

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDY IN THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

PART EIGHT – CHAPTERS 31-34 – OUR POSSESSION IS IN HEAVEN!

Moses had delivered his message. He was 120 years old. It was time for him to go, not to the Promised Land on earth but to begin enjoying all his possessions in Christ in heaven. He himself had been refused the privilege of entering the land of Canaan because of the occasion in Numbers 20 when he had mis-taught the people by hitting the rock twice to obtain water when all he had to do was to speak to the rock. Jesus would be struck only once on the cross for us so that the water of the Holy Spirit would always flow freely in our lives. The crucifixion was never to be repeated. All we now have to do to experience His life in us is to speak to Him in prayer. The Lord wanted to make this principle crystal clear. The big question was how would the people enjoy their possessions without Moses to remind them?

First they had to grasp the secret of being ‘strong and courageous’ in the face of huge opposition. The Lord would go ahead of them. We so often picture Him straggling behind, and being told by us to hurry up and help only when there is a new problem. What He had done before, He would always be capable and willing to do. He will never ‘fail or forsake you’. (Heb.13:5) Secondly they needed faithful leadership which would come in the first place from Joshua who had learned through all these years by being a ‘servant of the servant of God’. Exactly the same instructions were given to Joshua as to the whole nation. Leaders do not have anything extra that is not also available to those who follow. Thirdly the book Moses had just written was to be read in its entirety to all the people, men, women, children and even the aliens. This was to be done every seven years on the day when all debts were cancelled – just in case they conveniently forgot that instruction! Generation after generation needed to be taught the simple secret of possessing all that was theirs in Christ. They still do.

The handover of responsibility from Moses to Joshua took place in the presence of God. Joshua was warned right from the start of the challenge he faced. People would turn to other gods and suffer the consequences. The challenge was to know how to keep them on track. One of the ways would be through spiritual songs which captured the heart of the good news and kept them reminded. (Col.3:16) Moses wrote the song. The people learned it. The book of the Law was entrusted to the spiritual leaders and kept in the Holy of Holies which was the meeting place between the high priest and God. The Lord would guard His word and teach it to all who would listen. The whole leadership of Israel were responsible to be reminded and to remind. (chapter 31)

The song of Moses was not a happy song to clap to and celebrate with! After a poetic opening which pictured God's word as gentle rain or refreshing dew, Moses launched into a solemn warning of the terrible consequence of corruption, of turning to other gods, or forgetting how good God had been to them. The Lord is pictured throughout the song as 'the Rock'. He had given them water and victory over the Amalekites,(Exod.17) met them at Mt Sinai,(Exod.19) been a hiding place for Moses,(Exod.33) and again a source of water.(Num.20) Paul confirms the identity of the Rock in I Cor.10:4. The Rock was Christ. He is absolutely faithful and perfect.(v.4) He is our Saviour.(v.15) He created us and caused us to be born again.(v.18) He will give us victory over our enemies and never give up on us.(v.30,31) He is the Rock on which the church of Jesus Christ is built.(Matt.16:18; I Cor.3:11)

Other pictures were used to describe the God who loved them. He was their Father to whom they owed everything.(v.6) Why then would they want to throw all He had given them away? He was like an eagle who hovered over them and protected them.(v.11) Why would they desert Him? When God withdrew from among them so that they suffered all kinds of misfortune they would still go their own way. But when they finally hit rock bottom and cried out in desperation the Lord would be there for them, waiting to step in and deal with those who oppressed them.

After teaching the song to the people, Moses, with Joshua beside him, urged the Israelites one last time to accept his message, practise it and pass it on to their children as the secret of possessing their possessions. Now the Lord instructed Moses to climb Mount Nebo, east of Jericho across the River Jordan one last time to take a good look at the land he had promised to his people but would never enter himself.(chapter 32)

The song of Moses was a tough warning about the serious consequences of forgetting the Rock, the Lord on whom their lives were to be based. Now Moses was given some words of encouragement to individual tribes, each of which had its own character, problems and potential. For all of them the message was first of God's love, His Law and His Kingship. The first private message was to Reuben urging him to enjoy life and to multiply. The second was to Judah who was a fighter and would need all of God's help. The third was to Levi urging him to exercise his spiritual responsibility faithfully. Fourthly Benjamin needed to know that his security was in the love of God. The fifth was Joseph who had been so fruitful that he had become two tribes Ephraim and Manasseh so he correspondingly had much more land and power than the other tribes. Sixthly Zebulun was urged to know the joy of the Lord. Seventhly Issachar was reminded about sacrifice, the starting point for all blessing. Number eight was Gad who was told how growth and God's justice must go together. Dan, number nine, was compared to a baby lion. Naphtali was number ten who was encouraged to take his possession and be satisfied. Asher, number eleven, would be well cared for by his brothers and so be able to live a leisurely life. Mysteriously there was no

mention of Simeon. Why? With his brother Levi he had caused a huge problem to Jacob.(Gen.34) In Gen.49 when Jacob had a special message for each son, Simeon was warned his descendants would be scattered. The song of blessing ended with a reminder to every tribe that when God was their King they were secure and would be victorious.(chapter 33)

At last Moses was allowed an overview of the Promised Land he had been telling people about for 40 years. To receive it he had to climb a mountain, no mean feat at 120. From there he could see from the north of Israel to the far south, and across to the Mediterranean Sea. He needed the exceptional vigour and vision God had given him. Once more he was reminded that he could see but not enter. The Lord has something so much better even than this rich and beautiful land. He was going to heaven. There he died and the Lord, presumably Jesus, buried him in a secret grave so that no pilgrims could go to worship the one who only pointed them to God Himself. For thirty days his people mourned him. His witness and leadership had been superb and unique. And Joshua, filled with the same Spirit who had equipped Moses, took over.(chapter 34)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What principles of leadership did Moses seek to pass to Joshua? How are these same ideas repeated in the New Testament?(I Tim.3:1-13) Why do we stray away?(chapter 31)
2. What was the theme of the song of Moses? How does it tell both good news and bad news? How does it illustrate the place of music in Christian ministry?(chapter 32)
3. How were Moses' individual messages to the tribes similar to the ones Jacob had given in Gen.49 and how were they different? Why might this have been?(chapter 33)
4. What was so remarkable about the way Moses' life ended? How can we also expect to finish well?(II Tim.4:6-8) Who else in the Old Testament finished well?(chapter 34)

ADDITIONS TO PART ONE

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)