

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“AND Moses, with the elders of Israel, commanded the people, saying, ‘Keep all the commandments which I command you this day. And it shall be on the day when ye shall pass over Jordan unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, that thou shalt set thee up great stones, and plaster them with plaster; and thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law, when thou art passed over, that thou mayest go in unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, a land that floweth with milk and honey; as the Lord God of thy fathers hath promised thee. Therefore it shall be when ye be gone over Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in Mount Ebal, and thou shalt plaster them with plaster. And there shalt thou build an altar unto the Lord thy God, an altar of stones: thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them. Thou shalt build the altar of the Lord thy God of whole stones; and thou shalt offer burnt-offerings thereon unto the Lord thy God; and thou shalt offer peace-offerings, and shalt eat there, and rejoice before the Lord thy God. And thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly.’ And Moses and the priests the Levites spake unto all Israel, saying, ‘Take heed, and hearken, O Israel; *this day thou art become the people of the Lord thy God.* Thou shalt therefore obey the voice of the Lord thy God, and do His commandments and His statutes, which I command thee this day.’ And Moses charged the people the same day, saying, ‘These shall stand upon Mount Gerizim to bless the people, when ye are come over Jordan: Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Joseph and Benjamin. And these shall stand upon Mount Ebal to curse: Reuben, Gad, and Asher and Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali”
(Ver. 1-13).

There could not be a more striking contrast than that which is presented in the opening and close of this chapter. In the paragraph which we have just penned, we see Israel entering upon the land of promise – that fair and fruitful land flowing with milk and honey, and there erecting an altar in Mount Ebal, for burnt-offerings and peace-offerings. We read nothing about sin-offerings or trespass-offerings here.

The law, in all its fullness, was to be **“written very plainly”** upon the plastered stones, and the people, in full, recognized, covenant-relationship, were to offer on the altar those special offerings of sweet savor so blessedly expressive of worship and Holy Communion. The subject here is not the trespasser in act, or the sinner in nature, approaching the brazen altar with a trespass-offering or a sin-offering; but rather a people fully delivered, accepted, and blessed – a people in the actual enjoyment of their relationship and their inheritance.

True, they were trespassers and sinners, and as such, needed the precious provision of the brazen altar, – this, of course, is obvious, and fully understood and admitted by everyone taught of God; but it manifestly is not the subject of Deuteronomy 27:1-13, and the spiritual reader will at once perceive the reason.

When we see the Israel of God, in full covenant-relationship, entering into possession of their inheritance, having the revealed will of their covenant-God, the Lord, plainly and fully written before them, and the milk and honey flowing around them, we must conclude that all question as to trespasses and sins is definitively settled, and that nothing remains for a people so highly privileged and so richly blessed but to surround the altar of their covenant-God and present those sweet-savor offerings which were acceptable to Him and suited to them.

In short, the whole scene unfolded to our view in the first half of our chapter is perfectly beautiful.

Israel having avouched the Lord to be their God, and the Lord having avouched Israel to be His peculiar people, to make them high above all nations which He had made, in praise and in name and in honor, and a holy people unto the Lord their God, as He had spoken, – Israel thus privileged, blessed, and exalted, in full possession of the goodly land, and having all the precious commandments of God before their eyes, what remained but to present the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, in holy worship and happy fellowship?

But in the latter half of our chapter, we find something quite different.

Moses appoints six tribes to stand upon Mount Gerizim to bless the people, and six on Mount Ebal to curse; but alas! When we come to the actual history – the positive facts of the case, there is not a single syllable of blessing, nothing but twelve awful curses, each confirmed by a solemn “**amen**” from the whole congregation.

What a sad change! What a striking contrast!

It reminds us of what passed before us in our study of Exodus 19. There could not be a more impressive commentary on the words of the inspired apostle in Galatians 3:10 – “**For as many as are of the works of the law**” – as many as are on that ground – “**are under the curse; for it is written,**” – and here he quotes Deuteronomy 27:

“Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.”

Here we have the real solution of the question.

Israel, as to their actual moral condition, were on the ground of law; and hence, although the opening of our chapter presents a lovely picture of God’s thoughts respecting Israel, yet the close of it sets forth the sad and humiliating result of Israel’s real state before God. There is not a sound from Mount Gerizim, not one word of benediction; but, instead thereof, curse upon curse falls on the ears of the people.

Nor could it possibly be otherwise. Let people contend for it as they will, nothing but a curse can come upon “**as many as are of the works of the law.**”

It does not merely say, As many as fail to keep the law, though that is true; but, as if to set the truth in the very clearest and most forcible manner before us, the Holy Ghost declares that for all, no matter who – Jew, Gentile, or nominal Christian – all who are on the ground or principle of works of law, there is and can be nothing but a curse.

Thus, then, the reader will be able intelligently to account for the profound silence that reigned on Mount Gerizim in the day of Deuteronomy 27.

The simple fact is, if one solitary benediction had been heard, it would have been a contradiction to the entire teaching of Holy Scripture on the question of law.

We have so fully gone into the weighty subject of the law in earlier chapters of this volume, that we do not feel called upon to dwell upon it here. We can only say that the more we study Scripture, and the more we ponder the law question in the light of the New Testament, the more amazed we are at the manner in which some persist in contending for the opinion that Christians are under the law, whether for life, for righteousness, for holiness, or for any object whatsoever.

How can such an opinion stand for a moment in the face of that magnificent and conclusive statement in Romans 6, “**YE ARE NOT UNDER LAW, BUT UNDER GRACE**”?

~ end of chapter 27 ~

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