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THE BOOK of Deuteronomy

The Book of Deuteronomy is, to quote Martin Luther, 'a compendium and summary of the whole law and wisdom of the people of Israel, wherein those things which related to the priests and Levites are omitted, and only such things included as the people generally required to know,' Keil and Delitzsch add that it is 'a hortatory description, explanation and enforcement of the most essential contents of the covenant revelation and covenant laws, with emphatic prominence given to the spiritual principles of the law and its fulfilment, and with a further development of the ecclesiastical, judicial, political and civil organisation, which was intended for a permanent foundation for the life and well-being of the people in the land of Canaan'. These are good and reliable statements as to the nature of the book, for a guideline to study.

I) *1:1*

The word 'Deuteronomy' means 'second law', or 'repetition of the law'. Bible Dictionaries point out that this is a mistaken understanding of the words in Deuteronomy 17:18, 'a copy of this law', a phrase which has been taken to mean 'repetition of this law'. All the same, although it is not a 'second law' given by Moses, in the sense of a 'fresh and independent law-giving standing side by side with the earlier one' (in Exodus), or 'a second book of the law, intended for the people that knew not the law', it is true, as the Tyndale Commentary points out, that 'Deuteronomy sets out in the divine "Law", the whole body of teaching which showed the people of Israel the way to live in fellowship with Yahweh and with one another. That life would enable Israel to enjoy to the full blessings of the covenant. To live any other life was tantamount to a rejection of Yahweh's gracious intentions for His people'. Keil and Delitzsch sum up very cogently and adequately, when they say that from a general survey of the contents of the book 'it is sufficiently evident that the exposition of the commandments, statutes, and rights of the law had no other object than this ... to make the contents of the covenant legislation intelligible to all the people, and to impress them upon their hearts ... (and) to pledge the nation in the most solemn manner to an inviolable observance, in the land of Canaan, of the covenant which Jehovah had made with Israel at Horeb (29:1).'

2) ***1:1***

A brief word about the problems of the date and authorship of Deuteronomy had better be said at the outset. Since the 19th century, critical scholars have considered it not to have been written by Moses at all, but by some unknown prophet of the 7th century B.C., during the reign of Josiah, who was intent on promoting religious reforms, and hid his work in the Temple that it might be 'discovered' by Hilkiah the high priest (2 Kings 22:8ff; 2 Chronicles 34:14ff). Only some of the critics seem to have realised the implications of such a hypothesis (untenable as we believe it is) - namely, that the book would then be a fraud and a forgery. As W. Still says in his Gilcomston Record Notes, 'it would be impossible to read it without the tongue in the cheek as if playing a game of "Let's pretend", which is unthinkable to the godly reader of the Word of God.' Recent serious study and investigation of Ancient Near Eastern 'treaty forms' of the second millennium B.C., to which the structure of Deuteronomy bears marked and unmistakable resemblances, has served to put such cynical hypotheses in their proper place as requiring far more credulity and ingenuity in believing them than to accept the traditional view of the Mosaic authorship. This can be read up - and should be by those involved in a study of critical scholarship, in the Tyndale Commentary, pp 16ff, and in K.A. Kitchen's fine book, 'Ancient Orient and Old Testament, pp 92ff.

3) *1:1*

The book of Deuteronomy consists of three addresses given by Moses to Israel (1:1-4:43; 4:44-28:68; 29:1-34:12). The following analysis (following the Tyndale Commentary) will be a useful guide to our study:

I	1:1-5	Introduction
	1:6-3:29	Historical Retrospect: God's mighty acts
	4:1-40	Practical consequences of God's mighty acts
	4:41-43	Cities of Refuge
II	4:44-49	Introduction
	5:1-11:32	General: the nature of the Covenant faith: total allegiance to Jehovah
	12:1-26:19	Specific: the detailed covenant specifications
	27:1-26	Covenant renewal in Promised Land
	28:1-68	Covenant sanctions: blessings and curses
III	29:1-30:20	Recapitulation of Covenant Demand
	29:1-15	Israel exhorted to accept covenant
	29:16-28	Punishment for disobedience
	30:1-10	Repentance and forgiveness
	30:11-20	Appeal to choose life
IV	31:1-34:12	Last acts of Moses, and his death

4) ***1:1-5***

We need to consult Numbers 33:48, 49 and 36:13 to see Deuteronomy link up with the previous book. Israel has come to the borders of the Promised Land, after the long years of wandering because of their sin, and is now about to enter in. There is now a pause, while Moses expounds the covenant, and the nature of Israel's relationship to it. This very fact gives the message of the book a sense of urgency, and the application to us today is surely very obvious. On the threshold of a work, of an advance, for a fellowship, or for an individual, this will have much to say to us - beginning a new job, launching out on Christian service, the start of a career; the beginning of a university course - this is the kind of practical application.

The geographical details contained in 1 have significance not only in indicating where Moses spoke to the people, but also in reminding them and us that these were fateful places in the earlier history of the Israelites; Paran was the area of Kadesh Barnea (cf Num 13:3ff) where Moses had sent in the spies into Canaan, and where the fateful disobedience took place that consigned that whole generation of Israelites to wandering in the wilderness until their death; Hazeroth was where Miriam, Moses' sister, had stumbled through rebellion (Numbers 12:1ff). The 'words which Moses spake' are therefore invested with solemn import and full of sad associations, and this seems to be the point made by the statement in parenthesis in 2 about the fact that the distance between Horeb and Kadesh is only an eleven-day journey. The contrast between this and the 'dating' of their ultimate entry into Canaan, in the fortieth year is therefore all the more graphic and striking, and an urgent reminder to the new generation of what might have been, and what God had all along intended, but had become impossible because of the rebellion at Kadesh. The warning is surely clear: 'Do not repeat the mistakes of your fathers, but be obedient to the word of the Lord'.

5) ***1:6-8***

Moses now proceeds to rehearse the Lord's dealings with the people. We should bear in mind here his intention as being to bring them to 'an inviolable observance of the covenant', and he does so by reminding them of and recalling to them, the acts of God on their behalf. Israel had dwelt at Horeb (Sinai) for almost a year (compare Exodus 19:1 with Numbers 10:11ff), and the Lord had brought that sojourn to an end in His summons to them to go from the mount of God to the mount of the Amorites, one of the enemies they were to overcome. There seems to be at least a hint in 6 that Israel had settled down comfortably at Horeb, and needed to be jolted out of their immobility. It may be thought that Horeb was hardly a place conducive to comfort, but we should not forget that there is always a temptation to settle down on one's lees, and to hug the security of the common place, and refuse the far horizons that we might storm for God. After all, there had been much to occupy them at Horeb in that year (which it takes about one-third of the whole Pentateuch to cover), and all the law and the ordinances had been communicated to them. Perhaps they were thinking that that was enough to be going on with, without any further advance. The fear of the new, and the unexplored, can be very real, for God's people; but such fear is always baseless, if God is with us, and this is what they had to learn. Which thing is also a parable of spiritual realities: it is possible to dwell at Sinai, with the thunderings of the law, when we should be advancing into the riches of divine grace. It is possible to be so bemused with the dark side that we never see the bright side of the gospel. This can be a psychological quirk of temperament and personality; it can also be a distortion and imbalance in spiritual life. What a prospect was set before them, in 8. The promise made to their forebears was to be fulfilled at last in them. Well might they be urged to be up and doing.

6) ***1:9-18***

Moses' account of the appointment of counsellors and helpers to bear rule with him over the people given here should be compared with Exodus 18:13-27 and Numbers 11:14-17: Moses speaks at this point as if the idea of this appointment were his own, whereas in the Exodus reference it is clear that the suggestion came from Jethro, his father-in-law, while in Numbers it is God who is said to have commanded their appointment. The seeming discrepancy, however, is only seeming; we need not doubt but that it was the Lord Himself who ordained this provision, but it could just as truly be said that He did so through the instrumentality of Jethro's advice to Moses. Furthermore, the fact that Moses says here that he himself spoke at this time about the need for helpers and instructed the people to choose them out is simply an indication that in the service and furtherance of the divine purposes, our thoughts should be His thoughts: sanctified thinking will surely make us think His thoughts after Him (cf Acts 15:25, 28). The other question that this account raises is why Moses should have referred to this at this juncture. The answer must be that he is recounting this divine provision to them as a further evidence of God's guardian care over them, as if to say to this new generation now standing on the borders of the Promised Land, 'With such a God, should your fathers have been afraid to go into the Land? Should they have dreaded the giants? Would it not have been more sensible to assume that the God who had led them safely up to that point would be able to see them into their inheritance in Canaan? See, then, that you, their children, do not make the same mistake. Go forward in obedience, trusting in His sufficiency. He will not fail you nor forsake you.'

7) ***1:19-34A***

What follows in these verses is in the same vein as yesterday's reading, so far as the message Moses was intent on pointing is concerned. The sending in of the spies into the Land is in view, an incident that became fateful in its consequences for Israel, as we shall see. First of all, however, we note in 19 that the emphasis is not so much on the rigours of that place and time as on the bounty of the divine provision to enable them to go through: 'we went through ... and we came ...'. And the divine command was then given, 'Go up and possess ...'. This was the simple directive; but in Numbers 13:1 we are told that the Lord commanded the spies to be sent in. There need be no contradiction assumed here. The people's desire to send in spies (as here, in 22) - a normal procedure in a campaign of war - was referred by Moses to the Lord, who then commanded them to be sent in. But the question that does arise is: What if they had obeyed the simple directive in 21? Was there need to have sent spies when God had pledged His word to them that He would see them through? It is true that the spies encountered walled cities and the sons of Anak, and that this is what dispirited them; but the question does arise whether, if they had gone in in simple obedience to the word and command of God, they would have met the sons of Anak at all? Could they not trust God to do His own work? One might be forgiven for thinking that with the kind of assurance given by God in 21, there would have been little need to be concerned about anything that lay ahead. But more on this passage in tomorrow's Note.

8) ***1:19-34A***

At all events, twelve men were sent into the land, one from each tribe (23), and came back with the report, 'It is a good land which the Lord our God doth give us'. The account given in Numbers 13, however, speaks differently, with ten of the twelve spies giving an unfavourable report, and only Caleb and Joshua speaking in the terms recorded here (25). It looks, then, as if Moses accepted the minority report, ignoring the other, and - more significantly - indicating that the minority report was God's word to the people, and His assurance to go on, without fear. There is a sense in which what we have here is not so much the actual history of the situation as the spiritual understanding of what happened. Moses cuts away, as it were, all the unnecessary details, and gets to the heart of the matter. 'This', he says, 'is what happened that day at Kadesh-Barnea. A good report came back, and you refused it'. Such was the message, shorn of all the inessentials. It is a great thing when we are able to do this. Sometimes the mass of verbiage with which we surround a spiritual situation can be so confusing that it becomes almost impossible to see the real issues and grasp what is being said to us. On this occasion, what was being said to Israel was, 'It is a good land, and God wants you to go in'. And they refused to do so. This is one particular value of Deuteronomy; and it bears the same relationship to the historical record, in this regard, as the books of Chronicles do to 1 and 2 Kings, when the Chronicler frequently bypasses considerable portions of the historical record without mention because he is intent on pointing a spiritual lesson in a particular situation. Here, the lesson surely is that Israel had little need to have feared, when such a God was their defence (30-33).

9) ***1:34-46***

The particular value of this passage for us is the commentary it provides on one of the most fateful episodes in Israel's history, the disobedience at Kadesh-Barnea which led to that whole generation being condemned to wander in the wilderness until they died off. There are several points to note in particular. In 34, the phrase 'the voice of your words' is, doubtless, a Hebraism, but we may surely discern something deeper than a mere grammatical form. God heard not only their words, but also what their words were really saying: He heard the voice that spoke in these words. In 27, the phrase 'because the Lord hated us' is ostensibly a rather pathetic plaint and expression of fear, and that is what the words convey. But the voice speaking in them is something more: it is a voice of rebellion and revolt. There is something very important here: we may sometimes express ourselves in a plaint or cry of distress, but sometimes - and if we are honest with ourselves, we know that this is true - within that complaint or cry of distress there is a hard core of resentment against God. We do not put it in so many words, but the voice is there. Even in our prayers to God we may be saying one thing, and meaning something quite different. This will surely bear thinking about. It is not that the Israelites were giving expression to their natural timidity and fear, 'O Lord, we are terrified'. That is not what made Him angry: it was what lay behind that terror and fear, the heart-revolt against the good and perfect will of God. Over against this, we should observe what is said about Caleb in 36, 'he hath wholly followed the Lord'. This is God's testimony concerning Caleb, and how glad God must have been at that particular juncture, when He was so grievously disappointed with His people, to find one man who was totally loyal to His will. But there is more in this passage still and we shall continue with it when we resume our studies after Christmas.

10) ***1:34-46***

The reference in 37 to the Lord's anger with Moses is not without its difficulties for interpretation. Numbers 20:12 records the historical incident, and Numbers 27:12-14 the fateful consequence of it, but this took place quite some time after the tragedy of Kadesh (which is recorded in Numbers 13/14). Yet Moses clearly seems to link the two things together here, and this has made some commentators wonder whether the anger of the Lord was also associated with Moses agreeing to allow spies to go in to the land. There is little evidence for this, however; and the more probable explanation of the association of the two passages may be that Israel's sin was such that it infected the whole relationship between God and His people and caused continuing trouble even after they had been forgiven. This is something that is, alas, all too true in spiritual experience, and it highlights a distinction that simply must be recognized, between the forgiveness of sin and the consequences of sin. Moses made mighty and costly mediation and intercession for the people at Kadesh (Numbers 14:13ff), and God heard his prayers and forgave their sin, and they were not cast off as a people. But that generation of them were disqualified, and none of them was allowed to enter the land, save Caleb and Joshua. God does not always remove the consequences of sin when He forgives: and this was as true for Moses as it was for the people, for neither he nor they set foot on the Promised Land. But God continued to deal graciously with them, and did not cast them off; but His gracious dealings were within the limits that their sin imposed upon Him. He blessed them, in other words, as much as they allowed Him to do. That is a solemn thought, indeed, and one that might serve to explain a good deal in our spiritual lives and experience.

II) ***1:34-46***

It is hardly possible for us to leave this passage without looking at the way in which the whole tragic incident is taken up by the New Testament. Clearly, its message was considered a solemn one for the Christian Church, as may be seen from Paul's reference to it in 1 Corinthians 10:1ff, and also Hebrews 3:15-4:7. What the Apostle says in 1 Corinthians 10:11 makes it clear beyond doubt that he considered the story to be one of warning for believers against a backsliding spirit and the temptation to idolatry into which the Corinthian believers were in danger of falling. Likewise, in the Hebrews reference, the story is used to urge the people of God to enter into all that is theirs in Christ, through obedience and submission to His Word, and not fall short of it by an attitude of unbelief. These two New Testament passages are valuable in that they show us how the Old Testament history may legitimately be applied to Christian experience (although it is clear from Paul's words in Corinthians that we are not to think of Israel's experience simply in historical and geographical terms: there was a spiritual dimension present for them also, as is seen from the reference to Israel's drinking of the spiritual Rock that followed them, that Rock being Christ). It is worth noting also that Moses' exhortation to Israel at this point to obey, and not be like their forefathers, was heeded, at least in some measure, for after they did enter the Land to possess it, under Joshua, they walked in more complete obedience to God than they had ever done before, or ever did afterwards. The days of Joshua saw one of the high points in the history of the people of God.

12) ***2:1-8***

We have said that the point of Moses' historical retrospect was to urge the present generation (the children of the original rebels at Kadesh) not to repeat the mistakes and sins of their fathers, but to walk in obedience before the Lord. But now, in this chapter, Moses speaks more to the present generation, and of events in the immediate past, that concerned them, not their fathers. The 'many days' in 1 include the thirty-eight or so years of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness (cf Numbers 14:25 - 21:35). This means that, so far as the record of Deuteronomy is concerned, the events of these long and weary years are passed over here by Moses. The truth is that years spent out of the will of God have little of spiritual interest worth recording. How dull, indeed, are the lives of those who do not know God or who live athwart His good and perfect will! But there is another thought here: it is that for these thirty-eight years Israel was going round in circles, getting nowhere. There was no real forward movement for God - that movement did not begin until the deaths of Miriam and Aaron. This is not, of course, to say that the Lord had forsaken them; He was still with them and in their midst, but He blessed them within the limits that their disobedience, and His judgment, placed upon them. This is the point in Moses' word in 7. Nor was that blessing scant, as 7 makes plain - He had concerned Himself with them, and they lacked nothing. Behold therefore the goodness of God 'to the rebellious also' (cf Psalm 68:18). We should observe also the preciseness of the Lord's instructions to them on their way - they were not to meddle with Seir (Edom) for they did not need to possess it. It was as if the Lord were saying to them, 'Be content with such things as I have given thee. Do not covet what I am not pleased to give. I have given you abundantly in what I have given.' What a lesson for our affluent society!

13) ***2:9-23***

There are two parentheses contained in this passage, 10-12 and 20-23, both dealing with the former inhabitants of Canaan. They are archaeological notes full of interest. The Emims (10) were giants like the Anakims (the Moabite name), and the Zamzummins in 20 seem to be of a similar stature (this was the Ammonite name for them). The Tyndale commentary makes mention of yet another name, the Rephaim (spoken of in Genesis 14:5 and Joshua 12:4 and elsewhere), who were one of the pre-Israelite groups in Canaan who were defeated by the invader Chederlaomer. This account in Genesis 14 invites the speculation as to whether Chederlaomer was used of God to purge the land of Canaan of nameless atrocities in those far-off days, just as Israel was used of God later to cleanse and repeople Canaan. This seems to be what is suggested by the words in 12b. One wonders whether these towering giants were the offspring of the monstrous marriages mentioned in Genesis 6:1-7. At all events, it is no longer to be regarded as fantastic and far-fetched that 'larger than life' figures should rise up to terrorise the land, in a day when genetic engineering, with all its horrific and terrifying implications in producing a race of 'super men,' is so much a reality in modern life. Two further points may be noted in this passage. The first relates to the grim patience of God in waiting until the last of the original generation of Israelites had died off, before His ongoing purposes for His people could proceed. Is there a parallel to this in God's long waiting before He gives revival once again to our land? The second has to do with the twofold warning, in 9 and 19, against meddling with Moab or Ammon. God's purposes were now about to unfold in a new forward movement (13), and to have become involved with either of these nations would have been a costly distraction from the main issue on hand. The lessons here for the spiritual life are surely obvious: there will always be temptations on hand to distract us from what is of central and prior importance in the work of the kingdom of God. Bunyan's picture of Pilgrim wandering into Bypath Meadow, and landing in Doubting Castle with Giant Despair says it all.

14) ***2:24-37***

Here are some timely words for the first day of a new year, and we should be wonderfully heartened and encouraged to read such an exhortation in 24. Particularly to be noted is the statement, twice given (cf 31), 'Behold I have given ... begin to possess …'. There is profound significance in these words, for they underline the way in which the conquest of Canaan took place: it was because God had already given them the land in title that they were able - and indeed more than able - to possess any of it. The spiritual application of this principle to New Testament teaching is very graphic and helpful. It is only on the basis of the 'givenness' of sanctification ('He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified' Hebrews 10:14) that we can make it our own. This is a variation of the pattern 'You are … therefore be …' - 'You are free, therefore be free, and live as a freeman should' (Galatians 5:1ff) - that lies at the heart of all true advancement in spiritual life. In this light, Paul's famous words in Ephesians 5:18, 'Be filled with the Spirit' must surely mean 'Let His blessed indwelling (which is a fact if we are believers at all) be all that it was designed and intended to be'. The words 'begin to possess' also indicate - both in the historical and in the spiritual realm - that it does not take place all at once, but in and through a step by step appropriation. Nor, indeed, is this inconsistent with strenuous moral effort. The Israelites had to do the fighting with Sihon and the Amorites, just as Christians have to do battle with the forces of evil arrayed against them, but the battle was not theirs - as also it is not ours - but God's. It is never a 'walkover', in any sense of the term, even in the context of what is said in 36 about 'not one city being too strong' for them.

15) ***3:1-20***

The story continues with the account of the overthrow of Og, king of Bashan, in the same terms as that of Sihon, in yesterday's reading. It will be noted that the treatment meted out to these two kings, with the divine directive as to their destruction, is different from that given to Moab and Ammon. Concern is often expressed at the fierce and total destruction of these Canaanitish tribes - and the passage unquestionably makes grim reading - but what we must recognize is that the people of God were waging holy war - this is a biblical concept, whatever people may say to the contrary today - and Israel must be regarded in this respect as the instrument of divine judgment against wicked and depraved peoples whose cup of iniquity had been filled to the brim. The totality of the destruction was necessary because the poisonous infection of evil in these tribes was such that this was the only way for the land itself to survive. Anything less than this would simply have allowed the evil to proliferate yet again. Objections to this view serve to take issue with God Himself, in His right to deal with evil in His own way, and they ultimately call in question the fundamental issues of a moral universe. Indeed, they call in question the realities of judgment and hell, and this is to call in question our Lord's own unequivocal teaching on these subjects. We must be very careful in our studies of such grim and difficult passages lest we find ourselves at odds with God Himself when we disagree with such a view, on grounds of Christian love and compassion. Are we really to say that God Himself is lacking in 'Christian' values?

16) ***3:1-20***

The account of the apportionment of what we now know as Transjordan to the two and a half tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh, reads straightforwardly and without complication; but there is another and fuller account given in Numbers 32, and this should be read along with today's passage. In Numbers, we are told that the tribes came to Moses requesting permission to make the land of Gilead their permanent dwelling place, instead of going into Canaan itself with the rest of the people. They made this request, according to Numbers, because they had large flocks of cattle and they saw that Gilead was ideal cattle country. Moses reacted very markedly to this suggestion (Numbers 32:6-15), immediately identifying it with the spirit of Kadesh-Barnea, when (ch 24) Israel were unwilling to go in and possess the land. At Moses' reaction, the tribes then replied to Moses that they did not intend to neglect their responsibilities in the wars of the Lord in Canaan: they would go over Jordan to fight, but would leave their wives and children in the fenced cities in Gilead. In other words, they now indicated that it was concern for their families that actuated them in their desire and request (Numbers 32:16-19). This revised version was accepted by Moses, and the request was granted (20-24). It is this that is referred to in today's passage in Deuteronomy. If Numbers 32 is a reliable guide and we accept it as such - there can be little doubt that the tribes made a serious error of judgment here, and that their attitude was correctly interpreted by Moses in the first instance, in his reaction to it. This is an incident that will repay further consideration, and we shall turn to it again in tomorrow's Note.

17) ***3:1-20***

It would seem that the two and a half tribes saw something materially profitable in the prospect of inheriting Gilead, and they lost interest in going over Jordan (Numbers 32:5) in their desire for it. One is reminded of the story in Genesis 13:10ff, when Lot lifted up his eyes toward the plain of Jordan and beheld that it was well-watered everywhere, and chose it, despite the fact that he was choosing an environment that was morally and spiritually dangerous. The very wording in Numbers 32:1 is reminiscent of that earlier, fateful choice made by Lot, to his ultimate discomfiture and loss. And this choice was likewise fateful for the tribes concerned; for repeatedly, in later years, that was the portion of Israel that bore the first brunt of enemy attack, because they were so vulnerable, and because they did not have the protection of the river they refused to cross (cf Judges 10:8, 17, 18; 1 Kings 22:3; 2 Kings 10:32, 33; 2 Kings 15:29; 1 Chronicles 5:26). Moses' second response to Reuben, Gad and Manasseh must therefore be regarded as permissive of what was certainly a compromise. We may wonder at this; but we have learned enough about Israel's waywardness and their determination to go their own way to realise that God was, as it were, saying to them once again, 'Very well, if you are set on this, after all I have brought you through, I will accept the situation as you have delineated it. Gilead will be yours - to your cost:' 'He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul' (Psalm 106:15). How often have these words of the Psalmist applied to Israel's experience: (see Judges 5:5-17 for a significant comment on Reuben's attitude here).

18) ***3:1-20***

Before we pass from this incident, let us draw another lesson from it. The disquieting thing about Reuben's attitude is that he was saying two different things at the same time, not only to Moses but also to himself. This tends to lead to a double life, in which we deceive ourselves, and lead ourselves into an attitude of compromise which is a living lie. Reuben said one thing, but he meant another. His concern for his little ones (19, and cf also Numbers 32:16ff), however genuine in itself it may have been, was only an excuse to hide his carnal desire for the plains of Gilead. And this is what happens in spiritual life. We tell ourselves, and others, one thing; but the real reasons for not going over Jordan are different. The tragedy is that the real reasons become hidden from us also, and they no longer remain conscious in our minds. This is how the unhappy, unsatisfactory and spiritually barren state of compromise comes to pass, in which it is quite possible to pay lip service to the call of God, yet live at odds with it, to be 'under arms', it may be, and fighting the battles of the Lord, as Reuben and the others intended to do, but not with a full, unreserved commitment, and on a different footing from real warriors of God. Do such people really think that no one has discerned that this is how it is with them? Do they really think that such a compromising position, however subtly disguised, can be hidden? Why, it rings in their very voice: it cannot be concealed, for there is something in the nature of the warfare itself that serves to expose anything less than full and wholehearted commitment. We should not forget Moses' words in Numbers 32:23: 'Be sure your sin will find you out' - not, be it noted, 'your sin will be found out' - it will find you out, search you out, hunt you out, be your destroyer. The plains of Gilead cost Reuben dearly in the end. Compromise always does.

19) ***3:21-29***

Two points remain to be considered in this chapter. The first relates to Moses' words to Joshua (21, 22). The lesson these verses teach is a very simple one: it is that of the utter consistency of God. He is always true to character, and this is something on which we may always depend. This is the message to Joshua and to us. What He has done in the past, and what He has been in the past, He will continue to be and to do, given similar circumstances. What an assurance, to the man who was about to take over the leadership of God's people! The second relates to the 'disqualification' of Moses from entering into the Promised Land. There is something inexpressibly moving about these words (23ff). The reference is, of course, to the incident at the waters of Meribah, recorded in Numbers 201ff (cf also Psalm 106:32, 33), when Moses' 'spake inadvisedly with his lips', and was for this unwarranted outburst 'disqualified'. It has seemed to some that this was an extreme punishment for it was a sin committed under great provocation, stands in Scripture as a testimony to the seriousness with which God looks upon sin; and the incident was clearly regarded by God as a very grave one. It is a reminder to us that no one - not even one living in such close and intimate fellowship with God as Moses did - can presume upon that relationship. Perhaps - instead of being critical here - it would be better and safer to think of the implications of such an outburst being passed over unchecked, and what kind of spirit that would have allowed to germinate within the corporate life of Israel. God is holy: this is the message. He will not give His glory to another. Having said all this, is it not nevertheless wonderful that, although Moses had to be content with viewing the Promised Land from the top of Mount Pisgah, the patriarch is recorded in the New Testament (Luke 9:30, 31) as having stood on Mount Hermon at our Lord's Transfiguration? Does not this whisper to us that what is denied us here in this life because of the disciplines of grace may be granted to us and wonderfully fulfilled for us in the life to come?

20) ***4:1-8***

After the historical retrospect of the past three chapters, and on the basis of it, Moses now issues an appeal to the present generation to give heed to all that past history was saying to them. This chapter provides the climax of the first of the three main addresses given by Moses in Deuteronomy to the people of Israel as they gathered on the borders of the Promised Land. It should be borne in mind, as one commentator puts it, that 'Moses was addressing a nation of young men'. There is a certain sense of significance in realising that these words were spoken to a young generation who had everything before them and everything to live for. This surely heightens the challenge to the chapter. The whole thrust of these opening verses is that obedience would mean life and blessing; disobedience, death and destruction. This is not to be misinterpreted as a legalistic 'do-good-ism', but rather an exhortation based on what God had done for them in His grace. This is the characteristic note in the whole concept of divine grace, both in the Old Testament and in the New. The warning in 2 against adding or taking from the word God had spoken to them is said by the commentators to reflect the insistence made in ancient treaties that the terms of the treaty were not to be changed in any way. So it was to be here: the covenant was to be regarded as unalterable. Applied in the spiritual sense, this has permanent value in relation to the Word: to add to it in any way (as, e.g. the Pharisees did), would be to turn the Word of God into the traditions and commandments of men. This is emphasised in relation to the importance of obedience, and an incident from Israel's own history is instanced in 3, 4, to make the point. We shall look at this in the next Note.

21) ***4:1-8***

The incident referred to in 3, 4 relates to the sad and sordid ending to the 'Balaam' story recorded in Numbers 22-25. The immediate reference is to Numbers 25:1-6, but the whole incident of Balaam is significant, in that it shows the working of the evil one against the people of God, seducing them into wickedness. The reference to it here was very apposite, in relation to where they were then gathered together - over against Beth-Peor (3:29). Doubtless it was the very fact that they were now in the place where this atrocity had been committed that Moses felt constrained to make mention of it in such a warning. But there is something else of even greater moment here. In Numbers 24:15ff we have the wonderful prophecy about Christ - this, in the context of Israel's lapse - and surely a reminder of the tremendous issues involved in being the covenanted people of God. Here, in Balaam's prophecy, was the divine light breaking through, giving a glimpse of the ultimate purpose of their having been called of God, yet Israel was sinning, putting in jeopardy the divine purposes for the world. What immense and imponderable issues were involved, and how great the need for continuing obedience to the will and word of God! This is always to be taken into consideration in the experience of God's people - we may never know just what awful harm we are doing God's purposes of grace in the fellowship, in the community, even in the world, when we become careless and fall into sin.

22) ***4:9-14***

The exhortation contained in these verses is one that rings out repeatedly in Deuteronomy. This emphasis on remembering is important: a true recollection of what we have seen of God and from God is an inner dynamic for life, and this serves to explain why the New Testament also underlines it so emphatically (cf Ephesians 2:11ff). Such remembrance becomes - and is intended to become - the basis and motivation of true and generous and godly living. Also, and even more important, all this is to figure in the instruction of children and grandchildren (9). No one who reads the Old Testament, and especially its earlier books, could fail to recognize what great store is placed on the need for proper and adequate instruction of the young in the things of God. What is in view is instruction in terms of a whole lifestyle. Children need to be given the whole of the biblical revelation, and, within that context, specific teaching on various issues. Children absorb and take away attitudes from those who teach them, and if the glory of the biblical revelation is truly felt by us, and is real to us, it must surely become real to our children. This is the force of the particular emphasis on Horeb in 10. The law was given with such awesome accompaniments in order to underline its majesty and holiness, and it is this that communicates a spirit of reverence and worship, to old and young alike. It is beyond question that early impressions of awe and solemnity left on young children's hearts mark them permanently for good. Many of God's people can look back with gratitude to their childhood days when this true foundation for worship was laid in their minds and hearts.

23) ***4:9-14***

If what was said at the end of the previous Note is valid, the question arises as to how best to expose our children to these beneficent influences. We have more than once commented on the incident in Acts 21:1-6 which tells of Paul's farewell meeting with the saints at Tyre, on his way to Jerusalem and imprisonment, when they knelt down, with their wives and children, to pray for the Apostle. What must such an occasion have meant for these children! We believe it would have been something they would never forget as long as they lived. Is this an argument for taking our children to important spiritual occasions, or to prayer meetings? Or do we say, 'Such meetings are not really suitable for children'? It may well be asked on what grounds Christian folks make such assumptions, for they would be hard put to find justification for them in Scripture. We recall an old lady we once met in South Wales, who as a girl had heard Evan Roberts the great preacher of the Welsh revival in 1904. We will not easily forget the awe in her voice as she recalled the experience. It had marked her for life! We can easily become too afraid in the wrong sense for our children, and may deprive them, more than we realise, of something very needful for their spiritual welfare, by being over-protective of them in 'guarding' them against what we may feel to be over-long services and over-religious influences, in the interests of their 'natural' development.

24) ***4:15-24***

We can think of no better comment on these verses than that given in the Gilcomston Bible Readings, by the Revelation. William Still: 'Moses now takes up the aforementioned fact (12) that Israel saw no similitude on Sinai to point a warning about idolatry which, in view of subsequent events, was very necessary. It did not save Israel and Judah ultimately from ignominious captivity and centuries of humiliation in the land, but they could not say they had not been warned - or that after the warning they were not favoured with hundreds of years of divine patience in the most aggravating circumstances. The danger of idolatry is very great, and it is intriguing to consider psychologically and spiritually what that danger is. The inclination to worship images contains not only the tendency to worship lower and lower creatures (cf Romans 1:23), but to externalise worship, so that whatever demands are made on the worshipper, he is still free to live some sort of a life apart from his god. This is what true religion denies. For the Christian faith involves a God within, in whose presence and light the whole life has to be lived, and this is a total demand. This is why all routine religion is inadequate, for it leaves man free (however religionists may deny that intention) to live his own sinful life when his devotions have been performed. To be honest and gracious at the bench and desk for Christ's sake is the sort of worship that no other religion than that of the indwelling Christ demands or supplies.' We shall look at the rest of the quotation in tomorrow's Note.

25) ***4:15-24***

We continue the quotation from the Gilcomston Bible Readings: 'Furthermore, to worship an inanimate object is so unsatisfying to intelligent creatures that their worship must engage their active powers in some sort of self-expression, and since sticks and stones do not make any moral demands, the self-expression can become, and does, more and more, carnal, and gives at last every entrance to demon spirits whose office is to invade empty personalities and find rest in them to their (the personalities) destruction. Rather was Israel to be a 'people of inheritance' (20), and although that phrase has various applications, both Godward and manward, it always involves a close relationship and common interest which can envisage nothing less than a life of active 'living together'. This is quite different from merely appeasing a glowering, angry god, or from paradoxically using Him as a means to satisfy the baser nature. This is a relationship in which man is ennobled into the fullest stature of his manhood in companionate walk with God, for it was to this end that the Word became flesh. See Daniel 7:4, which describes Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation in Daniel 2 until that creature, characterised as a vaulting beast, became a man with a man's heart. It is humility which makes men human, and pride which makes them inhumane. But the transformation can only be wrought by an indwelling God.'

26) ***4:25-31***

These verses constitute almost a prophetic utterance on Moses' part, as he looks forward into the future and contemplates what might happen - and indeed was to happen - to his people. It could be that the patriarch foresaw that such a declension as is referred to here was inevitable, given the fatal bias within the people towards evil; it may be, however, that this was more in the nature of a prophecy, the precise import of which he need not have truly grasped. At all events, subsequent history confirmed his words only too truly and literally. We should pay particular heed to the phrase in 25 'remained long in the land', which the RSV renders 'grown old in the land'. There is a deep message in these words, for 'growing old in the land', and becoming used to the blessings of God and taking them for granted can breed complacency and forgetfulness. How true this proved to be in the experience of Israel in its subsequent history. The times of Joshua were so much healthier for them than later times; and David's tribulation period was much healthier and safer for him than the days of his settled kingship. And does not Hosea remind a backslidden Israel of how different everything was when they were first 'espoused' to the Lord? And it is true also in the life of the Church and in the experience of individuals. Well might the prophet Habakkuk (3:2) pray, 'Revive Thy work in the midst of the years' - it is the middle years that are the difficult, dangerous ones, when we settle down, and begin to 'grow old in the land'. With regard to the declension mentioned in 25, 28, Delitzsch comments: 'What Moses threatens here, follows from the eternal laws of divine government. The more refined idolatry of image-worship leads to coarser and coarser forms, in which the whole nature of idol-worship is manifested in all its pitiableness', and Delitzsch goes on to quote from a contemporary scholar, 'When once the God of revelation is forsaken, the God of reason and imagination must also soon be given up and make way for still lower powers, that perfectly accord with the I exalted upon the throne, and in the time of pretended 'illumination' to atheism and materialism also'.

27) ***4:32-40***

Following upon the stern warning of the previous passage, these verses are deeply moving to read. We cannot sufficiently admire the way in which Moses exhorts the people against declension. It is impossible to miss the sense of wonder that his words convey to them. There has been nothing in the whole of history, he maintains, comparable to the dealings God has had with this people of His choice (32, 33). Yes, it is the sheer wonder of the divine election and the divine condescension that is ever the best incentive to both devotion and faithfulness on the part of God's people, in any age. What need there is, therefore, to be constantly rehearsing all this - the miracle of divine grace in bringing His people out of Egypt, giving them a Land, giving them His law (36) - and what a moving statement we have in this verse, 'Out of heaven He made thee to hear His voice' - pledging to them His covenanted love (37). It is this that is emphasised so clearly in Paul's words in Ephesians 2:11, 'Wherefore remember ...'. And this, we may add, is the purpose and function of a continuing ministry of the Word in the Christian Church today, for how better could we recollect the mighty acts of God in our redemption than by going over the Word that expounds and unfolds them, over and over again, drawing continual wonder and awe from the realisation of the greatness of God's love in Christ. This is the best way to remember, being much in the whole counsel of God, delighting in its riches, meditating on His ways, until our whole souls are kindled and fired by a passion to walk in obedience to His will all the days of our life.

28) ***4:41-43***

These verses deal with the appointment of the cities of refuge. For a fuller account, see Numbers 35. The following comment is from our earlier Notes in Numbers. 'The appointment of these cities belonged to the general judicial system that was evolved among the Old Testament people of God. It is important to understand this. It will be noticed that the provision they offered was for the manslayer, not the murderer (Numbers 35:16ff), for the man who killed inadvertently or unawares, not the man who deliberately took life. In ancient times, not only in Israel, but among other nations, the duty of avenging a killing lay upon the nearest kinsman; and obviously occasions would arise in which vengeance might well be wreaked on those who had not killed deliberately, and it would seem that this merciful legislation was instituted to prevent excesses that might develop from blood-feuds. A man could flee to such a city of refuge for sanctuary, pending an enquiry into the matter made by the congregation, who would judge whether it was a deliberate murder or an inadvertent killing. If the latter, the killer could find refuge and sanctuary in the city, and be free from the fear of retribution, so long as he remained within its walls. If he ventured outside its protection, it was his own responsibility. He could be slain with impunity then, with none but himself to blame. One of the spiritual lessons for us here lies in the type of Christ that these cities of refuge always have been taken to afford, down the ages of the Church's history. And the various constituent parts of the type are remarkable in the way they point to, and illustrate the spiritual realities of the gospel in the New Testament.

29) ***4:44-49***

We come at this point to the second (and main) message of Moses to the people, and these verses constitute the preface to that message (see Note 3 for Friday, 16th December for general analysis). This address occupies the major part of Deuteronomy (5:1-26:58). The preface consists of a geographical note, identifying where Moses spoke, and some historical details which summarise the events which preceded the giving of that message. The following summary of the whole section, given by Delitzsch in his commentary on Deuteronomy, will prove a useful guide as we go on in our study: 'This address, which is described in the heading as the law which Moses set before the Israelites, commences with a repetition of the decalogue, and a notice of the powerful impression which was made, through the proclamation of it by God Himself, upon the people who were assembled before Him at Horeb (ch 5). In the first and more general part, it shows that the true essence of the law, and of that righteousness which the Israelites were to strive after, consisted in loving Jehovah their God with all their heart (ch 6); that the people were bound, by virtue of their election as the Lord's people of possession, to exterminate the Canaanites with their idolatrous worship, in order to rejoice in the blessing of God (ch 7); but more especially that, having regard on the one hand to the divine chastisement and humiliation which they had experienced in the desert (ch 8), and on the other hand to the frequency with which they had rebelled against their God (ch 9:1-10:11), they were to beware of self-exaltation and self-righteousness, that in the land of Canaan, of which they were about to take possession, they might not forget their God when enjoying the rich productions of the land, but might retain the blessings of their God for ever by a faithful observance of the covenant (ch 10:12-11:32).' Then after this there follows an exposition of the different commandments of the law (ch 12-26).

30) ***5:1-5***

These verses form an introduction to the statement of the law which follows in 6ff, and point out the importance and significance of the exposition which is about to be given, which consists in the fact that it contained the covenant of the Lord with His people. We should note particularly the statement made in 3: 'fathers' do not refer to that generation's immediate parents, who had died in the wilderness, nor the previous generation that had died in Egypt, but the patriarchs themselves, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses is referring to the covenant that had been made at Sinai, rather than the earlier covenant made with Abraham. The Sinaitic covenant was, of course, an expression of that earlier covenant, but it was at Sinai that Israel had been constituted as the covenant people of God, and it is this that Moses is referring to here. And Moses is reminding them that Sinai was not simply an event of the past, but was the concern of every Israelite at that point. As the Tyndale commentary observes, 'the original Israel held within it all later Israelites. It was the responsibility of every Israelite in every age to identify himself with his ancestors and to participate in memory and in faith in their experience of God's deliverance.' The nature and quality of that covenant is expressed clearly in 4, in the words 'the Lord talked with you face to face', as being based on a personal relationship. It is this that must be definitive in our understanding of Old Testament experience. The 'law', which follows in 6ff, is not to be understood in terms of legalistic observance, but in terms of that personal relationship. This is something of enormous importance not only in our understanding of Deuteronomy, but of the whole Old Testament, as we shall begin to see in the next Note on the Commandments.

31) ***5:6-21***

These verses repeat the Ten Commandments given originally in Exodus 20:1-17. There are two ways in which we could study them: one is to take the Commandments one by one and look at them in detail. This is an entirely legitimate thing to do, and one, indeed, that is necessary, and we did this in our studies in Exodus. But it is possible in doing so to miss a great deal of their significance. It is important for us to understand the purpose and function of the law in the economy of God, and it will be useful at this point to study this whole question in some detail. Part of the problem in such a study lies in the fact that 'law' is used in a number of clearly different senses in Scripture, and these need to be identified if we are to avoid confusion. What follows now in the next Note or two is the substance of a paper prepared some time ago dealing with a) the varying uses of 'law' in Scripture, and b) the purpose and function of 'law' as unfolded in the Old and New Testaments and crystallised in the teaching of the Reformers.

32) ***5:6-21***

The Hebrew word 'Torah', meaning 'law' first of all means the Pentateuch, as distinct from the Prophets and the Writings (the other two divisions of the Old Testament). It also means the whole covenant relation of the Old Testament, the sum total of all God has revealed to His people. Thirdly, it means and signifies God's explicit claim on man, His direction for man's life. This latter is expressed in the Old Testament in a threefold way, in the civil (penal), ceremonial, and moral law. Then, there is the law of the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue. Then, there is the use of the law which contrasts law and promise, or law and gospel. Further, there is the idea of the law which equates law with the old covenant, in contrast with the new covenant. We also have the idea of the law that is written in men's hearts. Then, there is the idea of natural law, in the sense of the order of creation. Then, there is the law that 'entered', or 'slipped in between' (Romans 5:20), or was 'added' because of transgressions (Galatians 3:19). Finally, there is the law conceived as a method of divine education, as Paul indicates in Galatians 3/4 in his use of the idea of tutors and guardians.

33) ***5:6-21***

Let us now think of 'law' as expressive of the covenant relationship between God and man. 'I will be your God, and you will be My people.' 'I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me'. The law is therefore the expression of life within the covenant (not a method of entering into the covenant). God's will is to have fellowship with us. Since He is God, that will is expressed as a sovereign claim upon us. But since He is love, He desires that His sovereignty should be freely accepted by us. He wants to awaken a responsive love in us. Thus, the law, as God's explicit claim on man is to be understood in terms of the covenant established between man and God. When it is not thus understood, it degenerates into a righteousness of works. This is the distortion that Paul is battling against in Galatians. It is the idea of the covenant that, ultimately, excludes legal thinking. Law as the claim of God becomes constantly misunderstood in legal terms, as something we must do; whereas that claim is not in the first place asking us to do something, but to be something: 'My son, give Me thine heart'. All God wants is that we should love Him. It is out of this that all 'doing' springs. This is the principle that needs to be understood. 'Law' involves 'works', doing something definite: grace involves an existence, a being in the love of God, which issues in doing God's will.

34) ***5:6-21***

But law is also to be understood as a divine order established by creation. Law, in this sense, is something that God has established with man, and requires him to respect, and has to do with definite ways of human behaviour, as for example in the case of marriage and family relationships. What the husband owes to the wife, the wife to the husband, and what parents owe to children and children to parents - all this derives from the order of creation, which is the basis of all 'right behaviour', and is given for all time. It is not law in this sense that Paul is speaking of in Galatians or Romans; nor are we absolved from it, either by the gospel or any other consideration.

Similarly, we require to think of law as built into the structure of society, as the way God intends that His world should operate - that by which (as the Reformers taught) the indirect kingship of Christ is exercised in the world, whereas His direct kingship is exercised in the Church by the gospel. As one scholar has put it, 'The State will never be governed by the Word - in the sense of the gospel - but exclusively by the word of the Law, quite simply by the Decalogue, which is not the actual "Word" of Christ'. That this aspect of law is a 'constant', and not changed one way or the other by the gospel, should surely be evident; there can be no question of this being superseded, nor is it in view in Paul's teaching in Galatians.

35) ***5:6-21***

We consider finally the purpose and function of the law as crystallised in the teaching of the Reformers. Calvin sums up the 'office and use of what is called the moral law' in the following three ways:

(i) First, the law discloses to men the righteousness of God and in so doing convinces them of their sin. This is the accusing function of the law. Through the law, man must learn that he is a sinner before the message of the forgiveness of sins can mean anything to him.

(ii) The second office of the law is, to cause those who without constraint feel no concern for justice and rectitude, when they hear its terrible sanctions, to be at least restrained by a fear of its penalties. This is the 'civil' use of the law, and it serves the purpose of God's common grace in the world at large.

(iii) The third use of the law is that it is a rule of life for believers, reminding them of their duties and leading them in the way of life and salvation. It is 'an excellent instrument to give them from day to day a better and more certain understanding of the divine will to which they aspire and to confirm them in the knowledge of it'.

One supremely important consideration, however, underlined by Calvin, is that the law 'no longer exercises towards us the part of a rigorous exacter, only to be satisfied by the perfect performance of every injunction'. We are no longer slaves, but sons, members of a family.

36) ***5:22-33***

The significance of the repeating of the Ten Commandments at this point needs to be considered also. It is this: the people were on the threshold of a new beginning, they were at last about to enter into the Land, and what was in effect taking place was a renewal of the covenant. Moses is reminding this generation of Israelites how it was with that first generation when they received the law at Sinai, and how they responded in the obedience of faith to what God had said (cf Exodus 19:7ff and 20:18ff). This is the point made here (27). The people promised to do all that the Lord had said. Sadly, they failed of this high promise, with the sad and inevitable consequence recorded in the second half of the book of Numbers; and the exclamation in 29 seems to echo both longing and warning that it might be - and must be - different with this new generation. At all events, wellbeing and prosperity would certainly depend on a new and continuing obedience from them as they prepared to enter their inheritance in Canaan. Moses is accepted by God as a mediator (32) through whom the unfolding of the divine commandments would be given to the people, and what follows in chapter 6 onwards gives us the interpretation and extension of these fundamental commands of the Decalogue. It is in this light and against this background that we are to understand the phrase 'that ye may live' in 33 - not as a religion of works in order to attain life, but rather, obedience as the expression of their gratitude to God for their redemption. It is no more legalistic than Jesus' own words, 'If ye love Me, keep My commandments'. What is in view here is not 'entrance into life', but quality of life and wellbeing and prosperity.

37) ***6:1-9***

We come in these verses to the expression of what was the very heart of Israel, a confession, namely that the Lord their God was One, and as such the sole object of their faith and obedience. The verses beginning at 4, 'Hear, O Israel ...' are known to Jews everywhere as the 'Shema' (the Hebrew word for 'hear'), and has been and is recited along with 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41 as a daily prayer. The central phrase has been translated in various ways, such as 'Jehovah is our God, Jehovah alone'. As such it is meant to be an exclusive statement, and all other gods are put out of court. One commentator suggests that the meaning and significance is that to Him alone does the name Jehovah belong and there is nobody like Him. This readily brings to mind the sublime words in Isaiah 40:18, 25, 'To whom then will ye liken God ...?' That these words should have been quoted by our Lord Himself (Mark 12:29ff) is of great significance. It is a great misunderstanding to suppose that Jesus was simply meeting the Pharisees on their own ground here, in terms of their legalistic religion, and that His real message was that of the gospel; this, rightly understood, is the gospel, and everything Jesus came to do, in His life, death, rising again and ascension to the Father's right hand, His sending forth of the Spirit, was accomplished in order that this great commandment might be fulfilled in us, in lives of obedience and love. The great Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner puts it very succinctly when he writes: 'It is thus and for this reason that He is the fulfilment of the Law: as Mediator, Revealer, Reconciler. For indeed even He wills to be known as the Lord Jesus. He does not wish to have any mere hearers, but disciples who do His will. It is a terrible misunderstanding, the worst, the most subtle fraud ever perpetrated in the Name of God, if we think that everything does not depend upon this obedience, if we hold that through faith in the Mediator, in justification, this obedience has become either superfluous or a secondary matter. Faith is obedience - nothing else - literally nothing else at all.'

38) ***6:1-9***

It is easy to see, of course, how this teaching might be misunderstood and distorted into a legalistic bondage. The instructions given in 8, 9 were originally given in figurative language. The 'signs' were indeed only meant to be signs, signifying an inward reality, namely an undeviating observance of the divine commands; but literal fulfilment of them, which became an empty formality with so many of them, and especially for the Pharisees in our Lord's day, would be significant only as the expression of an inward, spiritual attitude. It is much easier to wear something on your arm or head, than in your heart of hearts. It was this danger that the prophets later recognized as having become a reality in the life of Israel and that made them thunder against the futility of empty sacrifice, and that Jesus saw so plainly in the religion of the Pharisees (cf Matthew 23:5). 'Loving God' is the basis and heart of all the law and the prophets, and is therefore an inward, not an outward reality, and when the 'signs' of this become a substitute or the thing signified, the distortion is complete, and men are led into bondage. To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8) is what the Lord requires of His covenant people; and where this is absent, as the prophets saw so clearly, everything else, however meticulous in literal observance of the law, is utterly in vain.

39) ***6:10-25***

One central significance in this passage lies in the emphasis made within it on the importance of recollection and remembrance and the danger of forgetting. The salient point is that, having been the recipients of the divine favour and bounty - and how lavishly God had blessed and enriched them is underlined in 10b, 11, cities they built not, houses they filled not, wells they digged not, vineyards they planted not, but all given them by Him - they might well become complacent, forgetting the Giver in taking them for granted, as a right. This is not the first time Moses has emphasised the point (cf 4:23), and its reiteration here is surely timely for us all. It is one of the perils of affluence, whether material or spiritual, that we become used to God's good gifts, and take them unthinkingly. That is the point at which we may all too easily and imperceptibly subside into lukewarmness. One recalls in this connection two warnings from other parts of Scripture which have something to say to us, one in Psalm 62:10, 'If riches increase, set not thy heart upon them', the other in Proverbs 30:8, 9, 'Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny Thee ...'. Both references bear witness to a consciousness of the danger inherent in affluence. Nor is Moses' warning merely a negative one, for 'not forgetting' is defined positively in 13 in terms of 'fearing the Lord' and 'swearing by His name'. The tragedy, of course, in forgetting God lay in the likelihood of turning to 'strange gods', and this became only too fateful a reality for Israel, as subsequent history was to show.

40) ***6:10-25***

The reference to God as 'a jealous God' in 15 needs to be linked with what is said in 4 about His exclusive Lordship, and when it is, we need not be concerned to disabuse our minds of human notions of jealousy which, commentators say, is unfitting and unworthy in reference to God. For in fact it is precisely the human kind of jealousy that is in view here. A man is right to be jealous of any encroachment into or threat upon his relationship with his wife, for rightly considered that is an exclusive relationship which no one is entitled to challenge. And the Lord's relationship with His people is exclusive in that sense. He will brook no rivals here, and is entitled to be jealous with any rival who dares to intrude. It is this that invests the incident at Massah with such seriousness. This incident, as the Tyndale Commentary says, (Exodus 17:1-7) 'in which Israel put God to the test, is now recalled as another warning. To test God is to impose conditions on Him and to make His response to the people's demand in the hour of crisis the condition of their continuing to follow Him. In the wilderness when the people needed water they proposed the production of water by Moses as a test to determine whether Jehovah was among them or not (Exodus 17:7). But such an act is an impertinence and contrary to faith, for it refuses the signs offered by God and proposes to substitute others which are acceptable to man. By doubting God's sovereignty in the hour of need or crisis, the people sought to gain the initiative and to compel God to prove Himself to them by spectacular deeds which they themselves had proposed (cf 1:19-46). In His day Jesus refused to offer signs to the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 12:38, 39; 16:1-4).

41) ***6:10-25***

The reference to teaching children, in 20ff, takes up what is said earlier, in 2. What is said here is both important and deeply moving, and provides the best kind of basis for spiritual instruction and training in families. Put in modern terminology, it means that when our children say, 'Why should I do this? Why should I obey?', we are to reply, not in terms of 'I am your father, and you will do as I tell you', but - and this by way of explanation why obedience to the commandments is required - 'We were Pharaoh's bondmen in Egypt, and the Lord brought us out with a mighty hand …' (21ff). In other words, not a legalistic observance of His commands, but an evangelical response in gratitude to such a God for His mighty redemptive work. What a setting for the keeping of the law! This is something we should take far more seriously than we often do, in the matter of training up our children. It would surely make an indelible impression on young hearts to hear their father say something like, 'Well, my son, I was not always what I am now. I was once a prisoner, in the bondage of sin, broken and in despair; but the Lord laid His hand upon me, and lifted me from sinking sand, put a new heart in me, and a new song on my lips. That is why I am now living the Christian life, and that is why I want you, my son, to obey the Lord your God.'

It is not possible but that such a testimony should impress a child's mind and heart and convey a sense of the reality of the living God in such a way as to bespeak and claim that child's allegiance for the kingdom. Have we such a testimony? Let us try this, then, with our children!

42) ***7:1-11***

We come in this chapter to what Israel is to do when they go in to possess the Land. The subject is their future relationship with the Canaanite population. There is a sense in which the teaching here is quite straightforward and simple, not needing much by way of formal exposition, but the implications of what is said here are very considerable. In 1 we see the purposefulness of their going into the land. They had a definite objective: it was not to be an uncertain campaign, the outcome of which might be one thing or another. God had already decreed that the land was to be theirs. One readily thinks in this connection of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:26, 'I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air'. Two things in particular need to be said about the warfare that Israel was to be engaged in. The first is the supernaturalness of the exercise. They were to have divine help against nations mightier than they were, and would prevail against them because of that help. For it was to be no ordinary war of conquest - this is the second point - but a holy war, in which God the Lord would take full responsibility for what was done. It was His war, and He was using the Israelites as the instrument of His wrath against nations whose cup of iniquity was full and running over. The point that is being made is that there is a Power in the universe that is set utterly against the forces of evil, and that He is determined to put it down. In this respect, what is written here belongs to the revelation of grace in Scripture, for this is what God is pledged to do in the gospel - to put down evil and vindicate righteousness.

43) ***7:1-11***

The reason why Israel were to have no covenant with any of these Canaanitish peoples, and no association, is unfolded in 6ff. It was because they were a holy people, separated unto the Lord, and the danger of losing their 'separation' would always be real. Hence the radical nature of their attitude to everything belonging to their enemies, especially their religious rites and images and altars. The statement in 7, 8 is a deeply moving one, illustrating the inscrutability of the divine electing love, unconditioned and uncaused. It was nothing in them, but something in God that explained their election: not because they were lovable, but because He is love, did He choose them. This is the real biblical incentive to holiness. The scholars tell us that the word 'holiness' has a twofold connotation etymologically: one the idea of separation, the other that of brightness. The two ideas go together; for Israel's election was unto something, i.e. service; they were to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and only by being holy, in the sense of 'separate', could they really 'shine' as 'lights'. This is what both Jesus and the apostles take up in the New Testament, as we may see in Matthew 5:14ff, 'Ye are the light of the world ... Let your light so shine before men ...', that is, by fulfilling the spirit of Matthew 5:1-12, and being separate unto God and therefore different (cf also Philippians 2:14ff, '... shine as lights in the world ...'). What is said in 9, 10 amplifies the statement made in Exodus 20:5, 6. The 'thousand generations' is not so much a literal as a symbolic term denoting unchanging grace down the ages to the end of time. The 'therefore' in 11 follows inexorably from all that has preceded it: it is incumbent on God's people to live in character with the dignity conferred upon them by His sovereign love.

44) ***7:12-15***

Here is a wonderful assurance given by God to His people, in the promise of such abundant blessing upon obedience to the covenant. We should particularly note what is said at the beginning of 13, 'He will love thee'. There is more in this than a statement of the obvious, for of course God loved them - He loved them even when, alas, they were disobedient - but here it is, as it were, the love of appreciation that is in view, that is to say, the love that is able to express itself. When His people are obedient to Him, it means, He is able to express His love to them in a way that is simply not possible otherwise. Our lack of obedience often prevents Him giving expression to the wealth of love that is in His heart towards us. The New Testament parallel to this is found in John 14:21, 23, and in such passages as Luke 7:36ff, where we see Jesus very sensitive to two different attitudes to Him. Just as on the human level, if we love someone who does not return our love, this effectively stifles the deepest expressions of our love, so also in our relationship to God, our failure to love Him prevents Him loving us as He longs to do. It is answering love that opens the floodgates of the divine love. And, we may say, the riotous prodigality of that love's expression, as indicated in 13ff, could never be over-stated. All these things - and many more - are added to our happy experience. As the hymn says,

The love of Jesus, what it is,
None but His loved ones know.

45) ***7:16-26***

We learn from these verses that the grace of recollection is the cure for fear. What they are saying to us is: 'Remember how God helped you in the past, and take heart whenever you feel fearful about all that faces you now and in the future.' What God had done to the Egyptians He would also do to the Canaanites. It is as if God were saying, 'My beloved people, the battle is not yours, but Mine. I will fight for you, and put all your enemies to flight.' The manner in which the Lord undertook to do this, however, as expressed in 22, is deeply significant. It was to be a gradual, progressive operation, 'little by little'. To have done it in one fell swoop would have been more than they could have coped with, for with the immediate extinction of the Canaanitish tribes, the beasts of the field would inevitably increase and prove to be a dangerous hazard for the children of Israel. It is the practical problems involved in creating a vacuum, without having anything adequate to fill it with; and spiritual parallels readily come to mind here. One thinks, for example, of our Lord's words about the unclean spiriting out of a man and returning with seven other spirits into the 'empty, swept and garnished' house (Matthew 12:43-45), simply because nothing good had taken its place in the meanwhile. It is a principle of wide application to spiritual work and spiritual experience, and we would do well to ponder it. God's way of doing things is always the wisest and most practical.

46) ***8:1-6***

We come, in the next subsection of Moses' second address to Israel (8:1-10:12), to the application of some lessons from their past experience during the wilderness wanderings after the judgment of Kadesh-Barnea. Delitzsch makes this opening comment on the section: 'In addition to the danger of being drawn aside to transgress the covenant, by sparing the Canaanites and their idols out of pusillanimous compassion and false tolerance, the Israelites would be especially in danger, after their settlement in Canaan, of falling into pride and forgetfulness of God, when enjoying the abundant productions of that land. To guard against this danger, Moses set before them how the Lord had sought to lead and train them to obedience by temptations and humiliations during their journey through the desert. In order that his purpose in doing this might be clearly seen, he commenced (v 1) with the renewed admonition to keep the whole law which he commanded them that day, that they might live and multiply and attain to the possession of the promised land.' The blessings of the covenant are summed up succinctly in 1, in terms of life, descendants and a land, all promised to obedience. What follows the first verse describes the disciplines God applied to their experience, all with a view to prove them - not one part of it was devoid of meaning and significance and instruction, hence they were called to remember all the way God had led them throughout these forty years. It was a long-term discipline, and this was a long-term review.

47) ***8:1-6***

We will do well to pause for another day with these opening verses of the chapter before going on. The important words are 'to prove thee' in 2 and 'as a man chasteneth his son, so the Lord thy God chasteneth thee' in 5. Israel did not become a perfect people all at once, but had to be taught and brought to a place of conscious dependence on God. And the ongoing discipline of being made into instruments of the divine purpose and being brought to the place where it is possible to make one's contribution to that purpose is all-embracing and very much 'long-term', as was said at the end of the previous Note. And it is so also in spiritual life. Before we became Christians, we were conditioned by the world's standards and values: they were inbuilt into our system; and therefore, when we become Christians there is so much shedding and discarding to be done, and so much to unlearn. We must not assume that we can live the Christian life in terms of the old values that have hitherto been so much part and parcel of our lives. Demolition has to take place before new foundations can be laid and a new building raised up. In this connection we would do well to examine many of the significant statements in Hebrews 11 about the lives of the heroes of the faith - so often it was what they did at the end that was important and significant in the divine economy, and all the ongoing discipline of chastening they experienced had that in view (cf also Hebrews 12:7ff). God knows what He is doing with us, though sometimes we do not, and we must learn to trust Him, even in the dark.

48) ***8:7-20***

This is a notable passage. It begins with a description of the 'good land' that God had given them (7-10), then continues with a warning not to forget Him in their enjoyment of all His blessings and benefits. What is said about the richness of the land (cf 11:12, where it is spoken of as 'a land which the Lord thy God careth for') is particularly interesting and significant in relation to what it more than once in their subsequent history became, a barren desert and wilderness. Its natural resources were - and are undoubted, as Israel's times of prosperity and affluence during, for example, the reigns of David and Solomon; but national declension seems to have let it run to seed; and it has again and again needed the touch of the divine hand in spiritual restoration to restore that natural prosperity to what it was always meant to be, and to make 'the wilderness and the solitary place glad, and the desert rejoice and blossom as the rose' (Isaiah 35:1). The dramatic history of modern Israel shows forth all this as clearly as does the biblical record: the miraculous renewing of the land since 1948 is evident for all to see; but we should not fail to continue the association of ideas into the realm of economic duress and hardship today, with rampant and near astronomic inflation all but paralysing its national life. What modern nations - not only Israel - need to learn is that nations become poorer (whatever their natural potential) as moral decline increases. It is God Who sends blasting and mildew upon nations.

49) ***8:7-20***

In what the Tyndale commentary calls 'one of the longest sentences in Hebrew literature' (12-17) Israel is given a stern warning as to the consequences of forgetting God, in the enjoyment of the material blessings He provides. The danger is very real, always - not only in natural life (as we may see in the experience of Nebuchadnezzar, in Daniel 4:30), but also in the lives of God's people. The dangers of complacency in times of affluence are far greater than we often realise, in the easy acceptance of the good things of God, and the assumption that we are entitled to them, as a right, and in the lack, or loss, of awareness of the hardships and difficulties of earlier days. The now notorious utterance of a former Prime Minister, that 'we have never had it so good' has certainly proved to be prophetic of an attitude that has bedevilled and all but destroyed our society in the late twentieth century, and made us more discontented as a nation than at any time in our history. Well, we are seeing the fruits of this now, in the disorder all around us, in the unrest and turmoil in the industrial scene, the violence in our streets, and the callous disregard of the sanctity of life that has brutalized our way of life. 'God is not mocked: whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap' (Galatians 6:7).

50) ***8:7-20***

As a further contribution to our consideration of these verses, we give the following comment from the Gilcomston Bible Readings, by the Revelation. William Still: 'The waywardness of human nature is such that as soon as it is blessed in things natural it tends to lean off God and regard itself as independent and self-sufficient. The only safeguard is that every blessing, natural and spiritual, be brought to God in thanksgiving. This should be easy enough to a grateful heart, but the acquisitive desire soon takes the place of humble gratitude and we invoke the Almighty as a means to our further ends and then even as One to be circumvented in achieving them. All joy goes out of our life after that and, at first unconsciously, we estrange ourselves from the Giver of every good and perfect gift. What a far-reaching text is "When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the Lord thy God for the good land which He hath given thee". A man who prospers in material things and yet does not lose contact with bedrock thankfulness to God is surely a phenomenon. It is not easy, but possible, Jesus says, for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Perhaps it is even harder for one aspiring to be rich. He is the blindest, for thankfulness looks back, not forward, and his greedy eyes are always away out in front. Little does he know that when he gets where he wants to be, God will be there to meet him, to require of him that which is past. The past and the future ought to meet in a poised tension of happy enjoyment and anticipation of present gratitude and faith.'

51) ***9:1-6***

Just as it was the chastisement and humiliation that God brought on His people to test and discipline them that was emphasised, here it is the frequency of their rebellion all along their history that Moses underlines in this chapter. To get the setting, we should compare 7 and 24 with Acts 7:51, 'Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost'. Is it not striking and significant that Moses in the Old Testament and Stephen in the New coincide in what they say of Israel? And is it not also significant that both, in doing so, serve to magnify the grace of God in what they say? In 1-3 we have a general statement about what was about to happen - the invasion and capture of Canaan. The language in which this is couched makes it clear that it was to be a supernatural, divine operation. Humanly speaking, Israel had no chance: the Anakims were mighty, and Israel had no natural resources with which to deal with them. But - and it is a big 'but' - God had sovereign purposes for them and with them. He was about to fulfil His will, and it was something infinitely greater than the welfare of one nation - it was part of the outworking of His redemptive purpose in the world. Israel was simply caught up in it. This is the point made in 5, in the words 'not for thy righteousness, but ... that He may perform the word which the Lord sware unto thy fathers ...'. It is a wonderfully exhilarating thought that God is 'marching on' in the fulfilment of His purposes, acting as 'a consuming fire' against all that might stand in His way. When men (or nations) cooperate with Him in these purposes, they are taken up into them, and blessed; when they resist, well, these purposes will still go forward, but men (and nations) will be crushed and set at nought. 'I will work', He says, 'and who shall let (hinder) it?' (Isaiah 43:13).

52) ***9:7-29***

The rehearsal of Israel's long and chequered history of rebelliousness from the time they left Egypt to the time they stood (as now) on the borders of the Promised Land, makes sad and sorry reading indeed. The most part of this statement refers to the incident of the golden calf at Sinai, in Exodus 32, and it will be helpful to read that chapter along with these verses. It is very interesting to see when it was that Israel lapsed into idolatry. Moses was away from them on the mount, and they were left to their own resources, after the exciting and thrilling events through which they had passed in leaving Egypt and crossing the Red Sea; and now there was a lull of inactivity. God deigns these lulls in the experience of His people, for the good reason that too much excitement is not good for people. He knows that there is a great temptation to live on excitement and thrills. It is easy for people to be carried along on the crest of a wave, but it is when the excitement subsides a little that sifting takes place and then one begins to see just how much their earlier protestations ('All that the Lord hath spoken we will do') are worth, when it is the humdrum, nitty-gritty ordinariness of spiritual life that is involved and in question. This is the real test. And, alas, the discipline of the ordinary is one that many of us seem so unwilling to endure. That is the point at which we tend to make our idols. He that has ears to hear, let him hear.

53) ***9:7-29***

The reference in 21 to Moses' grinding the golden calf into dust and casting it into the brook brings to mind the circumstances of the making of the idol at Sinai, as recorded in Exodus 32. It is not without significance that while Aaron was gathering the people's golden ornaments and trinkets for the making of the idol, God was telling Moses on the Mount that gold would be required for the holy service of the Tabernacle that was to be constructed. It was material earmarked for God that was thus prostituted to base and ignoble use. It does not require much thought or imagination to apply this to spiritual issues, and to ask whether the gold in our lives (unquarried and unrefined though it may be as yet) is being used in the service of God or in the service of sin. Time, talents and money - these are the categories we speak of in Christian service. Well, there is surely much gold there available for use, one way or the other. The hymn says, 'O choose me in my golden time' - does not this have something to say to us? Then there is the parable of the talents - are our talents being used for God, or for the devil? And what of the tremendous resources of love in our hearts? Is this given over to the service of God, or squandered and dissipated on base and worthless things? These are surely considerations that add a new dimension to Frances Ridley Havergal's well-known words, 'Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee ... Take my silver and my gold ...'. Well?

54) ***9:7-29***

One further thought on this chapter is necessary before we leave it: Moses' intercession for the people, in 25ff. The reference is to Exodus 32:30ff and the two passages should be read together. In Exodus, the account of the intercession follows upon Moses' moving appeal, 'Who is on the Lord's side?', and this is surely a parable underlining the need for 'gospel challenges' to be undergirt with prayer if they are to be effectual. We should not miss the clear indication given in Moses' intercession: the ground of his appeal for clemency and mercy is nothing in Israel at all, but rather something in God, His promises and His covenant to their forefathers, and the greatness of His own Name (27, 28). Grace, not merit or deserving, was the basis of their reprieve. And yet - as the Exodus reading makes plain - on the human level, the depth of Moses' love for the people, and the length he was prepared to go for their sakes - 'blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book' (cf Romans 9:3) - must surely have been instrumental in moving the hand of God in blessing upon them. All of which serves to teach us that in the continuing enjoyment of the blessing and favour of God we live, far more than we can ever realise, 'under the Mercy', so that we must always be exclaiming,

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!

55) ***10:1-11***

In this chapter we are still in the fourth section of Moses' second address to Israel, in which he looks back over Israel's past, to draw lessons from it. In chapter 8, it was the chastisement and humiliation that God brought on His people. In chapter 9 it was the frequency of their rebellion all along their history. This latter is continued in 10:1-11, while from 10:12 to 11:32, Moses gives a call to commitment to the God of the covenant. In our last reading, we looked at the lessons of Exodus 32, at Moses' intercession for the people, and his resounding call to them to consecrate themselves afresh to God, in the words 'Who is on the Lord's side ...?' This is not mentioned in the verses before us now, but it lies behind what is said. Indeed what we have here is the situation from the divine point of view - the divine response, as it were, to Moses' intercession. But we should note that their response of dedication is also involved in this. The divine response is one full of grace. This is Moses' point here: in spite of their great sin, and the seriousness of their rebellion against God, He not only forgave them, but also renewed the covenant with them (1-5). And more also: the reference in 6, 7 to Aaron's death implies not only, or principally, that Aaron's death was involved in the sin of the people, but rather that Aaron, in spite of his sin in leading the people astray, was appointed high priest and invested with the priesthood - showing that he was forgiven and reinstated by God, and that the priesthood was established and confirmed, not only to his son Eleazer, but also to his family, the tribe of Levi (8). Such is the richness of the grace of God!

56) ***10:1-11***

The reference in 7 to 'rivers of waters' calls forth the comment from Delitzsch that 'the earlier commentators observed the inward connection between the continuation of the high-priesthood and the water-brooks ...'. God generally associates material blessings with spiritual; as long as the ministry of the Word and the observance of divine worship flourish among us, God will also provide for our temporal necessities. We should note the threefold 'office' of the Levites: they were to bear the ark of the covenant, to stand before the Lord to minister to Him, and to bless the people in His name. The Tyndale commentary well observes that 'throughout the centuries that followed, the Levites, scattered throughout the land, must have undertaken a great deal of faithful ministry. It is not at all unlikely that groups of faithful Levites preserved the true covenant faith in days of apostasy'. It is not difficult, either, to discern 'spiritual lessons' in their threefold office: the ark was the repository of the tables of stone, and must ever symbolise for us the word of God; 'standing before the Lord' surely signifies prayer; and when the Word and prayer are given their proper place in and by God's servants, they will just as surely bless men in the Lord's name (cf Numbers 6:23-27). One is prompted to apply the Tyndale comment given above to our own situation in Scotland today, for it is the glad truth that the Lord's Levites are scattered throughout the land, bearing faithful witness to His Word and ministering in a spirit of earnest prayer week by week, preserving the true covenant of faith. And not only do they bless the people now, but in a much greater way they will yet bless the land in the Lord's name!

57) ***10:12-22***

The appeal in these verses is made on the ground of grace. They have received all that they have received without meriting it, they are debtors to grace and mercy in the covenant love of God. Their proper response must therefore be that of love to God and obedience to His word and will. This is the grace of the Old Testament. It is not a simple call to obedience unrelated to anything else - that would be a counsel of despair. Rather, in face of such manifestations of the grace and love and patience and longsuffering of God, the obedience follows as a matter of course. It will help if we look right on to 11:26-32 to see the summing up of this: God sets before them the blessing and the cursing - blessing if obedient, cursing if disobedient and rebellious. This is the theme of the call to commitment. We should note particularly the words in 13, 'for thy good'. Walking in obedience is not irksome. As the hymn puts it, 'Love will make obedience sweet'. The Apostle John says in his first epistle, 'His commandments are not grievous' (1 John 5:3). It is only when we do not want to do them that we find them irksome or grievous. To want to do them brings us into a new world, the world of grace. That is more than enough to contemplate for one day, and we shall return to the passage in tomorrow's Note.

58) ***10:12-22***

Let us now look at what Moses says about this God of grace. In 14, He is the transcendent God; He is the mighty and terrible God; in 21, 22, He is the wonder-working God, and the praise of His people. It is in this context, of the greatness of God, that the wonder and marvel - and mystery - of Israel's election is set. And mystery there is indeed, as we may particularly see in 15, where God's delight in His people is underlined. This is something quite unaccountable. The contrast between His greatness and the insignificance of His people is everywhere implied in these verses, and yet - that He should delight in them, that He should seek the love of their poor hearts, this is the astounding, unbelievable condescension (cf Psalm 149:4).

That Thou shouldst love a worm like me,
And be the God Thou art,
Is darkness to my intellect,
But music to my heart!

It is because of this that circumcision of the heart (16) - i.e. love towards God - and love and compassion for the stranger - i.e. the man-ward, horizontal dimension - are enjoined so inexorably. In 22 what we have is a simple statement of fact - this was a miracle not to be disputed or controverted: from 70 souls this family had grown to the multitude gathered on the borders of the land - they were a monument to the wonder-working power of their God, and to the faithfulness of His word!

59) ***11:1-9***

Here is another 'therefore' based on grace. In 2ff, the force of the words 'I speak not …' is that Moses is reminding them that he is addressing them as men who had seen the great things God had done. Their children had not known these things or experienced them, but they had (7). Your eyes, he says, have seen all the great acts that God wrought. The meaning is: 'Your children have not known or seen what you have known and seen; it is not with your children that I have to do, but with you, who have seen My mighty acts. It is to you that I now appeal and I call you, by these mighty acts, to obedience and love.' The particular incident in the wilderness wanderings referred to in 6 is the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram (cf Numbers 16). We may ask why this is singled out, and the answer may be that it emphasises the revolt against the authority of God that really lies behind all sin. It is as if Moses were saying to them, 'This is what all your failure has been like in the sight of God. Take heed therefore, and rather obey, if this is the alternative to obedience'. This is all very stark, but then the word of God does tend to go to the very heart of things: it is 'quick and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit ... and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart' (Hebrews 3:12). Hence also the clear and unequivocal emphasis in 8, 9: prosperity and victory would be contingent upon obedience and submission to the Lord.

60) ***11:10-17***

The description of the land of Canaan given in these verses is very beautiful and moving, and one can readily understand the feelings of God's people in any age as they read them. The prosperity and fertility of Egypt, say the commentators, was man-made, with elaborate and artificial irrigation by mechanical means, but it was not to be so with Canaan. It was to be a land of promise, dependent on the blessing of God for its prosperity. Not human industry, but divine endowment, was to be the criterion. For God's people in those days, these words were literally true, and were literally fulfilled, as indeed in remarkable and wonderful ways they have proved true also for modern Israel, and this must always be taken into account in any thinking about Israel today. But the words are surely true also of every place where the Lord sets His name: there are favoured peoples and favoured places in the spiritual sense also, as many have had good cause to prove. And the continuance of that favour is still, today, contingent upon obedience (12). The divine blessing will be maintained where there is an obedient people, and the promise of rain is unfailing. To spiritualise even further, we may say that what is in view here is the contrast between a 'man-made' life, hard-won and struggled for, and the flowing luxury of a God-given life, rich and bountiful in His grace. As the Psalmist puts it in Psalm 65, 'the river of God is full of water', and He crowns the year with His goodness.

61) ***11:18-25***

The importance of imparting spiritual instruction to children is again stressed (18, 21), as it was in 6:6-9, 20ff, and the Note on these verses should be consulted (see Note 41, Sat, 28th January 1984). The 'signs' in 18, 20, were indeed only meant to be signs, signifying an inward reality of undeviating observance and obedience. We know, sadly, from our Lord's experience of the Pharisees, that these 'signs' became ends in themselves and proved to be a legalistic snare to them. But there is nothing legalistic about Moses' words here. Indeed, their obedience was to prove a dynamic for them, the dynamic of continuous victory (22ff), enabling faith to claim the promise (24) as they went forward resting on the word of a faithful God. The lesson of these verses is surely clear and plain: moral and spiritual obedience gives God's people the power to rout all their enemies, and this is just as true in the spiritual life today as it was in Israel's experience under Joshua. Obedience adds moral stature to life, and this is what wins through in battles, but how slow we are to learn this all-important lesson! Was it not the saintly Murray McCheyne who said, in effect, 'One word spoken by us while walking with God is worth ten thousand spoken in unbelief and sin'. How prone we are to put our trust in other things - true, our own work and preparation must be unflagging, and accomplished with all due sense of responsibility and integrity, but it is in the obedience we offer to the divine word and will that the secret of effective and victorious service lies.

62) ***11:26-32***

This is a significant and important passage. It contains the first reference to the blessing and cursing associated with Mounts Gerizim and Ebal. The reference here is brief, but it is taken up in greater detail in chapters 27 and 28 (which see) and the fulfilment of this injunction takes place in Joshua 8. It is as well to think about this now, although what we say will anticipate these later chapters. The picture that emerges is this: there was a great valley about three-quarters of a mile wide (visitors to the area have testified the acoustics of the place are remarkable), formed like a vast amphitheatre, in which voices from one side of the valley can be clearly heard on the other side. Six tribes were on one side and six on the other, on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim respectively, and the Levites were down in the valley. The Levites were to speak to all the men of Israel, crying with a loud voice, 'Cursed be the man that maketh any graven image'. And all the people were to say, Amen. And the Law of Moses, the law of God, was rehearsed before the people in this way. Chapter 27 of Deuteronomy contains the cursings, chapter 28 the blessings, although this latter chapter continues to warn of the consequence of disobedience. It is to all this that the passage in Joshua 8:33-35 refers; and we shall look at some of the significance of this in tomorrow's Note.

63) ***11:26-32***

It does not need much imagination to see the drama and the impressiveness of the tremendous occasion that took place in Joshua's day, as the fulfilment of these words in Deuteronomy 11. As to its significance, what we must say first of all is this: what Joshua and the people were doing was to pay their vows to the Lord, according to the Scriptures. Worship, not warfare, was the first priority of their lives. Several commentators make this point clearly that it would have seemed, humanly speaking, that having reduced Ai to such destruction, the children of Israel should have moved right forward up country, and made the most of their advance while they could; but instead, they turned aside to Shechem, where Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim were situated, a place so hoary with association from the days of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and there they paid their vows to the Lord. It must have been a tremendously moving and solemnizing occasion for Israel, especially since it would be a graphic reminder to them of the possibilities for weal or woe before them, because of the terrible experience they had had at Ai (Joshua 7). For in the experience recorded in that chapter they had known both cursing and blessing, cursing because of their disobedience and blessing because of their renewed obedience after the disaster. The reference to Gerizim and Ebal in 11:29 was no empty theory, but something that was to be manifested in the ongoing experience of the people as a reality.

64) ***11:26-32***

There is a further significance in this ritual, that we do well to look at before passing on to the next chapter. We see from Joshua 8 that what was happening, in effect, was that Israel's leader was planting the law of God in the land of Canaan. This is the significance of writing upon the plastered stones at Ebal and Gerizim a copy of the Law of Moses, in the presence of the children of Israel. This was a highly symbolic act: here was a country that had passed the point of no return in evil and depravity, and God was about to destroy its inhabitants for their sin; and now here is His people, and they plant the law of God in that land. One is reminded of the Pilgrim Fathers in the New World in the 17th century; this is the kind of thing they did. They planted the word of the living God in the new world. It was a testimony to the fact that they meant their life in that new world to be based upon, and lived in obedience to, the Word of God. Israel here, under Joshua, were proclaiming that they were embracing God's law as the rule of their life, and as the condition of their continuing prosperity.

It will be noted that the altar of burnt offerings was built on Mount Ebal. One would have thought, humanly speaking, that Gerizim, the mount of blessing, would have been the place for it; but no, there is a stranger, more wonderful symbolism at work here, because the altar of burnt offering speaks ultimately of the great sacrifice for sin. Ebal was the place of the curse, and as Paul puts it in Galatians 3, 'Christ became a curse for us', in bearing away the sin of the world. So, in the remarkable way, the shadow of the cross stands here; and it is because He bore the curse for us that it is ours to know all the blessings of Mount Gerizim.

65) ***12:1-28***

We come with this chapter to the central part of Moses' second address to the people, 12:1-26:19 (see Analysis, in Note 3 for Friday, 16 December). It has sometimes been called the Deuteronomic Code, and it gives in detail the covenant stipulations that are expressed in general terms in the previous chapters. It will be useful at this point to consider the analysis and summary of these chapters as given by Keil and Delitzsch in their commentary as being laws designed to regulate the civil and domestic life of Israel in the land of Canaan, in harmony with its calling to be the holy nation of the Lord. 'Moses first of all describes the religious and ecclesiastical life of the nation, in its various relations to the Lord (12:1-16:17); and then the political organisation of the congregation, or the rights and duties of the civil and spiritual leaders of the nation (16: 18-18:22); and lastly, seeks to establish upon a permanent basis the civil and domestic well-being of the whole congregation and its individual members, by a multiplicity of precepts, intended to set before the people, as a conscientious obligation on their part, reverence and holy awe in relation to human life, to property, and to personal rights; a pious regard for the fundamental laws of the world; sanctification of domestic life and of the social bond; practical brotherly love towards the poor, the oppressed, and the needy; and righteousness of walk and conversation (19:1-26:19).' In other words, it is a 'spelling out' of the meaning and significance of the laws of the Decalogue.

66) ***12:1-28***

Significantly enough, the exposition of this 'code' begins with worship (12a-16:17). A right relationship with the Lord is the beginning of everything! The theme in this chapter is that of a central sanctuary and a centralised worship. The Tyndale commentary speaks of two questions raised: Israel's attitude to non-Jehovah sanctuaries and the importance of the place which the Lord your God will choose, and points out that both of these were important 'in the days of the old tribal confederacy, when a central shrine was necessary to provide cohesion between the various tribal groups.' One readily sees the wisdom in this, far beyond the more immediate concern to eschew the use of the many cult centres throughout the land where idolatrous practices had been rife among the Canaanite tribes. The psychological, as well as the moral and spiritual, value and strength of united worship can hardly be over-estimated, and it is certain that the Old Testament's emphasis in the main on the 'whole congregation of the Lord' represents one of its most enduring testimonies and truest and richest spiritual insights. The measure of the danger that the obscuring of this insight has brought to the life of the Church today is seen in the way in which 'de-centralisation' of worship has proliferated through the formation of 'para-church' splinter groups that have the effect of siphoning off some of the best and most promising Christians from local congregations, to the impoverishment of the latters' ongoing work. On the day this Note is being penned, we have received a letter from a minister who has experienced, to his cost and distress, the loss of some of his finest young folk from his own congregational prayer meeting to a united 'para-church' group which is needlessly duplicating work that that congregation is already seeking to do. The motives underlying such 'competitive' efforts need to be very carefully scrutinized. It is perilously easy for things that begin as 'hand-maids' to the Church's work to become 'ends in themselves'.

67) ***12:1-28***

We are discussing in these verses a code of behaviour designed to regulate the whole of Israel's life, and it might be thought that it would have a limiting, even stifling effect, with its precise and definite laying down of parameters within which life was to be confined. But this would be to misunderstand what is being said. Indeed, one of the remarkable and impressive evidences throughout the chapter is the emphasis on rejoicing in their worship (e.g. 7, 12, 18) and the evident liberty that was to be theirs (e.g. 20) when they reached the land. There is an important lesson for us in this: it is that a structured life, far from being restrictive and hampering, proves in fact to be a liberating and enabling experience. This is as true in business life (as time-management studies are proving in big business concerns) as in spiritual life, and may have more to teach us than might at first be apparent. It is without doubt true that in a minister's ongoing life and experience he will get far more work done when his days and working time are structured and disciplined than whey they are not. It is true, of course, than any 'organisation' or 'system' that we impose on ourselves can become a fetish and a snare, but it need not be so, and will not, if we are careful to use it as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. This is how it was to be in the corporate life of Israel; and rightly understood it was to be a life of liberty, in which they would 'come into their own' and realise their truest destiny.

68) ***12:29-13:5***

The last few verses of chapter 12 stand as a preface to the substance of chapter 13, which instances three examples, or 'cases' which illustrate the point made in 12:30. The warning is against any kind of compromise with the heathenish religions. The starkness of that warning is indicated in 31, in the 'end-product' of heathen practice. We can hardly suppose that the horror of child-sacrifice would have any initial appeal to people so thrilled to family life as Israel was, but we know that in their lowest times (much later in their history) they did in fact sink to this terrible level, and this should be a reminder to us of how dangerous - and misleading - it is ever to say 'We would not, in our worst moments descend to such depths'. We would, if the restraints of common grace were lifted from us. There is no depth to which we might not sink, if the evil inherent in our natures were to take us over. This is the realism of Scripture: it shows us the end-product of sin, shorn of all its seductive attractiveness and beguilements, and shows it up as the ugly and deadly horror that it is (James 1:14, 15). If only we could always see it thus stripped of its allure! But we do not, hence our need of discernment, imparted by the Word, as chapter 13 indicates.

69) ***13:1-18***

The three cases, or illustrations, given in this chapter are given in the form 'If … then ...'. The first gives us some indication of the subtlety of sin and the deceptive powers of Satan in the context of spiritual life. Here is the employment of 'lying wonders' to entice and seduce the people of God into ways that are against His word and will. One has only to think of today's Christian world and its preoccupation, not to say obsession, with supernatural manifestations and signs and wonders to realise what a substantial and subtle danger lies here. Is it not true that the wielding or demonstrating of such supernatural power as is described here has tended to become the chief, indeed almost the only, criterion of spiritual authority, authenticity or 'rightness' in the Church today? Yet, in this case, it was false and evil, impressive and persuasive as it was. Ah, we are to try the spirits, even at their most impressive and persuasive, whether they are of God. It was said of the Baptist, 'John did no miracle, but all things that John spoke of this man (Jesus) were true' (John 10:41). That is surely a better and safer authentication than miracle-working. It is a measure of the seriousness with which such a deception was regarded that the death penalty was imposed for it, as also for the other cases (9, 15). But then, the very life and well-being of the people of God in the land were at stake. And when this was so, not even wives, children or brothers, or the inhabitants of a whole city could be spared. Thus drastically was evil to be driven out of Israel.

70) ***14:1-2***

Three issues are discussed in this chapter: mourning rites (1, 2), clean and unclean foods (3-21), and tithing (22-29). Although the reference to the first of these is very brief (1, 2), it opens up a subject of considerable significance for us, and we shall spend some time with the implications of what is said. The ground of the prohibition given here is that the Israelites are children of the Lord, and they were therefore not to adopt or practise things that were inconsistent with or unworthy of that relationship. The cutting of the body and the shaving of the head were common mourning rites in ancient times.

Delitzsch, referring also to Leviticus 19:28, says the reference is to passionate outbursts of mourning, common among the excitable nations of the east. Israel, it means, was not to become involved in the practices of their pagan neighbours. Significantly enough, this becomes a very real issue in missionary situations, and young churches have had to lay down basic guidelines for Christians facing traditional beliefs and customs. Some traditions for example are in complete conflict with the Christian faith, so it is not a question of Christianising the tradition. If Christians fall in with the tradition, they are failing to witness; if they do not, they feel isolated from their culture. What is the answer? They must demonstrate their newness of life in a meaningful way, in new forms compatible with Christian testimony. But there is a particular issue involved here in relation to mourning, and we shall look at it in tomorrow's Note.

71) ***14:1-2***

Delitzsch's phrase was 'passionate outbursts of mourning, common among the excitable nations of the east'. The question that arises is what these outbursts were meant to signify (C.S. Lewis says something in one of his letters which may provide the answer to this. Speaking of his own bereavement (the loss of his wife) he wrote, 'My great recent discovery is that when I mourn Joy I feel nearest to her. Passionate sorrow cuts us off from the dead (there are ballads and folk tales which hint this). Do you think that much of the traditional ritual of mourning had, unconsciously, that very purpose? For of course the primitive mind is very anxious to keep them away.') Is this what lies behind the 'passionate outbursts of mourning' - fear and dread of death and departed spirits? One recalls the Apostle's words in 1 Thessalonians 4:14, '... that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope'. We who are in Christ, and who lose loved ones in Christ, cannot have that fear and passionate outburst through dread of departed spirits, for we have the hope!! This is why a Christian funeral can be a triumphant testimony, full of joy and hope and sweetness, even in the pain and anguish of parting with a loved one. One can think, by contrast, of a funeral taken many years ago in Glasgow (in days when unchurched folk assumed more readily than they do now that 'having a minister' for the service was 'the done thing') when hysterical outbursts, screaming and protestations all but disrupted the service, and it was clear that it was not so much sorrow as fear and terror at having been confronted by the mystery of death that explained such demonstrations. Well might Paul speak of 'others which have no hope'!

72) ***14:3-21***

We come next to the matter of clean and unclean foods. For a full statement of this, Leviticus 11 should be consulted. The significance of the ordinances was as follows: a) some food was simply unfit for human consumption; b) other animals (e.g. swine) were unsafe to eat in a hot climate; c) others were too closely associated with surrounding idolatry. One readily thinks in this connection of the New Testament question of eating 'meats offered to idols' (cf 1 Corinthians 8, 10:19-33). The Tyndale commentary has a useful comment here: 'It was evidence of obedience in God's people that they made a distinction between clean and unclean food .... It was not the observance of food laws that distinguished Israel as holy, but a total attitude of willing allegiance to Jehovah in love and obedience.' We have another longish comment by the godly Bonar, which will occupy us in tomorrow's Note; meantime, however we look at what is said in 21b about 'seething a kid in its mother's milk'. The point here, surely, is that it is the inhumanity and unnaturalness of doing this that is so forbidden. An illustration will help: stewed rabbit is regarded by many as a pleasant, succulent dish. But one's pet rabbit? Put it in the pot?? Would not this betray an unnatural and unfeeling attitude?

73) ***14:3-21***

In his commentary on Leviticus 11, Andrew Bonar makes the following observation: 'The Lord wishes to make the sinner flee to the Atonement, by creating in his mind a loathing of sin, that so pollutes and defiles. For this end, he lays before Israel instructions of a peculiar kind, containing distinctions that would every day need to be attended to. He first so arranges the beasts they were to eat, and those they were not to eat, that an Israelite would every day meet some object which called for the exercise of his discrimination between clean and unclean. Thus they were to be taught God's discernment of sin, and the stigma he had set upon it. Though there was nothing morally different between one beast and another, yet, if God put his difference between them, they must so regard them; and it was thus that every beast became to them a remembrancer of the law, calling upon them to distinguish between what was right and what was wrong - what was permitted and what was forbidden. The Lord set up so many finger-posts which pointed Israel to the Fall, and reminded them that they were in a fallen world ....

'To imbue the mind of Israel with moral distinctions was the grand and primary use of this arrangement. It was so in Noah's days, and probably in Adam's; but now the development of that system takes place more fully.'

74) ***14:22-29***

The law of the tithe expressed in these verses echoes teaching given elsewhere in the Pentateuch, e.g. Numbers 18:21-32. The force and significance of the giving of a tithe to the Lord was similar to the institution of the Sabbath day of rest - was a symbol and acknowledgment that all days belonged to God. The tithe given to the Lord was the symbol and acknowledgment, in like manner, that all that we have is the Lord's, and as such giving it was a standing witness that we recognize this to be so in our lives. It has been averred that since tithing is not enjoined in the New Testament, it ought not to be regarded as a Christian requirement. It is true, of course, that no explicit teaching is given on this by the Apostles; but by analogy it must surely be evident that the spirit underlying the giving of tithes not only continues into the thought of the New Testament, but is strongly reinforced by it. Jesus' reinterpretation of the Old Testament laws in the Sermon on the Mount not only did not rescind them, but invariably - in going to the heart and spirit of them - made their demand far more inexorable and radical, and in view of this it is sheerest hypocrisy to suppose that Christians under grace are 'let off the hook' and free to give much less than under the law. One has only to read passages such as 2 Corinthians 8:1ff to see the spirit in which the early Christians gave to the Lord. This is the real heart of tithing and, we may say, it is something that needs to be learned at the outset, when Christians are young. When young people begin to earn money at all, they need to get this sorted out as basic to their whole lifestyle, so that it becomes instinctive and 'second nature'.

75) ***15:1-11.***

The teaching of these verses, with that of those that follow (12-18) follows naturally upon 14:28, 29. Israel was not only to cause those who had no possessions to refresh themselves with the produce of their inheritance, but they were not to force or oppress the poor. Debtors especially were not to be deprived of the blessings of the sabbatical year, just as the land itself was to be released from toil. There is some uncertainty of interpretation as to what precisely is envisaged in this 'release' of debt. Does it refer to a total remission of the indebtedness, i.e. cancellation of the debt altogether? Or, does it refer merely to the suspension of the debt for that year? The Tyndale commentary, while mentioning both possibilities, favours the first interpretation, maintaining that the verses which follow 2 suggest that a total cancellation of the debt was intended. Delitzsch, following Calvin, maintains that it is not a remission of the debt that is in view, in the sense of relinquishing of all claim for payment, but simply lengthening the term, not pressing for payment during the seventh year. Either way, however, the message is plain: mercy and compassion towards their fellows less fortunate than themselves are enjoined upon them. Give them a break - treat the poor at all times with an open hand and an open heart (7, 8) - such is the spirit of the words (cf 1 John 3:17).

76) ***15:12-18***

The regulations with regard to the poor are now matched by a similar spirit towards slaves. See Exodus 21:2-6 - the law is repeated here for the purpose of explaining the true mode of fulfilling it, viz. it was not enough to give a slave his freedom after six years. He would need something with which to set up a home again. Love to the poor must make provision for their continued prosperity. The inspiration of this was to be the remembrance of their own bondage in Egypt (15). It is very significant to see just how much emphasis there is in both Old and New Testaments on this idea. In Deuteronomy itself it is brought repeatedly before us - cf 5:15, 8:2, 16:2, 24:18, 22, also Exodus 13:3, and cf particularly Ephesians 2:11, where Paul gathers up so much of the Old Testament emphasis in what he says. The message is very clear: it is the fact of our having been delivered from bondage that is the basis of the divine claim upon us to live true, generous, compassionate lives, and the remembrance of this fact becomes the inspiration of such behaviour. There is a great challenge for us in this: the world today has great need to see compassionate, generous living, holy living, and liberal, loving attitudes. This is so out of the ordinary that when it is seen it makes men ask questions, makes them ask, 'What makes you tick? What makes you live like this, do such things?' And the answer? 'I was a bondman in Egypt, and the Lord brought me out and saved me'.

77) ***15:19-23***

The law concerning the sacrifice of firstlings to the Lord is stated in Exodus 13:2. Saved from the angel of death on Passover night by blood, they were given over and set apart for the Lord - and therefore withdrawn from all economic use (this is the force of the reference in 19, but, significantly, what was forbidden for economic use could be enjoyed in fellowship with the Lord (20). A distinction is made between animals without blemish and those that were not perfect. Blemished animals were not acceptable for sacrifice. As the Tyndale commentary observes, 'It was both an economic trick and an insult to God to offer them (cf Malachi 1:7ff)'. And the spiritual application is just as decisive: it must be our best, not our leftovers that we must offer to God. Any old, cast-off remnant that we have no longer any use for, will not do, nor the small-change that we have left over from our major financial transactions in life. David interpreted the spirit of true giving worthily when, at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite he said, 'Neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God of that which doth cost me nothing.' With such a spirit, we also shall fulfil the spirit of Moses' words here.

78) ***16:1-17***

These verses complete the longish section on the worship of the covenant people which began at 12:1, 'describing the religious and ecclesiastical life of the nation, in its various relations to the Lord' (Delitzsch). It deals with the three annual pilgrimages to the central sanctuary, the feast of the Passover and unleavened bread (1-8) the feast of weeks (8-12) and the feast of tabernacles (13-17). The reason why other feasts, such as the day of atonement or the feast of trumpets, are not mentioned or included here is that for these the people were not required to assemble at the sanctuary, as with those mentioned in these verses (cf Exodus 23:14ff). The Passover feast commemorated the constitution of the covenant and the deliverance from Egypt, and was designed to give the Israelites the opportunity to express their undying gratitude for God's goodness to them. The feast of weeks, or harvest, or first-fruits, marked the completion of the barley harvest, and expressed Israel's gratitude for the blessings of the grain harvest; while the feast of tabernacles, the feast of ingathering, at the end of all the harvests, was the 'harvest thanksgiving' of Israel, in some ways the greatest and most joyful feast of all. It is interesting to see how the natural and agricultural feasts came to be linked and associated with historical high-points, and thus invested with a new significance. The harvest thanksgiving at the feast of tabernacles is an especial case in point, for the 'booths' or 'tabernacles' symbolised the 'tents' in which the Israelites sojourned in their wilderness journeyings. Thus the harvest thanksgiving included thanksgiving for all the mercies of the pilgrim journey. Happy is the people who can see in the material providence of a bountiful God the shadows and illustrations of other and deeper blessings of grace and redemption.

79) ***16:1-17***

We still have to ask, however, what was the significance of these feasts for Israel. The answer must surely be: worship. The position of the feasts in Exodus is that they followed the giving of the law. This teaches that God wants more from His people than obedience to His laws. He desires the worship, the adoration of our hearts. He desires fellowship with them. Man's duties Godward are not fulfilled simply by the keeping of the law. As one of the scholars puts it, 'The ritual side of religion is the reminder that our life is destined for the worship of God. Man is the personal property of God. God desires from him not only a correct life, but personal surrender, even as He Himself, the Creator, grants to His creatures not merely a happy life, salvation, but personal communion with Him.' (Brunner). It is to this that the emphasis on these feasts bear witness: it is our relationship to God, our fellowship and communion with Him, that is all-important, and from which all else is to flow. Where that is not right, nothing else can ever be right.

80) ***16:18-20***

With these verses we come to a new section of Moses' address, which stretches to 18:23, and deals with 'the political organisation of the congregation, or the rights and duties of the civil and spiritual leaders of the nation'. To put it in Keil and Delitzsch's words, they speak of 'a well-ordered judicial constitution, and on impartial administration of justice.' The structure of justice, and a judicial system, had already been given them in Exodus 18. But now, when they were to go into the land, and be dispersed through the land, the system had to be expanded and supplemented. First of all (16:18-17:7) the appointment of judges and officials in every town is outlined, and certain precise injunctions given as to their judicial proceedings. Then (17:8-13) there is described the appointment of a higher judicial court at the place of the sanctuary, for the more difficult cases. Then (17:14-20), a law is laid down for the future with reference to the choice of a king. Here, in 18, we see the extent of the new departure: judges and officers were to be appointed 'in all thy gates' and 'throughout thy tribes'. Still more important is the emphasis on impartiality and just judgment. 'That which is altogether just' may be rendered 'justice and only justice'. The emphasis does not in any wise exclude mercy and compassion - indeed, we have seen repeatedly throughout these studies just how much compassion there is in the Mosaic legislation as a whole. Rather, it is justice in the sense of true justice, in contrast to any 'bent' form, whether through partiality or respect of persons, or through bribery, that is being insisted upon in these verses.

81) ***16:21-17:1***

The Tyndale commentary has a useful summary here which will afford a guide to interpretation and understanding: 'Because of the inter-relationship of cultic and civil processes, principles which applied in religious practice also applied in civil practice. Three principles are declared in these verses, the finality of Jehovah's authority, respect for Jehovah's name, and the need for careful investigation and substantiation of every offence before judgment was carried out. Two of these principles find support in three ancient apodictic laws, two of which are then quoted (16:21; 17:1), while the third arises from the discussion of a case of apostasy (17:2-7).' The RSV rendering of 21 should be followed: 'You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the Lord your God …'. The Asherah was a wooden post, the symbol of the god Asherah, or Astarte, while the 'image' referred to in 22 means 'pillar', made of stone, symbolising Baal. These were instances by Moses as examples of the kind of issues about which the judges and officers were to have special concern and to be unhesitating in their dealing with. It was, in effect, a 'spelling out' of a job they were to do in Israel.

82) ***17:2-7***

The proper judicial proceedings in the case of idolatry are next outlined. When it was made known, the facts were to be carefully inquired into, and if the charge were substantiated, the guilty party was to be led out and stoned. But this would require the testimony of two or three witnesses: and the hand of the witnesses were to be the first to cast the stones (the phrase in 5, 'unto thy gates' should read 'outside thy gates', and signifies exclusion from the congregation of the Lord). We should note particularly the meticulousness of the process, and the clear implication of the principle that an accused is innocent until proved guilty. This is a principle much in need of being introduced into the ordinary thinking of Christians in relation to the often hurtful and cruel 'gossip' (there is no better word for it!) that is bandied about concerning others - often, forsooth, under the guise of 'sharing'! - and which has so little basis in fact. If Christians were obliged to put their names in writing to the things they say about others, there might be a dramatic reduction in rumour-mongering and of the hurt and distress it causes. Perhaps one very practical lesson to be drawn from these verses lies just here: 'Would I be prepared to sign my name to the information I have just passed on to others?' Or, 'Would I be prepared to be named in public as the one responsible for giving credence to that story?'

83) *17:8-13*

Provision is here made for referring hard and difficult cases, or cases too serious for local settlement, to a higher court. This is not so much an appeal court, as with our judicial system, since it gave verdict only in cases in which the lower court could not come to a decision e.g. in different cases of homicide, manslaughter or premeditated murder, different cases of rights at law, or different cases of assault or injury. In all such, the decision of the higher court was to be final. Where such verdict was disputed, this would constitute such a 'contempt of court' that a capital sentence would be imposed for the presumption. This may be considered harsh and extreme, but two things need to be said concerning it. On the one hand, reference to the higher court meant that the case was now being judged 'before the Lord', and that the verdict was considered to be His; hence the seriousness of disputing it. The second point is this: in new communities (which Israel surely was, on entering the Land), where basic constitutional foundations were being laid, it was quite common for penalties for infringement of the law to be severe to the point of capital punishment (this was often seen in rigorous, authoritarian regimes in ancient times, and has in fact also been seen in modern times e.g. in Russia, where in the earlier years of the Revolution crimes other than murder, for example, industrial sabotage, carried the death penalty) in order to preserve the very existence of a new constitution. Nothing could be allowed to threaten its well-being, and no punishment was considered too severe in order to safeguard it. So it was to be in Israel, in the Land.

84) *17:14-20*

We should note particularly here, in view of Israel's later history, that the appointment of a king is not commanded, as that of the judges was (18), but simply permitted. There is at least a hint here that choosing a king would be God's 'second best' and that it would be better for them to be content with God Himself as their king. However, if it was to be so, certain stipulations were to be strictly adhered to. It was to be one whom the Lord Himself would appoint (15), and certain limitations or prohibitions were to be mandatory: he must not multiply horses (16), or take many wives (17), and he must have a copy of the book of the law (18, 19), and base his rule upon it. As to this last, see 2 Kings 11:12 for a fulfilment of this important ordinance. One thinks of the presentation of the Scriptures to our own sovereign at the time of coronation. This is surely to be regarded as a counteractive to the motivating desire for a king in 14, to be 'like as all the nations that are about me', for of course God had chosen them as a people unto Himself, to be different from all other nations. This permission therefore recognizes an unhallowed determination on Israel's part: to depart from God's best and directive will, and as such the passage is a grim prophetic preview of Israel's subsequent history, which, under the kings of Israel and Judah, proved to be one that was strewed with hazard and fateful consequence for the Lord's people. It is true that within the limitations imposed by the initial wrong choice of kingship there were those kings who sought with uprightness of heart to fulfil these stipulations and make the institution work, and that they knew, within these limitations, the blessing of God. This is seen particularly in the case of king Jehoshaphat of Judah, and it will be useful to spend time in the next Note in looking at the record of it given in 2 Chronicles 19.

85) *17:14-20*

Jehoshaphat's reign serves to exemplify not only the attempt to order a king's reign by the book of the law, but also in a wider sense the entire Mosaic legislation about the appointment of judges (16:18ff). In 2 Chronicles 19:5-11, the king's appointment of judges was made entirely 'by the book', and the similarity of the language in that passage makes it evident that his action was based upon the Deuteronomic stipulations. Not only so: in an earlier chapter, 2 Chronicles 17:7ff (which see), it is clear that the king was intent on promulgating the teaching of the law, and made it his business to see to it that all the people were made conversant with its injunctions. This was, it is true, an exception rather than the rule, even among the good kings of Judah, for most of them, indeed the best of them, Josiah, did but lay emphasis upon the restoration of the liturgical life of the nation, and the rehabilitation of the sacrificial system and the feasts, with all too little concern for the establishment of the law in the life of the people; but Jehoshaphat put the emphasis in the proper place (cf. 2 Chronicles 17:9). Nothing - nothing - could be more relevant from a practical point of view, for us today than this immensely significant operation. It spelt prosperity for Judah, in those days; and it would certainly spell prosperity in ours. This is what brings prosperity and blessing to nations and communities!

86) *18:1-8*

The duties of the priests and Levites (1-8) and the prophets (9-22) are now delineated. As rendered in the AV, 1a is by no means clear, and RSV serves to mislead in identifying 'the Levitical priests' with the whole tribe of Levi. The Tyndale commentary helpfully distinguishes the functions of the Levitical priests, as alone having the ministry of officiating at the central sanctuary and of offering sacrifices there, and those of the Levites who had other tasks. What all had in common was the task of instructing Israel in their covenant law, and it is in relation to these common tasks that they are spoken of together in these verses. The special position of the Levites goes back to Israel's early history. In Exodus 13 we read how the Lord claimed the firstborn of Israel for Himself, following the Passover in Egypt. Then, in Numbers 3:11-13, 44ff, we are told that instead of the firstborn, the Lord would take the tribe of Levi for Himself. The questions that arise are: Why this change? And why Levi? The selection of one tribe rather than a hetrogeneous mixture of the firstborn from all twelve tribes may in fact be purely a matter of practical expediency, more easily identifiable and more easily managed - a unit, readymade and able to work together. And Levi? That is a further question, which will have to wait until the next Note.

87) *18:1-8*

In the previous Note we posed the question of why Levi, rather than another tribe, should have been chosen instead of the firstborn. One possible reason may lie in the account given in Exodus 32:26-29 of the confrontation Moses had with Israel after the idolatry of the golden calf at Sinai. Levi was the most zealous for the honour of the Lord at this time, and it may well be that because this was so, they had conferred on them this solemn dignity and privilege. It was surely therefore a moment of destiny for the Levites, and they rose right nobly to the occasion. One thinks of a similar situation that arose for Caleb and Joshua, who proved themselves so faithful and concerned for the Lord's honour when the spies who went into Canaan brought back their adverse report. The Lord honoured these men for their faithfulness ('Them that honour Me I will honour' 1 Samuel 2:30): Joshua was appointed as leader to succeed Moses, and Caleb came into his inheritance according to God's promise to him. Thus it was with the Levites. It may be thought that not being given an inheritance like the other tribes was to penalise them rather than reward them, but this is to misunderstand the greatness of their privilege, for the Lord was to be their inheritance, and they were in His special care in this regard. No man is ever the loser for having been set apart unto God! God is no man's debtor.

88) *18:9-22*

This is an important passage, relating to Israel's separated life in the land into which they were about to enter. The main statement is in 9, relating to the abominations that abounded at that time in Canaan, and what follows spells out the things that were at all costs to be avoided. It is one of the clearest statements of prohibition against all that we know in modern times as fortune tellers, witches, spiritist mediums, horoscopists and necromancers. They are denounced and condemned for two reasons: because of the methods they employ, and because they so easily bring men into contact with evil spirits. It is a matter for astonishment, in view of the uniform emphasis in Scripture, not only in the Old Testament but also in the New (cf Acts 19:13ff) on the reality of the dark underworld of spirits, that there is often so little evidence that many Christians are ever disposed to take seriously the evil of our modern day manifestations in this realm. It is clear not only from this passage but also from others in the Old Testament that one of the final pre-disposing and precipitating factors that brought divine judgment on these Canaanite nations was precisely the predominance of these practices among them, representing the end product of a long journey into evil. It can hardly be without fateful significance in this regard that our late twentieth century culture is so ridden and preoccupied with these issues, to the extent that daily life is virtually controlled and directed by them. It is surely one of the more shameful and squalid marks of the deterioration of our public services that the BBC should have descended to a new all-time low of peddling horoscopes as an essential feature of its morning television programmes. We have, alas, come a long, long way from the lofty moral standards of Lord Reith!

89) *18:9-22*

The reason why these unhallowed practices were an abomination to the Lord is that they represent the practice of consulting unseen powers, and this is tantamount to acknowledging a power other than God. It is a transgression of the first two commandments of the Decalogue. It is important for us to understand aright what it is these forbidden practices are really about: they are seeking a supernatural indication, either in terms of guidance or foretelling of the future, without reference to moral or spiritual categories. The determinism, even fatalism ('what will be will be') of such 'living by the stars' robs life of, and cuts the nerve of, any moral endeavour and allows people to live as they please. This is its condemnation: it is essentially divorced from responsible and honourable moral living. It is over against all this that the biblical way of life sets the concept of living by the word of God. This is the point of the reference to the prophet (15, 18, 20, 22). This is to be the source - and we may say, the only source of divine guidance and direction for men - 'unto him shall ye hearken', not the charmers, not the wizards, not the necromancers, not the horoscopists, but God's appointed representative, who speaks His word from on high. This is the first thrust of the passage before us, and the reference in 15 is not in the first instance a messianic one (although without doubt it finds its truest and fullest consummation in Christ the Messiah who was to come). The emphasis is similar to that made by Peter in his second epistle (2 Peter 1:19) when he speaks of the 'more sure word of prophecy' vouchsafed to every believer, i.e. the word of scripture, which surpasses in significance and importance even a vision such as that given to Peter, James and John on the mount of Transfiguration. Nothing could emphasise more decisively the primacy of the Word over every other consideration, not excepting even the unusual and spectacular supernatural manifestations that are sometimes (not often) given to God's people by the Spirit Himself. It cannot be too strongly stressed that the normal and therefore definitive way in which God communicates Himself to His people is through the Scriptures and the hearing of the Word. It is this, and not the other, that we must covet.

90) *18:9-22*

Two further things remain to be said before we leave this chapter. On the one hand, it is clear from what was said in the previous Note that the ultimate criterion for life, so far as God's people are concerned, must ever be the Word, and everything must be tested by what God has said. 'To the law and to the testimony,' cried Isaiah. (Isaiah 8:19, 20) centuries later, and when he did so he was simply echoing Moses' fundamental stance here, and applying it in precisely the same kind of situation. On the other hand, we must also give due weight to the messianic note that rings out in 15 and 18, for it must surely be clear that it is only in Christ that these words are really fulfilled. He would be a bold man who averred that there was no messianic vision in Moses' words, especially since He Himself is the Word of God Incarnate, and God said of Him, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye Him.' This is a valuable association of ideas for our study of this passage; and it will also be helpful for us to look in this connection at the comparisons made between Moses and Christ in Hebrews 3. Finally, we must consider what is said in 20-22 about how to test a prophet's authenticity. The test is clear and unequivocal: 'if the thing follow not, nor come not to pass', the Lord is not in it. Once again, in the fullest sense, this is true only of Christ Himself (cf John 5:13-18). His witness alone is utterly true and reliable. Well might the living God say to us all, 'Hear ye Him!'

91) *19:1-13*

With this chapter we come to the final sub-section of Moses' second discourse (see Note on the introduction to this sub-section, 12:1-28). We quoted Keil and Delitzsch as saying that it 'seeks to establish upon a permanent basis the civil and domestic well-being of the whole congregation and its individual members, by a multiplicity of precepts, intended to set before the people, as a conscientious obligation on their part, reverence and holy awe in relation to human life, to property, and to personal rights: a pious regard for the fundamental laws of the world; sanctification of domestic life and of the social bond; practical brotherly love towards the poor, the oppressed and the needy; and righteousness of walk and conversation.' It is a longish sub-section, stretching to 26:19, and it continues Moses' concern (which began at 12:1) to spell out the meaning and implications of the laws of the Decalogue. There is indeed a wide spectrum of teaching in the chapters that are now to occupy us, but all in general emphasising the idea of reverence and respect for life. One has only to formulate these words to realise that this must have a very practical relevance for our day and generation. And we do well to remember that these issues, which are so often at a discount in our time, are issues in which God has a deep interest. The first topic relates to the cities of refuge that were to be instituted for the protection of unintentional and accidental manslayers, and we shall look at this interesting institution in the next Note.

92) *19:1-13*

The appointment of the cities of refuge belongs to the general judicial system that was evolved among the people of God, and the provision was made for the manslayer - i.e. the inadvertent killer (as distinct from the deliberate murderer) - because the duty of avenging loss of life fell upon the near kinsman. It was an all too common experience for vengeance to be wreaked indiscriminately and without mercy, without waiting to see whether the killing was inadvertent or not. With these cities of refuge, the manslayer could flee for sanctuary, pending an enquiry into the matter by judges from the congregation who would decide whether it was a deliberate or inadvertent act. If the latter, then the killer could find permanent refuge and sanctuary in the city and be free from the fear of any retribution so long as he remained within its bounds. If however he ventured outwith its walls, he could be slain with impunity (see Numbers 35 for a full account of the whole procedure, also Joshua 20/21). We see from the Numbers reference that the cities of refuge were chosen out of the cities set apart for the Levites, and this is something that in itself has significance in relation to the Levites' calling to be separate unto God, with the Lord their inheritance. It was their high dignity to become, through these cities, the vehicles of the Lord's mercy and compassion for those in urgent need, and the fact that the cities of refuge were spaced out throughout the land meant that no one was too far distanced from a place of sanctuary when need arose. It is not difficult to see a spiritual application of all this: the function of the cities matched the function of the Levites, and happy is the man, separated unto the gospel of God, who is recognized as constituting and creating a 'place' to which the burdened and the heavy-laden can turn in time of need, and find refuge and rest.

93) *19:14*

The injunction against removing one's neighbour's landmarks stands alone in this passage, but its significance has to do with the basic thrust of the chapter as it deals with respect and reverence for life and property which was so important a part of the Mosaic legislation. The importance attached to it is explained by the fact, as the Tyndale commentary usefully points out, 'In Israel, where every man held his piece of land as an inheritance from the Lord, the removal of landmarks was an offence against the Lord Himself. There was a close connection between a man's possessions as his means of support and the very life of the man.' It is this that explains the curse mentioned in 27:17. One thinks of the words in Proverbs 22:28, 23:10, 11, concerning which one commentator writes, 'Each Israelite had received his portion directly from Jehovah. Its bounds were marked out by clearly indicated landmarks, which all were commanded to respect. He who removed them forcibly, or in secret, would have to do with God for his transgression (cf also Jeremiah 6:16, for a kindred thought, in spiritual terms). It is the sanctity of property that is in view: God says that we must learn to respect and reverence what does not belong to us, and keep our hands off it - better still, keep our covetous eyes and thoughts off it - for it is not ours to intrude into or interfere with. It is not difficult to see just how valuable such legislation would be for the weak and the powerless in the land. One thinks of Naboth's vineyard, and the seriousness of Ahab's sin in coveting and appropriating it for his own selfish and greedy purpose. It was an offence not only against man, but against God. And Ahab paid dearly for it.

94) *19:14*

Here is a helpful comment from one of the commentators on the spiritual application of this word about landmarks: 'In this dispensation of grace the portion of the people of God is heavenly not earthly. Their inheritance is in the precious truth which He has committed to us. To remove the landmarks - the great distinguishing doctrines of Scripture - will be to incur the divine displeasure. Yet, alas, this is the wretched business in which many learned doctors and wiseacres are engaged today. Nothing is too sacred for their irreverent handling. Precious truths like those of Atonement and Justification by Faith - yea, even the mystery of the Holy Trinity and the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ - are, in their eyes, but common things, which they may dismiss or ignore as they please. But a day of reckoning is coming, when God will judge them in righteousness, and when those who have been misled by their removal of ancient and venerable landmarks will curse them for the loss of their souls. Terrible will be the accounting of men who, while posing as instructors of the flock of Christ, have all the while been Satan's instruments for overthrowing the saving truths of Scripture. See Paul's warning word to Timothy (2 Timothy 1:8-13 and 4:1-5)'.

95) *19:15-21*

This brief section deals with the whole matter of witnesses, and in particular with false witness. Reference has already been made to this, in 17:2-7 and the teaching there should be borne in mind in studying these verses before us now. The Tyndale commentary thinks that the reference in 17 is to the higher tribunal at the central sanctuary (mentioned in 17:8ff), and the phrase 'stand before the Lord' seems to bear this out. At all events, the most careful examination and enquiry was to be conducted, and the verdict was to be considered as the Lord's - hence the seriousness of the situation, and the extreme nature of the punishment meted out to the false witness (19). False witness is a sin against God, it means, and the need therefore to stamp it out in this radical way would be great. And the legislation formulated here was designed to do this very thing (20). The penalty was to be exacted in accordance with the lex talionis, the law of retaliation; an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. As Tyndale says, very wisely and properly, 'This principle is often misunderstood. Far from encouraging vengeance it limits vengeance and stands as a guide for a judge as he fixes a penalty suited to the crime. The principle was thus not licence or vengeance, but a guarantee of justice.' This emphasis on justice is one of the abiding characteristics of the biblical doctrine of punishment, and one that is in sore need of rehabilitation in our thinking today. Indeed, unless the basic concept of justice is re-introduced into modern ideas of punishment - i.e. that punishment is something that wrongdoers deserve - then liberal and 'humanitarian' notions, however specious and attractive they may appear, will deprive us of all rights as human beings. Where we stand in all this may be determined by our answers to the following questions: What do we really think is important about punishment: that it should deter the criminal? Or that it should cure or correct him? Or that he should deserve it?

96) 20:1-9

The Tyndale commentary gives as a heading for this chapter 'Regulations for the Holy War'. The reference is of course to the battles Israel was to fight in subduing the land God had given them and driving out the Canaanite tribes, but the applications are obvious, in individual and in corporate spiritual life alike. We should note first of all, however, by way of introduction, how comprehensive God's directives are for the whole of life - not only for 'spiritual life', as such, but all aspects of life, public, private, personal, intimate. God does not leave us in much doubt as to how He wants us to live. He wants to be in on every aspect of our lives! The immediate reference in 1-4 is a word of wonderful encouragement to God's people as they faced great odds in the forthcoming campaign. The reference to horses and chariots in 1 is a significant one. These were the stock-in-trade of many of the heathen nations, but it seems clear that not until much later in their history (i.e. Solomon's time) did Israel ever have them. The Israelite armies were composed of footmen, and clearly the psychological impact of seeing arrays of horses and chariots coming at them would have been very great indeed. It is against that very human and understandable fear that this word is spoken: Be not afraid of them.

The reference to Egypt in 1 is significant in this connection (cf Exodus 14:26-28, 15:1, 3, 4, 19, 21; Joshua 17:18; Judges 4:13ff; Psalm 20:7; Isaiah 30:15, 16, 31:1ff; 2 Kings 2:12). The Lord was Israel's chariot and horsemen, i.e. their protection, and these words were a reminder to them to recall what God had done with these other horses and chariots in the Red Sea, and to assure them that He would find no difficulty in doing likewise with the horses and chariots that they would encounter in Canaan.

97) *20:1-9*

It is not difficult to see the spiritual application of 3 and 4 to our own battles. The coming of the priest to the people (2) corresponds to the giving of the Word week by week in the Lord's house, as we hear and receive His message through preaching, and there is a very real sense in which the exhortations against fainting, fearing or trembling and the assurance of the Lord's presence are there every time we hear the Word preached, to minister to us in the battles and pressures that face us day by day. There would almost seem to be a progression in the phrases used in 3: the word 'faint' has the meaning of being 'tender', in the sense of receiving all the impressions of fear. It is the idea of being 'soft', conveyed in the colloquial but graphic phrase of 'legs turning to jelly'. 'Faint-hearted' or even 'low-spirited' is what is in view. The 'fear not' is taken up in so many places in Scripture - one thinks of Isaiah 41:10, and of these oft repeated words on the lips of Jesus Himself. The marginal reading for 'tremble' is 'make haste'. One thinks of Isaiah 28:16, 'He that believeth shall not make haste' (i.e. to flee). He will not move, but stand firm. The idea is that of panic reaction, losing grip, turning to blind, unreasoning action. The end product of such panic is well expressed in the next word 'terrified', which is even stronger than 'tremble'. Over against all that, there is the wonderful 'For' in 4. What an assurance! This is the word that can still any and every storm.

98) *20:1-9*

We look next at the interesting and significant series of 'excusings' in 5-9. Four classes of men were excused military service: the man who had built a new house and had not dedicated it (5), the man who had planted a vineyard and had not yet eaten of it (6), the man who had betrothed a wife (7), and the man who, in spite of the assurances of 4, was fearful and fainthearted. Delitzsch comments that 'the intention of these instructions was ... to avoid depriving any member of the covenant nation of his enjoyment of the good things of this life bestowed on him by the Lord'. This can refer only to the first three cases (5-7), and it was on compassionate, humanitarian grounds that such enactments were made. One thinks of similar compassionate attitudes in our own Army today, as for example the excusing of a young soldier from service in Ulster, when his brother has already been killed in action there. It was different, however, with the other class, the fearful and trembling: they were excused because their cowardice might infect the morale of the army as a whole (cf Judges 7:1ff, and the story of Gideon and his 300 - Gideon's army was cut down dramatically - but it is no problem to God to save by many or by few, cf 1 Samuel 14:6). But there is another consideration also, which applies to all four cases, the first three as well as the fourth - that is the question of divided loyalties. As the Apostle Paul says, 'No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life' (2 Timothy 2:4), and James, 'A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways' (James 1:8). And we have our Lord's words in Luke 9:57ff, 'No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God'. From which we may gather that as well as compassion, there is a note of realism here in the Mosaic enactments, and a recognition that there are some risks not worth the work of the kingdom.

99) *20:10-18*

A careful reading of these verses makes it clear that a distinction is made between cities 'which are very far off' (15) and cities which belong to the Canaanites (17). This distinction is very important, and it serves to dispel the accusation often made that the Israelites were bloodthirsty and ruthless in the extreme in their campaign of conquest in Canaan. It was in fact only the Canaanite nations or tribes that were extirpated and utterly destroyed, men, women and children alike, and this was done at the behest and command of the Lord. This is the meaning of the phrase 'holy war': judgment was appointed for these tribes because the cup of their iniquity was full and running over. But with cities and peoples not in that category (as described in 10:15) the procedure was to be very different: an offer of peace was made to them (10), as Matthew Henry says, quoting Jewish writers, 'upon condition that they renounce idolatry, worship the God of Israel, as proselytes of the gate that were not circumcised, pay to their new masters a yearly tribute, and submit to their government'; on these terms the process of war should be stayed, and their conquerors, upon this submission, were to be their protectors.' It is very significant that in such a situation the women and children were to be spared. Where, in ancient time, would this ever have happened? The compassion and humanitarianism implied here is truly remarkable, and reveals a forbearance that has been all too little recognized by those who contemptuously dismiss the Old Testament as bloodthirsty and sub Christian. The same enlightened humanitarianism is extended to the trees, in 19, 20. No 'scorched earth' policy here.

100)*21:1-9*

We come now to a chapter full of interest, unfolding laws concerning a variety of issues for the most part disconnected with one another. In 1-9, it is the expiation of an uncertain, anonymous murder; in 10-14 the treatment of a captive wife; in 15-17 it is the right of the first-born; in 18-21, the punishment of a refractory son; in 22, 23, the burial of a hanged criminal. The question that arises is: what is the point of gathering together these separate issues, and what is the message for us? The answer is to be found, as Delitzsch says, 'in the desire to bring out distinctly the sacredness of life and of personal rights from every point of view, and impress it on the covenant nation'. Hence also their attachment to the previous regulations formulated in this section of Moses' address to Israel. Two lessons emerge from the first section (1-9). One is in relation to the sanctity of life, and the other to the reality of corporate responsibility. With regard to the first of these, we need to see that this concept stands over against all modern attitudes which assume that life is ours, to do with it what we choose. This is what underlies issues such as euthanasia, on the one hand, and abortion on the other (to take two extremes, at opposite ends of the life-scale). The assumption is made, in either case, that the final prerogative lies with man, on the grounds of humanitarianism and compassion. But are men more compassionate than God, more humanitarian than He? Such an attitude can be adopted only by a society whose roots are no longer deep rooted in the principles of the word of God. Ours is a 'horizontal relationship' society, and it is this that turns its 'humanitarianism' and compassion into a heartless and ruthless attack on the sanctity and sacredness of human life itself, and earns it the sad and tragic reputation of being in essence 'a disposable society'.

101)*21:1-9*

The second lesson of the passage has to do with the reality of corporate responsibility. This is seen clearly from the involvement of the city (3) nearest which the slain man's body is found. It could be said in one sense that the inhabitants of that city had nothing to do with the killing, nevertheless it had to do with them for the simple but compelling reason that there is such a thing as corporate responsibility. As the Tyndale commentary rightly says, 'Such a murder involved the whole community in blood guilt. Both the people and the land were defiled and some kind of ceremonial execution was required to satisfy the demands of justice.' This notion is alien and foreign to modern thinking because we are so desperately individualistic in our attitudes. Not so the Scriptures, however, and there is much need today to get back to biblical thinking here. The 'Stop-the-world-I-want-to get-off' attitude is simply not possible as a workable philosophy of life, simply because we are all inevitably involved in the structures of society. Society's sins are our sins, and no one can opt out by saying, 'It has nothing to do with me'. This is true whether in such a case as the one before us in this passage, or in such issues as, for example, racial discrimination, neglect of the under-privileged, or the needs of the third world. This is why it is not possible for anyone of this generation to say accusingly, 'You dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.' It was we - twentieth century civilisation - that dropped the bomb, and we are all implicated in its horror, including those who were not even born at the time. In the same way - as we pointed out in our recent studies in Revelation, Auschwitz was not simply the crime of the Nazis, but also of twentieth century humanity. We are all guilty men. This is the point that is made here, in these verses.

102)*21:10-14*

The reference to war in these verses must be understood to mean war other than against the Canaanites, for in that situation the instructions were clear and unequivocal: men, women and children were all to be destroyed (cf 20:17). Once again, it is the sanctity of life that is emphasised. A superficial reading of these verses might tempt us to say, 'It does not look very much like it', but one has only to think of the cruel and barbarous treatment meted out to womenkind captured in war among the ancient nations to realise how very different is the attitude expressed here, which breathes a spirit of consideration for the captive woman. Where, in heathendom, would any woman be given a month to mourn the loss of her parents (13)? Tyndale thinks it strange that 'this legislation does not envisage the dangers attendant on the presence in the family of foreign women with a pagan background', and suggests that 'it must have been felt that the faith of Israel was strong enough to outweigh any such influence'. But Calvin assumes that what is in view is a change of religion on the part of the woman to the faith of Israel, and that 'the abjuration of former life should precede their marriage and that none should be allowed to marry a foreign wife until she has first renounced her own nation' - hence the reference to the shaving of the head, the cutting of nails and the change of garments, signifying and symbolising her leaving behind the old and adopting the new. At all events, the emphasis in the passage is on the humane and compassionate treatment that was to be given, and the overriding notion of respect for life even in the context of a conquering and conquered people.

103)*21:15-17*

The law with regard to the rights of the first-born was designed to prevent the abuse of paternal authority in favour of a favourite wife. Calvin comments: 'God reminds us that he did not enact this law without cause, for where polygamy was allowed the mind of the husband was generally most inclined to the second wife, because if he had loved the first with true affection he would be contented with her as the companion of his life and would not have thought of a second .... Wherefore when the husband grew tired of his first wife and desired a second, he could be coaxed by her blandishments to leave away from the children of his first wife what naturally belonged to them.' Once again, it is the matter of fair play and respect for human rights and the natural order of things that lies at the heart of this legislation. A father's personal preference did not justify his setting aside his eldest son in favour of a younger son. It is true of course that in some notable instances in the Scriptural record this did in fact actually happen, as for example in the cases of Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael, Ephraim and Manasseh and David and his elder brothers, but these were special circumstances, and were exceptions to the normal law, with the overriding divine purposes in the outworking of redemption being involved, for very good reasons, however mysterious to us. Here, it is a question of justice that is in view, and fair dealing, in a family situation, such as is indicated in Calvin's words.

104)21:18-21

Delitzsch says of these verses that 'the laws upon this point aim not only at the defence, but also at the limitation, of parental authority'. What he means is that, on the one hand the town magistrates not only uphold the parental authority in dealing with the refractory son, but also take out of the parents' hands the right to put him to death themselves. Again, at first reading, this whole matter may seem harsh and extreme to us, but we should bear in mind, in view of the phrase at the end of 21, that the severity of the punishment was to preserve society. We should seek to view what is said here in perspective, and bear in mind that it is only a hundred and fifty years or so since we used to hang people for stealing sheep, and we are here dealing with a situation going back three and a half thousand years! We do not hang people for stealing sheep today, but it is still wrong to steal sheep, and it would be very wrong if the idea got around that stealing a sheep was not a very serious matter after all. What we need to distinguish in such matters is the fact that the sanction of the law remains unaltered, even although the particular punishment might change with the passing of the years. The real danger in any society lies in this distinction being blurred. There is surely something far wrong in a society in which one man may be fined £10 for parking his car on the main street of a city, and another be fined the same amount for mugging a defenceless woman in broad daylight in a side street. Strict law enforcement is a necessity if we are ever to have a stable society. Here, in these verses, the importance of a stable society is stressed. Disobedience and rebelliousness strike at society: that is why they must be dealt with.

105)*21:22-23*

Calvin says of these verses, 'The object of this precept was to banish inhumanity and barbarism from the chosen people, and also to impress upon them horror even of a just execution. And surely the body of a man suspended on a cross is a sad and hideous spectacle; for the rights of sepulture are ordained for man, both as a pledge and symbol of the resurrection, and also to spare the eyes of the living, lest they should be defiled by the sight of so horrible a thing.' The idea seems to be that while in ancient times it was customary to expose the corpses of men condemned to death for all to see, it was enjoined upon the people of God to limit that exposure to a minimum, since a corpse was an impure object which defiled the land, and must be disposed of quickly. But more: there is the thought that even in death for a criminal offence, the man was still nevertheless made in the image of God, and was therefore due that basic respect that belongs to humanity. One thinks of the way in which God Himself drew a curtain of darkness down upon the suffering figure of His Son when He hung on the cross, having been made a curse for us, as if to pay respect to that sinless humanity in His image when He was made sin for us. It is as if here God was saying, 'This criminal, whose life has had to be destroyed because of his capital offence, was made in My image. Respect this, therefore, even in his shameful and just death, and bury him before sunset.' Reverence for life, indeed, even when it is forfeit!

106)22:1-12

A series of laws follows in these verses applicable to varying situations in the life of Israel, indicating that 'the scope of God's concern for proper behaviour in the covenant family was very wide' (Tyndale), and that the divine law was to apply to every kind of human circumstance. In 1-4 the emphasis is on the duty to love one's neighbour and have a concern for his needs - this extending to his goods and possessions. One is struck once again by the compassion and humanity of so much of the Old Testament legislation (cf Exodus 21/23, and also our Lord's use of these laws in Luke 15:3ff). One thinks by contrast of the modern attitude of indifference to neighbours' needs, and the 'not wanting to know' spirit that will allow muggers to attack their hapless victims without lifting a hand to help them, and tolerate criminal assaults, turning a deaf ear to despairing cries for help because 'they did not want to get involved'. Here is the divine requirement in such cases: 'Thou shalt not hide thyself from them' (4). We can hardly doubt that much of our Lord's own teaching is based on what is said here - and, indeed, on an even earlier word, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (Genesis 4:9) - in the emphasis He laid on duty to one's neighbour, as for example, in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10) and that of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25), where the issue is seen to be one of eternal importance, becoming the basis of the last judgment itself.

107)22:1-12

The injunction contained in 5 seems to have had a historical significance in that, as Tyndale points out, 'some association with the religion of Canaan made this practice an abomination to the Lord'. But Delitzsch insists that 'the immediate design of this prohibition was not to prevent licentiousness, or to oppose idolatrous practices; but to maintain the sanctity of that distinction of the sexes which was established by the creation of man and woman, and in relation to which Israel was not to sin'. Calvin comments: 'This decree also commends modesty in general, and in it God anticipates the danger, lest women should harden themselves into forgetfulness of modesty, or men should degenerate into effeminacy unworthy of their nature. Garments are not in themselves of so much importance; but as it is disgraceful for men to become effeminate, and also for women to affect manliness in their dress and gestures, propriety and modesty are prescribed, not only for decency's sake, but lest one kind of liberty should at length lead to something worse .... Decency in the fashion of the clothes is an excellent preservative of modesty.' This latter quotation in particular points the way to a true application of the injunction to the present day. Literal interpretation and application is not the point, as we may see from 12, but rather the confusion of the divine, natural distinction between the sexes. The idea behind 'unisex' is the real issue, and we shall consider this further in the next Note.

108)22:1-12

The question is: is it wrong for women to wear men's clothing? The answer must be, it depends what you mean. And, indeed, it depends for what reason the clothes are worn. For it may be done for comfort's sake (to keep out the cold) or for convenience of work; it may even be done by tradition (in some parts of India, for example, native dress for women includes trousers; and the Scottish kilt looks like a skirt to foreigners!) It is difficult to see much to object to in this; but it can sometimes be very different: for a woman to wear men's clothes to express manliness is to unwoman her (just as for a man to wear women's clothes to express effeminacy is to unman him). And of course 'wearing the trousers' is something a woman can still do even when vehemently objecting to the whole idea of wearing men's clothes (just as wearing a head-covering by a woman as a token of submission can often go hand in hand with a very unsubmissive spirit that 'hen-pecks' a hapless husband! It is the inward attitude, not the outward expression, that is the important thing). Of course, as W. Still puts it in his Notes, 'there are people who grow up as masculine women and effeminate men, and this problem is no doubt partly solved by the complementariness of marriage in which the chosen partner compensates for the mate. But this does not excuse the man naturally effeminate (he cannot help that, although we wonder if the increase in such types has not something to do with an influx of demonic influence in a lawless society) from assuming the headship of his house and family, or the mannish and naturally overbearing woman from submitting to her husband. But where the problem assumes far greater proportions than that of accommodating natural types, but becomes a fashion in which the latest craze is for men to unman themselves and women to unwoman themselves, then this should be seen as the work of the devil to undermine and destroy the Christian and biblical basis of our civilization .... Let us be on our guard against trends which are not only against nature, but are demon-inspired, with intent to undermine what is natural in society. The Bible has very plain things to say about this in both Testaments (cf Genesis 19:5; Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:27; 1 Corinthians 6:9).'

109)22:13-30

The confusion between things that are different, and that God has made different, is not confined to clothes, as 9-11 indicate. Unnatural combinations violate the purity of the species, whether of seeds for sowing, beasts for ploughing, or fibres for weaving. This may seem a far-off and largely antiquated regulation until we bear in mind that what is being done today in what we call genetic engineering - 'in vitro' fertilisation, surrogate motherhood, 'cloning' - represents just this mixing of dissimilar things, and unnatural tampering with nature, which raises enormously disquieting ethical issues for our time. It is not without significance that the society that has created 'unisex' has also created this other monstrous thing, and that both have become possible because God has been dismissed from the world that belongs to Him. What follows in the rest of the chapter, in the laws touching on the question of chastity, teach the same kind of lesson. The disorders and sins mentioned were recognized as serious because they attacked the sanctity of family life, and this is why they were dealt with so severely: 'So shalt thou put evil away from among you' (21). Who shall say that there is not wisdom in dealing in such severity with things that attack family life? One has only to look at our own society today, where adultery is not only not punished, but is in fact glamorized by the media to such an extent that chastity - and virginity too - has come to be regarded as being deviant and unnatural, and needing to be corrected. Is it surprising that one in every three marriages in our time will (according to the statistics) end up in divorce?

110)*22:13-30*

One or two further considerations must occupy our attention before we leave these verses. The punishments or penalties attached to the various issues mentioned may well be thought to be severe - over severe, indeed - but we have already pointed out that we must make a distinction between the sanction of the law and the nature of the punishment or penalty. The latter may change, from age to age, but the sanction remains. It is still wrong to do such things, although they are not punished in the same way now. But we should notice particularly that even here it is no unthinking severity that is at work, and that there are well-defined distinctions drawn between the various misdemeanours. They are not all heaped together in the same basket: the distinctions are made because the distinctions are there. This is part of the healthiness and wholesomeness about the biblical approach to sexual matters, a wholesomeness and clear-headedness that we would do well to get back to in our own confused and uncertain society. This is not to advocate a return to the penal structures, but rather a return to biblical thinking and biblical attitudes. This is the great value of a study such as this: really to grapple with biblical principles and to see what is being said in them, and relate them, in our own present-day needs, to the confusions and the 'double-think' attitudes that are so tragically undermining the structures of our society.

III)*23:1-8*

In this chapter we come to regulations as to the rights of citizenship in the congregation of the Lord. Here again, as in the previous chapter, a remarkable range of precept is unfolded. The reference in 1 is to (i) the acts and practice of bodily mutilation and emasculation practised by the heathen, either in the worship of a heathen deity, or in the practice of oriental brutality, or to render slaves innocuous to women in eastern households; and (ii) the Lord's desire for the 'unblemished' - in sacrifices or in His people. It is the mutilation of the nature of man as created by God in His image that is forbidden, as being 'against the natural order of things'. As such it is a precept similar to that in 22:4, 5 regarding the 'unnaturalness' of the blurring of the distinction between the sexes which wearing the wrong clothes would manifest. Always, it is the true dignity of manhood and of life that is stressed. It is true that some real and disquieting questions arise from these precepts, but we shall seek to answer these in a later Note, after we have looked at what is being said. 'Bastard' in 2 probably does not carry our meaning of the word as merely being an illegitimate child, but rather (as Jewish expositors maintain) the child of an incestuous union or of adultery, or of mixed marriages between Israelites and those of other nations. It is thus removed from the realm of 'ordinary' sinfulness (which normal illegitimacy betokens) and falls into the category of the unnatural, which is an abomination to the Lord. Hence also the prohibition with regard to the Ammonite or the Moabite: their attitude to Israel was regarded as unnaturally hostile (4-6), as indeed was their incestuous origin (cf Genesis 19:30-38). More on this in the next Note.

112)*23:1-8*

The Balaam 'incident' referred to in 4, 5 was obviously regarded with great abhorrence by Israel - and by God - and placed the Moabites and Ammonites in a different category from Edom or Egypt. The distinction thus made should surely make it clear that it is no arbitrary harshness or exclusiveness that is in view in these verses. Indeed, the spirit of compassion evident in 7 should serve to disarm any suspicion of harshness, even if it does not answer all the questions that arise for us. It may indeed be asked whether this legislation is hard on the afflicted ones, those who are the victims of unnatural union, and it must be confessed that it seems so. But it should be borne in mind that what is in view - and at stake - is the principle of purity within the congregation of the Lord. Israel had to be a pure, exclusive people in order to fulfil her true destiny, and this 'exclusiveness' was built into the structure of the law God had given them to keep them so. But it was as a means to an end, not an end in itself. This is why we find that exclusiveness being breached by the grace of the gospel in New Testament times, and the Gentiles being welcomed into the fold of covenantal grace. What was right and proper - and necessary - in old time was superseded in the wider grace of the gospel. And, indeed, even within the old covenant itself, we see how grace supersedes the letter of this law: in Isaiah 56:1-8 we see eunuchs being given a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters, and the sons of the stranger welcomed into the fold of the family of God. It is the principle of purity, not the literalness of the law's fulfilment, that is important here.

113)23:9-14

These verses deal with cultic requirements for God's people in their conduct of the holy war in which they were to be engaged. Even to look upon them in terms of hygiene is a useful exercise, and they speak well in this regard of the discipline that was to be operative within the Israel armies. But there is more to it than hygiene: 'wicked thing' in 9 refers not so much to moral wickedness as to anything that is unbecoming or unseemly or inappropriate. Cultic requirements, yes, but with spiritual lessons underlying them, and the reason is that the Lord Himself is in the midst of the camp. This is a call, therefore, to God's people to live in character with His calling, even in the ordinary, day-to-day matters of life. If His presence is real to us, it must be important - to us and to Him - that we conduct ourselves in a seemly fashion, and in character with what He has called us to be. Habits and attitudes that are in ordinary circumstances unimportant assume an entirely different significance in His presence. Would we slouch, hands in pockets, in baggy trousers and unbrushed shoes, when having an audience with the Queen? Does a minister's dress, demeanour and attitude in the pulpit matter less? Is he not standing before the King of kings, and speaking His word?

114)*23:9-14*

Here are two quotes which will serve to 'fill in' the message of 14: 'Our guilt-ridden minds tend to regard His perpetual inspection as an overshadowing threat (cf the stab of guilt children used to feel on merely seeing a policeman!). But we should rather think of the divine oversight as part of God's search for pleasure in His children. Certainly this is what He hopes and longs for. It is the good and not the bad He is looking for hopefully. Here the notion of the beauty of holiness as that which pleases the Lord both embraces and transcends the mere legalities of ethical rules' (W. Still). Indeed, the observance of laws and rules is not what true life is about, as C.S. Lewis points out. Living by the rules 'is mere machinery compared with the thing we men are really made for. Morality is indispensable; but the Divine Life, which gives itself to us and which calls us to be gods, intends for us something in which morality will be swallowed up .... Though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads you on, out of all that, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Every one there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes'.

115)*23:15-25*

A number of unrelated laws occupy the remainder of the chapter. They are full of interest, not least because of the fact, for example, that the spirit of humanity and compassion and concern for the oppressed and the needy in 15,16, stands alongside very much a 'hard-line' attitude in 17, 18 - which teaches us surely that hard-line inflexibility in some things can go hand in hand with tenderness and gentleness in others. Some think that to take a hard-line attitude in anything means you cannot be a caring person. Well, in contrast, let us observe the sheer realism of the Bible here! The word about usury in 19, 20 needs to be understood aright. The principle of interest-making is not in itself wrong (our modern society depends so largely upon its validity!), but the need of one's fellow should not become an opportunity for profit among God's people. There must be no hard-heartedness within the family of God. As to 21ff, two things may be said. The first is that what is being stressed is that our word must be as good as our bond. If our word cannot be depended upon, there is something basically - and fatally - wrong with our spiritual experience. Our 'yea' must be 'yea', and our 'nay', 'nay'. Secondly, it is a very solemn thing to vow a vow to the Lord, and having done so, we must pay it. But - and here is a necessary warning - it can never be right to keep a vow which would involve doing something that is forbidden in Scripture. It is never right to do wrong, even if we vowed to do it. Remember Jephthah (Judges 11:30ff)!

116)*24:1-4*

The case of divorce under discussion in these verses is a special one, not dealing with divorce in general (and therefore, by implication, remarriage) but with the forbidding of a reunion with the divorced wife, if in the meantime she had married another man, even though the second husband had also put her away, or had died. This is not made clear in the AV rendering which is confused and misleading, and the RSV should be followed, making 1-3 all 'if' clauses: 'if she finds no favour ...(1) ... if she goes and becomes another man's wife ...(2) ... if the latter husband dislikes her ...(3) ... then (4) certain consequences follow: her former husband may not take her again, for that would be an abomination to the Lord. This is, undoubtedly the correct reading of the passage; but problems remain, for it is not at all clear why such a remarriage would be an abomination to the Lord. Is it because it would represent a compound violation of the marriage bond, the first and the second divorce together, a compounding of the felony, so to speak? Or is it because, if the second marriage of a divorced woman was a moral defilement (cf Leviticus 18:2§; Numbers 5:13, 14), the defilement of the woman by another remarriage would be repeated and even increased?

117)*24:1-4*

In the previous reading we dealt with the possible reasons why the remarriage mentioned in these verses would be an abomination to the Lord. But the question still remains as to what the 'uncleanness' referred to in 1 can be. The strict rabbinic schools, following Shammai, regarded it as unchastity, while the liberal schools, following Hillel, regarded it as any indecency or even anything displeasing to the husband. The truth however must lie between these extremes: it cannot refer to adultery, for this carried the death penalty; and it can hardly be anything displeasing to the husband, for this would be to open the door to indiscriminate divorce on the flimsiest of pretexts. The importance of the passage for us is that this is the passage which our Lord takes up in his discussion with the Pharisees (Matthew 19, Mark 10). The Pharisees' intention was clearly to force Jesus to side with the one interpretation of the rabbis or the other, thus trapping, whichever answer He gave. But Jesus neatly turned the tables on them, exposing the falseness of their position in holding as they did that the 'bill of divorcement' (1) could be applied to issues other than adultery, and that indeed, since the verses in Deuteronomy could not apply to adultery (for which the penalty was death), they must apply to other things. But Jesus interpreted Moses differently: the bill of divorcement was made 'for the hardness of their hearts', and was no part of the original divine order. Rather, divorce was possible on the grounds of adultery alone. The Pharisees were misinterpreting and misunderstanding Deuteronomy 24, in taking it any other way. That is the point that is made in Matthew 19 and Mark 10.

118)24:5-22

The remainder of this chapter consists of a number of isolated precepts of various kinds, full of interest, and of considerable importance to the social life of Israel: exemption from military service (5), millstones not to be taken in pledge (6), against kidnapping (7), leprosy (8, 9), laws about loans (10-13), protection of hired servants (14, 15), personal responsibility (16), protection for the weak and helpless (17, 18), the laws of gleaning in harvest (19-22). Widely different and disparate as these are, it is nevertheless possible to discern a controlling common factor in these precepts, in their emphasis on the true dignity of humanity, and the evident spirit of compassion which they display. With regard to the first of them, in 5, the emphasis is on the importance of family life, and the need to establish and safeguard it, and indeed give it priority over even participation in the holy war. The point is not, as the AV phrase 'cheer up' seems to imply, that a new bride might be under pressure and need encouragement, but simply that they should have a chance to be happy together - a delightsome touch indeed, typical of the heart of a generous-hearted God! In 6 and 7, the emphasis is on guarding essential human dignity from attack, and reflects the deeply humanitarian and compassionate attitude which characterises so much of the Deuteronomic code. The point about leprosy in 8, 9 is not that when they saw leprosy they were to be on their guard, but rather to be on their guard lest they got it as a reward for rebellion against the teaching of the Word. Remember Miriam, and take heed, it means: do not do as she did (Numbers 12:10-15). In 10-13, the emphasis is again on fair and generous dealing with the poor and the unfortunate. The debtor, not the creditor was to decide on what the pledge would be. There must be avoidance of humiliation or hurt. What is it that stands out in all this? Is it not the 'humanity' of God?

119)24:5-22

In 14, 15, the concern is for protection against the exploitation of workers, the implication being that God has a concern about this (cf James 5:4, which is a direct reference to this word). In 16 it is the idea of personal responsibility that is underlined, in spite of the undoubted validity of the idea of corporate responsibility taught elsewhere in Scripture (cf 2 Kings 14:6 and 2 Chronicles 25:4 for examples of this, and cf also Jeremiah 31:29, 30; Ezekiel 18:1-4). In 17, 18, the duty of protecting the weak and defenceless is laid upon the whole of Israel. Significantly, the basis of this compassion is the fact that Israel was once a bondman in Egypt. The strongest argument for human compassion is the fact of the divine compassion to men (cf Matthew 18:28). In 19-22 it is the law of gleaning, and here particularly the grace of compassion is seen. The idea is that enough should be left over in the harvest field for the poor and needy. In 19 the words are 'hast forgot', but in Leviticus 19:9 it is enjoined as a duty obligatory upon Israel (cf Ruth 2, also Ephesians 4:28 enough left over to help others). It is in fact a matter of lifestyle, the adoption of an attitude of compassion that will express itself in this way. Someone has said, 'Where living religion declines, ultimately there is no sanction which obliges men to care for the poor and needy. Once again the basis of the compassion is said in 22 to be the divine compassion shown to Israel in delivering Israel from the bondage of Egypt. The remembrance of divine grace towards us is ever to be the mainspring of our action towards others.

120)25:1-3

This chapter continues the various precepts relating to the social life of Israel. In these verses we have an interesting comment on punishment. The concept of corporal punishment is assumed here as a matter of course, and this, be it noted, in a context in which the dignity of man is stressed! For the punishment is to be limited, lest man's dignity is undermined. The inference is clear: forty stripes do not dishonour and demean a man, more than forty will, therefore the latter is forbidden. We should also note the phrases 'worthy to be beaten' and 'according to his fault'. The emphasis is on desert, and this, as C.S. Lewis points out trenchantly, desert is the only thing that links punishment with justice. It is only as deserved or undeserved that a sentence can be just or unjust. This is, par excellence, the concept which has all but disappeared in the thinking of our society today, but which needs desperately to be recovered and rehabilitated. Lewis adds the following penetrating sentence: 'To be punished, however severely, because we have deserved it, because we 'ought to have known better', is to be treated as a human person made in God's image'. But when theories of punishment are severed from a true biblical foundation, our thinking can go off on many tangents that seem both mild and merciful, but which in the end will rob a man of his dignity as a human being - as witness the terrifying and degrading psychological 'cures' inflicted by Communist governments on dissidents today. Lewis's essay on 'The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment' may be consulted for a full exposition of these ideas.

121)*25:4-10*

As to 4, it is interesting to see the use Paul makes of this verse in 1 Corinthians 9:9, where the Apostle seems to spiritualise the words and find their truest fulfilment as an illustration of the principle that needs to regulate Christian service. In 5ff, the subject matter is what is sometimes called levirate marriage. This, the commentators tell us, was not a custom peculiar to Israel, but was of very ancient origin, and it is interesting to see how an ancient practice was incorporated into the Mosaic Law and thus regularized for Israel. It is said to be rooted in the deep desire to secure a continued personal existence through one's descendants. As Delitzsch says, 'Moses therefore recognized this custom as perfectly justifiable; but he sought to restrain it within such limits, that it should not present any impediment to the sanctification of marriage aimed at by the law'. The compulsory character of the custom was taken away by the further provision mentioned in 7ff, and it is this that is underlined in the story of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 4:7, 8). Boaz was not Ruth's brother-in-law, but a near kinsman (Hebrews. 'go'el'). The point about the 'shoe' (cf also Psalm 60:8) is that when any one took possession of landed property, he did so by treading upon the soil, and asserting his right of possession by standing upon it in his shoes. In this way the taking off of the shoe and handing it to another became a symbol of the renunciation of a man's position and property (Delitzsch). We should note also, however, the prohibition of this kind of association, made in Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21 while the brother was still alive; and the Sadducees' question to Jesus in Matthew 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27, in which they sought to prove the absurdity of belief in the resurrection.

122)25:11-12

Two comments from other sources will suffice for today's meditation. The first is from the Gilcomston Record, by Revelation. W. Still: 'Only two things are to be said about these verses: one, that the sentence seems savage and its execution merciless, and second, that it indicates God's hatred of such a sin as this, which is not only grossly immodest, but betrays a mind with no respect for the privacies of the life of another. The latter is a gravely fundamental error, since God Himself and His law is set to uphold the essential dignity of the individual man. None of us may improperly encroach upon the private life of another, whatever that encroachment may be. This only is the ground of true bonds between persons - fundamental respect. See even the most despicable type of person change under an approach of persistent respect. Nor does the danger that it may evoke presumption in the one so tempted excuse us from trying it.'

The other comment is from Delitzsch: 'But in order that the great independence which is here accorded to a childless widow in relation to her brother-in-law, might not be interpreted as a false freedom granted to the female sex (Baumgarten), the law is added immediately afterwards, that a woman whose husband was quarrelling with another, and who should come to his assistance by laying hold of the secret parts of the man who was striking her husband, should have her hand cut off.'

123)*25:13-19*

In 13-16, in the legislation about weights and measures, the duty of integrity in trade and commerce is enjoined (cf also Leviticus 19:35, 36). Strict honesty in business was to be a hallmark of all within the covenant (cf Proverbs 11:1-6), and dishonesty here was regarded not only as a sin against one's fellows, but also an offence against God. The way in which the prohibition is couched in 15 makes it plain that this is one of the 'commandments with promise' (cf Ephesians 6:2), and length of days is promised to those who honour it (the negative implication of this promise should not be forgotten). The reference in 17-19 to Amalek comes very suddenly, 'out of the blue', so to speak, and the connection with what has gone before is not clear or obvious. Delitzsch suggests the following: 'Whilst the Israelites were to make love the guiding principle in their dealings with a neighbour, and even with strangers and foes, this love was not to degenerate into weakness or indifference towards open ungodliness. To impress this upon the people, Moses concludes the discourse on the law by reminding them of the crafty enmity manifested towards them by Amalek on their march out of Egypt, and with the command to root out the Amalekites (cf Exodus 17:9-16).' For the fulfilment of this command, see 1 Samuel 15, and the consequences of Saul's incomplete obedience to the divine injunction. The circumstantial detail given in 18 fills in the story in Exodus 17, and exposes how heinous and heartless Amalek's sin against Israel and Israel's God really was. This also was an abomination to the Lord (cf 16), and this may be another link with the verses that precede 17-19.

124)*26:1-11*

With this chapter we come to the last part of Moses' second main discourse in Deuteronomy in which we have seen that there was no aspect of the corporate or individual life of Israel that was not meant to come under the influence and control of divine law. The final regulations deal with two important rituals: the presentation of first-fruits (1-11) and the presentation of the tithe of the third year (12-15). As to the first (1-11), this was an important and significant ritual, full of profound meaning, not only for Israel, but also for us, in the principle it displays. The fruits of the earth were the tangible proof to the Israelites that they were actually in possession of the land, and the presentation of the first of the fruits was the practical confession that they were indebted to the Lord for the land, and an acknowledgment that the divine promise had been fulfilled to them. And each succeeding generation would take up this affirmation anew and identify itself with these first arrivals for whom the wonder of the divine faithfulness was so overwhelming. The idea is that of continual thankful acknowledgement of God's goodness by the offering of the first-fruits. The confession in 5ff was the recognition that he and his people owed their existence and welfare to the grace of God, manifested in the miraculous redemption of Israel from the oppression of Egypt and their guidance into Canaan. Again, as so often in this book, the emphasis is on the wonder of God's redeeming grace and power. We should surely see in this, the true inspiration of stewardship and giving as being based on the consciousness of the greatness and wonder of the divine redemption - and by the same token see the impoverishment of life that comes from wrong and niggardly attitudes to giving. God does not want our unwilling gifts, but it delights Him when we are moved to say 'Thank you' in this way!

125)*26:12-15*

What was said in the previous Note is equally applicable to these verses about the tithes of the third year, and it serves to scotch once and for all the false notion that the concept of 'tithing' is a legalistic bondage which has no place in the New Testament era. This is but one of the places in the Old Testament where tithing is shown to be based on and to flow from the sheer wonder of divine grace. The real inspiration of tithing lies in an understanding of the words in 5ff, 'A Syrian ready to perish was my father ...' (translated differently by the RSV, but still a valid rendering of the Hebrew), a reference most probably to Jacob, for it was he who went down to Egypt as a family and came forth as a nation. One sees the same kind of emphasis in Ephesians 2:11ff, where Paul stresses the wonder and glory of the contrast between 'then' and 'now' in the Christian's experience, and makes it the basis of all he proceeds to say about the Christian's walk (4:1ff). Delitzsch says of 13, 'The declaration of having fulfilled the commandments of God refers primarily to the directions concerning the tithes, and was such a rendering of an account as springs from the consciousness that a man may easily transgress the commandments of God.' The important matter here is that what was holy unto the Lord (however the idea of the tithe is interpreted - and there are differing interpretations) was regarded as a debt, and this refers to the payment or settlement of a debt. This is a good way of looking at our givings: when we do not give as we ought, we are really robbing God of what is rightfully His. This is the point made by the prophet Malachi (Malachi 3:8ff).

126)*26:16-19*

These verses speak of the ratification of the covenant, and as such must refer back over the entire section (5:1-26:15). The commentators point out that in form the verses represent a contract in which the two parties - God and Israel - bind themselves by means of a solemn declaration. Delitzsch says, 'There are two important points contained in this. The acceptance of the laws laid before them on the part of the Israelites involved a practical declaration that the nation would accept Jehovah as its God, and walk in His ways (17); and the giving of the law on the part of the Lord was a practical confirmation of His promise that Israel should be His people of possession, which He would glorify above all nations (18, 19)'. The force, therefore, of the words in 17 is 'Thou hast given God occasion to say to thee that He will be thy God, manifest Himself to thee as thy God'. As Tyndale puts it, 'The picture is based on a secular parallel in the two contracting parties to a covenant each required the other to recite the terms of the agreement between them .... This secular metaphor is put to a religious use.' The promise to set them 'high above all nations' is given its full and wonderful expression in Ephesians 1:20-2:6, where Paul speaks of believers being made to sit together with the ascended Lord in heavenly places, a glorious destiny indeed, and certainly adumbrated in this promise in 19!

127)*27:1-10*

This chapter and the next are largely occupied with the ritual of Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, with their curses and blessings, and both should be read throughout together, so as to get their full flavour. Our notes will therefore cover the general teaching of the section, which brings to a close Moses' second great address to the people of Israel, rather than follow it section by section (although the readings themselves will do so, day by day). We need to go back a bit in Deuteronomy, to an earlier reference in chapter 11, to see the context of this. In 11:26-32, we have the climax to the call to commitment to the covenant that Moses makes to the people, before he spells out the meaning and implications of the commandments of the law, in 12:1-26:19. There is a sense in which 27:1ff follows naturally upon 11:26-32 (see Notes 62-64 for Fri. 17 Feb – Mon. 20 Feb 1984). The instructions given by Moses here (1-10) are twofold: on the one hand, the setting up of large stones covered with lime on Mount Ebal, after crossing into Canaan, and the building of an altar there, and the writing of the law on these stones; on the other hand, the proclaiming of the blessing and curse of the law on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. The two instructions are linked together by the command to observe the law given in 9, 10. The fulfilment of these directions after Israel's entrance into Canaan is given in Joshua 8:30-35, and this is a passage which should be consulted in the study of these two chapters. We shall make reference to the passage in Joshua in a later Note. Suffice it to say at the moment that this was a symbolic act representing the planting of the law of God in that heathen environment as that which was to cleanse and purge it of all its evil and sin.

128)*27:11-26*

The exact 'disposition' of the curses and the blessings in the chapter is somewhat difficult to decide. The blessings, made mention of in 12, are not in fact enumerated, and the curses begin at 15; but it has been remarked that 'Jewish commentators say that the priests and Levites (15) first addressed the tribes on Mount Gerizim with the words 'Blessed is the man ...' (a statement parallel to 'Cursed be the man in 15) ... that maketh not any graven or molten image', and that this was followed, in 15, by the corresponding curse. This is, to say the least, an interesting conjecture (for which there is, of course, no manuscript evidence), and it perhaps reveals a tidiness of mind in the Rabbis which has something to commend it! The curses in 15ff relate both to the commandments of the Decalogue and to the various enactments that have been unfolded through the second main address given by Moses. When one takes the reference in Joshua along with these verses, it does not require much imagination to realise the overwhelming solemnity of the occasion and the tremendous sense of drama that accompanied it, as the blessings and cursings sounded out in that great natural amphitheatre with its extraordinary acoustics, in which the voices on one side of the valley could be clearly heard by those on the other side. The chorus of Amens, as the law of God was rehearsed in such a spirit of worship, must have been an unforgettable experience to all who heard it. What must it have meant, for example, to the many children and young people who were there! It is not too much to say that it must have left an indelible mark upon their spirits that remained with them all the rest of their lives. For this, in fact, is what is being said: 'I have given you My Word', says the Lord, 'and now it is up to you. If you obey it, I will bless you, if you disobey, I will curse you. The choice is yours. Therefore choose life' (cf 30:19).

129)*28:3-14*

These verses outline the nature of the blessings that follow obedience to the covenant. It is a notable passage, full of grace and beauty, with some deeply significant words and phrases, which we must look at briefly, before making more general comment. In 2, it is said that these blessings will 'overtake' God's people, and this in itself is highly important in view of the contemporary search for, and preoccupation with, happiness that bedevils so much of our society. Happiness is not to be found by seeking it; it 'comes' to those whose minds and hearts have been gripped by something bigger than personal happiness, and steals on them unawares - 'overtakes' them - when something greater than themselves has commanded their souls. So it is here: the blessing of God 'overtakes' those whose hearts are gripped by a passion to obey God's Word. Furthermore, in such circumstances, the divine blessing comes to them not casually or fortuitously, but by divine command (8). And when it does, it opens to us all the treasures of His grace (1, 2) - it is a rich and wealthy experience. And - best of all - it makes His people 'more than conquerors' - this is the only phrase adequate to describe what is said in 13 - 'thou shalt be above only, and thou shalt not be beneath'. We sometimes say, in answer to the query, 'How are you?', 'Not too bad, under the circumstances.' But in the enjoyment of this blessing of God, we shall never be 'under the circumstances' but always above them. That is the measure of God's covenant blessings!

130)*28:15-68*

The list of curses described in these verses clearly occupies a disproportionate space compared with the blessings in 1-14. Tyndale suggests that this is 'probably due to the fact that, human nature being what it is, the threat of a severe judgment on the covenant breaker seems to act as a stronger stimulus to correct behaviour than any promise of blessing'. M. Noth has an interesting comment: 'The blessing is freely promised. If, however, men act independently, transgression and defection result. The curse and judgment follow. Thus the blessing is freely promised but the curse follows upon transgression.' And since the sins of the people were to be manifold, the description of the curses that would come upon them is manifold also. The Tyndale commentary divides the curses into three sections: those in 15-44 which conclude with the warning of 45, 46; those in 47-57 which refer to dangers from Israel's enemies; and those in 58-68 which give warning of Israel's banishment and despair. Delitzsch is more detailed, and speaks of a fivefold view being given of the divine curse, after a brief statement in 16-19 that the curse would cover all relations of life: firstly (20-26), the curse in all its forms (20), then seven diseases (21, 22), drought (23, 24), and defeat in battle (25, 26); secondly (27-34), diseases of body and soul, plunder and oppression by enemies; thirdly (35-46) calamities already threatened as signs of the rejection of the people of Israel from covenant fellowship; fourthly (47-57) the horrors that will fall consequent upon being given up to the power of the heathen; and fifthly (58-68) hardening of heart into disregard of the glorious and fearful name of the Lord their God. It is a fearful picture indeed! And one clear message in it relates to the moral power of fear. One recalls in this connection J.A. Froude's comment on the Calvinists, who 'attracted to themselves every man in Europe that "hated a lie". They abhorred as no body of men ever more abhorred, all conscious mendacity, all impurity, all moral wrong of every kind so far as they could recognize it. Whatever exists at this moment in England and Scotland of conscientious fear of wrongdoing is the remnant of the convictions which were branded by the Calvinists into the people's hearts.'

131)*27:1-28:68*

We turn now to more general comment on this whole section. It is important for us to see the over-all picture, and to grasp the message it proclaims as relevant for us today. It will be helpful, in doing so, to look again at the fulfilment of this divine instruction about Ebal and Gerizim in Joshua 8 (that has already been referred to). Indeed, the passage in Joshua gives the whole section a graphic and striking thrust, for here were the Israelites, fresh from their victory at Ai, and poised for a major forward movement into Canaan, to make the most of the advantage they had gained, but instead of thrusting forward against the enemy, they turned aside to Shechem (where Ebal and Gerizim were situated), the place hoary with association from the days of the patriarchs; and they paid their vows to the Lord there, according to the Scriptures. Worship, not warfare, was the first priority of their lives. This was the lesson they had learned at Ai: the blessing and the cursing were already operative for them in their heartsore experience there, and there is no doubt that they 'got the message'. The second great lesson that the story affords us has already been briefly referred to in a previous Note: what was happening, in effect, was that Joshua was planting the law of the Lord in the land of Canaan. Here was a country that had passed the point of no return in evil and depravity, and God was about to destroy its inhabitants because of their sin. And now, in their place, here was His people, who were to live by His law. One is reminded of the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers in the New World in the 17th century. This is what they did; and it was a testimony to their determination to live by that Word, and establish their corporate life in obedience to its commands.

132)*27:1-28:68*

What happened at Ebal and Gerizim was really a repeat of the scene at Sinai, where God stated the terms of His covenant to His people. He had delivered them with mighty hand and outstretched arm out of the bondage of Egypt, and brought them to Sinai to give them the covenant: 'I am the Lord thy God ... thou shalt have no other gods before Me'. The people listened and responded, 'All that the Lord hath said unto us we will do.' We know how tragically they failed of that undertaking, and they were turned back at Kadesh-Barnea to perish in the wilderness. But now a new generation has been taken up by the Lord, and He is renewing and re-ratifying the covenant with them. Furthermore, they were to take possession of Canaan not only on the grounds of the promise given to Abraham (remember, they were in Abraham's country at that moment, at Shechem, a place sacred and hallowed by association with the patriarch), but also according to the terms of the law of God. They were embracing God's law as the rule of their life, and as the condition of their prosperity. It was a public acknowledgement of the law of God, and their relationship to it. 'Here we stand' - this is what was being proclaimed. This, then, is the way to establish a word of God, in any age, and to ensure the divine blessing upon it. We may take as an illustration of this the difference between the reforms of king Asa in 2 Chronicles 15, and those of his son Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 17. Where Asa commanded reforms to take place, Jehoshaphat taught the people the law. It may be that he was conscious that the defect of his father's programme lay precisely in the fact that it was lacking in any real emphasis on the law of God, and took steps accordingly to rectify the situation. Is there not a lesson here for us today, and does it not proclaim the need for a recovery of the Word in the life of the Church in our time?

133)*27:1-28:68*

Two further points will complete our study of this section of Deuteronomy. The first is to note that the altar of burnt offering was to be built on Mount Ebal. One would have thought, humanly speaking, that Mount Gerizim, the place of blessing, would have been the place to build it; but there is a stranger, more wonderful symbolism at work here, because the altar of burnt offering speaks ultimately of the great sacrifice for sin, the Lord Jesus, Who in the fullness of the time came into the world, to bear away the sin of the world as the Lamb of God. Ebal was the place of a curse and, as Paul puts it in Galatians 3:13, Christ became a curse for us, in bearing away the sin of the world. In this remarkable way, therefore, the shadow of the Cross stands over ancient Shechem.

The second point is that it is surely significant that it is all the stronger and larger tribes that were positioned on Gerizim to shout out the blessings, and the smaller ones on Ebal to shout out the cursings, as if God always intended that the blessings would overpower the cursings and gain the victory over them. In the passage, the cursings are longer than the blessings (four times as long, in fact, verse-wise) but the blessings ring out louder than the cursings! And even if the planting of the law in the land ever leads to the mobilisation of the enemy (cf Joshua 9:1), the resources of the Lord's people are always more than sufficient to give them the victory!

134)*29:1-9*

We come now to the third and final address given by Moses on the borders of the Promised Land. It is brief, by comparison with the second, which stretched from 4:44-28:68, and comprises only two chapters (29:1-30:20). The address consists of the following: Israel is exhorted to accept the covenant (29:1-15), this being based once more on a brief historical retrospect and review. This is followed by a warning about the punishment that threatened them in case of apostasy (29:16-29). This is followed by the promise of restoration on the ground of sincere repentance and return to the Lord (30:1-14), and ends with a final appeal to them to choose life (15-20). It is not certain whether 1 belongs to what precedes it, or to what follows it - i.e. a tailpiece to the second address, or an introduction to the third one. Scholars are divided on this; in fact it could be taken either way. And it may just be that the third address constitutes a summary of all that has gone before, in an abbreviated form, a kind of recapitulation of the total covenant demand of the people. This is not a matter of very great moment in relation to our desire to find spiritual food in this passage. Discussion of technical problems of this nature do not nourish the soul. What is certainly of greater importance is what is said in 4 concerning not being able to discern the meaning of all that had happened to them. This was the real tragedy of Israel, and it was a blindness that led them ultimately to not knowing the time of their visitation, when the Messiah came (Luke 19:44, and cf also Isaiah 1:3).

135)*29:10-15*

This is a highly important and significant statement, in which the covenant community is assembled and the nature of the covenant explained, as they are exhorted to commitment to it. There are a number of points to note particularly. First of all, the whole people were to be involved, from the highest to the lowest, not excluding children (10, 11). It is the solidarity of the people that is emphasised. Then, the reference in 12 to 'into his oath' means that to enter into the covenant blessings was also to commit themselves to the curses, if they were disobedient to the covenant obligations. 'To enter into covenant' means to enter into both its blessings and its sanctions. Furthermore, the covenant obligation was extended to those who were yet to be born (14, 15) - this is the force of the phrase at the end of 15 - and 'future generations were one with that Israel who took the oath at Sinai. There is a genealogical continuity to the covenant, not because God's covenant mercies are an inalienable family right, but because God is faithful to His promise to extend His blessing to all who love Him and obey His commandments' (Tyndale). In later years, the commentary goes on to point out, by means of a ceremony of this kind, the concept of covenant was kept alive and was forever contemporary. This is solemnity indeed, but it is a solemnity full of grace and promise!

136)*29:16-28*

This is an awesome passage, but its message is clear and unequivocal, although not readily received by modern minds. The first part of it (16-21) reflects the certainty of the curses mentioned in 28:15ff, as coming upon those who presume upon the divine grace (19), fancying themselves immune from the consequences of their sin just because they are 'under the covenant'. Rather, they must learn the lessons of idolatry (17), and see its emptiness and vanity, and learn its lessons - a particularly moving and distressing thought in view of their subsequent failure to learn these lessons, to their awful cost! The second part of the passage (22-29) speaks of the verdict that succeeding generations would pass upon the certain doom that would come upon their disobedience. Not but that modern generations are generally very blind to the lessons of history, not only their own history, but of all history. Doubtless, as 29 points out, there are things which are secret, and remain mysterious, and hidden from the eyes of men (who are, after all, but men, and not all-knowing!), but the things we need to know - the law with its grimness and its threats (as here), is given clearly, and our duty is to obey, and we are accountable to God when we do not. And it is unwise and dangerous to be so preoccupied with the mysterious that we neglect to pay heed to the things that are within our knowledge and grasp and that we ought to do.

137)*30:1-10*

After the grimness of the previous verses, what is now said comes like a balm to the soul. Note first of all the implication in 1 - exile from the land because of their sins (such was the extremity to which the divine judgment visited them, as we know from their later history and what a prophetic word Moses' utterance here proved to be!). But beyond the curse of exile lay the promise of restoration, and this was also blessedly fulfilled for Israel, after the appalling tragedy of Babylon. The words 'thou shalt call them to mind' in 1 strike a characteristic note once more. This repeated emphasis of historical retrospect surely bears a lesson for us. Moses knew what had happened in the past; their (i.e. that generation's) knowledge of the past was only indirect; therefore he could speak with the authority of experience to them. And this underlines once again the need to discern the meaning of all that happens to us, and that we are involved in. This is the real value of Christian experience; the question is whether or not we learn from God's dealings with us. He leads us on, things happen to us, circumstances come upon us, we pass through times of pressure and difficulty - and often we can pass through all these things without learning a thing, without even being aware that God is trying to teach us. 'Are you learning from these things?' Moses is intent on asking them (and us!). Israel's subsequent history makes it only too clear that Moses had good reason to insist upon such a reminder!

138)*30:1-10*

Let us savour once again the sweetness of these wonderful divine promises, realising how similar they are to those given in the later chapters of Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezekiel 36:25ff), as also in Jeremiah before him (Jeremiah 31:31ff). The initial reference is of course to the turning of the captivity of Zion (cf Psalm 126) and the radical change in the condition of Israel at the time of their return from Babylon, but there is also of course a wider and more general, even spiritual reference. Delitzsch comments, 'The multiplication promised here (5), so far as it falls within the Messianic age, will consist in the realisation of the promises given to Abraham that his seed should grow into nations (Genesis 17:6, 16), i.e. in the innumerable multiplication, not of the 'Israel according to the flesh', but of the 'Israel according to the spirit', whose land is not restricted to the boundaries of the earthly Canaan or Palestine.' That is to say, the Messianic fulfilment relates to the Church as the new Israel of God, and this is certainly in line with Peter's words in his first epistle (1 Peter 2:4-10), but it need not exclude the ancient covenant people of God, Israel, concerning whose ultimate restoration and salvation Paul has too much to say in Romans 11 for us ever to believe that the literal Israel is of no further significance in the economy of God. Nor does one require to subscribe to dispensational or millennial views of prophecy to believe that the return of the Jews to their own land in our own time constitutes a very striking and remarkable phenomenon, which seems to fulfil some of the ancient prophecies of the Old Testament (for a full discussion of this, see notes on Romans 11, March/April. 1968).

139)*30:11-20*

The call given in this passage to Israel to acceptance and commitment is prefaced (11-14) by a reminder that what they are asked to do is neither 'too hard' nor 'far off', but something that is evident and comprehensible. These verses are of particular interest for us because of the use Paul makes of them in Romans 10:6ff in applying them to the gospel. Here is a passage from the writer's Commentary on Romans on what is said there:

'The righteousness based on faith is neither difficult nor hard to obtain, but is accessible and near to all. Such is the force (6-8) of the quotation from Deuteronomy 30:11-14. The implication is clear; righteousness by faith is found in the law itself (3:21; 4:1ff), and speaks to those who have ears to hear. The personification of this righteousness is graphic, and suggests that when Moses is heard aright it is the message of righteousness by faith that rings out clearly. In Deuteronomy, the reference is certainly to 'the commandment', but this need not, and ought not to be, interpreted in a legal sense, since Moses goes on to set before the people 'life and good, death and evil'. This is the point of Paul's quotation. The emphasis on covenant grace throughout Deuteronomy makes it easy and convincing to interpret Moses' words evangelically. The phrases, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' and 'Who will descend into the abyss?' are proverbial expressions for the impossible. By quoting them Paul means to say that we need not do the impossible to be saved, only believe in Christ. As Moses said there was no need to go up to heaven or beyond the sea to bring the commandment to men because it was near at hand, it is even truer to say that there is no need to go up to heaven to bring down the object of faith and source of righteousness, or descend into the abyss to find Him, for in His incarnation Christ has already come down from heaven and by His resurrection is an ever-living, ever-present Saviour.

'This means that righteousness by faith can no longer be difficult for anyone; for incarnation and resurrection sum up Christ's redeeming work. By it He has drawn near to us, and the way of salvation is open to all.'

140)*30:11-20*

The fact that we do not have to do impossible things to obtain salvation, only believe with the obedience of faith, makes the choice and summons placed before Israel by Moses all the more challenging and critical. The choice between life and good, and death and evil, means that the summons to obedience is not law, but grace. The command to love the Lord (16) means therefore that the choice they were to make was to be the fruit of grace - i.e. it is how a redeemed people should behave (cf Exodus 20:2, 3, 'I am the Lord thy God which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt ... Thou shalt have no other gods before Me'). Choice, therefore, is a 'must' - but, says Moses, you must live with the consequences of your choosing. Living out of character with your call and destiny is sure to lead to trouble and disaster. See then the paradox in the thought of choosing to love the Lord our God and obey His voice. This is life: life properly understood consists in loving God. When we speak of what God wants of us, we can sum it all up in this way: all that God wants of us is that we should love Him. Indeed, in this sense, this sums up all that Moses has been saying throughout Deuteronomy, and it underlines the truth that love is the fulfilling of the law. Presently, Moses was to go up into the mount where the Lord buried him, and it is good to think that the thoroughness and dedication and wholeheartedness with which the people of God moved into the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership must have been directly influenced and conditioned by this marvellous closing appeal and challenge from the lips of Moses, man of God. His word did not fall on deaf ears, but bore notable and impressive fruit.

141)*31:1-13*

Moses' final address to Israel (29:1-30:20) now over, the final chapters of Deuteronomy deal with the last acts of the patriarch, and his death (31:1-34:12). These consist of his handing over to his successor, Joshua, and the committing of the book of the law to the priests (ch 31), the composing of a song, or an ode for the people (ch 32), and the blessing of the tribes (ch 33); followed finally by a postscript describing the death and burial of the man of God (ch 34). In the verses before us today, Moses promises the help of the Lord in the conquest of the land, both to the people generally, and to Joshua particularly, their leader into Canaan (1-8), and commands the priests, the sons of Levi, to keep the book of the law and renew the covenant with the people every seventh year by reading its terms to them (9-13). We should compare 1 with 34:7. Does this comparison mean that we are not always the best judge of when we are ready to 'lay down the work'? Perhaps it is best to think of it as Moses being conscious that his allotted span was coming to an end. There is something very moving and thrilling here in the contrast between the mortality of man and the unchanging continuity of the Lord's ongoing purposes. Moses is to die: but the work goes on unhindered. As it has been said, 'The Lord buries His workmen, but carries on His work.' It is the testimony to the unchanging faithfulness of God to His promises and to His covenant. As he had done, so He would do! Note the twofold assurance in 3, 'The Lord will go before thee'. Not only is this an assurance that in anything they may encounter, the Lord will already have been there, to deal with it, and prepare the way, but also He Himself would be their leader. Moses had not been the leader of Israel, but the under-leader, and Joshua was now to take his place as under-leader. This is to be - and it is underlined in 6 - the source of their courage. It is the 'looking unto Jesus' emphasis which we see made so explicit in Hebrews 12:1, 2. We draw our resources from HIM!

142)*31:9-13*

The significance of 9ff is not that Moses was passing the law out of his own hands into those of the priests and the people, but simply that he was giving it to them for them to teach and keep - the priests to teach, and the people to keep. The main point is the command to read the law in the presence of the people at the Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh year, the year of release. The reading was not designed to promote a knowledge of the law in the people (how could a 'once-in-seven-year-reading do this?), or a solemn promulgation and restoration of the law as the rule for national life (which they already had) so much as a means of quickening the soul, refreshing the heart, enlightening the eyes. In other words, the reading was a coming together of the people in holy convocation, in convention, in much the same kind of way as people come today to Bible rallies or conferences - 'to make the law beloved and prized by the whole nation, as a precious gift of the grace of God. Consequently (12,13), not only the men, but the women and children also, were to be gathered together for this purpose, that they might hear the word of God, and learn to fear the Lord their God (Delitzsch). This is good psychology, as well as spiritual wisdom, for the value of a great coming together is immense in its inspirational impact, apart from anything else; but what shall we say about the other, even more important impact, as expressed in 12, 13, '... hear ... learn ... fear ... observe ... live...'. Please God our coming together may have as fruitful an outcome!

143)*31:14-23*

This is a remarkable passage indeed, and one is forcibly reminded of a similar note struck by the Apostle Paul in Acts 20:28ff, when he warns the Ephesian elders what was likely to happen after his departure from them, in terms of the dangers of moral and spiritual declension. Moses' words are certainly prophetic here, as Paul's were, and the sorry history of Israel, not so much in the immediate as in the further future, after the times of Joshua and into the time of the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, bears out only too sadly and tragically just how needful this warning was. The context in which this prophetic warning is set is also important and significant, for it is placed, as a kind of parenthesis, in the midst of the verses which describe Joshua's setting apart as Israel's new leader (14, 15, 23). The lesson in this is surely that there is an implied exhortation and admonition to Joshua, as he takes up his commission, not only to take care that Israel learned the song Moses was about to give them (ch 32) and keep it in their memories, but also that he might strive with all his might to prevent such an apostasy during his term of leadership (which, in fact, he succeeded in doing most faithfully, as the book of Joshua shows, for the period covered by that book is one of the most consistent in all Israel's history). We see from this that there is nothing fatalistic or deterministic operative in Moses' prophecy whereby Israel was doomed to be unfaithful. The choice, as we have seen in 30:19, was always Israel's own. Under Joshua's leadership, the decline was prevented from taking place; and succeeding generations could have prevented it also, had they had a mind to!

144)*31:14-23*

It is clear that 20 is a critical verse. It stresses God's faithfulness to His side of the covenant, in contrast to their unfaithfulness - which, significantly enough, is related to a spirit of complacency caused by affluence. Israel became too comfortable as the favoured people of God. This is a supreme danger point in spiritual life, whether the affluence be material or spiritual. Well might the prophet cry, 'Revive Thy work in the midst of the years' (Habakkuk 3:2), for that is the danger-time for believers. The early years of Christian life have all the warmth and verve of enthusiasm of great and dedicated endeavour - as indeed, frequently, have our last days - but that significant middle period, when we may be at the height of our natural powers, has been the danger-point for so many, when spiritual carelessness and complacency set in, and the 'never-had-it-so-good' syndrome betrays us gradually and imperceptibly into a backslidden torpor of spirit which can bring us to the point of becoming 'castaways' (1 Corinthians 9:27). Remember what happened to David when, in a spirit of carelessness and complacency, he tarried at Jerusalem at the time when kings go forth to battle!

145)*31:24-30*

These verses provide an introduction to the great song of Moses which occupies the whole of the next chapter. They serve as a complement to 9-13: there, Moses wrote down the law and instructed the priests to give it to the people; here, the written law is to be placed by the side of the Ark of the Covenant. This was to be an additional witness against the people, along with the 'song'. It was a supplement, and an elaboration, of the Decalogue. There is another significance however, implicit in this, which has an important message for us: the ark of the covenant symbolises, we may say, the liturgical element in Israel's religious life, with its association with the sacrificial system, but now here is the law, which speaks of the prophetic, teaching element. It is one of the ironies of Israel's continuing history that when renewal and reformation took place after times of declension, the emphasis was generally upon the restoration of the liturgical elements of religious life - the sacrifices and the feasts and festivals - with so little emphasis on the teaching of the law. Indeed, the reforms under Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 17) stand out as almost the only major instance in which teaching played a major part in the work of renewal. This was the weakness - and the defect - in most of the instances, and which led to the partial and unsatisfactory nature of so much of their efforts. This surely has a lesson to teach us today. No movement of renewal that is short on the teaching of the Word can ever hope to do much to recover the lost glories of the Church. Where the Word – as distinct from the liturgical and the sacramental - does not have central and prior place, all is in vain.

146)*32:1-5*

The song of Moses, which occupies the greater part of this chapter (1-43), is on any estimate a remarkable utterance. It sings the unchangeable faithfulness of God, contrasting it with the recurring perversity of His faithless and wayward people. First of all, in these introductory words, heaven and earth are summoned to hearken to the patriarch's words, and this is some indication of the importance of the instruction about to be given. The comparison in 2 is with the refreshing, fertilising and enlivening power of dew and rain, and the point being made is the expression of a hope (and prayer) that the song would have just such an effect on its hearers (the RSV reads it as a prayer, 'May my teaching drop as the rain'). What a way to think of one's ministry! Such a prayer should constantly be on our lips, minister's and people's alike. What follows in 3 indicates the ground on which that prayer is based: it is that the 'doctrine' (2) proclaims the name of the Lord. And what a proclamation it is! He is the Rock, and His work is perfect. All that is said of Him in 1 is indicative of durability and dependability. He is 'an unchangeable refuge, who grants a firm defence and secure resort to His people, by virtue of His unchangeableness or impregnable firmness' (Delitzsch). The picture here is one that is echoed frequently in the Psalms (cf Psalms 18:2, 31; 19:14; 31:2, 3; 71:3). Clearly, David took the testimony, the proclamation of Moses, and made it his own, proving it true in his own experience. And so, surely, must we!

147)*32:5-6*

In stark contrast to the faithfulness of their covenant God, Israel's perversity is next set forth, in words which heap indictment upon indictment in a series of extreme descriptions: corrupt, perverse, crooked, foolish, unwise. The picture could hardly have been more darkly painted - and, alas, we know from Israel's subsequent history just how true and merited such a description proved to be. One wonders whether Paul had this passage in view when he wrote Philippians 2:14-16. The language is very similar, even to the Apostle's phrase, 'holding forth the word of life', which is what Moses was doing here (2). How graphic and telling, in this connection, is Paul's exhortation, 'Do all things without murmurings or disputings', in view of Israel's repeated yielding to this temptation. 'Remember God's people of old', he seems to be saying to the Philippians, 'and do not fall into their snare'. The words Moses uses to describe God in 4 are all words of strength and resolution, but we should note particularly the 'other side' of the picture in the phrase in 6, 'Is not He thy father?' Here is the paradox of the divine nature - strength and gentleness together, and never the one without the other (cf Psalm 18:35, also 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11). It is this fact that makes Israel's perversity all the more serious and fateful - it was a family relationship that they violated. One thinks readily of the heart cry of God in Hosea's prophecy in this connection, especially Hosea 11ff, where the enormity of Israel's sin against the love of their Father-God is delineated so movingly. This is the note that rings out in Moses' words.

148)*32:7-14*

These are wonderful words! We need to meditate on them again and again, savouring the rich grace in them, and the wonderful unfolding of the nature and character of God that they display. The exhortation in 7 to 'remember the days of old' repeats the emphasis we have already seen so often throughout Deuteronomy, and it underlines once more the need for recollection. We forget so soon, the old hymn tells us. The phrase 'ask thy father' indicates the use of history to demonstrate the faithfulness of God. This is always a very useful and important exercise. The trouble is that we so often lack the perspective of history, and so we fail to learn history's lessons, to our cost. Three substantive facts about Israel's history are enumerated: the original calling of Israel in the choosing out of Abram in Genesis 11 (8, 9); the great deliverance from the bondage of Egypt at the time of the Exodus (10-12); and their settlement in the Promised Land (13, 14). In each instance, and at each point, the guardian care of God surrounded them and the divine mercy was manifested towards them. The evidence is incontrovertible and undisputable, and the grace of recollection must surely awaken in their hearts an attitude of humble wonderment and gratitude. The figurative language in 10-14 is very evocative, and the metaphors graphic and moving and very beautiful. Again we have the combination of fierce strength and wondrous gentleness in the nature of God (11), in the loving and tender care the eagle shows towards her young (and woe betide anyone who dares to interfere with her!). The eagle wings of divine love and omnipotence - what a glorious reality to recollect!

149)*32:15-18*

In face of the wealth of grace lavished on Israel, as described in the previous verses, what possible excuse could there be for such defection as is now unfolded here? 'Jeshurun' in 15 has sometimes been taken to be a diminutive and affectionate term for Israel, but this is not in fact a correct interpretation. It literally means 'righteous Israel' or 'Israel the righteous', and refers to the dignity God has set on Israel in making them His people and in their being justified and favoured in His sight. It was from this that they defected: their behaviour was a denial of their calling and destiny as the holy, separated people of God. There are two points in particular to note. The first is that in the phrase in 18, 'Of the Rock that begat thee ...' the word 'begat' indicates that their defection was essentially a family matter and was therefore fraught with all the seriousness and heartbreak that family tragedies bring and involve. It is a family sorrow and pain that God feels. It is the prodigal son story all over again, with the son going into the far country and the father's heart being broken. The other point that we need to bear in mind is that although what is said here had already been proved true of the generation of Israel prior to this time, those to whom Moses was now speaking had not as yet gone that sad and shameful way. The patriarch's words were therefore a warning exhortation to them to take heed to themselves; but alas - in view of their subsequent history - they proved to be a prophecy, a prophetic vision of their future behaviour also (for a New Testament parallel, see Acts 20:29ff).

150)*32:19-25*

We should bear in mind the backward and the forward look in these verses, and see their reference both to the earlier generation in their unfaithfulness at Kadesh-barnea and to the future history of Israel as unfolded in the later books of the Old Testament. A twofold judgment is unfolded, negative on the one hand and positive on the other. The negative side of God's judgment is the hiding of His face from His people. This is always one aspect of God's dealings with His erring children. When we get out of joint spiritually, the glow departs from our spiritual life, the fine edge of our consecration is lost, and something vital is missing. We may do and say the right things, we may 'go through the motions', but something vital is missing, something has gone, and the something that has gone is the smile of God's face. And one of the most frightening things about this is that so often, and for long enough, we may not even be conscious of having lost it. We need to remember what is said of Samson, who 'wist not that the Lord had departed from him' (Judges 16:20). The other, positive, side of the divine judgment is expressed in 21: 'They have moved Me to jealousy'. There is a play on words here, with 'not God' standing over against 'not a people', reminding us of Hosea's similar words in Hosea 1:9, 2:23. We should note the way in which Paul takes up this thought in Romans 10:19ff, using these words in his argument about the Jews in their rejection of the gospel, and indicating that the Gentiles were 'not a people', but became the people of God, while the original people of God, the Jews, became 'not a people'. There is something very profound here, and it is some measure of the depth of Moses' prophetic vision that Paul should recognize it as applying to the whole of Israel's sorry and tragic history in relation to the ongoing purposes of God in the redemption of the world.

151)*32:26-35*

A new note is now struck in Moses' song. The 'I' in 26 is the voice of God. Tyndale puts it thus: 'The section commences with the statement "I said". Some new deliberation has taken place in the heart of God. The introductory words may be translated "Then I said" or "Then I thought". The following verses express the hope of deliverance or redemption. We are lifted out of the turmoil of historical events to hear a soliloquy in the heart of God.' This is a useful and helpful comment that enables us to see what is really being said in these verses. The judgment is all but complete, as we have seen in the previous passage. BUT! - and this is the 'but' of grace. God refrains from total destruction for His own Name's sake. The enemies of His people must not be allowed to say, 'Our hand is high, and the Lord hath not done all this' - that is, attribute their triumph over Israel to their own prowess and not to the displeasure of God against His people (cf 9:28, Isaiah 48:9-11). The reference in 28 is to Israel, who are so blind in face of their misfortune. It is as if God were crying out, 'Can't they see what is happening to them, and why? Can't they interpret the facts of history?' Indeed, it is so plain, to those who have eyes to see. How else could such misfortunes have happened, except God their Rock had sold them and forsaken them? This is a very pertinent word for our own time also: we also need to interpret the facts of our history. Why do we suppose that our nation should continue in a state of chronic unrest and turmoil, economic duress and crisis, year after year, if not that the smile of God has been lifted from us, to leave us to our own devices? We are left by God for want of seeking Him. That is the tragedy of Britain today.

152)*32:36-43*

Judgment and mercy mingle in these final verses of Moses' song. Vengeance is pronounced upon their enemies when Israel has been brought low (36), and this in turn signalises Israel's forgiveness and restoration to fellowship with God. He is a God who both kills and makes alive, Who wounds yet heals (39). It is in this that Israel's hope ultimately lies. For He is their covenant God, and among the things that this means is that, however much He may chastise them, and punish them for their sins, in the extremest of ways, devastating them again and again, humbling them to their sorrow and shame, He will never let them go. It is this that necessarily makes the song end with a note of mercy - to the land and to the people (43). Mercy triumphs over wrath, and judgment, which is God's strange work, is never the last word, and can never be, since God has planted a Cross at the centre of history, and the victory of Christ proclaims that evil is vanquished. This, however, must never be misunderstood to mean that 'everything will work out all right for everybody in the end'. Not so: the dark side remains dark, as 41, 42 make only too clear, and as the New Testament also emphasises so unmistakably (cf 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). Riches of grace and fullness of forgiveness notwithstanding, 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Hebrews 10:31).

153)*32:44-47*

Moses' song is now ended, and it remains now for him to speak a final word to Israel which serves to put the song in its proper setting, as a word of warning exhortation, to be heeded and obeyed at all costs. 'Set your hearts' and 'observe to do' and 'it is your life' - these are the challenges he puts before them. The words in 47, 'It is not a vain thing for you' may well be an indication that, prophecy of the future notwithstanding, his utterance is not to be regarded in any fatalistic sense, as if their declension were fore-ordained and therefore it would take place no matter what they might do or not do. There is never any room in the teaching of Scripture for such a distortion of the idea of the sovereignty of God in the affairs of men. Human responsibility is always regarded as paramount and central - and it would make a nonsense of all moral endeavour if this were not so. There could be no hiding behind any fatalistic idea of the inevitability of their failure, so far as Israel was concerned, nor can there ever be for us either. It is not only not a vain thing to strive to obey God's Word, it is our life so to do. This is the message that comes over unmistakably in Moses' last words to the people.

154)*32:48-52*

The chapter concludes with a very solemn note, describing Moses' viewing of Canaan before dying. The reference in these verses is to what happened at Meribah, where Moses 'spake inadvisedly with his lips' (Psalm 106:32, 33; see also Numbers 27:12-14; Deuteronomy 3:23-28). The note for Fri 6th Jan 1984 should be also consulted. There is, of course, no question of Moses being excluded from the blessings of eternal life - but his irritation and anger at Meribah proved to be a costly mistake for him in that it excluded him from the privilege of leading Israel into the Promised Land. Let us learn from this that the sins of the saints, though they will never lead to forfeiture of eternal life, may affect their reward - affect, too, their continuing usefulness and 'serviceableness' for God. God is faithful to Himself, and takes His own grace seriously. This incident stands in the Scriptures as a timely warning to all who believe on Him that we may never presume on His grace. Carelessness and neglectfulness in spiritual things, though forgiven, may cost the children of God very dear. It is very solemn to realise that Scripture records several cases in which servants of God, honoured and owned of Him in the most signal way, have fallen sadly and tragically in the later days of their lives - Noah, Moses, David, Solomon. If this has a lesson for us, it is that there are dangers concealed in the spiritual life for those who have advanced beyond the elementary stage and have been going on faithfully and steadily for long enough. Well might the prophet pray, 'Revive Thy work in the midst of the years' - the middle years, when we are at the height of our powers. There is the danger point!

155)*33:1-5*

In this chapter we are given the blessing of Moses upon the tribes of Israel before his death. It opens with a description of the majesty of the Lord, reminiscent of Habakkuk 3, (1-5), and this is followed by the blessings pronounced on the tribes, (6-25), and finally, (26-29), an ascription of praise to the Lord for His goodness to Israel. There is much that is deep and mysterious in the chapter, which should be compared with a similar one at the end of the book of Genesis (ch 49). We look today first of all at the introductory verses. The note of praise is implicit throughout, although the actual form of words is that of a theophany, a manifestation of the divine majesty and power reminiscent, as we have indicated, of Habakkuk 3:3 and Judges 5:4, 5. Characteristic of all Old Testament theophanies, the Lord is depicted as in action on behalf of His people, coming to their aid accompanied with the hosts of heaven (cf also Psalm 18:7ff, Psalm 68:7, 8, 35). It is the wonderful consciousness that their God is a living God, Who does things and is seen to do things, doing them, moreover as the expression of His love for them (3). Delitzsch interprets 3 as an expression of the divine love for all nations, and links 4 with this, as follows: 'The God who met Israel at Sinai in terrible majesty, out of the myriads of holy angels, who embraces all nations in love, and has all the holy angels in His power, so that they lie at His feet and rise up at His word, gave the law through Moses to the congregation of Jacob as a precious possession, and became King in Israel'. This interpretation serves to underline the special position Israel had as God's peculiar people, chosen out of all the nations for His own possession.

156)*33:6-7*

The so-called 'blessing' of the various tribes, both here and in Genesis 49, are really outlines of character, and serve to illustrate a lesson that is repeatedly taught in the earlier books of the Old Testament and is summed up in the old adage:

'Sow a habit, reap a character;
Sow a character, reap a destiny'.

In some of Jacob's sons, character formed and became rigid and 'unmouldable', and in some mysterious way it was transmitted to posterity. Scripture teaches very clearly that there is an entail of sin as well as an entail of grace, having repercussions over many generations. On the 'grace' side, one sees this in many Christian families in the history of the Church, whose origins have been in a man of God who has been greatly used and owned of God in His work - William Booth of the Salvation Army is a case in point, Hudson Taylor of the C.I.M. is another - and there has been a continuance to the present day. The 'sin' side is amply illustrated in this chapter and in Genesis 49. When we take time to reflect on the great figures of biblical history, we realise that they came from only a few notable tribes, rather than from all alike. Moses came from Levi Joshua from Ephraim, Gideon from Manasseh, David from Judah, Paul the apostle from the tribe of Benjamin. The message is clear: one man by living a holy and dedicated life may lay the foundations of many generations, while another, by living a careless, undisciplined and wilful life will transmit evil influences to his posterity. We often say that no man lives unto himself: viewed in this light, it makes life very solemn and earnest.

157)*33:6-7*

A comparison of this chapter with Genesis 49 shows that, while the list of the tribes - and the 'blessings pronounced upon them' - may be said to be similar in content, here in Deuteronomy the tribe of Simeon is omitted altogether. There may be some significance in the reference in Genesis 49:5-7 to the cruel story in Genesis 34 (which see) which seems to have disqualified Simeon forever (although Levi who was also involved in the incident was reinstated, but see Exodus 32:26-29; Numbers 25:8, where Levi's actions spelt blessing and honour for him). Reuben, mentioned in 6, was to be few in number (the 'not' in the AV, written in italics, is correctly omitted in the modern versions), although preserved as a tribe. The Genesis reference illuminates this for us, in the mention of the shameful episode in Genesis 35:22, for which he was 'disqualified' (cf 1 Corinthians 9:27) and the birthright, which would naturally have fallen to him, was taken from him and given to Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph (of 1 Chronicles 5:1). The reference to Judah in 7 is very sparing, compared with the corresponding blessing in Genesis 49:8-12. This is intriguing, but it is wise not to read too much into this. All we can say is that Moses saw no more and no further about Judah than had been spoken by Jacob, and therefore did not feel it necessary to say anything simply for the sake of saying it. This is the realism of Scripture. The reference, however, to the Lord helping them against their foes (see RSV rendering) may be an indication of the travail that Judah was to experience in the process of bringing forth in the fullness of the time the promised Messiah (Genesis 49:10).

158)*33:8-11*

The blessing pronounced upon Levi is one of the fullest in the chapter, and deeply eloquent and significant. The Urim and the Thummim were committed to Levi (Exodus 28:29, 30 - Aaron was of the tribe of Levi, as was Moses), and it was through this means that the divine guidance was mediated to the people. The reference in 8 to Massah and Meribah take us back to Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13, and seems to indicate that in Moses and Aaron, the leaders of the tribe of Levi, the whole tribe was on trial, and proved. In 9 a further 'proving' of Levi is indicated, in the confrontation in Exodus 32:26-29, when Levi set their duty to the Lord above the claims of kindred, in faithfulness to His word and will. For this they were rewarded with the dual office of guarding the law and teaching it (9b, 10a), and to undertake various duties relating to the offering of sacrifices (10b). This is followed, in 11, by a prayer for Levi's blessing. There is thus a fruitful sequence presented to us in these verses: obedience to God's word and will leads to commission in His service, and this in turn is followed by blessing on such faithful ministry. 'The four verses therefore form an eloquent summary of the Lord's ways with those who will do His will .... God grants Levi high privilege, but excruciating consecration is demanded (9). This makes them fit not only to teach by word and deed (10), but to be worthy of fruitfulness in their labours, which brings the blessings upon them, not in prosperity, but of victory over their foes.' (W. Still).

159)*33:12*

It is well worth spending a day with this one long verse about Benjamin. It is full of beauty, and the picture it conjures up is an evocative one. There is an initial reference to Jacob's special love for the son of his old age, the child of Rachel, and we may well imagine Jacob carrying the beloved little one on his shoulders when he was weary with walking. What a wonderful picture of our God, to Whom all His children are beloved like this! One thinks of the wonderful words in Psalm 91, 'He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty'. This is the kind of thought that is expressed here, in different words and imagery. And we can apply it in the most practical of ways. Paul the Apostle was of the tribe of Benjamin, and we may readily see how applicable this word would be to him, in any number of circumstances. We could hardly doubt, could we, that there were times in his experience, during his missionary journeyings, when he was under great pressure and in hazard and jeopardy of his life, when he went to this ancient prophecy about his tribe and claimed its promise for himself: 'The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by him'. It would be a bible study of great enrichment simply to read through the Apostle's missionary journeys, and some of the autobiographical references to them in his epistles (e.g. 2 Corinthians 1:3-10, 2 Corinthians 7:5) and lay this wonderful verse alongside them, to see how full the divine provision was for His servant, and how richly this promise was fulfilled for him.

160)*33:13-17*

The blessing pronounced on Joseph in these verses is the longest of them all. It is a remarkable utterance, full of 'precious' things - the word is mentioned in almost every verse. This full and rich blessing is pronounced because of Joseph's stand and his integrity in the Genesis story. Joseph was not in the line of promise, since the Lawgiver was to come from Judah, but he nevertheless had his own particular task to fulfil in the purposes of God, because he was instrumental in bringing Israel down into Egypt in the time of the famine, and therefore instrumental in the furthering of the divine purposes. If it had not been for Joseph, humanly speaking, there would not have been an Exodus, or an instituting of the covenant which constituted Israel as the covenant-people of God. In the material sense he was instrumental in feeding the twelve tribes in the sense that he fed his brethren with the plentiful corn of Egypt. And because he was so pre-eminently faithful in the task allotted to him, the blessing of God followed his family. Perhaps the most significant phrase of all, however, is that in 16, where 'the good will of Him that dwelt in the bush' is said to rest on the tribe of Joseph. What a marvellous expression! We may well say that if only this could be true of us, we would be of all men the most blest and enriched. For if God's good will is towards us, nothing could ever withstand us. As Paul says, in Romans 8:31, 'If God be for us, who can be against us?' Well might the patriarch go on to speak of Joseph as Jehovah's 'firstborn bull who possesses majesty and the horns of a wild ox or buffalo' (Tyndale) - the picture is one of irresistible might pressing forward in triumph. The phrase in Revelation 6:2 expresses it perfectly: 'he went forth conquering and to conquer'. That is the heritage of those that know 'the good will of him that dwelt in the bush'.

161)*33:18-25*

We shall take the remaining blessings together, although doubtless there is much of individual worth to ponder in the various statements. Zebulon and Issachar are taken together here, in 18, 19, although in Genesis 49 separate statements are made about each. It is instructive to compare the two sets of prophecies. The reference to Issachar's tents may be expanded significantly by Genesis 49:15, in the deprecatory and unenviable picture of, if not indolence, yet ease and lack of drive and vigour that is said to characterise him - a fateful verdict, by no means unknown in the ongoing work of God in the Church of today. The contrast between what is said of Gad in Genesis 49 and the picture given here is particularly significant: in the earlier word, Gad is shown to be the man who is generally in a 'trauchle', but better days are prophesied for him. And here, things are very different for now a leader's share is assigned to him (21). Such is the blessing that the divine enlargement (20) can bring! In Genesis 49, Naphtali is 'a hind let loose'; here he is 'satisfied with favour, full with the blessing of the Lord' - a reminder that God's deliverances are more than a setting free from: they are also a setting free unto! The picture given of Asher in 25 is rich and enriching. When lives are as rich as this, they endow and refresh all with whom they come in contact (24). The modern translations render 25 differently from the AV: 'May his towns be protected with iron gates, and may he always live secure', is how the RSV gives it. 'May your bolts be of iron and bronze, and your strength last as long as you live' (NEB). But the meaning is substantially the same, all alike stressing the abundance and sufficiency of the divine provision.

162)*33:26-29*

The closing verses of the song of Moses return to the theme of praise, as its opening verses did. It can hardly be doubted that there is a link between the prologue and epilogue: the point of the theophancy in the first five verses is that God is revealed as the magnificent, omnipotent Creator God Who moves heaven and earth to help His children. And this is precisely what is said in 26: This God rides on the heavens for our help - and He will let nothing stand in His way. Some think there is an allusion here to the pillar of cloud and fire, but the reference may have more association with the idea of theophany (cf Psalm 18:7ff, Psalm 68:7, 8), and this serves to point up the glorious contrast that 26 and 27 together present: the mighty, glorious God of the theophany is the God who is the refuge of His people. The God of the storm-clouds, thunder and lightning is a God Who is incredibly gentle and tender with His own. What comfort and assurance have the words 'underneath are the everlasting arms' brought to countless hard-pressed saints! It is unfortunate that the words which follow have not been given the same prominence in our thinking, for in fact they invest the comfort of God with the best kind of value: this God 'shall thrust out the enemy from before thee'. Not only comfort, but victory is in view! Are we having trouble with the enemy today? Let us claim this promise, then, get into our refuge, be conscious of the everlasting arms, and listen. And He shall say, 'Destroy them'. And Israel shall then dwell in safety alone, free from the attentions of the evil one. Well might the patriarch exclaim - and how wonderful that these should be the last words he uttered on earth - 'Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord!'

163)*34:1-6*

This final chapter records, with great simplicity and a moving dignity, the death and burial of Moses, man of God, and the assumption of the leadership of Israel by Joshua, his divinely appointed successor. It is useful to consult a good map to identify the panoramic view Moses must have had from the top of Pisgah, a mountain some 2,600 feet high. From such a vantage point the patriarch would see the great expanse of the Dead Sea to the south, the land of Judah and across to the Mediterranean in the west, and northwards to Mount Hermon. On a clear day, practically the whole of the Promised Land would have stretched out before him. The Tyndale commentary suggests that the invitation to 'view the land' was not merely a kindly provision of God to allow His servant to see Israel's inheritance, but probably had some legal significance, and was part of a legal process. A man 'viewed' what he was to possess. More importantly and significantly, we see in 4 that it was a matter of reminding Moses that God's promise to Abraham and the patriarchs was about to be fulfilled. It was a testimony to the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God. When He promises, there will be a fulfilment of His word. What He says, that He will do, and all that He has said He will fulfil. This, then, was the climactic moment of Israel's history, and the culmination of the long pilgrimage which began in Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 12:1), through so many generations and so much chequered experience. Great is Thy faithfulness, indeed!

164)*34:1-6*

So Moses the servant of the Lord died. In his Historical Geography of the Holy Land George Adam Smith writes: 'And somewhere below the platform where the host, which he had guided through the desert for forty years, first lost their desert horizon, and saw the Promised Land open before them, the Lord buried Moses. Between the streams that in these valley bottoms spring full-born from the rocks, and the merry corn fields on the Plateau of Moab above, there are some thousand feet of slopes and gullies, where no foot comes, the rock is crumbling, and utter silence reigns, save for the west wind moaning through the thistles. Here Moses was laid. Who would wish to know the exact spot? The whole region is a sepulchre.' We are told in 5 that the patriarch died 'according to the word of the Lord'. This seems to refer back to 32:50, where his death is spoken of as a command from God. There was a purposiveness about this dying. We usually think of death overtaking us, but death did not so much overtake Moses: he died at God's behest, with all his work accomplished. The literal rendering of 'according to the word of the Lord' is 'at the mouth of the Lord'. It is interesting to realise that Jewish rabbinic interpretation puts it that Moses died at the kiss of the Lord. This is not what the text says, of course, but it is a lovely touch, indicating something of the sweetness and intimacy of fellowship that existed between Moses and his Lord. How wonderful to think of him as being kissed into eternity by the living God! And surely, the 'he' in 6, 'he buried him ...' must refer to God, and not to be taken as 'one buried him' or 'he was buried'. Everything about this death was special, including the burial. More on this in the next Note.

165)*34:1-6*

The special nature of Moses' death and burial is further underlined by Keil and Delitzsch in their commentary on this chapter, in a quotation they make from another: 'The purpose of God was to prepare for him a condition, both of body and soul, resembling that of these two men of God (Enoch and Elijah). Men bury a corpse that it may pass into corruption. If Jehovah, therefore, would not suffer the body of Moses to be buried by men, it is but natural to seek for the reason in the fact that He did not intend to leave him to corruption, but, when burying it with His own hand, imparted a power to it which preserved it from corruption, and prepared the way for it to pass into the same form of existence to which Enoch and Elijah were taken, without either death or burial.' The same commentators add that there can be no doubt that this truth lies at the foundation of what is said in the Epistle of Jude concerning the contest between Michael the archangel and the devil for the body of Moses (Jude 9). We should also bear in mind what is said in the gospel record of our Lord's Transfiguration, in Luke 9:28ff, when Moses appeared on the mount along with Elijah and conversed with Jesus about the death He was to die at Jerusalem. Although the patriarch was not allowed to enter the Land at this point, it is surely not without significance that in our Lord's Day he is found standing on Mount Hermon with Him! But we shall have to look further at the Jude reference in the next Note.

166)*34:1-6*

The following is the substance of a Note on Jude 9 from an earlier Record, on the subject of 'the body of Moses': 'Michael the archangel appears in Scripture as the guardian angel of Israel, God's people, as we see in Daniel 10:21, 12:1. He is mentioned in the New Testament here and in Revelation 12:7. We have for long thought that the doctrine of angels has been neglected by the church, and relegated to the level of Sunday-school legendary lore. Nothing could be more misleading. Nothing is written in Scripture in vain, but for our learning. Is it not heartening to know that Satan, who is a spiritual being, is now allowed his own way in the affairs of men, but is opposed and challenged in heavenly places by good angels, ministering spirits sent forth by our Lord, who contend with him on our behalf, and dispute his right to harm us.

The reference to 'the body of Moses' is shrouded in mystery. There is no reference to it in the Old Testament. The burial of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:6) was unusual in that God Himself undertook it, and an old tradition among the Jews states that Michael was the appointed guardian of his grave. According to another tradition, Michael was charged with the burial of Moses, and Satan opposed him, bringing an accusation against him relative to the murder of the Egyptian, in consequence of which he was unworthy of such an honourable burial. This last certainly fits in with what we learn of Satan's activities against the saints in Revelation 12:10 as the accuser of the brethren. We are not however in a position to say what the verse means or refers to, it is one of the things that have been hid from our eyes and we must be content with that. The real point to note is that even Michael did not speak evilly against Satan, because, fallen angel though he was, he once was a prince with God (as Lucifer, son of the morning). How much more then ought we mortals determine to 'speak evil of no man' (Titus 3:2), remembering that even in their rebellion against God, men do not cease to be destined for Him.'

167)*34:7-8*

There is something very wonderful, is there not, about someone who dies in such a way that the coming of death does not frustrate or negate anything in his life. Moses' work was done. It was completely fulfilled in the sense that there was nothing left for him to do: that which, from all eternity, had been allocated to him in the purposes of God was fulfilled. Sometimes when death cuts off someone in the midst of his years, one feels the sense of sorrow and loss that a life has been brought to a (untimely) close when it could have done so much more. But the point about Moses was that everything that God had intended him to do had been accomplished. Moses, it is true, lived to be one hundred and twenty years old, but a man could well live for only half that time and still be in the same position as Moses, having fulfilled all that it was the purpose and intention of God for that life to fulfil. When such is the case, death cannot be the ultimate sorrow, for there is always the element of joy when a life has come to fruition. That is one lesson we may gather from these verses. Another is this: Moses lived and died ideally. We sometimes think of people who, because of the rigour and costliness of their life's work and service, grow old before their time and prematurely wear out. But it was not so with this man of God: his eye was not dim and his natural force was not abated. It is rather wonderful to think that, naturally and medically speaking, Moses did not need to die at that point, but that God ordained it, and he would be glad and happy to die in the mount, at the divine behest, and be gathered home to his rest and reward. This gives a graphic illustration of Paul's words in Philippians 1:21, 'To die is gain'.

168)*34:9-12*

The man of God was now dead, but God was not dead, and His presence was symbolised in the anointing that had come upon Joshua, Moses' successor. God buries His workmen, as the saying has it, but carries on his work, and here He did so by anointing Joshua and empowering him to take up what Moses had laid down. The story of his mighty exploits is recorded in the book that bears his name, and sometime soon we shall have the opportunity in the Bible Readings to study in detail that wonderful period of Israel's history. The final tribute to Moses in 10-12 seems to centre on what is said at the end of 10: 'Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face'. Is not this what explains everything about his life and ministry? To know Him, or rather, to be known of Him, is the fountain-head of all blessing and fruitfulness in spiritual life and service. The mighty Apostle Paul expresses exactly the same thought in that wonderful passage in Philippians 3:7ff, when he speaks of counting all things loss 'that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto his death'. This is the law of spiritual harvest; and it was surely a law that was abundantly manifest and fully operative in Moses' life and experience.

And so we come to the end of our study of what is undoubtedly one of the greatest books of the Old Testament, whose influence, as has been said, on the domestic and personal religion of all ages has hardly been surpassed by any other book. It is quoted over eighty times in the New Testament and thus belongs to a small group of four Old Testament books to which the early Church made frequent reference, the others being Genesis, Psalms and Isaiah. We thank God for the privilege and joy of studying its pages, and pray its message will continue to shape our thinking and our lives in days to come.