

No Bitter Root Among You

Deuteronomy 29

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

I. Introduction and Background

- a. The **Book of Deuteronomy** consists of three speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness. The three speeches are as follows:
 - i. **Speech No. 1: Deuteronomy 1-4** (the first four chapters)
 - ii. **Speech No. 2: Deuteronomy 5-26** (twenty-two chapters; for us, about 25 lessons in this series)
 - 1. This section covers the specific laws and regulations.
 - iii. **Speech No. 3: Deuteronomy 27-34** (last eight chapters of the book)
 - 1. Final wrap-up, including warnings and blessings, depending on whether the Israelites obey or disobey what has just been handed down.
 - 2. Death of Moses and handoff of leadership to Joshua.
- b. Now in **Deuteronomy 28-30**:
 - i. No additional laws will be given from this point. Now, Moses explains to the Israelites *why they need to follow these Laws*.
 - 1. Moses explains what will happen if they obey (and if they disobey).
 - 2. Then, he calls them to make a decision.
 - ii. This reminds me of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus follows the same pattern.
 - 1. Jesus explains His new laws (in parallel with the Law of Moses), in **Matthew 5-6**, and then.
 - 2. He closes in **Matthew 7** by explaining what will happen if they do obey His commands, versus what will happen if they do not; and He calls his listeners to make a decision!

- c. In the prior chapter, **Deuteronomy 28**, Moses explained...
 - i. The character of God revealed: His sense of *justice* in blessing obedience and punishing disobedience.
 - ii. *Blessings* if they obey, including:
 - 1. Their offspring, flocks, herds, and crops will be blessed and multiplied.
 - 2. Their barns and storehouses will be filled to overflowing.
 - 3. They will defeat all their enemies.
 - 4. The Lord will set them over all the other nations. They will not be ruled by any other nation.
 - iii. *Curses* if they disobey, including:
 - 1. They will be cursed in the city and countryside (wherever they go).
 - 2. Poverty, famine, and death will cling to them.
 - 3. For them, the sky will be like brass, and the earth like iron. Dust and dirt instead of rain shall fall on the land.
 - 4. They will be afflicted with madness, blindness, confusion, sores that won't heal; all kinds of illnesses. They will be paralyzed by fear.
 - 5. Their enemies shall take their wives, children, lands, etc.
 - 6. Their children will be carried off into captivity.
 - 7. The famine will be so bad that gentle mothers will eat their own babies in secret.
 - 8. They will be taken back to Egypt and offered for sale there as slaves, but no one will buy them.
 - 9. The Lord will rejoice over destroying the Israelites, as He previously rejoiced over blessing and delivering them!
- d. In **Deuteronomy 29**, the chapter we will be reading today, Moses continues his appeal to the Israelites: that they must guard and keep (obey) the Law, *or else*! Here, Moses adds a more complete explanation of what will happen to them if they don't obey His commands. In this chapter, we will learn:

- i. What will happen *if only one person* (or tribe or family) disobeys the commands of the Lord (assuming essentially everyone else is obeying)?
- ii. If the Israelites as a nation turn away from the Lord and get severely punished (as explained in the prior chapter), what will happen after that? Will the Lord's reputation among the nations be damaged? Will God's plans end up being thwarted?
- iii. We will encounter a few phrases Moses introduces here, which will come back, with even greater significance, in the New Testament.
 1. One phrase in particular has great practical significance to how we live as Christians in the church today.

II. If One (Person, Family or Tribe) Should Disobey

a. Read **Deuteronomy 29:1-8**.

- i. God reminds them of how He delivered them thus far.
 1. They had seen miraculous signs and deliverance in Egypt.
 2. The Lord had led them for 40 years in the Wilderness.
 - a. He preserved their clothes and sandals.
 - b. He fed them and provided drink.
 - c. He led them to victory against kings.
 - d. The Lord already had given them some land to inherit (to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh, east of the Jordan River).
- ii. Therefore, remembering all that, they need to keep all the words of the covenant.
 1. **Challenge for Us:** Don't forget all the ways God has delivered us thus far. If we constantly remember those things, we are much less likely to stray.
 2. Always remember the blessings we have received, and give thanks to God for what He has done for us thus far!
 3. Our American holiday of Thanksgiving was established for a similar purpose. It was intended to be a time to stop everything to give thanks to God for the many blessings He has given us.

b. Read **Deuteronomy 29:9-16**.

- i. Moses calls all of them (including the non-Jewish resident aliens among them) to renew the covenant the Lord had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
 - ii. They are called to be God's special people. Not like the nations they left and had passed through, who worshiped "gods" of wood, stone, silver and gold.
- c. Read **Deuteronomy 29:17-20**.
- i. This answers the question: "What happens *if just one person* (or one family or tribe) *turns away from the Lord*, to serve other gods?"
 - 1. For example, if the person thinks in his heart, "God certainly won't destroy me as a result of my sin, since He would have to destroy a lot of other innocent people in the process. And surely the Lord would not want to do that!"
 - 2. God *will not show mercy* to that one individual (or tribe) who sins. The Lord will cause the curses to cling to that person, and blot his name out from under heaven.
 - ii. **Lesson for Us:**
 - 1. If someone today who is in the church (among the spiritual community), yet is involved in sin, the Lord will find you out. In the end, no one 'gets away with' anything. Being among "God's holy people" is no guarantee for anyone, unless they are personally following Jesus and His commands.
 - 2. This is similar to the warning Paul gave in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**, where he uses the exodus journey as an example to teach the Christians important lessons. All the people (Israelites in the Wilderness) had been "baptized". All were in the "assembly" [Greek word in the LXX = church]. All ate the spiritual food and drink [corresponding to us taking the Lord's supper]. All "drank from Christ". Yet most of them fell into sin (idolatry, sexual immorality, putting the Lord to the test, complaining) and did not make it to the Promised Land.
 - a. Paul said that they serve as a warning lesson to us Christians.
 - 3. "The Lord will blot out his name..." (**Deuteronomy 29:19**)
 - a. **Question:** Does that phrase make you think of anything Jesus said?

- b. "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: *"I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.* Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and *I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life;* but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*"*" (**Revelation 3:1–6**, NKJV)
- c. The Christians in Sardis had a reputation that was better than how they really were. But the Lord knew what the truth was by observing their works (how they lived, what they did and did not do). Some among them would be saved, but others (who did not repent) would be "blotted out". May all of us take that warning to heart!

III. Let There Not Be Among You a Bitter Root

- a. Re-read **Deuteronomy 29:17**.
 - i. **Question:** Does what it says in this verse remind you of *anything in the New Testament*?
 - ii. Read **Hebrews 12:12-17**.
 - 1. "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; *lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;* lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears." (**Hebrews 12:14–17**, NKJV)
 - 2. The background for this passage from **Hebrews**.

- a. The primary focus of the book of **Hebrews** is the importance of *persevering in the faith*.
- b. The writer lays out his main thesis by saying that Jesus was the *faithful priest* over the *faithful house* of God (**Hebrews 3:1-6**, likely alluding to the prophecy in **1 Samuel/1 Kingdoms 2:35**). The writer then poses the challenge to the Christians who are reading his letter, by making the challenge: “Are we the *faithful* house?”
- c. In **Hebrews 10-12**, this call to persevere and remain faithful is carried to its conclusion.
 - i. “Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: ‘For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.’ (**Habakkuk 2:3-4**, LXX) But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.” (**Hebrews 10:35-39**, NKJV)
 - ii. **Hebrews 11** provides many examples of Old Testament heroes who remained faithful through severe trials.
 - iii. In **Hebrews 12**, we are pointed to the example of Jesus persevering through suffering on the cross. Similarly, from **Proverbs 3:11-12**, we are reminded that fathers chasten their children for a greater benefit in the end (as God is chastening Christians through trials).
- iii. It seems to me that the “bitter root” in both passages (**Deuteronomy 29:17** and **Hebrews 12:15**) applies to someone who is among God’s people, but (perhaps not obvious to most) is not living a life of following/obeying the Lord. They are giving in to their flesh.
 - 1. The same phrase is used in both passages (**Hebrews 12:15** and **Deuteronomy 29:17**). The match between the two is even clearer when comparing the Greek of the LXX with that of the New Testament.

- a. Keep in mind that the **Hebrews** writer was clearly quoting from the LXX; compare Old Testament passages quoted in **Hebrews 10-11** between the Masoretic Text and the LXX.
2. The bitter root may be hidden from view, but will send out shoots and spread, “springing up” and causing trouble, thereby defiling many.
3. The Christians are not only to take heed to this in their own lives. They must also look out for their brothers and sisters in the church. We are called to “look carefully *lest anyone fall short* of the grace of God”. We are then given the tragic example of Esau (**Genesis 25-27**), who valued short-term pleasure over his inheritance, and therefore is called “godless”.
 - a. We are saved by God’s grace. However, as the Hebrews writer says, we *CAN* thereafter “fall short” of His grace.
 - b. We also can insult the spirit of grace, treating the blood of Christ as an unholy thing, and thereby face God’s wrath.
 - i. “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and *insulted the Spirit of grace*? For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. And again, ‘The LORD will judge His people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (**Hebrews 10:26-31**, NKJV)
- iv. The admonition for us Christians, contained in this passage, warns about the “bitter root” in the church:
 1. “*Look carefully*”. Be on the lookout for anyone in the church who might be like Esau, a bitter root.

2. This is *not* a “hands off” approach to suspected sin. We can’t just look the other way and say, “That’s not my problem.” And this passage does not just apply to leaders in the church. It applies to all of us!
3. Two problems in this area:
 - a. Those who prefer to look the other way (cowards, conflict avoiders, excuse-makers, more concerned with their own peace and comfort than with the salvation of those around them). If we walk as Jesus walked, what will we do?
 - i. Some churches have a “hands-off” culture.
 - ii. Sometimes we refer to people who have this tendency as “conflict avoiders”. However, the Biblical term for this is “coward”. That is one of the sins that will be punished by eternal fire!
 1. “But the *cowardly*, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars *shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone*, which is the second death.” (**Revelation 21:8**, NKJV)
 - iii. “Beware, brethren, *lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God*; but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” (**Hebrews 3:12–13**, NKJV)
 - iv. We need to have relationships with one another in the church where we are like “iron sharpening iron” (**Proverbs 27:17**).
 - b. On the other hand, some among us have the opposite problem of being conflict avoiders and are busybodies instead.
 - i. They have a problem of meddling in the lives of others, and do not want to “mind their own business” (**1 Thessalonians 4:11**).

- ii. They prefer to pick out the specks in the eyes of others rather than first dealing with sins in their own lives (**Matthew 7:3-5, Luke 6:41-42**).
- iii. Ask others if you have that problem, and if you do, repent!

IV. Closing Thoughts on Last Passage

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 29:23-28**.
- b. God will triumph even in the disobedience of His people. The other nations will notice and fear God when they see what happened!
 - i. This points to the *sovereignty* of God, using all things (even wickedness by others) to advance His purposes.
- c. The last verse of this chapter (**Deuteronomy 29:28** in the OSB; designated **29:29** in other versions) speaks of “the secret/hidden things” of God.
 - i. “*The secret things belong to the Lord our God*, but those things revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (**Deuteronomy 29:28**, LXX, OSB)
 - ii. “*The hidden things are the Lord your God’s*, but the revealed things belong to you and to your children forever, to do all the words of this law.” (**Deuteronomy 29:29**, LES, LXX)
 - 1. In the LXX, the Greek word translated “secret” or “hidden” is κρυπτός / kruptos.
 - a. This is the basis for familiar English language words that include “*crypt*” (where a dead body is ‘hidden’), “*cryptic*” and “*cryptocurrency*”.
 - iii. In the New Testament, it speaks of things that were *hidden in the past* that *have now been revealed* to us through Christ.
 - 1. Jesus: “For there is nothing covered that will not be *revealed*, nor *hidden* that will not be known.” (**Luke 12:2**, NKJV)
 - 2. Paul: “...the mystery which has been *hidden from ages and from generations*, but now has been *revealed to His saints*.” (**Colossians 1:26**, NKJV)
 - 3. Paul: “To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the *mystery, which from the beginning of the ages*

has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ;" (**Ephesians 3:8-9**, NKJV)

- iv. Let us appreciate the fact that we have been entrusted with the secret things of God, which were hidden from men until Christ came and revealed them to His followers!
 - 1. Most people in the world, those who do not know Christ, are still groping in the dark on these things.
 - 2. Mysteries that have been revealed to us include things such as:
 - a. The nature of God, Satan and the angels.
 - b. What happens after we die (Hades, Day of Judgment, resurrection of the body, eternal life or eternal fire).
 - c. The fate of the world (the earth).
 - d. The nature of man (soul, spirit and flesh).
 - e. What we must do to inherit eternal life.
 - f. The body and blood of Christ present in the Lord's Supper.
 - 3. We have been given the knowledge of so many spiritual mysteries, secret things that were hidden even from Moses and the prophets. Let us never forget that we have been entrusted with these wonderful treasures!