



Cornton Baptist Church

Demonstrating God's love in action
in the community of Cornton

Through the Bible

June 2011

These are the commands and regulations the LORD gave through Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho. (v.13)

Back in chapter 27 the daughters Zelophehad had asked for a solution to a problem they saw – no males in the family to inherit their father’s land. Moses brought the case before God and a solution was given. This solution here brings a problem as inheritance laws have been given for when the people enter the Promised Land. Again Moses goes before the Lord and returns with God’s way ahead. The daughters then go and obey the Lord and walk in his ways. A great sign of faith and trust. Remember of course we have seen many of the people fail over the last forty years in the wilderness because of lack of faith. These girls are a sign of faithful followers.

Interestingly one solution later brought problems and difficulties and life is so often like that for us isn’t it. We resolve one situation to only later be faced with having to think that through in light of another situation before us. Life isn’t perfect. We are a fallen people living in a fallen world. The lesson here is to always trust in and rely on God. To turn to him when things get tough and seek his guidance for the way ahead. So often we try and take matters into our own hands. These girls come to Moses so he can mediate before God for them. And having received God’s reply they go and obey.

The people are now on the verge of the Promised Land. Numbers started out in the wilderness and ends with the people being as close to the land of Promise as they could be. They have learned much on their journey – and a whole generation has passed away due to their lack of faith. A new generation willing to trust God for big things had come to maturity.

Pray: asking God to continue to lead and guide us.

Reflect: what difficulty am I facing just now? Turn it over to God and ask for His guidance.

These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel. (v.1)

The children of Israel are on the edge of the Promised Land. It has taken them 40 years to get to this stage on what should have been an 11 day journey (v.2). And all this because they were slow to believe and follow. The people were frightened about entering the land and so God had them wander through the wilderness until that entire generation had passed away. He would take the next generation into the Promised Land. The time was not wasted of course for they were taught much during those days. Now at the end of their wilderness wanderings, it's time for a review, hence the "Second Law". Moses spends the last month and a half of his life reminding the people of their journey, the Lord's promises and the laws that they have been given to follow.

There are a couple of reasons why a "review" is necessary - the people have changed. The generation that heard the Law the first time has mostly passed away, and it's time for the current generation to hear God's truths. The times have also changed. The people have been wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Now they are finally about to come into the Promised Land. Some of the Laws were intended specifically for use in the Promised Land and they haven't been in the forefront of people's minds for forty years. Some of the Law will see new application as they are about to cross over the Jordan.

The reasons for reading and re-reading God's incredible Word are the same for us. You change. I am not exactly the same person as I was a couple of years ago. I am growing in the Lord, I am slowly changing. As I go through my own "stages" of development in my Christian life, I need to be reminded over and over again of God's Word. Circumstances change. As I am growing, my circumstances change just like I do. I may not always be "wandering in the wilderness". Each time I go through God's Word, I learn more and more from it, sometimes simply because my own life's circumstances force me to look at God's Word from another perspective. So keep reading the Bible.

Pray: thanking God for His Word which is always relevant.

Reflect: where am I on my walk with the Lord? What am I learning just now from His Word?

The Lord your God has blessed you...he has watched over your journey...these forty years the Lord your God has been with you and you have not lacked anything. (v.7)

Magazine articles filled with ideas on how to express love for special people are very popular these days. They usually show up under such titles as 'Fifty Ways to Say I Love You' or 'Twenty-Five Ways to Make Your Child Feel Special.' The idea, of course, is that true love is shown by actions as well as by words. The sermons of Deuteronomy in which Moses recalled God's dealings with Israel are a stunning catalogue of the ways God shows His love and care for His people.

It's true that Israel's disobedience and lack of faith are a part of the story. But when we step back to look at the big picture, the nation's forty-year trek through the desert is a testimonial to God's patience and overruling love. Even Israel's failures become the backdrop for God's grace in sustaining the people He chooses as His own.

Moses reminds the people of God's presence with them and his blessing upon them – they lacked nothing. Isn't this an awesome display of God's love for these people? Here they are stubborn, rebellious, and He takes care of them? God's purpose is to get them into the Promised Land alive! Even though they claim that God is trying to destroy them, He's really been preserving them all along.

As God watched over their journey in the wilderness so he watches over our lives as well. He never leaves us nor forsakes us. Sometimes it is good to step back and look back over our lives – to see God's hand leading us, to see the blessings we have received, to see the provision of God in our lives right when we needed it the most.

Pray: thanking God for being with us always and blessing us in so many ways.

Reflect: on the blessings of God this past week – write them down and see how great your God is.

But commission Joshua and encourage and strengthen him. (v.28)

When a corporate accountant committed suicide, an effort was made to find out why. The company's books were examined, but no shortage was found. Nothing could be uncovered that gave any clue as to why he took his life - that is, until a note was discovered. It simply said: "In 30 years I have never had one word of encouragement. I'm fed up!"

All of us need a word of encouragement from time to time to spur us on when we are facing a major new challenge. But we also need words of appreciation and commendation as we carry out our daily responsibilities, whether at home or at work. Here we find Moses encouraging Joshua. And in some ways this was very hard for Moses. Moses here reminds us of his own sin – at Meribah the people grumbled about no water, Moses spoke to the Lord and was told to speak to the rock. However, Moses ignored that and struck the rock just as he had done on a previous occasion. Moses has tried to get the Lord to let him at least go into the land and see it with his own eyes. God said no and told him to view it from the hill.

Sad times for Moses but he none the less commissions Joshua as the new leader and encourages him. I have no doubt that Joshua was a little fearful about the task in front of him and perhaps even felt inadequate about following in Moses' footsteps. Moses encourages him by reminding him of all God has done in the past. Moses told Joshua, in effect: 'Look at all that God has done for you in the past. There is nothing you will face in the future that He cannot handle, because He is the same God today.'

Our God never changes – look back and be encouraged to keep going forward today; look back and encourage others to keep walking with Jesus. As the writer to the Hebrews says (10:24) '*Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.*'

Pray: thanking God for all He has done in the past and asking him to keep walking with us in the future.

Reflect: who can I encourage today in their life, ministry and walk.

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. (v.9)

The 18th-century actor Charles Macklin once boasted to fellow actor Samuel Foote that he could repeat any speech after hearing it just once. So Foote challenged Macklin to repeat what he was about to say and then launched into a very hard-to-remember series of nonsense sentences. Macklin had to admit defeat.

It's hard to remember perfectly something we have heard only once. That's why God repeated His commands through each generation of His spokesmen and then recorded them so that we might obey Him and be blessed.

Moses knew how forgetful the Israelites were. He was well aware that they had trouble remembering even the amazing miracles of God's grace they had witnessed in the desert. If the generation standing before him was prone to forget, how in the world would their children ever learn and remember the lessons of obedience? And so he encourages the people to watch their lives closely. He urges them not to forget anything they have been taught or seen. He then urges them to share it with their children as well so they learn from a young age the ways of the Lord.

The challenge for us is to keep reading God's Word and to keep being reminded through that reading of all God's plans and promises. We ought never to tire of reading the story of salvation. The further encouragement for us is to be teaching it to our children – even from a young age. Children never forget the things they are taught when they are young – they stick with them.

Pray: thanking God for His Word which we have readily at hand to read and be reminded of his great love for us.

Reflect: what distractions face me that draw me away from reading the Bible and remembering all that God has done and taught me?

So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. (v.32)

Moses gathers the people before him once more and shares more information with them. This time he moves on to the Ten Commandments and shares them in this chapter before expanding on the first few commandments in the chapters that follow. He calls for the people to hear these words – and by this he means not simply listening to them but acting upon them and obeying them. He calls for them to learn the commandments and follow them.

We hear and receive many different instructions during our lifetimes. When we come to learn to drive we are instructed about driving on the left hand side of the road. If we deviate on to the right we will cause an accident. God's word is full of instructions for our lives – how to live life well and fully.

Once the Ten Commandments had been given to Moses he was under an obligation to serve the Lord by immediately sharing the truths that had been revealed to him. He had been commissioned to listen attentively to God's word and then communicate it faithfully to the waiting people. Truth is not only to be received but to be shared. And that is what Moses has done previously and continues to do now. He wants to make sure this generation of Israelites that are about to enter the Promised Land know the Commandments so they will live by them. He urges the people to be careful to follow them. And he reminds them of the conditional promise...if they walk in God's ways then he will bless them.

The same call is there for us today to follow his commands and walk in his ways. We are to keep reading God's word so we are reminded of them often and then what we receive we are to share with others too.

Pray: asking for God's help to keep walking in his ways and following his commands.

Reflect: do I follow the instructions closely or do my own thing? Am I encouraging others to follow God's ways?

These commandments I give you today are to be upon your hearts. (v.6)

I remember, rather embarrassingly, a Sunday in Livingston some years ago. Morag and Rebekah had gone home early after the service while I stood chatting to folks. I left sometime after and drove round to the house in quietness thinking on the many conversations I had and wondering how lunch was cooking. I reversed the car into the drive, still silence around me, and walked into the house. I filled Morag in on a few conversations I'd had, and then she asked me where Andrew was. I looked around me and then realised I had left him at the church! I forgot my own son. (I did quickly go back and get him and he was fine).

You might laugh at me and think how could he...but wait...we're not much different in our relationship to God. We actually fail to remember the One who created us and redeemed us. How is this possible? I don't know. But we do forget. And it's a constant struggle not to. Man's short attention span is no surprise to God. Speaking to Israel, He offered solutions in Deuteronomy 6.

He urges the people to focus on God and love him with all their heart, soul and strength. He encourages them to become so familiar with the Bible that it is a part of what they think and feel and do (v.6) – God's Word is to be upon their hearts. They are challenged to talk about God to their children, and look for opportunities to tell them of His love (v.7). More than that they are to write reminders to themselves and put them where they can be easily seen (vv.8-9). For us that could little notes on the mirror or around the computer, on the fridge and in the car. And they are also told to realise that their need for God is not limited to times of obvious stress or danger. They are to enjoy with gratitude whatever health and happiness they have (vv.10-11).

Don't forget God – focus on Him and His Word.

Pray: thanking God for allowing us to know Him and love Him.

Reflect: how can I remind myself daily of God's Word? What ways can I teach God's Word to my children or grandchildren today?

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands. (v.9)

A lot of people struggle, asking, “Why does God love me? What does He see in me? I feel like there’s nothing about me that God could love, so I question whether He really does or not.” To be perfectly frank, the real source of that kind of thinking is pride. The honest truth is that God doesn’t love us because of what’s inside of us. He loves us because of what’s inside of Him! If you keep looking for something that God can find lovable about you, you’ll never find it. God loves you simply because He loves you, period.

He loved us when we were still in our sin, as the Scripture says, in Romans 5:8 ‘*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*’ God loved us and saved us, not because of who we were or are. Paul reminded Titus (3:5) that ‘*he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.*’ A lot of Christians are trying to work out their “self-esteem” issues, to discover what is so lovable about themselves. But they’re looking in the wrong place. They need to look at how loving God is, rather than how lovable they are.

Here in Deuteronomy 7 we learn that God is loving – he set his affection on us (v.7); God keeps his promises – he kept the oath (v.8); God is faithful – he is the faithful God (v.9); God is merciful – keeping his covenant of love (his loving kindness) (v.9). And since God is all these things Moses tells us in verse 11 that we ought to follow his ways and keep his commands.

Accept his love and walk in his ways.

Pray: thanking God for loving you.

Reflect: in what ways can I see God’s love for me in my life? Write them down and spend some time praising God for his faithful love.

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. (v.11)

Every Sunday in many churches, people recite the Lord's Prayer, which contains this line: '*Give us this day our daily bread*' (Matthew 6:11). Then during the remainder of the week, most of them go out and earn money to buy their food. Secretly, they may sometimes feel like the ungrateful cartoon character who prayed before his meal and said, "Dear God, we paid for all this ourselves, so thanks for nothing."

How easy it is to give ourselves the credit for acquiring things we need - that is, until we're driven to our knees because of the lean times. In Deuteronomy 8:3, the Lord reminded Israel of their hunger in the wilderness and of His daily supply of manna to sustain them. Through this amazing provision God proved that He was their source and provider. He wanted them to remember that it was His power, not merely their own, that enabled them to get wealth (vv.17-18).

Moses' words of warning were so the people would not forget God and his provision for them. Sufficient food would lead to satisfaction of Israel in the land. This satisfaction and security could lead to Israel forgetting God. Forgetting God means no longer having him in the daily thoughts of their lives. Israel's forgetfulness would lead to a disobedience of his commandments. Whereas in the wilderness Israel had to depend on God for the necessities of life, in the rich land there would be a tempting sense of self-sufficiency.

We live in a rich land and we have far more than we ever need (most of us anyway). That is why many ignore God and do not know him – they have all they think they need. Let's watch we do not fall into that trap. Do not forget God and his provision in our lives.

Pray: thanking God for all his provision in our lives.

Reflect: in what areas of my life am I tempted to be self-sufficient and forget about God?

I fell prostrate before the Lord...I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord...but again the Lord listened to me. (v.18-19)

Moses reminds the people of God's amazing grace in this chapter also teaches them how to pray for difficult people. The chapter begins with the Moses remembered the people's shock when they heard the original report of the twelve spies concerning the size, strength and number of the inhabitants of Canaan (Numbers 13). Therefore he emphasised that from a purely military and human point of view their victory was impossible. But with God on their side all would be well. He further reminds them that their impending victory in the land will not be due to their own righteousness or goodness but will be entirely the work of God.

And the same is true in life for us...there is nothing we can do by ourselves to earn salvation. It is a gift of God – it is through his grace and mercy (Ephesians 2:8-9). It's all by grace. For us, we have received the promise of eternal life not because we earned it, but because God was gracious enough to love us even in our rebellion.

Moses also reminds the people of their sin at Horeb. They were impatient as Moses was away on the hill top with God for so long – forty days and nights. They decided to make their own idol by smelting their gold and making a golden calf. God was so angry he wanted to destroy them.

How do you pray for those you're having troubles with? If God were to come to you and say, "I'll just wipe them out and let you take their place ...", would you give in and say, "Let me help you God!" Or would you turn and plead for them? Moses pleads for the people. He reminds them that he fell prostrate before God with prayer and fasting for forty days and nights. He pleaded for the people and God listened to him. God hears our prayers. So keep praying...even for those difficult people in your life.

Pray: thanking God for his grace and mercy.

Reflect: who am I struggling with at home, at work, socially? How can I pray for them in light of this passage?

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (v.12)

Moses reminds us today that God is the God of the second chance. The people had made the golden calf and in his anger Moses had thrown down the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments had been written. In his anger he broke them. He had spent forty days and nights with God and it was God who made and wrote on the tablets. Exodus 32:15-16 reminds us of this. Sin is something to be angry about, but Moses destroyed the written Word of God in his anger. Now, he's being disciplined a bit. This time around, God's not making the tablets - Moses is. And he's only got a short time to do it. Exodus 34:1-2 tell us Moses had to have the stone cut out and ready for the morning. Moses would have another set of tablets, but he'd have to cut them out himself. It's interesting that when God gives you a blessing and you mess it up, He will sometimes replace it. But the second time around, it involves more work to get back what you had before.

Moses has been reminding the people that they haven't exactly been the most pleasant people to work with. Instead, they've been quite stubborn. Which is why in the second half of the chapter he goes on to call them to fear God, to walk in his ways, to love him and to serve him. He calls them in verse 16 to not be stiff-necked any longer. He is literally saying stop being like a horse that won't turn when the reins are pulled in one direction or another – stop being like those that refuse to obey, and stubbornly stiffen their necks.

God is patient and loving and gracious and offers second chances but we have to take them. We must fear him and live for him, stopping being so stubborn and stiff-necked in our approach.

Pray: asking God's forgiveness for stubbornness in your life.

Reflect: in what ways am I being stubborn in my service to God? Repent and give yourself fully to His service.

*Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.
(v.19)*

Sponges have always intrigued me. There is just something about their appearance, feel, and absorptive qualities that is most fascinating. I remember finding out about how sea sponges were harvested. Donning their helmets, water-proof suits, and their weighted shoes, divers descended into the murky depths of the sea to gather their crop. Sponges are actually animals, and must be cleaned before they are useful for household purposes. All the living matter must be removed so that the skeleton which remains with its open-celled structure can soak up and absorb other elements.

Sponges remind me of children. They, too, quietly and silently soak up everything with which they come in contact. They are what they are, not only because of the inheritance of certain characteristics and traits received from their parents, but also because of their environment. We must be very careful, therefore, of what is allowed to fill their little hearts and minds. How important it is to govern and control their surroundings.

So I encourage you to be careful what you watch on the television with your children, what magazines and books you leave lying around, what words and attitudes you use in your conversations. Talk to your children often about God, His love and His Word. That's what Moses encourages here in Deuteronomy 11.

Moses is reminding the people of Israel here of keeping God's words and commands. He urges them to fix the words on their hearts and minds (memorise Scripture), to tie them on their hands (wristbands like WWJD), teach them to their children by talking about them often, and by writing them on the doorframe (sticky notes around the home).

Pray: thanking God for your children and for the children in the church.

Reflect: what is there in my life and home that affects my children? How can I improve their learning around the home?

You must not worship the LORD your God in their way. But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go. (v.4-5)

When the people came into the Promised Land, God would pick out a single place for the whole nation to come and worship. All worship was to be done there. Gilgal, Bethel, and Shiloh would all be temporary central sanctuaries until the temple would be built in Jerusalem. The whole point is to make sure that the beliefs of the Jews stayed pure. This was a day when people didn't have their own copies of the Bible. They relied upon the Levitical priests to teach them about God and how to worship him. But when the people started getting away from a set standard of worship, the result would always be that the people would go into idolatry.

One of the first things the Israelites were to do when they entered the land and conquered the enemy was to completely destroy the Canaanites' altars and places of worship. This is a principle which many people learn in their walk with God: He doesn't want anything competing for your affection, so it's got to go. The world's ways and the world's worship must be removed. Clear it out, clean it up, and take it all to the dump or the bonfire.

For us, it's not the issue of coming to a central place to worship. The issue is making sure we keep our worship on track, by making sure we stay in God's Word. Jesus would later say in John 4:20-24 that we to worship the Father in Spirit and truth. Now the idea has boiled down to the basics – worshipping God spiritually (with the Spirit and not just a mental exercise or religious tradition) and in truth (based in God's Word).

When churches begin to get away from God's Word, it's like the people trying to offer sacrifices their own way, and they end up worshipping goat-demons instead of following after God Himself. God's Word is the thing that holds us together in worshipping God in truth. As long as we all hold to God's Word, we all worship with the same, correct standard.

Pray: asking for His forgiveness when we wander off track.

Reflect: what is competing for my affection with God?

It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. (v.4)

When doctors find cancerous cells in their patients, they have only one goal: kill the cancer! By whatever means possible, cancer must be removed from the body. If this can be done, the patient might go on to live a long, normal life. So doctors attack the disease with all the resources they possess: surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. These are strong remedies, and in themselves can have serious consequences and cause great suffering. Then why use them? Because the disease would do worse. The cancer must be completely eradicated.

It was in this same spirit that Moses cried, ‘*You must purge the evil from among you*’ (verse 5). The spiritual disease of idolatry could cripple or kill the nation - it must be annihilated. This is a common thread all through chapter thirteen. This is a command which is frequently ignored by Christians. No matter how much the Bible says it, we find excuses not to do it. Keeping people in our lives who are trying to lead us down an ungodly path will almost always wipe us out. The difficulty for us is we like the people around us: they make us laugh and smile; they make us feel good about ourselves and life. The danger is they slowly entice us away from God. Moses reminds the people they should check their close family as well and if they are trying to entice away from God then we should have nothing to do with them either.

One of the biggest threats to our spiritual walk is the books and magazines we read and the television programmes we watch. They are enjoyable and relaxing and fun...but so often they pollute our minds with evil and ungodly thoughts. We have to be so careful they do not take us away from God. In order to stop this from happening we have to firstly stay close to God and hold fast to him; then we have to do away with the things in our life that would seek to draw us away from God.

Pray: asking for God’s help in holding fast to him.

Reflect: what in my life is a distraction to my walk with God – what entices me away from God?

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession. (v.2)

We come now to teaching on clean and unclean food and then on tithing. We often struggle with these verses on food because many of them have disappeared in our day. On what basis did God decide clean and unclean? I have no idea. But I do know that since we have been freed from the bondage of the Law, we are also freed from the dietary requirements of the Law. Jesus said, Mark 7:18-19 *'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him "unclean"? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body. (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)'*

We are to beware of what enters our heart. We are to be a people holy to God and so we should not let sin enter our lives. For the people of Israel they were not to become so alike the people in the land that they were entering that they no longer stood out. They were to keep following God as his chosen people. That same principle applies to us. Would your colleagues at work know you were different to them, that you were a Christian? This doesn't come about by the food we eat nowadays but by the conversations we join in, the jokes we share, the fun we poke at others, the derogatory comments that are passed, the bitter thoughts shared and the anger expressed.

The second half of the chapter is a reminder to the people of giving their tithe to the Lord. They are to set aside the first ten percent of all they have and bring it to the Lord. They do this so that they *'may learn to revere the Lord your God always.'* (Verse 23). What does tithing have to do with fearing the Lord? It has to do with learning to trust and obey God, even when sometimes it doesn't make sense or seem logical.

Pray: asking for God's help in withstanding sin and following him.

Reflect: do I stand out from the crowd – do people know me to be a Christian?

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land. (v.11)

The man sits on the street corner day after day, begging for money. He's poor and desperate for a little cash to spend on food. He's not alone. More than one-half of the world's people live below the internationally defined poverty line of less than \$2.00 a day. Poverty and hunger are such a big problem in our world that it's easy for us to feel helpless or to become hard-hearted and do nothing.

But God doesn't close His eyes to the plight of the poor. When He gave His people guidelines for living, He included instructions on ways to care for the needy (verse 11). He told His people, '*do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother. Rather be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs.*' (verse 7).

God also commanded His people not to glean the corners of their fields so that the less fortunate could gather food (Leviticus 19:9-10). And Jesus showed His compassion for the poor by His words and actions.

God wants us to be open to the needs of others. We have to stay balanced though - if a person is willing to work, then we ought to be willing to help. If a person is unwilling to work, and just wants to live off of the kindness of others, we are doing the wrong thing in helping them. We need to help others according to what their real need is. If they aren't working, then their real need is to get a job and learn to support themselves – and we can help them with this. Sometimes we need to think outside the box in regard to this.

We show our love for God and our faith in him as we live it out day by day. That means having the heart that God has and acting like he would in the world around us.

Pray: thanking God for His good gifts to us and asking him for a heart of compassion for the poor.

Reflect: how can I personally or we as a church family help the poor?

Celebrate...rejoice before the Lord your God...remember. (v.10-12)

What's your favourite holiday? Perhaps it's Christmas, with its Nativity scenes, snow, tree and decorations and carol concerts. Or maybe Easter, a season to meditate on the life-giving death and resurrection of our Lord. If you like bright sun and outdoor barbecues, no doubt you enjoy the Bank holiday weekends. Or do you prefer more personal holidays, such as your birthday or wedding anniversary? Such occasions help form the rhythm of our lives - times of rest, remembrance, celebration, and worship. The special feasts described in today's reading served much the same purpose for the nation of Israel.

Passover commemorated the night that the angel of the Lord "passed over" the Israelite houses in Egypt. Passover was immediately followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, named for the bread without yeast that the people carried in their hasty departure from slavery. This festival took place in the month of Abib (March or April on our calendars), the first month of the Jewish year.

The Feast of Weeks, or Firstfruits, was a harvest festival. At the wheat harvest, the people celebrated it to show joy and thankfulness for God's blessing. This event took place in May or June, and was also called "Pentecost." In the history of the church, Pentecost is the day the Holy Spirit first descended on the believers. Jewish tradition also links this festival with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai.

The Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, took place in September or October, and was also a harvest festival. The people lived in booths made of tree branches and foliage in order to remember the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

All these festivals were designed to allow the people to celebrate and rejoice in God and to remember His leading and guiding and blessing. I wonder what celebrations we hold in the church – or perhaps could and should hold?

Pray: thanking God for His many blessings.

Reflect: how can we celebrate more as a church?

It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees. (v.19)

Some of the greatest scholars in the world have stated without apology that no person's education can be complete without an acquaintance with the Bible. Not only are its contents of inestimable value, but its very literary perfection and beauty are also worthy of our special attention and admiration. If we are to know this Book, it goes without saying that we must be willing to read and study it faithfully. No person can master any subject without diligent effort, concentration, and application. Much of the criticism laid against the Scriptures has come from those who have never studied it, much less even read it through.

A certain Bible teacher, boarding a train, found a seat next to a man who was diligently reading his newspaper. Opening his briefcase the preacher took out his Bible and began to read. The gentleman with the newspaper, glancing out of the corner of his eye, saw this unusual sight and his curiosity was aroused. Finally he said, "Pardon me, Sir, are you a minister?" "Yes, I am," said the man, and began talking to his questioner about the Bible. He explained some of the mysteries of that wonderful Book and its marvellous doctrines and revelations until the other exclaimed in amazement, "How in the world did you ever learn so much about that Book?" The Bible teacher simply replied, "I certainly did not get it by reading the daily newspaper!" Now, we should know what's going on in the world today but I am concerned over the amount of time that is taken up in reading our newspapers, magazines, and periodicals as compared with the Bible.

Moses has been speaking of judges and officials in the land to maintain justice and righteousness, and has finished by laying the foundation for when the people sometime in the future will ask for a king. He says this king should read the word daily and live by it. The same applies to us.

Pray: thanking God for His Word.

Reflect: do I read my Bible every day and live by its teaching?

They shall have no inheritance among their brothers; the LORD is their inheritance, as he promised them. (v.2)

Imagine that you're present at the reading of a will in ancient Israel. The lawyer clears his throat and begins: "I, so-and-so, being of sound mind, do hereby bequeath my entire estate to my children. May they live forever in its wealth."

Wow! What's the estate? Stocks, shares, or real estate? No. Then perhaps gold, gems, or cash? No. Then what? Is he leaving them a profitable company? A valuable patent? A treasure map? No, no, and no. You see, the man who died was a Levite. Levites didn't accumulate property or wealth. Instead, they served the Lord and He was their inheritance. What a fantastic bequest to leave their descendants!

As Moses turned his attention to Israel's religious leaders, he gave instructions concerning the Levites. Because they had been chosen to serve God and to minister at the Tabernacle, they were to have no other allegiances or preoccupations. They would live off the people's tithes and offerings, and receive towns to live in - out of the other tribes' land grants. The historical reason for this privilege is the golden calf episode, during which the Levites rallied to Moses and fought for God (Ex. 32:25-29). Levites served as Scripture teachers and possibly as judges, and also assisted the priests with sacrifices. For these leaders, purity was essential.

That's why Moses takes time to warn them to avoid detestable practices here in Deuteronomy 18. The nations around Israel sacrificed their children to their false gods, and practiced all sorts of sorcery, magic, and witchcraft. All of these things are detestable to the Lord, and the children of God are not to participate in them. While many Christians would never dream of sacrificing their babies, many don't think twice about reading their horoscope, or believing in television psychics. These things are wrong and are to be avoided.

Pray: thanking God for our inheritance – eternal life in heaven.

Reflect: do I live a pure life? Am I tempted to read horoscopes and the like? It's time to stop!

Otherwise, the avenger of blood might pursue him in a rage, overtake him if the distance is too great, and kill him even though he is not deserving of death, since he did it to his neighbour without malice aforethought. (v.6)

The great Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini was legendary for his fits of rage. The librarian of one of Toscanini's orchestras was particularly vexed by the maestro's habit of throwing valuable musical scores at the musicians when angry. Watching closely, the librarian observed that Toscanini's first act when enraged was to take his baton in both hands and try to break it. If the baton snapped, Toscanini usually calmed down and rehearsal continued. If the baton did not break, he began hurling scores. The librarian's solution? He made sure the conductor had a generous supply of flimsy batons on hand for rehearsal!

Many of us get angry in life; in fact if truth be told we get angry very easily and very quickly. Sometimes this leads to dreadful outcomes – not simply the snapping of a baton but hitting out in rage, driving madly and too close to the person who cut us up, and seeking revenge at all costs. Moses is urging the people to put practices into place that will stop the first act of rage and anger. He speaks here of cities of refuge – places people who accidentally and unintentionally kill someone can flee to so that the family member of the deceased does not react in anger before finding out the facts. We should never act without pausing to think. And we should certainly never react while angry. Take time to consider what has happened logically and then respond.

At the end of the chapter the eye for eye idea is shared. The idea of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was not unique to Israel. Called the *lex talionis*, or “law of retaliation,” this figurative language established the principle that the punishment should fit the crime. Jesus taught against the misunderstanding that saw “an eye for an eye” as a license to get even. On the contrary, turning the other cheek and going the extra mile should characterise everyday life (Mt. 5:38-42).

Pray: asking God to help you deal fairly with people.

Reflect: in what way(s) am I tempted to respond in an ‘eye for an eye’ type way at the present time? How can I go the extra mile?

Do not be faint-hearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before them. For the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory. (v.3-4)

Several years ago there was a well-known television circus show that developed a Bengal tiger act. Like the rest of the show, it was done “live” before a large audience. One evening, the tiger trainer went into the cage with several tigers to do a routine performance. The door was locked behind him. The spotlights highlighted the cage, the television cameras moved in close, and the audience watched in suspense as the trainer skilfully put the tigers through their paces. In the middle of the performance, the worst possible fate befell the act: the lights went out!

For twenty or thirty long, dark seconds the trainer was locked in with the tigers. In the darkness they could see him, but he could not see them. A whip and a small kitchen chair seemed meagre protection under the circumstances, but he survived, and when the lights came on, he calmly finished the performance. In an interview afterward, he was asked how he felt knowing that the tigers could see him but that he could not see them. He first admitted the chilling fear of the situation, but pointed out that the tigers did not know that he could not see them. He said, “I just kept cracking my whip and talking to them until the lights came on. And they never knew I could not see them as well as they could see me.”

Sometimes it seems like life’s lights have gone out and we’re faced with a cage full of tigers in the dark. But though we can’t always see Him, we’re not alone in our cage with the tigers. God is with us. He is there to fight for us and protect us. Even when the lights are out. Moses gives the people of Israel a reminder that God will be with them in battle. He will lead the way and he will give them the victory. They were to look to God and not to trust in their own fighting prowess or their own weapons. In life we too should look to God, trusting in Him and not in our strength and abilities.

Pray: thanking God for His presence in our lives.

Reflect: what difficult situations do I face this week? What am I trusting in to get me through them? Trust in God alone.

He must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the son of the wife he does not love. (v.16)

We get into all kinds of difficulty in this chapter for we know that God's design for marriage is one man marrying one woman and them remaining together forever. Just because God's law acknowledged that some men would have more than one wife doesn't put God's stamp of approval on it. God is not here allowing or permitting a man to have 2 wives but he is setting out some ground rules for when this does happen. Now, in the case that a man has two wives, trouble is bound to be brewing. In this case, the Lord addresses the case of favouring one wife over another by refusing to give the firstborn son his rightful inheritance. God is saying, "There is to be no favouritism. You can't change the rules just because you like one person more than the other."

Favouritism in families happens but we ought to be careful not to have favourites. We should treat all our children the same. I know that we can get a little carried away with this. There are times when one child will complain that we only spent £5 on them while we spent £5.50 on another child. I think that a good way to handle this is to explain to your children that sometimes life is going to be unfair. Period.

This passage also speaks of a stubborn and rebellious child. Now this is not a child who has a strange hairdo or body piercings – it is talking about stubbornness, rebellion, refusing to listen to correction, failure to obey, drunkenness, and gluttony. Parents have to take control at home and bring their children up well. There are too many parents who are letting their children call the shots. God has entrusted them to you. You are to be the one in charge. They may have learned how to manipulate you, berate you, calling you names, making you feel insecure, but you are still their parent. Love and discipline them so they grow up well and learn respect.

Pray: thanking God for the gift of children.

Reflect: do I show favouritism at home? Do I let my children away with too much?

You must purge the evil from among you. (v.22)

What's the state of marriage these days? A recent poll found that households comprising a married couple with children - a nuclear family, in other words - account for just 36 percent of all British households. Only 30 percent think that premarital sex is wrong, and more than half endorse "living together" as morally acceptable, with younger people holding much more permissive views than their elders. A majority prefer fewer children and view divorce as no problem.

Another survey reported that 50 percent of teenage girls have had sex before age 18. And one in six women say they've been involved in a pregnancy that ended in an abortion. Sin leads to the breakdown of the family in society. That's why God provided rules about marriage and family for His chosen people: to keep sin at bay and His holiness at the centre. We're not sure of the exact reason for every regulation in today's passage, but we do know that purity was the primary focus.

Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage should be honoured by all." Women should be treated with dignity, even if they'd been captured in battle. A new husband who slandered his wife (falsely accusing her of not having been a virgin prior to their marriage) would be fined twice the typical bride-price and forbidden to divorce her. A son shouldn't marry his father's former wife, for that would dishonour the family. The differences between men and women should be respected (verse 5). Marriage and family sins were to be punished severely. A rebellious son would be stoned to death. In cases of fornication or adultery, both partners would be executed. A man who raped a married woman would be killed.

The message for us...a reminder to keep our lives pure and to follow God's ways. We should abstain from sex until we are married. Once married we should keep working at our relationships so we remain married and in love forever. And no sex out with our married relationship either.

Pray: for the married couples in the church and for young people in relationships.

Reflect: how can I support and encourage marriage and married couples?

For the LORD your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that he will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you. (v.14)

Writer and theologian J. I. Packer said the following about the Puritans: “The Puritan ideal was that all of life, the individual, the family, the church, the worlds of politics and economics, philosophy and science, social structures and education, personal relationships and the arts, should at every point be, to use the biblical phrase, ‘holiness to the Lord,’ and that everyone should be pursuing with all their might the reality of practical, experiential, conscientious, determined, hopeful, vigorous, hardworking, humble, visionary, prayerful, enterprising godliness in the fellowship and service and power of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”

In seeing all of life as holy, the Puritans followed in the footsteps of Deuteronomy. As we’ve seen, God’s choosing of Israel to be His people affected every area of their lives. Today we cover various laws and regulations that don’t necessarily lend themselves to a topical approach. But the context is the same - these are the covenant responsibilities of God’s people; this is how they are to live as His people in His presence.

The concerns in today’s reading touch on topics we’ve already dealt with. Recently, we’ve reviewed God’s expectations and commands about marriage and family, warfare, the justice system, political and religious leadership, tithes and debts, and worship feasts. Many of the examples here deal with community love. For example, one Israelite couldn’t charge another interest on a loan. Debtors and labourers shouldn’t be exploited. Grain should be left in the fields for the poor to glean. Other laws deal with worship, such as the note that money earned from prostitution shouldn’t be used to pay a vow to the Lord.

God longs for his people to be pure and holy. In all that we do we should seek to live for him and follow his ways.

Pray: asking God to help us put him first always.

Reflect: do I live all of my life for God? Are there areas I keep to myself?

The LORD your God commands you this day to follow these decrees and laws; carefully observe them with all your heart and with all your soul. (v.16)

In the mid-eighteenth century, Sir William Blackstone became the first man to explain English common law in a way understandable to a layperson. His lectures, first given at Oxford University, were expanded to four volumes and published as Commentaries on the Laws of England. These books sold very well, and the concepts they expounded later served as a cornerstone of the American Constitution. Due to this groundbreaking work, Blackstone achieved lasting fame.

The Law God had given at Sinai wasn't nearly as obscure as English common law, but the Israelites still needed many points explained. Even more, they needed to be encouraged and exhorted to obey what they knew. This was the motivation behind Moses' words in the book of Deuteronomy and here his comments urged the people further toward righteous living.

Although this section contains many miscellaneous regulations, one ongoing theme was to remember history in dealings with other peoples. They should be kind to strangers, since they'd been aliens in Egypt. As former slaves, they shouldn't oppress the poor. They shouldn't hate the Edomites, for the descendants of Esau were their brothers. The Amalekites, on the other hand, should be wiped out as punishment for their irreverent attacks on God's people. And the Ammonites and Moabites were forbidden to enter the assembly because of their treatment of Israel.

The people were also to remember history in their dealings with God. Individuals were instructed to bring the firstfruits of their first harvest in the Promised Land before the Lord, and in their worship to recite a creedal summary of how God had worked nationally and individually. For leading them from slavery to a land "flowing with milk and honey," God deserved all the glory! The Lord asked His people then, as He asks us today, to obey His Word. We must give heed to the Scriptures and do what they instruct us.

Pray: thanking God for His Word.

Reflect: do I know His Word and am I following it?

Be silent, O Israel, and listen! You have now become the people of the LORD your God. Obey the LORD your God and follow his commands and decrees that I give you today. (v.9-10)

The world's largest collection of hearing aids and "ear trumpets" is housed at Kent State University in Ohio. An "ear trumpet" was a device used to amplify sound for the hearing-impaired, but it was only somewhat successful. When the electrical hearing aid was patented in 1880 and made available to the general public by about 1900, it was a major improvement. Electrical hearing aids offered not only amplified sounds, but they also increased the range of sounds. Nowadays, modern hearing aids can even be fine-tuned to meet the needs of particular individuals.

Hearing God's Law was important for Israel. But even the best "hearing aid" wasn't all that was needed - obedience had to follow.

This is the start of Moses' third sermon. Yesterday we saw a formal renewal of the covenant at the end of his second address; in this new sermon he wanted to impress upon the Israelites the seriousness of their commitment - the big-picture benefits, responsibilities, and consequences of their covenant relationship with God. Moses drove the point home dramatically! Half the tribes were to stand on Mount Gerizim to read the blessings, and half on Mount Ebal to read the curses. These mountains, both about 3,000 feet high, are located in the central hill country of Israel.

Moses asks the people to set up some stones as an altar and to write the law on them. He does not want them to forget the law. He wants them to follow it. The best way to remember something is to do it. And so it is not enough to hear but action has to follow. Whenever we read God's Word or hear it preached and proclaimed we should be asking ourselves how can I live that out – how can I apply it to my life?

Pray: thanking God for His Word which we have at hand to read and which we hear preached and proclaimed regularly.

Reflect: do I read His Word and hear His Word and act upon it? How can I act upon the sermon I heard today?

All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God. (v.2)

Medical research suggests that natural substances found in tea help stop blood clotting, balance the damaging effects of oxygen (such as fatty deposits in the arteries), and boost the production of disease-fighting enzymes. According to one study, a daily cup of black tea reduces the chance of a heart attack by 44 percent. Another study found that drinking tea can protect against or slow down the growth of some forms of cancer. Yet another study discovered that people drinking one or two cups of tea per day lowered their chances of atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) by 46 percent.

Moses prescribed a more powerful health tip to the Israelites: obeying God. If the people obeyed the Word of God, there would be huge blessings. As a nation, they would be unbeatable. In farming and family-building they would be prosperous. They just had to stay on the straight and narrow path.

I think verse two uses a wonderful description, that the blessings would ‘accompany you’ or as the ESV and King James say ‘overtake’ them. So many people are always running around trying to find, capture, and overtake the blessings. But here we see that if we would just be obedient to the Word, then the blessings will overtake us.

If, however, the people did not obey the Word of God, then God would consider that as them having forsaken Him. In that case, the opposite of the blessings would take place. They would be continually defeated as a nation. Their farming and attempts at raising a family would all fail. They would be sick, confused, enslaved, and destroyed.

The challenge for us is to keep following God and obeying his command and then we too will be subject to his blessing.

Pray: thanking God for His promises and His faithfulness.

Reflect: how easy is it to stay on the straight path?

Tuesday 28 June 2011

Deuteronomy 29:1-29

Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do. (v.9)

In the former Soviet Union, the government frequently published maps that were deliberately falsified or erroneous. Towns, rivers, and roads were misplaced or mislabelled. Places were left out. Street maps were inaccurate. Why? National security. The reasoning was that the less people knew about these things, the more trouble foreign spies and soldiers would have in undermining or invading the country. It was part of a concept called “maskirovka,” meaning misdirection, camouflage, misinformation, or diversion. Such a strategy mostly led to confusion and inefficiency. To get where they’re going, people need accurate maps.

For God’s people, the covenant recounted in Deuteronomy was a roadmap for living, one that was wholly accurate and truthful. Deuteronomy 29–30 is the climax of Israel’s renewal of the covenant. Moses charged the nation, formally standing in the presence of God, the initiator of the covenant, to fulfil carefully their duties and obligations under the terms of the covenant (verses 9-15).

Moses reminds them of their history and of all that God has done for them. He reminds them of the law and regulations that God has given them and he even speaks of their obedience and disobedience. He is challenging them here to renew the covenant and to live by it. He wants them to follow the map – God’s map for living well in the land.

And I love verse 29. There are a lot of things that God has not revealed in His Word which people are curious about. “Why does God do this? How does that work? When did this take place? What if this other thing were to happen?” Maybe I’m too simple, but I’m frankly not interested in hypothesizing about things God hasn’t told us. The secret things belong to Him, and I need to be busy with the things He has told me.

Pray: thanking God for giving us a map showing us the way to live life well on earth.

Reflect: am I following the map or trying to find my own way in life?

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. (v.19-20)

You've heard the infamous name of John Wilkes Booth. He assassinated President Abraham Lincoln in 1865. But have you heard about Edwin Booth, John's eldest brother? Edwin, a well-known actor, was waiting at a Jersey City train station when he saw someone slip and fall off the platform. Edwin quickly grabbed the man's collar and pulled him to safety - rescuing him from serious injury or death. Who was the man he saved? Abraham Lincoln's son Robert, a soldier in the Civil War. How ironic that the man who saved Lincoln's son had a brother who would soon kill the president. One saved a life; one took a life. One chose life; the other chose death.

The Lord gave His people a choice between life and death: They could love Him and obey His commands (verse 16), or they could worship and serve other gods (verse 17). He told them, '*I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses; now choose life.*' (verse 19).

We too have a choice between life and death. We can receive Jesus as our Saviour and live with Him forever, or we can reject Jesus and be in darkness forever without Him. The best choice is clear. Receive God's gift of His Son Jesus. Choose life!

In some ways this is a once in a lifetime choice but in another it is a choice we make daily to follow Jesus and walk in his way. Each day we are faced with many choices and the devil tries to tempt us in so many ways. So each day as we begin our day we ought to choose Jesus and follow him closely throughout that day.

Pray: asking for God's help in making the right choices in life.

Reflect: what choice have I made? Do I choose Jesus every day in life?

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the LORD swore to their forefathers to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. (v.7-8)

At many churches, job descriptions for volunteer positions often include a line something like this one: “In consultation with church leaders, find, mentor, and train an appropriate replacement for this ministry.” In other words, part of answering a call and accepting the responsibilities of a ministry, whether large or small, is to make sure the work continues after you’ve moved on.

Moses understood this principle well. In these last four days of our study, we’ll see him finish his 120-year pilgrimage and wind up his affairs. Naturally, the issue of succession was key. Though it was God who’d done the real work, and though Moses knew that and had given Him all the glory, when a leader leaves, there is a vacuum. That was certainly true with Moses, the only human leader the recently liberated nation had ever known.

Joshua would be the one to take his place. Chosen by God, appointed by Moses, and publicly commissioned in today’s reading, he was already known as a skilled military leader. It might have been tempting for the people to put their faith in his abilities, so Moses reminded them to trust in God alone for victory in the Promised Land. To Joshua, stepping into some very big shoes, Moses said, ‘*Be strong and courageous,*’ a theme that carries into the book of Joshua (Joshua 1:6-9).

We too should learn not to trust in our own abilities but to fully rely on God. Times will come when we may be tempted to fear but as Moses says ‘*Be strong and courageous...for the Lord your God goes with you.*’

Pray: thanking God for his presence.

Reflect: what am I scared of just now? Hand it over to God and trust him.

