

### DEUTERONOMY

#### Lesson 22 - Chapters 16 and 17

We've spent the last two lessons in Deuteronomy 16 looking very carefully at some esoteric but clearly important aspects of the Feasts of the Lord, especially the ones that involved the requirement of pilgrimage to the Tabernacle/Temple. Since it is a long and complex subject we won't review it today; I'll just advise you to refer to those last two lessons if you have questions.

But we also studied the matter of the time that Yeshua spent in that hewn rock tomb and on the timeline the detailed when He died and was resurrected. As expected I received quite a few questions after class and in the following days and (interestingly) most of them centered around your concerns of why it is that some of our most well-known and beloved Pastors and Bible teachers seem to so easily just talk around the issue of the firmly entrenched Church position that Yeshua died on Friday, and arose on Sunday obviously resulting in His spending only 2 nights in the tomb. Yet I maintain that the Scriptures plainly prophesy this event by saying that He'll spend 3 days and **3 nights** in the tomb.

I'm not going to argue this Good Friday tradition or order of events from a doctrinal viewpoint. What I'd rather do is simply point out what the Holy Scriptures actually say, and what historical documents from that same era say, and show you how they completely agree and I think that's what we did in our previous lesson. One good question that did seem to come up though was, "where does it literally say in the Bible that Jesus was 3 days and 3 nights in the tomb?"

Let's just address that head-on and then we'll finish up chapter 16.

First, the prophecy was established when the prophet Jonah was sent to Nineveh by the Lord but he balked because he didn't think these foreign people worthy of receiving God's Word. The result was that Jonah was temporarily swallowed by a giant fish. <sup>RSV</sup> **Jonah 1:17 *And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.***

It doesn't matter which of the hundreds of Bible translations one chooses; the 3 days and **3 nights** schedule is established and it fully agrees with the original Hebrew and the rabbinical commentary on the matter.

Second; where does the Bible say that this event concerning Jonah was ACTUALLY prophetic of Jesus' time in the grave? Or was this merely an assumption that could be reasonably challenged?

<sup>RSV</sup> **Matthew 12:38** *Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."<sup>39</sup> But he (Yeshua) answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.<sup>40</sup> For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."*

3 days and 3 nights are required to fulfill **not** some vague prophecy but Jesus' exact words of what was about to happen. The Good Friday scenario cannot be correct. Yeshua could not have died on Friday during the daytime, spent Friday nighttime in the tomb, then Saturday daytime and Saturday nighttime still in the tomb, and then arise Sunday morning because try as anyone might (and there have been the silliest attempts to do so) Friday night and Saturday night are but 2 nights and Yeshua says He'd be in the "heart of the earth" for 3 nights. The only other possibility is that the event Jesus spoke about (of laying 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth) was NOT about his death and lying in the tomb. But there is simply no other recorded event prophesied, known, or carried out by Messiah that fulfills this scenario; as far as anything revealed by God to man it must be referring to His time in that tomb.

It is this misguided mentality of FIRST establishing a doctrine in order to fulfill some kind of agenda, and then twisting and contorting the Scriptures to try and make it fit, that has often left the Church confused and afraid at times to actually explore the Bible for fear of what we might find out. What Christian (especially of the Evangelical persuasion) doesn't glowing speak of taking the Bible literally only to easily read-around or discard that which doesn't fit our traditions? Let me assure you who are new to Torah Class: what you will find is that everything you ever counted on in Christ is fully established and validated in the Torah. The result of studying Torah is that doubts will diminish and faith will increase. The Word of God (ALL, not just some of it) is alive and well, accurate and reliable, and can be understood by us all if we'll just take the time to learn it and open ourselves to the Holy Spirit as our guide and teacher.

Today we'll continue with verse 18 of Deuteronomy chapter 16 when the subject matter takes a significant shift away from God-ordained worship practices and the Biblical Feasts, and moves into the Lord's expectations of Israel's civil and religious authorities. In other words what is about to come concerns every level of human government and it matters not whether it is on a civil level or on a religious level. Essentially the idea is that in God's economy there is

no such thing as a separation or compartmentalization of the spiritual from the government. These laws apply to the religious leaders and to the government leaders. In Israel there was really no dividing line between the two, anyway; civil and religious law were thoroughly entwined.

Let's read Deuteronomy 16 from verse 18 to the end of the chapter.

### RE-READ DEUTERONOMY 16:18 – end

The subject of human government will continue well into chapter 21 and we find that there are 4 basic types of human authorities discussed: kings, priests, judges, and prophets. There really isn't a good definition recorded in the Torah of what each of these offices and titles entails, it must have been well understood and common knowledge among all the Middle Eastern cultures of that era. What we'll find as a general rule is that it was not intended by God that these governmental authorities were to represent elite social classes (above the normal working person on the socio-economic scale), nor was it envisioned that these government officials lord it over the citizens in an arrogant manner. Rather what we'll study is meant to set boundaries and limitations on how each of these 4 offices (king, priest, judge, prophet) are to operate, and to demonstrate that they are not above the scrutiny of the general public.

It is interesting that this section begins by establishing the appointment of offices called judges and officials because after only a couple of verses our attention is turned towards a prohibition against Israel setting up sacred poles and pillars. Undoubtedly that is because throughout the Middle Eastern cultures of that day it was the authorized government and religious officials (not usually the general public) who were the one to put up sacred poles and pillars (although at times regular citizens did do that). Therefore Israel's government and religious officials were NOT to mimic the general practices of Israel's pagan neighbors that on the surface seemed so ordinary and usual.

The first words of verse 18 are most literally recorded as, "you shall appoint for **yourselves**....." judges. I point this out because the first question that any Israelite would have asked is, "who is it that will appoint these judges?" And the answer is that the people do. Since tribal systems employ elders as the representatives of the people (elders were leaders who, while beholden to their tribe, were NOT necessarily beholden to the tribal chief), it was actually these elders who were supposed to appoint the judges.

The Hebrew word for judge is **shofet**. And shortly after Israel conquered Canaan we enter the 250 -300 year era of the Judges who ruled, led, and delivered Israel from foreign oppression.

We have an entire book of the Bible (one of the most fascinating books in the Bible, by the way) that addresses this period and it is appropriately called the book of Judges (the **sepher of the Shofetim**). Yet it is here in Deuteronomy where the office of **shofet** is actually established. Now it's not that a system of authority figures who sat in judgment of every day civil matters was new for Israel; we read in Exodus that at the encouragement of Moses' father-in-law Yitro, Moses set up a legal system whereby some men of integrity (elders) were chosen to become a kind of lower court to hear typical and mundane matters of the people; and if the matter proved too difficult or serious in nature only then would Moses and the High Priest Aaron get involved. The difference is that under the system they were using out in the Wilderness, legal matters were not handled tribe-by-tribe; that is, if a person belonged to the tribe of Judah it was not just members of the tribe of Judah to which he answered. Rather it was via a centralized system that Moses set up that a council of elders consisting of men from various tribes who sat in judgment of all.

Now however, on the mountains of Moab just before entering into the Promised Land, which would change. Israel while out in the Wilderness was a united nation operating under one leader, Moses. As they went into Canaan to conquer it the same tightly centralized organizational format most suited for the military operation they were carrying out would remain, only now Joshua was the ultimate authority. But almost immediately following Joshua the central government weakened and essentially dissolved. So these ordinances in Deuteronomy about how the Israeli government would operate really only take effect after the Land of Canaan had been secured, when the military-style administration and structure was no longer needed, and after each of the 12 tribes had established a foothold in the district of land allotted to each of them. Because this envisioned the time when each tribe would be more autonomous, therefore each tribe would have its own set of judges and officials. The key is that while Israel would soon become a more decentralized system of government in Canaan, the Lord still fully expected that each tribe operate under the same common set of principles: the Law, the Torah.

And Torah principle number one is stated at the end of verse 18: these judges and officials are to govern with righteous judgment; in Hebrew, "**mishpat tzadek**". Verse 19 explains the fundamentals of "righteous judgment" in God's eyes; 1) the judgment must be fair, 2) there must be no favoritism; and 3) there shall not be the taking of bribes from one party or the other in a dispute because that is liable to tilt the outcome UNJUSTLY in the favor of the one who gave the gift. Now I have a bit of a bone to pick with the translation used in verse 20 by the CJB and all but a small handful of other Bible translations. Verse 20 typically says "justice and only justice you must pursue..." Certainly this meaning is not outside of what God's intent is within His justice system. However in Hebrew the words actually used are, "**tzadek** and only **tzadek** you must pursue..." **Tzadek** means righteousness, not justice. So the admonition to the judges more accurately reads "righteousness and only righteousness you must pursue..." The significance is that righteousness is the BASIS for God's justice system and therefore righteousness is the goal for which the judging of every case should aim. And since righteousness can ONLY come from God, then so it is that true justice can only come from God. The statement of verse 20, therefore, is not some fuzzy or emotionally charged order that

the magistrates are to judge fairly; rather it is a commandment to institute the **Lord's system** of righteousness and not some manmade judicial philosophy that will vary according to circumstances and to who is currently in charge. And it is that system of **mishpat tzadek**, righteous justice, that the Law establishes and the Law must be scrupulously followed at all times within Israel when deciding legal matters.

In addition to administering God's justice system faithfully as a logical and proper response for the leaders of God's people, there is a blessing that comes from doing so: it is that Israel may thrive and occupy the land that God is giving to them. This is not the first nor the last time that we will see Moses tell the people that following Yehoveh's commands and ordinances has a purpose beyond simple mechanical obedience; living under righteous justice is indispensable if they expect to hang on to the land after they conquer it, and if they expect the land to produce in abundance.

Now comes 3 completely unacceptable religious practices that it is the responsibility of the people to avoid, and the responsibility of the government officials to ruthlessly stamp out. In verse 21 the first is that Israel is not to set up a sacred post or any kind of pole next to the altar of God Almighty. In Hebrew it says they are not to set up an "Asherah". The definition of an Asherah is worth spending a few moments with; an Asherah simply means any kind of wooden pole, tree, or tree-like object that is dedicated to a god. It's not that the pagans looked upon these poles AS gods or goddesses; it's that they were but god-symbols that honored certain gods. The Canaanites had long ago begun erecting two different kinds of objects to honor their two primary gods: Ba'al and Ashtoreth.

Therefore at some point, long before Israel began it's conquest of Canaan, a fir tree or a wooden pole used for a religious purpose in the Land of Canaan became almost exclusively associated with the Canaanite goddess of fertility, Ashtoreth.

That is why in the next verse the matter of the object used by the Canaanites to honor their chief god, Ba'al, was also prohibited. That object is a stone pillar, sometimes translated as "standing stone". So in Canaan a stone pillar was the common way of denoting an altar or shrine built in honor of the male god Ba'al, and a tree or wooden post was planted next to an altar or shrine built in honor of the female goddess Ashtoreth. BTW: in Canaanite god mythology, Ashtoreth was Baal's wife.

Naturally the Lord says don't you DARE use a tree or pole or standing stone next to MY altar as a means to dedicate that altar to Me, Yehoveh. God doesn't want something that is obviously symbolic of the Canaanites' gods to simply be reused and then rededicated to Him. And such was a usual practice when one society conquered another society's sacred places. That is why we'll see many laws against doing certain things (like cooking a goat kid in it's mother's milk) in the Torah that on the surface don't seem to be inherently bad; but they are

outlawed because they were Canaanite worship practices and God didn't want those injected into worship of Him.

Now if you're paying attention some may be asking right about now why it is that if stone pillars, standing stones, are emphatically prohibited by the Lord that we find Jacob erecting one to El Shaddai as he is on his journey from Canaan to Mesopotamia some 5 centuries earlier; or we have Abraham setting up an altar to El Shaddai under the Tamarisk tree at Beer-Sheva a hundred years before that. In fact Moses set up 12 of these stones at Mt. Sinai and Joshua would set up an enormous standing stone at Shechem (and all of these to honor Yehoveh and not a hint that Yehoveh objected to it).

While I cannot give you a completely satisfactory answer to this (because I don't know why, for sure, that the Lord didn't come down hard on this practice) I'm confident it has to do with an understanding that is woven into the fabric of the Torah and the Bible in general. It is that NO object or living creature is of itself unclean or evil. Rather the issue is what an object or creature is used for and to whom it is meant to identify, along with God's declaration concerning the holy or unclean status He ascribes to that object or living creature. Now that doesn't mean that Israel had the legitimate option to take that which God prohibits and make it permissible simply because (to their minds) they felt that they were doing a better or more loving thing (and the same goes for us).

So an uncut stone stood up on its edge is not inherently evil. A tree or a pole that has been formed from a tree trunk and sunk into the ground is not inherently wicked. But when these things are used as a means to attempt to honor the Lord God (at least this is so since the time of Moses and the giving of the Law) the Lord has prohibited it because it can easily become confused with well known pagan worship practices. The intent of the worshipper of God in doing these things may not be to mix paganism with worship of Yehoveh; but the effect is that we have disobeyed the commandments of the Father and we have put our thoughts ahead of His because He has already firmly said, "don't do it". And second, doing such things can cause confusion among those we are trying to teach within the body of Believers, and misunderstanding among those we are trying to REACH who are outside the community of God. The reality is that the ability for man to distinguish on our own between the legitimate and the idolatrous can be just too difficult. Therefore as we search for technicalities, and loopholes, and exceptions and ways to inject what we are convinced comes from the purer state of our hearts, into matters that the Law of the Lord often says we're are simply to avoid, we are going to fail far more often than we succeed in upholding our righteousness that is only a gift of grace.

Let's move on to Deuteronomy chapter 17.

### READ DEUTERONOMY CHAPTER 17:1 - 13

The very first instruction given in this chapter is that only unblemished animals are to be offered to Yehoveh. To offer anything else is to show the Lord our contempt. In fact God calls such a thing “abhorrent” to Him (very strong language). Offering the Lord anything but a perfect sacrifice is wrong; He demands our best. When we know that is what He expects and we do otherwise, it is an attempt to deceive. In Acts 5 is the story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira who brought a gift of offering that on the surface seemed proper and acceptable; but they held some back (they deceived) and that decision proved to be fatal.

The most fundamental commandment of the Mosaic Covenant is that Israel shall worship no other gods. And so verse 2 explains what it is that governmental officials are to do with someone who is suspected of idolatry. And while it might seem obvious to us today there are some basics as to just what constitutes “worshipping other gods” that are set down to guide the Judges who will be deciding on the fate of the accused. Let me repeat that so that we can understand what is going on here: most of what we’ll find in chapters 17 through 21 are guidelines set down for the various magistrates and officials who are being given the responsibility to adjudicate cases brought before them on any number of possible violations of the Law. The Lord expects these guidelines for the administration of His righteous justice to be followed in EVERY territory and settlement that Israel establishes (as it says in the first few words of verse 2).

The first thing we notice is that this edict applies to men and women; the next is that to worship other gods is a direct affront to Yehoveh and it violates the covenant He has made with Israel. Now it is interesting that in verse 3 the Lord makes it clear that to send worship towards the sun, the moon, and the stars is something that He has NEVER commanded. This statement is designed to refute the idea that the heavenly bodies WERE made to be worshipped and that in earlier times the Lord commanded that such a thing was permissible. It is designed to deny what others have said, namely that it IS OK to do this. The idea here is that, indeed, the luminaries of the sky ARE classified as some of those “other gods” and they are a typical example of the kinds of things that wind up being worshipped by humans, but should not be.

Let’s be clear: the Lord God is aware that there are “no other gods”. He knows that Ba’al and Ashtoreth and Marduk and Zeus and Allah and all the rest are but ridiculous names for figments of men’s fertile imaginations. But men have always thought otherwise. God is quite confident that the planets and stars and moons that He created are just that: created things (balls of rocks or gases) that have no souls and no divine powers. But men often think otherwise. I tell you this (something that everyone listening to me already fully understands) because even though “no other gods” exist in any kind of physical or spiritual form, they do exist within the evil inclinations of humans. So when your Pastors and Rabbis remind you that

Messiah and the Apostles warn that money, wealth, power, your job, your status in society or anything that we put tremendous hope or stock in can be rather easily and unconsciously elevated to a position of “other gods”, this is not allegory. This is not divine hyperbole meant to be taken with a grain of salt. Money is no more inherently a god than the moon, or a standing stone, or a carved image. But neither is money any different in its ability to corrupt and become elevated to a position of supreme importance than the moon, or a standing stone, or a carved image. It’s all one big ball of wax and so we can all be tempted to commit idolatry with any of those things and pretend that this actually a godly thing. Be very leery of the latest avenue of apostasy and idolatry within God’s church: the Prosperity Doctrine.

After defining what “worshipping other gods” amounts to, verse 4 begins an explanation of exactly what the procedure of the judges and officials should be when confronting someone accused of this serious act of rebellion. And it is that as soon as the local officials are informed of a possible violation of God’s Law a thorough investigation must be initiated. And if it turns out that the accused has indeed “worshipped other gods” then (whether male or female) that person is to be publicly executed by means of stoning.

The words of this judicial procedure are even more exacting than it might seem because when it says, “and it is told to you or you hear about” this crime, it means that whether a judge hears about this possible violation by a direct report from a responsible person or it is simply a rumor floating around, there is to be an investigation. Please note: this is NOT the case with all possible violations of the Law. It is that the commission of idolatry is so serious that even the rumor of it occurring within Israel must be immediately investigated. However since the ONLY possible punishment for idolatry is death, then at least two (and ideally, more) witnesses must step forward and testify. Let’s be clear: witnesses in almost all cases were also the accusers. A witness isn’t like what we see today whereby a person might testify as to DNA evidence, or the make of a car, or the medical nature of certain injuries. Witnesses in the Bible era were what we today call “eye witnesses”; it was those who claimed to have been present when the crime was committed and actually saw it happen.

But a witness in Bible times had an even greater duty; a witness was also an executioner in a capital case. As verse 7 says, those who are the witnesses and whose claims will cause the death of the accused must be the first to throw the stones at the criminal; and then the remainder of the community are required to join in.

There is some excellent psychology behind this protocol. First, a witness who gives untruthful testimony in a capital case that leads to the execution of an innocent person now has blood on his head. What that means is that he is now a murderer and is subject to execution himself. And just as anyone who is guilty of “blood” in the OT, He is permanently cut-off from God. This means both physical and spiritual death. Therefore there was a safeguard in place meant to discourage rash or intentionally false testimony; and by requiring several witnesses then testimony could be verified.



Then after accusers/witnesses began the execution process (by throwing the first stones) the entire community is to join in and finish the job. Can you imagine what an impression was made on everyone who picked up a stone and helped to kill that criminal? It was bloody and graphic and awful. It wasn't sanitary and out of public view like it is today. It didn't have a goal of being "painless" for the perpetrator NOR painless for the community. God doesn't enjoy the death of even the wicked and neither should His people. But by the entire community participating in such a thing as execution no one could say they didn't know about it nor would they not have full realization of just how terrible a thing an execution is and how full of consequences sin can be.

In the end, though, this was also about the entire community affirming God's justice system. It was an entire community acknowledging that highhanded evil had been committed (first and foremost against Yehoveh) and it was THEIR job to purge this wickedness from the society. This is the job of human government.

Just as in the Wilderness when it was the job of a board of elders to decide everyday cases, and if it was very serious or beyond their ability to decide it they referred the matter upward to Moses, so it will be once Israel settles in the Promised Land.

Beginning in verse 8 government officials are told to establish a "higher court" where matters too difficult for the local courts are to be decided. Let me be explicit: this was NOT a court of appeals. This was not a situation whereby a lower court made a ruling and the accused sought it to be overturned. This was a matter of a case more difficult or serious than the lower court was capable of handling or the elders simply couldn't agree on a verdict. There was no appeals system in the Law. If the lower court decided the matter, the result stood and that was the end of it.

The instruction that the case is to be brought "to a place the Lord your God has chosen" means that it is being brought to a central tribunal. The lower courts (once Israel was established in the Land) were where matters were tried by the tribe to which one belonged. Each of the 12 tribes had its own territory and therefore its own lower courts. But if the lower court judges could not agree upon the case then it went to the higher court that usually consisted of Levite priests. The priests were considered to be more sophisticated in their understanding of the Law and therefore the most qualified to decide tougher cases. Further the priesthood was in authority over ALL Israel so a panel of priests had the duty to decide cases brought to them from any of the 12 Hebrew tribes.

The "place where the Lord your God chooses" was NOT necessarily the location of the Tabernacle; rather it was any of the 48 Levitical cities scattered throughout the Holy Lands, and undoubtedly it was the closest one to where the lower court resided that was used in any

particular matter.

Verse 10 makes it clear that whatever the board of Levitical Priests decides their decision is final and it carries authority over ANY of the 12 tribes. Therefore the punishment (if there is one) is to be carried out immediately and fully and without recourse. The instructions go so far as to say that if the local authorities (meaning the local tribal leaders) refuse to act in accordance with the ruling of the higher court then that tribal official (or group of officials) shall be executed.

There were practical reasons for this threat to be added. I have taught you before about some of the nuances of the tribal system of societal organization. And the bottom line is that loyalty to the tribe is everything. The goal of every tribe is to be the most dominant over all the other tribes. The idea of several tribal chiefs or princes giving their personal loyalty or releasing some of their personal power to a central authority ran against the grain. Out in the Wilderness Moses was constantly dealing with this reality and therefore he was in a never-ending battle with the 12 tribal chiefs of Israel to try and maintain some kind of national unity. But in their journey from Egypt it was understood by most Israelites that their survival depended on mutual co-operation of the tribes. Once they had settled inside their own land allotments however, the perceived need for national unity and mutual protection diminished and so each tribal leader became the supreme authority over those who lived in his territory.

So we've examined one of the 4 basic types of human authority that God has authorized for Israel (Judges), and now verse 14 begins to establish the next: a King. This surprises a lot of people because most folks who know their Bibles think about when Samuel appointed King Saul and the generally negative attitude of the narrative about this crowning of the first King of Israel. Yet here we have Yehoveh anticipating the day that Israel will have a king and so lists the boundaries and rules that Israel's Kings must operate under.

It is informational that this section is the ONLY place in the Torah that brings up the subject of the possibility of there being a King over Israel. And the tone is one of such an occurrence being an eventual concession to the wishes of the people, not as something the Lord ideally wants for Israel. And therefore there are restrictions: first is that the King must be someone that Yehoveh chooses (though it does not indicate how this choice would be communicated), and second that this King MUST be an Israelite and never a foreigner.

Let me comment that this matter of a King being agreed to by the Lord is prophetic; it speaks of a time (around 300 years after Moses) when this will happen, but it was certainly was not imminent. Some minimalist Bible scholars have argued that this mention of a King means that Deuteronomy (or at least this section of Deuteronomy) wasn't even written until after the Babylonian exile because by then Israel had had some pretty bad experiences with kings and so wanted to lay down some rules to control these tyrants. There is no reason to read such a

late date into these passages; the entire known world had kings during Moses' era, and Canaan was home to dozens (probably scores) of kings. What a king did, how he came into power, how he ruled and more was well established since time immemorial and for a people NOT to have a king over them was almost unthinkable. Therefore it was but human nature that Israel (despite God's offer to be both their God and King) would eventually demand a **VISIBLE** human monarch to reign over them just as their neighbors had.

When we meet again, we'll examine the limitations that the Lord has decreed for the future kings of Israel.