, the whole section from the verses 25-37 gives a description of a war condition. The marriage that is never realized is a clear reference to the law of an earlier chapter which refers to a war situation. We read there: "If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married."⁷⁴³ The same condition applies to the building of a house and the planting of a vineyard, none of which can be enjoyed because the war interrupted daily life. The ox is slaughtered by enemy soldiers, the donkey is recruited in the enemy army and the children are led away into captivity.

Most of the disasters mentioned in the verses 38-42 are due to natural disasters: locusts, worms, and draught account for poor harvests. The mention in this context of the sons and daughters who are led into captivity may refer to a shortage of labor which would drastically cut into the harvesting, causing severe shortages.

The economy of the country would be taken over by the aliens living in it (vs. 43,44). It is not uncommon to see aliens in charge of the market in this world. Such a situation often evokes jealousy and racial tension. The fact that Jews have formed the backbone of finance in the western world accounts for much anti-Semitism, and the role the Chinese play in commerce in many Asian countries has caused their discrimination and persecution, particularly, in Indonesia. Here, the Lord predicts that this will happen in Israel. The people of Israel will become the tail in their own homeland.

Vs. 60 mentions the plagues of Egypt which had been the means by which God had brought about the liberation of His people. "He will bring upon you all the diseases of Egypt that you dreaded, and they will cling to you." The ten plagues were a scourge to the Egyptians to beat them into a position in which they finally let the Israelites go. They were severe but they did not last. These and similar plagues are mentioned here as lasting afflictions for the Israelites who have rejected the God who saved them.

Vs. 62 is a reference to God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be numerous as the stars in the sky. We read in Genesis: "He [God] took him outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." The monumental promise to Abraham which became the foundation of his justification, can be undone by the unfaithfulness of his descendants. Only a few stars will be left in the sky. In Daniel's prophecy this means that only a few wise and righteous will remain out of millions of people. "Those who

⁷⁴³ Deut. 24:5

are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."⁷⁴⁴

The Matthew Henry's Commentary writes about the verses 64-68: "It should seem that in the former part of this commination Moses foretells their captivity in Babylon, and the calamities which introduced and attended that, by which, even after their return, they were brought to that low and poor condition which is described, v. 44. That their enemies should be the head, and they the tail: but here, in this latter part, he foretells their last destruction by the Romans and their dispersion thereupon. And the present deplorable state of the Jewish nation, and of all that have incorporated themselves with them, by embracing their religion, does so fully and exactly answer to the prediction in these verses that it serves for an incontestable proof of the truth of prophecy, and consequently of the divine authority of the scripture. And, this last destruction being here represented as more dreadful than the former, it shows that their sin, in rejecting Christ and his gospel, was more heinous and more provoking to God than idolatry itself, and left them more under the power of Satan; for their captivity in Babylon cured them effectually of their idolatry in seventy years' time; but under this last destruction now for above 1600 years they continue incurably averse to the Lord Jesus."⁷⁴⁵

Hitler's "Final Solution" which makes all previous anti-Semitic pogroms seem bleak was, undoubtedly, the outcome of this prophecy. The Holocaust is unparalleled in horror in world history. The irony, if we may use such a word in this context, is that the Jews that caught Hitler's attention were not the idol worshippers or the liberals but the ones who had preserved the tradition of Judaism and who followed the precepts of the law in a meticulously. They had, however, rejected the righteousness that God had made available for them in their Messiah. For that reason the Apostle Paul wrote: "What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone.'"⁷⁴⁶ Paul also predicted the restoration of Israel. He states: "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in."⁷⁴⁷ The rebirth of the state of Israel of which Matthew Henry was ignorant is, undoubtedly, the beginning of fulfillment of this prophecy.

In general, Moses' predictions have not come through in their full extent. Israel has suffered enormously over the centuries, but it has not been destroyed. God has not carried out the full measure of this curse. In Paul's words: "As far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs."⁷⁴⁸ The intent of the severity of the curse was obviously a deterrent to the nation to keep them from the extreme measures that God could have carried out but didn't.

There are no Biblical references that record the return of the Israelites to Egypt with the exception of the group that was left behind at the destruction of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar and who dragged the prophet Jeremiah with them.⁷⁴⁹

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments on vs. 68 with: "The accomplishment of this prediction took place under Titus, when, according to Josephus, multitudes of Jews were transported in ships to the land of the Nile, and sold as slaves. Those above 17 years of age were dispatched to various parts of the Roman empire, to be employed in the public works, or doomed to fight with wild beasts in the amphitheaters. Those under 17 were exposed as slaves in such numbers and such abject circumstances that the market was glutted with them. Thirty were offered for a trifle, and it was often difficult to find a purchaser."

Barnes' Notes adds to this: "This is the climax. As the Exodus from Egypt was as it were the birth of the nation into its covenant relationship with God, so the return to the house of bondage is in like manner the death of it. The mode of conveyance, 'in ships,' is added to heighten the contrast. They crossed the sea from Egypt with a high hand, the waves being parted before them. They should go back again cooped up in slave ships."

Moses suggests in vs. 63 that the Lord would enjoy crushing His the people who disobey Him. We read: "Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you." The voice of "Wisdom" in the book of Proverbs seems to say the same thing: "If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. But since you rejected me

⁷⁴⁴ Dan. 12:3

⁷⁴⁵ Matthew Henry's information is dated a few centuries earlier.

Recent history has modified the picture somewhat. But the restoration of Israel is as much a fulfillment of prophecy as her dispersion.

⁷⁴⁶ Rom. 9:30-32

⁷⁴⁷ Rom. 11:25

⁷⁴⁸ Rom. 11:28

⁷⁴⁹ See Jer. 42:1-43:7

when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you-- when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you."⁷⁵⁰

These statements do not seem to be in accordance with what we read elsewhere in Scripture about God's reaction to the suffering mankind hauls over itself by disobedience. Jeremiah's tears were God's tears over Israel. We read that God says to the prophet: "Speak this word to them: 'Let my eyes overflow with tears night and day without ceasing; for my virgin daughter--my people-- has suffered a grievous wound, a crushing blow."⁷⁵¹ Those are not the words of a sadistic God who rejoices in the pain of His creatures. Luke's Gospel describes Jesus' sentiments over the city of Jerusalem: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-but now it is hidden from your eyes.'⁷⁵²

The only conclusion we can draw from the apparent inconsistency is that evil man projects his own evil character upon the character of God. We are not inferring that Moses was an evil man, but he painted a picture of the thoughts of the person who was faced with God's opposition toward him. The very fact that the Word has become flesh and dwelt among us, and that "He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows... [that]he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; [and] the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,"⁷⁵³ is enough proof that Moses' words, when taken out of context, are not a true representation of the character of God. The context is, of course, the deciding factor for the interpretation of these words.

In conclusion, we repeat that most of the curses detailed in this chapter have never come over the nation of Israel in their full extend. This is not an indication that prophecy remains unfulfilled. It proves that the intent of Moses' speech was not to prophesy but to deter. The very fact that most threats were only carried out in part indicates that the expounding of the curses has had its desired effect.

Announcement of God's judgment is never meant to be absolute and irreversible. The door for repentance and escape is always left open. The purpose of announcement of judgment is always to lead people to repentance, never to frighten them with an outcome that is unavoidable.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Part Three: Moses' Third Speech – "What God Will Do for Israel" (Continued 27:1-34:12)

II. Establishment of the Covenant in Palestine 29:1-30:20

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament summarizes this chapter by saying: "The obligation binding upon the people to fulfill the covenant is introduced by Moses with an appeal to all that the Lord had done for Israel (Deut 29:2-9); and this is followed by a summons to enter into the covenant which the Lord was concluding with them now, that He might be their God, and fulfill His promises concerning them (vv. 10-15), with a repeated allusion to the punishment which threatened them in case of apostasy (vv. 16-29), and the eventual restoration on the ground of sincere repentance and return to the Lord (Deut 30:1-14), and finally another solemn adjuration, with a blessing and a curse before them, to make choice of the blessing (vv. 15-20)."

1. Moses' appeal to God's acts in the past vs. 2-9

There is some difference of opinion among scholars as to whether vs. 1 (These are the terms of the covenant the LORD commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb) are the conclusion of the previous chapter or the introduction to this one. For purposes of interpretation, however, this does not make any difference.

Vs. 29 expresses the core of Moses' address to the nation here: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law." There are things that are hidden in God to which a human being has no access. With our finite minds we cannot read the infinite. For this reason, many of our questions remain unanswered. Ronald Dunn, in his book *When Heaven is Silent*, observes that we often receive no answer to our questions because we ask the wrong questions.

⁷⁵⁰ Prov. 1:23-27

⁷⁵¹ Jer. 14:17

⁷⁵² Luke 19:41,42

⁷⁵³ Isa. 53:4,5

The point of Moses' words here is that God wants us to give the right interpretation to what He has revealed to us. The reproach "To this day the LORD has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear," seems to refer to the mental attitude of the people: a closed mind, a wrong approach, or asking the wrong questions. It should be obvious enough that, if God brought them out of Egypt and led them through a region where human life was constantly endangered, not for a brief period of time, but for forty years, He would be able to lead and keep them in the future that lay ahead of them. God had given them some very tangible indications of His supernatural care during those years. "During the forty years that I led you through the desert, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet." We find these same words spoken at an earlier occasion.⁷⁵⁴ No one in his right mind could give a natural explanation for such a phenomenon. Vs. 6 reads: "You ate no bread and drank no wine or other fermented drink. I did this so that you might know that I am the LORD your God." This verse does not refer to the food God gave them to substitute for the bread and wine. The psalmist tells the story with the words: "He rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grain of heaven. Men ate the bread of angels; he sent them all the food they could eat."⁷⁵⁵

In vs. 3, Moses refers to the Ten Plagues of Egypt, saying, "With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those miraculous signs and great wonders." Yet most of the people that were addressed here had not even been born or were too young to remember when the plagues occurred. Yet they are treated as eyewitnesses on the basis of what they have heard from their parents. God expected them to be able to interpret their history and build their faith in Him on the facts of salvation that took place before they came into the world. Gideon's answer to the angel of the Lord confirms this. He said: "Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?'"⁷⁵⁶

The oral and written records of the facts of salvation are meant to be the basis of our faith in God for the present day. For the same reason Abraham said to the rich man in hell: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."... "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."⁷⁵⁷ Because of this record, we can be like eyewitnesses to the facts of salvation. They happened for us and to us. As the Negro Spiritual says: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there...?"

Vs. 4 suggests that the people had not identified themselves with the facts that brought about their freedom and salvation. It should not be read as if God had not given them the possibility to understand; they simply had not bothered to absorb the facts.

The Adam Clarke Commentary comments on vs. 4: "[The Lord hath not given you a heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day.] Some critics read this verse interrogatively: And hath not God given you a heart, etc.? because they suppose that God could not reprehend them for the non-performance of a duty, when he had neither given them a mind to perceive the obligation of it, nor strength to perform it, had that obligation been known. Though this is strictly just, yet there is no need for the interrogation, as the words only imply that they had not such a heart, etc., not because God had not given them all the means of knowledge, and helps of his grace and Spirit, which were necessary; but they had not made a faithful use of their advantages, and therefore they had not that wise, loving, and obedient heart which they otherwise might have had. If they had had such a heart, it would have been God's gift, for he is the author of all good; and that they had not such a heart was a proof that they had grieved his Spirit and abused the grace which he had afforded them to produce that gracious change, the want of which is here deplored. Hence, God himself is represented as grieved because they were unchanged and disobedient: 'O that there were such a heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them and with their children for ever!'"

We can only say to others: "Were you there when the crucified my Lord?" if we have been crucified with Christ ourselves.

The Matthew Henry's Commentary offers some precious insight on the fact that Moses reminds the people of the miracles of the past. He did this: "As an encouragement to them to believe that God would indeed be to them a God, for he would not have done so much for them if he had not designed more, to which all he had hitherto done was but a preface (as it were) or introduction; nay, he had shown himself a God in what he had hitherto done for them, which might raise their expectations of something great and answering the vast extent and compass of that pregnant promise, that God would be to them a God."

If we approach Moses' lament from a positive angle, we may say that, if we acquire understanding and have insight into the meaning of the events of our lives, that this is a gift of God.

⁷⁵⁴ Deut. 8:4

⁷⁵⁵ Ps. 78:24,25

⁷⁵⁶ Judg. 6:13

⁷⁵⁷ Luke 16:29,31

Jesus said to His disciples: “When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.”⁷⁵⁸ And David says in one of the psalms: “The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.”⁷⁵⁹ The KJV puts it even more profoundly: “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him.”

The miracles that ought to have led the people to understanding God’s dealings with them consisted in the smaller and greater things of life: the length of wear of their clothes, the food they ate, but also the unexpected victory over the kings of Sihon and Bashan.

Moses advises the people that, if they obey the terms of the covenant, they will prosper in everything they do. The Hebrew word used here is interesting; it has no relation to what we consider to be prosperous or successful. The word *sakal* is defined as: “to be circumspect and hence, intelligent.” It is not the outcome but the way of approach that is emphasized.

Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words writes: “The basic meaning of sakal seems to be ‘to look at, to give attention to,’ as illustrated in this parallelism: ‘That they may see, and know, and consider, and understand...’ <Isa. 41:20>. From this develops the connotation of insight, intellectual comprehension: ‘Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom... But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me...’ <Jer. 9:23-24>. As here, it is frequently used along with and in parallelism to the Hebrew yada`, ‘to know’ (primarily experientially). As is true of chakam, ‘to be wise,’ sakal never concerns abstract prudence, but acting prudently: ‘Therefore the prudent shall keep silence...’ <Amos 5:13>; ‘...he hath left off to be wise...’ <Ps. 36:3>.”

There is, therefore, in the word *sakal* the suggestion of knowing God, and of experiencing Him. The key to knowing God is obedience. Intimate knowledge of God may bring on prosperity as a byproduct but success in the material realm has no direct connection to it. As a matter of fact, the people who know God best are often those who are not on the world’s “Who’s who list.” Yet, the Old Testament uses material prosperity often as an image of blessing. The New Testament emphasizes that the real milk and honey is found in the heavenly places.

The day Moses addressed the people was the day of renewal of the covenant. Vs. 12 tells us: “You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the LORD your God, a covenant the LORD is making with you this day and sealing with an oath.”

This entering into a covenant consisted of a prescribed ritual that we find illustrated in God’s dealing with Abraham. We read in Genesis: “So the LORD said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.’ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ... When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates’ ...”⁷⁶⁰ At the entering into a covenant both parties would walk between the pieces of the sacrificial animal.

The Adam Clarke Commentary explains this entering into a covenant as follows: “[That thou shouldest enter] L^a `aabar, to pass through, that is, between the separated parts of the covenant sacrifice. See <Gen. 15:18> [And into his oath] Thus we find that in a covenant were these seven particulars:

1. The parties about to contract were considered as being hitherto separated.
2. They now agree to enter into a state of close and permanent amity.
3. They meet together in a solemn manner for this purpose.
4. A sacrifice is offered to God on the occasion, for the whole is a religious act.
5. The victim is separated exactly into two equal parts, the separation being in the direction of the spine; and these parts are laid opposite to each other, sufficient room being allowed for the contracting parties to pass between them.
6. The contracting parties meet in the victim, and the conditions of the covenant by which they are to be mutually bound are recited.
7. An oath is taken by these parties that they shall punctually and faithfully perform their respective conditions and thus the covenant is made and ratified.”

When God made His covenant with Abraham, He alone passed between the pieces of the cleft animals. As Israel enters into this covenant with God, the people pass through, meeting God who had passed there four centuries earlier. In the words of Adam Clarke: “The contracting parties meet in the victim, and the conditions of the covenant

⁷⁵⁸ John 16:13,14

⁷⁵⁹ Ps. 25:14

⁷⁶⁰ Gen. 15:9-12, 17,18

by which they are to be mutually bound are recited.” It is difficult to imagine a clearer picture of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Christ’s body was torn in two on the cross, as was the curtain in the temple, and we meet God between the torn pieces.

Vs. 14 extends the part represented by the people also to those who were not present at that time. Initially, this may have meant that not only the representatives of the people who were listening to Moses’ speech, but the nation as a whole who were being represented, were involved in the conclusion of the covenant. Commenting on vs. 10, *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* writes: “[Ye stand this day all of you before the Lord your God.] Moses had (Deut 29:2) convoked an assembly; and though, from the language of this passage, he apparently addressed the whole people of Israel, of all ages and conditions, young as well as old, menials as well as masters, naturalized strangers as well as native Israelites, yet, in reality, the convention was confined to ‘the captains of the tribes’ ... ‘your heads, your tribes’ (Num. 5:1; 17:2; 36:1) ... -the (twelve) princes of tribes (tribes being added merely by way of illustration, as in Deut 33:5); ‘your elders’... the 70 and other heads of distinguished families; although ‘elders,’ when no distinction is expressed, include the princes also (Deut 31:28); ‘and your officers’... and from written documents being much employed in the administration of justice, magistrates, leaders (Deut 1:15; 31:28; Num. 11:16)... and your judges (cf. Ex. 18:21; Deut. 1:15; Josh 23:2)]-the three established orders of national representatives (Deut 31:28) [constituting the *ʿedaah*..., or sometimes the *qaahal* (OT:6951)-i.e., the congregation (Deut 31:30; Ex 12:3; Num 27:2)] to whom the communication was made in the first instance, and by whom it would be repeated to all the people.”

It is also quite likely, however, that Moses looked over the heads of the generation he was addressing to the generations to come, and eventually to all the nations of the world. In the same way, Jesus prayed on the night of His going to the cross: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.”⁷⁶¹ It is true that only Israel left the slavery of Egypt and entered the freedom of Canaan, but God wants every human soul to experience redemption from the slavery of sin and the freedom of entering into His rest. Moses held Israel’s experience up as a picture of what God wanted to do for the whole world.

Moses warns the people against idolatry. The Israelites had been familiar with the practices of idolatry in Egypt. Although the majority may not have been eyewitnesses, as their parents were, they must have had sufficient knowledge of the facts to understand what Moses referred to. The countries Israel passed through on their way to Canaan were Moab, Heshbon, and Bashan. The Bible does not give us much information about the practices of idolatry in Egypt, Canaan, and neighboring countries. Moses describes the idols as “detestable images.” The Hebrew word used is *shiqquwts* which *Strongs* defines as, “disgusting, i.e. filthy; especially idolatrous.” Archeology has brought to light that many idolatrous practices were linked to perverse sexual behavior. The Bible has coined for us the expression “abomination of desolation” which is used, among others, by Daniel and referred to by Christ when speaking about the coming of the Antichrist.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia writes the following about this “abomination of desolation”: “The Hebrew root for abomination is *shaqats*, ‘to be filthy,’ ‘to loathe,’ ‘to abhor,’ from which is derived *shiqquwts*, ‘filthy,’ especially ‘idolatrous.’ This word is used to describe specific forms of idolatrous worship that were specially abhorrent, as of the Ammonites (1 Kings 11:5,7); of the Moabites (1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 23:13). When Daniel undertook to specify an abomination so surpassingly disgusting to the sense of morality and decency, and so aggressive against everything that was godly as to drive all from its presence and leave its abode desolate, he chose this as the strongest among the several synonyms, adding the qualification ‘that maketh desolate’ (Dan 11:31; 12:11)... The New Testament equivalent of the noun is *bdel-ug-ma* = ‘detestable,’ i.e. (specially) ‘idolatrous.’ Alluding to Daniel, Christ spoke of the ‘abomination of desolation’ (Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14).”

Fausset’s Bible Dictionary writes: “ ‘The idol of the desolator,’ or ‘the idol that causeth desolation.’ Abomination refers especially to such idolatry only as is perpetrated by apostates from Jehovah (2 Kings 21:2-7; 23:13). Josephus... refers to the Jews’ tradition that the temple would be destroyed ‘if domestic hands should first pollute it.’ The Lord quotes Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11, in Matt 24:15 ‘the abomination of desolation,’ as the sign of Jerusalem’s coming destruction. Daniel makes the ceasing of the sacrifice and oblation the preliminary to it. Jewish rabbis considered the prophecy fulfilled when the Jews erected an idol altar, described as ‘the abomination of desolation’ in 1 Macc. 1:54; 6:7. This was necessarily followed by the profanation of the temple under the Old Testament antichrist, Antiochus Epiphanes. He built an idolatrous altar on the altar of burnt offering to Jupiter Olympius, and dedicated the temple to him, and offered swine’s flesh.”

Antiochus Epiphanes’ act stands out as the epitome of ceremonial pollution, and a pointer to the ultimate desecration the antichrist will perform at the end of times. The Apostle John writes about him in his apocalyptic vision: “The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-

⁷⁶¹ John 17:20

two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven.”⁷⁶²

It is doubtful that Moses had the image of this beast before his eyes when he uttered his warning against idolatry. But he knew that any turning away from the living God toward the statues of the idols behind which demonic powers were hidden would be like a root that produces bitter poison which would kill the whole nation of Israel. The writer to the Hebrews uses the same expression to describe people who miss the grace of God. We read: “See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”⁷⁶³

Moses depicts a person who invokes upon himself the blessings of the covenant as a cover for his devious occult practices. For the first time in the Bible we read about a sin that the Lord will never be willing to forgive. The context of these verses sheds light upon the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit about which Jesus says: “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”⁷⁶⁴

How devious is the human heart! We are capable of imagining that we can deceive God by invoking His blessing upon us as a cover under which we practice sin. Jesus’ most biting denunciations were against the pious sinners. He calls them “hypocrites, snakes, and brood of vipers.”⁷⁶⁵ Human beings are the only ones among God’s creatures who are killed by their own poison. When we realize how utterly depraved the human heart is, we cannot imagine how we can be saved. The depth of God’s grace is, however, emphasized by the depth of our desperate condition.

The result of human sin is described as: “This will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry.” We should, first of all, interpret these words as a poetical portrait of what sin does to a person and to society. In the context, these words do not seem to apply primarily to the countryside. We find the same kind of poetry in Psalm 107. After speaking about the experience of persons whose lives were changed by God’s redeeming grace, we read: “He turned rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground, and fruitful land into a salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who lived there. He turned the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs.”⁷⁶⁶ It is true that human behavior can change the ecology but the picture shows, first of all, the landscape of the human soul. Sin makes the heart arid like a desert but God’s grace can make the desert bloom.

Isaiah’s beautiful prophecy describes the scene: “The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. ... Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.”⁷⁶⁷

And Jesus confirms this ministry of the Holy Spirit in the human heart when He says: “ ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”⁷⁶⁸

In the vs. 22-28, Moses paints a vivid picture of the land that used to be called “a land flowing with milk and honey” that had been reduced to “a burning waste of salt and sulfur.” Future generations and foreigners from distant lands are called in as witnesses. Like the silence of the Dead Sea which exists as a memorial to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, so the whole Promised Land will lie there as a testimony of Israel’s unfaithfulness to the Lord. This, of course, is no longer a picture of the human heart but of a land that has vomited out its inhabitants. As we read in Leviticus: “Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.”⁷⁶⁹ The Promised Land never became completely the bleak scene Moses depicted in his address. Before the land became utterly depleted God told Jeremiah: “I am grieved over the disaster I have inflicted on you.”⁷⁷⁰ God’s furious anger which led Israel and Judah into captivity was tempered by His love and compassion. The strong language Moses uses in this address is obviously meant as a deterrent.

⁷⁶² Rev. 13:5,6

⁷⁶³ Heb. 12:15

⁷⁶⁴ Matt. 12:32

⁷⁶⁵ See Matt. 23:13, 33

⁷⁶⁶ Ps. 107:33-36

⁷⁶⁷ Isa. 35:1,2,6,7

⁷⁶⁸ John 7:37-39

⁷⁶⁹ Lev. 18:25

⁷⁷⁰ Jer. 42:10

The address ends with the mysterious statement: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”

The Pulpit Commentary says the following about this verse: “By **secret** things, here, some understand ‘hidden sins,’ which are known only to God, and which he will punish...; but the meaning rather is, things in God’s purpose known only to himself; these things, it is affirmed, belong to him, are his affair, and may be left with him. On the other hand, the things revealed are the things made known by God to man in his Word, viz. His injunctions, threatenings, and promises; and with these men have to do. Some regard this verse as part of the answer given to the question of vs. 24; but others regard it as a general reflection added by Moses by way of admonition to his previous discourse. This latter view is the more probable, and the scribes may have had this in their mind when they distinguished the words; **unto us and to our children**, by placing over them extraordinary points... in order to emphasize them, though by many this is regarded as a mere critical notation, indicating a various reading.”

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary gives the following, rather level-headed, explanation of this verse: “The simple general meaning seems to be this: ‘What God has thought proper to reveal, he has revealed; what he has revealed is essential to the well-being of man, and this revelation is intended not for the present time merely, nor for one people, but for all succeeding generations. The things which he has not revealed concern not man but God alone, and are therefore not to be inquired after.’ Thus, then, the things that are hidden belong unto the Lord, those that are revealed belong unto us and our children. But possibly the words here refer to the subjects of these chapters, as if he had said, ‘Apostasy from God and his truth is possible. When a national apostasy among us may take place, is known only to God; but he has revealed himself to us and our children that we may do all the words of this law, and so prevent the dreadful evils that shall fall on the disobedient.’ The Jews have always considered these verses as containing subjects of the highest importance to them, and have affixed marks to the original *laanuw... uwlbaaneeynuw...* ‘to us and to our CHILDREN,’ in order to fix the attention of the reader on truths which affect them individually, and not them only, but the whole of their posterity.”

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary approaches the verse more from the angle of the meaning within the context of Moses’ address to the nation. We read: “He concludes his prophecy of the Jews’ rejection just as St. Paul concludes his discourse on the same subject, when it began to be fulfilled (Rom 11:33), How unsearchable are God’s judgments, and his ways past finding out! So here (v. 29), Secret things belong to the Lord our God. Some make it to be one sentence, The secret things of the Lord our God are revealed to us and to our children, as far as we are concerned to know them, and he hath not dealt so with other nations: but we make it two sentences, by which, First, we are forbidden curiously to inquire into the secret counsels of God and to determine concerning them. A full answer is given to that question, Wherefore has the Lord done thus to this land? sufficient to justify God and admonish us. But if any ask further why God would be at such a vast expense of miracles to form such a people, whose apostasy and ruin he plainly foresaw, why he did not by his almighty grace prevent it, or what he intends yet to do with them, let such know that these are questions which cannot be answered, and therefore are not fit to be asked. It is presumption in us to pry into ... the mysteries of government, and to inquire into the reasons of state which it is not for us to know. See Acts 1:7; John 21:22; Col. 2:18. Secondly, We are directed and encouraged diligently to inquire into that which God has made known: things revealed belong to us and to our children. Note, 1. Though God has kept much of his counsel secret, yet there is enough revealed to satisfy and save us. He has kept back nothing that is profitable for us, but that only which it is good for us to be ignorant of. 2. We ought to acquaint ourselves, and our children too, with the things of God that are revealed. We are not only allowed to search into them, but are concerned to do so. They are things which we and ours are nearly interested in. They are the rules we are to live by, the grants we are to live upon; and therefore we are to learn them diligently ourselves, and to teach them diligently to our children. 3. All our knowledge must be in order to practice, for this is the end of all divine revelation, not to furnish us with curious subjects of speculation and discourse, with which to entertain ourselves and our friends, but that we may do all the words of this law, and be blessed in our deed.”

From *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* we quote: “This verse has no apparent connection with the thread of discourse; and it is thought to have been said in answer to the looks of astonishment or the words of inquiry, whether the people would be ever so wicked as to deserve such punishments, or the institutions which God had established among them ever be withdrawn or subverted. The words ‘ad... `owlaam⁷⁷¹... have not the extensive meaning which the Jews have always been fond of attaching to them. `Owlaam... is frequently used in a limited sense (cf. Ex 21:6; 1 Sam 1:22,28). Maimonides, and other Jewish writers answer that `owlaam... by itself may not signify eternity; yet, when preceded by `ad... unto, until, it denotes eternal duration in the most absolute sense, continuance of time admitting no end; and, in support of this assertion, appeal to Ps 19:9, ‘The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever.’ The passage is irrelevant, because it refers to the moral, not the political nor ritual law.

⁷⁷¹ for ever

The true meaning of the expressions was to distinguish the observances which were to be continued when the nation was settled in Canaan from the temporary enactments which had respect to their shifting condition before they reached it. Having served their purpose, however, they have ceased with the dispensation to which they belonged: though called 'an everlasting covenant,' 'an ordinance forever,' it was only 'throughout their generations' The recorded history of God's providential dealings towards Israel presents a wonderful combination of goodness and severity.' There is much of it involved in mystery too profound for our limited capacities to fathom; but, from the comprehensive wisdom displayed in those parts which have been made known to us, we are prepared to enter into the full spirit of the Apostle's exclamation, 'How unsearchable are His judgments!' (Rom 11:33)."

The meaning of the expression "the secret things" remains a secret to us. The Hebrew word is *cathar* which simply means "to hide." As such it is used in the phrase: "And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God."⁷⁷² It could very well be that Moses does not speak at all in this verse about God's hidden counsel, but about the fact that God can hide himself from us, as over against His revealing Himself to us.

As far as God's counsel is concerned, we read in the report of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: "Then the LORD said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.' Then the LORD said, 'The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.'⁷⁷³ In that context God declares His willingness to uncover His design to Abraham on the basis of Abraham's obedience and the obedience of his descendants. We find here the same relationship between what is hidden or uncovered and man's obedience as in Moses' words. The prophet Amos seems to contradict Moses when he says: "Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets."⁷⁷⁴ And David writes in one of the Psalms: "The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them."⁷⁷⁵ Then there is the taunting statement in Proverbs: "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings."⁷⁷⁶

None of the above implies that man would be able to search the limits of God's omniscience or unravel all the secrets of His Holy character. Paul's words remain true: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."⁷⁷⁷

Yet, there are people God takes into His confidence. Jesus said to His disciples: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."⁷⁷⁸

Paul touches upon God's mystery and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in revealing this to us when he writes: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him – but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: 'For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ."⁷⁷⁹

When we look again at Moses' words in the light of the above quotes, we see that the emphasis is not upon the difference between things hidden and things revealed but upon the sequence: the relationship between revelation and obedience. Our primary obligation to that which God has revealed is obedience. Once we obey what has been

⁷⁷² Ex. 3:6 (KJV)

⁷⁷³ Gen. 18:17-21

⁷⁷⁴ Amos 3:7

⁷⁷⁵ Ps. 25:14

⁷⁷⁶ Prov. 25:2

⁷⁷⁷ Rom. 11:33-36

⁷⁷⁸ John 15:15

⁷⁷⁹ I Cor. 2:9-16

revealed, part of the mystery will move from the shadow into the light. God doesn't say about the hidden things that they are none of our business but if we make God's business ours, we will also gradually move into the realm of God's mysteries. This is the intent of Jesus' words to His disciples when they asked Him about the miracles: "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."⁷⁸⁰ God does not open up His mysteries to the scrutiny of our curiosity. We are not allowed to investigate so that we can decide whether we will obey or not. Our horizon will only open up when we begin to obey God's revelation.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Part Three: Moses' Third Speech – "What God Will Do for Israel" (Continued 27:1-34:12)

II. Establishment of the Covenant in Palestine (Continued) 30:1-20

In this chapter, Moses looks beyond the punishment and captivity to the time where the people come to themselves and turn to God in confession and repentance. *The Pulpit Commentary* introduces this chapter by saying: "Moses, looking into the future, anticipates that both the blessing and the curse would come upon the people according as they were faithful to their covenant engagement and obedient to God's Law, or were disobedient and unfaithful. But even when the curse came upon them to the full, this would not amount to final rejection; but God would, by the discipline of suffering, lead them to repentance, and then he would again bestow the blessing (cf. Neh. I. 9)."

The Adam Clarke's Commentary outlines this chapter as follows:

- Gracious promises are given to the penitent, v. 1-6.
- The Lord will circumcise their heart, and put all these curses on their enemies, if they hearken to his voice and keep his testimonies, v. 7-10.
- The word is near to them, and easy to be understood, v. 11-14.
- Life and death, a blessing and a curse, are set before them; and they are exhorted to love the Lord, obey his voice, and cleave unto him, that they may inherit the land promised to Abraham, v. 15-20.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary examines this chapter against the background of God's universal plan of redemption. We quote: "Beyond the curse of exile opened the prospect of restoration (vv. 1-10; cf. Deut 4:29-31; Lev 26:40-45). The redemptive program is not to be frustrated by the fall of those who were of Israel yet were not faithful Israelites. An obedient remnant together with the remnant of the Gentiles will be restored to the covenant Lord in his glorious kingdom. Of this ultimate restoration, the OT return from Babylonian exile was typical. The one vast complex of typical and antitypical restoration is embraced in this prophetic blessing of Moses. The section of the treaty concerned with covenant ratification (Deut 27-30) closes with the call for decision, in which Moses reminded the people of Israel that they could not plead ignorance of God's demands (vv. 11-14) and warned them that the alternatives set before them in the covenant curses and blessings were those of life and death (vv. 15-20)."

And *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* writes about Moses' promises: "They are chiefly to be considered as a conditional promise, and so they belong to all persons and all people, and not to Israel only; and the design of them is to assure us that the greatest sinners, if they repent and be converted, shall have their sins pardoned, and be restored to God's favor. This is the purport of the covenant of grace, it leaves room for repentance in case of misdemeanor, and promises pardon upon repentance, which the covenant of innocence did not."

In the light of the seeming finality of the punishments invoked upon the people in the previous chapter, this part of Moses' speech comes as a complete surprise. The curse is not God's final word; death is not the end of life. There is no point of no return with God. Cain and Judas both thought there was no forgiveness for their crime. Cain said to the Lord: My punishment is more than I can bear. ...But the LORD said to him, 'Not so.'⁷⁸¹ And Judas exclaimed: "I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood," and we read: "Then he went away and hanged himself."⁷⁸² But, we understand, that even he could have obtained forgiveness had he asked for it. Satan tries to make us believe that we can reach a point where we are beyond the reach of God's grace. But David says: "Where can I go

⁷⁸⁰ Matt. 13:11,12

⁷⁸¹ Gen. 4:13,15

⁷⁸² See Matt. 27:4-5

from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day."⁷⁸³

The opening words of this chapter should amaze us. We would expect that Moses would only mention the curses and their effect upon the people when they realized why they had been led into captivity. But we read instead: "When all these *blessings and curses* I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations...." It seems that Moses had no illusions about human nature. He knew how the people would react to God's blessings and that, in spite of them, they would incur God's wrath upon them because of how they handled the blessings. Moses had the same prophetic insight into human nature as Jesus, about whom we read: "But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man."⁷⁸⁴ *Adam Clarke's Commentary* correctly observes: "So fully did God foresee the bad use these people would make of their free agency in resisting the Holy Ghost, that he speaks of their sin and punishment as certain; yet, at the same time, shows how they might turn to himself and live, even while he was pouring out his indignation upon them because of their transgressions."

The blessing stands both at the beginning and at the end of the curse and punishment. God's punishments are never meant to destroy but to bring man back to reality and to Himself. When He inflicts pain, He does not do it in a sadistic fashion for His own enjoyment, but for our ultimate salvation. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it this way: "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons."⁷⁸⁵

The keyword in vs. 3 is compassion, which is the translation of the Hebrew word *racham*. The word means literally "womb." It reflects the tenderness an pregnant mother feels toward her unborn child. God loves His people infinitely more than a mother can love her own child. We are closer to His heart than a baby in his mother's womb. The slightest indication that a wayward child would want to return home triggers in God the reaction of the father of the prodigal.

Moses foresaw the apostasy and he eloquently depicted the disasters that would come upon the nation. But he also saw how God would relish the return of His people and the immense joy which He would exhibit in restoring them into His favor. God does not forgive reluctantly. Moses sensed this joy of the Lord almost one full millennium before that fact.

Vs. 6 borrows from the rite of circumcision to shed light upon a spiritual condition. The term "circumcision of the heart" was used earlier in ch. 10:16, where we read: "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer." In this verse, however, the circumcision is done by God Himself: "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."

The prophet Jeremiah uses the expression a few times in his prophecies, as in: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done-- burn with no one to quench it."⁷⁸⁶ And in: "Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart."⁷⁸⁷ The Apostle Paul explains what defines the real Jew by saying: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."⁷⁸⁸ And he explains the spiritual meaning of circumcision with: "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh."⁷⁸⁹

It is obvious that, in the Bible, the meaning of circumcision as a physical act is more than the removal of the male foreskin. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* explains: "The rite had a moral significance, Ex 6:12,30, where it is metaphorically applied to the lips; so to the ear, Jer 6:10, and the heart, Deut 30:6; Jer 4:4. Cf. Jer 9:25-26. It refers to the state of 'circumcision,' in Rom 2:25-28; 3:1; 4:10; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15; Col 3:11. In the

⁷⁸³ Ps. 139:7,11,12

⁷⁸⁴ John 2:24,25

⁷⁸⁵ Heb. 12:5-7

⁷⁸⁶ Jer. 4:4

⁷⁸⁷ Jer. 9:26

⁷⁸⁸ Rom. 2:28,29

⁷⁸⁹ Phil. 3:3

economy of grace no account is taken of any ordinance performed on the flesh; the old racial distinction is ignored in the preaching of the gospel, and faith is the sole condition upon which the favor of God in salvation is to be obtained, Rom 10:11-13; 1 Cor 7:19. See also Rom 4:9-12.”

In God’s dealing with Israel, circumcision was the mark of the covenant in the same way as a wedding band is a token of a person’s marital status. And as a wedding band without a partner makes the ring a piece of metal without meaning, so was circumcision without a love relationship with God for the Israelite an empty ritual. The essence is not the token but the content.

So, both in the Old as well as in the New Testament, circumcision represented a love relationship with God. And since man in his fallen condition could not love God but instead rebelled against Him, circumcision symbolized an inner transformation, a change of heart. The conflict of circumcision is that man could perform the outward ritual but he could not bring about the spiritual change for which it stood. If God does not circumcise the human heart, man cannot possibly change. Moses’ words, therefore, contain a rich promise: “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.” God is able to create in us a heart that is able to love and obey Him. It does not say that God forces us to love Him. If love is not voluntary it is not love. God’s act makes it possible for us to love by delivering our will from its bondage to sin. The bondage is called “the flesh” in the New Testament. Paul explains that God’s intervention in our lives by which we are inwardly renewed means the removal of the desire to rebel. In the Epistle to the Colossians we read: “And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.”⁷⁹⁰

All of the law is condensed into the one commandment to love God. We read in Matthew’s Gospel: “An expert in the law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’”⁷⁹¹ And Paul says: “Love is the fulfillment of the law.”⁷⁹² This condensation both simplifies and complicates the keeping of the law. Unless the Holy Spirit renews our inner being, we are incapable of love and obedience. But if we submit to the circumcision of our heart by an act of God, love and obedience will become a natural tendency to us. This makes the Apostle Paul exclaim: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”⁷⁹³ God’s requirements are fulfilled in us by the Holy Spirit.

Having explained the mystery of the renewal of the heart, Moses spells out, in the verses 10-14, that obedience to the law is not beyond their reach. These words have acquired a greater depth and meaning in Paul’s quotation in Romans: “But the righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming.”⁷⁹⁴

Before we examine Paul’s use of the text, we want to look at what *The Pulpit Commentary* says about these verses. “The fulfillment of this condition was not impossible or even difficult; for God had done everything to render it easy for them. The commandment of God was not hidden from them; literally, was not wonderful to them; i.e. hard to be understood or to perform (see the use of the Hebrew word in Ps. cxxxi. 1; Prov. xxx. 18); nor was it far off; it was not in heaven— i.e. though heavenly in its source, it had not remained there, but had been revealed— so that there was no need for any one to say, Who will ascend to heaven, and bring it down to us, that we may hear it, and do it? The idea is not, as Keil suggests, that of ‘an inaccessible height’ which none could scale; nor is it, as suggested by Knobel, that of something ‘incomprehensible, impracticable, and superhuman;’ it is simply a statement of fact that the Law had not been retained in heaven, but had been revealed to men. Nor was this revelation made in some far distant place across the sea, so that any need say, Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? On the contrary, it was very near to them, had been disclosed in words so that they could utter it

⁷⁹⁰ Col. 2:11 (NAS)

⁷⁹¹ Matt. 22:35-40

⁷⁹² Rom. 13:10

⁷⁹³ Rom. 8:1-4

⁷⁹⁴ Rom. 10:6-8

with their own mouth, converse over it, and ponder it in their hearts (cf. Isa. xlv. 19; Jer. xxiii. 28; Rom. x. 6). In the allusion to the sea, the representation is not that of depth (Targum Jon.), but that of distance.”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary says about these verses: “That law of loving and obeying God, which was the subject of Moses’ discourse, was well known to the Israelites. They could not plead ignorance of its existence and requirements. It was not concealed as an impenetrable mystery in heaven, for it had been revealed through Moses; nor was it carefully withheld from the people as a dangerous discovery, and one had to rise from the depths of the sea, like Jonah, to proclaim it; for the youngest and humblest of them were instructed in those truths which were subjects of earnest study and research among the wisest and greatest of other nations. They were not under a necessity of undertaking long journeys or distant voyages, as many ancient sages did, in quest of knowledge. They enjoyed the special privilege of a familiar acquaintance with it. It was with them a subject of common conversation, engraven on their memories, and frequently explained and inculcated on their hearts.”

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament remarks: “God had done everything to render the observance of His commandments possible to Israel.”

Moses’ intent is obvious: Heavenly things have been expressed in terms of earth, in words used by men, which man can understand. It is this truth about the mode of God’s revelation that Paul highlights in his quotation in Romans. The Old Testament Jew cannot have understood the mystery of the Incarnation but the meaning of Moses’ words was nonetheless clear enough to him: God had revealed Himself and given man His law. Man’s obligation was to do what it said. We have to remind ourselves at this point that the law did not merely consist of a series of moral precepts. A large part of the law dealt with the way in which atonement was made and sins were forgiven. The very fact that a ceremonial law existed was an indication that man was a sinner who needed forgiveness and cleansing. The Old Testament Jew was not saved because he obeyed the moral law but because he applied the ceremonial law to his failures. This is the very point that most Israelites have never understood. Everybody knew that the Ten Commandments had been given. God had revealed His will to man in a series of laws and regulations. The question that had to be answered was, what to do when man failed in living up to God’s standard? Where is pardon obtained? It is about this quest that Moses said, not in heaven, or in the seas, or in a distant country, but right in front of you.

The Gospel of forgiveness by the blood of Jesus Christ is at everybody’s doorstep. In Egypt it stuck to the doorposts of the houses of the people of Israel. But even in the very beginning, before the first murder was committed, God pointed out to Cain what to do about sin. We read in the Genesis account: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”⁷⁹⁵ This controversial verse can also be rendered with: “If you do not do what is right, a sin offering is now lying at your doorstep, of which you may avail yourself.” The Hebrew word translated in the NIV with “sin” is *chatta’ah* which has the meaning of both “an offense” as well as “a sacrifice, or expiation.” The KJV renders it alternately with “punishment of sin, purification for sin, or sin offering.” God had always provided a means of atonement for man’s sin. Immediately after Adam and Eve had sinned God provided them with a covering for their nakedness consisting of the skin of an animal that had been slain.⁷⁹⁶ Man never had to search far for the forgiveness of his sin.

This is the point the Apostle Paul elaborates in his quotation of Moses’ words in his Epistle to the Romans. Paul first mentions the moral law, saying: “Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: ‘The man who does these things will live by them,’ ” and he then continues with: “But the righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘ ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘ ‘Who will descend into the deep?’ ’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”⁷⁹⁷ In the virtuoso way in which Paul treats Moses’ words, he preaches the Gospel in a statement of the facts of salvation. The Word is very near to us because: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”⁷⁹⁸ There is no need for us to “go beyond the sea,” as Moses put it, or “descend into the deep” as Paul quotes from the Septuagint; we do not have to enter death because Christ was raised from the dead in our behalf. Paul does not specifically mention Christ’s sacrifice for our sins, but that is, obviously, implied in “the word of faith we are proclaiming.” The confession with our mouth, “Jesus is Lord” represents the surrender of our lives to His authority. The believing in our heart that God

⁷⁹⁵ Gen. 4:7

⁷⁹⁶ See Gen. 3:21

⁷⁹⁷ Rom. 10:5-9

⁷⁹⁸ John 1:14

raised Jesus from the dead stands for the renewal of our life. It is a heart-changing confession, the result of the circumcision God has applied to the core of our being. How close is the word? It is in our heart!

It is easy to misunderstand Moses' words as if the emphasis is upon a perfect fulfillment of all the requirements of the moral law. This was the misunderstanding that poisoned the lifestyle of the Pharisees in the days of John the Baptist and Jesus. They both reserved their sharpest condemnation for those who kept up a front of sinless perfection to cover up a corrupt nature. John called them: "Brood of vipers!"⁷⁹⁹ And Jesus says to them: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."⁸⁰⁰ In putting before the people of Israel the choice between life and death, Moses did not advocate that they choose between sinless perfection and perfidy but between cleansing and defilement.

The NIV renders vs. 15: "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction." The Hebrew word translated with "prosperity" is *towh*, which literally means "good" in the fullest sense of the word. No mere material prosperity is intended in Moses' words, although spiritual blessing was often translated in terms of material prosperity in the Old Testament. In this phrase "prosperity" is contrasted with "evil" or "destruction."

In vs. 19, Moses presents the opposites of life and death as a choice: "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now *choose* life, so that you and your children may live." In this verse the options are given as a command: "I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws." It seems hard to reconcile the command with the choice. The one takes away man's freedom and the second affirms it. This problem touches upon the apparently irreconcilable issue of God's sovereignty and man's freedom. It is irreconcilable from a human position, but obviously not from God's point of view. We cannot understand how God can create a being that has absolute freedom of choice and, at the same time, remain in complete control Himself. We are like people who work with two-dimensional pictures while trying to see three-dimensional objects. We live in a three-dimensional world (four-dimensional, according to Albert Einstein), but God's reality is multi-dimensional and that is the reality in which the paradox is resolved. Love is both a choice and a command. The command is: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."⁸⁰¹ Jesus calls this "the first and greatest commandment."⁸⁰² In Paradise, Adam and Eve stood between "The Tree of Life" and "The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil." They chose knowledge instead of life, giving up both life and freedom to love. Since then God issued an order to love so that man would turn to Him and regain his freedom to choose. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* says here: "Were there no such thing as free will in man, who could reconcile these sayings either with sincerity or common sense? God has made the human will free, and there is no power or influence either in heaven, earth, or hell, except the power of God, that can deprive it of its free volition; of its power to will and nill, to choose and refuse, to act or not act or force it to sin against God. Hence, man is accountable for his actions, because they are his; were he necessitated by fate, or sovereign constraint, they could not be his. Hence, he is rewardable, hence, he is punishable. God, in his creation, willed that the human creature should be free, and he formed his soul accordingly, and the Law and Gospel, the promise and precept, the denunciation of which and the doctrine of eternal life, are all constructed on this ground; that is, they all necessarily suppose the freedom of the human will: nor could it be will if it were not free, because the principle of freedom or liberty is necessarily implied in the idea of volition."

Above all, we have to remember that obedience is a choice. Even obedience based on fear is a choice. Man can be forced to perform certain illegal or immoral acts if he chooses to stay alive under all circumstances. If we are "not afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, [but] rather, [are] afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell,"⁸⁰³ there is not much we can be forced to do.

The alternative to loving and obeying God is idolatry. Man worships an idol because he believes he can manipulate an idol and remain master of his own life. It is our desire to continue the rebellion instead of laying down our arms that keeps us from loving God. We can only love God if we surrender to Him first. We often think that fear is a wrong motive to seek salvation. God implanted fear in the human mind as a defense mechanism. As the body warns us of something wrong in signaling pain, so fear turns on a red light to warn us. There is nothing wrong in turning to God because we are afraid to die or are afraid of hell. This is the very reason Moses paints all those pictures of death and destruction.

⁷⁹⁹ Matt. 3:7

⁸⁰⁰ Matt. 23:27,28

⁸⁰¹ Deut. 6:5

⁸⁰² See Matt. 22:38

⁸⁰³ See Matt. 10:28

The Matthew Henry's Commentary observes here: "Every man is moved and governed in his actions by hope and fear, hope of good and fear of evil, real of apparent. 'Now,' says Moses, 'I have tried both ways; if you will be either drawn to obedience by the certain prospect of advantage by it, or driven to obedience by the no less certain prospect of ruin in case you be disobedient-if you will be wrought upon either way, you will be kept close to God and your duty; but, if you will not, you are utterly inexcusable.'"

Moses concludes this section with the most impressive oratory at man's command, calling the whole of creation to the witness stand: "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." This sweeping gesture to heaven and earth as witnesses is found four times in the Book of Deuteronomy.⁸⁰⁴ It was a single act of man's disobedience that disturbed the balance of all of creation. Death reigns over all and, in the words of the Apostle Paul: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."⁸⁰⁵ Moses not only uses impressive oratory, he also demonstrates a clear vision of the condition of creation and man's pivotal role in it. In sinning, man does not only destroy himself but the creation of which he is the most important part. As God said to Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you,"⁸⁰⁶ so He holds man responsible for what he does to the planet on which God placed him. On the other hand, the result of our repentance and restoration will change the face of this earth again. In the words of Paul: "Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."⁸⁰⁷

For Moses, all was linked to the promise of God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The fulfillment of this promise was the physical presence of the nation of Israel in the Promised Land. The New Testament teaches that God's plan went well beyond the nation and land of Israel and an existence on earth that would end in the death of all. God's plan is eternal and meant for eternity. God promised Abraham much more than a place to live on earth for himself and his children. God wants all of mankind to inherit the fullness of His own life. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."⁸⁰⁸ We may paraphrase Moses' words with: "For the LORD is your life, and he will give you eternity in heaven in the bosom of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." With so much at stake, who would want to "drift away" and "ignore so great a salvation?"⁸⁰⁹

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Part Three: Moses' Third Speech – "What God Will Do for Israel" (Continued 27:1-34:12)

III. Changing of the Covenant Mediator 31:1-34:12

A. Moses Charges Joshua and Israel 31:1-13

In this chapter Moses announces his retirement as leader of the nation. Retirement coincides here with death. It has been said that a servant of the Lord never retires. This is true in the sense that there is no phase in the life of a Christian where he can withdraw from the battle that rages in the heavenly places in order to start living for himself. The only permissible way to retire is to pass away. We may end our career on earth as a prayer warrior instead of a warrior on the front line, but we will remain warriors till the end.

The Pulpit Commentary introduces this chapter by commenting: "Moses had now finished his work as the legislator and ruler and leader of Israel. But ere he finally retired from his place, he had to take order for the carrying forward of the work by the nomination of a successor to himself in the leadership; by committing the keeping of the Law to the priests; and by anew admonishing the people to obedience, encouraging them to go forward to the conquest of Canaan, animating them with the assurance of the Divine favor and blessing, and pronouncing on them his parting benediction."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes: "It is probable that this rehearsal of the law extended over several successive days; and it might be the last and most important day on which the return of Moses to the place of assembly is specially noticed. In drawing his discourse toward a conclusion, he adverted to his

⁸⁰⁴ Beside this verse in Ch. 4:26; 31:28; 32:1

⁸⁰⁵ Rom. 8:22

⁸⁰⁶ Gen. 3:17

⁸⁰⁷ Rom. 8:21

⁸⁰⁸ Gal. 3:14

⁸⁰⁹ See Heb. 2:1-3

advanced age; and although neither his physical nor intellectual powers had suffered any decay (Deut 34:7), yet he knew by a special revelation that the time had arrived when he was about to be withdrawn from the superintendence and government of Israel.”

Moses mentions his age as being 120. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments on this: “The life of Moses, the great prophet of God and lawgiver of the Jews, was exactly the same in length as the time Noah employed in preaching righteousness to the antediluvian world. These one hundred and twenty years were divided into three remarkable periods: forty years he lived in Egypt, in Pharaoh’s court, acquiring all the learning and wisdom of the Egyptians; (see Acts 7:20,23;) forty years he sojourned in the land of Midian in a state of preparation for his great and important mission; (Acts 7:29-30;) and forty years he guided, led, and governed the Israelites under the express direction and authority of God: in all, one hundred and twenty years.”

The mention of this advanced age is misleading because it makes us think that Moses had certainly reached an age on which it is legitimate to retire. Also the words “I am no longer able to lead you” create the misconception that Moses had to quit because of physical deterioration. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* takes this line by observing: “Through Moses was still competent in terms of individual daily life (cf. 34:7), he had lost the stamina necessary to shepherd the whole flock of Israel and in particular to lead the campaign of conquest lying before the nation.” This, however, is contradicted by a later reference to Moses’ age at the moment of his death: “Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone.”⁸¹⁰

The Pulpit Commentary writes about the phrase **I can no more go out and come in:** ... “I am no longer able to work among and for the nation as I have hitherto done (cf. Numb. xxvii. 17). This does not conflict with the statement in ch. xxxiv. 7, that up to the time of his death his eyes were not dim nor his natural strength abated, for this is the statement of an observer, and it often happens that an individual feels himself to be failing, when to those around him he appears to possess unabated vigor. There is no need, therefore, for resorting, with Raschi and others, to the expedient of reading ‘for’ instead of ‘and’ in the following clause; as if the cause why Moses could no longer go in and out among the people was God’s prohibition of his going over Jordan. This is simply another and collateral reason why he had now to retire from his post as leader.” This commentary’s opinion, obviously, opposes the position of *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*. I see no reason to modify the literal meaning of the statement that Moses’ eyesight had not suffered and his strength had not diminished over the years because of his intimate fellowship with God. The joy of the Lord had been his strength. And as the Book of Proverbs says: “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.”⁸¹¹ The reason for Moses’ inability to cross the Jordan was because God did not allow him to do so, not his advanced age.

It is true that intimacy with God is not always identical with physical well-being. The Apostle Paul must have suffered from various conditions related to his age. In his letter to Philemon he writes: “I then, as Paul-an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus-.”⁸¹² And to the Galatians he says: “As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.”⁸¹³ Then there was his “thorn in the flesh.”⁸¹⁴

But if we believe that fellowship with God is identical with physical failure, we have lost the right perspective. If “A cheerful heart is good medicine,” then the Gospel should have a wholesome effect upon our bodies. Paul’s condition should rather be considered abnormal. The Apostle John, writing to his friend Gaius, expresses a normal wish with: “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”⁸¹⁵ God obviously wants us to be healthy, unless He wants to teach us something this is more important than physical well-being.

Vs. 3 emphasizes the truth that the extermination of the inhabitants of Canaan was not a political venture initiated by the people of Israel; it was, in the most literal sense of the word, an act of God. During one of the major battle with a confederacy of Canaanite kings, we read: “As they fled before Israel on the road down from Beth Horon to Azekah, the LORD hurled large hailstones down on them from the sky, and more of them died from the hailstones than were killed by the swords of the Israelites.”⁸¹⁶

⁸¹⁰ ch. 34:7

⁸¹¹ Prov. 17:22

⁸¹² Philemon vs. 9

⁸¹³ Gal. 4:13,14

⁸¹⁴ See II Cor. 12:7

⁸¹⁵ III John vs. 2

⁸¹⁶ Josh. 10:11

It is easy and natural to feel repulsion in the face of this massive genocide ordered by God. The occurrence in recent times of various examples of “ethnic cleansing” make it the more difficult for us to put ourselves behind this biblical account. Our problem is complicated by the fact that we know so little about the meaning of God’s word to Abraham that “the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”⁸¹⁷ When Israel stood at the borders of the Promised Land the measure of sin of the people of the land was full. Archeological finds confirm that licentiousness was rampant and infanticide as a mode of worship was the accepted norm. Nature itself turned against man and his sin and “the land vomited out its inhabitants.”⁸¹⁸ This does not make this episode of world history palatable to our modern mind, but it helps us to understand that the conquest of Canaan was not an act of Israel’s pseudo colonialist expansion. God could have wiped the land clean with a flood, as He did in the days of Noah; He chose instead a human agent: the people of Israel.

Joshua had earlier been singled out as Moses’ successor.⁸¹⁹ And the actual inauguration had already taken place, as recorded in the Book of Numbers: “So the LORD said to Moses, ‘Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him. He is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will obtain decisions for him by inquiring of the Urim before the LORD. At his command he and the entire community of the Israelites will go out, and at his command they will come in.’”⁸²⁰

The conquest of Canaan was a frightening undertaking. From a military viewpoint the campaign was doomed to fail. The chances of an army of nomadic people conquering a land with strongly defended cities inhabited by people who would be fighting for their lives was nil. Were it not for the two previous experiences in which the people saw the unlikely defeat of the kings Sihon and Og, they would have utterly despaired to succeed. It is not without reason that we find the encouragement: “Be strong and courageous” three times in this chapter.⁸²¹

We have to remind ourselves that Moses is not giving a pep talk to the people in order to build up their ego with words like “you can do it! Go for it!” The admonition is given in connection with the presence of God. The only reason why the people can be courageous is because God is with them to alleviate their fear. Their strength was not something they had to work themselves up to, like the building up of muscles in the body by means of exercise. They were to be strong in the Lord, not in themselves. The Old Testament saints knew this truth as much as the Apostle Paul. David wrote: “Blessed are those whose strength is in you.”⁸²² And Isaiah prophesied: “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”⁸²³ The Apostle Paul even goes so far as to state that human strength and being strong in the Lord are mutually exclusive. Praying that God would remove his “thorn in the flesh” he received Jesus’ answer: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” He reacts to this by saying: “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”⁸²⁴

We don’t know what Paul’s physical appearance was like. Paul never contradicted what people had said about him and even quoted their words in his Epistle to the Corinthians: “For some say, ‘His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.’”⁸²⁵ We tend to picture Joshua as the general of a Roman army receiving a hero’s welcome after a decisive victory. We should not forget, however, that being in the age group of those that were condemned to perish in the desert, and having wandered forty years with the people, Joshua must have been in his eighties when he became Israel’s supreme commander. It could very well be that, from a human viewpoint, this mighty man of God was “unimpressive and his speaking amount[ed] to nothing.” He needed the imposition of Moses’ hands and the anointing of the Holy Spirit to command obedience from the people. Moses had to tell him repeatedly “Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged.” It is not unlikely that Joshua learned that God’s strength is made perfect in human weakness.

⁸¹⁷ See Gen. 15:16

⁸¹⁸ Lev. 18:25

⁸¹⁹ See ch. 3:28

⁸²⁰ Num. 27:18-21

⁸²¹ See verses 6, 7, 23

⁸²² Ps. 84:5

⁸²³ Isa. 40:29-31

⁸²⁴ II Cor. 12:9,10

⁸²⁵ II Cor. 10:10

The assurance Moses gives to Joshua is: “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” This pledge sound easy, but it is the result of Moses’ encounter with God after Israel’s sin with the Golden Calf. He had wrestled this assurance from God after having offered himself as a sacrifice in the place of the people. He had pled for forgiveness for the sins of the people with the words: “But now, please forgive their sin--but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”⁸²⁶ After which he had argued with God: “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”⁸²⁷

We have the same promise on our way to glory, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews states: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”⁸²⁸

This charge to Joshua was recorded in the Book of the Law which was given to the Levites. After Moses’ death, the Lord personally confirmed this charge to Joshua and linked the fulfillment of His promise to Joshua’s faithfulness to the written word. We read: “I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ... No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”⁸²⁹ The same link exists for us. Our strength in the Lord will be equal to the depth of our involvement in the Bible.

It is not clear whether the phrase “So Moses wrote down this law...” refers to parts of Deuteronomy, or the whole book, or even the whole Pentateuch. The opinion of the scholars is divided on this point. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “It was usual in cases of public or private contract for two copies of the engagement to be made-- one to be deposited in the national archives, or some secure place for reference, should occasion require; the other to remain in the hands of the contracting parties (Jer 32:12-14). The course was followed on this renewal of the covenant between God and Israel. Two written copies of the law were prepared, the one of which was delivered to the public representatives of Israel--namely, the priests and the elders.”

The giving of the law to the priests and Levites with the order to read it once every seven years during the Feast of Tabernacles had a symbolic meaning. It certainly did not imply that reading the law at seven-year intervals was sufficient for the keeping of the law. Moses had earlier said to the people: “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates.”⁸³⁰ This could not possibly be when the law was only read once every seven years. In connection with the future appointment of a king, Moses had said: “When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it *all the days of his life* so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees.”⁸³¹ So the reading of the law during the Feast of Tabernacles was, obviously, not meant to instruct the people as to its contents but to emphasize the connection between the law and the feast. The Feast of Tabernacles was a reminder of Israel’s crossing of the desert and man’s pilgrimage through life on earth. The seventh year was the Sabbath Year, the year of cancellation of all debts. The law had to be read against the background of the character of man’s life on earth, a pilgrimage toward heaven, and the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of the dignity of human life.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary observes about the practice of this reading: “It is strange that this commandment, relative to a public reading of the law every seven years, should have been rarely attended to. It does not appear that from the time mentioned Josh 8:30, at which time this public reading first took place, till the reign of

⁸²⁶ Ex. 32:32

⁸²⁷ Ex. 33:15,16

⁸²⁸ Heb. 13:5,6

⁸²⁹ Josh. 1:3,5-9

⁸³⁰ ch. 6:6-9

⁸³¹ ch. 17:18,19

Jehoshaphat 2 Chron 17:7, there was any public seventh year reading—a period of 530 years. The next seventh year reading was not till the eighteenth year of the reign of Josiah, 2 Chron 34:30, a space of two hundred and eighty-two years. Nor do we find any other publicly mentioned from this time till the return from the Babylonish captivity, Neh 8:2. Nor is there any other on record from that time to the destruction of Jerusalem.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary sees in this reading in the seventh year an opportunity given to the people to rededicate themselves to the Lord. The Commentary observes: “In Israel there was to be a constant proclamation of the will of the Lord through the service of the cult and in time through the ministry of prophets. Parents, too, were charged with the faithful instruction of the covenant children in the commandments of the Lord (see e.g., Deut 6:7,20ff.). Hence the septennial reading of the Law to Israel (v. 10) at the Feast of Tabernacles (cf. 16:13ff.) in the year of release (cf. 15:1ff.) was intended not as the sole means of teaching the people of Israel their covenantal obligations but as an especially impressive reminder, at this time of sabbatical renewal and consummation, of the need for an ever fresh self-consecration by the servants of the Lord if they would enjoy full covenant blessing.”

The Adam Clarke's Commentary sees in the copy of the law that was placed at the side of the ark, the copy that belonged to God. We read: “As the law was properly a covenant or contract between God and the people, it is natural to suppose there were two copies of it, that each of the contracting parties might have one: therefore one was laid up beside the ark, this was the Lord's copy; another was given to the priests and Levites, this was the people's copy.” Whether only two copies were made is an open question. *Clarke* mentions a rabbinical tradition “that Moses wrote thirteen copies of the whole Pentateuch; that he gave one to each of the twelve tribes, and the thirteenth was laid up by the ark.” And he adds: “This opinion deserves little credit.” But *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* takes the possibility of several copies being made more seriously. The copy to the priests was, supposedly, the original one. We read: “He delivered one authentic copy to the priests, to be laid up by the ark (v. 26), there to remain as a standard by which all other copies must be tried. And it is supposed that he gave another copy to the elders of each tribe, to be transcribed by all of that tribe that were so disposed. Some observe that the elders, as well as the priests, were entrusted with the law, to intimate that magistrates by their power, as well as ministers by their doctrine, are to maintain religion, and to take care that the law be not broken nor lost.”

We don't know how widespread literacy was among Israel at that point in their history. There is no reason to believe that man's ability to read evolved slowly over the centuries. It is a well-known phenomenon that most illiterate minds have a greater ability to retain verbally what is heard than heads that are cluttered with much reading. The need to read for oneself may have been less than we would presume when looking at the past from our perspective. But even if the written word was less important for the refreshing of one's own memory, it was of vital significance as one generation passed into another. The great emphasis given to the written word in Deuteronomy would indicate, however, that the ability to read was rather widespread. Not only was the law written on paper, it was to be chiseled in stone for public reading.⁸³² The traditions and experiences of the former generations have, as long as man exists, never been accepted by the younger generation as relevant. The youth in every generation thinks that they have to remake history for themselves. Reading can have a salutary effect upon this mindset.

What impresses us particularly in these chapters in which Moses speaks about the future and the observance of the law is the vision of a great leader. God had warned him of the future apostasy that would sweep the people away. They would turn to visible idols, the products of their own hands and their own imagination, and turn away from the invisible God. In his emphasis upon the law, Moses demonstrated that he did not accept apostasy as inevitable. The people were not doomed to fall away from God; it would never be an inescapable fate. Apostasy and obedience are always a matter of choice. And the law of God did not only demand obedience it also gave a reason for obedience. It was backed up by the history of salvation, the facts of the exodus, the journey through the wilderness, and the conquest of the Promised Land. The law gave insight into God's reality and made obedience to the demands a logical choice. David's testimony about the law is: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.”⁸³³ And the writer of Psalm 119 testifies: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.”⁸³⁴

B. God Charges Israel 31:14-21

At this point, Joshua is officially inaugurated as the new leader of the people. Joshua's succession is introduced with the words: “Now the day of your death is near. Call Joshua....” It is interesting to see that God mentions Moses' death several times in connection with Joshua's initiation. We should not read too much in this, but

⁸³² See ch. 27:3,8

⁸³³ Ps. 19:7

⁸³⁴ Ps 119:105

it sounds as if there is a note of sadness in God's voice that Moses had to die. We seldom pause to think what God's reaction to death is. We tend to believe that God created death instead of realizing that death is the opposite of creation. God's sadness over death is expressed in the fact that Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb.⁸³⁵ John also mentions that Jesus "was deeply moved in spirit."⁸³⁶ The Greek word used here is *embrimaomai* which literally means: "to snort with anger" or "to have indignation on." God is angry with the phenomenon of death and He reacts more strongly against it than we do.

Joshua's inauguration took on the form of a theophany. *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* notes: "This is the only time in all this book that we read of the glory of God appearing, whereas we often read of it in the three foregoing books." But although Moses and Joshua are both called into God's presence, God initially only addresses Moses, telling him about the apostasy to which the Israelites will abandon themselves. The fact that this is warning is given in Joshua's presence is, of course, significant. God wanted Joshua to know what to expect and to fight the decline with all his might. This prophecy of doom was not inevitable. God's intent was, in fact, that it would be avoided. *Barnes' Notes* writes: "The future apostasy of the people is announced in the presence of Joshua that the latter might be fully aware of the danger and strive in his day to avert it. This he faithfully did (compare Josh 24:31); but we find him in his own last address to Israel repeating (Josh 23:15-16) the self-same prediction and warning."

Joshua's own radiant example seems to have been the greatest impetus to remain faithful to the Lord. Joshua did not use the persuasive rhetoric of Moses to command the people; he held up his own choice before them as an example to follow, which turned out to be most effective. He said: "If serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."⁸³⁷ And at the end of Joshua's story we read: "Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel."⁸³⁸

The Song of Moses must also have played a major role in Israel's early history in Canaan. The text of the song is given in the next chapter. It is most likely that it was put to music and Moses may have chanted the words instead of merely saying them. The song was inspired in the most literal sense of the word. God practically dictated the words to Moses. Again, Joshua's presence was important, because he would not only be the future leader of the people but also their future song leader.

Modern advertisement has rediscovered that words connected to catchy tunes stick more easily in people's mind than plain prose. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "Things which were of great importance and of common concern were, among the ancients, put into verse, as this was found the best method of keeping them in remembrance, especially in those times when writing was little practiced. Even prose was sometimes sung. The history of Herodotus was divided into NINE books, and each inscribed with the name of one of the NINE Muses, because these books were anciently sung. Homer is reported to have sung his poems through different Greek cities. Aristotle observes that anciently the people sung their laws. And Cicero observes that it was a custom among the ancient Romans to sing the praises of their heroes at the public festivals. This was the case among the northern inhabitants of Europe, particularly in Ireland and Scotland; hence, the Gaelic poetry of Ossian and others." In Muslim countries, reading of the Koran contests actually consists of the singing of the text. So we may assume that, for several decades at least, the song of Moses became a national anthem that people would sing in the cities of the Promised Land and that both words and music kept moral corruption at a distance for a while. More than words, music has always influenced the moral climate of a nation.

The obvious intent of the prophecy God gave to Moses was to give them hope. The words: "Have not these disasters come upon us because our God is not with us?" indicate that the people will, at one point, return to reality. The discovery "God is not in this" in the midst of tragedy and calamity opens a door of return.

Most of the tribes in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, have a legend about God's departure for heaven when sin entered the world. The tradition says when God left, eternal life was taken away from man. But there was also the hope that was kept alive from one generation to another that, one day, eternal life would be returned to them. God knew that man who has eternity in his heart,⁸³⁹ would not be able to go through life without hope. Every generation of Israel would learn the national anthem, the song Moses wrote.

Israel's greatest enemy would not be the original inhabitants of Canaan or the surrounding nations but the ease of a life of affluence. The blessing of the milk and honey of Canaan would become their curse, because they

⁸³⁵ See John 11:35

⁸³⁶ John 11:33

⁸³⁷ Josh. 24:15

⁸³⁸ Josh. 24:31

⁸³⁹ See Eccl. 3:11

refused to thank God for their earthly blessings. A nation that doesn't know what to do with its blessings is headed for disaster. The golden ages in a peoples' history are often, spiritually, the darkest pages in God's book. The people would sing the words of Moses' hymn for ages to come till they had killed the meaning of the words.

C. The Book of the Law Is Deposited 31:22-29

Before Moses finished the writing of the book and before the ceremonial placement at the side of the ark took place, God addressed Joshua personally. The words: "Be strong and courageous, for you will bring the Israelites into the land I promised them on oath, and I myself will be with you" are the creative Word of God. This means that God imparted strength and courage to Joshua in addressing him. Daniel described the experience of being strengthened by the word of an angel. We read: "Again the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength. 'Do not be afraid, O man highly esteemed,' he said. 'Peace! Be strong now; be strong.' When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, 'Speak, my lord, since you have given me strength.'"⁸⁴⁰

The singing of the song and the reading of the law is presented here as a testimony against the people. Somehow the people have never understood what the actual function of the law was. Jesus said to the people of His time: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."⁸⁴¹ And the Apostle Paul explains: "No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."⁸⁴²

The copy of the law that was handed to the Levites and the priests was placed at the side of the ark. Whether this meant that it was inside the Holy of Holies is not said. It was probably put in front of the veil, since its placement on the other side would have made it unavailable to anyone except to the high priest on the Day of Atonement. The suggestion that it would be inside the ark is contradicted by the record of the dedication of Solomon's temple, where we read: "There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the Israelites after they came out of Egypt."⁸⁴³

The two stone tablets only contained the Ten Commandments. The scroll placed beside the ark was, in the words of *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary*, "an elaborate commentary upon the Decalogue." The stone tablets were covered by the Mercy Seat upon which the blood was sprinkled once a year at the Day of Atonement. The scroll, if it was a complete copy of the Pentateuch, contained both the moral and the ceremonial law. Although Moses called it a witness *against* the people, in both cases the Gospel message was preached that there was atonement for sin by the blood of the sacrifice.

It is true that the law produces awareness of sin but it also provides atonement. When the writer of Psalm 119 exclaimed: "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart. They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways. You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed"⁸⁴⁴ he did not preach sinless perfection. To be blameless, both in the Old and New Testament, means to have received pardon for sin in the way God provided. Paul expresses this as follows: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."⁸⁴⁵

God had said to Moses: "These people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them. On that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and difficulties will come upon them, and on that day they will ask, 'Have not these disasters come upon us because our God is not with us?' And I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods." Israel's apostasy did not consist in the fact that they broke the Ten Commandments but that they did not go to God with their sin and turned instead to idols.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

⁸⁴⁰ Dan. 10:18,19

⁸⁴¹ John 5:39,40

⁸⁴² Rom. 3:20

⁸⁴³ I Kings 8:9

⁸⁴⁴ Ps. 119:1-4

⁸⁴⁵ II Cor. 5:21

Part Three: Moses' Third Speech – “What God Will Do for Israel” (continued 27:1-34:12)**III. Changing of the Covenant Mediator** 31:1-34:12**D. The Song of Moses** 31:30-32:47

The last verse of ch. 30 obviously belongs to this chapter. The hymn Moses composed is one of the most beautiful national anthems of any nation in this world. A national anthem is supposed to extol the character of a nation, to bestow a sense of history to its people, and to make them proud of being what they are. The national anthems of this world vary greatly in beauty and content. The Dutch national anthem is an ancient stately poem, consisting of 15 stanzas, only two of which are ever sung. It is an ode to William of Nassau (Orange), who is considered to be the father of the nation. The Germans sing their “Germany, Germany above all in the world” to a tune composed by Frans Joseph Haydn. “O say, can you see” refers to the flag of the United States which symbolizes liberty. And then there is Australia’s “Waltzing Mathilda” which rather mocks than elevates the dignity of the nation. Israel’s national anthem rises above all in that it celebrates divine election and human failure.

In one of his sermons, Ravi Zacharias quotes the Scottish writer Andrew Fletcher who said: “Let me write the songs of a nation and I don’t care who writes its laws.” The meaning is that the poet translates more clearly the character of his people than the lawgiver does. In Moses’ case the two were combined in one person.

Adam Clarke’s Commentary writes about this chapter: “On the inimitable excellence of this ode much has been written by commentators, critics, and poets, and it is allowed by the best judges to contain a specimen of almost every species of excellence in composition. It is so thoroughly poetic that even the dull Jews themselves found they could not write it in the prose form; and hence, it is distinguished as poetry in every Hebrew Bible by being written in its own hemistichs or short half lines, which is the general form of the Hebrew poetry; and were it translated in the same way it would be more easily understood. The song itself has suffered both by transcribers and translators, the former having mistaken some letters in different places, and made wrong combinations of them in others. As to the translators, most of them have followed their own fancy, from good Mr. Ainsworth, who ruined it by the most inanimate rhyming version, to certain latter poets, who have cast it unhallowedly into a European mold.”

The Pulpit Commentary writes: “The poem may be divided into six parts. 1. An introduction (vers. 1-3), in which the importance of the doctrine to be delivered is announced. 2. The blamelessness and excellency of Jehovah are placed in contrast with the corruptness and perversity of Israel (vers. 4,5). 3. The folly and ingratitude of the rebellious people is dwelt upon (vers. 7-18). 4. The purpose of God to punish and reject the rebellious generation is declared (vers. 19-23). 5. The fulfillment of this purpose in the judgments which should come upon the rebels, whilst mercy and favor should be showed to those that repented and were humbled under the hand of God (vers. 24:34). 6. And finally, the judgment which God would execute on the enemies of Israel, and the mercy he would show to his servants (vers. 35-43).”

The same Commentary continues with: “It is the compendious anticipatory sketch and the common watchword of all prophecy, and stands related to it as fundamentally as the Decalogue to all laws, and the Lord Prayer to all prayers.”

The hymn opens with an appeal to the heavens and the earth. Moses had used similar words before in addressing the people but rather in the sense of calling upon heaven and earth to testify against a sinful nation. In the first verses of this song, heaven and earth appear as less hostile witnesses. Earlier, Moses had said: “I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed.”⁸⁴⁶ And: “Assemble before me all the elders of your tribes and all your officials, so that I can speak these words in their hearing and call heaven and earth to testify against them.”⁸⁴⁷ In this hymn a poetical parallel is drawn between the heavens and earth as listeners in vs. 1 and “the rain [that] descends like dew,... like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants.” There is nothing harsh or hostile in that image. It is true that Israel’s apostasy will stand out later in sharp contrast to the virgin beauty of the first picture, but that does not rob the beginning of this hymn of the fresh smell of pearly dew on tender plants. The Name of the Lord and His greatness are not out to condemn man but to bless him. David later wrote about the dew as a picture of God’s blessing upon conditions of brotherly love. We read: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.”⁸⁴⁸

⁸⁴⁶ ch. 4:26

⁸⁴⁷ ch. 31:28

⁸⁴⁸ Ps. 133:1,3

The heavens, in this context, are not the heaven we think about when we hear the word, the dwelling place of God, the place we go to as God's redeemed. They are the heavens we can see from the earth, the starry sky at night and the blue canopy with the white clouds that produce rain for the land. Moses calls upon the whole of creation that is visible to man.

The verses 3 and 4 give a condensed but beautiful description of God's character. Moses described God in a proclamation. The Hebrew word is *qara'* which basically means: "to call out to." In the creation story the word is used for the divine decree that established the order of things. We read: "And God *called* the light Day, and the darkness he *called* Night."⁸⁴⁹ Moses announces established facts that have to make man understand what reality is all about. The fact that Moses brings this in the form of a proclamation suggests that mankind has forgotten the facts, or that they were unknown. The latter is not the case. The Apostle Paul observes: "What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."⁸⁵⁰ The proclamation, therefore, serves rather the purpose of refreshing man's memory. Man forgets who God is because he wants to forget.

Moses mentions five things about God in this brief introduction: God's Name, His greatness, that He is a rock of refuge, that He is perfect, and that all He does is right. The proclamation of His Name comprises the perfect infinity of His character. God is the great "I AM," incomparable to any other thing or person that exists. When Moses asked to see God's glory, God Himself proclaimed His Name. We read: "And the LORD said, 'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. ... And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.'"⁸⁵¹ This mountain-top experience must have stood before Moses' eyes as he began to sing his song.

God's greatness stands in sharp contrast with man's smallness. David brings out some of this when he says: "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!... When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"⁸⁵² God's majesty as evident in creation is only a small detail of the greatness of His person. Our finite minds are unable to take all in and our eyes are insufficient to see it all. Even the heavenly beings who surround the throne of God about whom we read that they are "covered with eyes, in front and in back even under [their] wings"⁸⁵³ stand in continuous awe before God's greatness and majesty. The closest word we have in our dictionary to approach God's greatness is "glory." God's greatness must be the object of our praise.

Moses furthermore calls God, "our Rock." The Hebrew word *tsuwr* conveys the idea of "a refuge." God is our hiding place. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* suggest an alternate meaning of the word. We read: "The word *Tsuwr* is rendered Creator by some eminent critics; and *khalyk* is the reading in the Arabic Version. Rab. Moses ben Maimon, in his valuable work, *Moreh Nebochim*, observes that the word *Tsuwr*, which is ordinarily translated rock, signifies origin, fountain, first cause, etc., and in this way it should be translated here: 'He is the first principle, his work is perfect.' As he is the cause of all things, he must be infinitely perfect; and consequently all his works must be perfect in their respective kinds. As is the cause, so must the effect be. Some think the word rock gives a very good sense: for, as in those lands, rocks were the ordinary places of defense and security, God may be metaphorically represented thus, to signify his protection of his followers. I prefer the opinion of Maimon." Most other commentators, however, adhere to the translation of *tsuwr* with "rock" although the Septuagint renders it with "God."

The image of the rock, as referring to God's immutability, is used frequently in the Old Testament. In his blessing for Joseph, Jacob said: "But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel."⁸⁵⁴ Isaiah demonstrates the unity between the two concepts of origin and refuge when he says: "Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn."⁸⁵⁵

⁸⁴⁹ Gen. 1:5

⁸⁵⁰ Rom. 1:19,20

⁸⁵¹ Ex. 33:19; 34:6,7

⁸⁵² Ps. 8:1,3,4

⁸⁵³ See Rev 4:6-8

⁸⁵⁴ Gen. 49:24

⁸⁵⁵ Isa. 51:1

Matthew Henry's Commentary comments in this passage: "He is the rock. So he is called six times in this chapter, and the Septuagint all along translates it theos, God. The learned Mr. Hugh Broughton reckons that God is called the rock eighteen times (besides in this chapter) in the Old Testament (though in some places we translate it strength), and charges it therefore upon the papists that they make St. Peter a god when they make him the rock on which the church is built. God is the rock, for he is in himself immutable immovable, and he is to all that seek him and fly to him an impenetrable shelter, and to all that trust in him an everlasting foundation." The accusation of "the learned Mr. Hugh Broughton" that the Roman Catholic Church elevated Peter to more than sainthood seems strange and farfetched to us. Whatever the Church teaches about Peter, it has not made him into a god. This kind of sharp controversy between Roman Catholics and Protestants has eased over the years.

In Moses' song the rock is a poetical parallel to God's perfection and justice. The image of the rock has a moral connotation. Sin has landed man in a quagmire in which his feet cannot find a place to stand on. God's justice is the only firm basis for human life. God's moral character is the measuring rod for our moral behavior. His standards are absolute and solid. There is no such thing as "situational ethics." Our human minds may not always been able to judge correctly but this doesn't mean that there are no absolutes for right and wrong. Everything that doesn't measure up the God's glory is sin. This makes all of us sinners, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."⁸⁵⁶

Moses refers to God as "A faithful God who does no wrong." The KJV renders it with: "a God of truth and without iniquity." The concept that God and truth are identical runs like a golden thread through the whole Bible. David says: "For the word of the LORD is right; and all his works are done in truth."⁸⁵⁷ On a human level truth may be illusive. We read in the Book of Proverbs: "A truthful witness gives honest testimony, but a false witness tells lies."⁸⁵⁸ A truthful witness is one who relates the facts objectively but man can never be one hundred percent objective. We all interpret facts and describe them the way we see them. Even honest witnesses can do no better than coming close to the facts. This doesn't mean that truth is relative. It means that truth can only be fully known in relation with God. God is the God of truth. For that reason Jesus could say: "I am the way and the truth and the life."⁸⁵⁹ As human beings we may be truthful but only God is truth.

Moses' addition that God is "without sin" (TLB) is an accommodation to our human way of thinking. It would be impossible for God to commit sin or for sin to be part of God's being. If sin means coming short of the glory of God, sin is everything that God is not. If God were not "without sin," He would not be God and the whole creation would fall apart. A sinning God would not be able to be "sustaining all things by his powerful word."⁸⁶⁰ As long as the atoms are held together and we are alive in this world we have living proof of the fact that there is no sin in God.

Moses' intent, however, is not to define sin but to justify the ways of God. "All his ways are just." Man has always struggled with the fact that things go wrong in this world. Life is not fair. We jump to the conclusion that this means that God is not fair. Suffering and death are a problem; they are *the* problem in this life. If we begin with the supposition that God is the creator of death, we arrive at the conclusion that God's ways are far from perfect. The supposition "If God is love..." opens the door to the insinuation that He cannot be love and omnipotent at the same time because the things that happen could not have happened. *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People* expresses the struggle of Harold Kushner's book. The Nazi death camps are even harder to explain in the light of God's love and power. Going down this track, we act as if man is not responsible for the evil he produces. I am convinced that, once we can look back upon life from the perspective heaven will allow us, and we can see the whole picture of the cosmic struggle between good and evil, we will affirm that God's ways are perfect.

In vs. 5 Moses projected Israel's future apostasy on the present. At that time, Israel was still God's chosen nation. But Moses spoke about them as people who were no longer God's children. They had lost their position as a kingdom of priests. Evidently, the exercise of their priesthood was conditional upon their fellowship with God. One cannot be a bridge between God and man if the bridge does not span both sides of the water. Paul touches on the problem of Israel's loss of the position God had chosen for them. He says: "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ... A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."⁸⁶¹

⁸⁵⁶ Rom. 3:23

⁸⁵⁷ Ps. 33:4 (KJV)

⁸⁵⁸ Prov. 12:17

⁸⁵⁹ John 14:6

⁸⁶⁰ Heb. 1:3

⁸⁶¹ Rom. 9:6; 28,29

The people Moses described had not responded to God's love in an appropriate way. The question is, how could they? Unless an encounter with God produces a change of heart there never will be an appropriate response. Paul declared man in his natural sinful condition dead. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, he writes: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."⁸⁶² The very fact though that Moses asked the question: "Is this the way you repay the LORD?" is an indication that man has a choice to respond appropriately. We may be dead in sin, but the dead also can hear the Word of God. Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live."⁸⁶³

We should bear in mind that God's redemption of Israel is not identical to our salvation in Jesus Christ. Israel's redemption was a physical deliverance from slavery and a leading into a Promised Land which was a specific place on earth. There were spiritual elements in it but the overall character was earth-bound. Our redemption is spiritual and, although there may be physical elements in God's blessings for us, our Promised Land is heaven. The fact that God had delivered Israel from Egypt and led them into Canaan did not bring every single Israelite automatically to heaven. God had provided them with a means of atonement for their sins but those who refused to confess and repent did not profit from this, even though they went through the rituals and motions. Jesus' strong condemnations of the people in His time indicate that they used their religion to cover up their sinful way of life. To the Jews of His day Jesus said: "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire."⁸⁶⁴ And to the leaders of the people He said: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."⁸⁶⁵ Moses spoke of the corruption of the people, Jesus describes them as "dead men's bones."

This doesn't mean, of course, that there were no righteous people in Israel. There were many who took the cleansing of their sins seriously, and believed that God had taken away their iniquity. The Book of Psalms abounds with testimonies to that effect.

Moses' first argument to bring the people back into fellowship with God is a reminder of the fact that God is their creator. The recognition that God created us is the most basic fact of life. To deviate from this assumption means giving up any hope for purpose and meaning in life. The poison of the theory of evolution is that it leaves us without meaning. If man descended from the apes, there is no guarantee that his thoughts and words are any more valuable than the ape's. Why would the theory of evolution itself be any more truthful when it is pronounced by a human than if an ape would utter the same sounds? If our speaking, that is if our word is not related to the Word of God, the Word that created, there is no basis for the assumption that the sounds we make have meaning. If God is not our creator, we should stop making noises. When the Apostle John describes Jesus' coming into this world with: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,"⁸⁶⁶ he identifies God with meaning.

Moses reproaches his fellowmen for a lack of gratitude. How can a person accept what God has done for him in His love and not show gratitude? David asks the question: "How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?" And he gives the answer: "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people." He even implies that it would be an appropriate response to give his life for the Lord. In the following verse of the same psalm he says: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints." In saying this, David reached prophetically beyond the cross of Calvary. Although he could not have known that God would provide atonement for his sins in the death of His dear Son, he proclaimed that it would be fitting for man to surrender his life to God. The Apostle John drew the ultimate conclusion, the final expression of gratitude, when he wrote: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."⁸⁶⁷

Matthew Henry's Commentary observes: "It was base ingratitude: 'Do you thus requite the Lord? Are these the returns you make him for all his favors to you? The powers you have from him will you employ them against

⁸⁶² Eph. 2:1-3

⁸⁶³ John 5:25

⁸⁶⁴ John 8:44

⁸⁶⁵ Matt. 23:27,28

⁸⁶⁶ John 1:1

⁸⁶⁷ I John 3:16

him?’ See Mica 6:3-4; John 10:32. This is such monstrous villainy as all the world will cry shame of: call a man ungrateful, and you can call him no worse. It was prodigious madness: O foolish people and unwise! Fools, and double fools! who has bewitched you? Gal 3:1. ‘Fools indeed, to disoblige one on whom you have such a necessary dependence! To forsake your own mercies for lying vanities!’ Note, All willful sinners, especially sinners in Israel, are the most unwise and the most ungrateful people in the world.”

Man’s problem is that, first of all, salvation is not hereditary, that life is very short, and that he forgets the lessons of history. Moses referred to the history of salvation when he said: “Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.” This reference would, first of all, pertain to the plagues of Egypt and the miracles surrounding the exodus. Israel’s birth as a nation was a supernatural event which should be the basis for each member of the nation to seek a personal relationship with the God of Jacob.

But Moses went farther back than Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian slavery. In vs. 8 he made the puzzling statement: “When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel.” The RSV renders this verse differently: “When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.” TLB differs even more with: “When God divided up the world among the nations, He gave each of them a supervising angel!” The latter is based on the Septuagint’s rendering of the verse: “He established the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God.” *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “The meaning of the passage seems to be, that when God divided the earth among mankind, he reserved twelve lots, according to the number of the sons of Jacob, which he was now, about to give to their descendants, according to his promise.” The commentary *Barnes’ Notes* explains that the Greek text of the Septuagint was “following apparently not a different reading, but the Jewish notion that the nations of the earth are seventy in number... and that each has its own guardian Angel.... This was possibly suggested by an apprehension that the literal rendering might prove invidious to the many Gentiles who would read the Greek version.”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary explains: “In the division of the earth, which Noah is believed to have made by divine direction in the days of Peleg (Gen 10:5,25; Deut 2:5-9; Acts 17:26-27), Palestine was reserved by the wisdom and goodness of Heaven for the possession of His special people, and the display of the most stupendous wonders. The theater was small, but admirably situated for the convenient observation of the human race—at the junction of the two great continents of Asia and Africa, and almost within sight of Europe. From this spot, as from a common center, the report of God’s wonderful works, the glad tidings of salvation through the obedience and sufferings of His own eternal Son, might be rapidly and easily wafted to every part of the globe. [He set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel.] ‘Though Peleg is not named, a division of the earth is noticed; and the relation to the number of the children of Israel may point to its 72 (12 x 6) names that occur in the text (Gen 10), if we exclude Noah and his three sons’ (Pye Smith, Kitto’s ‘Cyclopaedia,’ art. ‘Dispersion of Nations’). The dispersion of mankind took place in an orderly manner, according to their families and language..., each people being guided by the secret over-ruling providence of God to the country they were destined to inherit. In this heaven-directed distribution of lands, the posterity of Canaan were located in the country of that name, the divine Proprietor having eventually assigned it to the children of Israel; and when the corruption of the former had increased to such a height that their iniquity was full, God interposed by His judgments to exterminate them, and make way for the children of Israel. Others think that the words ‘according to the number of the children of Israel,’ are used with a special reference to the vast population of Israel in later ages, when, though they should multiply to so extraordinary an amount, the land of Canaan, by its mountain terraces, etc., was made sufficient for containing its teeming multitudes. Another rendering, which has received the sanction of eminent scholars, has been proposed as follows: ‘When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of Adam, and set the bounds of every people, the children of Israel were few in numbers, when the Lord chose that people and made Jacob His inheritance’ (cf. Deut 30:5; Gen 34:30; Ps 105:9-12). [The Septuagint renders the latter clause:... according to the number of the angels (cf. Dan 10:13).] Also, on the origin of the dogma of the tutelary spirits of the nation, and the popular belief of the Jews in this doctrine, supposed to have been derived from the contact with the Egyptians, who divided the earth into 70 parts.”

One interesting interpretation comes from a twentieth century preacher, I once heard, who believed that God blessed the nations according to the number of Jewish immigrants they had accepted within their borders. The preacher was German, and the sermon was preached shortly after the full extend of Hitler’s holocaust had come to light.

God’s words to Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai may shed some light upon the meaning of this verse. We read: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”⁸⁶⁸ Paul’s introduction of the Gospel to the philosophers at the Areopagus may also be a good pointer to the real meaning of Moses’ words. He said: “>From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”⁸⁶⁹ Israel has played a pivotal role in the history of salvation. God, not only, has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed [Jesus, a member of the nation of Israel], He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”⁸⁷⁰ He also “reconciled us to himself through Christ.”⁸⁷¹ Whatever happened to Israel as a nation, God’s ultimate purpose has always been the salvation of the whole world. Jesus said clearly: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”⁸⁷² The Apostles Peter and Paul corroborate this by saying: “[God] wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth,”⁸⁷³ and “[God] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”⁸⁷⁴

Vs. 9 makes the amazing statement: “For the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance.” The Hebrew word, rendered by the NIV with “allotted” is *chebel* which means “a measuring line.” The verse could suggest, therefore, that God uses Israel as a measuring rod for the rest of the world. But good authorities, such as *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* do not interpret the verse that way. We read there: “[The Lord’s portion is his people] What an astonishing saying! As holy souls take GOD for their portion, so GOD takes them for his portion. He represents himself as happy in his followers; and they are infinitely happy in, and satisfied with, God as their portion. This is what is implied in being a saint. He who is seeking for an earthly portion, has little commerce with the Most High.”

Matthew Henry’s Commentary draws a direct line between the people of Israel in the Old Testament and the New Testament church, hardly making any distinction between one and the other. In the context of Moses’ song, particularly in regard to God’s heritage among men, this seems to be appropriate. The Commentary explains: “The reason given for the particular care God took for this people, so long before they were either born or thought of (as I may say), in our world, does yet more magnify the kindness, and make it obliging beyond expression (v. 9): For the Lord’s portion is his people. All the world is his. He is owner and possessor of heaven and earth, but his church is his in a peculiar manner. It is his demesne, his vineyard, his garden enclosed. He has a particular delight in it: it is the beloved of his soul, in it he walks, he dwells, it is his rest for ever. He has a particular concern for it, keeps it as the apple of his eye. He has particular expectations from it, as a man has from his portion, has a much greater rent of honor, glory, and worship, from that distinguished remnant, than from all the world besides. That God should be his people’s portion is easy to be accounted for, for he is their joy and felicity; but how they should be his portion, who neither needs them nor can be benefited by them, must be resolved into the wondrous condescension of free grace. Even so, Father, because it seemed good in thy eyes so to call and to account them.”

In the two following short parables, Jesus portrays God’s excitement over the salvation of man: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”⁸⁷⁵ If we are amazed about God’s excitement as portrayed in the first parable, the point of the second story is even more amazing. The merchant who was looking for pearls was an expert. He knew the perfect pearl when he saw it. We cannot picture ourselves as the emblem of perfection, since we cannot see ourselves as God sees us, covered with the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The verses 9-14 are among the most lyrical description in the Bible of God’s love for mankind. It is true that the focus is primarily on Israel in these verses. But we should never lose sight of the fact that Israel’s position in this world was that of a kingdom of priests, a bridge between God and the whole human race. God had the salvation of the world on His mind when He chose Israel. In the concentration of God’s love upon Israel is reflected His love for the world.

⁸⁶⁸ Ex. 19:5,6

⁸⁶⁹ Acts 17:26,27

⁸⁷⁰ Acts 17:31

⁸⁷¹ II Cor. 5:18

⁸⁷² John 3:16

⁸⁷³ I Tim. 2:4

⁸⁷⁴ II Peter 3:9

⁸⁷⁵ Matt. 13:44-46

Vs. 10 reads: "In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye." The question naturally arises why the desert is mentioned as the place where God began to occupy Himself with Israel, whereas the history of salvation began with Abraham. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes Hengstenberg who suggests that "the reason why 'the wilderness' is selected as the starting point of Israel's career is, that there only they began to feel themselves a free and independent people." The Commentary also observes that "the phrase is borrowed by Hosea (Hos 9:10), 'I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness,' 'where,' says Hengstenberg, 'the general image of an agreeable discovery, in the Pentateuch, is individualized by the prophet under the image of grapes.'" And: "The phraseology, 'waste howling wilderness' is commonly considered an Oriental expression for a desert full of wild beasts, whose loud roars at night form a terrific element in the scene. But perhaps the 'howling' refers rather to the loud rushing sound of the Khamsin, which, amid the prevalence of an awful death-like silence everywhere, blows with tremendous impetuosity, charged with clouds of sand and gravel, darkening the air, and excluding the prospect of every object far and near. The roaring sweep of this tempestuous blast over the wide area of the desert renders the figurative description in the song exceedingly striking and impressive.

In the commentary *Barnes' Notes*, the author points out that "The word for 'waste' is that used in Gen 1:2, and there rendered 'without form,' suggesting that God's call of Israel is comparable to His calling the physical creation into existence. This interpretation is consistent with the Apostle Paul's who draws the same parallel between God's original creation of the universe and His new creation in Jesus Christ. We read: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."⁸⁷⁶

We have to bear in mind that the only experience the generation, which Moses addressed at this point, had of God's revelation was during the desert crossing. As far as they were concerned the desert was the place where God had found them.

On the clause "he guarded him as the apple of his eye" *Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments: "Nothing can exceed the force and delicacy of this expression. As deeply concerned and as carefully attentive as man can be for the safety of his eyesight, so was God for the protection and welfare of this people. How amazing this condescension!" The Apostle Paul uses the image of the members of a human body to illustrate the functioning of the church of Jesus Christ.⁸⁷⁷ In Paul's illustration, one member should not boast against the other. All members are needed for the correct functioning of the body. The truth Moses wanted to convey, however, is that the body considers some members more precious than others. God's preferential treatment of Israel is based on this assumption. Israel is God's eye on the world. Jesus must have had this in mind when He said: "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" It is also true that when Israel failed God's call, the world was left in the dark.

Twice in the Old Testament, the image of the apple of the eye is used to convey God's tenderness towards His children. David prays: "Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings."⁸⁷⁸ The prophet Zechariah says to the people who returned from Babylonian captivity: "'Come, O Zion! Escape, you who live in the Daughter of Babylon!' For this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'After he has honored me and has sent me against the nations that have plundered you- *for whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye*- I will surely raise my hand against them so that their slaves will plunder them. Then you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me.'⁸⁷⁹

Once, the image is used of the Word of God and what man's relationship should be toward it. We read in Proverbs: "Keep my commands and you will live; guard my teachings as the apple of your eye."⁸⁸⁰ So the image relates to both sides of the relationship between God and man. God expects us to return the love and tenderness He shows to us by treating Him and His Word as we treat the apple of our own eye.

There is more than tenderness in the next image used of the eagle and its young. The eagle as a majestic and powerful bird has always spoken to man's imagination. The eagle has inspired man throughout the ages and it is, probably, the most influential model in man's aspiration to fly himself. The United States of America is not the only nation that has adopted the eagle as its national symbol.

⁸⁷⁶ II Cor. 4:6

⁸⁷⁷ See I Cor. 12:12-31; Rom. 12:4,5

⁸⁷⁸ Ps. 17:8

⁸⁷⁹ Zech. 2:7-9

⁸⁸⁰ Prov. 7:2

When Israel arrived at the place where God had invited them to celebrate the Festival unto YHWH, He used the image. Speaking to the nation as a whole for the first time, God said: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”⁸⁸¹ God reveals Himself to His children in terms of power and security. The thought that an eagle would drop his young and let them fall to earth when he soars above the clouds and catches them in midair is inconceivable. Later on, Moses will say: “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”⁸⁸²

But there is more than security in the image Moses uses. The eagle, first of all, stirs up its nest and throws out its young. The first part of the flying lesson is that the young birds learn to fall. It is the scare of falling that makes them spread their wings. Their fluttering does not resemble flying yet, but it is the first step. Without the fear of falling there is no security of being carried on the pinions of the mother bird. God’s Spirit does not keep fear from our doorstep; He allows it, He introduces it to force us to depend on Him for our security. God does not protect us from the storms of life without letting us experience those storms. His presence does not guarantee clear skies but it gives us the assurance that we will not perish in the storm. Our nests will be stirred up. God Himself will see to that. How else would we learn to fly?

Isaiah uses the image to portray God’s protection over Jerusalem. We read: “Like birds hovering overhead, the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will ‘pass over’ it and will rescue it.”⁸⁸³ The power that protects the nest is stronger than the power that wants to rob it.

One of the most encouraging verses in the Bible is also in Isaiah where the picture is applied to the believer. God imparts His eagle-like qualities to those who put their trust in Him. Isaiah says: “Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”⁸⁸⁴

Vs. 12, “The LORD alone led him; no foreign god was with him,” is a covert reference to the incident of the making of the Golden Calf. When Aaron made an idol cast in the shape of a calf, the people said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”⁸⁸⁵ The inference is YHWH and the Egyptian idol had worked together in bringing Israel out of Egypt. In the Song of Moses, God denies any such association.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary suggests that the phrase: “He made him ride on the heights of the land” refers to Israel’s triumphant march through the Trans-Jordan territory. But *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* remarks: “All the verbs here are in the future tense, because this is a prophecy of the prosperity they should possess in the Promised Land. The Israelites were to ride-exult, on the high places, the mountains and hills of their land, in which they are promised the highest degrees of prosperity, as even the rocky part of the country should be rendered fertile by the peculiar benediction of God.”

The “honey from the rock” and “oil from the flinty crag” suggest the unexpected blessing. One usually doesn’t look to rocks for honey or olive oil. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “This promise states that even the most barren places in the country should yield an abundance of aromatic flowers, from which the bees should collect honey in abundance; and even the tops of the rocks afford sufficient support for olive trees, from the fruit of which they should extract oil in abundance: and all this should be occasioned by the peculiar blessing of God upon the land.”

The KJV speaks of “butter” instead of “curds.” The gist of the promise is that God’s blessing would allow the people to live comfortably of “the fat off the land.” God’s promises are not sugar- or fat-free. But, of course, Moses was not primarily speaking of the people’s physical diet. He had emphasized in an earlier address “that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”⁸⁸⁶ Jesus explained to His disciples that all food is a picture of the real sustenance of man’s life. He told them: “I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”⁸⁸⁷ Isaiah put it all in the right perspective when he cried out: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.”⁸⁸⁸

⁸⁸¹ Ex. 19:4

⁸⁸² Deut. 33:27

⁸⁸³ Isa. 31:5

⁸⁸⁴ Isa. 40:31

⁸⁸⁵ Ex. 32:4

⁸⁸⁶ Deut. 8:3

⁸⁸⁷ John 4:32,34

⁸⁸⁸ Isa. 55:1-3

God is interested in our bodies and in our physical well-being but not at the expense of our souls. An abundance of food can be harmful to our physical health but affluence is often more detrimental to the soul. Moses foresaw this prophetically when he said: “Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; filled with food, he became heavy and sleek. He abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Savior.” Scarcity is often healthier for the soul than abundance. More people turn to God in times of hunger than at any other time. A. W. Tozer once sarcastically remarked that there was nothing wrong with the church that a serious economic crisis could not correct.

Very few people recognize the danger of abundance. God guarantees us the basic necessities of life. Isaiah prophesied about the righteous man: “His bread will be supplied, and water will not fail him.”⁸⁸⁹ The Bible warns us against the desire to become rich. “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”⁸⁹⁰ The Scottish writer George Macdonald once asked the question (and answered it in the affirmative) if we could believe that God may punish a man by making him rich. The majority of humanity would not object to this kind of punishment, even at the detriment of their souls. We hardly know what is good for us but we want it anyhow. One of the most terrible verses in the Bible is: “And He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul.”⁸⁹¹ How terrible it is when God’s blessings make us stumble and fall. The admonition of Hebrews “be content with what you have” should be written in bold letters over our lives, lest, like Jeshurun, we grow fat and kick; become filled with food, heavy and sleek and abandon the God who made us and reject the Rock our Savior.

The name Jeshurun for Israel is used almost exclusively in Deuteronomy where we find it three times.⁸⁹² The only other place it is found is in Isaiah.⁸⁹³

Adam Clarke’s Commentary explains that *Y’shuruwn* means “the upright.” We read: “This appellation is here put for Israel, and as it comes from *yaashar*, he was right, straight, may be intended to show that the people who once not only promised fair, but were really upright, walking in the paths of righteousness, should, in the time signified by the prophet, not only revolt from God, but actually fight against him; like a full fed horse, who not only will not bear the harness, but breaks away from his master, and endeavors to kick him as he struggles to get loose. All this is spoken prophetically, and is intended as a warning, that the evil might not take place. For were the transgression unavoidable, it must be the effect of some necessitating cause, which would destroy the turpitude of the action, as it referred to Israel; for if the evil were absolutely unavoidable, no blame could attach to the unfortunate agent, who could only consider himself the miserable instrument of a dire necessity.”

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary elaborates further: “*Y’shuruwn* - a poetical name for Israel, implying affection and endearment; from *yaashar*, straight, righteous. Diminutive, Jeshurun, ‘the good little people’ (Gesenius). But Hengstenberg rejects this definition, denying the termination ‘-un’ to be the Hebrew sign of a diminutive, and maintaining that Jeshurun is only a rare appellation, expressive of their covenanted relation to God. But their practice did not correspond to their privileges. The metaphor here used is derived from a pampered animal, which, instead of being tame and gentle, becomes mischievous and vicious, in consequence of good living and kind treatment. So did the Israelites conduct themselves by their various acts of rebellion, murmuring, and idolatrous apostasy.”

The essence of Israel’s sin is the one already mentioned in the previous chapter, that they did not go to God for the atonement of their sins but turned to idols whom they tried to appease. Their actions betrayed a complete lack of understanding of the nature of all moral failure. It is true that God is the only measurement of moral conduct. It is also true that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”⁸⁹⁴ It is true that “the wages of sin is death.” Adam and Eve brought death to our planet through their disobedience but they complicated matters by hiding from God and trying to work out their own atonement. When they came out of their closet and let God clothe their nakedness with the skin of an animal that was killed in their stead, death became a temporal phenomenon. Only God has made a provision for human sin. It is true that “the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In vs. 17, Moses clearly identifies idols with demons. There may have been animistic tendencies in the thinking of the Israelites of that time. That is, they may have believed that spiritual powers inhabited inert things. Or the idol could have been the representation of a spirit that was used as a means to direct man’s attention to a certain spirit. Israel’s entrance into Canaan opened up a whole new spectrum of spiritual powers that had been unknown to

⁸⁸⁹ Isa. 33:16

⁸⁹⁰ Heb. 13:5

⁸⁹¹ Ps. 106:15 (NKJV)

⁸⁹² See ch. 32:15; 33:5,26

⁸⁹³ See Isa. 44:2

⁸⁹⁴ Rom. 3:23

them before. These may have been recognized as territorial spirits which ought to be appeased, or as more powerful deities unknown to them before. Moses calls them: “gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear.” This does not mean that Israel had never indulged in idolatry before. We read about Abraham that he served other gods before God called him. Joshua reminded the people: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods.’”⁸⁹⁵ But Abraham, obviously, made a clean break with idolatry when God called him. Rachel had stolen her father’s teraphim.⁸⁹⁶ It wasn’t until Jacob finally returned to Bethel to fulfill the vow he had made that he “said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you.’” From that time on the gods of Mesopotamia are no longer found in the family of Israel. But Israel must have picked up idolatry again during their long sojourn in Egypt. Quoting a prophecy from the Book of Amos, Stephen said in his defense before the Sanhedrin: “Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship.”⁸⁹⁷

It seems that Moses mixed his metaphors in vs. 18 with: “You deserted the Rock, who fathered you.” The idea is, obviously, the same as in the verse in Isaiah’s prophecy: “Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn.”⁸⁹⁸ Like a master sculptor, God formed man in His own image from material different from Himself. In that sense, the Rock was their father.

Idolatry is the only sin mentioned in the Bible that provokes God to jealousy and that causes His rejection of man. There is forgiveness for all other sins, but when a man who knows God and who has experienced God’s love and mercy turns away from Him to other deities, he commits the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. Jesus said to the people of His time: “I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” As adultery is the only cause for the dissolution of a marriage, so does idolatry provoke God’s rejection of man. Moses did not address those words to atheists, or agnostics, or to people who had never known any fellowship with the living God but to God’s own people. The prophecy is put in the past tense, as if unfaithfulness had already taken place. Partly, this was done to emphasize the warning, but also because, according to Amos, Israel had in the desert “lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of [their] god Rephan.” There is no record of this in Moses’ account of the desert crossing, unless it is in the making of the Golden Calf or in Israel’s sin with the women of Moab, but absence of a written record does not invalidate Amos’ prophetic remembrance. “‘I will hide my face from them,’ he said, ‘and see what their end will be’” speaks of the effect the departure of God’s Spirit from man will have. The priestly blessing of the Old Testament reads: “The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”⁸⁹⁹ The essence of blessing and peace is in the fact that God’s face is turned toward us. When God’s face is turned away, the lifeline is cut and we perish. David says the same in the Psalms: “When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.”⁹⁰⁰ Our life depends upon God’s looking at us. In Paul’s words: “For in him we live and move and have our being.”⁹⁰¹ People, who turn away from the living God, the God who is their lifeline, turn against themselves.

Vs. 21 gives an interesting turn to God’s warning that He will abandon Israel. They made Him jealous, He will make them jealous also. The question is what is meant by “I will make them envious by those who are not a people; I will make them angry by a nation that has no understanding?” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* partly answers that question: “In the Sinaitic Covenant attached to the stipulation forbidding rival image-gods, was the warning: ‘I the Lord your God am a jealous God’ (Deut 5:9; Ex 20:5). God responds to unfaithfulness in the covenant relationship with something akin to the fiery conjugal zeal of a man whose spouse has been unfaithful (Deut 32:21, cf. v. 16). The law prescribed death for the adulteress. The covenant curses threatened Israel with extinction if she played the harlot with the no-gods of Canaan (cf. 31:16ff.). From the fire of divine jealousy there is no escape; it burns unto the depths of Sheol (32:22, RSV), the place of the dead. 19,20. He abhorred them.... And he said, I will hide my face. Applying the ... principle, God would reject Israel and remove his protection from them. He would incite jealousy in Israel by means of a no-people (v. 21; cf. Eph 2:12). That is, he would grant to a people

⁸⁹⁵ Josh. 24:2

⁸⁹⁶ See Gen. 31:19

⁸⁹⁷ See Amos 5:25,26; Acts 7:42,43

⁸⁹⁸ Isa. 51:1

⁸⁹⁹ Num. 6:25,26

⁹⁰⁰ Ps. 104:29

⁹⁰¹ Acts 17:28

that had not known his covenant favor to triumph over his children in whom is no faithfulness (v. 20b, ASV and RSV).” The Commentary suggests that “no-people” refers to the New Testament church. It is true that, in our present era, Christianity has been a thorn in the flesh of Judaism. But it is hard to grasp that God’s plan of salvation of the world would be the result of Israel’s idolatry.

Adam Clarke’s Commentary also see here a promise for the birth of the church: “This verse contains a very pointed promise of the calling of the Gentiles, in consequence of the rejection of the Jews, threatened Deut 32:19; and to this great event it is applied by Paul, Rom 10:19.”

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament observes: “The Israelites had excited the jealousy and vexation of God by a no-god and vanities; therefore God would excite their jealousy and vexation by a no-people and a foolish nation. How this retaliation would manifest itself is not fully defined however here, but is to be gathered from the conduct of Israel towards the Lord. Israel had excited the jealousy of God by preferring a no-god, or habaaliym ..., nothingnesses, i.e., gods that were vanities or nothings (Elilim, Lev 19:4), to the true and living God, its Father and Creator. God would therefore excite them to jealousy and ill-will by a no-people, a foolish nation, i.e., by preferring a no-people to the Israelites, transferring His favor to them, and giving the blessing which Israel had despised to a foolish nation. It is only with this explanation of the words that full justice is done to the idea of retribution; and it was in this sense that Paul understood this passage as referring to the adoption of the Gentiles as the people of God (Rom 10:19), and that not merely by adaptation, or by connecting another meaning with the words, as Umbreit supposes, but by interpreting it in exact accordance with the true sense of the words.”

The amazing truth in this verse is, indeed, that God turned Israel’s failure into a triumph for His revelation in the world. Initially, Israel itself became a no-people. In Hosea’s prophecy, his unfaithful wife, Gomer, had a son of whom the Lord said: “Call him Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.”⁹⁰² The Apostle Peter would later refer to this name Lo-Ammi when he wrote to gentile believers: “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

The Apostle Paul used the very principle of jealousy for the purpose of the conversion of the Jewish race. Writing to the Christians in Rome, he said: “I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?”⁹⁰³ Even in Moses’ warning to the people, God’s threat to make them envious is not negative. His purpose was to draw them out to salvation not to see them fret. Speaking of the heathen nations as having no understanding does not refer to their intellectual competence. The biblical definition of wisdom is having the right relationship to God. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding.”⁹⁰⁴

In verses 22-27, Moses announces a series of disasters, some natural, some manmade. The fire mentioned in vs. 22 is a metaphor of God’s wrath, but it can also be seen as a physical expression of His wrath as was the flood of Noah. Literal fire will be the means by which our planet will be destroyed. The Apostle Peter prophesied about the end of the world, saying: “The present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. ... The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. ... That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.”⁹⁰⁵ Moses’ simile goes well beyond any punishment Israel ever received for its sin. In the Epistle to the Hebrews we read: “God is a consuming fire.”⁹⁰⁶ And: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”⁹⁰⁷ The fire that will destroy our planet is, at the same time the fire of God’s judgment and wrath.

Secondly, there will be natural disasters causing famine in the land. Some famines can also be caused by war, which is referred to in vs. 25 ff.

The third threat is that wild animals will overrun the country. Earlier, God had brought the wild animals to the side of Israel as a weapon to drive out the nations of Canaan. We read in Exodus: “I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little

⁹⁰² Hos. 1:9

⁹⁰³ Rom. 11:13-15

⁹⁰⁴ Ps. 111:10

⁹⁰⁵ See II Peter 3:7-12

⁹⁰⁶ Heb. 12:29

⁹⁰⁷ Heb. 10:31

by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land.”⁹⁰⁸ The intent was that Israel would grow to fill the space God had given to them. Initially, physical growth was meant. The increase of population would secure the occupation of the land. But population increase has to go hand in hand with spiritual growth in order to be healthy and in order to be translated into victory. Turning away from God and turning to idols would stunt the growth of the nation, both physically and spiritually. It would make the wild animals turn in their tracks and attack the ones they were supposed to assist.

Some of the famine would be caused by the weather pattern of the country. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* says about famines: “In early times, especially in lands dependent on their own productions, famines were not infrequent. They were generally caused by local irregularities of the rainfall, by destructive hail storms (Ex 9:23,31-32), by ravages of insects (Ex 10:15; Joel 1:4) and by enemies (Deut 28:51); in a city a famine might be caused by a siege (2 Kings 6:25); pestilence often followed in its wake, and the suffering was great.” One example of a severe famine is the one that was announced, and probably instigated by the prophet Elijah, who announced to King Ahab that there would be no rain for years to come. After 3 ½ years, we read: “Now the famine was severe in Samaria.”⁹⁰⁹ The reason we say that Elijah instigated the famine is based upon James’ comment: “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”⁹¹⁰

Natural disasters, famines, and wars were all “an act of God” in the most literal sense of the word. In our modern world, insurance companies to avoid making payments for incidences beyond human control use the expression “an act of God” loosely. There is no concept that God did it. Very few people make a connection between tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and the moral condition of a country. In biblical times people did not believe in natural causes. From Jesus’ comment on a current event of His day: “Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them-do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?”⁹¹¹ we understand that the collapse of the tower of Siloam was attributed to the guilt of the people. Modern man cannot see life in black-and-white as they did but in our seeing everything in gray, we have not gotten any closer to the truth. God does use earthquakes to shake up people and in some cases there may be a relationship between tornadoes and wickedness. We can say this without generalizing and without setting ourselves up as judges over other. Wickedness and disaster do go together. If the first Pilgrims in North America instituted Thanksgiving Day because, against all odds, God saw them through their first year of hardship in the New World, why would the opposite not be true and we would recognize the hand of God in His punishment of sin?

The verses 26 and 27 explain the mystery of the continuous existence of the Jewish people. No other human race or nation has managed to maintain their identity throughout the millennia. Israel was not blotted out from human memory because of the controversy between God and His enemy. We understand little about the issues that govern the relationship between God and Satan. The Book of Job reveals that Satan is indefatigably contesting God’s dealings with man. Although he is the author of sin, he taunts God with it in the lives of His children. The Bible calls him “the accuser of our brothers who accuses them before our God day and night.”⁹¹² It is difficult, though, to take the words: “I dreaded the taunt of the enemy, lest the adversary misunderstand” literally, as if God would really be intimidated by Satan’s ridicule. It seems that those words are said more for the benefit of Israel to make them understand that their continued existence has nothing to do with their own qualities or perseverance. God keeps His children from perishing for diplomatic reasons.

This argumentation was close to Moses’ heart. In his intercession for the people after the making of the Golden Calf, he pleaded: “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.”⁹¹³ And: “If you put these people to death all at one time, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, ‘The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath; so he slaughtered them in the desert.’”⁹¹⁴ But in these verses, God Himself says that He is not willing to give His enemy any legal ground for his complaints. We read about the end of time that “Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth-Gog and Magog-to gather them for

⁹⁰⁸ Ex. 23:27-30

⁹⁰⁹ I Kings 18:2

⁹¹⁰ James 5:17,18

⁹¹¹ Luke 13:4

⁹¹² See Rev. 12:10

⁹¹³ Ex. 32:12

⁹¹⁴ Num. 14:15,16

battle.”⁹¹⁵ It seems that some of the suffering of God’s children in this world is connected to the fact that God wants to assure Satan of a fair trial.

In verses 28-30, God appeals to the reason of the future generations. When they are being trampled by other nations who bow to idols that cannot stand any comparison with the living God, they ought to come to the conclusion that something is wrong in their lives. Moses had used the question: “How could one man chase a thousand, or two put ten thousand to flight?” earlier to depict the supernatural power of Israel over its enemies: “Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you.”⁹¹⁶ Here the roles are reversed and the enemy possesses powers that cannot be explained in terms of military supremacy.

The words “their Rock had sold them, ... the LORD had given them up” point to a transaction that took place in the heavenly spheres. Because the people had withdrawn themselves from God’s protection by their sinful lifestyle, God handed them over to Satan for their punishment. The tragedy of Israel would be that their enemies understood what they could not understand themselves, that God’s power, which was far superior to any power their own gods could give them, had been withdrawn from the people and they had become an easy prey. The non-believers could have told the believers what was wrong with them. A pagan knows better what a Christian lifestyle should be like than the Christian himself.

The vine and venom of the verses 32 and 33 express the essence of Israel’s sin, not the character of their enemies. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments here: “That by vine is meant the people, and by grapes their moral conduct, is evident from Isa 5:1-7. It is very likely that the grapes produced about the lake Asphaltites, where Sodom and Gomorrah formerly stood, were not only of an acrid, disagreeable taste, but of a deleterious quality; and to this, it is probable, Moses here alludes.” But the image seems to go beyond the acrid taste of fruit grown at a certain place. The vine and venom of Sodom and Gomorrah represent the character of Israel’s sin. About four centuries before “the sin of the Amorites [had] reached its full measure,”⁹¹⁷ God told Abraham that the outcry of Sodom’s sin was too great to endure.⁹¹⁸ Moses’ comparison between Israel and Sodom and Gomorrah places Israel’s sin in a category that is so extreme that punishment cannot be delayed till the Day of Judgment.

The grapes of Sodom are not only acrid but also poisonous. One can acquire a taste for sour grapes but the sin of Sodom kills prematurely. Sin is often compared with wine in Scripture. In Revelation, Babylon is pictured as the prototype of sin of which we read: “For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries.”⁹¹⁹

The comparison between the wine and snake venom points to the source of Israel’s sin. The serpent was the first form in which Satan is introduced to us in Scripture.⁹²⁰ In Revelation, the devil is called “that ancient serpent.”⁹²¹ In this way Israel’s idolatry is exposed in all its nakedness. Behind every idol hides a demon and the worship of idols brings deadly poison into man’s soul. Man is ultimately not lost because he kills, steals, or commits adultery. Those acts are the fruits. The root is his fellowship with the powers of darkness. Sinful nature, of course, plays a role. We are responsible for the sins we commit. But God did not create our sinful nature. A sinful nature is the image of God in us distorted by the poison of the enemy. Jesus told the Jews of His time, the people who ultimately put Him on the cross: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire.”⁹²²

The verses 34-36 are the most amazing in this chapter. At first glance, we could conclude that these verses speak about God’s punishment of Israel for their sin. God announces that He will avenge Himself “in due time.” Punishment may not be instantaneous but it is unavoidable. It may be locked up in God’s safe, but God’s safe will one day be opened. All this sounds like a condemnation of the people of Israel. But then comes the surprise: “The LORD will judge his people and *have compassion* on his servants.” God’s judgment is an expression of His compassion. There is, obviously, something left out here. Moses could not have known, and God did not reveal this to anybody, that He Himself would take the brunt of His own wrath and punish the sin of mankind in His Son Jesus Christ. The vengeance in these verses is not the punishment of the people of Israel but the crushing of the real enemy of God and of Israel: Satan and his cohorts. The sins of man are punished in Jesus who died on the cross and thus

⁹¹⁵ Rev. 20:7,8

⁹¹⁶ Lev. 26:8

⁹¹⁷ See Gen. 15:16

⁹¹⁸ See Gen. 18:20,21

⁹¹⁹ Rev. 18:3

⁹²⁰ See Gen. 3:1-5

⁹²¹ See Rev. 12:9

⁹²² John 8:44

God is revenged. This is expressed in the phrase: “He will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people.” The ones who are judged and exposed are the gods to which Israel bowed down.

Israel will be ashamed when it discovers that the idols to which they sacrificed are without strength and are unable to save them. But, most of all, the powers behind they idols are put to shame. The Apostle Paul explains this victory as follows: “He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”⁹²³ The words, “I put to death and I bring to life,” apply, in the first place, to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This does not mean that human beings cannot fall under God’s judgment but the words in Moses’ song must be applied, in the first place, to God’s punishment of sin in His Son and to judgment upon Satan. For those who identify themselves with Jesus there is no condemnation; those who side with the enemy will fall under the judgment that is intended for the enemy. Hell was never meant to harbor human beings.

The phrase: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay” is, in the first place, God’s promise that He will address the core of the problem of the universe in due time. Elsewhere in Scripture it is understood as an admonition that we are not to avenge ourselves upon our fellowmen for injustice that was done to us. We read in Leviticus: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”⁹²⁴ The Book of Proverbs says: “Do not say, ‘I’ll pay you back for this wrong!’ Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.”⁹²⁵

Then there is God’s punishment for those who refuse God’s gift of pardon and are unwilling to give up their sins. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”⁹²⁶ The multitudes in heaven will acknowledge the righteousness of God’s judgment. We read in Revelation: “True and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”⁹²⁷

The purpose of Moses’ song is not to give Israel license to sin because God will, eventually, issue a complete pardon. God’s vengeance is presented as a warning, a deterrent to keep the people from sinning. Even though the extent to which God would go to reconcile revenge and compassion was beyond the scope of their vision, the people were called to stand in awe before God who offered them atonement and healing. The Apostle Paul who, of course, had a perfect understanding of the mystery of atonement touched upon the human tendency to cheapen grace. He wrote to the Christians in Rome: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”⁹²⁸ The marvel of reconciliation in the blood of Christ ought to be the strongest deterrent for sin in our lives.

Vs. 39 presents us with the same dilemma as vs. 11. God takes responsibility both for the stirring up of the nest and the catching of the young ones that are falling. Here we read: “I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand.” God is both the God of death and of life, of wounding and healing. It is easy to accept that healing and resurrection from the dead are acts of God. For us, the epitome of what God does in this world is expressed in Luke’s Gospel in the verse: “When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them.”⁹²⁹ We cannot bring ourselves to see God as the one who puts people to death and who wounds them. We cannot identify with the apparent glee that rings in the words of vs. 42 – “I will make my arrows drunk with blood, while my sword devours flesh: the blood of the slain and the captives, the heads of the enemy leaders.” This is the kind of bloody scene from which we turn away our heads. It is the same kind of gore that ends Isaiah’s beautiful prophecy of the new heavens and the new earth: “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”⁹³⁰ Those are images that are linked to sin, Satan, and death. How can God take responsibility for that kind of slaughter? Is this what “God is love” means? We have to beware of easy answers to these questions.

⁹²³ Col. 2:13-15

⁹²⁴ Lev. 19:18

⁹²⁵ Prov. 20:22

⁹²⁶ II Thess. 1:8

⁹²⁷ Rev. 19:2

⁹²⁸ Rom. 6:1-4

⁹²⁹ Luke 4:40

⁹³⁰ Isa. 66:24

We ought to remind ourselves, first of all, that the images are borrowed from certain conditions on earth which are the extreme result of man's sin. God did not begin the two devastating world wars that ravaged this last century. He did not organize the Nazi concentration camps or the Russians Gulags. We also have to bear in mind that the slaughter that is pictured before our eyes is not physical but spiritual. The horrible carnage John describes in Revelation begins with the invitation of an angel to the birds of heaven: "Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great."⁹³¹ The fallen are victims of the rider on a white horse, our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom we read: "Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations."⁹³² The victims are killed by the Word of God; they die a spiritual death. The question is, which is worse? Jesus warned His disciples with the words: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."⁹³³ If our fear of those who kill the body can paralyze us, how much more the fear of the One who can destroy the soul! If the above-mentioned pictures make us tremble, how much more their spiritual reality. The fact that the Word of God kills people spiritually is not less terrible than physical death by swords of steel, it is infinitely worse. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews did not exaggerate when he said: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." And Paul words lose all their comfort when we turn them around: "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is against us is, who can be for us?"⁹³⁴ Somehow this part of the Gospel has disappeared from our preaching. No one uses sermon titles anymore like Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The result of Edwards' preaching was a revival.

Only if we learn to know God as the One who puts to death and brings to life, the One who has wounded and who will heal, and that no one can deliver out of His hand are we dealing with reality. If the carnage of the battlefield causes aversion in us, how much more then will it be repulsive to God? We should not think that we are more sensitive than He is. God wants us to experience the same revulsion He feels in order to make us flee to Him. After all, He is the One who brings to life and who will heal. And if no one can pry a sinner out of His hand, no one can pry out a saint either! Both God's wrath and God's grace are absolute and no one can snatch them out of His hand.⁹³⁵

God is not the author of sin and death, but in dealing with sinners who are in danger of dying a second death He speaks in terms we can understand. He speaks our language. In the words of C. S. Lewis, "God shouts to us in our pain."

We should also keep in focus the fact that the actual adversary in Moses' song is not a human being but the whole hierarchy of demonic powers. The ultimate aim of God's vengeance is to "make atonement for his land and people." This atonement is not limited to Israel alone. Jesus proclaims: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."⁹³⁶ This salvation and atonement can never be separated from God's vengeance. God's flashing sword and blood-drunk arrows were aimed, primarily, at the cross where God cursed the sin of the world. We will never be able to fathom the depth of Christ's suffering and death that laid the foundation for our atonement.

God's statement of vengeance is accompanied by one of the most impressive oaths in the Bible: "I lift my hand to heaven and declare: As surely as I live forever..." The demon world must have trembled at those words. We know almost nothing about Satan's insurrection and his expulsion from heaven. What took place must have been the most horrible thing that has ever happened in the history of the universe. We cannot imagine intensity of demonic hatred for a God who is holy and perfect. God's oath pertains to the last phase of an insurrection that spans the ages of created time. Although the issue is beyond our comprehension, the oath itself gives us insight in the strength of God's promises, whether for judgment or salvation. The oath of judgment and revenge is almost more awesome than the one of salvation. The comfort we may draw from this is that God's promises to us are, indeed, "an anchor for the soul." The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews encourages us with the words: "When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.' And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he

⁹³¹ Rev. 19:17,18

⁹³² Rev. 19:15

⁹³³ Matt. 10:28

⁹³⁴ See Rom. 8:31

⁹³⁵ See John 10:28

⁹³⁶ John 3:17

confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.”⁹³⁷

Moses draws this positive conclusion from God’s promise of revenge that it means atonement for the nations. At this point, not only the nation of Israel is addressed but the whole world is involved. When the final act is played and the devil is cast into the lake of burning sulfur there will be a new heaven and a new earth and every living being will be filled with the knowledge of God’s holiness.

The reaction of the nations to this final act in world history is joy. The Apostle John, depicting the same events symbolically as the destruction of Babylon, “the great prostitute,” records: “After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: ‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.’ And again they shouted: ‘Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.’”⁹³⁸

It is amazing to realize that Moses reached forward in this anthem over the ages to the end of time and that he foresaw the joy of all nations at the complete redemption of this fallen world. Looking at the present world condition, one would assume that the majority of human beings would fall under the same condemnation as the devil and his hordes. Moses’ hymn, as well as John’s prophecy in Revelation seem to indicate that the majority will be on the Lord’s side. “Rejoice, O nations, with his people,” and “After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: ‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,’”⁹³⁹ says the same thing. The joy of Israel will be the joy of all humanity and the topic will be atonement. Thus ends Moses’ great national, or international, anthem!

Adam Clarke’s Commentary concludes the comments on Moses’ hymn with the words: “And all this is done with such strength and elegance of diction, with such appropriate, energetic, and impressive figures and metaphors and in such a powerful torrent of that soul-penetrating, pure poetic spirit that comes glowing from the bosom of God, that the reader is alternately elated or depressed, filled with compunction or confidence, with despair or hope, according to the quick transitions of the inimitable writer to the different topics which form the subject of this incomparable and wondrously varied ode. May that Spirit by which it was dictated give it its fullest, most durable, and most effectual impression upon the mind of every reader!”

Vs. 44 tells us that Moses, together with Joshua, chanted this hymn before the people. This seems to be another indication that the hymn was intended to be sung by Israel’s future generations. The admonition that the “children... obey carefully all the words of this law” may refer primarily to the contents of this song. They would enter the Promised Land to the tones of this anthem.

E. The Death of Moses 32:48-34:12

1. Moses Is Ordered to Mount Nebo 32:48-52

“On that same day the LORD told Moses, ‘Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab...’” It is obvious that the verses that conclude this chapter are not from the hand of Moses. With the last chapter of this book, they form the editorial comments on Moses’ last day on earth.

Moses’ climbing to the top of Mount Nebo is almost anticlimactic after the mountaintop experience of the hymn he composed and sung, together with Joshua. We can imagine the sadness of Moses’ soul in having to turn away from the goal God had set for Israel. He came so close. We suppose that, at this point, Moses was more overwhelmed with the sadness of earthly failure than with the joyful anticipation of entering the heavenly glory.

We don’t know what the condition of the souls of Old Testament saints after death was but we can be sure it was incomparably better than anything they ever knew on earth. Even before the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we see Moses, together with Elijah, appearing on the Mount of Transfiguration.⁹⁴⁰ Moses may not have entered the same glory we will enter when God calls us home but, whatever the character of this new experience, it will have surpassed by far what happened when God hid him in the cleft of the rock and His glory passed by him.⁹⁴¹ Moses life had been lived in a world of images of reality. The tabernacle and all its furniture he built were a copy of

⁹³⁷ Heb. 6:13-18

⁹³⁸ Rev. 19:1-3

⁹³⁹ See Rev. 19:1

⁹⁴⁰ See Matt. 17:1-3

⁹⁴¹ See Ex. 34:21-23

the ultimate reality in heaven. On this day Moses left the pictures behind in order to enter into the reality of God's presence. From now on he would be fully satisfied with the glory of which he had only had a foretaste before. God's *punishment* for Moses was that, instead of being allowed to enter Canaan on earth, he was ushered into the real Promised Land.

Moses' failure to enter Canaan was on account of his sin. God reminded him: "This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites." But how can we say that Moses failed, if he entered into the presence of God? By a miracle of God's grace, his failure on earth precipitated the consummation of his life. Grace is, indeed, amazing!

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

E. The Death of Moses (continued) 33:1-34:12

2. Moses Blesses the Tribes 33:1-29

The Pulpit Commentary makes a comparison between the Song of Moses in the previous chapter and the Blessing of Moses in this chapter. We read: "The one may be regarded as the counterpart of the other. In the song, Moses dwells chiefly on the calamities that were to befall the people because of their apostasy; in the blessing, he depicts the benefits that were to be enjoyed by them through the Divine favor. The tone of the one is somber and minatory; the tone of the other is serene and cheering. The one presents the darker side, the other the brighter side, of Israel's fortunes. Both were fitting utterances for the occasion: the one the farewell warning, the other the farewell benediction, of him who had so long proved them and known their ways; who, whilst he desired their welfare, feared they might forfeit this by their folly and sin; and who sought, both by warning and by blessing, to encourage them to pursue that course by which alone prosperity and happiness could be secured."

The blessing for the various tribes is preceded by an introduction (verses 1-5). Then there is the actual benediction for each of the tribes (verses 6-25), which is followed by a conclusion (verses 26-29).

Adam Clarke's Commentary introduces this chapter with the following observations: "The general nature of this solemn introduction, says Dr. Kennicott, is to show the foundation which Moses had for blessing his brethren, viz., because God had frequently manifested his glory in their behalf; and the several parts of this introduction are disposed in the following order: 1. The manifestation of the divine glory on Sinai, as it was prior in time and more magnificent in splendor, is mentioned first. 2. That God manifested his glory at Seir is evident from Judg 5:4: Lord, when thou wentest out of Seir, when thou marchedst out of the fields of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, etc. 3. The next place is Paran, where the glory of the Lord appeared before all the children of Israel, Num 14:10. Instead of, he came with ten thousand saints, by which our translators have rendered *meeribbot... qodesh...*, Dr. Kennicott reads Meribah-kadesh, the name of a place: for we find that, toward the end of forty years, the Israelites came to Kadesh, Num 20:1, which was also called Meribah, on account of their contentious opposition to the determinations of God in their favor, Deut 33:13; and there the glory of the Lord again appeared as we are informed Deut 33:6. These four places, Sinai, Seir, Paran, and Meribah-kadesh, mentioned by Moses in the text, are the identical places where God manifested his glory in a fiery appearance, the more illustriously to proclaim his special providence over and care of Israel."

2 a Introduction (vs. 1-5)

The appellation "Moses the man of God" is, obviously, an insertion by a later hand. This was, evidently, the title given to Moses by his contemporaries. We read in Joshua that Caleb called Moses by that name.⁹⁴² The title is mostly given to Old Testament prophets, and once to King David.⁹⁴³ The designation distinguishes the person from the crowd because of his unique relationship with God. In the New Testament, Paul addresses Timothy with the words: "But you, man of God..."⁹⁴⁴ implying that every believer who actively serves the Lord is worthy of that name. The phrase "the law that Moses gave us" also suggests that these words are not from the hands of Moses.

Barnes' Notes observes about the phrase "He came with myriads of holy ones": "God is represented as leaving heaven where He dwells amidst the host of the Angels (1 Kings 22:19) and descending in majesty to earth (Mic 1:3)." If the "holy ones" in this verse speaks of angels, in the next verse the same words are used to designate

⁹⁴² See Josh. 14:6

⁹⁴³ See II Chron. 8:14

⁹⁴⁴ I Tim. 6:11

the people of Israel. The nation is depicted as bowing down before God to receive His command and the revelation of Himself of which they became the guardians.

Most commentators believe that the words “He was king over Jeshurun” refer to God Himself. They could, however, also pertain to Moses who was king over Israel by the grace of God. There is no contradiction between a theocracy and a genuine monarchy in which the king is seen as one who receives his authority from God and reigns in His behalf.

In conclusion, the introductory verses paint before our eyes an awesome scene of God descending to earth in all His glory to reveal Himself to human beings who become His people, His priests on earth, a nation meant to be a beacon of light in a dark world. People belonging to God, “that [they] may declare the praises of him who called [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light.”⁹⁴⁵

Bible critics of modern persuasion have tried to deny the authenticity of Moses’ authorship of these blessings, and have tried to place them at a later date in Israel’s history. There is no scientific ground for this supposition and one needs a prejudiced mind to come to such conclusion. Our prejudice is that, the Holy Spirit being the author of Scripture, we may believe that the verse: “This is the blessing that Moses the man of God pronounced on the Israelites before his death” means that this is the blessing that Moses pronounced on the Israelites before his death.

The pronouncement of blessings upon all the tribes of Israel forces us to go back to the original blessing father Jacob pronounced upon his sons.⁹⁴⁶

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament observes here: “On comparing the blessing of Moses with that of Jacob, we should expect at the very outset, that if the blessings of these two men of God have really been preserved to us, and they are not later inventions, their contents would be essentially the same, so that the blessing of Moses would contain simply a confirmation of that of the dying patriarch, and would be founded upon it in various ways. This is most conspicuous in the blessing upon Joseph; but there are also several other blessings in which it is unmistakable, although Moses’ blessing is not surpassed in independence and originality by that of Jacob, either in its figures, its similes, or its thoughts. But the resemblance goes much deeper. It is manifest, for example, in the fact, that in the case of several of the tribes, Moses, like Jacob, does nothing more than expound their names, and on the ground of the peculiar characters expressed in the names, foretell to the tribes themselves their peculiar calling and future development within the covenant nation. Consequently we have nowhere any special predictions, but simply prophetic glances at the future, depicted in a purely ideal manner, whilst in the case of most of the tribes the utter want of precise information concerning their future history prevents us from showing in what way they were fulfilled. The difference in the times at which the two blessings were uttered is also very apparent. The existing circumstances from which Moses surveyed the future history of the tribes of Israel in the light of divine revelation, were greatly altered from the time when Jacob blessed the heads of the twelve tribes before his death, in the persons of his twelve sons. These tribes had now grown into a numerous people, with which the Lord had established the covenant that He had made with the patriarchs. The curse of dispersion in Israel, which the patriarch had pronounced upon Simeon and Levi (Gen 49:5-7), had been changed into a blessing so far as Levi was concerned.”

Regarding the order in which Moses pronounced the blessings, *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* observes: “It neither accords with the respective order of the sons of Jacob, nor with the distribution of the tribes in the camp, nor with the situation of their possessions in the land of Canaan. It is true that Reuben stands first as the eldest son of Jacob; but Simeon is then passed over, and Judah, to whom the dying patriarch bequeathed the birthright which he withdrew from Reuben, stands next; and then Levi, the priestly tribe. Then follow Benjamin and Joseph, the sons of Rachel; Zebulun and Issachar, the last sons of Leah (in both cases the younger before the elder); and lastly, the tribes descended from the sons of the maids: Gad, the son of Zilpah; Dan and Naphtali, the sons of Bilhah; and finally, Asher, the second son of Zilpah. To discover the guiding principle in this arrangement, we must look to the blessings themselves, which indicate partly the position already obtained by each tribe, as a member of the whole nation, in the earthly kingdom of God, and partly the place which it was to reach and occupy in the further development of Israel in the future, not only in relation to the Lord, but also in relation to the other nations.

The only exception to this is the position assigned to Reuben, who occupies the foremost place as the first-born, notwithstanding his loss of the birthright. In accordance with this principle, the first place properly belonged to the tribe of Judah, who was raised into the position of lord over his brethren, and the second to the tribe of Levi, which had been set apart to take charge of the sacred things; whilst Benjamin is associated with Levi as the ‘beloved of the Lord.’ Then follow Joseph, as the representative of the might which Israel would manifest in conflict with the

⁹⁴⁵ I Peter 2:9

⁹⁴⁶ See Gen. 49:1-27

nations; Zebulun and Issachar, as the tribes which would become the channels of blessings to the nations through their wealth in earthly good; and lastly, the tribes descended from the sons of the maids, Asher being separated from his brother Gad, and placed at the end, in all probability simply because it was in the blessing promised to him that the earthly blessedness of the people of God was to receive its fullest manifestation.”

Moses’ utterances differ from Jacob’s in that, in several instances, Jacob’s words constituted more a judgment upon his sons than a divine blessing. In the case of Reuben, for instance, Jacob had said: “Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power. Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your father’s bed, onto my couch and defiled it.” We get the impression that Jacob had never censored his son before for this act of incest, and it wasn’t until his dying moment that he found the courage to condemn him. Jacob’s words can hardly be construed as a blessing. Moses’ words: “Let Reuben live and not die, nor his men be few” seem to be the most superficial thing that can be wished to anybody. “Long live Reuben!” sounds like “Happy Birthday!” Moses, as the author of the Pentateuch, was very familiar with Jacob’s pronouncement on Reuben. His blessing, therefore, can be understood as a cancellation of the curse Jacob put on his oldest son. Moses’ blessing was not just a wish but a prophecy. It was God who said to Reuben: “Long live Reuben!” And when God says to man “live” it means life in the deepest sense of the word.

Jacob had said to Judah: “You are a lion’s cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes will be darker than wine, his teeth whiter than milk.”⁹⁴⁷ Moses’ blessing touches indirectly upon the longing for the coming of the Messiah. “Hear, O LORD, the cry of Judah; bring him to his people. With his own hands he defends his cause. Oh, be his help against his foes!”

Adam Clarke’s Commentary comments on the blessing of Judah: “Though the word blessing is not in the text, yet it may be implied from Deut 33:1; but probably the words, he spoke, are those which should be supplied: And this he spoke of Judah, Lord hear the voice of Judah; that is, says the Targum, receive his prayer when he goes out to battle, and let him be brought back in safety to his own people. Let his hands be sufficient for him—let him have a sufficiency of warriors always to support the tribe, and vindicate its rights; and let his enemies never be able to prevail against him! Three things are expressed here: 1. That the tribe of Judah, conscious of its weakness, shall depend on the Most High, and make prayer and supplication to him; 2. That God will hear such prayer, and, 3. That his hands shall be increased, and that he shall prevail over his enemies. This blessing has a striking affinity with that which this tribe received from Jacob, Gen. 49:9; and both may refer to our blessed Lord, who sprang from this tribe, as is noticed on the above passage, who has conquered our deadly foes by his death, and whose praying posterity ever prevail through his might.”

The Pulpit Commentary says about the blessing on Levi: “The blessing on Levi is also in the form of a prayer. In Jacob’s blessing, Simeon is joined with Levi, but Moses passes him over altogether, probably because, as Jacob foretold, he was to be scattered among his brethren (Gen. xlix. 7), and so lose his tribal individuality. Simeon, however, is included in the general blessing pronounced on Israel; and as this tribe received a number of towns within the territory of Judah (Josh. xix. 2 – 9), it was probably regarded as included in the blessing on that tribe.”

Moses reserved his most eloquent blessing for his own tribe. In the words “Your Thummim and Urim belong to the man you favored” the person addressed is not Levi but YHWH. The favored man cannot be anyone else but the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. This links the blessing to Levi to the one given to Judah. In both blessing the coming of the Messiah is anticipated. It was also God who tested Levi at the waters of Massah and Meribah, not the other way around. In the accounts of the incidents, in the Books of Exodus and Numbers,⁹⁴⁸ we do not read that the tribe of Levi distinguished itself from the rest of Israel in trusting God. But this can be inferred from this blessing.

Moses’ blessing of Levi almost completely reverses the words Jacob had addressed to his son. Jacob had combined Simeon with Levi and condemned in the strongest term the genocide they had committed at Shechem. “Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.” It was primarily Moses’ own testimony and the status of intimacy he had acquired with God that turned the curse of Levi into a blessing. They would be scattered in Jacob, but their spreading out in the Promised Land would make them the salt of the earth. The presence of Levites among all the other tribes was to be part of God’s revelation to the nation as a whole.

⁹⁴⁷ Gen. 49:9-12

⁹⁴⁸ See Ex. 17:7; Num. 20:13

Levi's election dates from the time when the opposed those who had made the Golden Calf. The situation had completely gotten out of hand. The Exodus' record tells us: "So [Moses] stood at the entrance to the camp and said, 'Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.' And all the Levites rallied to him. Then he said to them, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.' 'The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Then Moses said, 'You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.'"⁹⁴⁹

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament further notices: "The tribe of Levi had been entrusted with the 'light and right' of the Lord, had been called to be the teacher of the rights and law of God in Israel, because it had preserved the covenant of the Lord, after the conclusion of the covenant at Sinai, even though it involved the denial of flesh and blood. Reuben, Gad, and half Manasseh had already received their inheritance, and the other tribes were to take possession of Canaan immediately. These circumstances formed the starting-point for the blessings of Moses, not only in the case of Levi and Gad, where they are expressly mentioned, but in that of the other tribes also, where they do not stand prominently forward, because for the most part Moses simply repeats the leading features of their future development in their promised inheritance, as already indicated in the blessing of Jacob, and 'thus bore his testimony to the patriarch who anticipated him, that the spirit of his prophecy was truth' (Ziegler, p. 159) ... This blessing is also addressed to God as a prayer. The Urim and Thummim-that pledge, which the high priest wore upon his breast-plate, that the Lord would always give His people light to preserve His endangered right (vid., Ex 28:29-30)-are here regarded as a prerogative of the whole of the tribe of Levi. Thummim is placed before Urim, to indicate at the outset that Levi had defended the right of the Lord, and that for that very reason the right of the Urim and Thummim had been given to him by the Lord. 'Thy holy one' is not Aaron, but Levi the tribe-father, who represents the whole tribe to which the blessing applies; hence in vv. 9b and 10 the verb passes into the plural."

Adam Clarke's Commentary comments on vs. 9: "There are several difficulties in this and the following verses. Some think they are spoken of the tribe of Levi; others, of all the tribes; others, of the Messiah, etc.; but several of the interpretations founded on these suppositions are too recondite, and should not be resorted to till a plain literal sense is made out. I suppose the whole to be primarily spoken of Aaron and the tribe of Levi. Let us examine the words in this way, Who said unto his father, etc. The law had strictly enjoined that if the father, mother, brother, or child of the high priest should die, he must not mourn for them, but act as if they were not his kindred; see Lev 21:11-12. Neither must Aaron mourn for his sons Nadab and Abihu, etc., though not only their death, but the circumstances of it, were the most afflicting that could possibly affect a parent's heart. Besides, the high priest was forbidden, on pain of death, to go out from the door of the tabernacle, Lev 10:2-7, for God would have them more to regard their function (as good Mr. Ainsworth observes) and duty in his service, than any natural affection whatever. And herein Christ was figured, who, when he was told that his mother and brethren stood without, and wished to speak with him, said: 'Who is my mother, and who are my brethren? whosoever shall do the will of my father who is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother,' Matt 12:46-50. It is likely also that Moses may refer here to the fact of the Levites, according to the command of Moses, killing every man his brother, friend, neighbor, and even son, who had sinned in worshipping the golden calf, Ex 32:26; and in this way the Chaldee paraphrase understands the words."

The gist of the description of Levi's status and attitude is that God's call upon their lives supersedes all natural affiliations. Their service to God takes priority over family relations. Although some cities and pasture lands were assigned to them among the other tribes of Israel, they did not participate in the inheritance of the Promised Land like the other tribes did. What God had said to Aaron was applied to the whole tribe of Levi: "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites."⁹⁵⁰ Their task description was teaching the law to the people and maintain the altar service. This meant that they were responsible to proclaim both parts of the law, the moral law and the ceremonial law. The one was a declaration of the will of God, the part of the law that makes us understand that we are sinners, and the other was the means by which sin was atoned for through the animals that died as substitution for the sinner. Regarding this ministry, Moses prayed: "Bless all his skills, O LORD, and be pleased with the work of his hands."

The phrase "Smite the loins of those who rise up against him" seems to have a sexual connotation. Figuratively it can mean that those who oppose the ministry of the Levites and what they stand for, be made sterile so that evil is prevented from spreading. Moses may have had in mind the incident of Phinehas who pierced the

⁹⁴⁹ Ex. 32:26-29

⁹⁵⁰ Num. 18:20

Israelite and the Midianite woman when they were in the act of being “one flesh.”⁹⁵¹ The Lord reacted to this by saying about Phinehas: “He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.”⁹⁵² This link between Phinehas’ act of revenge and the mandate God gave him may be the meaning of these strange words in Moses’ blessing.

After blessing Judah from which tribe the royal line would emerge that would reign over Israel, and Levi, the tribe of Israel’s priesthood, Moses turns to Benjamin. The meaning of the name Benjamin is, “son of my right hand.” Benjamin was Jacob’s youngest son, born from Jacob’s favorite wife Rachel. He was the recipient of his father’s affection, particularly after the disappearance of Joseph.

Moses’ blessing of Benjamin is one of the tenderest utterances in this chapter. Jacob’s affection for his son is here projected upon God Himself. Benjamin is called “the beloved of the LORD.” And he is pictured as the recipient of God’s special protection and rest.

There is, of course, a sense in which God has not favorite. The Bible says: “God does not show favoritism.”⁹⁵³ Yet, the Apostle John sets himself apart from the other disciples by calling himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” This does not prove that Jesus had favorites among His disciples. He loved Judas with the same love He bestowed on John. But John accepted what Judas rejected. God loves the world but only those who acknowledge this love will call themselves beloved. Jacob may have had his favorites but God doesn’t. When Benjamin is called “beloved” it indicates that he showed himself susceptible to the love of God. This also made him take the promised rest seriously. As the nation entered the Promised Land, Benjamin entered into the rest God had promised.

Adam Clarke’s Commentary comments on the text: “Some object to our translation of the Hebrew *y’diyd*... by the term beloved, and think the original should be divided as it is in the Samaritan, *yad, yad* the hand, even the hand of the Lord shall dwell for safety or protection, *`aalaayw*, upon him. This makes a good sense, and the reader may choose.”

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament quotes Calvin, who wrote: “To dwell upon God and between His shoulders is the same as to repose upon Him: the simile being taken from fathers who carry their sons while delicate and young.”

As it turns out, Benjamin acquired the area in which Jerusalem was located as his inheritance. This would put him in the closest vicinity of the place of God’s revelation since the temple would be built on his territory. This may be the meaning of the words: “And the one the LORD loves rests between his shoulders.”

Matthew Henry’s Commentary concurs with this. We read: “It is here intimated that the temple in which God would dwell should be built in the borders of this tribe. Jerusalem the holy city was in the lot of this tribe (Josh 18:28); and though Zion, the city of David, is supposed to belong to Judah, yet Mount Moriah, on which the temple was built, was in Benjamin’s lot. God is therefore said to dwell between his shoulders, because the temple stood on that mount, as the head of a man upon his shoulders. And by this means Benjamin was covered all the day long under the protection of the sanctuary (Ps 125:2), which is often spoken of as a place of refuge, Ps 27:4-5; Neh 6:10. Benjamin, dwelling by the temple of God, dwelt in safety by him. Note, It is a happy thing to be in the neighborhood of the temple. This situation of Benjamin, it is likely, was the only thing that kept that tribe in adherence with Judah to the divine institutions, when the other ten tribes apostatized. Those have corrupt and wicked hearts indeed who, the nearer they are to the church, are so much the further from God.”

Moses spent considerably more time blessing Joseph than his brother Benjamin. The blessing focuses particularly on the fertility of the land and the strength of the tribe. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “The double portion, the right of the first-born forfeited by Reuben, had been given to Joseph (Gen 48:22) in that his two sons enjoyed separate tribal status. Moses now confirmed the pre-eminence which Jacob gave Ephraim over Manasseh (Deut 33:17; cf. Gen 48:14ff.). Again like Jacob, Moses blessed Joseph with military power and abundance of the choicest gifts of the earth (cf. Gen 49:22-26). 16. The source of all Joseph’s prowess and prosperity was in the favor of him that dwelt in the bush (RSV; cf. Ex 3:2ff.). A slight change in the text would substitute ‘Sinai’ for bush.”

On the comparison between Jacob’s blessing of Joseph and Moses’ *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* comments: “What Jacob desired and solicited for his son Joseph, Moses also desires for this tribe, namely, the greatest possible abundance of earthly blessing, and a vigorous manifestation of power in conflict with the nations. But however unmistakable may be the connection between these words and the blessing of Jacob (Gen 49:22ff.), not only in the things desired, but even in particular expression, there is an important difference which equally strikes us,

⁹⁵¹ See Num. 25:6-8

⁹⁵² Num. 25:13

⁹⁵³ Acts 10:34

namely, that in the case of Jacob the main point of the blessing is the growth of Joseph into a powerful tribe, whereas with Moses it is the development of power on the part of this tribe in the land of its inheritance, in perfect harmony with the different times at which the blessings were pronounced. Jacob described the growth of Joseph under the figure of the luxuriant branch of a fruit-tree planted by the water; whilst Moses fixes his eye primarily upon the land of Joseph, and desires for him the richest productions. 'May his land be blessed by Jehovah from (min...) of the cause of the blessing, whose author was Jehovah; vid., Ps 28:7; 104:3) the most precious thing of the heaven.' Meged..., which only occurs again in the Song of Sol. 4:13, 16, and 7:14, is applied to precious fruits. The most precious fruit which the heaven yields to the land is the dew. The 'productions of the sun,' and geresh..., ha'p leg from gaarash..., 'the produce of the moons,' are the fruits of the earth, which are matured by the influence of the sun and moon, by their light, their warmth."

Vs. 13 assures Joseph of a good water supply for the land that would be allotted to the tribe. Rain is still a precious commodity in the Middle East. The area knows no steady rainfall like most countries in the rest of the world. This makes dew and underground water reserves so important. It is understandable that God's blessing was often represented by images of rain.

Still speaking in terms of the fruit of the land, Moses lifts his eyes from the earth to the sky and looks to the heavenly bodies that govern conditions on earth: the sun and the moon. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* explains the relationship between the sun, the moon, and the crops on earth as follows: "All excellent and important productions of the earth, which come to perfection once in the year. So the precious things put forth by the moon may imply those vegetables which require but about a month to bring them to perfection, or vegetables of which several crops may be had in the course of a year." Moses may have had a broader picture in mind of interdependence of the solar system. Or he may have wanted to say that man should look to heaven for earthly blessings.

"The choicest gifts of the ancient mountains and the fruitfulness of the everlasting hills" refers, in the first place, to man's ability to use the ore of the earth for the production of various useful metals. The oldest book of the Bible, Job, indicates that mining was a known profession in the earlier parts of human history. "There is a mine for silver and a place where gold is refined. Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from ore. Man puts an end to the darkness; he searches the farthest recesses for ore in the blackest darkness. Far from where people dwell he cuts a shaft, in places forgotten by the foot of man; far from men he dangles and sways. The earth, from which food comes, is transformed below as by fire; sapphires come from its rocks, and its dust contains nuggets of gold."⁹⁵⁴ As far as we know, mining was not common in Palestine. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: "In Job 28:1-11 we have the only Biblical reference to mines. The writer very likely derived his information either from personal observation or from a description by an eyewitness, of the mining operations of Sinai. No traces of ancient mines have yet been found in Palestine and Syria. What metals were taken out came from the superficial strata." Moses may have projected his knowledge of the mining that was done in Egypt upon the Promised Land, expecting that the conditions would be similar.

As we saw earlier, the reference to God as the one "who dwelt in the burning bush" may apply to Moses' own call or to God's revelation to Israel on Mount Sinai. In either case it establishes the divine authority for the blessing.

Joseph's role in the redemption and preservation of Jacob's family was, obviously, remembered centuries after he had lived. In crowning Joseph "the prince among his brothers," Moses hints to the realization of Joseph's dreams as a teenager in which he saw the sheaves of his brothers bow before his sheaf and the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down before him.⁹⁵⁵ The realization of those dreams went beyond the moment when the ten brothers bowed before him at Pharaoh's court; all the tribes of Israel would bow to Ephraim and Manasseh for most of the nation's history.

Added to the images that speak of material blessing as proofs of God's favor upon the tribe of Joseph, is the blessing of power symbolized by the horns of a wild ox. In the eyes of the nations of that time, Israel constituted a formidable military might. Their victory over the kings of Bashan and Ammon was a recent feat which made the nations of Canaan tremble in their boots. The conquest of Canaan was still unwritten history at that point. Joshua and later David would make Israel a world power to be reckoned with.

Yet, the images of affluence and power were nothing more than images. Not that the land would not flow with milk and honey and Israel would be militarily strong but the picture represented a reality that was beyond. Canaan and its blessings stood for more than a place and an easy life on earth and the real power is more than can be expressed in troops and armies. In destructive power, a drop of water can do more damage than dynamite. God's power is not only completely different from human might it is also incomparably stronger. Zechariah prophesied:

⁹⁵⁴ Job 28:1-6

⁹⁵⁵ See Gen. 37:5-11

“This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.”⁹⁵⁶ Stalin asked Churchill during their first conference in World War II: “The Pope! How many division does he have?” Stalin and communism are dead. The Pope and the Roman Catholic Church are still alive and well. (I am not equating the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church with the power of the Holy Spirit).

The bull is often used as a picture of power in the Bible. One of the four living creatures that surround the throne of God with unending praise is pictured as a bull or an ox. John depicts the scene for us with the words: “The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle.”⁹⁵⁷

Joseph’s going of the nations, “even those at the ends of the earth” does not speak of military power or colonialism but of the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of the kingdom of priests. Jesus’ conviction about military power is evinced in His words to Peter: “Put your sword back in its place,... for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”⁹⁵⁸ The sword of God is the sword that comes out of the mouth of Christ. John describes the victorious Lord in Revelation with the words: “Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter.”⁹⁵⁹ The nations of the world will ultimately be subdued by the power of the Word of God. In pre-mediaeval times, the Vikings of Scandinavia terrorized Western Europe for two centuries with their annual invasions. The raids ceased when they heard the Gospel and accepted it. At the eve of an extended military campaign for the conquest of Canaan, Israel may very well have misunderstood Moses’ prophecy to Joseph. But the intent of the Holy Spirit is clear. Jesus says: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”⁹⁶⁰ Sadly, Ephraim and Manasseh never took up the role of world evangelization God meant them to have.

Zebulun and Issachar are linked together in a rather cryptic blessing. One is said to be going out and the other staying in his tent. Jacob had blessed Zebulun with the words: “Zebulun will live by the seashore and become a haven for ships; his border will extend toward Sidon.”

The Pulpit Commentary observes about this blessing: “Zebulun and Issachar, the two last sons of Leah, are taken together by Moses; and Zebulun, though the young son, is placed first, in accordance with Gen. xlix. 13. Success in enterprise, and felicity at home, are assured to both. ‘Although ‘going out’ (enterprise, labor) is attributed to Zebulun, and ‘remaining in tents’ (the comfortable enjoyment of life) to Issachar, in accordance with the delineation of their respective characters in the blessing of Jacob, this is to be attributed to the poetic parallelism of the clauses, and the whole is to be understood as applying to both in the sense suggest by Graf, ‘Rejoice, Zebulun and Issachar, in your labor and your rest.’ ” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* disagrees with the above. We read: “There is no parallelism in this verse: for the two clauses of which it consists refer to two distinct tribes; and the ‘going out’ of the one is contrasted with the ‘tents’ of the other. These two brothers are coupled in the prophetic blessings, because they were to be closely associated in their allotted territories. But it is observable that in this passage, as well as in Gen 49, Zebulun, though the younger, is mentioned first, on account of the superior activity and prominence of his tribe.” This leaves us with a choice between to opposing opinions.

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament adds to this: “The tribes of the last two sons of Leah Moses unites together, and, like Jacob in Gen 49:13, places Zebulun the younger first. He first of all confirms the blessing which Jacob pronounced through simply interpreting their names as omnia, by calling upon them to rejoice in their undertakings abroad and at home. ‘At thy tents’ corresponds to ‘at thy going out’ (tents being used poetically for dwellings, as in Deut 16:7); like ‘sitting’ to ‘going out and coming in’ in 2 Kings 19:27; Isa 37:28; Ps 139:2; and describes in its two aspects of work and production, rest and recreation. Although ‘going out’ (enterprise and labor) is attributed to Zebulun, and ‘remaining in tents’ (the comfortable enjoyment of life) to Issachar, in accordance with the delineation of their respective characters in the blessing of Jacob, this is to be attributed to the poetical parallelism of the clauses, and the whole is to be understood as applying to both in the sense suggested by Graf, ‘Rejoice, Zebulun and Issachar, in your labor and your rest.’ This peculiarity, which is founded in the very nature of poetical parallelism, which is to individualize the thought by distributing it into parallel members, has been entirely overlooked by all the commentators who have given a historical interpretation to each, referring the ‘going out’ to the shipping trade and commercial pursuits of the Zebulunites, and the expression ‘in thy tents’ either to the spending of a nomad life in tents, for the purpose of performing a subordinate part in connection with trade

⁹⁵⁶ Zech. 4:6

⁹⁵⁷ Rev. 4:7

⁹⁵⁸ Matt. 26:52

⁹⁵⁹ Rev. 19:15

⁹⁶⁰ John 16:33

(Schultz)⁹⁶¹, or to the quiet pursuits of agriculture and grazing (Knobel). They were to rejoice in their undertakings at home and abroad; for they would be successful. The good things of life would flow to them in rich abundance; they would not make them into mammon, however, but would invite nations to the mountain, and there offer sacrifices of righteousness. ‘The peoples’ are nations generally, not the tribes of Israel, still less the members of their own tribes.”

The verse “They will summon peoples to the mountain and there offer sacrifices of righteousness” has given rise to various interpretations. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “By their traffic with the Gentiles (for so I think `amiym ... should be understood here) they shall be the instruments in God’s hands of converting many to the true faith; so that instead of sacrificing to idols, they should offer sacrifices of righteousness.”

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament is of another opinion: By the ‘mountain,’ without any more precise definition, we are not to understand Tabor or Carmel any more than the mountain land of Canaan. It is rather ‘the mountain of the Lord’s inheritance’ (Ezek. 15:17), upon which the Lord was about to plant His people, the mountain which the Lord had chosen for His sanctuary, and in which His people were to dwell with Him, and rejoice in sacrificial meals of fellowship with Him.... To this end the Lord had sanctified Moriah through the sacrifice of Isaac which He required of Abraham, though it had not been revealed to Moses that it was there that the temple, in which the name of the Lord in Israel would dwell, was afterwards to be built. There is no distinct or direct allusion to Moriah or Zion, as the temple-mountain, involved in the words of Moses. It was only by later Revelation and appointments on the part of God that this was to be made known. The words simply contain the Messianic thought that Zebulun and Issachar would offer rich praise-offerings and thank-offerings to the Lord, from the abundant supply of earthly good that would flow to them, upon the mountain which He would make ready as the seat of His gracious presence, and would call, i.e., invite the nations to the sacrificial meals connected with them to delight themselves with them in the rich gifts of the Lord, and worship the Lord who blessed His people thus. ... Sacrifice is mentioned here as an expression of divine worship, which culminated in sacrifice; and slain-offerings are mentioned, not burnt-offerings, to set forth the worship of God under the aspect of blessedness in fellowship with the Lord. ‘Slain-offerings of righteousness’ are not merely outwardly legal sacrifices, in conformity with the ritual of the law, but such as were offered in a right spirit, which was well-pleasing to God (as in Ps. 4:6; 51:21). It follows as a matter of course, therefore, that by the abundance of the seas, we are not merely to understand the profits of trade upon the Mediterranean Sea; and that we are still less to understand by the hidden treasures of the sand ‘the fish, the purple snails, and sponges’ (Knobel), or ‘tunny-fish, purple shells, and glass’ ...; but that the words receive their best exposition from Isa 60:5-6,16, and 66:11-12, i.e., that the thought expressed is, that the riches and treasures of both sea and land would flow to the tribes of Israel.”

All of the above demonstrates that we are dealing with a difficult passage in which it is hard to make the application from the poetical language to the practical application of the people involved. The distance that separates us from the people who first heard these words makes it hard for us to reconstruct what they may have understood.

“They will feast on the abundance of the seas, on the treasures hidden in the sand.” *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments on this phrase: “Jonathan ben Uzziel has probably hit upon the true meaning of this difficult passage: ‘From the sand,’ says he, ‘are produced looking-glasses and glass in general, the treasures-the method of finding and working this, was revealed to these tribes.’ Several ancient writers inform us that there were havens in the coasts of the Zebulunites in which the vitreous sand, or sand proper for making glass, was found. ... ‘The river Belus falls into the Jewish sea, about whose mouth those sands, mixed with niter, are collected, out of which glass is formed,’ or which is melted into glass. Some think that the celebrated shell-fish called murex, out of which the precious purple dye was extracted, is here intended by the treasure hid in the sand: this also Jonathan introduces in this verse. And others think that it is a general term for the advantages derived from navigation and commerce.”

Issachar received special mention in the Book of Chronicles, when David was about to inherit Saul’s throne, as: “[The] men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”⁹⁶² *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* comments on this: “According to the Targum, this meant that they knew how to ascertain the periods of the sun and moon, the intercalation of months, the dates of solemn feasts, and could interpret the signs of the times.” This special gift God had bestowed upon that tribe is not specifically mentioned in Moses’ blessing. But it would account for the fact that they would “summon peoples to the mountain.”

The next blessing goes to the tribe of Gad, or actually to the person or persons who assist Gad in the enlargement of his territory. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments on this blessing: “The tribe of Gad (first son of Leah’s handmaid Zilpah) had chosen a commander’s portion (v. 21a, RSV) as their inheritance in Trans-Jordan, the first fruits of the conquest (vv. 20,21a). Then they faithfully joined their brethren in the conflict for their portions in Canaan (v. 21b). Like Shem’s blessing (Gen 9:26), Gad’s is couched in doxology (cf. Gen 49:19).” We understand

⁹⁶¹ No relative of mine!

⁹⁶² I Chr. 12:32

that Moses wanted Gad's unselfish attitude in helping the other tribes to obtain their inheritance after his tribe had already obtained his, to be rewarded.

Matthew Henry's Commentary has a lengthy and comprehensive comment on the blessing of Gad: "[Moses] foretells what this tribe would be, v. 20. That it would be enlarged, as at present it had a spacious allotment; and he gives God the glory both of its present and of its future extent: Blessed be he that enlargeth Gad. We find how this tribe was enlarged by their success in a war which it seems they carried on very religiously against the Hagarites, 1 Chron. 5:19-20,22. Note, God is to have the glory of all our enlargements. In David's time there were Gadites whose faces were as the faces of lions, 1 Chron. 12:8. Some reckon Jehu to be of this tribe, because the first mention we have of him is at Ramoth Gilead, which belonged to Gad, and they think this may refer to his valiant acts. He commends this tribe for what they had done and were now doing, v. 21. They had done very wisely for themselves, when they chose their lot with the first, in a country already conquered: He provided the first part for himself; though he had a concern for his brethren, yet his charity began at home, and he was willing to see himself first served, first settled. The Gadites were the first and most active movers for an allotment on that side Jordan, and therefore are still mentioned before the Reubenites in the history of that affair, Num 32:2. And thus, while the other tribes had their portion assigned them by Joshua the conqueror, Gad and his companions had theirs from Moses the law-giver, and in it they were seated by law; or (as the word is) covered or protected by a special providence which watched over those that were left behind, while the men of war went forward with their brethren. Note, Men will praise thee when thou doest well for thyself (when thou providest first for thyself, as Gad did), Ps 49:18. And God will praise thee when thou doest well for thy soul, which is indeed thyself, and providest the first part for that in a portion from the law-giver. They were now doing honestly and bravely for their brethren; for they came with the heads of the people, before whom they went armed over Jordan, to execute the justice of the Lord upon the Canaanites, under the conduct of Joshua, to whom we afterwards find they solemnly vowed obedience, Josh 1:12,16. This was what they undertook to do when they had their lot assigned them, Num 32:27. This they did, Josh 4:12. And, when the wars of Canaan were ended, Joshua dismissed them with a blessing, Josh 22:7. Note, It is a blessed and honorable thing to be helpful to our brethren in their affairs, and particularly to assist in executing the justice of the Lord by suppressing that which is provoking to him: it was this that was counted to Phinehas for righteousness."

Adam Clarke's Commentary writes about the blessing to Dan that the picture of the lion whelp was a prophetic pointer to Dan's future inheritance: "The Jewish interpreters observe that Bashan was a place much frequented by lions, who issued thence into all parts to look for prey. By this probably Moses intended to point out the strength and prowess of this tribe, that it should extend its territories, and live a sort of predatory life. It appears from Josh 19:47, that the portion originally assigned to this tribe was not sufficient for them; hence, we find them going out to war against Leshem and taking it, adding it to their territories, and calling it by the name of the tribe. Jacob, in his prophetic blessing of this tribe, represents it under the notion of a serpent in the path, Gen 49:17. The character there, and that given here, constitute the complete warrior-stratagem and courage." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* also sees in it a reference to the character of the tribe. We read: "[Dan is a lion's whelp], [quwr ... 'aryeeh ...]-a cub; differing from [kipiyr ...] a young lion weaned, must begin to catch prey for itself. Dan is here called 'a lion's whelp,' in the knowledge or prophetic anticipation of his tribal character, when developed in future; and accordingly Burckhardt renders the clause." The double characteristic of Dan in the opposing images of a serpent and a lion whelp reminds us of Jesus' admonition to His disciples to be "shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."⁹⁶³ The picture of Dan as a lion came to full maturity in the person of Samson who was a Danite.⁹⁶⁴ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* adds: "Samson was the one great man produced by Dan, and he seems to have embodied the leading characteristics of the tribe: unsteady, unscrupulous, violent, possessed of a certain grim humor; stealthy in tactics-'a serpent in the way, an adder in the path' (Gen 49:17)-but swift and strong in striking-'a lion's whelp, that leapeth forth from Bashan' (Deut 33:22). Along with Abel, Dan ranked as a city in which the true customs of old Israel were preserved (2 Sam 20:18, Septuagint)."

The blessing on Naphtali is one of the sweetest of all of Moses' pronouncements on the individual tribes. The KJV puts it beautifully with: "O Naphtali, satisfied with favor, and full with the blessing of the LORD." The Hebrew word translated with "favor" is *ratsown* which literally means "delight." *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* interprets Moses' words in the most literal sense: "The Lord's favor on Naphtali (Bilhah's younger son) was to be shown in the remarkable fertility and beauty of his inheritance, especially its southern portion on the shores of Chinnereth (Deut 33:23; cf. Gen 49:21)." But *Adam Clarke's Commentary* states about this blessing on the tribe: "Though this may refer to the very great fertility of the country that fell to this tribe, yet certainly something more is intended. Scarcely any of the tribes was more particularly favored by the wondrous mercy and kindness of God, than

⁹⁶³ Matt. 10:16

⁹⁶⁴ See Judg. 13:2

this and the tribe of Zebulun. The light of the glorious Gospel of Christ shone brightly here, Matt 4:13,15-16. Christ's chief residence was at Capernaum in this tribe, Matt 9:1; Mark 2:1; and this city, through Christ's constant residence, and the mighty miracles he performed in it, is represented as being exalted unto heaven, Matt 11:23. And it is generally allowed that the apostles were principally of the tribe of Naphtali, who were to possess the west and the south-to dispense the Gospel through all the other tribes."

The last tribe to be blessed was Asher. The name Asher means "Happy." The essence of the blessing is both beauty and strength. Oil, as a means of anointing represented the presence of God's Spirit. The unusual feature of this blessing is that not the head is anointed but the feet. The only person whose feet were ever anointed was Jesus. Two instances are recorded. We read in Luke's Gospel: "When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them."⁹⁶⁵ And John records: "Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."⁹⁶⁶ The iron and bronze of the gates symbolize strength and protection.

Whether Asher handled his blessing wisely is another question. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes about the tribe's history: "The rich land assigned to Asher sloped to the Phoenician seaboard, and brought him into touch with the Phoenicians who were already world-famous in trade and commerce. He probably soon became a partner in their profitable enterprises, and lost any desire he may ever have had to eject them from their cities (Judg 1:31). He cared not who ruled over him if he were free to pursue the ends of commerce. Zebulun might jeopardize their lives unto the death, and Naphtali upon the high places of the field, to break the power of the foreign oppressor, but Asher 'sat still at the haven of the sea, and abode by his creeks' (Judg 5:17 ff). He was probably soon largely absorbed by the people with whose interests his were so closely identified: nevertheless 'divers of Asher,' moved by the appeal of Hezekiah, 'humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem' (2 Chron 30:11 the King James Version). To this tribe belonged the prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36 ff)." This last fact, that the prophetess Anna could trace her roots to Asher, is an indication that the tribe was not completely lost in the captivity that eradicated the remainder of the ten tribes. Moses blessing may have found its ultimate fulfillment in Anna's ministry to Jesus and His family.

The last words of this blessing, "and your strength will equal your days" have become a standard expression, a well-wishing, particularly to older people, for health and happiness. The words of the KJV "as thy days, so shall thy strength be" are often heard in prayers. The NASU has an interesting variation in its reading: "And according to your days, so will your leisurely walk be." The Hebrew word for "day" is *yowm* which literally means "to be hot." From this is derived "the warm hours of a day." Whether this meaning warrants the translation of a "leisurely walk" remains to be seen. This may be pushing the limits of interpretation a bit too far.

This chapter of Moses' blessings ends as it began with a great doxology. These last verses, 26-29, are obviously addressed to the whole nation of Israel. They are Moses' last recorded words. Israel's blessing is related to the person of God. They are protected by God's eternal majesty and glory. The glory of God is above them and His arms are beneath them. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "The uniqueness of Israel's beatitude arises from the uniqueness of Israel's Savior-Lord."

The use of the name Jeshurun emphasizes the intimacy of God's love for His people. The literal meaning of the word is "upright." Some commentators believe that it is used as a diminutive. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* notes: "Besides its literal meaning, it seems to be used as an expression of particular affection." In Isaiah's prophecy, God addresses Israel in the same affectionate way, using the diminutive: "'Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you,' declares the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel."⁹⁶⁷ This same affection, expressed in diminutives, is clear in Jesus' proclamation: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom."⁹⁶⁸

The Pulpit Commentary clarifies: "The points and accents direct that this should be read, *There is none like God, O Jeshurun*; and though all the ancient versions read as does the Authorized Version, the Masoretic punctuation is vindicated here by the following *thy help*, which shows that Israel is here addressed."

The revelation of God's majesty in the heavens is closely linked to our help. The image of God riding on the heavens may strike us as strange. The Hebrew word *rakab* can also be translated with "to dispatch." This suggests that God sends help from heaven. TLB is probably closest to the real meaning with: "He descends from the heavens

⁹⁶⁵ Luke 7:37,38

⁹⁶⁶ John 12:3

⁹⁶⁷ Isa. 41:14

⁹⁶⁸ Luke 12:32

in majestic splendor to help you.” We know that this happened in the Incarnation. It is an awesome thought that God’s majesty is intended to help us. God’s glory is not something exclusive that separates us from Him; it is what draws us to Him. We see this in the amazing statement of Hanani the seer to King Asa: “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”⁹⁶⁹

In God’s plan of salvation of the world, Israel occupied the central place. They were the vehicle of God’s revelation of Himself. A realization of who God is brings to man an awareness of his own identity. We can look up to the clouds and the night sky and testify that we know that the One who created this created me also. Like the sailor who sets his course on earth by looking at the stars, so God’s majesty is our compass in life. We are not in this world as naked, unprotected creatures. The majesty above us is also the surety that surrounds and protects us. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “In him we live and move and have our being.”⁹⁷⁰

There is a lot of Gospel in these last verses. It sounds contradictory that there is mention of a refuge and, in the same breath, of the destruction of the enemy for whom one flees. Yet the Gospel message is that there is victory in flight, and there is conquest in surrender. The looser wins. Jacob became a Prince of God when he pleaded for mercy. The prophet Hosea interpreted Jacob’s experience at Peniel with: “He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor.”⁹⁷¹

Moses’ words: “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms” are some of the most comforting in all of Scripture. They speak of strength and protection and love. It is the image of perfect love about which the Apostle John says: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.”⁹⁷² The protective strength of the refuge and the tenderness of the arms speak of the completeness of God’s love. God’s love is the strong love of a father and the tender warmth of a mother. God loves Israel; He loves the world.

It strikes us as a contradiction to say that God loves the world and to read that when Moses speaks about God’s love, he says in the same breath: “He will drive out your enemy before you, saying, ‘Destroy him!’ ” God’s love is given as the basis for the extermination of the nations of Canaan! The first thing that ought to catch our attention is that the enemy is spoken of in the singular. “Destroy him” refers to one single individual. Although the population of Canaan had to be driven out and destroyed, Israel’s “struggle [was] not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”⁹⁷³ The Canaanites were not destroyed because God didn’t love them but because they had rejected the light of God. When Abraham settled in Canaan, the people of the land still knew God. The mention of Melchizedek is proof of this.⁹⁷⁴ The measure of the sins of the Amorites was not full. But four centuries later, not a trace of the knowledge of God was left. The people had extinguished all the light with their sinful practices. They had sided with the enemy which made them subject to his destruction.

It is impossible to share in God’s love without sharing in His hate. David understood this when he wrote: “Let those who love the LORD hate evil.”⁹⁷⁵ And: “Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you?”⁹⁷⁶ The issue of the sin of the Canaanites is referred to in the last phrase of this chapter which reads: “you will trample down their high places.” Those were the places where the idol altars stood and where little children were slaughtered as sacrifices to Molech and other atrocities were committed.

The Septuagint renders this clause with: “Thou shalt tread upon their necks.” This translation finds credibility in what we read in Joshua about the way the vanquished kings of Canaan were treated. “When they had brought these kings to Joshua, he summoned all the men of Israel and said to the army commanders who had come with him, ‘Come here and put your feet on the necks of these kings.’ ”⁹⁷⁷

The NIV renders vs. 29 with: “Your enemies will cower before you.” The Hebrew word translated “cower” is *kachash* which can be translated with “to be untrue, to lie, to cringe.” The KJV renders it variously with “to deceive, deny, dissemble, fail, deal falsely, be found liars, submit selves.” This is the reason why some versions translate the verse with: “Thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee; and thou shalt tread upon their high places”⁹⁷⁸

⁹⁶⁹ II Chr. 16:9

⁹⁷⁰ Acts 17:28

⁹⁷¹ Hos. 12:4

⁹⁷² I John 4:18

⁹⁷³ Eph. 6:12,13

⁹⁷⁴ See Gen. 14:18-20

⁹⁷⁵ Ps. 97:10

⁹⁷⁶ Ps. 139:21

⁹⁷⁷ Josh. 10:24

⁹⁷⁸ KJV

and others with: “So your enemies shall cringe before you, and you shall tread upon their high places.”⁹⁷⁹ TLB gives a very plausible rendering with: “Your enemies shall bow low before you, And you shall trample on their backs!”

Israel’s dwelling in the Promised Land is painted in idyllic terms. The land is well watered and it yields an abundance of grain and grapes. The Lord is called Israel’s shield and glorious sword.

This chapter with blessings on each individual tribe ends appropriately with a blessing on the whole nation. “Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD?” Israel’s blessing consists, first of all in the fact that God saved them. If this is true of a people in the Old Testament, how much more of us. Their salvation consisted of a liberation of physical slavery and restoration of human dignity on earth. Their history was marked by images of the reality we enjoy. The Passover lamb, the blood of which saved them from death, was a picture of the Lamb of God who shed His blood for our eternal salvation and our spiritual liberation. The whole ceremonial law that governed their relationship with God portrayed the reality of the “confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus.”⁹⁸⁰ But the amazing characteristics of Israel are not found in themselves. Moses can call them incomparable, “Who is like you?” because they are “a people saved by the LORD.” What makes them so remarkable and outstanding in the world is that they reflect the glory of God. If we could only see ourselves as Moses saw the nation of Israel, under God’s protection and armed with His Word. “He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword.” Israel had to conquer Canaan; we have a world to conquer.

Adam Clarke’s Commentary concludes the comments on this chapter with: “The blessings contained in this chapter belong also to the spiritual Israel of God, who, according to the divine promise, shall have a complete victory over all their spiritual foes, shall have all their inward enemies, the whole of the carnal mind, destroyed, (for the blood of Jesus Christ, applied by the energy of the eternal Spirit, shall not only blot out all their sin, but purify their hearts from all unrighteousness;) and thus, being delivered from their enemies, they shall love God with all their heart, and serve him in righteousness and true holiness, without fear before him all the days of their life. There are many circumstances and expressions in this ode similar to several in the prophetic blessing pronounced by Jacob on his twelve sons, Gen 49, for the subject is the same in both chapters.... Both these chapters constitute a part of those Scriptures which, according to Paul, Rom 15:4, were written for our learning; and, as to instruct the reader and make him wise unto salvation was the gracious design of God, we should particularly beg of him that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, by patience and comfort of his holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which he has given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

- E. The Death of Moses (continued) 33:1-34:12**
- 3. Moses Views the Promised Land 34:1-4**
 - 4. Moses Dies and is Mourned 34:5-8
 - 5. Moses Is Replaced by Joshua 34:9
 - 6. Moses Is Praised in Israel 34:10-12

It is obvious that this last chapter constitutes an editorial addition to the book of Deuteronomy. The pen was taken out of Moses’ hand at the moment of his death. The purpose of the chapter is clearly to establish the fact that Moses died and was buried and that Joshua thus legally succeeded him in the leadership of the nation. The question has been asked whether this chapter really belongs to this book or if it should be considered to be part of another one. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “This chapter could not have been written by Moses. A man certainly cannot give an account of his own death and burial. We may therefore consider Moses’ words as ending with the conclusion of the preceding chapter, as what follows could not possibly have been written by himself. To suppose that he anticipated these circumstances, or that they were shown to him by a special revelation, is departing far from propriety and necessity, and involving the subject in absurdity; for God gives no prophetic intimations but such as are absolutely necessary to be made; but there is no necessity here, for the Spirit which inspired the writer of the following book, would naturally communicate the matter that concludes this. I believe, therefore, that Deut. 34 should constitute the first chapter of the book of Joshua. On this subject the following note from an intelligent Jew cannot be unacceptable to the reader: ‘Most commentators are of opinion that Ezra was the author of the last chapter

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⁹⁸⁰ Heb. 10:19

of Deuteronomy; some think it was Joshua, and others the seventy elders, immediately after the death of Moses; adding, that the book of Deuteronomy originally ended with the prophetic blessing upon the twelve tribes: ‘Happy art thou, O Israel! who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord,’ etc.; and that what now makes the last chapter of Deuteronomy was formerly the first of Joshua, but was removed from thence and joined to the former by way of supplement. This opinion will not appear unnatural if it be considered that sections and other divisions, as well as points and pauses, were invented long since these books were written; for in those early ages several books were connected together and followed each other on the same roll. The beginning of one book might therefore be easily transferred to the end of another, and in process of time be considered as its real conclusion, as in the case of Deuteronomy, especially as this supplemental chapter contains an account of the last transactions and death of the great author of the Pentateuch.’-Alexander’s Heb. and Eng. Pentateuch. This seems to be a perfectly correct view of the subject. This chapter forms a very proper commencement to the book of Joshua, for of this last chapter of Deuteronomy the first chapter of Joshua is an evident continuation. If the subject be viewed in this light it will remove every appearance of absurdity and contradiction with which, on the common mode of interpretation, it stands sadly encumbered.”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary introduces this last chapter of the book with: “A testament is of force only after the death of the testator. So the Deuteronomic Covenant in its testamentary aspect (cf. comments introd. to ch. 33) would not become operative until after the death of Moses. Only then would Joshua succeed to the role of vicegerent of God over Israel, and only then under the leadership of Joshua could the tribes, according to the declarations of the Lord, enter into their inheritance in Canaan. It was, therefore, appropriate that the Deuteronomic treaty should close with the record of Moses’ death, which in effect notarizes the treaty. That the testamentary significance of Moses’ death is in view is evidenced by the accompanying attention given to the land of Israel’s inheritance and to Joshua’s accession to the royal mediatorship of the covenant. Verses 1-8 record Moses’ death and verses 9-12, Joshua’s succession to Moses. The account resumes the narrative of Deut 32:48-52.”

None of the above touches the mystery of the subject matter that is treated in these first four verses. It is obvious that, beside God, no one else was present when Moses died. Yet the particulars of his last vision on earth are given in detail. Without a special revelation to someone, whether Joshua or Ezra, none of this would be available to us. But then, the first chapter of Genesis falls in the same category! In a way, it seems fitting that the first and the last chapter of the Pentateuch have this mystery in common.

Being at this side of the dividing line between life and death, none of us can testify what a person sees at the moment of his death when he reaches his final destination. Those who lived to tell us, that is those who came close, never really reached that point. There is no written account of Lazarus’ testimony. People who have come so close to death that they could taste it, testify that they saw their whole life replayed before their eyes in a few seconds. The testimony of what Moses saw reveals not the past but the future that should have been but never was. Moses was shown the goal he didn’t reach.

Or did he reach it? I have an inkling that what God showed him was the real Promised Land “from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar.” Moses was prevented from entering that which was a mere image of the heavenly reality but God certainly allowed him to enter the rest He had prepared for the man who had been faithful to Him in all His house.⁹⁸¹ God’s punishments of His children are sweet. We can apply to Moses what the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says about all the Patriarchs: “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”⁹⁸²

Jude makes the following mysterious remark about Moses’ burial in his epistle: “But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’”⁹⁸³ No one has been able to trace Jude’s reference to any reliable source. Most commentators agree that Jude’s point was not to establish the historicity of the myth but to use words attributed to Michael as an example to illustrate his point.

The Bible makes it clear that Moses did not die of old age in spite of the fact that he had reached the age of 120. The record tells us: “His eyes were not weak nor his strength gone.” The mention of his eyesight underlines the

⁹⁸¹ See Num. 12:7

⁹⁸² Heb. 11:13-16

⁹⁸³ Jude vs. 9, 10

fact that his vision of the Promised Land cannot be attributed to weakness of any kind. Moses did not reach the age of the patriarchs. Abraham died at the age of 175, Isaac was 180, and Jacob 174. They all died of old age and in poor physical condition. No details are known about Abraham's eyesight, but Isaac and Jacob were both blind at the time of their death. Moses seems never to have aged. This can only be attributed to the supernatural effect his relationship with God had on his body.

From a medical viewpoint, aging is an inexplicable phenomenon. There is no apparent reason why, at a certain point in human life, the body flips a switch and begins to deteriorate. The Bible establishes a clear link between death of the body and sin. But there seems to be no direct link between atonement and health. Even if we maintain that healing is included in the atonement, we know that God's saints can die of cancer. Solomon had a lot to say about the relationship between the fear of the Lord and physical health. "Fear the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones."⁹⁸⁴ He credits the Gospel for our health. "Good news gives health to the bones."⁹⁸⁵ And: "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones."⁹⁸⁶ At the same time, Paul speaks about the deterioration of our bodies as we grow old, and the hope this gives to us for a new body in heaven. He wrote: "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands."⁹⁸⁷

Vs. 5 reads: "And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, *as the LORD had said.*" Most versions hold to this interpretation. Some have "according to the word of the LORD." The Hebrew reads literally "according to the mouth of the LORD." The Hebrew word *peh* means "the mouth as the means of blowing." It is derived from *pa'ah* which means "to puff, to blow away." *Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments: "He dies according to the word of the Lord. At the mouth of the Lord; so the word is. The Jews say, 'with a kiss from the mouth of God.' No doubt, he died very easily (it was an euthanasia—a delightful death), there were no bands in his death; and he had in his death a most pleasing taste of the love of God to him: but that he died at the mouth of the Lord means no more but that he died in compliance with the will of God." Thus *Matthew Henry* revives the original meaning of the word euthanasia! No Christian would be opposed to this kind of euthanasia.

There is a deeper beauty in this "kiss of death" than appears at the surface. The first man became a living being when God kissed him. We read in the Genesis account of creation: "The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."⁹⁸⁸ This second "kiss" given to Moses cannot have caused death. It relegated his body back to the dust of the ground but it ushered his soul into the glory he had so deeply longed to see. Moses became more alive than he had ever been before.

On Israel's mourning over Moses' death, *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "Seven days was the usual period of mourning; but for persons of high rank or official eminence, it was extended to thirty (Gen 50:3-10; Num 20:29). It was and is customary in the East for friends to mourn very bitterly over such as were absent from home when they died, and were buried at a distance from their relations. It was after this manner that the Israelites lamented the death of Moses. He was absent from them when he died; nor did they carry him in public procession, but they wept for him in the plains of Moab."

The death of Moses meant the loss of one of the greatest men who ever lived on earth. It is obvious that the verses 10-12 express the opinion of the editor of the book. The people who lived at the time Moses died were too close to him to see him in the perspective that only history can give. As the distance increased, Moses' greatness became more obvious. These last verses, being part of the inspired Word of God, express at the same time what God thought about Moses. The most amazing statement made about this man is expressed in the words "whom the LORD knew face to face." This does not speak about Moses' knowledge of God but of God's intimacy with Moses. There is a sense in which the omniscient God knows all of His creatures completely but this is not what is meant here. Paul catches the real meaning when he says: "The man who loves God is known by God."⁹⁸⁹ If there are things we do not want God to know about ourselves, we do not love Him as we ought to. God knows them anyhow but we miss out on the intimacy of our fellowship with Him. The more we tell God about ourselves the more He will tell us about Himself. That is what eternal life is all about. Jesus says: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only

⁹⁸⁴ Prov. 3:7,8

⁹⁸⁵ Prov. 15:30

⁹⁸⁶ Prov. 16:24

⁹⁸⁷ II Cor. 5:1

⁹⁸⁸ Gen. 2:7

⁹⁸⁹ I Cor. 8:3

true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”⁹⁹⁰ Moses’ greatness did not consist in the miracles he performed but in his communion with God. The miracles were the byproduct of this communion.

How could anyone fill such shoes? In *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*, we read: “Joshua now took Moses’ place as the leader of the people, filled with the spirit of wisdom (practical wisdom, manifesting itself in action), because Moses had ordained him to his office by the laying on of hands (Num 27:18). And the people obeyed him; but he was not like Moses. ‘There arose no more a prophet in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face,’ i.e., so far as the miracles and signs were concerned which Moses did, by virtue of his divine mission, upon Pharaoh, his servants, and his land, and the terrible acts which he performed before the eyes of Israel (vv. 11 and 12; vid., Deut 26:8, and 4:34). Whom Jehovah knew:’ not who knew Him, the Lord. ‘To know,’ ... relates to the divine knowledge, which not only involves a careful observance (Deut 2:7), but is also a manifestation of Himself to man, a penetration of man with the spiritual power of God. Because he was thus known by the Lord, Moses was able to perform signs and wonders, and mighty, terrible acts, such as no other performed either before or after him.”

Joshua was not a second Moses; he was Joshua. Moses foreshadowed Jesus Christ as a prophet. That is how Moses saw himself, although he could not have known the full extend of his words: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”⁹⁹¹ But Joshua depicted Jesus as Savior in a fuller way than Moses ever did. In leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land, he became an image of Him who leads many sons to glory. Even his name links this man to the Messiah. The Hebrew form of the name is *Yehoshua* which means “Yahweh is deliverance.” It is the very same name that in the New Testament Greek is rendered with Jesus (*Iesus*).

We don’t know much about the character of Joshua’s relationship with God. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and from his early days he had exhibited a great spiritual hunger. We read: “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.”⁹⁹²

Joshua’s faith was instrumental in the occurrence of the greatest miracle creation has ever known, apart from the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We read the story of Joshua’s prayer during the battle with the Amorites. “On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: ‘O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.’ So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a man.”⁹⁹³ God never listened to Moses as He did to Joshua. But that is a different story.

The conclusion in *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* on Deuteronomy is a worthy ending to our study of this magnificent book: “Among all the succeeding prophets none was found so eminent in all respects nor so highly privileged as Moses, with him God spoke face to face—admitted him to the closest familiarity and greatest friendship with himself. Now all this continued true till the advent of Jesus Christ, of whom Moses said, ‘A Prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you from among your brethren, like unto me;’ but how great was this person when compared with Moses! Moses desired to see God’s glory; this sight he could not bear; he saw his back parts probably meaning God’s design relative to the latter days: but Jesus, the Almighty Savior in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, who lay in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared God to man. Wondrous system of legal ordinances that pointed out and typified all these things! And more wonderful system of Gospel salvation, which is the body, soul, life, energy, and full accomplishment of all that was written in the LAW, in the PROPHETS, and in the PSALMS, concerning the sufferings and death of Jesus, and the redemption of a ruined world ‘by his agony and bloody sweat, by his cross and passion, by his death and burial, by his glorious resurrection and ascension, and by the coming of the Holy Ghost!’ Thus ends the PENTATEUCH, commonly called the LAW of MOSES, a work every way worthy of God its author, and only less than the NEW COVENANT, the law and Gospel of our Lord and Savior JESUS CHRIST.

Now to the ever blessed and glorious TRINITY, FATHER, WORD, and SPIRIT, the infinite and eternal ONE, from whom alone wisdom, truth and goodness can proceed, be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Toccoa Falls, GA. January 17, 2000.

⁹⁹⁰ John 17:3

⁹⁹¹ Ch. 18:16

⁹⁹² Ex. 33:11

⁹⁹³ Josh. 10:12-14