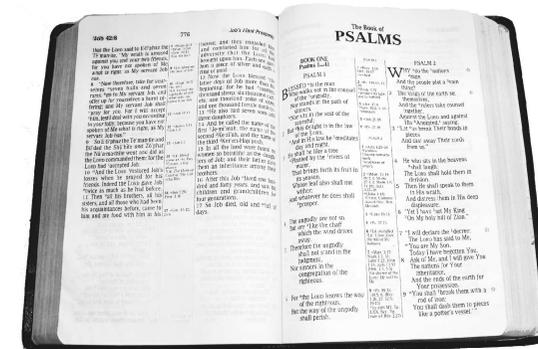


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



February 2015

Bible readings from Deuteronomy chapters 11 to 30

Choose life

Deuteronomy is full of warnings about the consequences of departing from God but it is also filled with promises of the compassion and grace of the Lord. Notice how many times the expression ‘*The LORD your God*’ is found in this chapter. The Lord points to the time when they would be scattered and go into captivity because of their disobedience to him, but he promised that he would restore them and bless them if they returned to him (1–5). He would do for a repenting people what he had previously called on them to do for themselves: ‘*And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart ...*’ (6; cp. 10:16; cp. Romans 2:29). When God graciously works in a person’s heart, they will then love him with all their heart and with all their soul (2,6,10).

God has his ‘*secret things*’ which he does not reveal to us (29:29), but he has given us his word which is not hidden from us. His commands are not so distant or veiled in mystery that we cannot understand what he has to say to us. We must not spend our time speculating about the things that the Lord has not revealed, but get on and obey the things that he has plainly made known in the pages of holy Scripture (11–14).

Moses set before the people ‘*life and good, death and evil*’ (15) and he challenged them to ‘*choose life*’ (19). **The options are clear. Like Israel, we have to choose between blessing and cursing.** The challenge, ‘*choose life*’ is still sounded out in gospel preaching today. To ‘*choose life*’ is to love God, to obey his voice and to cling to him (20). Is this too great a price to pay in choosing life? Lasting happiness is found only in loving God. All that he asks of us is that we should love and obey him. When we truly love God, we want to please him; we want to cling to him so that nothing else will cause us to wander away from him.

Have you chosen life or are you still in your sins – unforgiven and under the curse of God? If this describes you, I urge you to repent of your sins and call upon the Lord Jesus to save you. Choose life!

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A people for himself

In this, his third address to the people, Moses led Israel to renew the covenant which God had made with them (1,12–13). The older generation had died during the wilderness journey and it was important that those going into the promised land were fully aware of their privileges and responsibilities as God’s covenant people. They had seen great signs and wonders from God (2–7) but they did not have spiritual perception. Spiritual perception is a gift from God (4) and we should rejoice much in the Lord if he has opened our eyes to the greatness of Christ and his work in dying to save us from our sins.

A covenant is a binding agreement (or treaty). In his covenants with men, it is God who lays down the conditions and it is for us to obey him (9). Christians belong to the new covenant which was sealed in the blood of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 13:20). This is a far better covenant than the one we are reading about in Deuteronomy (Hebrews 8:6). What does it mean to be in covenant with God? It means that God has taken us to be *a people for himself* (13). The word ‘holy’ applied to Christians means that we have been separated from this world to God, to be his special possession – *‘a people for himself*. The Lord blesses his covenant people as they love him and obey him (9). He expects *a people for himself* to be totally committed to him. The Israelites were again warned of the consequences of forsaking the covenant (18–28).

There is a false peace which is enjoyed by many people. Many bless themselves, saying, *‘I shall have peace, even though I walk in the imagination of my heart’* (19). Many of the Israelites did just that (Jeremiah 11:7–8; 16:12). God has his *secret things* (29); we must not waste time speculating about the things that he chooses to conceal from us (eg. the date of Christ’s second coming).

A people for himself; the almighty, eternal, all-wise God is totally committed to all who belong to him. Christian, rejoice in him and be holy.

Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived

The Israelites had seen the mighty acts of God with their own eyes both against the Egyptians, and against Dathan and Abiram who rebelled against Moses and Aaron (1–7; cp. Numbers 16). God promised that he would continue to display his power on their behalf if they would love him and obey him (1,8,13). He would make them strong and would prosper them, giving them rich harvests (8–15).

The Israelites had seen God’s mighty acts but they were still prone to wander away from the Lord. Moses urged them, *‘Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them’* (16). The unfaithfulness of the Israelites is held up in the New Testament as a warning to us. — *‘Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily ... lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin’* (Hebrews 3:12–13). Many who once appeared to have a good Christian profession have grown cold in heart. They have been seduced by the enticements of materialism and pleasure-seeking. **Let us take heed to ourselves lest we also be deceived.**

John Currid comments, ‘Moses’ warning to Israel to beware of temptation once they have settled in the land is worthy of our contemplation. When a Christian is content and satisfied, that is perhaps the time of greatest danger. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus taught his disciples, “What I say unto you I say unto all, Watch” (Mark 13:37). We must ever keep sentinel. Sleep not upon your guard: our sleeping time is the devil’s tempting time. When you have prayed against sin, watch against temptation.’ (COMMENTARY ON DEUTERONOMY, page 241).

I set before you today a blessing and a curse

The necessity of keeping God's word in our heart and to instruct our children in it is again stressed (18–21; cp. 4:9–10; 6:6–9). The Lord promised the Israelites that if they carefully kept all his commandments — to love him, *to walk in all his ways, and to hold fast to him*, he would drive out the nations dwelling in Canaan (22–23). Love for God and obedience to his word are inseparable. If we love the Lord we will delight in obeying his commandments (Psalm 119:35).

God challenged his people, '*Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse* (26) and the Israelites were to remember this when they reached the promised land. They were to go to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal in Shechem. Six tribes were to stand on each mountain and promises of blessing for obedience were to be repeated from Gerizim and warning of curses for disobedience were to be uttered from Ebal (26–30; cp. 27:11 to 28:68; Joshua 8:30–35).

The people were repeatedly warned that the Lord demands our wholehearted obedience. This principle applies to every Christian. The Lord will not accept divided loyalties. Our lives will be blighted if we attempt to serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). John Currid points out, 'God cannot bear any rival. Homage must be paid to him as the one and only Lord of the universe. There is simply no other.' (COMMENTARY ON DEUTERONOMY, page 246).

Let us be wise and seek always to behave in such a manner that pleases God and attracts his smile upon our lives.

Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy

How could Israel slip into a backslidden state? Verse 45 and 47 give the answer:

- By failing to keep God's commandments (45).
- By failing to serve the LORD God *with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things*. that God had given to them (45).
- By lacking godly fear (58).

Israel was to learn to her cost that in by refusing to serve God, she would become a servant to other nations (48; captivity in Assyria, 2 Kings 17:5–23 and Babylon, 2 Kings 24:17 to 25:21). Such servitude was hard and inhumane, especially as God was against them. They were warned that if they failed to obey God, he would bring upon them extraordinary plagues and serious illnesses (49–68).

Do we serve the Lord with joy, or has our Christian work become such a burden that we hardly notice any blessing? How does backsliding begin? It can begin in a variety of ways:

- We may neglect the place of private prayer in our lives. Daily fellowship with the Lord is essential.
- We may neglect to feed ourselves on the word of God by not reading it prayerfully or meditating on the things that we read in it.
- We may sink into discouragement like certain New Testament Jewish Christians and then begin to drift (Hebrews 2:1). At such times we often lose the sense of wonder that God gave his beloved Son to die for our salvation and that he has had mercy on us.
- We may, like Demas, become preoccupied with the things of this world (2 Timothy 4:10).
- We may lose our first love (Revelation 2:4).

Let us examine our own hearts to see whether there is an attitude of coldness toward God lurking within us. We know that the only way to real freedom is to serve the Lord with joy and gladness.

And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you

The pathway to God's blessing is obedience to his word. The early part of this chapter lists some of the promised blessings to the Israelites. The principle in verse 2 applies to Christians as well as to the Old Testament people of God. Moses promised the people, '*And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God.*' Unsought blessings and divine surprises will overtake us! If we are preoccupied with seeking after blessings, we will be barren in the Christian life. God's blessing overtakes us as we obey his voice. We hear his voice through the preaching of the Bible and through reading it. As with Israel, God will command his blessing on us and open to us *his good treasure* (8,12).

The disobedient will be overtaken by curses however (15) and some of these curses are listed in verses 16 to 46 (read these verses at your leisure; they are not included in our readings). The curse of God's holy law is upon all who break that law (26; cp Galatians 3:10). The Christian rejoices that *Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us* (Galatians 3:13).

Another of God's blessings is to *be above only, and not be beneath*' (13) being above every adverse circumstance and not letting things get on top of us. *In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us* (Romans 8:37). Joyful obedience to the Lord's will is the secret of blessing and spiritual contentment.

You will have noticed that the importance of love for God and of obedience to his word are repeatedly stressed throughout the Book of Deuteronomy. The challenge for us is obvious. Blessing comes not from chasing after spine-tingling sensational experiences but through daily obedience to the Lord. **Are you being disobedient to God in some area of your life? Why give Satan cause for satisfaction? He hates you.** If you love the Lord, let it be seen by joyful obedience and be sure to repent of any rebellion that is lurking in your heart.

Every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes

The Israelites were to destroy every trace of idolatry from Canaan and they were not to use pagan altars for their worship (1–4). True worship must be according to the word of God. The recent battles of a pilgrim people had made it very difficult for orderly worship to be maintained with *every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes* (8). When the Israelites came into their rest (from travel and battles) and inheritance (9) they were to '*do what is right in the sight of the LORD*' (25, 28).

The places associated with idolatry were to be destroyed but there was to be a special place where God would be worshipped. The tabernacle would be set up in '*the place where the LORD your God chooses*' (5,11,14,18, 21 (notice the repeated use of this expression). They had to follow God's directions for their worship and for their offerings (13–28). No territory was allocated to the Levites who were set apart to serve God full-time but certain cities and land were to be given to them (12; cp. Numbers 35). The nation had a solemn duty to care for these full-time servants of God (19).

If worship in Old Testament times was strictly regulated and conducted according to God's instructions, how much more should we be careful in our Christian worship. We must resist the call to be 'culturally relevant' which often means 'let us bring the ways of the world into our worship.' Let us remember that western culture is a culture which is in rebellion against God. We sometimes hear talk about 'experimentation' and 'innovation' in worship. Many who have little desire to hear and obey God's word are entertained with pop-style music, clowns, mime and dance, while the hungry 'sheep' are starved of spiritual food. We are not free to do what is right in our own eyes, but must worship God *in spirit and truth* (John 4:24) *with reverence and godly fear* (Hebrews 12:28).

How seriously do you take your worship of God? Do you expect the Lord to meet with you and to speak to you through his word when you gather at your local church?

Take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them

Our reading today again warns us against idolatry and you may wonder what relevance it has in the twentieth century? It has every relevance! Idolatry and superstition are found everywhere. The use of ‘lucky charms’ and zodiac brooches is widespread. There are also pressures coming from the ecumenical movement to be involved in multi-faith worship in churches where men bow before altars and statues, or in temples where they chant and burn incense to idols. The Lord forbids us to have any involvement in such wickedness. We must resist all forms of idolatry (11): God says, ‘*Take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them*’ (12:30). Idolatry is an abomination to God and in later history, the Israelites did the unthinkable and sacrificed their children to idols (12:31; cp. 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6).

We have been warned. Here are some of Satan’s devices to ensnare us into idolatry:

- Curiosity in wanting to find out how the heathen worship (12:30). Curiosity can become an obsession to trap the unwary.
- Through a prophet or miracle worker (13:1–5). Their prophecies may be fulfilled, their miracles genuine, but if they seek to turn us away from truth, we must have nothing to do with them.
- Through close relatives or friends (6–11). Family or emotional ties can become a powerful enticement to false religion.
- Through wicked men (12–18). Satan uses powerful personalities to lead many astray. He also uses those who are very friendly and ‘nice’ to propagate error. They are wolves in sheep’s clothing.

Christians have no mandate to put to death false prophets or others who seek to entice us to worship idols; this command was restricted to Israel (5). **We must, however, warn against them and expose their errors.** The Lord Jesus said, ‘*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves*’ (Matthew 7:15).

And all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’

Six of the tribes of Israel were to stand on Mount Gerizim and say their ‘Amens’ as the Levites repeated the blessings for those who obey God. The other six tribes were to stand on Mount Ebal and say their ‘Amens’ to the curses pronounced by the Levites on those who violated God’s law (11–26).

Sins which bring the curse of God are listed in verses 15 to 26. – Idolatry, contempt for parents, stealing another’s land by changing boundaries, mistreatment of the blind, perverting the cause of justice to the weak and vulnerable, sexual perversion, attacking a neighbour, and taking a bribe to slay an innocent person. All sin brings us under judgment and we must always see sin as our deadly enemy (26).

The acoustics at Gerizim and Ebal were exceptionally good and the voices of the people would be clearly heard by those who were on the other side of the valley. As God’s law was rehearsed there was to be a chorus of ‘Amens’. The Hebrew word ‘*Amen*’ has been carried into English. It means ‘so be it’ and it implies steadfastness. When the Lord Jesus wanted to emphasize the importance of what he was saying, he began his sentences with, ‘*Assuredly*’ (‘*Verily*’ – AV. cp. Matthew 5:18). The word he used was the Greek word translated ‘*Amen*.’ Christians have always ended their prayers with ‘*Amen*’ (eg. Ephesians 3:21; 6:24).

Some people believe that there can be no congregational participation in worship unless there is the freedom for everyone to do their distinct bit (which really amounts to a free-for-all). We all participate in worship when we sing our hymns, read God’s word together, hear the preaching and when we add our ‘Amens’ to the prayers. **Do you come to church each Lord’s Day prepared to give yourself to the worship of God?** *And all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’* (16).

You have become the people of LORD your God

Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people, ‘*Keep all the commandments which I command you today*’ (1). We are not allowed to choose which of God’s commandments we will obey. They are all important. When we fail and sin by breaking just one commandment of God, we break all of his holy law. *For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all* (James 2:10). Imagine that you had the commandments of God written on a delicate piece of china and you break the plate in just one place. The whole of the plate is broken. **We should remember that one act of disobedience to God by just one man brought ruin and death to the world (Romans 5:12).** The glorious news of the gospel is, that through the obedience of One, the Lord Jesus Christ, many are saved, made righteous in the sight of God and have eternal life (Romans 5:17–21). If you are a Christian, this should cause you to joyfully praise God.

When Israel crossed the River Jordan into Canaan, they were to set up huge stones on Mount Ebal. These stones were to be covered with lime (2; the Hebrew word indicates ‘*lime*,’ as translated in the NKJV; in some versions it is translated, ‘*plaster*’). All the words of God’s law were to be plainly written on them (8).

The Israelites were also to build an altar with uncut stones (cp. Exodus 20:25) and on it offer burnt offerings and peace offerings (1–8; cp. Joshua 8:30–35). The people, at last in the promised land, would rejoice before the Lord at this altar (7).

Moses and the Levites spoke the people saying, ‘*You have become the people of the LORD your God. Therefore you shall obey the voice of the LORD your God*’ (9). **They were special to God and they must show this in their obedience to him. The words that were first given to the Israelites are also true concerning every Christian; cp. 1 Peter 2:9–12).**

A holy people to the LORD ... a special treasure

This chapter deals with mourning ritual (1–2), clean and unclean foods (3–21), and principles of tithing (22–29). The pagan people of Canaan went berserk in their sorrow at the death of a loved one. They would cut themselves and shave the front of their head in a frenzy of hysteria. God’s people are to be different: ‘*For you are a holy people to the LORD your God ... chosen to be a people for himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth*’ (2; cp. 7:6). When we mourn the death of a Christian, we do of course weep and grieve, but we do not *sorrow as others who have no hope* (1 Thessalonians 4:13). When a Christian dies, he is *with Christ, which is far better*’ (Philippians 1:23), and we know that there will be a wonderful day of reunion (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18).

The Israelites had to distinguish between clean and unclean meats (3–21; cp. Leviticus 11). Some animals were unclean (eg. swine, 8) and others were unfit to be eaten (21). the eating of other kinds of meat was associated with idol worship, eg. the Canaanites boiled a young goat in its mother’s milk (21) as part of a fertility rite. We are not bound by these dietary laws, but we must be wise in what we eat. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and we must take care of them.

‘*A holy people to the LORD*’ will also show that they are ‘*a special treasure*’ to him by a generous attitude in supporting the work of God (22–29). Many Christians insist that tithing was an Old Testament requirement and is not demanded of New Testament believers. The Lord Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount that far more is required of Christians than of Old Testament believers (see Matthew 5:17–48). We are under the new and better covenant (Hebrews 8:6). Should we, dare we, give less than those Israelites? **The sincerity of our love for the Lord Jesus, who gave himself for us, is demonstrated by our attitude to giving.** *God loves a cheerful giver* (2 Corinthians 8:8–9; 9:7).

You shall not ... shut your hand from your poor brother

Every seventh year, the Jews were to cancel the debts of their fellow-Israelites (2) and release any fellow-Hebrew who had been bought as a slave (12–18; cp. Exodus 21:1–6). Some commentators believe that the debt was cancelled totally, others that repayment was not required during the seventh year. God is full of compassion and mercy (Exodus 34:6) and he wants his people to be concerned for the poor and to be generous in helping them. They were told, *'You shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother'* (7). God promised that those who are generous to the needy would be blessed in all that they did (10; cp. Psalm 41:1–2; Isaiah 58:10–12).

These principles also apply to us. Compassion for the poor is taught throughout the New Testament (eg. Acts 11:29–30; Romans 15:25–26; Galatians 2:10; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9). We must not harden our hearts to any brother or sister in Christ who is in need. At the same time we need to be wary of strangers who may appear among us with a sob story, telling us that God has sent them to us. The writer of these notes has known of such scoundrels who play on the generosity of sincere Christians. I have also found that the most needy among Christians do not readily make their needs known. We must seek to be aware of the true needs of those in our church fellowship.

If you use the internet, you may receive begging e-mails from complete strangers. These communications are couched in spiritual language and ask for financial support for Christian orphanages, schools, hospitals, relief work, etc. Ignore them and only give through reputable evangelical agencies or missions.

We must pray for discernment in our giving. If we shut up our hearts to needy brothers or sisters in Christ, our faith is not much good (James 2:14–17). **If we have no compassion for a needy brother, how can we claim to know the love of God (1 John 3:17)?**

Today you have proclaimed the LORD to be your God

The people had solemnly owned and confessed Jehovah to be their God: *'Today you have proclaimed the LORD to be your God'* (17). We go on to read, *'Also today the LORD has proclaimed you to be his special people.'* God promised that he would set Israel high above all other nations *in praise, in name and in honour*. The Israelites had already been reminded of this: *'For you are a holy people to the LORD your God ... chosen to be a people for himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth'* (14:2; cp. 7:6). Their privileges were very great but a *'high'* people must also be a *'holy'* people (19). He commands that those who belong to him are wholehearted in their obedience to his word (16–18).

When we are converted to Christ, we can identify with verse 17. We soon discover that we are *'his special people'* (18; cp. 1 Peter 2:9 – *You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light*). When we are discouraged or facing trials (cp. 1 Peter 1:6), we should encourage ourselves in this great truth. How wonderful and how humbling to know that the almighty God loves us so much that he gave his beloved Son to die in order to save us from our sins!

God has chosen every Christian in Christ before he made the world to be holy and to be conformed to the image of his Son (Ephesians 1:4; Romans 8:29). How can those who are not Christians know that we belong to the Lord? Do you proclaim *the LORD to be your God?* Confession with the mouth is important but the words of our lips must be supported by holy living and obedience to God's word. **How genuine is your confession of faith in God?**

You shall rejoice in every good thing which the LORD God has given to you

When the Israelites reached Canaan, they were to offer some of the first produce of the ground to God (1–2). This offering was a token of their gratitude to God for keeping his promise to their fathers (3) and for his great love to them and his power in delivering them from Egypt (4–10). The words, ‘*My father was a Syrian*’ (5) refer to Jacob, whose mother Rebekah came from Syria (or ‘Aram’ – Genesis 25:20). The tithe (one tenth) of their produce in the third year was to be set aside for the Levite, for the poor and the needy (11–15; cp. 14:28–29).

We need frequently to remind ourselves of all that the Lord has done for us in giving his beloved Son to be our Saviour. We should also encourage ourselves by remembering the gracious answers to our prayers and the Lord’s dealings with us. The Israelites were told, in connection with their giving, ‘*So you shall rejoice in every good thing which the LORD your God has given to you.*’ When we rejoice in the Lord’s goodness to us we will gladly and generously give money to support his work and those in need. **Are you rejoicing in every good thing which the Lord has given to you (11)? How do show your gratitude to God?**

John Currid observes, ‘It is important not to forget the spirit and the laws of tithing. They are to be implemented as an affirmation and acknowledgement that Yahweh is the giver of all good things. And they are to reflect one’s care for the disadvantaged and the needy in Israel. These are issues of the heart. How do you view yourself in the matter of tithing? Do you do it begrudgingly? Or do you do it self-righteously? Or do you do it for the glory of God and for his sheep? (COMMENTARY ON DEUTERONOMY, pages 416 and 417).

You shall remember that you were a slave

Before his conversion, John Newton had been a slave-trader, and for a time was himself enslaved in Africa. He displayed verse 15 in his study, ‘*You shall remember that you were a slave ... and the LORD your God redeemed you*’. This was to remind him constantly of his great debt of gratitude to the Lord. The same reminder is repeated several times in Deuteronomy (5:15; 16:12; 24:18,22). God had delivered Israel from bondage when they had been in a hopeless situation. Seeing that God had been gracious and merciful to them, they should also have pity on the poor and on slaves. It was not enough to release a slave in the seventh year! The freed man was to be supplied generously so that he could set up home (12–15).

Can you imagine a slave loving his master and renouncing his right to emancipation after his six years service? Such a relationship was happy indeed. The slave would consider himself better off by remaining with his master and in being secure with all the needs of his family met. His ear was pierced and he served his master for the rest of his life (16–17). Christian slave-owners had to treat their slaves well (Ephesians 6:9) and it was through the efforts of Christians like John Newton and William Wilberforce that slavery was abolished in Britain and its colonies.

The dedication to the Lord of the firstborn of the herd or flock also served as a reminder to Israel of all that he had done for them at the first Passover (19–23; cp. Exodus 13:11–16). **We too must remember all that the Lord has done for us by being holy and by showing compassion to the needy (Ephesians 2:11–13; 1 John 4:7–11).**

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found:
Was blind, but now I see.*

(John Newton)

They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed

This chapter deals with the three feasts in which the people were required to assemble at the sanctuary (*‘in the place where the LORD chooses to put his name’* – 2,11,15). The people were again reminded of their slavery in Egypt (12).

- The Passover (1–8) commemorated the deliverance from Egypt.
- The Feast of Weeks (or First-fruits, 9–12) was later called the Feast of Pentecost because it was celebrated on the fiftieth day from the Sabbath which began the Passover (Leviticus 23:15–16). The Feast of Firstfruits of the barley harvest in Israel began in March/April at the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the day after the Sabbath (Leviticus 23:9–14). The firstfruits of the wheat harvest were offered during the Feast of Weeks (Leviticus 23:20; cp. Exodus 34:22; Numbers 28:26).
- The Feast of Tabernacles was the feast to give thanks at the end of all the harvests (13–17). At the latter two feasts there was great rejoicing (11,15) and during the Feast of Tabernacles, the Israelites were required to live in booths made from tree boughs and branches of palm trees, as a remembrance of the time they came out of Egypt (Leviticus 23:39–44).

The Lord commanded that at these feasts, the men should come to God with their gifts: *‘They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able’* (16–17). **The generous Christian is the blessed and happy Christian. The tight-fisted Christian will never know the joy of the Lord in his life while he continues to appear before the Lord empty-handed.**

We must also be like the Israelites in seeking and practising justice (18–21). We must never give or take a bribe. Bribery breeds corruption; *a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous* (19). A holy people are generous and they cannot be corrupted by money or by idolatry (21–22). How do you measure up?

All who behave unrighteously are an abomination to the LORD

When a man died childless his widow was not to remarry outside of his family but be married to his brother. This principle (called ‘levirate marriage’) went back to ancient times (cp. Genesis 38:8). The marriage would give the widow the opportunity to bear children from the same flesh and blood of her deceased husband. This would, hopefully, enable her to bear a son to preserve his name and inheritance (5–10). The loosing of the sandal (9) symbolised the man’s rejection of his responsibility or its transfer to someone else (cp. Ruth 4:7–10).

God hates immodesty and we must have great respect for the bodies of the opposite sex to ourselves. The punishment for the example of immodesty in verses 11 to 12 may appear harsh, but it reflects God’s holy hatred of such sin. The Lord Jesus may have had these verses in mind when he commanded us to cut off the right hand that causes us to sin (Matthew 5:30). He did not, of course, mean us to take this literally but he was insisting that we must be drastic in dealing with any remaining sin in our lives.

The Israelites were forbidden to have false weights in their possession that would deceive purchasers of grain, etc. They would not be tempted to cheat if they did not have the false weights (13–16). **We must have the highest possible standards of honesty in our business and at our place of work.** Cheating on anything that we sell (or cheating our employer) is sin. God loathes dishonest practices: *‘All who behave unrighteously are an abomination to the LORD’* (16). God is not ignorant of man’s sinful ways; he sees and he remembers. Let us serve him *with reverence and godly fear* (Hebrews 12:28).

The Amalekites were under divine judgment on account of their wicked treatment of the Israelites when they left Egypt. The Lord was to use the Israelites as his instrument in punishing this wicked race of people (17–19; cp. Exodus 17:8–16; 1 Samuel 15:2–3).

And they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked

Justice is essential in any well-ordered society. The criminal was to be punished according to his guilt and beaten if that is what he deserved, but the punishment was not to be excessive, forty blows being the maximum sentence. The Jews restricted the maximum punishment to thirty-nine stripes to ensure that they did not give more than the maximum through a mistaken count. The apostle Paul was punished in this manner of five occasions (2 Corinthians 11:24). He was not guilty of any crime, but was punished for preaching the gospel of Christ.

Punishment must fit the crime (1–3) and not be used just as a deterrent (the execution of thieves in 18th century Britain was hardly just). The corporal punishment of violent criminals (eg. flogging or beating) is quite in order and the view of certain so-called ‘progressive’ thinkers that physical punishment is uncivilised is to argue against God.

The humane treatment of animals is a mark of true godliness. The working animal was not to be muzzled, but was to be allowed to satisfy its hunger (4). This verse is quoted in the New Testament to illustrate the principle that God’s servants must be financially supported (1 Corinthians 9:9; 1 Timothy 5:18).

It was the duty of judges to *justify the righteous and condemn the wicked* (1). **How can God, the righteous Judge of all the earth (Genesis 18:25) be just and justify the ungodly?** He gave his beloved Son to die in the place of sinners, to bear the punishment that they deserve (Romans 3:21–26; 5:6–9).

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned he stood;
Sealed my pardon with his blood:
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

(Philip P. Bliss)

He shall read it all the days of his life

God would not accept a sick or injured animal as a sacrifice (1; cp. 15:21). The Jews were later condemned for doing this very thing (Malachi 1:7–8). The principle here is that God will not accept our second-best. We should always remember that only our best is good enough for the Lord in all that we do for him.

*Oh not for thee my weak desires,
My poorer, baser part!
O not for thee my fading fires,
The ashes of my heart!*

*O choose me in my golden time,
In my dear joys have part;
For thee the glory of my prime,
The fullness of my heart!*

(Thomas H. Gill)

The sanction of the death penalty for idolatry may appear severe (2–7), but it was essential that Israel begin well in Canaan and be a holy people. The failure to shun idolatry brought disaster and ruin for the nation. The law had to be administered with great care and justice; the testimony of one witness was not sufficient (6). Difficult cases were to be brought to the priests for judgment (8–13).

God did not command Israel to have a king but it was permitted if they wanted to be like the surrounding nations (14). The point is that Israel was to be different from the other nations (eg. 14:1–2). Solomon fell into the very sin described in verse 17 (1 Kings 11:1–9). The king was to have his own *copy of this law* (the book of Deuteronomy). God commanded, ‘*He shall it read it all the days of his life, that he may learn the fear of the LORD his God.*’ The fear of God brings humility and obedience to the word of God (18–20). **We too should read God’s word every day if we are to learn to fear God, obey him and walk humbly before him.**

All who do these things are an abomination to the LORD

We have already seen that the tribe of Levi was not to be given an inheritance when they entered Canaan. No land would be allotted to them from which they could gain a livelihood. They were set aside to do the work of the Lord and Israel's responsibility to care for the Levites is again repeated (1–8). They were to be supported by the tithes and offerings of God's people. The Lord commanded that certain portions of animal sacrifices be given to the priest for himself as well as the first-fruits of grain, new wine and oil, and the first fleece sheared from the sheep (3–5).

John Currid comments, 'Israel is required to care for these men in a bountiful manner ... The same is true of the church today. God has set apart men for special service to him (1 Timothy 1:12). The question for the church then is, do we lavishly care for these men? Or, are we stingy with them? Do we say the prayer, "God, you keep him humble, and we will keep him poor?"' (COMMENTARY ON DEUTERONOMY, page 319).

The Israelites were given a very stern warning concerning the abominable practices that they would encounter in the land of Canaan. Nine of these abominations are listed, the first of which is child-sacrifice (10; cp. 12:31). The Canaanites offered children to their gods (often the first-born son), believing that the gods would grant them more children or intervene on their behalf in a time of great crisis (see 2 Kings 3:26–27).

The other eight abominations concern various occult practices. These things are not harmless fun but are very wicked in the sight of God. '*For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD*' (9–14). Britain has sunk into a cesspool of New Age practices, spiritism, astrology, fortune-telling and witchcraft. Occult books are prominently displayed in our bookshops. We must recognise that their practices are evil. **Christians, like Israel of old, have no need of these things because we have God to protect us and to guide us.**

That the LORD your God may bless you

The law concerning divorce (1–4) was a live issue between the Lord Jesus and the Pharisees (Matthew 19:1–9; Mark 10:2–12). In Israel under Moses, adultery attracted the death penalty, so divorce granted on grounds of adultery was not relevant if the adulterer was put to death (Leviticus 20:10). There were two main schools of thought among Jewish teachers in New Testament times regarding the teaching in this chapter of Deuteronomy. The strict Jews following the school of Shammai regarded '*uncleanness*' (1) as unchastity, but the liberal Jews who followed Hillel, took it to mean anything which displeased the husband. Women were then divorced for the most trivial reasons.

Jesus made it clear that adultery was the only ground for divorce (adulterers were not stoned to death in New Testament Israel). The law here was given because of the hardness of their hearts and not because God condoned divorce (Matthew 19:8). A newly married man was exempt from military call-up for the first year of his marriage '*to bring happiness to his wife*' (5). This was a compassionate law to prevent stress or anxiety in the marriage. The remainder of the chapter contains various laws:

- Pledges for loans (6, 10–13).
- Against kidnapping (7) and concerning leprosy (8–9).
- The just treatment of hired servants (14–15).
- Personal responsibility for sin (16).
- Protection for the needy and helpless (17–18).
- Harvesting and gleaning. The Jews were to leave some of their harvest for the poor to glean.

The Lord had done so much for the Israelites in redeeming them from Egypt and they were to have compassion on the poor (18–22): '*That the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands*' (19). **The just and the generous person is not the loser for his largeness of heart, but he will rejoice in the blessing of the Lord.**

When you make a vow to the LORD your God

The Lord does not tolerate sexual immorality or perversion; the wicked ritual of prostitution found in many heathen temples and shrines is forbidden to the people of God (17–18). Holding firm beliefs based on Scripture must not make us hard-hearted, however. We must, *as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness ...* (Colossians 3:12) and this should be seen in our concern for the needy and the oppressed. The Israelites were to welcome an escaped slave (probably escaping from severe oppression, 15–16). The Jews were not to exploit each other by charging interest on loans (19–20; cp. Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35–37).

We must take great care when we make promises to the Lord: *‘When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it’* (21–22; cp. Numbers 30). To make vows to God is a solemn business and God requires that we keep those promises. It is not right to do wrong in order to keep a vow as did Jephthah after making a foolish promise to God (Judges 11:30–40). It is not sinful to refrain from making vows (22). We must resist pressure from some religious leaders who seek to put us under psychological and emotional pressure to extract vows or promises from us.

When we make promises, we must keep them. How often we promise to pray for certain people or for missionaries, and then we forget. Let us search our own hearts and be sure that we are not failing to keep our word. *What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits towards me? ... I will pay my vows to the LORD’* (Psalm 116:12,14,18).

The Israelites were allowed to eat from their neighbour’s vineyard or fields as they passed by, but they were not to gather crops to take away with them (24–25). John Currid writes, ‘The principle behind these laws still applies. That principle is that we, as Christians, are to share with our brothers and we are to be hospitable to them. Does that describe you in your Christian walk?’ (COMMENTARY ON DEUTERONOMY, page 387).

God will raise up for you a Prophet

The Israelites were strictly forbidden to use occult practices in the hope of obtaining direction for their lives. God blessed Israel by sending them many prophets before the coming of the Lord Jesus. They were moved by the Holy Spirit to bring God’s word to the people (2 Peter 1:21). The words of many of them are recorded in the Old Testament scriptures and are quoted in the New Testament.

Moses told the people, *‘The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst’* (15–18). This prophecy points to the coming of the greatest prophet of all time, the Lord Jesus Christ (see John 6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:19–23; Hebrews 1:1–4). The holy Son of God not only brought the word of God to the people, he also died to save sinners and he conquered death.

There are true prophets and there are false prophets and many warnings are given against the latter. The Lord Jesus often warned against false prophets and false Christs (eg. Matthew 7:15; 24:24). There are two types of false prophet, one claiming to speak in the name of the Lord, the other spoke in the name of other gods (20; cp. 1 Kings 18:20–22). To claim to be able to speak as the mouthpiece of God is a very serious business. False prophets were executed in Old Testament times (19–20; cp. 1 Kings 18:40).

How can we discern between true and false prophets? Those who are false, teach error and their predictions fail (20–22; cp. 13:1–5). There are many today who claim to have the prophetic gift, but their prophecies are generally trivial or fail to be fulfilled. If those who listen to them were more Biblical, they would refuse to pay any attention to them. Many churches would be far more healthy if their pastors and peoples exercised more discernment.

The message is clear. Do not listen to counterfeits, whether they be spiritists, fortune-tellers, or so-called prophets. We have all that we need to know in the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21).

By the mouth of two or three witnesses

God is absolutely just and true in all his ways and we see this in his concern for the sanctity of human life (2–13), for property rights (14) and personal rights (15–21). Comments have already been made on cities of refuge (2–13). This system ensured that manslaughter was distinguished from murder and that the death penalty was applied to the murderer.

Large stones, known as ‘landmarks’ were set in place to mark the boundaries of the land belonging to the people. The law forbidding the removal of a neighbour’s landmark was given to prevent the theft of land (14; cp. 27:17; Proverbs 22:28; 23:10).

The testimony of a single witness was not sufficient to gain a conviction for crime (15). The crime of false witness violates the eighth commandment). If a person was found guilty of false witness, he was himself punished with the sentence that would have been visited on the victim of his lies (18–19). This principle, if applied today, would be seen as a just punishment as well as deterring other would-be offenders (20). Confidence in justice is undermined when nations are corrupt, police are inefficient, or where magistrates do not order just punishment for criminals.

The principle ‘*by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established*’ (15) is applied in the New Testament for church discipline against sinning members or church leaders (Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19). **We must be certain about the ‘facts’ before passing judgment and we must never be swayed by mere rumour or gossip.** Facts often get distorted and we may easily fall into the trap of believing ‘half-truths’. We must always be honest so that our Christian light shines brightly in the surrounding darkness.

God turned the curse into a blessing

Certain categories of people were excluded from coming to worship the Lord with the Israelites (1–4). The principle behind these laws was that the congregation of the Lord should be pure. This exclusiveness was breached by the grace of God in the gospel. Those who have been mutilated or emasculated (eg. eunuchs) and Gentiles are freely accepted by Christ (Isaiah 56:3–8; Acts 8:27–39; Ephesians 2:11–15).

The people were reminded that God had frustrated all the attempts of the wicked prophet Balaam to curse them: ‘*God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loves you*’ (5; cp. Numbers 24:10). Some Christians fear the curses of gypsies, witches or other occult practitioners. We have no need to fear such people nor their curses (1 John 4:4).

Israel was to be different from other nations even in its army camps (9–14). Hygiene requirements were very strict not only for the sake of their health, but also because God walked among them (14). God’s people must have a lifestyle that reflects their high calling and our attitude is important. We do not honour God if we are careless concerning hygiene and dress. An untidy Christian who does not wash or take a bath is a very poor testimony to his Saviour (the opposite extreme is the Christian who is extravagantly clothed – 1 Peter 3:1–5).

We should not arrive at the Lord’s house looking a mess. Would you attend an audience with the queen in creased-up clothes and dirty shoes? Would you attend a job-interview in an untidy state? Many argue that God looks on the heart, rather than outward appearances. This is true, but we must remember that our attitude to hygiene and dress often reflects the state of our heart. We must, however, welcome among us the unbeliever who is smelly and untidy. The Lord is able to change more than his heart. The Christian must be different, however. **When we come to worship God, we stand before the King of kings. He walks among us. Surely we should be tidy and clean**

You must not hide yourself

The Lord Jesus said that the second great commandment is, ‘*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*’ (Matthew 22:39; cp. Leviticus 19:18). The commandment means that we should have a concern and a regard for our neighbour and for all that belongs to him. When a neighbour was in need the Israelites were told, ‘*You must not hide yourself*’ (1–4). It is not uncommon to hear of someone being attacked by thugs and of their cries for help being ignored by passers-by. A Christian must not hide away or go away when there are ways in which he can help (cp. Luke 10:36–37). An attitude of ‘not wanting to know’ or of turning a blind eye or a deaf ear to a neighbour’s needs is a denial of our faith. We must not hide ourselves. Being a friend in need often opens up opportunities to witness for the Lord (see Matthew 5:16).

We are responsible to ensure that what we do does not endanger others (8). A modern example would be a failure to drive carefully and so endanger the lives of others. We must also have a regard for birds and animals (6–7,10). Though verses 11 and 12 have no particular relevance to us, the principle of distinction in the case of male and female is very relevant. Cross-dressing is forbidden by Scripture (5). Men must not dress as women and neither must women dress as if they were men.

The disorders and sins described in verses 13 to 30 would be of little concern to our ‘liberated’ society, but these sins are an attack on the sanctity of family life. The ‘*evil person*’ (21,24) was severely punished. Sexual sins no longer attract the death penalty (eg. the Corinthians were not told to punish the immoral man in their church by death, 1 Corinthians 5:1–5) but they are still very grievous and wicked in the sight of God (cp. Revelation 22:15). **We must not allow ourselves to be brainwashed by the world into thinking otherwise.** Many Christians have fallen into sexual immorality and have ruined their walk with God. It is the will of God that we shun such behaviour (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid

The Lord laid down clear guidelines for Israel concerning warfare. He was concerned also to encourage his people and he reminded them of the mighty victory that he had wrought over the Egyptians. A priest was to speak to the people before battle and to encourage them with a promise from God: ‘*Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them, for the LORD your God is he who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you*’ (1–4). Four groups of men were excused military service:

- The man who had built a house and had not dedicated it (5). Christian, have you dedicated your home to the Lord? Is it a place where a warm welcome and hospitality is given?
- The man who had planted a vineyard and was yet to enjoy its first harvest (6).
- The man who was betrothed to be married (7).
- The man who was fearful and faint-hearted despite all of God’s promises in verse 4 (8). Faint hearts discourage their brethren and are a hindrance rather than a help.

Israel only had a mandate to destroy the Canaanites (16–18). They were not to destroy other defeated nations if suitable conditions for peace could be negotiated. Tribute was to be levied from these nations which were then to serve the Israelites (10–15). The Israelites were forbidden to destroy fruit trees to use in a siege against a city (19–20). The command to destroy the Canaanites may appear to be cruel and merciless but when the Israelites failed to do this, they turned away from God to serve idols (see Judges 1:27 to 2:23).

We are engaged in spiritual warfare but some Christians seem to have forgotten this (Ephesians 6:10–18). Satan is very powerful but God is far stronger than all of our enemies. Let us not be fearful but strong in faith, for our God is with us, fighting for us. **Let us encourage ourselves in the word of God and also encourage our embattled fellow-believers.**

Innocent blood

There are principles in this chapter that western society has long forsaken to its own great cost. An unsolved murder brings a collective guilt upon society for which atonement had to be made (1–9). The city nearest to the place where the body of a murder victim was discovered, was responsible for the sacrificial ritual. Its elders had also to swear that they and their people were not responsible for the murder. They had to pray, *‘Provide atonement, O LORD, ... and do not lay innocent blood to the charge of your people Israel.’* Atonement involves the shedding of blood and brings the removal of guilt and cleansing from sin (8–9). The Lord Jesus shed his blood on the cross to provide atonement for our sin (cp. Hebrews 9:11–15).

The sixth commandment forbids murder because human life is sacred (5:17; cp. Genesis 9:6). When someone takes another’s life for his own wicked ends, the blood of that person cries out from the ground (Genesis 4:10). God is concerned about the shedding of *innocent blood* (8–9) and he has given judges and magistrates the sword of justice to deal with those who are guilty of murder (19:11–13; Romans 13:4). Those who denounce the death penalty for murder as being barbaric argue with God’s holy word. They also fail to recognise the rights of the victim and his family. Many of those who oppose the death penalty for murder have little regard for the life of the unborn child. Millions of children have been destroyed by abortion, *innocent blood*, with no repentance evident in our nation. **Our nation deserves divine judgment and we must be urgent in prayer and in evangelism.**

Women captured in war were to be humanely treated. A male Israelite was permitted to marry a female captive. The shaving of the head was a symbol of mourning (10–13). If the man later divorced the woman, she was not to be sold into slavery and her dignity was to be respected (14). The law allowing divorce was given because of hardness of heart and to protect the woman who was divorced. (Matthew 19:8).

For he who is hanged is accursed of God

Scripture contains a number of examples of the problems caused by polygamy. If a man took a second wife there was the possibility that he would disinherit the first-born son in favour of a son of the second wife. The Lord laid down that the rights of the first-born must be maintained (15–17). There were special circumstances, however, in which God chose the younger in preference to the elder son (eg. Isaac and Ishmael; Jacob and Esau). These exceptions were not to be used to override the rights of the first-born son.

When a son was continually rebellious and refused pleas to be obedient there was a sanction for the death penalty to be administered by the elders of the city (18–21). This may seem harsh, but let us remember that Eli was a very weak father whose wicked sons were a disgrace and brought disaster upon Israel (1 Samuel 2:13–36; 3:11–14). It is still sin for children to despise their parents and to rebel against them. (Ephesians 6:1–3), but the New Testament does not sanction the execution of rebellious children. The Lord Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son who squandered his share of his father’s estate in riotous living (Luke 15:13). The father could have rejected him and had him tried before the courts of Israel, but he did not do so. He waited for the rebel son to return home, and he welcomed him with open arms. This is a picture of the love of God for his wayward children.

In ancient society, the corpses of executed criminals were often hung up for all to see, but God’s people were to restrict the exposure of the dead criminal who was to be buried on the day of his execution: *‘For he who is hanged is accursed of God’* (22–23). It is not without significance that this law follows on from the law concerning the rebellious son. The sinless Son of God (2 Corinthians 5:21) was obedient to God the Father’s will (Luke 22:42–44; Philippians 2:5–8) and he was made a curse to redeem us from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13, which quotes Deuteronomy 21:23). **What a wonderful salvation! What great love that God should not spare his Son to save rebel sinners! Let us worship and praise him.**