

### DEUTERONOMY

#### Lesson 36 - Chapters 26 and 27

We started Deuteronomy chapter 26 last week and we'll finish that this week and get well into chapter 27.

Chapter 26 began a 4-chapter section that marks the end of a kind of lengthy review and reminder of the Law as given on Mt. Sinai and begins the part of Moses' sermon that deals with the more mystical and spiritual aspects of what is expected of Israel in its new formed relationship with Yehoveh. I say mystical and spiritual in a couple of senses; first is that the spirit of the law (what the Apostles James and Paul called "true religion") is vital in carrying out the individual rules and regulations previously laid out; and second is that there are aspects of God's nature and His Word that are beyond man's ability to entirely comprehend and at the same time He has given to Israel straightforward instructions (laws and commands) that are fully understandable to men.

The nature of the Word of God is that it consists of various levels of depth. The notion that God's Word spans a range from the most plain and straightforward to the deepest and most mystical has been captured in an interesting rabbinical principle of Scripture study. That principle says that there are essentially 4 definable levels or dimensions of learning and Biblical examination: **Pshat**, **Remez**, **Drash**, and **Sod**. **Pshat** means the most straightforward intended meaning, **Remez** is what you read between the lines, **Drash** is an interpretative meaning that can include the allegorical, and **Sod** is the most mystical and esoteric.

To be clear: it's not that Scripture divided up such that some is **Pshat**, while other Scripture is **Remez**, and so on; rather it is that all Scripture passages can be examined on each of these 4 levels. It is also generally agreed that all Scripture is not alike; some Scripture is inherently more straightforward and some is inherently more mystical. Some is meant to be taken more at face value and other is meant to be looked at far more deeply. Thus what can be gained by examining the Word using each of these 4 levels will vary somewhat according to the relevant passage.

So the 4 chapter section beginning with chapter 26 is dealing with passages that are more mystical and thus more conducive to yielding their meaning when studied using the **Sod** level of examination.

One of these instructions is that upon entering the Promised Land a series of firstfruits ceremonies are to begin, that are accompanied with declarations by each Israelite that his own personal identity is wrapped up in Israel's redemption history. Therefore the declaration that each Israelite states (when he brings his firstfruits as an offering) is that this set-apart people was created by an act of God, and that the founder was a wanderer from Aram (Abraham), and eventually through Abraham this led to Jacob who (with but a few people that formed his clan) went down into Egypt where his family became enslaved and yet it grew enormously. After that God rescued and redeemed them, and brought them to the Land of Canaan, which He gave to the Israelites as their land possession. As a result of this reality Israel is to give back to the Lord (out of gratitude) the first of each new harvest and is to share their bounty with widows, orphans, and foreigners living in their land.

Let's begin by re-reading a portion of Deuteronomy 26.

### **RE-READ DEUTERONOMY 26:12 – end**

It has become common in the Church to think that our total monetary obligation is to give a tithe of 1/10<sup>th</sup> of our income to the local Church. By doing so this fulfills any biblical duty we might have to give of our own possessions or prosperity. Even though the entire concept of tithing is introduced, explained and defined in the Old Testament, because we are a New Testament church then we have no further obligation to give anything beyond that 10%. Another alternative church doctrine is that if we feel some kind of spiritual unction within us to give, then we give according to the direction of that unction; but if we have no Spirit led unction to give at all, then we have no duty to give anything at all.

I can tell you with full confidence that NONE of these 3 common doctrines concerning giving are Scriptural. As we have seen in earlier books of the Torah, there were several kinds of giving and tithing that all operated simultaneously. In other words, you didn't select one or two types (your favorites) from a list of possibilities; each type was to occur at its prescribed time for its prescribed purpose. One was to offer sacrifices of animals and grains to God at the altar for various reasons, and then there were the firstfruits ceremonies that occurred multiple times during the year. In addition to that there was support for the Tabernacle/Temple workers and infrastructure the giving of money for vows, and in addition there was to be support for the poor and needy. And this is hardly an exhaustive list of the several kinds and purpose of giving obligations that were called for.

Later when the Apostles were out teaching and preaching the Gospel, Paul argued that it was the duty of the Messianic Community to support these evangelists just as they supported the Temple. Please notice that this was not that they were to STOP supporting the Temple in order to support the bearers of the Good News; they were not to merely shift their giving from one

designated purpose to another. It was to be in addition to all the other forms of giving prescribed by the Torah. Giving to Paul, Peter, and the others did not negate the Torah requirements for giving (naturally, once the Temple was destroyed and the Priesthood disbanded, certain types of giving became impossible).

So our tithes and offerings and general giving is not so straightforward, neat and clean (and relatively inexpensive) as has become the Western Church model.

What is described beginning in verse 12 is what came to be known as the “poor-tithe”. Every 3<sup>rd</sup> year a Hebrew individual’s tithe was to be set-aside in their local village as a means of support for the poor. This particular tithe was just one of several different kinds of giving and the purpose of this specific one was to restock warehouses from which the poor, needy, and foreigners could draw from. Therefore instead of the usual manner in which firstfruits were taken to the Temple and there the worshipper would feast on some those firstfruits, every 3<sup>rd</sup> year those firstfruits were donated as a poor-tithe.

Interestingly however, the reality is that because Israel operated on the Sabbatical Year system (a system of 7-year rolling cycles), the schedule for this poor tithe was 3-years, 3-years, and 4-years. In other words in a 7-year cycle year 3 was the first poor-tithe year, year 6 was the 2<sup>nd</sup> poor-tithe year, BUT since the 7<sup>th</sup> year was a year in which no crops were grown, no tithes of firstfruits were given whatsoever (not to the Temple nor to anyone). So after giving the poor-tithe in year 6 of the 7-year cycle, another poor tithe would not be due until year 3 of the next 7-year cycle; a span of 4 years having gone by since the previous one

Believe me, the Israelites eventually grew tired of obeying God in their financial matters and so they modified (to their favor) the regulations of tithing and firstfruits. The Temple in particular didn’t like the loss of some of their income every 3<sup>rd</sup> year, nor did they like not having control over giving to the poor; so about a century before Yeshua was born the High Priest John Hyrcannus (an illegitimate High Priest installed by the Hasmon family) declared the abolition of the poor tithe. The modern church has picked up on this and many of the largest denominations require that ALL of its members’ tithes and offerings be to their local church and that church’s leadership will then decide how to dole it out.

When giving the poor-tithe the farmer is to make a declaration to the Lord, more or less in the form of a vow. The farmer first states that he has indeed offered-up that portion of his produce set aside for God and has held nothing back. This may sound like a harmless nicety or a formality but the reality is that this is all about the inherently dangerous situation of dealing with God’s Holy Property. That which is set-aside for God is His even before it is physically given to Him in some kind of ceremony or ritual. We see that principle developed early in Torah; at the moment a worshipper even **mentally** selects a particular animal that he intends to be his sacrifice, the ownership of that animal essentially transfers to Yehoveh. God’s Holy Property is

a sensitive matter to Him, and those who try to misappropriate His Holy Property often suffer the death sentence. This has not ended; we recently looked at the story in the New Testament of Ananias and Sapphira, a Believing husband and wife who INWARDLY determined to sell a piece of property they owned and give the proceeds to the Messianic Community. However in secret, they held some of those proceeds back for themselves. When questioned by the church leadership whether they had given ALL the proceeds they answered that they had (a lie), and God instantly killed them.

So you see from this declaration that the farmer makes in Deuteronomy 26:13 (that indeed he has held nothing back from the holy portion set-aside for God) it is precisely the same form used in the book of Acts to question Ananias and Sapphira. To hold back that which has been promised to Yehoveh is to misappropriate Holy Property; it is to rob God.

The next portion of the declaration is that the worshipper has donated the firstfruits as a poor-tithe to fulfill all of God's commandments concerning the giving of firstfruits, therefore properly discharging his obligations as prescribed in the Law.

Verse 14 begins a series of statements as part of this vow declaration to Yehoveh, in which the worshipper says he has handled this holy portion accordingly while it has been in his house. There is more to handling God's Holy Property than simply giving it up as called for; it can be defiled by misuse in the interim. Part of the reason for this vow-statement and some of the others is that because this tithe was taken to the local storehouse instead of given to the Priests, there were fewer checks and balances. When given to the Temple in normal years, Priests inspected the produce to be sure of both quantity and quality. If the quality was not up to snuff or the quantity was suspect, the Priest would not accept it and he'd turn the worshipper away. But here with the poor-tithe, much could be done in secret. You can imagine how easy it would be for a giver to give less than the best of his produce when he knew it was going to the least valued people in their society and not to the Temple (and likely no one would be any the wiser).

The first of those statements he makes is that he has not defiled the poor-tithe by eating a portion of it while in mourning. In other words, a mourner who has been in the same tent or house as a corpse becomes unclean. If a mourner (while he was in an unclean state) eats a portion of the offering that had been set-aside for God (even if in good faith he replaced what had been eaten at a later time) then the entire holy portion was now defiled and no longer suitable for tithing. Remember that contact from something unclean infects that which was formerly clean. Further this declaration indicates that apart from being unclean (*tamei*) due to nearness to (or contact with) a corpse, the 2<sup>nd</sup> statement is that the worshipper has not handled God's holy property while he was unclean for any reason.

The next declaration by the giver is an odd sounding one: he declares that he has not given

any of the holy portions to the dead. What does THAT mean? I have shared with you on many occasions that the Hebrews maintained many superstitions about death and the afterlife that were common among the various peoples and cultures of the Middle East. I've also commented that the evidence of it is sprinkled all throughout both the New and Old Testaments and is memorialized in archaic sayings and in practices that kind of fly right over our modern heads when we read them in Scripture passages.

Someone said to me a few weeks ago that it seems as though in the Bible era God condoned and even allowed for these nearly universal customs of ancestor worship and life-after-death beliefs among His own set-apart people. And that He seemed to do that at the same time He was giving Israel very specific laws and information against such practices. I'd have to agree with that assessment. The matter of what happens after one dies is only briefly addressed in the New Testament and almost not at all in the Old. There are vague Biblical references to Sheol, the dead going to be with their fathers, the underground chambers of Abraham's Bosom, Paradise, Hades, and such. But the reason there are literally scores of varying doctrines within the Church about Hell, Heaven, Purgatory, resurrection, and so on is because we are simply not given much information in the Scriptures about death and what comes after. I consider this one of those mysteries that God has determined He will hold for His own glory, and will share only that which He deems man needs to know (and apparently what man needed to know was practically nothing in the days of the Patriarchs, only slightly more in the days of Kings and the Prophets, and eventually a few more pieces of the puzzle were added in the New Testament era).

Archeologists have uncovered ancient Hebrew gravesites that had strange holes (small diameter tubes or passageways) that went from ground level down to where the body lay in repose. They were used to drop morsels of food and beverage down to the corpse. Ancestor worship was practiced differently among different cultures; indeed some did actually worship their dead ancestors and even prayed to them. Other cultures didn't offer worship to them but simply decided that some essence of that dead person lived on and so certainly they must need to eat. Or that they had ongoing needs for things like perfume, incense, and most of all they craved communication with the living. So it was critical that a person had children who would tend to his afterlife needs. During almost all of the Biblical era a significant section of the Hebrew society practiced this custom in one way or another.

With that bit of information, now you can see why the worshipper in Deuteronomy 26:14 swears that he has NOT given any of this food to the dead. It's not that the normal practice of giving food to the dead was necessarily being prohibited by God; it's that any kind of contact with a grave site automatically defiles the worshipper, and so if the food dropped down that hole to the body came from God's Holy Portion then the powerful uncleanness that comes from death would render whatever that worshipper had set-aside as his tithe as unworthy to be given to the Lord.

In verse 15 the focus of the statement shifts from the individual to the nation. I've mentioned on numerous occasions that while in Biblical Hebrew-ism the focus is more on the community of Israel as a whole, and the role of the individual is primarily as but a member of that community, in Christianity we tend to focus almost entirely on the individual (the community of God tends to play a lesser role). In this mystical 4-chapter segment of Deuteronomy we'll see more attention paid to the individual worshipper than anywhere else in the Torah. Not surprisingly at the end of this series of declarations by and for the individual worshipper who is giving his offering, verse 15 gets back to the more typical Torah format of placing the role of the whole congregation as above that of an individual. So the worshipper finishes by asking God to bless ALL Israel as a result of each individual displaying proper obedience to God's commands.

Next Moses states that the key to pleasing God is to faithfully adhere to his rules and regulations with "all of your heart and soul". This of course reminds us of the Great Commandment that supports all the other commandments: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Remember: heart in the Bible era MEANS "mind". The idea is that every aspect of our being is to submit to the direction of the Lord at all times. This certainly punctures the modern western notion of separation of church and state, or the compartmentalization of our human activities into the religious and the secular (that is now accepted as politically correct). A person seeking elected office today has a litmus test that he or she must be willing to separate their faith from their public duties. Even mentioning God is cause for suspicion if not disqualification. But even the average synagogue or church-goer today finds that life is much easier if we only live-out our faith during Shabbat, or from about 9 to noon on Sundays, but put that faith back on the shelf at all other times.

Verses 17, 18, and 19 are very powerful ones in my estimation. First, they fully demonstrate the mutual nature of covenant relationship that has been established between Israel and Yehoveh by means of the Mosaic Covenant. Second, these verses finalize the acceptance of the terms of the Covenant by both God and by Israel. Third, a summary of what, precisely, each side has agreed to is presented.

And the Lord says that Israel has already agreed to the covenant, individual by individual, and that means that Israel will walk in His ways, observe His laws and commands, and obey God. The key to understanding this is that Israel has agreed to more than an intellectual assent to God's rules; they have agreed to hold it in their hearts in a way that brings about action.

In return for Israel's intellectual assent and action to demonstrate their faithfulness, Yehoveh covenants that as of this moment Israel is His treasured people **above** every other people and nation on earth. Further that in God's eyes Israel is holy; not because they are inherently better than anybody else, but because they have submitted to His covenant offer He is now free to DECLARE them holy (which He has just done). Further, God has given Israel preeminence above all the other nations of the earth. It's not that the rest of humanity doesn't

matter to the Lord; rather it is that He has given Israel priority status. It's just like the pattern demonstrated among the tribes of Israel; all of Israel is holy, but the Levites have been set-apart and made a step above and thus a step holier than common Israel. Further, from the tribe of the Levites the clan of the priests have been set-apart and declared a bit more holy than the common Levites. And from among the clan of the Levitical priests the family of the High Priest has been set-apart and made the most holy of all the Israelites.

I have such a bittersweet feeling about this declaration of Yehoveh. I know that He keeps His promises and though thousands of years pass, the return of the Jewish people to their homeland proves that He never changes, and never forgets. But I also have such trepidation and heartsickness over my brothers and sisters in the faith who are worse than blind to this never-ending promise of God that Israel is, and shall remain, His precious treasure. Too many steadfastly insist that God has abandoned His treasure Israel in favor of the church; a **gentile** church. Folks if God can do that, why would we think that He wouldn't at some point, in another newer revelation, abandon the church for someone else?

What you say? But Jesus promises He'll never abandon us? Well that's essentially the same promise the Father made to Israel and recorded it in numerous places throughout the Old Testament. So if we can find an excuse for the Father to permanently abandon Israel then we can certainly contemplate a situation whereby Jesus can permanently abandon His followers. The REALLY good news is that NEITHER has the Father given up on Israel nor will Yeshua thus give up on us. Let's get that message out to both the Jewish people of this earth and to the church.

I want to end this chapter with this comment: the entire tone and context of what we have just concluded makes it clear that what God is seeking is a personal relationship with men. Obedience to the precepts and principles of His commandments is His prescribed means of demonstrating our love for Him. But at the same time keeping those commandments is NOT the MEANS to our own justification or the establishment of our own righteousness, any more than it was for the Hebrews. Only when one follows God in a heartfelt way; only when one makes our relationship with Him the focus of our lives in love and submission; and only when one is redeemed by the only Redeemer there will ever be, does DOING the commandments have any value.

Let me remind you that BEFORE the Law (the Torah) was given, Israel was redeemed. God didn't say to Israel: let me give you the law, and then we'll see how you do. And if you meet my standard THEN I'll redeem you. The pattern is: redemption first, obedience to the commandments next. It was that way in the Old Testament and it remains that way in the New.

Let's move on to chapter 27.

### READ DEUTERONOMY CHAPTER 27 all

This is one of those places in the Bible that is a major bother to Torah scholars. It is a very curious chapter that some say MUST be out of place. Some claim that in the process of handing down the Bible, and the various redactions that happened over the centuries, somewhere along the line some things got out of order. I suppose that's possible; but also understand that even if this chapter is out of order everything it says is still true, no principles change, and there is no cause to be concerned. And by the way, it is by no means universally agreed upon that the perceived problem of chapter order actually exists.

The major problem is in the form. Notice that since the beginning of Deuteronomy we have Moses speaking a sermon, primarily using the present tense. The narrative uses a lot of "I" and "we". Then notice how this suddenly changes up and it speaks in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person; it is not Moses speaking it is someone speaking about what Moses said and did. It is speaking in the past tense. Later it speaks of multiple covenant renewal ceremonies that are each occurring in different places; but the wording makes it appear like they happen simultaneously.

I have no intention of delving deeply into the relatively new academic discipline called literary criticism, even though it is from that academic discipline that these skepticisms arise. That is, the literary critics say that the grammar and the form isn't what they expect therefore the content is suspect. Rather I see little problem with the content other than a couple of very minor issues that has little bearing except as a curiosity. I'll point those out when we get there.

Chapter 27 documents ceremonies that mark the arrival of Israel into the Promised Land, Canaan. The ceremonies are specifically to take place at Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. There the curses and the blessings of the Covenant of Moses will be pronounced.

In verse 1 an anomaly is uncovered: here is the only place in the Torah where the elders join Moses in commanding the people. Some scholars think this is also some kind of late redaction, but to me it's natural and makes all the sense in the world. Moses is about to die; he is NOT going to enter the Promised Land (he's already been told that by the Lord). When one is about to turn over authority to someone else it has always been typical to publicly display the legitimacy of this transition by including the incoming authority figure at appropriate times when the current leader is making speeches and declarations. Moses is simply showing the elders the ropes and demonstrating to the people what it's going to look like when he's not around. He wants no suspicion of foul play, and no cause for rebellion and doubt. It's going to fall to Joshua, the priests, and the elders to rule Israel in only a matter of days from the time of this sermon. Moses will be no more.



Here's where we encounter another difficulty: verse 2 says that as soon as Israel crosses over the Jordan River into Canaan they are to erect large stones as memorial markers. The problem is that it says they're to erect them at Mt. Ebal even though they crossed over the Jordan near Jericho. Mt. Ebal is a solid 30 miles north of Jericho as-the-crow-flies, but due to the ruggedness of the area it is probably at least a 5 day journey between the two points. So where it says, "on the **day** you have crossed the Jordan" they are to set up the stones on Ebal, it seems impossible to accomplish. In light of what we read elsewhere about this historic event however, likely we should take this phrase to mean, "**once** you have crossed the Jordan". In other words it is just a common way of speaking that means do it expediently after crossing the Jordan; it does NOT mean to do it before the sun sets, thereby ending that day.

The Israelites are to coat these large flat stones with plaster and then inscribe into the wet plaster the words of the Torah. First let's recall that while we tend to use the word "Torah" as a technical title for the 1<sup>st</sup> five books of the Bible, in fact it is also a generic word that means teaching or instruction. The command then is NOT to write the entire contents of the 5 books of Moses on these plastered stones; rather it is to write the high points of Moses' SERMON in Deuteronomy (primarily the general list of blessings and curses).

Writing on plastered rocks was not something employed by all cultures, and certainly not by nomads. But writing on plaster was a usual and customary way of memorializing important edicts and events in Egypt. This procedure would have been totally familiar to the Israelites. Besides, the large amount of writing that was being called for could be accomplished in a fraction of the time by scribing characters onto wet plaster with a stylus as opposed to chiseling out letters on hardened rock.

In addition to setting up these enormous stones embossed with the words of Moses on them at Mt. Ebal, they were also to build an altar for sacrificing to Yehoveh. The stones were to be carefully piled up to create a usable altar but they were not to be formed and chiseled into perfect shapes using iron tools. The building material for the altar was to be only of natural stones, as found lying about on the ground.

Mt. Ebal and its twin mountain Gerizim were located in the old stomping grounds of the Patriarch Abraham; no doubt that had something to do with why they were chosen for this historic covenant renewal ceremony. Mt. Ebal is about 3 miles north of Mt. Gerizim, and the city and plain of Shechem (today called Nablus) is in between the two. Mt. Ebal rose to a height of about 1200 feet above the city of Shechem so whatever would take place up there could be seen for miles in every direction.

Verse 8 gives the instruction that the teachings of Yehoveh through Moses that were to be inscribed in the plaster were to be written **ba'er heitev** (literally "setting it out well"). In other

words it was to be prominent and easy to read. The Rabbis have done some excellent work on this subject and they point out that the intent of this instruction is that the common man could read and understand the meaning. Since these were the words of God, and since Israel had a priesthood, it would have been rather expected in the religious mindset of that era that the words would be of a “mystical” form that ONLY God’s direct servants, the priests, could render correctly. This was the norm of most Middle Eastern cultures; that the priests were the only ones entitled to the divine words and the only ones who could comprehend them. The goal, of course, was control of the people. After all, if ONLY the priests possessed the divine word, and even where it was written publicly only the priests could decipher it, then whatever the priests said was truth and there could be no dissent. These plastered stones, plainly written upon, were monuments to demonstrate that the Word of God was to be possessed by all Israel, not just a privileged class.

We’ve all studied the European Inquisition in school; and the heart of the matter of the early Inquisition was that certain people outside of the Institutional Church authority began to acquire copies of Scripture. Lay people wanted to read the Word for themselves; in some cases it was because they no longer trusted the Church. Those people were considered criminals as ONLY the Church authority was allowed to have Scripture because they were the only ones with the divine knowledge and authorization to interpret the divine word. If the people at large actually possessed Holy Scripture then Church control over the people would be far more difficult. Thousands and thousands of Believers were burned at the stake for merely possessing a fragment of a page of the Bible.

While in time those laws against owning Scripture were abandoned, another transition began in more modern times whereby even though Bibles are cheap and plentiful, people lost interest in Scripture and have been encouraged to accept a denomination’s articles of faith or doctrinal pillars instead of spending the time to study God’s Word. In that vein I would like to close with a quote from D.L. Christensen, a highly acclaimed Christian Bible scholar:

***”One of the curious features of modern worship within the evangelical churches today is the absence of public recitation of the Scriptures as an end in itself. Much time is given to singing songs of praise, many of which are simply biblical texts put to music. But very little time is given to hearing the Bible read, other than perhaps the typically very limited text on which the Pastor’s sermon is based. We need to find ways to expose our people to the WHOLE of the Bible in public worship in the manner that ancient Israel experienced Deuteronomy on Mt. Ebal.”***

Next time we’ll take up that pivotal ceremony on the breezy summit of Mt. Ebal above the ancient city of Shechem.