

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDY IN THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

PART SIX – CHAPTERS 20-24 – PROTECTING OUR POSSESSIONS

To hold on to their possessions in the Promised Land, the Israelites would have to be prepared to fight battles. Their enemies would not leave them in peace for long. To hold on to all we have in Christ we will have battles. The Devil and his allies, the world and the flesh will always be looking for opportunity to defeat us with temptation. Even Jesus was tempted.(Lk.4:1-12) Once He was victorious the Devil would leave Him, but only until an opportune time.(Lk.4:13)

When God's people faced a new battle they would realise how their enemies were apparently superior in numbers and fire-power. The priest would be responsible to remind them of the lesson they had been repeatedly learning since Numbers 13, that the Lord is bigger than the biggest giants. He would do the fighting. As such times there were to be some exemptions from military service – those who had just built a house, planted a vineyard or become engaged to a future wife. The battles were to be led by those whose lives were established who had already proved the Lord at home, at work and in marriage. These situations are the scene for our first challenges in life. There was also exemption for those who were fearful, whose low morale might undermine the rest of the army. This principle was wisely applied by Gideon in Judges 7:3 with exciting results. The priest under the guidance of God would also appoint the army leaders. We too need God's wisdom not to throw those not yet strong in their faith into challenging Christian service before they are ready.(I Tim.3:6)

When they faced enemies from outside the Promised Land they were always to offer them mercy if they were prepared to surrender to God and His people. They were to be 'a light to the nations' with the door of forgiveness always open to those who would join them. Ruth the Moabitess would be an example.(Ruth 1:4) On the other hand the people already in Canaan had been given notice by God to quit and hand back the land they had stolen to Abraham's descendants. Instead of doing so they had trusted other gods who would be their means of destroying Israel if they were not eliminated. Even then God would always welcome those like Rahab from Jericho,(Josh.6:17) Uriah the Hittite,(II Sam.33:29) and the Canaanite woman with the demon possessed daughter,(Matt.15:22) who recognized that they were not God's children but wanted to be. The chapter concludes with some wise environmental advice.(chapter 20)

The next chapter returns to the justice system. Moses had already given instructions about the importance of distinguishing accidental manslaughter from murder. But what if there was a body but no one had witnessed the killing? The assumption was that someone in the nearest city was responsible. Someone was guilty but it was important that the whole city were not blamed so that the dead man's relatives did not randomly slaughter any they suspected. The leaders were to offer a sacrifice on behalf of their city then the whole population was to be presumed innocent until proved guilty. The cross of Christ and His forgiveness is the only way to deal with our suspicions about the guilt of others.

Right from creation the Lord had made it clear that His plan was for one man to marry one woman for life. Their oneness was to be spiritual, of the soul, as well as physical.(Gen.2:24) At the same time God recognized that people would make mistakes. If a soldier married a woman from his defeated enemy he was to treat her fairly. If a man married a second wife whom he loved more than the first, he was to treat their children equally. Jacob,(Gen.37:3)and Elkanah, the father of Samuel,(I Sam.1:1-5) were examples of this problem and the results of getting it wrong. Rebellion against parents was totally unacceptable to God as would be our rebellion against our heavenly Father. A corpse hanging on a tree was not to stay there all night, foreshadowing the curse on Jesus,(Gal.3:13) when He hung for us on the cross.(chapter 21)

Loving your neighbour was to be practical and extend to his lost animals. Cross dressing was the ultimate hypocrisy when we pretend to be what we are not. Environmental concern was to include birds with their young. Occupational safety and health were acknowledged in the responsibility to protect people falling off a flat roof. Seeds, work animals and fabrics were not to be mixed as a reminder that God wants us to be pure.(Matt.5:8) Tassels on clothes were to be reminders like rosaries of the teaching of God. As people walked for many hours they could use them for meditating on God's word.

Marriage was to be a unique relationship with only one partner before and after the wedding. Rape and seduction were to be clearly distinguished and dealt with accordingly. Incest was forbidden. To us these absolute standards seem unrealistic or harsh. Remember that God wants only the best for us, but that His forgiveness makes us clean when we fail.(chapter 22)

The eunuch or the illegitimate child were not to blame for their condition but God used them to make clear how His plan was for perfection in every sense. The Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites and Egyptians had in various ways contributed to the suffering of God's people. Their descendants would not be ready to know the Lord for a number of generations. Personal hygiene was another way of illustrating what it means to honour God who wants to make us clean on the inside also. Prostitution was loathsome. Charging interest on your

believing brother's debt was another kind of uncleanness in a society. Breaking your word to God or each other was dirty behaviour. Grapes and grain could be gathered for personal food by the needy. All these practices illustrated what loving your neighbour meant in practice.(chapter 23)

Grounds for divorce were recognized if there was 'indecent' which is interpreted by Jesus as 'unchastity', or 'unfaithfulness'.(Matt.5:33; 19:9) Notice that the matter was not decided by priests or a court. Remarriage to the first husband after a second marriage was forbidden. Exemption from military service for a year after marriage was again emphasized. Vital household equipment was not to be taken as security for debt. Violent kidnapping was treated like murder. Leprosy was catching, as sin is catching, so cross infection was to be avoided. The last part of this chapter deals further with debt, poverty, treatment of low paid workers and food for the hungry. Applying these principles in today's world would be Christian love in action.(chapter 24)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What does this chapter teach us about overcoming the Devil's attacks on us? What mistakes do we make in pushing young Christians too quickly into leadership?(chapter 20)
2. How does this chapter establish the legal principle of presuming innocence until proved guilty? Why does favouritism happen in families and why is it so damaging?(chapter 21)
3. Why is it important that the different issues of community life which are dealt with here should first be a matter of rules? How does the love of God build on this beginning?(chapter 22)
4. What further examples of unloving behaviour are described? Why are such varied topics grouped together here?(chapter 23)
5. How does Jesus build on this teaching about divorce? Is it acceptable to God? How would these laws applied in the present change the condition of the poor?(chapter 24)