

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE heart of Moses still lingers, with deep tenderness and affectionate solicitude, over the congregation. It seems as though he could never weary of pouring into their ears his earnest exhortations. He felt their need, he foresaw their danger, and, like a true and faithful shepherd, he sought, with all the deep and tender affection of His large, loving heart, to prepare them for what was before them. No one can read his closing words without being struck with their peculiarly solemn tone.

They remind us of Paul's touching farewell to the elders of Ephesus. Both these beloved and honored servants realized, in a very vivid manner, the seriousness of their own position and that of the persons they were addressing. They felt the uncommon gravity of the interests at stake, and the urgent need of the most faithful dealing with the heart and conscience. This will account for what we may term the awful solemnity of their appeals. All who really enter into the situation and destiny of the people of God in a world like this must be serious. The true sense of these things, the apprehension of them in the divine presence, must, of necessity, impart a holy gravity to the character, and a special pungency and power to the testimony.

“And Moses went and spake these words unto all Israel. And he said unto them, ‘I am a hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no more go out and come in; also the Lord hath said unto me, Thou shalt not go over this Jordan.’”

How very touching this allusion to his great age, and this fresh and final reference to the solemn governmental dealing of God with himself personally! The direct and manifest object of both was, to give effect to his appeal to the hearts and consciences of the people, to strengthen the moral lever by which this beloved and honored servant of God sought to move them in the direction of simple obedience. If he points to his gray hairs, or to the holy discipline exercised toward him, it most assuredly is not for the purpose of bringing himself, his circumstances, or his feelings before them, but simply to touch the deepest springs of their moral being by every possible means.

“The Lord thy God, He will go over before thee, and He will destroy these nations from before thee, and thou shalt possess them; and Joshua, he shall go over before thee, as the Lord hath said. And the Lord shall do unto them as He did to Sihon and to Og, kings of the Amorites, and unto the land of them whom He destroyed. And the Lord shall give them up before your face, that ye may do unto them according unto all the commandments which I have commanded you.”

Not a word of murmuring or repining as to himself, not the faintest tinge of envy or jealousy in his reference to the one who was to take his place, not the most distant approach to aught of the kind; every selfish consideration is swallowed up in the one grand object of encouraging the hearts of the people to tread, with firm step, the pathway of obedience, which was then, is now, and ever must be the path of victory, the path of blessing, the path of peace.

“Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them; for the Lord thy God, He it is that doth go with thee; He will not fail thee nor forsake thee.”

What precious, soul-sustaining words are these, beloved Christian reader! How eminently calculated to lift the heart above every discouraging influence!

The blessed consciousness of the Lord’s presence with us, and the remembrance of His gracious ways with us, in days gone by, must ever prove the true secret of strength in moving onward.

The same mighty hand which had subdued before them Sihon and Og, could subdue all the kings of Canaan. The Amorites were quite as formidable as the Canaanites; the Lord was more than a match for all.

“We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work Thou didst in their days, in the times of old. How Thou didst drive out the heathen with Thy hand, and plantedst them; how Thou didst afflict the people, and cast them out.”

Only think of God driving out people with His own hand!

What an answer to all the arguments and difficulties of a morbid sentimentality!

- How very shallow and erroneous are the thoughts of some in reference to the governmental ways of God!
- How miserably one-sided their notions of His character and actings!
- How perfectly absurd the attempt to measure God by the standard of human judgment and feeling!

It is very evident that Moses had not the smallest particle of sympathy with such sentiments when he addressed to the congregation of Israel the magnificent exhortation quoted above. He knew something of the gravity and solemnity of the government of God, something, too, of the blessedness of having Him as a shield in the day of battle, a refuge and a resource in every hour of peril and need. Let us hearken to his encouraging words addressed to the man who was to succeed him.

“And Moses called unto Joshua, and said unto him in the sight of all Israel, ‘Be strong and of a good courage; for thou must go with this people unto the land which the Lord hath sworn unto their fathers to give them; and thou shalt cause them to inherit it. And the Lord, He it is that doth go before thee; He will be with thee; He will not fail thee, neither forsake thee; fear not, neither be dismayed.’”

Joshua needed a special word for himself, as one called to occupy a prominent and very distinguished place in the congregation. But the word to him embodies the same precious truth as that addressed to the whole assembly. He is assured of the divine presence and power with him. This is enough for each, for all; for Joshua as for the most obscure member of the assembly. Yes, reader, and enough for thee, whoever thou art, or whatever be thy sphere of action. It matters not in the least what difficulties or dangers may lie before us, our God is amply sufficient for all. If only we have the sense of the Lord's presence with us, and the authority of His Word for the work in which we are engaged, we may move on with joyful confidence, spite of ten thousand difficulties and hostile influences.

“And Moses wrote this law, and delivered it unto the priests the sons of Levi, which bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and unto all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, saying, ‘At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, when all Israel is come to appear before the Lord thy God in the place which He shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel, in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and *observe to do all the words of this law; and that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it*” (Ver. 9-35).

Two things in the foregoing passage claim our special attention; first, the fact that the Lord attached the most solemn importance to the public assembly of His people for the purpose of hearing His Word. **“All Israel”** - **“men, women, and children”** - with the stranger who had cast in his lot amongst them, were commanded to assemble themselves together to hear the reading of the book of the law of God, that all might learn His holy will and their duty.

Each member of the assembly, from the eldest to the youngest, was to be brought into direct personal contact with the revealed will of the Lord, that each one might know his solemn responsibility.

And secondly, we have to weigh the fact that the children were to be gathered before the Lord to hearken to His Word. Both these facts are full of weighty instruction for all the members of the Church of God - instruction urgently called for on all sides.

There is a most deplorable amount of failure as to these two points. We sadly neglect the assembling of ourselves together for the simple reading of the Holy Scriptures. There does not seem to be sufficient attraction in the Word of God itself to bring us together. There is an unhealthy craving for other things; human oratory, music, religious excitement of some kind or other seems needful to bring people together, - anything and everything but the precious Word of God.

It will perhaps be said that people have the Word of God in their houses, that it is quite different now from what it was with Israel; everyone can read the Scriptures at home, and there is not the same necessity for the public reading. Such a plea will not stand the test of truth for a moment.

We may rest assured, if the Word of God were loved and prized and studied in private and in the family, it would be loved and prized and studied in public. We should delight to gather together around the fountain of Holy Scripture, to drink, in happy fellowship, of the living water, for our common refreshment and blessing.

But it is not so. The Word of God is not loved and studied, either privately or publicly. Trashy literature is devoured in private, and music, ritualistic services, and imposing ceremonies are eagerly sought after in public. Thousands will flock to hear music, and pay for admission, but how few care for a meeting to read the Holy Scriptures! These are facts, and facts are powerful arguments. We cannot get over them. There is a growing thirst for religious excitement, and a growing distaste for the calm study of Holy Scripture and the spiritual exercises of the Christian assembly. It is perfectly useless to deny it. We cannot shut our eyes to it. The evidence of it meets us on every hand.

Thank God, there are a few, here and there, who really love the Word of God, and delight to meet, in holy fellowship, for the study of its precious truths. May the Lord increase the number of such, and bless them abundantly.

May our lot be cast with them, "till traveling days are done." They are but an obscure and feeble remnant everywhere; but they love Christ and cleave to His Word, and their richest enjoyment is, to get together and think and speak and sing of Him. May God bless them and keep them. May He deepen His precious work in their souls, and bind them more closely to Himself and one another, and thus prepare them, in the state of their affections, for the appearing of "**the Bright and Morning Star.**"

We must now turn for a few moments to the closing verses of our chapter, in which the Lord speaks to His beloved and honored servant, in tones of deep and touching solemnity, as to his own death, and as to Israel's dark and gloomy future.

"And the Lord said unto Moses, 'Behold, thy days approach that thou must die: call Joshua, and present yourselves in the tabernacle of the congregation, that I may give him a charge.' And Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tabernacle of the congregation. And the Lord appeared in the tabernacle in a pillar of a cloud; and the pillar of the cloud stood over the door of the tabernacle. And the Lord said unto Moses, 'Behold, thou shalt sleep with thy fathers; and this people will rise up and go a whoring after the gods of the strangers of the land, whither they go to be among them, and will forsake Me, and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them; so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?! And I will surely hide My face in that day, for all the evils which they shall have wrought, in that they are turned unto other gods.'"

"Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another god." So says the Spirit of CHRIST in Psalm 16.

Israel has proved, is proving, and shall yet more fully prove the solemn truth of these words. Their history in the past, their present dispersion and desolation, and, beyond all, that “**great tribulation**” through which they have yet to pass, at “**the time of the end,**” - all go to confirm and illustrate the truth that the sure and certain way to multiply our sorrows is, to turn away from the Lord and look to any creature-resource.

This is one of the many and varied practical lessons which we have to gather from the marvelous history of the seed of Abraham. May we learn it effectually. May we learn to cleave to the Lord with purpose of heart, and turn away, with holy decision, from every other object. This, we feel persuaded, is the only path of true happiness and peace. May we ever be found in it.

“Now therefore write ye this song for you, and teach it the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel. For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swore unto their fathers, that floweth with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten and filled themselves and waxen fat; then will they turn unto other gods, and serve them, and provoke Me, and break My covenant. And it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are befallen them, that this song shall testify against them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed; for I know their imaginations which they go about, even now, before I have brought them into the land which I swear.”

How deeply affecting, how peculiarly solemn, is all this!

Instead of Israel being a witness for the Lord before all nations, the song of Moses was to be a witness for the Lord against the children of Israel. They were called to be His witnesses; they were responsible to declare His name and to show forth His praise in that land into which, in His faithfulness and sovereign mercy, He conducted them; but alas! they utterly and shamefully failed, and hence, in view of this sad and most humiliating failure, a song was to be written which, in the first place, as we shall see, sets forth, in most magnificent strains, the glory of God; and secondly, records, in accents of inflexible faithfulness, Israel’s deplorable failure, in every stage of their history.

“Moses therefore wrote this song the same day, and taught it the children of Israel. And he gave Joshua the son of Nun a charge, and said, ‘Be strong, and of a good courage,. for thou shalt bring the children of Israel into the land which I swear unto them; and I will be with thee.”

Joshua was not to be discouraged or faint-hearted because of the predicted unfaithfulness of the people. He was, like his great progenitor, to be strong in faith giving glory to God. He was to move forward with joyful confidence, leaning on the arm and confiding in the word of the Lord, the covenant-God of Israel, in nothing terrified by his adversaries, but resting in the precious, soul-sustaining assurance that, however the seed of Abraham might fail to obey, and, as a consequence, bring down judgment on themselves, yet the God of Abraham would infallibly maintain and make good His promise, and glorify His name in the final restoration and everlasting blessing of His chosen people.

All this comes out with uncommon vividness and power in the song of Moses, and Joshua was called to serve in the faith of it.

He was to fix his eye, not upon Israel's ways, but upon the eternal stability of the divine covenant with Abraham. He was to conduct Israel across the Jordan and plant them in that fair inheritance designed for them in the purpose of God. Had Joshua occupied his mind with Israel, he must have flung down his sword and given up in despair; but no, he had to encourage himself in the Lord his God, and serve in the energy of a faith that endures as seeing Him who is invisible.

Precious, soul-sustaining, God - honoring faith!

May the reader, whatever be his line of life or sphere of action, know, in the profoundest depths of his soul, the moral power of this divine principle. May every beloved child of God and every servant of CHRIST know it. It is the only thing which will enable us to grapple with the difficulties, hindrances, and hostile influences which surround us in the scene through which we are passing, and to finish our course with joy.

“And it came to pass when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, saying, ‘Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee. For I know thy rebellion, and thy stiff neck; behold, while I am yet alive with you this day, ye have been rebellious against the Lord; and how much more after my death? Gather unto me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears, and call heaven and earth to record against them. For I know that after my death ye will utterly corrupt yourselves, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days; because ye will do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your bands.’”

How forcibly we are here reminded of Paul's farewell address to the elders of Ephesus!

“For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

“Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified” (Acts 20:29-32).

Man is the same always and every where. His history is a blotted one from beginning to end. But oh, it is such a relief and solace to the heart to know and remember that God is ever the same, and His Word abides and is **“settled forever in heaven.”** It was hid in the side of the ark of the covenant and there preserved intact, spite of all the grievous sin and folly of the people.

This gives sweet rest to the heart at all times, in the face of human failure, and the wreck and ruin of everything committed to man's hand. "**The Word of our God shall stand forever;**" and while it bears a true and solemn testimony against man and his ways, it also conveys home to the heart the most precious and tranquilizing assurance that God is above all man's sin and folly, that His resources are absolutely inexhaustible, and that ere long His glory shall shine out and fill the whole scene. The Lord be praised for the deep consolation of all this!

~ end of chapter 31 ~

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