

DEUTERONOMY

Lesson 37 - Chapter 27

Last time we met we were part way into a new section of Deuteronomy that covers from chapters 26 – 30; and what makes this section substantially different than the previous 14 chapters is that the nature of the sermon being given by Moses changes. Chapters 12 – 26 recited the bulk of the Law that had been given to Israel almost 40 years earlier at Mt. Sinai. Further it was now being done more in sermon style as Moses expounded on the meaning and the life application of many of those laws and commands that had been given near the beginning of their journey.

Here in this section we move into some mystical aspects of God's Torah whereby blessings and curses are pronounced, prophecies of future happenings regarding Israel are presented (though the people of Israel probably didn't understand the prophetic nature of what was being said), deep and inscrutable spiritual truths are implied, and straightforward admonitions and warnings are laid out. As a result of the extraordinary nature of this section we are going to rest here for a while and I'm going to delve into a few aspects of the more complex and mysterious things that moving swiftly wouldn't allow.

Chapter 27 is often said to be out of place; that it seems as though some writer well after the fact wanted to make a particular point, or to go back and clarify some earlier information. Some scholars think that an ancient editor discovered two (or more) slightly different traditions surrounding these events and simply included them both without regard to the difficulties doing such a thing presented. Other competent Bible scholars would prefer to simply skip chapter 27 altogether, just moving directly from chapter 26 into chapter 28, and then the flow would make more sense to their minds. I cannot say with certainty whether this is the case or not; however I can say that without doubt one has to look very carefully at chapter 27 otherwise we get the wrong idea about what is actually happening and indeed it can be quite confusing.

Let's read all of Deuteronomy chapter 27.

READ DEUTERONOMY 27 all

The thing to understand is this: what we are witnessing are covenant renewal ceremonies. Even though the Mosaic Covenant was agreed to and handed down almost 4 decades earlier out in the Wilderness, God was now (through Moses) calling on the people of Israel to **renew** their vows as regards their commitment to this covenant, and to remember how and why it was established in the first place.

I said that we are witnessing covenant renewal ceremonies....plural.....more than 1.... even though it may not seem so at a casual reading. How do I come to that conclusion? Let's look at the facts.

Moses was speaking (at least part of the time); yet part of this admonition is that there is to be a ceremony AFTER Israel crosses the Jordan River and takes possession of Canaan. Further verse 9 says that Moses together with the Levite Priests spoke the words that were presented to the people; those two circumstances could NOT have happened at the same time because Moses died before Israel crossed over the Jordan. Not allowing Moses into the Promised Land was a punishment imposed upon him by Yehoveh in response to an incident whereby Moses struck a rock to bring forth water instead of speaking to it as God as instructed Him.

Further we know that Israel crossed into Canaan just above the northern tip of the Dead Sea at a place called Gilgal, only a stone's throw from the ancient city of Jericho. Yet in the verses just preceding the ones we read today, it seems as though this covenant renewal ceremony is to be done on the one hand "IMMEDIATELY" upon crossing the Jordan (which was at Gilgal), but on the other hand it is to be performed atop the twin mountain peaks of Ebal and Gerizim. The problem is that these two mountains are 30 miles north of Gilgal and Jericho, and due to their location and the number of people that would attend it was a journey of probably close to a week.

So on the surface it implies that we have Moses in Canaan, at Mt. Ebal, and immediately upon crossing the Jordan he is leading the Priests in a covenant renewal ceremony (none of which squares with any other Scripture). Let's see if we can untangle this. What we are dealing with are at least 2 and likely 3 different covenant renewal ceremonies. When Moses is identified as the one who is speaking we can know with certainty that this part of the oracle took place on the mountains of Moab just days before he died (about a month later Israel would cross into Canaan). Therefore we have Moses saying to Israel as they were listening to this extended sermon (that is the bulk of Deuteronomy) the words contained in verses 9 and 10. Next we have in verses 11, 12, and 13 instructions from Moses as to what the people are to do LATER, after he is dead and after they are in Canaan. And then verse 14 says: "***The Levites, speaking loudly, will proclaim to every man of Israel.....***"; it says nothing of Moses joining in. That seems at odds with the preceding verses that have Moses speaking WITH the Levites.

So what we have is a change in location occurring between verses 13 and 14. In verse 13 the

location is still Moab where Moses is speaking; in verse 14 the location is inside Canaan with the Levite Priests pronouncing the blessings and curses.

Therefore as our reading began today the present situation was that the Hebrew people we gathered in Moab listening to Moses' grand sermon. And he is reminding them that as of TODAY they have become Yehoveh's people. Wait: I thought they became God's people back on Mt. Sinai? What's different about today? The difference is that back on Sinai the land was still just a promise as yet unfulfilled. This congregational meeting in Moab, as the Israelites are looking across the Jordon to the Promised Land, is essentially the Israelites' graduation ceremony. The time in the Wilderness is officially over and the time in they're own land (in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant) is beginning. The crux is that many of the regulations of the Mosaic Covenant depended on Israel residing, settled, in their own land; they couldn't do those things UNTIL the land was in their possession. They couldn't use the required wine in ritual observances because they had no vineyards. They couldn't perform the firstfruits ceremonies because they grew no crops and had no harvest. They couldn't eat as the Torah required because their primary food was still Manna. When the PEOPLE of Israel are disconnected from the LAND of Israel, they are incomplete. While Israel was wandering in the Wilderness they could only do some of the Law, not all of it, because there was no means to do certain specified things that revolved around agriculture, as did (for instance) at least 3 (and arguably 5) of the 7 Biblical Feasts.

Further, at the time they were receiving this word from Moses, the 1st Exodus generation had died off. Those who were of the age of accountability upon leaving Egypt (defined in the Torah as those old enough to serve in the military) were the ones who personally witnessed the original giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. They were the ones who shouted in united affirmation that they would obey all of the Torah's terms. But that group was now dead and gone (a divinely ordered consequence of their disobedience to the Lord by refusing to enter the Promised Land decades earlier).

Thus it would be a new generation of Hebrews entering Canaan who were either young children or not yet born at the time of the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai. And during this time in the Wilderness it is clear that only parts of the Law were followed; some because they couldn't be followed and others because they chose not to follow them. In fact apparently male circumcision didn't occur in the Wilderness (or perhaps only a few did it), therefore a mass circumcision ceremony would occur right after entering the land. The Lord wanted the new generation who would enter into the land that was promised to them so long ago to both HEAR the Law with their own ears and to personally accept the terms of the covenant. Thus the reason for Moses' words of verses 9 and 10 that TODAY they are God's people (they are accepting His covenant). This still existent attitude of every Hebrew throughout history that each individual should affirm the Law as though it had just been given to him personally; and that his mindset is to be as though he or she personally marched out of Egypt and stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai, is demonstrated here in Deuteronomy 27.

Now I mentioned that another aspect of the reason that Moses considered the occasion of his sermon in Moab as the day Israel became God's people was that they were officially receiving the land, and that the Hebrews without the land are incomplete. It is ironic that today the Hebrews finally DO have that land again; yet in some ways they are still incomplete.....at least that is the mindset of the most religious. And this is because they don't have a Temple.

My good friend Rabbi Baruch likes to say that in our era the Torah is inoperative; he is right. And by that he means NOT that the Torah is dead and gone, but that just as when the Hebrews were in the Wilderness, there was much of the Law they could not do. Yet the Exodus Hebrews DID experience the presence of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. Today's Jews do NOT have God's dwelling place among them even though they're back in the land. The Temple is a vital part of obedience to the Torah and thus Ezekiel prophesies not only a rebuilt Temple but that the sacrifices and other Temple dependent observances would begin once again.

I'm not going to spend much time with this but you must understand something; most of the laws of ritual purity and of atonement for sin depend on the existence of a Temple. Without the Temple and the priests who perform the rituals, a critical link in the chain of Torah observance is missing. Even Shabbat cannot fully meet Torah standards because the Torah requires certain sacrifices for the Sabbath, and these obviously enough cannot be done without a Temple, an Altar, and a priesthood to perform the sacrifices. All-important Firstfruits ceremonies cannot be done because there is no Temple or priesthood to whom the firstfruits can be presented. Yom Kippur cannot be properly observed according to Torah standards because there is no High Priest to go into a Holy of Holies and sprinkle blood onto an Ark that has gone missing for 2500 years. I could go on for quite some time giving you examples of Torah laws and regulations that **require** Temple and priesthood participation. And with a little more time and preparation I could spend quite some time showing you how those required Torah rituals that cannot be performed affect other aspects of Torah commands that on the surface don't seem to be attached to the Temple but in fact they are (if only in an indirect way). The Torah and the Temple are, have always been and will always be, completely intertwined.

That doesn't mean that it is wrong to observe some of these ceremonies, nor is it wrong to follow the commands of Torah as far as one can as a demonstration of our personal trust in Yehoveh, our desire to be in harmony with Him and His universe, and our intent to be obedient out of gratitude. Some of the Laws can be observed in Spirit only. But to use the Torah laws as any sort of self-justification or attempt at self-righteousness is more futile today than when there was a Temple. To pretend that we are keeping Torah in a pure way is folly, or to claim that we are "Torah observant" is hypocritical. Without a Temple and without a Priesthood it is physically impossible to fully or correctly carry out Torah because too many of the procedural elements are unavailable to us.

All the elements MUST be in place for the Torah to be fully observed: the people, the land, and the Temple with its priesthood. It seems as though Israel has been without at least one of these elements for most of their existence. Therefore you'll understand why it is that the most religious and fervent Jews have such a zealous desire to have their Temple rebuilt and the Priesthood re-established. They full well understand their predicament. It is also fascinating to understand that in the near future all 3 elements will once again exist and proper Torah observance will once again be possible.....yet even though only to a point.

What I have been describing is just one of an unknown number of mysterious aspects of this section of Deuteronomy. This idea that ONLY as of the moment of the actual and formal giving of the Promised Land to Israel could Israel finally fully perform it's part of that mutual obligation treaty they had established with God (called The Covenant of Moses) has so many facets and I have only lightly touched upon a few of those facets.

In verse 11 a fascinating aspect of the renewal ceremony is to take place: Israel is divided into two groups of 6 tribes each and one group is to go to Mt. Ebal and the other to ascend Mt. Gerizim. A very specific listing of the composition of each group of 6 is ordained and while it is difficult to find anything particularly special about each group this much can be said: the group that is assigned the task of pronouncing **the blessings** are made up of the two sons of Rachel (Jacob's favored wife), and four of Leah's sons (technically Jacob's first wife). The group that will pronounce **the curses** is made up mostly of the sons of Jacob's concubines, plus Reuben who (although being Jacob's true firstborn son) was removed from that position due to having sex with one of Jacob's concubines, and finally the youngest son of Leah. So perhaps this has something to do with the selection.

What I find more interesting, though, is that the overall composition of the tribes of Israel has changed back to its original, pre-Exodus make-up. Recall that we had the original 12 sons of Jacob and then Jacob shockingly adopted two of the Egyptian sons of Joseph away from him (Ephraim and Manasseh) and included them as among the tribes of Jacob (now giving him 14 son, 14 tribes). Then Joseph was removed as a tribal name bringing the total down to 13, and then Levi was removed as a regular tribe of Israel (in order to become God's priests) bringing us back to 12, but not the original 12. And this new tribal make-up is what was used to divide the land and assign its territories. Here however we have the two sons of Joseph removed from the tribal listing, and Joseph added back in; plus Levi is also counted as among the regular 12 tribes. Why this happens I'm not sure except that I think it is likely prophetic; we know looking ahead in prophetic books like Ezekiel that the original tribal configuration will be restored after Messiah returns.

But notice this as well: we read in Exodus 39 that the Ephod of the High Priest has two large stones mounted onto the shoulder straps; one stone on each shoulder strap. And upon these stones are written the names of the tribes of Israel, 6 names on each stone. Can you picture the imagery of the two hilltops of Ebal and Gerizim as represented by the two stones on the

High Priest's shoulders, with 6 tribes inscribed in each corresponding to the two hills upon which 6 tribes are to present themselves? There has been a great deal of conjecture about which tribes were listed together on each of the shoulder-stones. I suspect that the logic behind which tribes were chosen to appear together on each hill was taken from the way the shoulder-stones of the High Priest were inscribed; but that's just my speculation.

In verse 15 begins a series of 12 curses to be pronounced by the Priests. The Hebrew word for curse as used here is **arur**. The sense of the word **arur** is one of divinely imposed misfortune. The disaster that befalls you is perhaps because the Lord SENT the disaster upon you in His wrath; or that He pulled His hand of blessing and protection upon you and let evil from some source affect you; or that He COULD have intervened but has decided not to. The great Hebrew sages say that the Priests of the Exodus went to the mountaintops of Ebal and Gerizim, along with the tribal prince (and possibly the chief elders) of each tribe (divided into 2 groups of 6 as we saw). The remaining members of the associated tribes congregated down in the large valley between Mts. Ebal and Gerizim, with one group of 6 tribes facing towards their corresponding mountain and the other group of 6 doing the same but in an opposite direction. From Mt. Ebal the curses would be pronounced.

Eleven specific sins are elaborated, the commission of which will call down a curse upon an Israelite; and then a 12th rather general trespass is called out. Each of these 11 specific sins has been dealt with already in the Law, and many of them have the curse of the death penalty associated with them, so why the choice of these particular 11 sins? What is different or special about these? First understand that this list of sins is representative and not exhaustive. That is, the Torah has not now been reduced to 11 (or 12) sins that bring on a divine punishment. Rather these 11 are representative of a type or category of sin: the type that can be done in secret or are very difficult for their victims to publicize or prove their case. In other words they are sins that more often than not known only to God, the criminal, and the victim. Earthly justice by means of the Law code is not likely to happen due to the secrecy of the act.

Second, the first two curses (brought about by specific sins) concern two of the 10 Commandments: making a god image and dishonoring ones' parents. Although we covered this at length back in Exodus it is good to remember that at all times the Hebrews have believed and practiced that the admonition against god-images refers BOTH to pagan (false) gods AND to Yehoveh. No god-images of ANY kind of any god are to be manufactured by the Israelites. Needless to say this may have been the single most violated Commandment of them all throughout Israelite history. And I maintain that the modern Christian denominational icons and images that we tend to use so liberally today (with so little thought and a very heavy helping of rationalization) either ride precariously along the razor's edge of what constitutes making god-images, or it falls squarely on the side of idolatry. So I want to throw that little caution in there.

As we move down the list of these clandestine sins, next in verse 17 we find that illegally

moving a neighbor's property boundary marker is mentioned. I will point out from time to time (as I have in the past) that many of these laws and sins are very common for the cultures of that era. Babylonian boundary stones have been found with similar curses written on them for anyone who would move the boundaries, usually describing the severe punishment involved that is a combination of what the king will do to you AND a divine curse visited upon you by the local god.

For the Hebrews though, this was more a crime against God than against the legal landowner. God purposely divided up the land among the tribes of Israel in a certain fashion, and so for a man to try and change that division was a great affront to Yehoveh. Further the Lord owned the land of Israel so it was (and remains) His Holy Property. Messing with God's Holy Property usually brings the death sentence. We must always remember this important God-principle: the Israelites do NOT own the Promised Land; they are just land tenants (the ONLY authorized land tenants). In the past they have been allowed to stay in the land only so long as they obeyed God; but when they passed some line-in-the-sand that their rebellion became too great for even God's mercy, they were evicted for a time. Let me be clear, however, that NO ONE else other than the Hebrews have any right to be there. God has NOT granted permission for foreigners to be there except as part of Israel.

Verse 18 says that no one is to cause a blind person to lose his way. The idea is that no one is to take advantage of someone else's ignorance or disability by misleading them to your advantage or their detriment. This is central to the fairness doctrine that is so woven in to all of the Lord's commands and certainly violates what both the OT and NT state as the underlying foundation behind all laws and commands: love the Lord God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Next is that no one is to interfere with the justice system for a foreigner, widow or orphan. Obviously this is aimed at protecting the most vulnerable of society; and the violation is really more about a judge judging unfairly and not about a person's social or economic status.

We now get a series of 4 laws involving sexual behavior. Again these laws are not exhaustive covering every unacceptable sexual practice; they are just representative of all. Verse 20 speaks of a man who has sexual relations with his stepmother although technically it could include his own biological mother. As sick as that sounds to us, we know that it does happen so this is hardly a reach. Interestingly the argument against doing such a thing isn't so much the inherent incestuous immorality of it all; rather it is because (as it says literally), the son who would do that "has removed his father's garment". It is an affront against his father's honor. Here is that inference that I taught you about a few weeks ago and that we're going to see many times in the Bible; that in the Holy Scriptures a wife is often seen metaphorically as the garment of her husband. Let me remind you that this is in no way demeaning to the wife; rather she is a kind of covering for her husband. He wears her as a covering, as one would a garment; therefore for a son to have sex with his own mother or stepmother is a violation of the

father's exclusive sexual rights.

Verse 21 speaks of bestiality. As strange a practice as this may seem to us, and as many off-color jokes that have been invented revolving around the subject, it was rather common in ancient times (especially in more rural areas). In fact ancient Hittite laws prohibited sex with some animals and permitted it with others. We see in the pantheon of Middle and Near Eastern gods half human/half animal gods and goddesses; we read in Greek mythology of similar creatures and they are the result of sexual activity between humans and animals, or divinity and animals. This activity was largely acceptable in most societies to one degree or another, but it was completely outlawed in every circumstance in Israel.

One doesn't have to look very far in the Bible to find the God-pattern that makes bestiality unthinkable; Adam and Eve is the representative "type" of human sexuality and marriage unions. Adam was given the opportunity to have animals as domestic partners (not sexual partners) but decided that none were suitable. Therefore the Lord created from him a female as the only appropriate domestic AND sexual partner for him. Let me be clear; God was not inviting Adam to have sex with animals but Adam refused. Rather it is that the Genesis narrative is (at least partially) for the purpose of making it clear that mankind is not to try to procreate or come into a union with lesser beings not of his species, and that the only acceptable domestic companion for a man is a human woman and vice versa. It is amazing that apparently this lesson has to be re-taught over and over again, and that nation after nation eventually figures that this law of God no longer applies.

This is followed in verse 23 with another law that essentially defines incest; a man is not to have relations with his sister or stepsister.

Next is a curse on the one who commits a violent act against another Israelite; and it does not necessarily limit the acts of violence to murder, as it also refers to assault.

Verse 25 speaks of not accepting a bribe to help a murderer go free; this is speaking of a judge, a witness, or even hiring a person to commit a murder for you. The unintended consequence of such an act is that the bloodguilt caused by the unjustified killing will remain upon the land until the murderer has his own life taken from him.

The 12th curse is that general one I told you about. It refers to all the other teachings of Torah and demands that all the Torah be followed or the person who breaks it will be cursed. Rashi says that it is essentially an oath taken by each Israelite to uphold the entire Torah.

Notice that after every reading of a curse it is followed with an "Amen" from the people. A

person who responds to a prayer or a vow or in this case a covenant is saying: “let it be so with me”. It was agreement with the terms of the covenant and used as a kind of shortcut for the person to publically accept the terms. Earlier in Exodus and Leviticus we went through this tedious process whereby God would tell Moses what to say, then we’d read about Moses saying it to the people, and then we’d read about the people doing it. Page after page of the Torah was essentially repeating the same instruction at least twice and often three times because this is simply how it was done in the ancient Middle East. Here in Deuteronomy is a deviation from this process; we see a declaration made or instruction given and rather than the people repeating everything the people simply responded, “Amen” to what was said.

Let me end with this thought: I said at the beginning that this chapter actually speaks of multiple covenant renewal ceremonies and no doubt there were other covenant renewal ceremonies held at appropriate times. Why? Did God need to have Israel keep reaffirming their covenant with Him for His sake?

The reality is that this was normal custom and tradition in that era. We have Assyrian, Mesopotamian, Hittite, Canaanite and other law code documents that are very similar in form to what we have read here in Deuteronomy. And what we find is that repetition, or saying essentially the same thing in the positive, and then later in the negative, or using multiple examples was the norm in order to create emphasis. The curses stated concerning any regulation were always more numerous than the associated blessings. Repetition helps us to remember. The people didn’t have scrolls or books with these instructions written down so they could easily refer to them, so saying them over and over imprinted these laws in their minds. Never forget that while Israel is God’s set apart people, they are first and foremost “people”. Consciously or not we all make decisions and communicate within the context of our era and our culture and our language. We find out just how true that is when we visit a foreign country and things that we take for granted in our own nation are unknown to them. Something as simple as which side of the road one drives on varies around the world. It was no different for Israel. It was natural for them to communicate to God, and for God to communicate with them, within the context of their own culture (or better within the rather extensive set of customs and traditions that were common throughout the known world at that time). Therefore even though the Bible is inspired, perhaps the larger miracle is that God’s divine perfection and truth can be expressed through the imperfect and somewhat arbitrary customs and traditions of mere men that aren’t always the most edifying in their nature. The **form** of the Mosaic Covenant is not heavenly, it’s earthbound, intended for men to follow; the way it is structured would have been very familiar to any person of the Middle and Near East at in that era. It’s the divine principles expressed in it that matter, not its form.

Next week we’ll move into Deuteronomy chapter 28 and study the blessings pronounced by the Priests.