

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

By C. H. M.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“AND this is the blessing wherewith Moses, the man of God, blessed the children of Israel before his death.”

It is full of interest and comfort to find that the last words of the lawgiver were words of unmingled blessing.

We have dwelt upon his various discourses – those solemn, searching, and deeply affecting homilies addressed to the congregation of Israel; we have meditated upon that marvelous song, with its mingled notes of grace and government: but we are now called to hearken to words of most precious benediction, words of sweetest comfort and consolation, words flowing from the very heart of the God of Israel and giving His own loving thoughts respecting them, and His onlook into their glorious future.

The reader will doubtless notice a marked difference between the last words of Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy 33 and the last words of Jacob as given in Genesis 49.

It is needless to say that both are given by the same pen – both divinely inspired, and hence, although they differ, they do not and cannot clash; there is, there can be, no discrepancy between two sections of the volume of God. This is a cardinal truth, a vital and fundamental principle with every devout Christian, every true believer – a truth to be tenaciously grasped and faithfully confessed, in the face of all the ignorant and insolent assaults of infidelity.

We are not, of course, going to enter upon an elaborate comparison of the two chapters; this would be impossible just now, on various grounds. We are obliged to be as concise and brief as possible. But there is one grand point of difference, which can be seized at a glance.

Jacob gives the history of the actings of his sons – some of them, alas! most sad and humiliating: Moses, on the contrary, presents the actings of divine grace, whether in them or toward them. This will at once account for the difference.

The evil actings of Reuben, of Simeon, and of Levi are recorded by Jacob, but entirely omitted by Moses. Is this discrepancy? Nay, but divine harmony.

- Jacob views his sons in their personal history; Moses views them in their covenant-relationship with the Lord.

- Jacob gives us human failure, infirmity, and sin: Moses gives us divine faithfulness, goodness, and loving-kindness.
- Jacob gives us human actings, and judgment thereon: Moses gives us divine counsels, and unmingled blessing flowing out of them.

Thanks and praise to our God, His counsels and His blessings and His glory are above and beyond all human failure, sin, and folly. He will ultimately have it all His own way, and that forever; then, Israel and the nations shall be fully blessed, and shall rejoice together in the abundant goodness of God, and celebrate His praise from shore to shore, and from the river to the ends of the earth.

We shall now do little more than quote for the reader the various blessings of the tribes. They are full of most precious instruction, and do not call for much in the way of exposition.

“And he said, I The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; He shined forth from Mount Paran, and He came with ten thousands of saints [holy ones]; from His right hand went a fiery law for them. Yea, He loved the people;” – precious, unfailing source of all their future blessing! – **“all His saints are in Thy hand;”** – true secret of their perfect security – **“and they sat down at Thy feet;”** – the only safe and proper attitude for them, for us, for each, for all – **“every one shall receive of Thy words.”** – Blessed boon precious treasure! Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord is more precious, by far, than thousands of gold and silver; sweeter also than honey and the honey-comb – **“Moses commanded us a law, even the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob. And he was king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people and the tribes of Israel were gathered together. Let Reuben live and not die, and let not his men be few.”**

We hear nothing here about Reuben’s instability, nothing about his sin. Grace is in the ascendant; blessings are flowing in rich abundance from the loving heart of the One who delights to bless and to surround Himself with hearts filled to overflowing with the sense of His goodness.

“And this is the blessing of Judah; and he said, ‘Hear, Lord, the voice of Judah, and bring him unto his people; let his hands be sufficient for him; and be Thou a help to him from his enemies.’” Judah is the royal line. **“Our Lord sprang out of Judah,”** thus illustrating, in a truly marvelous manner, how divine grace rises, in its majesty, above human sin, and triumphs gloriously over circumstances which reveal man’s utter weakness.

“Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar.” Who but the Holy Spirit could have penned these words? How plainly they declare that God’s thoughts are not as our thoughts! What human hand would have introduced Thamar into the genealogical line of our adorable Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? Not one. The stamp of divinity is strikingly impressed on Matthew 1:3, as it is upon every clause of the holy volume from beginning to end. The Lord be praised that it is so!

“Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise; thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father’s children shall bow down before thee.

“Judah is a lion’s whelp; from the prey, my son, thou art gone up; he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. Binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass’s colt unto the choice vine; he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes; his eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk” (Genesis 49:8-12).

“And I saw in the right hand of Him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?’ And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon. And one of the elders saith unto me, ‘Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book and to loose the seven seals thereof.’ And I beheld, and lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb, as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.”

How highly favored is the tribe of Judah!

Surely, to be in the genealogical line from which our Lord sprang is a high honor, and yet we know – for our Lord Himself has told us – that it is far higher, far more blessed, to hear the Word of God and keep it. To do the will of God, to treasure up in our hearts His precious commandments, brings us morally nearer to Christ than even the fact of being of His kindred according to the flesh. (Matthew 12:46-50).

“And of Levi he said, ‘Let Thy Thummin and Thy Ummin [lights and perfections] be with Thy holy one, whom Thou didst prove at Massah, and with whom Thou didst strive at the waters of Meribah; who said unto his father and to his mother, I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew his own children; for they have observed Thy word and kept Thy covenant. They shall teach Jacob Thy judgments, and Israel Thy law; they shall put incense before Thee, and whole burnt-sacrifice upon Thine altar. Bless, Lord, his substance, and accept the work of his hands; smite through the loins of them that rise against him, and of them that hate him, that they rise not again.’” (Ver. 8-11).

The reader will notice the fact that Simeon is left out here, though so intimately associated with Levi in Genesis 49. **“Simeon and Levi are brethren; instruments of cruelty are in their habitations. O my son! Come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honor, be not thou united; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will they digged down a wall. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.”**

Now, when we compare Genesis 49, with Deuteronomy 33; we observe two things, namely, human responsibility on the one hand, and divine sovereignty on the other. Moreover, we see nature and its actings; grace and its fruits.

Jacob looks at Simeon and Levi linked together in nature, and displaying nature's tempers and ways. So far as they were concerned, they both alike deserved the curse; but in Levi, we see the glorious triumphs of sovereign grace. It was grace which enabled Levi, in the days of the golden calf, to gird on the sword and stand for the glory of the God of Israel.

“Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, ‘Who is on the Lord’s side? let him come unto me. ‘And all the Sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him. And he said unto them, ‘Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.’ And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses; and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men. For Moses had said, ‘Consecrate yourselves to-day to the Lord, even every man upon his son, and upon his brother; that he may bestow upon you a blessing this day’ “ (Exodus 32:26-29).

Where was Simeon on this occasion? He was with Levi in the day of nature's self-will, fierce anger, and cruel wrath; why not in the day of bold decision for the Lord? He was ready to go with his brother to avenge a family insult, why not to vindicate the honor of God, insulted as it was by the idolatrous act of the whole congregation? Will anyone say he was not responsible? Let such an one beware how he raises such a question.

The call of Moses was addressed to the whole congregation; Levi alone responded, and he got the blessing. He stood for God in a dark and evil day, and for this he was honored with the priesthood – the very highest dignity that could be conferred upon him. The call was addressed to Simeon as well as to Levi, but Simeon did not respond. Is there any difficulty here? To a mere theologian there may be, but to a devout Christian there is none. God is sovereign. He does as He pleases, and gives none account of any of His matters. If anyone feels disposed to ask, Why is Simeon omitted in Deuteronomy 33? The simple and conclusive answer is, **“O man, who art thou that replest against God?”**

In Simeon, we see nature's actings judged; in Levi, we see the fruits of grace rewarded; in both, we see God's truth vindicated and His name glorified. Thus it ever has been, thus it is, and thus it shall be. Man is responsible: God is sovereign. Are we called upon to reconcile these two propositions? Nay, we are called to believe them. They are reconciled already, inasmuch as they appear side by side on the page of inspiration. This is enough for every pious mind; and as for cavers; they will get their definitive answer by and by. *

*** For further remarks on the tribe of Levi, the reader is referred to “Notes on the Book of Exodus,” chapter 32; “Notes on the Book of Numbers,” chapter 3, 4, and 8; also a pamphlet, first published in the year, 1846, entitled, “The History of the Tribe of Levi Considered,” All these can be had from Loizeaux Brothers.**

“And of Benjamin. [*“the son of my right hand”*] he said, “The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him; and the Lord shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between His shoulders.”

Blessed place for Benjamin! Blessed place for each beloved child of God! How precious is the thought of dwelling in safety in the divine presence, in conscious nearness to the true and faithful Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, day and night abiding under the covert of His sheltering wings!

“How blest are they who still abide,
Close sheltered by Thy watchful side!
Who life and strength from Thee receive,
And with Thee move and in Thee live.”

Reader, seek to know more and more the reality and blessedness of Benjamin’s place and portion. Be not satisfied with anything short of the enjoyed presence of Christ, the abiding sense of relationship and nearness to Him. Be assured of it, it is your happy privilege. Let nothing rob you of it. Keep ever near the Shepherd’s side, reposing in His love, lying down in the green pastures and beside the still waters.

The Lord grant that the writer and the reader may prove the deep blessedness of this, in this day of hollow profession and empty talk. May we know the unspeakable preciousness of deep, personal intimacy with Himself. This is the special need of the day in which our lot is cast – a day of so much intellectual traffic in truth, but of so little heart-knowledge and true appreciation of Christ.

“And of Joseph he said, ‘Blessed of the Lord be his land, for the precious things of heaven, for the dew, and for the deep that coucheth beneath, and for the precious fruits brought forth by the sun, and for the precious things put forth by the moon, and for the chief things of the ancient mountains, and for the precious things of the lasting hills, and for the precious things of the earth and fullness thereof, and for the good-will of Him that dwelt in the bush; let the blessing come upon the head of Joseph, and upon the top of the head of him that was separated from his brethren. His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns; with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth; and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.’”

Joseph is a very remarkable type of Christ.

We have dwelt upon his history in our studies on the book of Genesis. The reader will notice the emphatic way in which Moses speaks of, the fact of his having been separated from his brethren. He was rejected and cast into the pit. He passed, in figure, through the deep waters of death, and thus reached the place of dignity and glory. He was raised from the dungeon to be ruler over the land of Egypt, and the preserver and sustainer of his brethren. The iron entered into his soul, and he was made to taste the bitterness of the place of death ere he entered the sphere of glory. Striking type of Him who hung upon the Cross, lay in the grave, and is now on the throne of the Majesty of Heaven.

We cannot but be struck with the fullness of the blessing pronounced upon Joseph both by Moses in Deuteronomy 33. and by Jacob in Genesis 49.

Jacob's utterance is uncommonly fine. **"Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well" – Exquisitely beautiful figure! – "whose branches run over the wall. The archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him; but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob; (from thence is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel) even by the God of thy father, who shall help thee; and by the Almighty, who shall bless thee with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lieth under, blessings of the breasts and of the womb: the blessings of thy father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills: they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren."**

Magnificent range of blessing! And all this flowing from and based upon his sufferings. It is needless to say that all these blessings will be made good in the experience of Israel by and by. The sufferings of the true Joseph will form the imperishable foundation of the future blessedness of His brethren in the land of Canaan; and not only so, but the tide of blessing, deep and full, shall flow forth from that highly favored though now desolate land, in refreshing virtue into all the earth. **"And it shall be in that day, that living waters shall go but from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea; in summer and in winter shall it be."** Bright and blessed prospect for Jerusalem, . for the land of Israel, and in the whole earth! What a sad mistake to apply such Scriptures to the Gospel dispensation or to the Church of God! How contrary to the testimony of Holy Scripture, to the heart of God, and to the mind of Christ!

"And of Zebulun he said, 'Rejoice, Zebulun, in thy going out; and, Issachar, in thy tents. They shall call the people unto the mountain; there they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness: for they shall suck of the abundance of the seas, and of the treasures hid in the sand.'"

Zebulun is to rejoice in his going forth, and Issachar in abiding in his tents. It will be joy at home and abroad; and there will be power to act on others also – calling the people unto the mountain to offer the sacrifices of righteousness. All this grounded upon the fact that they themselves shall suck of the abundance of the seas and of hidden treasures. Thus it is always, in principle. It is our privilege to rejoice in the Lord, come what may, and to draw from those eternal springs and hidden treasures that are to be found in Himself. Then shall we be in a condition of soul to call others – to taste and see that the Lord is good; and not only so, but to present to God those sacrifices of righteousness so acceptable to Him.

"And of Gad he said, 'Blessed be he that enlargeth Gad: he dwelleth as a lion, and teareth the arm with the crown of the head. And he provided the first part for himself, because there, in a portion of the lawgiver, was he seated; and he came with the heads of the people, he executed the justice of the Lord, and His judgments with Israel.' And of Dan he said, 'Dan is a lion's whelp; he shall leap from Bashan.' And of Naphtali he said, 'O Naphtali, satisfied with favor, and full with the blessing of the Lord: possess thou the west and the south.'"

“And of Asher he said, ‘Let Asher be blessed with children; let him be acceptable to his brethren, and let him dip his foot in oil. Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days thy strength. There is none like unto the God of Jeshurun, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help, and in His excellency on the sky. The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and He shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy them. Israel then shall dwell in safety alone: the fountain of Jacob shall be upon a land of corn and wine; also his heavens shall drop down dew. Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord, the shield of thy help, and who is the sword of thy excellency! And thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee; and thou shalt tread upon their high places’” (Ver. 20-29).

Truly we may say human comment is uncalled for here. Nothing can exceed the preciousness of the grace that breathes in the closing lines of our book.

The blessings of this chapter, like the song of chapter 32, begin and end with God and His marvelous ways with Israel. It is refreshing and comforting beyond expression, at the close of all the appeals, all the exhortations, all the solemn warnings, all the faithful declarations, all the prophetic records as to failure and sin, judgment and governmental wrath – after all these, to listen to such accents as those which we have just penned.

It is indeed a most magnificent termination to this blessed book of Deuteronomy. Grace and glory shine out with uncommon luster. God will yet be glorified in Israel, and Israel fully and forever blessed in God. Nothing can hinder this.

The gifts and calling of God are without repentance. He will make good every jot and tittle of His precious Word to Israel. The last words of the lawgiver bear the clearest and fullest testimony to all this. Had we nothing but the last four verses of the precious chapter on which we have been dwelling, they would be amply sufficient to prove, beyond all question, the future restoration, blessing, preeminence, and glory of the twelve tribes of Israel in their own land.

True it is – blessedly true – that the Lord’s people now can draw instruction, comfort, and refreshment from the blessings pronounced upon Israel.

Blessed be God, we can know what it is to be **“satisfied with favor, and full of the blessing of the Lord;”**

- We may take comfort from the assurance that **“as our days shall be our strength.”**
- We too can say, **“The eternal God is our refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms”**
- We can say all this, and much more.
- We can say what Israel never could and never can say.

The Church’s blessings and privileges are all heavenly and spiritual, but that does not hinder our taking comfort from the promises made to Israel. The grand mistake of professing Christians is in applying to the Church exclusively what most manifestly applies to God’s earthly people.

We must once more earnestly entreat the Christian reader to watch against this serious error.

He need not be in the least afraid of losing aught of his own special blessing by leaving to the seed of Abraham the place and the portion assigned them by the counsels and promises of God; on the contrary, it is only when these are clearly understood and fully acknowledged that we can make an intelligent use of the entire canon of Old Testament Scripture.

We may lay it down as a great root-principle that no one can possibly understand or interpret Scripture who does not clearly recognize the grand distinction between Israel and the Church of God.

~ end of chapter 33 ~

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