

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDY IN THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

PART ONE – INTRODUCTION AND CHAPTERS 1-3

HOW TO POSSESS YOUR POSSESSIONS

Imagine you are Moses. You are now 120 years old but still alert and vigorous. You have been the writer of four of the world's best selling books of all time. You are drawing to the end of forty years of one of the most extraordinary ministries in history in which you have led two million grumbling rebellious people through some of the harshest country on earth, having to prove God's power and faithfulness over and over again, against overwhelming odds. Your time is almost up but what about one last series of messages drawing together all you have been saying and doing, combined into a final book? Could you be bothered? He could and he did! The result was Deuteronomy, a book which is still relevant, exciting and life changing nearly 3,500 years later.

First we should briefly review Moses' previous books. Genesis told his people's early history, relating the story from creation to their ancestors move to Egypt. Exodus described Moses' first 80 years from birth to the deliverance of his people, Israel, out of slavery, and their arrival at Mt Sinai for their meeting with God. There Moses heard from God of His plan for human life and the design of a huge visual aid. The tabernacle was to teach them how to have a working relationship with God. Leviticus was the manual for operating the tabernacle and some examples of how to apply its message in family and community life. Numbers told the story of the next 38 years in which they repeatedly missed the point and learned the consequences of their mistakes, but at the same time of God's boundless forgiveness. Now they were poised on the edge of possessing the land promised to them if only they remained faithful.

In the first five verses of Deuteronomy, Moses sets the scene. They are in the middle of the Sinai desert. The irony is that to travel even in those days from Mt Sinai, (Horeb) to Kadesh Barnea, the logical starting point for taking possession of Canaan, need only have taken 11 days, yet they had wasted 38 years. How many years have we wasted since we first met Christ?

Moses spends the first eleven chapters of the book reviewing the events of their journey so far and the lessons God had taught them which needed to be grasped and practised if they were to take over Canaan. One word dominated his message, the verb 'possess', 'yaresh' in Hebrew, which can also be translated 'inherit'. They were not stealing the land from others but reclaiming what God had given them in the time of Abraham. Hearing about Canaan from others and glimpsing it from the distance was not the same as moving in and making it theirs. As Christians we will inherit the earth if we are gentle,(Matt.5:5) inherit salvation,(Heb.1:14) and eternal life,(Matt.19:29) if we follow Christ wholeheartedly. Because we have been adopted as sons of God we have an inheritance but we need to claim it.(Eph.1:5-18) There is only one way to inherit all God has promised His sons and daughters and that is by faith, and one way above all else in which our inheritance shows, in love.(Eph.1:15)

First Moses recalled how they had received the Ten Commandments and instructions to build the tabernacle. Once they had constructed the tabernacle and seen the Lord move into it so that it could become the focal point of their life as a nation, God said to them it was time to move into the Promised Land.(Num.10) Moses remembered how he had learned to delegate responsibility and train leaders,(Exod.18) and of the high standard of justice and integrity he expected from his judges.

He reminded the people of how they had asked for twelve spies to be sent ahead into Canaan, and of their return with the evidence of what a good place it was, but of the seemingly impossible task of claiming the land because of the giants already there. Only Moses, Caleb and Joshua could foresee how trusting God to deal with the giants would be the answer. When the people had refused to listen, Moses told them to go back into the wilderness. The people changed their minds and tried to fight the enemy, but in their own strength.(Num.13-14) They lost - as we do when we fight the giants in our time and our power.(chapter 1)

Finally after 38 more years of wandering around in the wilderness, the Lord instructed them to move once more towards Canaan. On the way they would have to pass through the territories of Esau, Moab and Ammon, who were all relatives of Israel. They were told to treat them fairly, understanding how they too had been given land to possess by God. They too had had to overcome giants to claim their territories. We are to treat with respect those who have sought God however imperfectly, walking a different path from us. By contrast when they asked permission to pass through the territory of Sihon, king of Heshbon, he refused and they had a battle on their hands, which God won. We too will sometimes face outright opposition to our faith and will have to let God fight for us.(chapter 2)

Og, the king of Bashan, also opposed their journey. He was the giant of all giants whose bed was four metres long. God dealt with him as He will defeat with the biggest 'giants' in our lives. The territories of Sihon and Og were the first instalments of the Promised Land and were given to 2 ½ tribes of Israel with the condition that they were first to join with their brethren in the battle for the rest of Canaan before they settled in. Exploring and possessing all we have in Christ is to be shared experience, not just a private one.(chapter 3)

Having had a taste of what God would do in their defeat of Sihon and Og, two powerful kings east of the River Jordan, Canaan was still only a distant dream. How could they move in to make it a reality? 'Possess' is a command repeated 44 times in Deuteronomy, equal to its use in the whole of the rest of the Old Testament. Look for 'possess' and its noun 'possession' as you read through Moses' words. Every time you find these words ask yourself the questions, 'What?' 'How?' 'Have I?' and 'Will I?'

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What were the boundaries of Israel's promised possession? Did they ever occupy this much territory at any time in their history? What was God teaching them and us?

2. What organisational structure was needed among them if they were as a community to possess their land? What qualities were needed for effective leadership? How were these leaders to deal with conflict?

3. As they had prepared to possess Canaan 38 years earlier what strategy had they adopted? How can our Christian testimony achieve the same purpose? Why did this plan not work out? How do people still hold back from enjoying Christ's best today? What factor have they overlooked?

4. How were Joshua and Caleb different from the other ten spies? If we do not overcome obstacles to proving Christ, where will we spend our lives? What mistake do we also make when we see our lives going nowhere?(chapter 1)

5. What three nations' territories were Israel to pass through on their way to Canaan? How were they to treat these neighbours and why was this different from their treatment of the Canaanites? What warning might this be giving us as we establish our Christian lives? Why does Moses mention that these nations too had faced giants under different names? What giants do we face today?(chapter 2)

6. How did the Israelites succeed against Sihon and Og? How can we also have success against great opposition?(Eph.6:10-17; Col.1:29) Why do not the two and a half tribes who now have their possession just settle down to enjoy it? What does their continuing involvement in the claiming of Canaan show us? What mistake had Moses made which caused him to miss out on entering Canaan?(Num.20:9-13) Why was God so firm with him in saying no to his final plea? What can we learn from this story?(chapter 3)