

With Moses on the Plains of Moab

Studies in Deuteronomy

David W. Gooding

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w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com
e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

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Introduction: Forward with God

Reading: Numbers 36:13; Deuteronomy 1:1–5; 29:1

During this study in our imaginations we shall be camping on the plains of Moab. You say to me perhaps, 'Where on earth are the plains of Moab?' If you can visualise a map of Palestine, emerging at the bottom of the Sea of Galilee there's a thin black line going down the base—that's the River Jordan, which flows into the Dead Sea. On the east side of the River Jordan, just a few miles north, are the plains of Moab. Nowadays they belong to the Kingdom of Jordan. Further to the east rises the big mountain range in Moab, with Pisgah and Mount Nebo, where Moses went up to view the promised land.

The main message is coming through Moses and we shall have to discuss what he says. So let us now track down these plains of Moab in our actual Bibles. Deuteronomy 29:1 is a particularly important verse, for it tells us that just as God appeared to Israel on Mount Horeb—otherwise known as Mount Sinai—he did so again when they were in the plains of Moab and he made a covenant with them. It was not an additional covenant, it was the same covenant that had been given in all the splendour and awesomeness of Mount Sinai, given again now and confirmed and Israel called to obey it.

Do I hear someone say, 'You are not intending to drag us through the whole book of Deuteronomy, are you? If we'd known that we wouldn't have come. Law, statutes, ordinances, commandments and things like that! We're Christians here, we're not under law like Israel was, we're under grace.' Yes, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, we're not under law¹ but under grace. We owe it to our blessed Lord Jesus, in that when he died at Calvary he bore the curse of the law in our place, to set us free from that curse. Law as such is not just good advice—'I should love the Lord your God with all your heart if I were you.' Law is command plus penalty—'Keep it,' says law, 'and if you don't I shall curse you.' If we were under law, how far should we get in the pathway of holiness? One sin and the law would curse us. Thank God, we are not under law but under grace. The motivating and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit is in our very hearts and we are assured that there is no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1).

But now God has a programme for us: 'That the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit' (v. 4). Surely, therefore, we need to read God's law, if we are serious and determined to allow God's Spirit to do his gracious work in our lives.

¹ Please quote it correctly: not 'the law', but 'law'.

We know the attitude of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ to the book of Deuteronomy. Just before he came out into his public ministry the Holy Spirit led him away into the wilderness, where he was to be tempted by the devil. Just imagine the power and impertinence of the devil, daring to tempt our blessed Lord (Matt 4:1–11). He said to him first, ‘If thou be the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread. You can, can’t you? You have the power to do it.’

I have to confess that that would never have been a temptation to me. Satan could say to me, ‘Turn these stones into bread,’ but I haven’t the power to do it so it never would tempt me. Our Lord had the power and, being tempted of the devil, he replied with words from Deuteronomy 8:3, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’

The devil came back with a second temptation and took him up to the pinnacle of the temple. ‘Cast yourself down,’ he said. ‘What a spectacular thing that would be—that will get you converts.’ Satan dared to quote Holy Scripture, perversely tempting our Lord to do such a thing, but our Lord answered once more with Deuteronomy: ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test’ (6:16).

Then the devil came back with a third temptation, taking him up a mountain to show him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. ‘Now, all this will I give you, for it’s been given to me,’ he said—‘on the condition that you fall down and acknowledge my power and authority. You will fall down and worship me.’ The Lord answered that third temptation with Deuteronomy once more: ‘It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve’ (6:13).

This comes as a challenge to our hearts. If Satan were to tempt us tomorrow in his devilishly penetrating way, would we know enough about Deuteronomy to be able to use it to oppose and silence his temptation? It’s a book we need to know, for very practical reasons. ‘But life isn’t all temptation,’ someone says. ‘Why don’t you talk to us about the love of God and cheer up our hearts and minds?’ Would you like to hear about the love of God? Well, I’ll tell you a good book to read. Yes, you’ve guessed it—Deuteronomy! Moses wrote five books, but if you want to read about the term, *the love of God*, then the first book in the Pentateuch to talk of it is Deuteronomy.

As God talks through Moses to his ancient people, what marvellous things are said there about the love of God. ‘I have not chosen you because you were very good and better than others. I’ve not chosen Israel because it was a bigger and worthier nation than the others; I’ve chosen you because I love you. I loved your forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and swore an oath to them that I would raise them up a nation. Because of my love and my loving faithfulness to my oath, I’ve chosen you as well. I love you,’ says God. ‘Since I love you, I ask in return that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength’ (6:5).

When our Lord Jesus was asked what is the biggest commandment—what best sums up the whole spirit of the law, he said, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength’ (Mark 12:30). With your emotions, your soul, your affections, your talents, mental powers and intellect, your physical strength—love him with your all. My brother, my sister, there is no escaping the implications of it. We are redeemed and saved from the wrath of God, not under law as such, but the

power of God's grace and Spirit. Yet, if God is expecting that 'the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit' (Rom 8:4), the demand remains—we are expected to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. Being loved of God then, we are expected to fulfil the second of the great commandments, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:31). May God help us to do it.

Entering into the land

We shall not be looking at the whole book of Deuteronomy, of course. We're going to listen to Moses as he addresses Israel on the plains of Moab and we shall find it to be an intensely dramatic situation. The story so far is that Moses had invested his life in the people of Israel. He could still have been in the court of Pharaoh, as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He could have been enjoying chariot races with the Egyptian princes. Perhaps he had an outside chance of becoming Pharaoh one day, with all the ease and comfort of the sofas and divans and cosy beds of the palace and all the magnificent art and the pyramids with their treasures. But Moses chose to 'be mistreated with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures in Egypt' (Heb 11:25–26).

The current Pharaoh must have wondered at it all. 'What's this you're saying Moses? You are proposing to lead out these slaves that I have working here in the brick kilns and take them to some airy-fairy promised land somewhere. And you say that the future of the world is bound up with your nation of Israel and God is going to raise up a prophet like you one day—the Christ. So you're going to cast your lot in now with the people of God, in the interest of the coming Christ?' 'Yes,' says Moses. He forsook the treasures and the power of the greatness of Egypt and took those slaves out of Egypt, holding before them the enticement of the promised land.

Eventually they came to a place called Kadesh Barnea, which was to be the base from which they would go into the promised land and take it for God and for themselves. They sent spies to reconnoitre the land and when they heard what it was like they said, 'Moses, if we'd known it was like this we wouldn't have come! We're not going into your promised land. It's full of fortified cities and giants; we're not going to risk our necks going in there! Why on earth did you bring us out of Egypt? It was more comfortable there, with the onions and cucumbers and things like that.' They appointed a captain so that they could return to Egypt. How do you suppose Moses felt, let alone God? (We shall have to consider how God felt later on.)

They had already been forty years in the wilderness, because God had declared that the people who refused to go in the first time had shown themselves to be apostates and they would die out in the wilderness. It would be the second, third and fourth generations that would eventually enter the land. Now at last they've reached the plains of Moab. Was this to be the end of the sorrows and difficulties, not only for Israel but also for Moses? The first time they could have gone straight in with no river to cross. This time it would be a little bit more difficult because God had brought them up east of Jordan. If they were now to enter the land they must first cross the river in flood. The dramatic question that hangs in the air over the

plains of Moab is, what will Israel do this time? Will they have learned their lesson? Will they go in and claim their inheritance or will they do what their fathers did, turn back and refuse to go in? For reasons recorded in scripture, Moses pleaded with them; but at this moment we cannot take time to consider them.

Because Moses had been disobedient he had lost the right to go into Canaan with the nation. He would be allowed to see the land from afar, but he would never live to see them actually go in. God would bury him on Mount Nebo. If only they would decide to go in this time, Moses could at least die happy and know that his life of sacrifice had not been for nothing. He warned them that they would face unaccustomed dangers and life would be difficult with enormous temptations to compromise. It would mean fighting their way through in order to enter the promised land.

As we hear Moses plead with them, command them, cajole them to take the decision and go in, we shall find an imperative call by the Holy Spirit of God rising in our own hearts. What decision shall we make? I don't know what your past year has been, what progress you feel you have made as a believer. Perhaps you can say, 'By God's grace I have made good progress in getting to know the Lord and in entering into the spiritual inheritance that already is mine in Christ. I have made some progress in my responsibility for the spreading of the gospel throughout this world.' Or perhaps you will say, 'This year had been so difficult that it's made me wonder whether God's love is real or not.' Someone else may say, 'Well, to be honest, I've wobbled a bit these last few years and I've taken my eye off the ball. I've had other ambitions, which have taken the place of my prime ambition and tended to stifle it. Really, I've not made much progress, I've gone back a step or two.'

Whatever our past experience has been to date, none of us would say that our progress has been everything that could have been desired, with no room for improvement. Surely not! We sense the need to push ahead with God into the glories of his word, into the enjoyment of our great inheritance in Christ. We need to make progress in our responsibility to help forward the work of the gospel in this world. God will require it of us. As these studies progress and the Lord talks to our hearts, may we come and say with utter sincerity, 'Lord, by your grace and by the strength that is in Christ Jesus, I want to respond to your exhortation. I want to press on—“One thing I do. . . I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:13–14). I've not yet attained, Lord, I have a long way to go; but by your grace I'm determined to go on and make progress.'

Fighting for the land

I think I hear another objection coming up! 'Mr Preacher, it's all right studying Deuteronomy and lambasting those obstinate Israelites, but you're going to land yourself in some trouble. Are you saying that if we want to enter our promised land we've got to start fighting? You must know that Israel's entry into the promised land is a picture of our entry into our glorious inheritance in heaven! Israel were slaves in Egypt and they were redeemed by the blood of the Passover lamb. They were told that they had an inheritance flowing with milk and honey, and we've been told, by no less an authority than the Apostle Peter, that we've been redeemed, not with corruptible things as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ (1 Pet 1:18–19). Being redeemed, we're on our way to heaven and Peter tells us that

we're being kept unto this great living hope—there is an inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, reserved in heaven for us.

And all that is right, thank God. Beyond this changing world of time, there is an eternal inheritance that shall never fade in its glory and we're on the way there. But that's not enough to satisfy my objector!

'Mr Preacher, I'm glad you've been converted to that point of view. But my point is, we don't have to fight to get into heaven! It's all of grace. When the dying thief on the cross said that he repented and trusted the Saviour, the Lord said to him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). There was no talk of him having to fight to get in. It's all of grace.'

We're not in our paradise yet but one day we shall be. We are in what Paul calls 'the heavenly places.' God has raised us up and 'seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (Eph 2:6). But Paul reminds us that it is in the heavenly places we war 'against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil' (6:12). It's now we've got to fight! He tells Timothy to 'fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life' (1 Tim 6:12).

The Apostle John will say, 'Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3:2). 'Well now,' says John, 'if you have that hope within you and you want to be like Christ in heaven, you'd want to be like him now, wouldn't you?' If you were to say, 'By God's grace I hope to be like Christ when I get to heaven, but I'm not interested in developing a Christ like character now,' that would be a contradiction. If we say we've got the hope, then we have a bounden duty to project holiness now, in the fear of God. And that will mean some fighting. What about the unconverted and our responsibility to take the gospel to them? That will take some fighting as well.

Living in the land

In our studies I'm going to take a slightly different stance. I'm going to ask you, if possible, to forget typology and to come in all reality to the plains of Moab, to literal Israel as they stood there with Moses. The Jordan River is in front of them to the west and the challenge is for them to enter into the land. What did that mean for them? Moses never pretended that it meant going to heaven. He didn't say, 'If you come out of Egypt and go through the wilderness, when you get to the promised land you'll find that it's heaven itself. You'll disappear through the clouds and that will be heaven.' It was to be a promised land here on earth, so much territory in the Middle East—and that's a valuable promise. Before they went in, Moses honestly told them, 'Your tenure of that land will depend on whether you obey the Lord or not. If you should forsake him and join with the idolatry and immorality of the surrounding nations, God will turn you out of this land and send you back among the nations.'

He wasn't talking about heaven. We will never be turned out of heaven. 'If you repent,' says Moses, 'God will bring you back again. If you sin and go after false gods and their immoralities, God will turn you out; but if you repent he will restore you.' It happened, didn't it? They got into the land, but eventually under the kings their idolatry and immorality became absolutely intolerable. God allowed the Assyrians to take away the ten tribes and the

Babylonians to take away the other two. Some of them repented and God brought them back under Ezra and Nehemiah. When our blessed Lord Jesus came—Son of God, the appointed Messiah—they rejected and crucified him. Before he suffered he warned them straight that, because of what they were about to do, God would let their enemies come. ‘They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled’ (Luke 21:24). And so it happened.

Israel is now back in her land as a sovereign State, but Israel will never fully occupy that land of promise as long as they reject their Messiah. The land is covenanted by God to Abraham and his seed—that seed is Christ (Gal 3:16). Israel cannot reject the Saviour and suppose that God will give them final and complete possession of the land. They shall not possess it in full until the Lord Jesus comes in power and great glory. Then those who believe in him will inherit that land with him. One day all Israel shall be saved (Rom 11:26). It’s a marvellous thing! If their falling away has been to the enrichment of the Gentiles, what shall their restoration be? A veritable life from the dead! (v. 15).

What then was the point of entering the land, as Moses kept on urging them to do? It was the first stage in that great programme of God, a genuine advance in his purposes. In hope of the great oath that God had sworn to Abraham, men of faith like Caleb and Joshua—the second and third generations, dared to cross the river and enter in. At Kadesh Barnea it must have been a great disappointment to Moses when Israel refused to go in and God said that at this stage they wouldn’t enter. The nation would have to wander forty years in the wilderness before they got in for the first time. Moses is very disappointed and upset at this decision not to go in. I think I’ll have a word with him!

‘Moses, you’re eighty now. Many men at your age are thinking of retiring. If you’ve got to wait another forty years you’ll be one hundred and twenty before you get in! Why bother to make the effort, why don’t you get a decent tent and settle down?’

What do you think Moses would say to me? ‘Retire! Give up! God’s purpose now for me is to move forward in this first stage and I’m going on with God. I hope to see it in my lifetime, but if God doesn’t allow it, one day he will finally bring the people in.’

Going on with God

This has a lesson for us. Let’s not confuse matters. In the very start of the Church Age, when a believer died he or she went immediately into the presence of the Lord—‘away from the body and at home with the Lord’ (2 Cor 5:8). But what happened to the church as a whole—not just as individuals, but as a whole? Paul warned his fellow disciples that after his departure grievous wolves would enter in (Acts 20:29). Peter warned of the false teachers that would come (2 Pet 2:1), and so did John (1 John 4:1). How soon the doctrines of grace were lost and the Lord’s Supper turned into superstitious sacrifice. Was it worth going on? Of course it was! There came great revivals under Wycliffe and Tyndale, Luther of course and Calvin. Wesley’s great revivals and the Evangelical Awakening, not to talk of the revival in 1859 in Ireland, or the local revival under W. P. Nicholson. Marvellous moves forward in the gospel. Tell me, my dear fellow believers, how are things at this moment? You say, ‘There’s encouragement in many places, but it’s not quite what it was in the 1859 revival. We don’t see

so many coming to Christ as under W. P. Nicholson and it's a much more difficult world.' So what? You're not giving up, are you! You're not saying, 'We might as well retire; the Lord will do his work, we need not be bothered,' are you?

'No', I hear you saying. 'I don't care what present conditions are; I'm going on with God. I'm going to try and love him with all my heart, mind, soul and strength and what little bit he gives me to do in his present programme by his grace I will do it—assured that all God's purposes will one day be fulfilled, both for his church and for Israel.'

May the Lord keep us in that frame of mind.

Don't be Ashamed of your Wisdom

Reading: Deuteronomy 4:5–11

So we find ourselves encamped with Moses and the Israelites on the plains of Moab. As Moses rises to address the people once more, you'll sense that the situation is intensely dramatic. Thirty years before, the nation had come to Kadesh Barnea. It was intended as the launching pad from which they might invade the land that God had promised to their fathers. Spies had been sent out to reconnoitre the land and, though they all had to agree that the land was good, the majority of the spies brought back an evil report. They said it was full of fortified cities and giants. It was simply nonsense to attempt any invasion of that land.

So they rebelled against Moses and appointed a captain to return to Egypt, flinging back in the face of God the redemption from Egypt he had offered them, refusing to believe the gospel that God would bring them into this land flowing with milk and honey. God's verdict on them and on their behaviour was that they were sheer unbelievers. They despised God, so he gave them what they demanded. They refused to go into the land. 'All right,' said God, 'you don't have to. In fact you won't! You must now live as nomads in the wilderness until this present generation has died out. The next generation and those following will go into the land.'

Now the moment has come. Israel are assembled, but there's a barrier that wasn't there before. This time they are east of Jordan and to get into the land they will have to cross that river when it was in flood. God had appointed a successor to Moses—Joshua was filled with God's Spirit and, maintained by God, he would lead the people in.

Dangers in the land

What has Moses to say to them now? Yes, the land is flowing with milk and honey, but there are dangers—and not merely from giants and fortified cities. In the course of their wanderings east of Jordan, God had largely delivered them from fear of giants by having no actual experience of them; but across the Jordan and in Canaan there would be far more sinister dangers. The world they were now entering was very different from what they had known in the wilderness. There they had been a self-contained people, very rarely did they have to meet any other nation.

They could live with God's presence in the tabernacle, Moses as their guide and the Levites teaching God's word. Now that they were going into the land, it was a very different

world. God informed them that he would give them victory over the giants and over many a fortified city, but the nations would not all be driven out at once. He would leave them there and they must mix with them. As they separated into individual tribes and lived in their different places there would be an insidious danger. First of all, the newer generations would begin to forget the unique, historic experience at Mount Horeb, when God revealed himself to them. And when in his mercy he came down upon Sinai, until the mountain shook, the fire of God's glory burned up into the very heavens and they actually heard the voice of the Lord God speaking to them. God said he had done it so that they might never forget the experience. It was to be foundational to all that should follow for three succeeding generations.

The danger was that it should fade when the people became prosperous. They would meet people of other faiths, who practised idolatry and immorality and they would be tempted. They would also be tempted to regard Moses' law as merely words in a book—rules and regulations that they didn't really need in their modern world. It wasn't to be taken too seriously. They would meet the prettily decorated young ladies of Moab and such places, who introduced them to their worship. There was no denying that it was more colourful than the worship of the Lord in the tabernacle. In Moab they weren't so strict on morality, and the tendency to compromise with modern sexual liberality and idolatrous worship would grow in intensity. The farmers would watch how some of these Gentile farmers went about their work. When they saw them with a very good crop and asked, 'How did you manage that?' they would reply, 'Before you sow the seed you need to offer a bit of incense to Moloch. It works—you should try it!' Influenced by the cash, they would compromise with heathen moralities and sacrifices. Israel's testimony to God would be weakened.

Worldly wisdom and the uniqueness of God

In our own modern generation, it's a very different world from what it was seventy years ago. When you preached the gospel in the 1930s or 1940s here in Ulster, it was largely to people who had been taught the word of God in school, if not in church. They believed that there was a God, that Jesus was the Son of God; and they accepted the historical fact that Jesus died on the cross. They didn't understand how they could personally find forgiveness and eternal life—they still had it in their heads that salvation is earned by works. You were delighted to preach to them from the word of God, because they accepted it before you even started to preach.

It's a different world now, even here in Ulster. In England and Western Europe you face generations that have no idea what is in the Bible and some of them have never heard the gospel. They've been taught atheistic materialism in school and that science has proved there is no God. You can't suppose they know the Bible; you can't even suppose they believe in God, let alone in Christ. There is constant pressure over radio and television for us to stop preaching that Jesus is the only way to God—all religions are leading to the same point and Christian evangelism is politically incorrect. What should we do? In this new age, we need Moses and the Christian apostles to tell us not to be ashamed of the gospel of Christ (Rom 1:16). We are not to abandon the claim of Christ to be unique. 'No one comes to the Father

except through me' (John 14:6). We are to be unashamed of Christian standards of morality and dare to preach them to our families.

You will therefore understand the address that Moses now delivers to his nation, as they stand poised to enter the promised land. He appeals to them to observe the unique quality of their redemption (Deut 4:32–34). What was the purpose of it and why was Israel so blessed with redemption? Here comes the purpose: 'To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him' (v. 35). It is repeated in verse 39: 'Know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.' The uniqueness of God was never to be confused with idols. God's self-revelation to this nation of Israel was unique—calling not just a few individuals, but calling Israel to be the one nation amongst all other nations, who for centuries would stand on this planet as a witness to the one true God.

Our Christian faith is bound up with these historical things. It is not a philosophy—almost anyone can invent a philosophy. There are plenty on offer—you could invent another one if you had the mind to. However, Christianity is not a philosophy that someone thought up. Christianity is the fulfilling of a great movement in history. God called out Abraham and then his successors, Israel, to be a nation to whom God would reveal himself and through whom the Christ would come. Matthew tells us that our gospel is about the Lord Jesus who was the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt 1:1). Paul reminds us that the gospel is about Jesus Christ, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh (Rom 1:3). Why is that important? Because no mere man can decide where he's going to be born and by whom he shall be born. Because Jesus Christ was born of the seed of David, that in itself is an indication of God's authority behind the Christian gospel. It was announced in the Old Testament, fulfilled in the New—not only his birth and the place of his birth, but the purpose for which he came and that he should die as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Christianity then is rooted in history and God's self-revelation to Israel is part of our Christian testimony. Paul wrote his great exposition of the Christian gospel in the Epistle to the Romans. It is in four major parts, the third part is a discussion of the part Israel has played in God's self-manifestation to the world. 'They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises' (9:4). All so utterly different from pagan service—there was no image of any god inside the temple. 'To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed for ever' (v. 5). We thank God for Israel and their testimony to the uniqueness of God, the distinction between Jehovah and all idols.

It is true that Israel compromised from time to time, but God in his mercy brought them back. By the time our blessed Lord Jesus came to Jerusalem and entered the temple courts, there was no idol to be seen in the temple. No cultic prostitutes, as had been the habit of some of the idolatrous kings of Judah. Why was that important? God was going to send Jesus into the world to proclaim that he is the Son of God and God thought it wise to establish first of all what is meant by the term 'God'. If Jesus Christ had been born in pagan Greece, what would they have thought it meant? They had stories of gods galore, who had relations with goddesses and sometimes with human women, and their offspring were called 'children of

god.' God took the trouble with Israel to establish and secure that they were totally faithful to the doctrine of the one true God.

As they are about to enter the land, Moses appeals to them not to be ashamed. He says, 'Keep them (these statutes) and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people"' (Deut 4:6). *Don't be ashamed of your wisdom!*

When I first joined Queen's University there were two bodies of students that sought to witness for Christ. One of them was the Student Christian Movement and the other the Christian Union. In its early days the Student Christian Movement had set out with good and great intentions. By the time I reached Queen's it had lost their grip on the doctrines of the gospel, the deity of Christ, his virgin birth and his resurrection. The last president of the Student Christian Movement was an atheist! That movement folded up. A sociologist came to the university who was an atheist. He chose to write a PhD thesis on the Student Christian Movement and the Christian Union in Queen's University Belfast. His aim was to discover why the one institution had folded up and the other had continued vigorously. Being an atheist he was not biased, for he didn't believe any of it. He pointed out to the world that the one institution had folded up because they had lost grip of their beliefs—they had nothing to believe any more.

There are people that claim to have a religious faith, but they are prepared to compromise it all the way along the line. You can't continue if you've lost your faith in the very foundations of your beliefs. The world won't respect you for it. They won't necessarily agree that you are wise, if you do maintain your beliefs. But as far as the world is concerned, a Christianity that denies the virgin birth of Christ, his atoning death, his resurrection and his second coming, might as well fold up. My good brothers and sisters, and especially you younger folks who must face this new age that we are entering, take heed to the historic facts, both of Israel's faith and of ours, and determine by God's grace not to be ashamed of them.

God coming near to his people

Then Moses continues: 'For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?' (4:7). When you listen to a Christian at prayer (a real believer, I mean), you'll find that he or she is not just mouthing formal words. They're talking to God as if they knew him—and they do know him. Listen to the evidence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts as they cry 'Abba! Father!' and rejoice in their closeness to God and God to them (Rom 8:15). It doesn't mean that God says yes to all their requests. Even when he says 'No' and it tests a Christian's courage, heart and faith—yet the Spirit of God triumphs in them. 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?' (v. 32). It is a marvellous experience to have the living Spirit of God within. 'For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"' (v. 15)

So near, so very near to God,
 I cannot nearer be;
 Yet in the person of His Son
 I am as near as he.²

‘I write to you, children,’ says John to his youngest converts, ‘because you know the Father’ (1 John 2:13). Says Paul to the Galatians, ‘God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons’ (Gal 4:4-5). Thank God for that redemption. But he’s done more. ‘Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”’ (v. 6). God has given us the status of sons and daughters in the family of God.

At one stage, my good colleagues in the Chemistry Department of Queen’s asked would I mind if they sent me a PhD research student. She came from Thailand, she was a Buddhist and she wanted someone to tell her what Christians really believed. So one day she came. She was a formidable but charming lady. She warned me before we started that she wasn’t going to get converted! So I talked to her about Christianity and the doctrine of salvation and forgiveness and how marvellous it is. Because Christ has died as our Saviour, we can have forgiveness of sins—and not only have it but know it. We don’t have to wait until the end of life to know whether we are forgiven or not, we can know it right now. I said, ‘Suppose you were a mother and your child did something wrong, then she came to you and said, “I’m sorry mum,” would you say in your heart, “I’m going to forgive her, but I shan’t let her know—let’s keep her in suspense”? You wouldn’t do that, would you?’ She said to me, ‘What are you talking about? I couldn’t forgive my child. There is no such thing as forgiveness!’

Then she treated me to her particular Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation. Everybody has to bear the responsibility for their own sins and no one can relieve them of the suffering that must come upon them. They must suffer and if they haven’t suffered enough by the time they reach the end of life they must be reincarnated and go through the whole process again. Then they must also suffer for any other sins they would happen to do in this second incarnation. They would never be sure that they’ve suffered enough and if you were to ask what sins of a previous incarnation they’re suffering for, they couldn’t tell you. Or how many reincarnations they’ve been through already and how many before they’re eventually free from suffering—they can’t tell you that either.

The wisdom of God in the gospel

‘I am not ashamed of the gospel’ (Rom 1:16). The mercies of God are revealed through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord, ‘that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified’ (Acts 26:18). Don’t be ashamed of your wisdom, don’t be so humble as all that! We haven’t got any inherent wisdom maybe, but listen to this: ‘Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God’ (1 Cor 1:30). What appears to be a foolish message, the message of Christ crucified is in fact ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1:25). It does what philosophy cannot do. Philosophy can teach you to argue logically, but it cannot get at your

² Horatius Bonar (1808-89), ‘A mind at perfect peace with God’.

heart. The problem with man's relationship to God doesn't lie simply in his intellectual deficits. It lies in his heart, the rebel's heart that doesn't fear God and doesn't want to submit to him. He thinks that God is against him.

How can you solve the problem? Our God has a way of reaching a man or woman's heart and showing them what he is really like. God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ, so near that they took God incarnate and smote him across the face, put a crown of thorns on his head and plunged their spear into his side. He stood and took it, to show men and women what God is really like, that God is not, in that sense, against them. While we were enemies we could be reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Rom 5:10). Do not let us be ashamed of our wisdom, nor compromise it. When it comes to salvation and forgiveness, Christianity is the only one among all the world's religions that's on the market (forgive my crude expression). If you want forgiveness from God and to know it, there's no one else other than Christ to go to.

The wisdom of God in the law

'Don't be ashamed of the statutes that I have taught you,' says Moses (Deut 4:5-6). Why should they be ashamed? They were among the Canaanites who from time to time would put their little babies on the outstretched arms of their idols, Moloch in particular, and light fires underneath until the arms of the idol were hot and the babies sizzled. 'You don't need to be ashamed of God's statutes,' says Moses. They are based on this basic principle of human life that man is made in the image of God and God himself forbids any murder. God sent his judgments on the Canaanite society for what they did to their babies, amongst other things.

What do you suppose God thinks of the Western world in this last thirty to forty years, where fourteen million unborn fetuses, alive and human, were murdered in the United States alone? We needn't be ashamed of his statutes. Bioethics is now a very big topic in many universities in the world—what is right and what is not right in medicine. On what basis shall we decide the value of a human life?

When I was a boy, Queen Victoria was recently dead! Most houses in Britain had cats to keep the mice down. If a cat had too many kittens and you didn't want any more, you tried to give them away. Most people had too many, so you selected the best one and father got the bin, filled it with water and drowned the rest. Would you have been happy if you had been born and father had done the same with you? You say, 'Don't be silly!' I'm not being silly. In ancient Greece when parents had children that they didn't want, they didn't kill them themselves, they put them in a little pot and set it out on the mountains, knowing that the wild beasts would devour it. Somehow they thought that they were excused from any guilt because they didn't murder the child themselves.

What is the value of human life? If you are an atheist and an evolutionist combined, perhaps you'll think like Professor Peter Singer of Princeton University. 'It's about time we got rid of this notion that man is made in the image of God. Man is not special. There isn't a god anyway. We've evolved and human beings are just like all the other animals on the evolutionary tree and must be so evaluated. A human baby is basically no more valuable

than a pig.’³ So says Professor Singer. Mark you, he thinks pigs are very valuable and are to be treated decently! But a human being is no more valuable than a pig and if a child is born with some defect, then it should be allowable that within twenty-eight days of birth it can be killed.

The wisdom of God in his Word

‘Don’t be ashamed of God’s statutes, based as they are on the fear of God and the value that God assigns to human life,’ says Moses. Not only does Moses exhort them not to forget the words of God, or the nearness of God, or the wonder and glory of these statutes, he senses another danger. He had stood with Israel as he brought them as a nation to the foot of Mount Horeb, where they might come and meet God personally. They had heard the living God speak and they would never forget that the words Moses gave them were not just rules written in a book, they were the voice of the living God.

That is still true. So often when it comes to rigorous study of Scripture, particularly in academic circles, it is easy to slip into studying the Bible as though it were merely a book of Physics. Physics is a marvellous topic of course, but if we treat the Bible merely as another book of Physics we shall miss the biggest thing about it. To study rigorously is good; and to say that we study rigorously at our desks but in our devotions we study on our knees, that’s also good advice. But I have found what many have found. We would be better, metaphorically speaking, studying it rigorously on our knees, because it is God’s word, mediated by his inspired apostles and prophets and if God opened the heaven and spoke he would speak these very words. My dear brothers and sisters, we must be careful to distinguish between God’s revealed word and all sorts of rules and regulations in Christian circles that are not justified by the word of God at all. That’s a very different thing.

Now Moses says an extraordinary thing to the second and third generation. He reminds them how *they* had stood at Horeb (v. 10). Has he forgotten who he’s talking to? It was the first generation that stood at Horeb—these are their grandchildren and *they* never stood at Horeb. But they were part of the nation, therefore they must experience what the nation experiences. It was part of them being Israelites.

When we think of the way that God has spoken to us in our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we might learn to reverence God, read his word and obey him gladly, we can say like the old spiritual song: ‘Were *you* there when they crucified my Lord?’ You were there, weren’t you? We too would be true to our historic faith. From time to time, guided and helped by God’s Spirit, we must come back to Calvary. At Horeb the glory of God was shown to impress Israel so that they might reverence him forever, and the fire of his holiness blew out into space to the topmost galaxy. But how much nearer and more loudly God spoke when our blessed Lord died at Calvary:

‘Mid rending rocks and darkening skies
My Saviour bows his head and dies . . .
Oh, Calvary! blest Calvary!

³ *Practical Ethics*, [1979] 3rd edition, Princeton University Press, 2011.

'Twas there my Saviour died for me.⁴

God help us to stand there again and again, until the wonder of God's speaking penetrates deeply into our minds and hearts, that we might learn to fear him all our days and not be ashamed of his gospel.

⁴ W. Darwood (1835-1914), 'On Calvary's brow my Saviour died'.

Remember God's Covenant

Reading: Deuteronomy 5:1–7; 6:4–5; 7:5–8, 12–13

Already in his long sermons Moses has reminded the people that God made a covenant with them at Sinai, but now he returns to that topic and places significant emphasis upon it—‘The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb’ (Deut 5:2), the mountain range where Sinai is. Then he says a startling thing, ‘Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today’ (v. 3).

This is a Hebrew way of talking. When a Hebrew says, ‘Not this, but that’, it often means ‘not so much this, as that’. When Moses says that God did not make the covenant with their fathers, he’s not denying the fact. He is pointing out to their second and third generations that not only did God make a covenant with their fathers when they stood at Mount Horeb, but he made it with these very people that were now standing before Moses—even though the youngest set of them was not at Horeb. ‘He made it with you,’ says Moses. The covenant God had made at Horeb was not merely with the people that had since died, but with these present people.

It was exceedingly important therefore that the present generation, standing in the plains of Moab with Moses, should remember and hear the voice of God again, making that covenant with them. The basis of the covenant is given in verses 6–7, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’ In other words, God did not say to them in Egypt, ‘If you manage to get yourselves out of Egypt, I would consider making a covenant with you.’ No, when God came to deliver Israel out of Egypt, he spoke to Moses personally and said, ‘I have come down to deliver my people on the grounds of the covenant that I made with Abraham.’ Israel had not been delivered out of Egypt on the basis of the Law of Moses given at Sinai; they were delivered out of Egypt on the basis of the covenant and oath that God had given to Abraham their forefather. It was a covenant utterly of God’s grace—in technical language *a one party covenant*. He had redeemed them out of Egypt and they were now free. It was on the basis of that one party covenant made with Abraham that God now drew near to Israel at Mount Horeb to make this second covenant with them.

The nature of the covenant

What is the nature of the covenant then; and what is meant by saying that God made a covenant with his people? Two illustrations will help us. The first of which we owe to a number of thematic scholars and archaeologists who, in 1928, uncovered the remains of a Canaanite civilisation that, until then, people had not realised existed. The clay tablets that they discovered referred to a great Canaanite emperor who lived in those far-off days. There was, in fact, a succession of such emperors. They conquered several lands and in each land they installed a vassal king who would see that the commands of the emperor were carried out. The emperor would make a covenant with them and, since many tablets have survived from different periods, we can now read the various forms that these covenants took. They varied from time to time, but they had certain central features.

The great emperor would begin by announcing who he was. Then he would proceed to say what he had done for them (mainly beating them up in warfare and conquering them). Then he would issue a series of prohibitions: 'You shall have no other emperor but me,' for example. He would issue a series of positive commands: 'You shall do this and you shall do that,' and then a series of prohibitions: 'You shall not do that and you shall not do the other.' Because he was a pagan, he'd call the gods to witness that if these people broke the covenant the gods would rain down their curses upon them. Then he would give directions that the covenant documents were to be written out and that from time to time the vassal king would assemble the people and read the terms of the covenant to them.

When the scholars read these documents that the archaeologists had found they got excited, because the covenant that God made with Israel in the time of Moses shows very vivid similarities with those other covenants. 'I am the Lord your God' — the great sovereign king of the universe telling us who he is. He proceeds to tell Israel what he had done for them — 'I . . . who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery' (5:6). Then the prohibition — 'You shall have no other gods before me' (v. 7), followed by the list of the positive things they should do and the list of the negative things. Subsequently we read how God assembled all the people and in their hearing the Levites were to pronounce the blessings for those that kept the covenant and the curses of God on those who broke it. There was provision made that the Levites should take the covenant documents, store them in the Ark and from time to time as the days and years went by they were to assemble the people, bring out the documents and rehearse them in their ears. This all brings us to perceive that the covenant that God made with Israel was an instrument of government — the basis of God's governing of his people.

The terms of the old covenant

We need not force the comparison to any unseemly lengths, because there was another element to this covenant that we pick up from Jeremiah's prophecy — which was, of course, centuries after Moses. In talking about the time that Israel spent in the wilderness, God says, 'Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord, "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of his harvest"' (Jer 2:2–3). What magnificent words, when you consider who utters them — that same Lord who appeared in fire and cloud

and storm on Mount Horeb. Hear now how his heart is feeling—like a bridegroom going after his bride. ‘I remember it,’ says God—hundreds of years later he remembered it. I suppose it’s like a husband now ninety-six years old, getting grey and bent, who can remember the first time he dared to put the question to the lady that he hoped would marry him. ‘I remember it,’ says God (v. 2). Then you’ll notice how he phrases it. Not, ‘how I went after *you*’—‘how you went after *me*.’

Now I have to be very careful what I say here, being a man of no experience! Sometimes it is thought that it’s the young men that go after the young ladies. But from the touchlines I have observed that it’s not always the case. A young lady doesn’t make it obvious that she’s after a certain young man, of course. When he appears, she just happens to be there, if you see what I mean!

‘I remember that,’ says God, ‘I remember how *you went after me*.’ How does God come to speak like that about creatures of flesh and blood, ‘in whose nostrils is breath’ (Isa 2:22)? ‘You went after me in the wilderness when there was nothing there but bare old sand and rock. You had no occasion to go there except to come after me. I made my proposal to you there and you said “Yes”. I still remember it,’ says God.

Let’s look at the proposal God made to Israel when they came out of Egypt. ‘There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself”’ (Exod 19:2–4). The goal of Israel’s redemption was not the promised land—that was their destination. Here God specifies exactly the goal that he had in mind when he delivered them out of Egypt: ‘You’ve seen what I did to the Egyptians, I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you *to myself*.’ This is the lover of men’s souls speaking. Israel came out of Egypt under the gracious influence of God, who brought them to himself and sought their hearts’ affection, so that they should receive his covenant and be his. ‘Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel’ (vv. 5–6).

God going courting and giving his proposal—‘If you keep my covenant.’ He’s talking now of the covenant as a marriage contract. If you keep my covenant indeed, then you shall be (as the King James Version puts it) ‘a peculiar treasure’. Not our modern sense of the word *peculiar* (odd though some of us are!), but in the sense of his private, personal property—his personal treasure. It’s as if God is saying to them, ‘Oh, my treasure! If you keep my covenant, you shall be my very own, my personal delight, my personal joy and my personal treasure. All the nations are mine, but you shall be distinct, you shall be my special love.’ Can you imagine it, the God of the universe, of all of the billions of galaxies and uncountable numbers of angels that excel in strength—he comes to a band of one-time slaves and says that, if they keep his covenant, they shall be the darling of his heart.

But then we hear how God continues to speak to them through Jeremiah, as he observed how Israel lost their first love. ‘What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?’ (Jer 2:5). We prick up our

ears, for the language is inescapable. Let me read it so that you see I do not exaggerate. ‘But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his *own possession* [Greek *peculiar treasure*], that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (1 Pet 2:9). This is the language of the lover of our souls, saying that we are a peculiar treasure to him. When God gave his proposal to Israel and also to us, did you notice what God got out of our redemption? What was God looking for? It is true to say that at Calvary God wasn’t trying to get something from us—it was God who was giving to us. But that’s only half true. At Calvary God was also looking for what he could get from you, my brothers and sisters. He said to Israel, ‘If only you’ll keep my covenant, you shall be to me a peculiar treasure.’ And he says the same to us! Through the grace and redemption that is in Christ Jesus he has made us a peculiar treasure and God is now looking for what he can get from us. It would delight him to see us going out after him, like Israel went after God in the wilderness.

The terms of the new covenant

Because the language of God’s original covenant with Israel is now applied also to the believers of this age, we should remember that we are likewise related to our Lord under the terms of a covenant. Not under the old covenant, but under the terms of the new covenant. I believe that we who belong to the church are nevertheless under the terms of the new covenant; but some thinkers and theologians and teachers far better than I have come to the conclusion that the new covenant is simply for Israel and has nothing to do with the church. I respect their scholarship. They say that the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah is a covenant that God will make with the house of Israel and the house of Judah and it means what it says—it is a covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not with the church. Therefore, God will make a new covenant with them in the future when the Lord comes again. Israel shall be restored and all Israel shall be saved.

I’m sure he will bring in the Jews of that time and Israel shall be restored into the covenant, but let us hear what the New Testament says precisely. ‘But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old [than that of Moses, or the Aaronic priesthood] as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises’ (Heb 8:6). Notice the verb at the end of the sentence and its tense: ‘*has been enacted*.’⁵ It *has passed* into law, it *has been* signed and settled. It is now in operation—it has been enacted. In the ancient world a covenant was made when the sacrificial victim was offered. Animals were taken and slain and offered as sacrificial victims for the covenant. When was the new covenant made—when was it enacted and what sacrifice hallowed and guaranteed the terms of that covenant? Praise God, it was enacted when the great sacrifice died and shed his blood. He is the guarantor of the new covenant—the guarantor that all its conditions should be fulfilled.

When the old covenant was made, Moses took the book of the covenant and read it in the audience of the people. He took the blood of the sacrifices, put it in the basin and sprinkled all the people. Holding it up, he said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has

⁵ Gk. *νενομοθέτηται*, *nenomothetētai* is a perfect tense.

made with you' (Exod 24:7–8). Listen then as our Lord, in the upper room a few hours from Calvary, took a cup; handing it to his apostles he said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you. All of you drink it.'⁶ Do you see the similarity? At the Lord's Supper, when we take the cup, in our hearts do we not see the blessed Lord himself handing us the cup? Moses said to the succeeding generations, 'Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are. . . alive this day' (Deut 5:3). I remind you too, that when you take the cup you were there, so to speak, when he made the covenant.

What difference is the new covenant from the old? Well, it's better! The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews is all happy and anxious to pile on the words to tell us that this covenant is made on better promises and that it is a better covenant (Heb 8:6). The fault with the first covenant (so we're told by God through Jeremiah) is that, though God made the covenant, they forsook him. Although he was a husband to them, they deserted him and went after other gods. He'd come down as the lover of their souls and offered them his proposal, but they lost their first love, broke the covenant and departed from the law. The Greek of Hebrews 8:9 points out the weakness in that old covenant, 'For they did not continue in my covenant.' If there's going to be a new covenant that's any better than the old, it will have to come to the heart of the matter—how can God get his redeemed people to continue and not depart?

The answer is in the marvel of the second distinction in the new covenant. The old covenant was written on tables of stone. It's easy enough to write on stone, if your chisel is sharp enough and you've got a steady hand. But writing commands on bits of stone doesn't necessarily give people the strength to keep the commands. Israel couldn't keep them. Praise God for the new covenant. As Paul puts it: 'And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts' (2 Cor 3:3).

Are you not aware of what happened at your conversion? The 'ink' was the Holy Spirit of God himself. God performed the miracle of the new covenant and wrote his laws on your hearts, not on some bits of stone. Conversion is to be born again of the Spirit of God and the very life of Christ put within. (I'll give you two and a half seconds to pause and in your hearts say 'hallelujah' to God!) Frail and weak as we may be, is it not true, my brothers and sisters, that God has written his law on your very heart? You are a child of God, joined to Christ for all eternity.

It doesn't mean that we are free to sin as we please. When Paul writes to the church at Corinth about the Lord's Supper he points out, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood' (1 Cor 11:25). He exhorts them, and us when we come to the Lord's Supper, to examine ourselves and put right the things that may not be right. We have to confess our sins before God. 'If we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged' (v. 31). But suppose I as a believer come to the Lord's Supper unworthily—carrying on with things and actions and attitudes I know to be wrong? Nevertheless I come and I say, 'It's all of grace, I don't need to worry about my sins.' What will happen? Well, you'll find that the Lord will fulfil the new covenant. The new covenant says that God is going to write these laws on your heart and will

⁶ See Luke 22:20 and Matt 26:27–28.

persist in engraving them ever deeper. We can let him do it the easy way, or if we are careless he will take us in hand. He will chasten us and bring us to a better frame of mind, 'that we may not be condemned along with the world' (v. 32). There is no condemnation, thank God (Rom 8:1), but there is discipline, for the new covenant is also an instrument of our Lord's government of his people.

Fulfilling the terms of the new covenant

What are the requirements of the new covenant? The basic requirement of the old covenant was for Israel to believe that the Lord is one. 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Deut 6:4). And to this very present time, Jews who believe in their Old Testament will fight tooth and nail for the oneness of God. We Christians re-echo it, 'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim 2:5). The demand is on the other side of the coin. If there's one God, then we are to love him with an undivided heart, mind, soul and strength. The New Testament says it explicitly (Mark 12:30). Now that we're saved by faith, the righteous demand of the law is to be fulfilled in us who walk after the Spirit (Rom 8:4).

How would you sum up the law that God requires? 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. . . You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:30–31). Paul says, 'Love is the fulfilling of the law' (Rom 13:10). Note what that means and what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean, like some say, that we don't have to bother about the law at all now. We can forget the law, the commandments, the rules and regulations and just set about loving people. You needn't bother about what you do, so long as you're loving. You can do to them what you like. It doesn't mean that at all! It means that if you really love a person you will act according to God's holy law and love them as you love God—with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. You will love your neighbour as yourself. What right have I to preach it? It's the doing of it that counts. God save us from the doctrine of grace that is so lax that we get the idea that we shall be in heaven at last so it doesn't matter what we do.

So Moses puts down God's demands for how Israel should behave (Deut 7). He tells Israel that when they get into the land they are not to demean their holy status. God had chosen them to be his peculiar possession and they were to be holy unto the Lord (v. 6). He told them not to forget it—and nor should we believers. We are 'a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his [God's] own possession' (1 Pet 2:9). Our blessed Lord met with publicans and sinners to bring them the gospel. And so may we, but we don't marry them, my brother, my sister—we don't marry unbelievers, do we? Beware, lest we lower the dignity of our high and holy calling. We are married to another, even Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 7:4).

Hearing the voice of God

Now I have to tell you something almost incredible. When Israel heard God speaking to them out of the fire from Mount Horeb, they feared and quaked and felt they couldn't endure it any longer (Deut 5:25). They said to Moses, 'Please ask God to let us go, so that we don't

listen to his voice any more. You be our intermediary between God and us, lest we die.' To my surprise, God said, 'That's a very good suggestion, Moses: "They are right in all that they have spoken. Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants for ever!"' (vv. 28–29). So Moses became their mediator. God wants his people never to lose the reverence for him and who he is; to lose reverence for the holiness of God results in a very cheap grace.

That's the easy bit to believe and now I must tell you the difficult bit. Who was it that spoke on that mountain? You say, 'Surely it was God!' Yes, but Christians are Trinitarians! Whenever God speaks, who does the speaking? Who is the Word of God? The Gospel of John will tell us, 'In the beginning was the Word' (1:1), the Logos—he never *became* the Logos, he eternally *was* the Logos. He was with the Father; this shows you the distinction between Father and Son. He was 'with God' and yet at the same time he 'was God'. There are not three people in the Trinity, but three relationships. The relationships are what the theologians call *substantial*. It has always been the Logos when God speaks. Having regard to our frailty, God Almighty was not content just to speak to us and woo us from the heights of Mount Horeb. The incredible story is that the Word who spoke at Horeb became flesh and dwelt among us (v. 14). The magnificent wonder of it, 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (v. 17). '... and we have seen his glory,' says John, 'glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth' (v. 14).

Have you heard his voice? 'Yes,' you say, 'I have indeed.' Some voice, isn't it? When he was here on earth he said, 'An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice' (John 5:28). When the Logos speaks, the dead shall come out of their tombs and come to life: 'those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement' (v. 29). He says to us, 'Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live' (vv. 24–25). It is the spiritually dead that shall hear the voice of the Son of God and live, of course.

Moses' companions said, 'The Lord our God has showed us his glory and his greatness; we can't listen to his voice anymore, for we might die.' Here is God incarnate—that same Logos who then spoke and he says, 'The hour is coming and now is, when the spiritually dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live.' It is a marvellous story and we are allowed to be romantic! 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (Eph 5:25–27).

Not for your Righteousness

Reading: Deuteronomy 8:7–10; 9:4–7

In this session we shall consider at least the main principles in chapters 8, 9 and 10 and the first half of chapter 11 of Deuteronomy. Please keep your Bible open at those chapters so that you may follow me and not let me get lost in the detail of this passage. All three chapters continue with Moses' preparation of his people for their entry into Canaan. It is brimmed full from end to end with delightful material blessings in abundance and of course there would be nothing wrong with those material blessings in and of themselves. They were to be the gift of God to his people in response to their faith and in God's fulfilment of his oath to Abraham. However, there would be hidden spiritual dangers in them unless the people were first trained by experience how to handle material blessings correctly.

The first danger that they would confront would be that, after some years in the wealth of Canaan, the material blessings might induce in them independence of God. The second danger is that they might stimulate self-righteousness and an attitude of superiority above all other people. Then, in the third place, we shall consider the advice that Moses gave to his people on the nature of the land into which God would bring them—how to reap the maximum profit from its agriculture.

The danger of material blessings

So let us move ahead as quickly as we can and read Deuteronomy 8:7–10. This was marvellously different from their experience in the wilderness, where very often they lived on the breadline and sometimes had scarcely enough water to drink. Now they were entering a land where there shall be fruit in abundance, cereals on their breakfast plates and houses to live in. It's more convenient, when all is said and done, to live in a house than a tent. Tents might be fun to begin with, but what with the children and no separate kitchen and all that matter of toilets, it gets a bit difficult. Now they had two reception rooms and a bedroom or two, if not en-suite with a bathroom! Not only that, but the possibility of industrial development and mining and the latest technology to get the iron out of the iron ore and how to make brass. It would be modern and up-to-date and financially it would be very rewarding. They would have flocks in abundance and sheep, all the blessings of God and God is not stingy. He meant them to enjoy it—'God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy' (1 Tim 6:17).

But there were dangers. 'And you shall eat and be full. . . Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments' (Deut 8:10–11). The very satisfaction of these material blessings would eat away at their memory and their awareness of God and it would no longer seem so important to them to keep his commandments. With their minds and hearts so full of material things, there would be little time left for God's word, for prayer and devotion. Instead of increasing their spirituality, thanksgiving and gratitude to God, the material blessings might have the very reverse effect. 'Then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery' (v. 14). What a disaster, if it happened. That sheer material wealth and its enjoyment would mean that the memory of redemption gradually faded. They had once endured slavery in Egypt, but the memory fades, even of their basic need for redemption.

It could happen to us too, couldn't it? Life is so busy, so full that even if we come to the Lord's Supper on a Sunday the significance of it fades in our minds. The next step then is, 'Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth"' (v. 17). The danger was that they should develop a sense of independence of God and say, 'We don't need God any more.'

I lived at one stage in County Durham in North East England and lodged with a Christian family. The husband was a miner and most of their relatives were miners. They used to say to me, 'David, you know, it was a difficult time for us between the wars. Men were out of work for years on end. We women had to get down on our knees from time to time and ask God for the next meal to eat. Now, with the end of the war, we are so wealthy, but the effect it's had on our spirituality has not altogether been good.'

The danger of idolatry

You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day. And if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. (vv. 18–19)

As Christians, we remember that our Lord talked to us about his kingdom and the role of God in our daily lives—how we ought to go about the business of getting clothes to wear and food to eat. He said, 'No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money' (Luke 16:13). Beware of this, he said—if you serve money it will make a slave of you.

Let us look, therefore, to a delightful thing that begins in Deuteronomy 8. God uses Moses to cause the Israelites to pause for a moment on the very brink of all these marvellous material blessings in Canaan and look back on the desert journey through which God has brought them.

And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart,

whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (8:2–3)

A very tender moment, when God stands by his people and asks them to remember the past and consider the way that he dealt with them in the difficult years.

In the wilderness it had been very tough sometimes. You may remember the incident recorded in Numbers 20. They were going through a landscape like the moon and they ran out of water, not for the first time. They were tired and the sun beat hot, the children were crying and the wives had no water to do what little cooking they had to do. So the people came to Moses and said, ‘Moses, we must have water! This is not a land of figs and pomegranates’ (v. 5). Their lips were parched and their tongues swollen. They murmured and strove against Moses and against the Lord. ‘They shouldn’t have done that, should they?’ someone will ask. Well, no, they shouldn’t, but have a heart, my dear brother. Have you never cried out in the privacy of your room, ‘Lord, I can’t stick this any more?’ That’s how they felt and Moses and Aaron didn’t altogether help at that stage. They thought this was but a repetition of what Israel had done earlier, when they strove with the Lord and tempted him (see Exod 17). There too they had run out of water and they came with arrogant defiance to Moses. ‘Moses, we’ve had enough now. If your God is really among us, he’ll give us water. And, if he doesn’t, we’re done with him.’ That was tempting the Lord their God, putting a pistol to God’s head and telling him if he doesn’t do better than this they’ll desert him.

Rebels they were—they talked of picking up stones and stoning Moses. Sheer rebellion. Half of them weren’t believers anyway. When Moses took the complaint to God, what is God is going to do? He’ll not put up with this kind of arrogant rebellion and temptation. He told Moses to take his rod with which he had smitten the River Nile. Surely he’ll bring it down on these rebel men? But we’ve misunderstood God, haven’t we? How does God deal with rebels? He tries to convert them! ‘Moses,’ he said, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock” (vv. 5–6a). You say, ‘It’s coming down on the people now!’

What do you suppose would be the significance, if the Queen came to Belfast and somebody came out of the crowd with a mighty great stick and started to beat the platform upon which the Queen stood? I know what the police would think of it!

It was rebellion against God; but the wonder of it all was that, when Moses struck that rock, water came out to satisfy the thirst even of those rebels—‘And water shall come out of it, and the people will drink’ (v. 6).

How does God deal with the rebellion of the human heart? It is a wondrous story when we think of Calvary; it’s a mighty difficult thing to rebel against the God of Calvary.

Jehovah lifted up His rod;
O Christ, it fell on Thee!
Thou wast sore stricken of Thy God;
There’s not one stroke for me.

Thy tears, Thy blood, beneath it flowed;
Thy bruising healeth me.⁷

God's chastisement and his comfort

But the incident in Numbers 20 was very different. Again they strove against Moses and God, but God told Moses that he understood. The people were at the end of their tether under the discipline and training of God. God told Moses to take Aaron's rod of office.⁸ In the sight of the people, all Moses had to do was to speak to the rock and the waters would flow out (v. 8). Poor old Moses and Aaron, I suspect they'd had enough. With all the difficulties of the wilderness, their nerves were frayed and they were losing their tempers. Moses said, 'You rebels; shall we bring you forth water out of this rock?' With some hefty strokes he smote the rock and the waters came. But God disapproved; Moses had misrepresented God and for it he would never enter the land (v. 12). It's a very serious thing to misrepresent God when his people are in deep trouble. It's not chastisement they need, but the comfort of God. He's a God that you just have to speak to and he understands our infirmities. What a delight it is to be reminded by the epistle to the Hebrews, 'For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted' (2:18). He is our 'merciful and faithful high priest' (v. 17).

It had been tough for the people and God explains to them why it had to be. He had led them and humbled them as a father would discipline a child, because they had to be trained to be able to bear the blessings of Canaan without those blessings endangering their spirituality. Hebrews 12 reminds us that God chastens us, as a father chastens his son. 'For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it' (v. 11). My dear brother and sister, just across the border that divides us physically from eternity, there awaits for you 'an eternal weight of glory' (2 Cor 4:17). Notice the noun—it's not some frivolous little thing, some tinsel decoration on a Christmas tree, it is *glory!* Glory conceived of and created by the living God himself, Creator of the vast universe and all its galaxies. 'It will be like a tremendous weight of glory,' says the apostle.

I don't go and take tea with the Queen too often—well, I haven't done it at all! I do pay into a club that keeps her racehorses, it's called H. M. Income Tax or something, but she never invites me to tea or dinner, and I'm really glad! If you go to dinner with the Queen, there are so many knives and forks and spoons on the table that getting the right one at the right time is moderately difficult! In all these glories—the nobility in their robes and whatnot—a footman comes up and you think he must be the heir to the throne. You say 'Sir' to him when you shouldn't and all that! Not being used to the riches, instead of it being an enjoyment it's a positive burden. You'll be glad to escape and go back to eat your sausages!

How do you propose to feel in glory, when Michael the Archangel will be your servant? When the very Son of God will gird himself and come and serve you (it's on record as coming from his own mouth). How shall we stand the glory? In ancient time, before the world was,

⁷ Anne Ross Cousin (1824–1906), 'O Christ, what burdens bowed Thy head!'

⁸ Aaron was the priest, whose task it was to bless the people, intercede for them and cause them to know the very blessing of God in their hearts.

the highest anointed cherub found it too much and he rebelled against God. And you've got to bear it—an eternal weight of glory! God explains to us now, before we go home, why he has allowed certain parts of life to be so tough: 'For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison' (2 Cor 4:17).

Two things were at stake when God trained Israel over their daily bread. The story is given in Exodus 16. First God allowed them to hunger and then he fed them with the manna, which came down from heaven. He explicitly said that the manna was so arranged that he might prove their hearts, whether they would obey his commandments or not, over the matter of their daily bread. You say, 'I'd like to have been living then. You had only to go outside your tent in the morning and the manna came right into your mouth! It wasn't quite like that. The manna came down, but they had to go out and pick it up. It was very small and bending your back to pick up little bits of stuff off the desert floor can be hard work. The men had to take it home and mill it and then they had to cook it or fry it. No packaged stuff from Tesco—it's a lot of work! The arrangements were that for five days a week they were to take what they could eat in the day. If they took more it was useless because it bred worms and stank. On the sixth day they were to take enough for that day and the next day, which was Sabbath; and on the Sabbath day the manna didn't come. God watched to see what they would do and, if you please, a lot of folks didn't take any notice! Five days a week they tried to grab more than was necessary only to find it went bad on them. On the Friday some didn't take enough for the Sabbath and found themselves without food on the Sabbath. Simple rules, but God arranged it to see whether in their daily work of finding bread and butter to eat they would obey his commandments.

And so it is still with us. Is our daily work just a matter of getting food and clothes? Says Christ, 'For the Gentiles seek after all these things' (Matt 6:32). Of course we've got to work, but don't let your prime motive be just getting food and clothes. What should my first motivation be in going to work? 'Seek,' says Christ, 'the rule of God—that is, the kingdom of God, his kingly rule in your life.' Daily work presents us with the possibility of whether or not we shall obey the Lord's righteous principles in our daily life. If we do seek first his rule in our lives it will produce the very character, the righteousness, of God's rule and kingdom. But if in the course of getting our daily food and our clothes we transgress God's commandments, like the world does, we may get the food and clothes but we shall have lost the very reason God sent us to work in the first place.

I was seated at table with a good Christian man, now retired, and he told me his story. He worked for a very big company with premises in different areas. They had been moving their assets here, there and everywhere to escape Income Tax. The Income Tax inspector asked for a meeting with the board of directors and my friend had to attend. Presently, the inspector asked some very penetrating, direct questions about these assets. The chairman of the board, addressing my Christian friend, said, 'Please answer.' He said to me, 'David, I knew that if I told the truth it would be the end of my job. I had my wife, family, education of the children and the mortgage to think of. What should I do? I told the truth. The directors came afterwards and said, "We shan't need your services anymore."'

Daily work is meant to educate and test us, whether we will keep the Lord's rule or not. It's not just meetings that are preparing us for glory. It's our daily work and how faithful we

are in obeying our Lord's standards of right behaviour and developing a righteous character, that are preparing us for sharing the reign of Christ with him when he comes.

There was more to it. 'He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna. . . that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deut 8:3). That is not God being stingy. Life is not just food and clothes, is it? It's fellowship with the Lord, who gives true life. It's spiritually enjoying the very life of God.

You will remember what happened in John 6. When the Lord fed the multitude with their loaves and fish, they were delighted at the free meal. They came the next day, hoping the Lord would do another miracle and give them another free meal. He said, 'Not anymore, Gentlemen. You seek me, not because you saw the sign but simply because you ate of the fishes and the loaves and were filled (v. 26). You haven't asked, 'Whose hands are these that multiplied the loaves and fish?' You don't start enquiring who I am. 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever' (vv. 50–51). They took the gift but they had no time for the giver. One day these material things will all have vanished. If we would enjoy life—'Take hold of the eternal life,' as Paul exhorted Timothy (1 Tim 6:12)—we must look beyond the material blessings to the hand that gives and make sure, even now, that it is fellowship with him that we prize above all else.

The danger of self-righteousness

Then in chapters 9, 10 and part of 11, God warned them of another danger that they might encounter in the land of Canaan. The danger was that, since God would drive out the wicked nations and put Israel in their place, Israel would come to think that it was because of their superior righteousness and become like the Pharisees, full of self-righteousness (9:4–7). If ever that got into their hearts, it would begin to eat like a worm at the very basis of their relationship with the Lord. 'You should remember therefore what happened in the past,' he says (v. 7).

I'm in difficulty here, because I'm sure someone will rise up and protest against me, quoting the words of Paul in Phil 3:13–14—'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. . . towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.' 'It's no good,' they'll say, 'harking back on all our old mistakes. Forget it, go on!' And I do want to preach that. Just at this moment I wish I had Philippians 3 to preach instead of the book of Deuteronomy! 'There's no good just harking back to the past, press on to the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. If you dwell forever on your mistakes you'll become like them and they will loom so large in your thinking as to become a positive hindrance to spiritual development. If you occupy yourself with the Lord you'll become like him as well and therein is the hope of our deliverance.'

But when I've said that, then there is this other lesson. Israel is told to remember their past, lest they should become self-righteous and take a *better than thou* attitude. What were they to remember? They were to remember what had happened at Mount Sinai. God had proposed that they should build him a tabernacle, so that he might come and dwell among them and walk with them through the desert to the promised land. Moses had gone up the mountain to get directions for this tabernacle and had been gone for more than two weeks,

until the people at the bottom of the mountain began to murmur, 'Where has this Moses gone to?'

'He didn't have any food when he went,' someone said; 'but he said he would come back.'

'Ah,' they said, 'that was what he said when he went and people have been saying it for a long while; but he hasn't come back yet. What is the good of us sitting here at the bottom of a mountain, twiddling our thumbs and getting nowhere very fast?'

'You can't do that in life, can you? You've got to have some aim in life or you'll get nowhere. We can't just sit here,' they said.

So they said to Aaron, 'Look here, Aaron, we're tired of just sitting here; we have to have a goal to aim at. Make to us gods that shall go before us.'

Aaron suggested they break off their earrings—that was the way people carried their surplus wealth in those days, there being no banks—and they gave them to Aaron. They got those earrings when they came out of Egypt. God ordained that when they were set free they should ask the Egyptians to give them much wealth: gold, silver and clothes. These were the side benefits of redemption. Now Aaron told them to take these side benefits and he made from them a god, a golden calf, and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord. And they rose up early the next day. . . And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.' They danced around the old golden calf and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' (Exod 32:4–6).

They proposed to go back to Egypt; they had got completely disorientated in the wilderness. Now what they were aiming at was not the Lord himself, but the side benefits. It does happen sometimes. Christians who lived in poverty because the man of the house drank too much, or smoked too much, or bet on the greyhounds or something—he got converted and now his family benefitted. They got furniture and a carpet on the floor and the children got an education. It's marvellous what conversion can do. Unless presently this is our goal in life and the side benefits become the goal, not the Lord himself.

The people had been redeemed out of Egypt. Listen to God: 'I bore you on eagles' wings.' And what was the goal of it all? '[I] brought you to myself' (Exod 19:4). Now they've gone after another goal and then attributed their redemption to their gold and their silver. God nearly destroyed them. Think of the impertinence—when God had proposed that they make him a sanctuary, he'd dwell among them and God's presence and person would be their goal, they had gone to other goals. 'Remember it,' says God through Moses to Israel (Deut 9:7). 'Don't suppose that it's for your goodness I bring you in here' (v. 4).

We too are called upon to remember that. Not so much our mistakes, but as we gather to keep the covenant that our blessed Lord has made with us and take the bread from his hand and the cup that is the new covenant in his blood, he says, 'Remember me—remember it is I who brought you out of 'Egypt'. You'll remember, won't you, why I hung upon that cross for you. I bore your sins in my body on the tree. Don't forget it, lest you should come to think that you are somehow superior and boast in your self-righteousness. Remember the covenant.'

Let us never forget Calvary. We shall not forget it, even in the glories of heaven. When you are crowned with all the crowns you will have and shine brighter than the angels, you will still be singing for all eternity, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,” because he was slain for my sins.’ And you’ll tell any angel that happens to be passing by and anybody else that’s interested, ‘I am here because the blessed Lord bore my sin in his body. I was a rebel and he subdued and conquered me by the love by which he gave himself for me.’ We shall never forget it, shall we? There will not be an atom of self-righteousness in heaven.

Depending on God

Finally, in chapter 11 Moses informs them now on the nature of agriculture that they will find in Canaan. He points out to them that in Egypt they didn’t get any rain, they depended on the Nile overflowing. When it overflowed they had all sorts of irrigation channels made in the earth and the farmers or their slaves would go along and with their feet they would direct the water. Some earth was heaped up so the water couldn’t get any further, and when this earth was removed the water would flow through and you weren’t dependent on the rain from heaven.

‘In the promised land,’ said Moses, ‘you’ll find that it won’t be like that. The rivers will not overflow; you will be dependent on the rain that comes down from heaven. You won’t control it with your feet! It will be a perpetual reminder that, if your inheritance is going to be fruitful, you will be dependent on God to give the rain from heaven. Beware how you behave, for if you forget the Lord your God, God might dry up the rain from heaven’ (v. 17). It is what God did from time to time. There would come a drought and a famine and only when they repented would God resume sending the rain. They were dependent on the former rains in the autumn so that they could then plough the land and the latter rains in the spring when the newly sown seed should germinate and come to a harvest.

When you come to the Prophets, you will find that this water system for agriculture had turned itself into an object lesson. Not only were they dependent on God for the rain from heaven, but if their nation were ever to be restored they would need more than a restoration of physical rain. They would need what God began to promise them—the Spirit of God poured out upon them.

Let us remember now what our blessed Lord said at the great Feast of Tabernacles, recorded in John 7. At that feast the officials would have gone down to the pool of Siloam and filled a golden pitcher with water, brought it up and poured it at the base of the altar in memory of how God had given them literal water in the wilderness. Also because of what the Prophets had said, that one day God would pour out his Spirit upon Israel and it would lead to her restoration.⁹ On the last great day of the feast, just when they had poured the water at the base of the altar, there arose a voice over the head of the multitude.

If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom

⁹ See Isa 44:3; Ezek 39:29; Joel 2:28.

those who believed in him were to receive for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)

For us too, that irrigation system of Canaan becomes a very vivid object lesson. If we would enjoy the inheritance that God gives us, our first great need is God's Holy Spirit. Every believer has the Holy Spirit of course—he is an earnest of our inheritance (Eph 1:13–14). And, because we have received the Holy Spirit, in that sense we don't need to pray for him. We get the blessed Holy Spirit when we trust the Saviour; but you will notice that Paul constantly prayed for his fellow believers who had already received the Holy Spirit. What does he pray for them? Well, for an ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit within their hearts.

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him. (1:17)

That according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being. (3:16)

We shall not prosper as we should nor enjoy our spiritual inheritance as we should, unless we come to acknowledge our dependence on the gracious ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit of God, both personally and in the church.

There are riches untold beyond description, but it is not simply by our intellect or our emotions that we can know what God has prepared. 'For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him?' (1 Cor 2:11). God has given us his Spirit so that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God and constantly realise our dependence on the gracious Holy Spirit in our private lives and in the life of the church. This is God's practical advice on how, even now, we are to reap the maximum benefit of our great inheritance.

Establishing the Law

Reading: Deuteronomy 11:26–32

So far, as we have listened to Moses on the plains of Moab, he has directed our attention to very practical things; so practical that sometimes they have been uncomfortable. It is my experience over many years of preaching, that God's people generally prefer practical things to doctrinal things; but it's not altogether my fault that I must now ask you think with me about doctrine. If you're inclined to blame anybody then blame Moses—he will speak to us about the establishment of the law in the land of Canaan and the covenant based upon that law. Then we who belong to the new covenant will think of the establishment of the law in our personal justification and in our personal sanctification. Doctrine is exceedingly important, because if our experience is to be true and sound and progressive it should be built on sound biblical doctrine.

As we listen to Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, he will connect God's law and covenant with three historic places. In chapter 5, for instance, we heard him remind the people how God made the original covenant with them at *Mount Horeb*—or, if you prefer, Mount Sinai. But now Moses tells them that here, in *the plains of Moab*, God is making a covenant with them, in addition to the covenant he made at Mount Horeb. This will not be another distinct covenant but a confirmation of the covenant made first at Horeb, now being explained more fully. Then Moses looks forward into the future, a future he would not live to see. He talks to them, and therefore to us, of the establishment of the law and the covenant of God in the land of Canaan—at a place called *Shechem*, near the mountains of Gerizim and Ebal.

This is confirmed to us by the very way that the book of Deuteronomy is structured. When they get to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal in Shechem, the covenant will involve all these particular laws, judgments and statutes, which he begins to list in chapters 12–26. Once he has completed the survey of the individual laws and the particular statutes and commandments, he refers once more to this matter of the establishment of the law in the land of Canaan, at Shechem (27:1–8). He is repeating the instructions that he gave in chapter 11, about the establishment of the law on Mount Ebal and Gerizim in Shechem.

I would love to have heard Moses speak these things to Israel, his very voice would have vibrated with almost excited joy at the wonderful prospect. He had lived for this for the last forty years amid constant discouragement and disappointment. There was that grievous time when the nation refused to enter the land when first they came out of Egypt and all the trials

of the wilderness since then had so taxed his patience. Now, at last, he stood with Israel on the plains of Moab by Jordan, the launching pad for the accomplishment of all he had lived for—the law of God would be established in that once-pagan idolatrous land, filled with sin and cruelty. ‘The law of God is going to be fulfilled,’ says Moses, ‘what a day of rejoicing it will be.’ ‘You shall set up stones there and write on them the law of God. You shall build an altar—be careful how you build it. You shall offer peace offerings and burnt offerings, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God. His covenant and law are finally being established in the land of Canaan’ (27:5–10).

The blessings and cursings of the law

Poor Moses, he wasn’t going to live to see it. This was the bitterest pill in all the discipline that God had put upon him. He asked the Lord many times to let him go over, but the Lord had to say, ‘Don’t raise the matter again, Moses.’ He would never see it, the crowning joy of his life. Instead he would be going home to Glory and another would do it. He had to appoint Joshua and let him lead the people of God into the land and establish the law there.

There were certain things that Moses couldn’t do. Christians will know that Moses stood for the law and there are things the law couldn’t do. ‘For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh’ (Rom 8:3). Why? ‘In order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit’ (v. 4). Moses could never live to see it done, nor Joshua either, in one sense. Let’s all thank God for the new covenant, ‘The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17).

‘When you get the tribes before these two mountains,’ says Moses, ‘and you’ve built your altar, offered your sacrifices and rejoiced before the Lord, then the Levites shall pronounce the blessings and the curses. When you keep God’s law the blessings will follow; if you break his covenant the curses must come.’ As the priests loudly recited each particular curse, the people answered, ‘Amen’ (vv. 15–26). They agreed to stand by the covenant and agree with God, saying ‘Amen’—‘so be it’ to God’s law. At this moment our hearts tremble a bit. Chapter 28 commences with the Levites pronouncing the blessings (vv. 1–14). Then it proceeds in numerous verses, sketching what will happen to Israel if they disobey and the curses are fulfilled upon them.

This is one of the most awesome passages in the whole of the Old Testament and should be read with tears in our eyes and sorrow in our hearts; all those terrible verses that describe Israel tortured by their enemies and driven out of the land. Wishing it were night time because the day is so full of pain and when night time comes they can’t sleep; and wishing it were day because they can’t endure the night. As we read it now, we inevitably begin to think of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazi gas chambers.

How can we read it without the deepest of emotion? What shall we say of these curses that God pronounced, in order that our hearts and emotions might begin to cope with it? The reciting of curses was in accordance with the practice of Canaanite overlords and emperors in the political covenants that they imposed upon their vassal kings and peoples; it would not have struck Israel’s contemporaries as anything unusual. The people had publicly to stand to

the covenant and agree to keep it. They would call the gods to witness that if the people broke it, the curses of the gods would come down upon them.

We should remember however, as we read that awesome chapter, that these are temporal judgments—plague, pestilence, exile to foreign countries. This is not talking about the final judgment of the Great White Throne. The following chapters will tell the nation that there will come a time when God will restore them (30:3). Secondly, we notice that God is dealing with Israel as a nation. For instance, when he tells them that if the nation breaks the covenant and goes off into idolatry, God will see to it that the nation is sent into exile. But we should remember that when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, caused much carnage and took away the people of Judah into captivity, they took godly people like Daniel. Because they were Israelites and Judahites, they had to share in the exile and the suffering. Daniel was a godly man and his salvation was never in doubt. We should remember too, that not all Jews who perished in Hitler's gas chambers were unbelievers. Were no believing Jews ever gassed? It wasn't their fault that Israel in part had departed from God and rejected the Messiah, but they had to share the afflictions that came upon the nation.

To help us further as we read those terrible chapters, we should remember that, when God says 'I will do this and I will do that to you,' in actual fact what happened was that in some sense God allowed appointed foreign nations to be the executors of his discipline. For instance, in the Prophecy of Isaiah God addresses himself to Syria (Isa 10:5). He says, 'Syria, I'm going to use you as a rod of my anger against my people, to chastise them.' But Syria exceeded their powers, they were not intending to do God's will and saw in it a brutality and possible victory for themselves. 'When I finish disciplining my people, I shall turn on you, Syria, and I shall discipline you far worse,' says God (v. 12).

Please notice that Moses is giving the people the warnings of these curses in advance (Deut 28:15), and as they hear them they say, 'Amen'—let it be so. We further notice that the issuing of these warnings didn't make the sin unavoidable. They didn't have to sin, the curses didn't need to come upon them. Moses reminded them that they had the choice. It was a stern lesson. In the mention of the curses, the description frequently reverts to phraseology like, 'I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, redeemed you and gave you this land. If you reject me, now that you are in the land, you must not suppose that you can keep the land. If you reject me, I shall turn you back to Egypt.' That is understandable, isn't it?

If one could only take the courage to say to modern Israel, 'You cannot reject your Messiah and still claim the land.' But there is coming a day when the Messiah shall come and Israel shall be saved. O thank God, 'they shall look upon him, whom they pierced,'¹⁰ and will say with consternation and repentance, 'We thought he was smitten by God, and afflicted—"But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed"' (Isa 53:4-5).

In passing, we ought just to have a little word in our own ears. Christendom's reputation has been blotted with ghastly sins. When the Church thought it ought to be the reigning political power, it began to persecute Jews. My former colleague, Professor E. Mary

¹⁰ Zech 12:10; John 19:37.

Smallwood, historian of Jews and Romans, entitled her inaugural lecture, 'From Pagan Protection to Christian Oppression',¹¹ pointing out the fact that the early emperors (starting even with Julius Caesar), though they didn't like Jews, introduced special legislation to protect them. It was only when Constantine professed conversion, and eventually elevated the Church so that it controlled the government, that the Christian Church began to persecute Jews. We pause to think of the Inquisition and how King John of England persecuted Jews; and the Russian pogroms; and Hitler's gas chambers, though Hitler's Germany professed to be Christian. It was a serious error when the Church got into its head that there was no future for Israel, the Church had replaced Israel—when God's own word said, 'For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11:29). Israel, raised up to be the olive tree of witness for God in the world, failed. Some branches have broken off and a responsibility to witness for Christ has been given to the church. 'But beware,' says Paul to the Gentiles, 'for if you go and apostatize, you shall be cut off too' (v. 21). We live in an advanced age, when so-called Christian theologians deny the very basis of Christianity—the deity of our Lord, his incarnation, resurrection, ascension and his second coming. Let them all be warned, if they apostatize Christendom shall be cut off.

We must therefore be careful how we speak of Jews. I had a Jewish friend in Belfast, who just managed to escape Hitler. He would come and have dinner with me and he would sit and cry. 'It's you Christians,' he said, 'who are responsible for the anti-Semitism and the gas chambers.' You taught your Sunday School children that wicked Jews killed your Jesus and implanted in them a fearful anti-Semitism.'

We must be careful, mustn't we? When Peter is addressing the Jews at Pentecost, in the city where Christ was murdered, he says to them plainly, 'You murdered the Christ' (Acts 2:23). But when Paul is speaking, hundreds of miles away in Pisidian Antioch (ch. 13), notice he doesn't say, 'You Jews murdered Christ', for Christ had been crucified long before the Jews in Pisidia had even heard about it, or him. Choosing his words carefully he says, 'Your rulers in Jerusalem crucified him,' (vv. 27–28).

I would say to my friend (I didn't know what better to say), 'Otto, do you know who killed Jesus?'

'Who?' said he.

'I did,' said I; 'they were but the agents. There was no other way to save mankind, no other way to save me but that the Messiah should bear my sins in his body on the tree. He died for my sins; that's what caused his death. And, Otto, you're really no better than I am, are you? He died for you too, because of your sins.'

Let's be careful, therefore, how we speak to our modern Jewish friends.

Upholding the law

That is our Old Testament passage for today; but, being a Christian, my fingers itch and at this point I have to turn the page and talk about the establishment of the law. We who are justified by faith and sanctified by Christ Jesus have it as a prime joy, delight and matter for boasting, that our salvation is not contrary to the law. It doesn't unsettle the law—in fact, it

¹¹ Queen's University, Belfast, 1979.

establishes the law. So, let me read the relevant verses and notice their place within the argument.

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. (Rom 3:28–31)

This is a difficult concept for many; and particularly for religious folk who from time to time think about salvation. They think it is suspect for anyone to say you can be sure that you have been justified, that you are saved and shall never come into wrath.

They will say, 'How can you be sure of salvation?'

So you say to them, 'It's by faith.'

'Well, of course it's by faith,' they respond.

'Yes,' you say, 'and it's by grace.'

And they say, 'Yes, it's by grace, but we have to do the works that qualify! When we've done the works, we shall be the first to admit that God gave us the grace to do them. God gets the credit, but our works have to qualify. If our works are unworthy, we shan't get into God's heaven.'

I was on a train going to Cork at one stage in my early history. The train was crowded and I saw one seat beside a clerical gentleman so I sat down beside him. Presently, I got out a Greek Testament (a little bit by guile, but then I was young!). I was reading it and eventually the cleric looked over and began to speak.

He said, 'That looks an interesting book you're reading.'

'Yes,' I said, 'it is, very!'

'What is it?' said he.

I said, 'It's a Greek Testament.'

'Yes, but you don't often see people on the train to Cork reading Greek Testaments—is it a special interest?'

'Yes, I do have a very big interest in this,' I said, 'so that I can read what Paul says in his own Greek language. I'm one of those who believe you can be saved and know it.'

'You're a very good man,' he said, 'but we can't really know we're saved, can we?'

'I thought we could!' I said.

'No, no, you can't be sure.'

So I said, 'Why is that?'

He said, 'Because it's by works! Don't you remember the Parable of the Talents? The men who worked well with their talents got a reward and the man who didn't work was sent to the bad place.'

I said, 'Is that what it means? I'm reading here what Paul says.' (He didn't know Greek, so I translated it for him.) "'Now to him that worketh, the reward is not reckoned as of grace, but as of debt. But to him that worketh not. . ." — What about him?'

'Well,' he said, 'he's hopeless!'

‘Hang on a minute, let me finish the sentence—“But to him that worketh not—but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness.”’

He honestly said, ‘I don’t know what that means, but Paul was a bit of a rascal, wasn’t he!’

They find it difficult and feel the only way to establish God’s law is if our salvation depends on our works. Such people say, ‘If you are going to say that salvation doesn’t depend on works—we can be justified simply by faith without the works of the law—then you can live as you like and it doesn’t matter.’ I’m in the habit of saying to them, ‘What do you think is going to happen to you when you stand before the Great White Throne of God’s judgment and God sums up your life? What do you think he will say?’ Generally they say something like, ‘God will be merciful. He’ll say, “You did your best. You came short here and there, of course, but because you tried hard you may come into my heaven.”’

But do you see what that implies? It’s implying that God gives us his law and we do what we call our best to keep it, but it isn’t very good. In the end God says, ‘You didn’t keep it all, but never mind—that bit that you didn’t keep doesn’t matter and you can come into my heaven.’ Would you call that, ‘establishing the law’? That’s undercutting the law! God has written it in his word already in advance and we know what he will say.

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. (3:19)

That sounds cruel to many people, but it is the fact. The first step towards salvation is what the Bible calls *repentance*; and repentance does not mean just being sorry for this little sin or that big sin. Repentance means agreeing with God about his verdict on our lives from start to finish and if we should live until we were ninety-nine and a half it would still be true of us—it certainly would be true of me—‘For all have sinned [in the past], and [still] fall short of the glory of God’ (v. 23). Then what? God is not going to say, ‘My law didn’t matter.’ The law must be established—that means the execution of its penalty on every transgression.

But if we will agree with God and admit it, stand before his throne with our mouths shut, agreeing with God that we deserve the execution of his wrath—nothing less than the curse of his law for having broken it—then God has a Saviour to give us. It is his own blessed Son, who upheld the law by bearing its penalty and paying the cost of our forgiveness, so that God might remain just (because his law has been upheld) and yet justify the likes of you and me who are sinners (v. 26). In your heart do thank God that justification by faith does not undermine God’s law, it establishes it.

Let’s think for a moment how Paul found conversion, when he was Saul of Tarsus. He had two things against Christianity, for which he persecuted them. The one was their blasphemous assertion (according to him), that Jesus was the Son of God, God incarnate. According to Deuteronomy 6, that’s considered blasphemy. Then there was another problem. Jesus had been crucified and hung on a tree. God’s Old Testament law says that anybody who hangs on a tree is cursed of God (Deut 21:23). What were these stupid, ignorant Christians saying? The one who had died on a cross, cursed of God, was the Messiah?

Saul was determined to wipe that kind of nonsense from the face of the earth. He was travelling up the Damascus road in pursuit of that purpose, when there shone around him a light above the brightness of the sun and a voice said, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads' (Acts 26:13–14). Saul didn't need to be told what the light was; he knew his theology. This was the very glory of God. The voice was saying, 'Why are you persecuting me?' Persecuting God? Paul thought he was a staunch pleaser of God. 'Who are you, Lord?' he says? And we listen to the word *Lord*. For a monotheist like Paul, what Lord could that be, speaking from the Shekinah glory? The voice came back, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting' (v. 15). Jesus is Jehovah and Paul fell, blinded, to the ground.

Then the question, what was Jesus, God's Son (God incarnate) doing, dying on a cross, cursed of God? The answer blew Paul's self-righteousness to smithereens. When he'd done all he could to keep God's law—and more, as he thought—he discovered that he was so bad that God had to pass the penalty of the law upon his blessed Son to save Paul from hell. Paul later explained it. 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us' (Gal 3:13).

Some people have a notion that God sent Jesus Christ into the world to give us a kind of helping hand. We're not very good at keeping God's law, so he comes along and helps us to keep it. The hope is that at last we shall have improved enough to pass God's standards and enter into heaven that way.

'No,' says Paul, 'the demand of the law is this: "Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them" (Gal 3:10, quoting Deut 27:26). Come short by one precept and the law will curse you.'

How then could we be delivered? Not by Christ coming to try and help us improve our law-keeping a little bit, but first by taking that curse of a broken law upon himself for our sake. What a gospel this is!

Says Paul, 'The law condemned me to death for my shortcoming and when I saw Christ taking my place on Calvary's cross, I said to myself, "That was me there, in him. Since he had to die for me, I died and the law has executed its penalty on me.'"

Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. . . And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:19–20)

Do we undermine the law? No, indeed not. Our justification establishes the law. It's not only our justification that involves the establishment of the law, but our sanctification too. I quote you that verse that I quoted at the beginning,

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh. (Rom 8:3)

This does not minimise the seriousness of sin in the flesh. God condemned it with all the authority and penalty of his just and holy law—'In order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the

Spirit' (v. 4). God has a way of perfecting sanctification within us, but now by a different principle. Not by the principle of the law-plus-penalty, but by the principle of God's Holy Spirit within. That is wonderful; but the process of making us holy, sanctifying us and perfecting holiness in the fear of God, is not going to be an overnight thing. Perhaps you have experienced long years of Christian life, pleasing the Lord, attempting to make progress in sanctification. Did you find you were holy and completely sinless overnight when you trusted the Lord? Of course you didn't. It's been a long progress—a good many advances and now and again two or three steps backward. It takes a long, realistic period. In fact, it will last as long as we're on earth.

Does it matter when we sin, or does God say, 'You're on my side now, so your sins don't really matter'? Of course they matter! When I was at school, the school authorities thought it wise that parents of boys who were learning to do chemistry should pay a very big lump sum in advance, in case their boys blew the chemistry lab to pieces! For them, it was a very expensive thing for boys to learn chemistry in our school. It's a crude analogy, but God isn't lowering his standards. When God sent you and me, as believers, to his school to make us holy, our sins mattered. The expense of it was tremendous. How shall I get it out, without bursting into song!—Christ has paid in advance the expense and cost of our training in holiness.

'For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace' (Rom 6:14). Because the Holy Spirit is within you, the principle on which we live is different. Because you are not under law, sin shall lose its grip. Law is not just advice—'I should do this, if I were you'—law is command-plus-penalty. 'You shall do this; and if you don't I shall curse you.'

Just imagine me waking up to find law personified standing by my bedside.

It says, 'Gooding, get up! Start now and love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and your neighbour as yourself.'

I say, 'Well, I'll try. I'll have a go!'

And the law says, 'You will indeed, and if you once fall short I shall curse you.'

What do you think I should do? I think some of you would get up and have a go. I wouldn't! I have too much experience for that.

I'd say, 'By God's grace I do love the Lord Jesus. But if you demand all my heart, soul and strength, I have failed so many times as a believer and I fail still, I know what will happen. So I shan't get up and try, I'll stay in bed!'

And the law will say, 'Now I curse you for staying in bed! You're meant to live for God.'

How could I make progress? One mistake and the law says that I'm finished.

O praise God, when it comes to our developing holiness, we are not under law- plus-penalty. The penalty has been paid and we are in Christ. We died with him, we've been raised with him and God has given us new life by his Spirit. Thank God, 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1).

But I must add one caveat. There is no condemnation, my brothers and sisters; but if we will be disobedient there are consequences, aren't there? There is no penalty for a believer, but there's a difference between the penalty of sin and consequences. Suppose in my foolishness I go and get drunk and being incapable of standing I fall out of the bedroom window, crash on the ground and my leg is so shattered that the surgeon has to amputate it. I'm a true believer, so I confess my foolishness and folly to the Lord and the genuineness of my repentance assures me that there is no penalty. But what about the leg—does the Lord put it back again? No he doesn't. He will, when I get to glory of course; but I shall have to face the consequences until the end of my days.

And then there's another matter. As a believer I work for the Lord; not to get salvation, but because in his grace he tells me that there shall be a reward for work well done. But suppose I refuse to do any work or I'm so careless I do very little. As I stand before his judgment seat, how shall he review my work? My work is substandard and his criticism burns it up, but because salvation was never dependent on works I myself shall be saved. 'If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire' (1 Cor 3:15). My works shall be burned up, sanctification does not take sin lightly. It does not underestimate the law, it fulfils its requirements. There is no penalty and that is glorious, but there will be consequences. So let us seek God's grace to serve him acceptably with reverence and godly fear (Heb 12:28).

Bittersweet Song and Blessing

Reading: Deuteronomy 31:14–22, 30; 33:1–5

What we have read are the features of the last two major items in the book of Deuteronomy. First of all there is *the bittersweet song* that God told Moses to teach the children of Israel, so that its words might get into their hearts all down the generations. The verses we have read give us the background and the tactics and strategies God had in mind when he told Moses to write it. The second major item is *the blessing* that Moses pronounced upon the tribes as he said goodbye to them. They went across the River Jordan to take up and enjoy their inheritance and he went home.

The temperature of the book of Deuteronomy falls very markedly now, as we turn from our previous study. In our imagination we joined with the nation and witnessed the establishment of the law of God in that once pagan country of Canaan. We heard the reverberations of their praise as they rejoiced in the Lord at this tremendous move forward. In their mind's eye they saw in the future the time when the tribes would stand, some on Mount Ebal, some on Mount Gerizim, and the Levites would rehearse the blessings of God as the tribes full-throatedly cried 'Amen'. When the Levites pronounced the curses on those who should disobey, with willing hearts and ready voice the tribes would likewise reply, 'Amen'—so be it. What a day of rejoicing was ahead of them, as in a few months they would be getting into Canaan under Joshua's leadership and the law of God was established there.

As they're about to go in God calls for Moses and Joshua, the two leaders of the people, to talk to them about his strategies for the succeeding year and so forth. And Moses could see the realism of it, for God is a realist and cannot be content with merely empty religious prayer. As God came to them in all the glory of his immediate presence, the cloud filled their tent. What an encouragement for Moses at the end of his ministry, and also for Joshua as he was about to commence his, that they should stand in the presence of God and feel in their hearts the glory and the majesty of the God whom they serve. Israel would surely need it from their leaders, that they should somehow be able to transmit to their people the glory, the grandeur and the proportions of God in the word they had to convey to them; lest their gospel should become a very simplistic thing that has ceased to have meaning.

The bittersweet song (31:19–22)

So God informs Joshua and Moses what will happen when they have been there for some years. Israel, in spite of their rejoicing, would gradually depart from the Living God and in unfaithfulness go after other gods and conform themselves to the fashions of this world. It would provoke God to his very heart. If God were some marble statue you couldn't move his feelings; but God is a God of love who loved Israel with spectacular love and promised to be loyal to them. Any unfaithfulness on Israel's part would move him to his infinite depths and provoke his jealousy.

Provoking God to jealousy

And as we hear this, we remember some of the words that Paul spoke to the church at Corinth. 'Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? [in our compromises with paganism]—Are we stronger than he?' (1 Cor 10:22). If we should provoke him to jealousy, the hand that will chastise us will be nothing less than the hand of almighty God. 'I shall have to chastise them,' says God (11:29). 'I must make them aware of what their unfaithfulness has done and perceive that their troubles are because of this.' God is no longer among them, for they have despised and rejected him.

It's difficult to think how anybody could reject God. I understand the atheist that does it; but what kind of a value system is it that despises the very Creator of the universe, with its billions of galaxies, and the infiniteness of his love? As Paul came to the end of his sermon in the synagogue at Antioch, he saw the opposition gather like a dark cloud in the faces of his audience and their determination not only to refuse the gospel themselves but to try, if they could, to stop the Gentiles hearing it. He said, 'Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish' (Acts 13:41, quoting Hab 1:5). It's even more difficult to conceive how any believer could ever despise God and so lose his or her sense of values, as to fritter away life on insubstantial idols and forget God, his Spirit and his word?

What will God do? 'I must chastise them,' says God. But difficulties came up before the divine mind. 'What if, under my chastising, Israel lose faith in me, or come to think that I'm horrible?'

A few years ago I was in the country of Georgia. I met an American evangelist, a very brave woman. She had gone to Georgia in faith. She said, 'I believe the Lord has sent me here and he will provide.' Mighty difficult it was, for Georgia was at the extreme bottom of the poverty pile, but she managed to get a job in government offices. So pleased were they with her work that they gave her permission to teach in the kindergarten school and allowed her to teach Bible stories to the children.

She happened to meet us on a Sunday morning and she said, 'I've invited some of my colleagues from work to a dinner party tonight. One or two of them are girls out of the office and I've been able to lead them to the Lord. I've also invited some quite high-ranking members of the government department where I work. I've hired a room in a hotel, would you come?' I found a tremendous admiration for her welling up in my heart. On her meagre

salary, how could she possibly afford to entertain in that expensive hotel, in order that people should hear the gospel?

My friend and I went and we sat around a table with about fifteen or sixteen people. A woman from the other side of the table fixed her eagle eye on me and said, 'What are you doing here?' She was the daughter of the owner of one of America's leading oil firms, who had come to negotiate with the government on matters of oil. (I didn't know that at the time—she was formidable enough without knowing it!) I stumbled a kind of reply. 'Well, among other things, I hope to visit the Institute of Manuscripts here in Tbilisi. They have some famous ancient manuscripts, including one of the three great manuscripts upon which the Hebrew Bible was based until the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1946. I hope to go and have a look at it.'

'What do you think of the Dead Sea Scrolls?' she said. I couldn't get the words out of my mouth before she continued. 'I'm not a liberal, I'm an Orthodox Jew. My father was Orthodox, all before him were Orthodox, I shall always be Orthodox! I think God is horrible—he was horrible to Moses in the wilderness when he made one mistake.'

What would you say? I tried to quote her that lovely Old Testament song, Psalm 23. I said, 'I'm a Gentile and a one-time pagan, but I like this song. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall . . ."'

'You can't quote that at me,' she said. 'That's Christian!'

The voices around the table said, 'Oh no, that isn't Christian, that's Old Testament!'

God had it written so that Israel, even in their times of persecution, might sing it in their hearts, to remember what kind of a God he is.

How will God restore his people?

We are now thinking of another song that Israel were to teach to their children before the bad days came (Deut 32). They would remember the past and be reminded of the lovely character of their God who warned against apostatising from him and what should inevitably follow if they did. But another problem was expressed in this song. How would God save them when they've gone astray? What tactics would he use to bring Israel back, for God's testaments always had that inbuilt clause? It was a question of tactics. How careful God had to be, for if he chastised and disowned Israel what would the nations say?

'Well there you are! All that talk of Israel being a special nation, chosen of God, was childish nonsense. There is no God and as far as world politics go it's a question of who has the biggest battalion. We have overrun Israel and put them down (v. 27). Their claim to be God's chosen people is empty nonsense.'

'How shall I stop that happening?' says God. And therefore, for that reason among others, the song records God's fixed determination that one day he should restore Israel. It runs its way through Jewish history—their initial blessing, their departures and then God's magnificent methods and tactics to get them saved. And finally, God's claim to be vindicated at what we call *the day of vengeance*, at the second coming of the Lord Jesus (v. 35).

So now let's look at the song and go over some of these major points. It starts with a declaration of the beautiful character of God.

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distil as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb. (32:1–2)

All delightful poetry, in view what Moses must say later in this song, but that's how it begins. This is not a poem of fiery denunciation. If you only listened to it there, it's like a refreshing rain, a gentle dew. Not some avalanche or tornado uprooting everything, but a gentle rain to nurture the tender grass.

'For I will proclaim the name of the Lord' (v. 3). What a blessed occupation for any preacher of the word. That took Moses back to his initial ordination as he stood by the burning bush and God came down and told him to go and deliver his people from Pharaoh and bring them to the promised land. Quaking in his shoes, Moses said, 'If I go and tell the people that you sent me to deliver them and they say, "This God—what is his name?" what do I say?'

'This is what you'll say,' says God. "'I AM has sent me to you.'" I am the God of their fathers. I AM THAT I AM; I AM WHO I AM; I will be what I will be, the eternal, unchanging God' (see Exod 3:13–14).

As Christians, we can't read it and not remember our blessed Lord accounting for his ministry to his Father, a few steps away from Gethsemane and the cross.

And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.' (John 17:5–6)

'I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me.' In our poor perverted world, amongst even Israel that soon would put him to a cross, he comes to declare the marvellous, delightful name of God. And having begun his prayer that way, he finishes with the same remark: 'I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (v. 26). What a thing that is for you preachers, pastors, shepherds of God's people, Sunday school teachers. What an important thing this is to get into people's hearts—to declare to them the name of God and what God is like. Has it dawned on my dull heart that the love wherewith God loved the Lord Jesus is the love that God has for me?

He will walk with me in the troubles and the trials of life. He is the rock of my salvation, his work is perfect, he is absolutely just—just in his benefits, good and holy and still loving even in his chastisement (Deut 32:4). Now Israel has to hear him speak plain words to them.

They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you? (vv. 5–6)

Their behaviour will become so bad, so perverted, so compromised with idolatry that God would have to disown them—they are not his children. The thing was that Israel was a special nation, chosen to represent God amidst the pagan world. ‘You only have I known,’ says God to the prophet Amos (3:2). You are my special people, my witnesses in this world of what the true God is like and what behaviour he requires. ‘You will not pervert yourselves,’ says God to Amos. ‘You are my people, you only have I known and chosen: therefore I will visit your iniquities.’

Here we must not let fancy get into our hearts. We must hear God say through Hosea, the prophet of Israel, ‘Call his name Not My People for you are not my people’ (Hos 1:9). Then God, within a few words, adds, ‘And in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people”, it shall be said to them, “Children of the living God”’ (v. 10). But God had to have it said publically, ‘You are not my people.’ And then what did Israel do? They acted like a child that has been chastised by a loving parent and tried to kick his mother in the shin and say, ‘You’re horrible, Mother.’

What will God do to prevent it? The song in Deuteronomy calls upon Israel to remember the past and uses a series of beautiful metaphors. God retraces his ways with Israel, from the time he chose and delivered them out of Egypt and brought them on eagles’ wings to himself and taught them how to make progress. As the eagle would train its little birds to fly, they flew over the great mountains of pagan strongholds and superstition with all their cultural idols. God blessed them and they were triumphant. ‘Remember the days of old,’ said God (Deut 32:7). ‘I have not changed; I am the Rock, I don’t change. It’s you that has changed.’

Said God to Moses and Joshua, ‘When they get their full material benefits, they wax fat and become sleek. But their appreciation of God fades, they lose a grip on his glory and God is only a little prayer that they say before they get into bed at night. They don’t take him seriously.’

They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth. (vv. 17–18)

So, in the song that Israel was to learn to sing, God here inserts their estimation of him. The Lord saw it and abhorred them because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. ‘And he said, I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end will be, for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness’ (v. 20).

Provoking Israel to jealousy

Perhaps you think that those words are the utterances of the stern God of the Old Testament and Jesus Christ has shown us that God isn’t really like that. He is much more kind and lenient with his people. Yet these are the words that the Lord Jesus took upon his lips when a father brought his son to him and said, ‘A demon has got hold of him and torn him. I’ve lost my son, almost. We can’t have any conversation with him. If you can do anything, do it.’ And our Lord said, ‘O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you?’ (Luke 9:41). God had a son called Israel, who had gone over to the worship of

demons. Communication between God and his sons was at an end; they were a perverse and foolish generation. And in our Lord's day that perverse and foolish generation were to take God's own dear Son and nail him to a tree.

What will God do? How will he get them back? 'They have made me jealous with what is no god,' he says (Deut 32:21). 'So I will make them jealous with those who are no people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nature.' That sounds like homeopathy to me. They provoke God, so to cure them he provokes them! Who is he talking about—'provoking Israel with a foolish nature'?

Well, of course, this is what Paul had in mind when he penned the letter to the Romans. He uses the very same language. 'So I ask, did they [Israel] stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous' (Rom 11:11). 'All right,' says God, 'I redeemed you and saved you out of Egypt. I loved you, I tended you and you have forsaken me. You have despised my salvation. I'll go and save somebody else then.' Through their fall, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Catching on to the notion of God's tactics, Paul continues, 'Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them' (vv. 13–14). They were Israelites indeed that were the remnant—the whole nation hadn't gone anti-Christ. Paul was one of the remnant that did worship the Lord with some thousands of others. It was the nation officially that had rejected and still rejects the Lord. 'You see,' said Paul, 'God was provoking those Jews and so I'm doing the same thing. I'm going down to the Gentiles and these Jews will have to see multitudes of pagans coming to faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and enjoying his salvation. In the end they won't be able to bear it. It will provoke them to jealousy.'

I do my own little bit in provoking to jealousy where I can, when I meet Jewish friends who have no time for Jesus Christ. I tend to say, 'How is it that you don't like Jesus Christ? I was an old pagan in England (we were all Pagan at one stage), I'm a Gentile and don't have the honour of being a Jew. But I've come to believe not just in any old God—I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Doesn't that please you? Point me to another Jew in the whole of history that has led so many million pagan Gentiles to faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Tell me one that has done anything like Jesus of Nazareth has done?' It's unanswerable, isn't it? It will provoke them to jealousy; but then how shall they get saved?

Says God in that same song, 'They are a faithless people' (Deut 32:20). They are not really believers. If ever they are going to be saved, Israel will have to come and admit before God that, in the only sense that means anything, they are not believers. Paul is an example of it. He resisted the gospel of Christ, he thought it was a blasphemy that Christians should hold that Jesus is God incarnate. If you had asked him, he would have said that he knew about God. 'God is one; and you Gentiles with your three Gods—Father, Son and Holy Spirit!' Paul thought he knew all about God, but on the Damascus road he discovered he knew very little about God. He discovered that Jesus Christ is more than the glory of God the Father; the eternal Word of God has become flesh for our salvation. Paul discovered that, in the only sense that really matters, he had been an unbeliever who nailed God incarnate to a cross. Speaking of his conversion he said, 'How marvellous God has been to have mercy on me,

because I did it in ignorance and unbelief' (1 Tim 1:13). He was religious, but an unbeliever in the only sense that belief matters. He had to be brought to the point where he believed that Jesus Christ is Jehovah.

And it can happen to ordinary religious folks, can it not? You come across some gracious lady and you talk to her about the gospel. She believes in God, of course she does; she believes the Bible; she believes in the law of Moses. You pluck up courage and put it in the nicest terms you can possibly use, so you don't throw it all in her face. You get round to asking, 'Are you a believer, are you saved, do you know you're saved?' 'I can't really say,' she says, 'I do my best.' But then you explain the gospel of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, how we cannot be saved by doing our best, or even by our efforts to keep God's law. Jesus Christ, God's Son, came to bear our sins in his body and bore the curse of the law for us, so that we might be forgiven and know it. And as you talk to her about it, she says, 'Well if that is what you mean by believing, then I couldn't call myself a believer.' She's made good progress, she's discovered that she hasn't believed the gospel. Let's hope for her that God will show her that salvation is not of works or religious ritual or merit; it is through faith in the crucified Son of God.

The nation restored

But then this song finally goes on to discuss the problem with God's discipline of Israel. The nations will come to consider that the claim of Israel to be God's special people was always nonsense from the start, so God explicitly says that he will act lest the nations get the wrong opinion (Deut 32:27). And one day he will. There will come the day of avenging, when God will vindicate Israel. He will come with flaming fire, taking vengeance on those that persecute the people of God (2 Thess 1:8). Israel shall be restored and expiation made for their land. 'What a magnificent thing that shall be,' says Paul, 'when the Lord comes and all Israel shall be saved' (Rom 11:26).

There's a final stanza in this song that Israel were to sing about their final restoration. 'Rejoice with him, O heavens' (v. 43). What a tremendous concept that is going to be, when Israel as a whole gets saved and they join the Christians in the eternal praise of God. Gentiles, honoured to help point Israel the way to their conversion and final vindication.

The blessing (ch. 33)

We have not much time left to discuss the blessing of Moses in chapter 33. In my heart of hearts I'm a little bit glad about that, for there's so much of it I don't understand. The blessing of Moses is poetry of course, maybe some of the most difficult poetry in the whole of the Old Testament. Even the experts agree that knowing exactly how this poetry should be translated is difficult, but knowing how it should be applied can be altogether uncertain. We can't be dogmatic.

You younger men and women don't necessarily have to choose as your profession to be experts in computers; there are thousands of experts in computers! If God has given you the gift to learn a few languages, do learn Hebrew and a little bit of Greek as a service to the church at large, so that we may be helped to come to a better understanding of Hebrew in

general and Hebrew poetry in particular and be able to more accurately translate such passages as these. The biblical manuscripts in Hebrew are here, there and elsewhere in our universities. It's a humble task but worth doing, if you can, to look after the manuscripts and the languages and the translations of Old and New Testaments.

This blessing of Moses on the people, then, is different from the song. The song regarded Israel as a whole—as a nation. Though it denounces their apostasy, not all Jews apostatise. In the time of Christ there were many dear Jewish believers and also in the early church—Paul was one of them. Thank God, all down the ages there have been believing Jews. The song regarded Israel officially as a nation, their history from that time until the Lord's coming and the blessing deals with individual tribes. As Moses blessed the individual tribes, he wasn't thinking of the long distant future, he was thinking of the future that lay immediately ahead of them.

He had brought them to this critical point in their life. Now he had to go to Glory and they had to go across Jordan with all the excitement and blessings, all the struggles and fighting that that would involve. With a loving pastor-shepherd's heart, he sought to bless them. They weren't perfect and soon they would go wrong, but he loved them and there was one thing he must not do as they now moved forward into this new pathway for God. He must not defeat their courage, lest they lose their faith.

Forgive me if I have done that. We have to talk about our faults, but if we talk about them in such a way that a believer says, 'I'm no good, I've failed, I give up'—what a damage we've done. We must try to buttress people's faith as we preach God's holy Word.

Individuals blessed (33:1–25)

So in this chapter Moses' concern is for individuals, not just the nation as a whole. Some will go to a part of the country that's good for growing olive trees and get involved in the olive oil industry. Men have got to live and God has given them their various trades and a particular piece of land.

There goes Zebulun and his colleague, he'll be situated in a part of the land where commerce and particularly shipping is handled (Deut 33:18–19). If you want to see him, you'll find him in the shipping offices or down at the docks. You say, 'That's making money.' Well, of course it is! Even Christians have to eat bread and that generally costs! Of course he's making money and God has given him the ability and the circumstances to make it.

Where's Gad? He's in agriculture in a big way and he had the foresight to ask for the territory east of Jordan, where it's marvellous pastureland (vv. 20–21).

Moses is thinking of them—they're his children, so to speak. They're growing up and he must leave them. They're going out into all their different ways and he prays God's blessing on them.

As we conclude our studies I wish I could pronounce a blessing on you.

Did I hear you say that you're in oil too? Olive oil? Is that what you were at? God bless you, it's good stuff for the old diet!

And you're in petroleum? That's also a very necessary thing. Go out and do an honest job, won't you?

Are you're in farming, sir? How much we depend on you for God's blessings in daily life.

You're hoping to get married soon? God is being good to you. Peter says that you'll have to learn to behave with each other because God intends you to be joint heirs. That's your inheritance isn't it?—'Heirs. . . of the grace of life' (1 Pet 3:7).

You're out for extending the kingdom of God? That can be a fight and uncomfortable, but we need pioneers, don't we? God bless you.

As now, as you go from this time of waiting before God back to the affairs of daily life, your vocation, the family, marriage and bringing up the children, may God's blessings be on your head.

Moses, wise man, introduces his blessing with a general reminder to all the tribes of the love of God. 'The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us. . . Yes, he loved his people, all his holy ones were in his hand' (vv. 2–3). And the interpreters disagree as to what is meant by *saints*—'All his saints are in his hand (KJV).' Does it refer to his believing people, for all believers (nowadays anyway) are saints? Well if that's so, they certainly are in his hand. They were all reminded of it and I am delighted to be able to remind you that if you are a child of God, a saint of God, you are in his hand.

My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (John 10:29–30)

But some theologians and experts say, 'But that word *saints* could refer to God's holy ones, or the myriad angels that come with him in his glory.' It could mean that, but it doesn't really make any difference whichever way you have it, because these angels are sent forth to minister, to be the servants of those that shall be heirs of salvation—all you wonderfully blessed people!

If an angel turned up just now and sat beside you, you would be tempted (like John the apostle was when he saw an angel, Rev 19:10) to fall at the angel's feet and start worshipping him. But the angel would say, 'Please learn the etiquette of heaven! You mustn't do that. I'm merely one of your fellow servants.' And he might even add that there's a rumour going about that, in the eternity to come, you'll be above the angels! You'll be seated with Christ in heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named (Eph 1:20–21). O what you shall be, my brother my sister, when you get home to glory; so like the Saviour that if we didn't know better we should bow at your feet and worship you.

God loves his people and he talks about their individual inheritances. But Moses is a realist and Levi got a very large responsibility given to him (Deut 33:8–11). Why? Well, not by accident. It was because in days past, when he was first called, he dared to stand for God even though it cost him, having to be against his family. These are our Lord's conditions, 'If anyone comes after me and doesn't put in second place even his relatives, he cannot be my

disciple' (Luke 14:26). The responsibilities, privileges and tasks that God gives us now will in some part be a response to our faithfulness in discipleship.

Joseph got a great, fruitful inheritance (Deut 33:13–17). Dear old Joseph, with all the things in his past. He was separated from his brothers and suffered many things from them, but when they came to him he forgave them and put an end to all dispute. How fruitful he was, because he didn't avenge himself. How easy it is for believers to fight each other. Can you explain it? However, if we will be fruitful, strife must go, quarrelling must go; we must learn to forgive one another, as Christ forgave us.

And then there were the Gadites (vv. 20–21). When they were about to go into Canaan, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh came to Moses and said, 'Sir, God has given us our territory this side to the east of Jordan. When you come to divide the land, could we ask that we should be given this territory and remain east of Jordan?' (Num 32). Moses took one look at them and he exploded like a volcano. 'And Moses said unto the children of Gad and to the children of Reuben, "Shall your brothers go to the war while you sit here? Why will you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over into the land that the Lord has given them?"' (vv. 6–7).

Now I don't like being told off myself, even when I'm wrong; but when I'm right I don't like being told off at all! These two and a half tribes stood there and endured this.

Moses was an old man and when he'd finished, they said, 'Sorry Sir, but you have misunderstood us. We weren't proposing to slack and settle down here. We are prepared to go over with the other tribes right in the forefront of the battle and fight our way through until every enemy has been defeated, and then and only then would we like to be allowed to come back into our inheritance this side of Jordan.'

Moses had misunderstood them. 'Well if you'll really do that, then God bless you,' he said. 'But make sure you do it, don't try to settle down here while the rest are having to fight. Go and lead them and then you can come back.'

If you should go out of here and come across a man and to your eyes he must one hundred and twenty years old, watch him! If he turns out to be Moses and he says, 'I hear you've been slacking recently,' you'd need to have an answer ready!

'I hear you've been just sitting down, enjoying yourself,' he says. 'You don't always come to the meetings of the church, you omit yourself from the Lord's Supper and you don't take part in evangelism. You're slacking, aren't you?'

Tell Moses, 'Excuse me Sir; you've got it wrong. I'm not like that at all. I'm in the forefront of the Lord's work; I'm willing to help God's people or help the furtherance of the gospel.'

You see, if I slack it hurts you. And if you slack it hurts the rest.

And then Moses ended as he began and I'll just read the blessing that he finally pronounced. It covers the whole of God's people and it covers us. Listen to him and may God bless you.

There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty. The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the

everlasting arms. . . So Israel lived in safety, Jacob lived alone, in a land of grain and wine, whose heavens drop down dew. Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord. (Deut 33:26–27, 29)