

Deuteronomy 15

Life of Worship (I-IV)

Song: 34 Father in whom we live
 11 Great God of wonders

Deuteronomy 12-16:17

These last twenty-four chapters follow and expand on the teachings in the first eleven chapters. In some ways they are the practical application of the Ten Words, spelling out how they should be carried out in the life and times of the early Israelites agricultural and farming settlement. Therefore, as we read them, we need to rework those applications in terms of our technological age. I will be brief here and spell out some examples, because each of us has to work out the teachings as we face the situation before us.

The way I want to work through these remaining chapters is as follows.

1. Life of Worship (I-IV). Ch. 12-16.
2. Leadership (V). Ch. 16-18.
3. Civil Order (VI-VII). Ch. 19-23.
4. Covetousness (VIII-X) Ch. 23-26.
5. New Covenant. Ch. 27-34.

Before I go into the first segment, I need to briefly recap what we talked about before. This is also for those who might not have been here in previous years.

Resume

Though the book of Deuteronomy is often called 'The second law', it is really about the grace of God, if we understand *nomos* in its proper sense. The law is the reflection of the nature of God and it is given to us as a revelation of the God who created us and redeemed us.

The book starts off not with the giving of the law, but with the faithlessness of Israel at Kadesh Barnea when they did not trust God enough to enter the land He has promised them. This is the setting to contrast the faithlessness of Israel with the faithfulness of God. Despite the faithlessness, Israel was given a second chance by the grace of God. This sets the stage for the book, the grace of God to His people. Forgiveness is implicit the God's covenant with His people.

The book continues with instructions for the conquest of the promised land, but with special provisions for Edom and Ammon who are also the descendants of Abraham. They were not to conquer them as God has a purpose for them. This sets the relational at the core of the covenant.

It is only after these preambles that the law was pronounced. The 'Ten Words' reflect the nature of God. I have emphasised that the Ten Words start with the worship of the one and only God and that is followed with commandments that give due consideration to honour God's created humanity. It concludes with a warning of the covetousness of the human heart which cannot be policed. Only God can see through that and only God can make that right. The Ten Words cannot be carried out without the covetousness of the human heart being corrected by the Spirit of God.

An addendum to the Ten Words is the *Shema* or as Jesus called it, the greatest commandment.

⁴ Hear (*shema*), O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (6:4-5)

One final point before we conclude the resume. The book of Deuteronomy contains blessings and curses. We need to distinguish blessing that is creational and not dependant on human responses and continued blessing when humanity lives in obedience to God and follows the way of the Lord. 'And so the total blessings of the land were not a reward for faith, but were enjoyed and appropriated by a life of faith and obedience in the light of the Lord's covenant of love made with the forefathers' (Tyndale Commentary, 179).

With that resume we now look first at Deuteronomy 12-16 which spells out how the first four commandments are to be observed. They deal with the worship of God. I shall not be going into the details of the chapters. My purpose in these studies is to highlight the way in which the Ten Words needs to be lived out.

I-IV commandments

⁷ "You shall have no other gods before me.

⁸ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image,

¹¹ "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain,

¹² Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. (5:7-12)

These four commandments form the first set covering the worship of God. Chapter 12 begins the new section on the observance of the commandments. Commandments they are but they were given by the grace of God in guiding the people as they moved forward to the promised land.

Worship (12:1-32)

This section begins with another reminder as to the importance of following the ways of the Lord.

These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. (12:1)

The first task for the people was to destroy the pagan worship set up by the inhabitants of the land. They were not to follow their ways, attractive though that might be. They were to seek the way of the Lord and the rest of the chapter stipulates how that might be done. There is an added warning at the end of the chapter not to follow the pagan worship on the land (29-31). That was an abhorrent thing as it included the sacrifice of children.

²⁹ "When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, ³⁰ take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.' ³¹ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods (12:29-31).

The destruction of the pagan altars is one thing, but the worship of God must be the way God chooses to be worshipped. There are laws governing the sacrifices and the way they are to be offered and we won't go into the details of the ceremonial laws here.

You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way. ⁵ But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, ⁶ and there you shall ... (12:4ff).

We are not allowed to worship God in the way we think He should be worshipped, not even in the way which seems right to us.

You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, (12:8)

There is a responsibility on our part and that is to seek out that place (12:5). Much has been written about the centrality of the temple worship in Israel, but what is important is that God is to be worshipped in the place and the way He chooses. However, there is provision for the tyranny of distance.

²¹ If the place that the LORD your God will choose to put his name there is too far from you, then you may kill any of your herd or your flock, which the LORD has given you, as I have commanded you, and you may eat within your towns whenever you desire. (12:21)

Warning against the worship of other gods (13:1-14:2)

¹ "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams ...

⁵ the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery,

⁶ "If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter or the wife you embrace or your friend ...

¹⁰ the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

¹² "If you hear in one of your cities, ...

¹⁷ ... as he swore to your fathers, ¹⁸ if you obey the voice of the LORD your God, keeping all his commandments that I am commanding you today, and doing what is right in the sight of the LORD your God.

False gods and false teachings abound in every age, no less in ours. Signs and wonders (1), and gnosis (6) are mentioned. These play to the curiosity of the human heart and the instantaneous gratification. What is tested in these seductions is 'whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul' (3). This is the God who delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. They were to obey the Lord and to keep his commandments (18). In each of the three warnings, it concludes with a statement on what the Lord had done for them. This has been repeated time and time again. It is a call to remember that the covenant relationship that Israel has with God is initiated by God Himself.

Other observances

The three chapters that follow may not seem to be directly related to the worship of the one true God. However, the observances of the Sabbath and the ceremonial laws and festivals are part of worship because that is the way God has decreed He should be worshipped. It is easy to see that the sub-sections on offerings and festivals fit into this. However, the next section on food laws may not seem to be so.

Diet (14:3-21)

Food laws are often considered in a separate category of its own. Its inclusion in this section on the worship of God may not be obvious. There are two views on the need of food laws. One is based on the hygiene of the animals. Several studies had been made into this and not without justification. However, the other view is that the prohibition on eating certain animals is that they are associated with the worship in the Canaanite culture. This view fits in well with the inclusion of the food laws here. It comes after the warning against following other religions and in this sense the avoidance of these foods used in Canaanite worship is the way Israel shows that she is remaining true to Yahweh and therefore part of our worship of God.

Here end the negatives in the worship of God, the ways in which He is to be acknowledged. Israel was not to conform to the cultural practices of the land. They needed to present a counter culture according to the precepts that God had given them and which Moses was

spelling out for them. It is the same for us today. So often the church has adopted the prevailing practices of the culture in which she finds itself. What makes for success in the world may not be what the church should be engaged in. The modelling of the church today should not come from secular models. We are in the world and I acknowledge that it may be difficult to draw that line.

Tithing (14:22-29)

The following observances given by Moses spell out the positives in the worship of God. The principle of tithing in Israel is for the support of the Levites. The tribe of Levi serves in the tabernacle. They do not have land as their inheritance and therefore do not have any produce for their sustenance. A tenth of the produce from the other tribes is used for the support of the Levites. That is their inheritance. This is part of our worship, the maintenance of the tabernacle and those who served in it.

²¹“To the Levites I have given every tithes in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting, ... ²⁴For the tithes of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the LORD, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance. ... (Num. 18:21,24)

The tithes collected is to be shared with the ‘sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow’.

²⁹And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do. (14:29)

This appears to be a special provision every third year. Be that as it may, the principle of providing for the needy is very much a part of our worship.

Jesus mentioned the giving of tithes (Lk. 18:9-14), and condemned those who disregard it (Lk. 11:42). As our worship of God is a matter of the heart (see the *Shema*), God loves a cheerful willing giver (2 Cor. 9:7).

The Sabbatical Year (15:1-18)

¹⁵“At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. ²And this is the manner of the release:

The principle of the sabbath relates not only to seventh day, but to the seventh year and the jubilee, seven of the seventh year. I have dealt with this in a previous study on the fourth commandment (Study 7, Sabbath Rest). To honour the sabbath is to honour the rest of God, the completed work of God in creation. In so doing, we also acknowledge the ‘rest’ of creation, the restitution of creation to its former state.

No one needs to be a slave forever in Israel. The seventh year is the year of release for the person to start life again as a free person. Israel needs to remember that they were slaves in Egypt before and it is God who gives them the release. They need to do likewise to others.

¹¹For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’ (15:11)

The poor and the needy are the concern of God. In releasing them from their debt and from the predicament of the situation they find themselves in, we are honouring the creator. This is not merely a social concern. We need not separate the social and the religious as we tend to today. This has to be seen as our worship of God. This is also the principle of tithing as we have seen above. John sums it up succinctly, ‘But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?’ (1 John 3:17).

Offering (15:19-23)

In ancient Israel it is the firstling that belongs to the Lord. It has to be unblemished. This has to be interpreted as the gift of the land which the Lord has given to them. In today's word it has to be interpreted today as what we have profited from the abilities the Lord has bestowed on us. Perhaps we can say that is the first pay packet.

Festivals (16:1-17), Passover (unleavened bread), Pentecost (feast of weeks), Feast of tabernacles, yearly pilgrimages

These are the three feasts that Israel was instructed to observe with very good reasons. The Israelites were to make yearly pilgrimage to the place that the Lord chose to celebrate these events.

The Passover commemorates the deliverance from slavery in Egypt. This is a spring festival celebrated at the beginning of the new year, the month of Nisan. This is also the time of the deliverance from Egypt, the beginning of their nationhood, a step towards the fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham. This was followed immediately with the feast of unleavened bread for seven days. The unleavened bread is also a reminder of their deliverance from Egypt as they left in a hurry and there was no time to leaven the bread. The Passover was not mentioned later as it became incorporated into the feast of unleavened bread. Both commemorates the deliverance from Egypt. Jesus reinterpreted the Passover meal with His disciples on the eve of His path to the cross. The Lord's supper is now our 'passover', our passover from death into new life.

The feast of weeks or Pentecost is an early harvest feast. It has been variously called 'the feast of the harvest' (Ex. 23:16), and 'the day of the first fruits' (Num. 28:26). The harvest is to be a time of rejoicing because it is the Lord who gives the produce. This is to be shared with all, including the 'sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you' (16:11). This feast is again a reminder to the Israelites that they were slaves 'in Egypt; and you shall be careful to observe these statutes (16:12).

The feast of tabernacles (booths) is an autumn festival. It marks the end of the harvest. The Israelites were to dwell in the booths for seven days. Again, the ingathering was to be shared with the 'sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you' (16:14). Again this is a reminder of their deliverance from Egypt.

⁴²You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, ⁴³that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." (Lev. 23:42-43)

Summary

There are many issues mentioned in these chapters on the one theme of worship. I will try to sum them up.

Israel has been called to gather together as one people to celebrate what God has done for them, in their deliverance from slavery as well as to celebrate the bountiful goodness of God in providing for them. We do not celebrate the feast of weeks or tabernacles today, but the Passover has been reinterpreted by Christ as the new covenant and we celebrate the Lord's supper instead today. Moreover, the new covenant is ushered in through the incarnation and the cross, and these two are the two great festivities of the Christian faith.

We have been cautioned that in our worship we do not follow the ways of the world, spectacular and uplifting though they may be. It is easy to be led astray by what appears to be words of wisdom, and this may even come from those in our own family.

We have been reminded that in our worship we need to be true to the word of God, and true to the way that God wants us to worship Him.

True, this is the worship of God, and the acknowledgment of God must also include the acknowledgment of His creation, and in particular, created humanity. Moses has adequately spelled that out in these chapters and Jesus reinforced that in interpreting the *shema*, to love God and to love others (Matt. 22:34-39). Moses brought out these two aspects of worship in the collection of tithes.

The celebration of the Sabbath is not just the one day in the week to rest (restitution) and remember the Lord. It includes the freedom and restitution of humanity as seen in the extrapolation of that principle to the seventh year and seven of the seventh year, the jubilee. The expression of the deliverance of Israel from slavery must also include the deliverance of humanity from the bondage due to their station in life, whatever the cause of that may be.

If we do not heed these words and do otherwise, we will be taking the name of the Lord in vain. We also cannot claim that the Lord has done this one day and recant on that another day. That is taking the Lord's name in vain and that is not the covenant relationship with the Lord and with one another. The exposition of the Ten Words by Moses is an exposition on the covenant relationship. We will see more of this as we go through the rest of the book.