

### DEUTERONOMY

#### Lesson 14 - Chapter 12

This is one of those weeks that we're going to move along carefully and deliberately because there are some vital spiritual principles to be extracted from even the first couple of verses of Deuteronomy 12. Chapters 1-11 of Deuteronomy were in essence the introduction to what is beginning in this chapter we're about to study, chapter 12. And scholars have established the importance of this section of Scripture by giving it its own name: the Code of Deuteronomy.

I think if we can come away with one supreme theme, one overriding God-principle, from our lesson last week it is that when the Lord offers us an opportunity to join in His covenant offer we DO have a choice; it is an offer that we CAN refuse. The Lord asked Israel: "do you want to be My People and for Me to be your God? If you do then enter into My Covenant that I've set before you. If you don't want My Covenant then reject it and walk away". That is the choice that is set before every man whom Yehoveh approaches.

And by the way, there would have been no calamitous penalty per se for Israel to choose to say "no" to the offer of God's Covenant. Israel simply would have been denied special holy status and instead be re-joined to the universal pool of nations from which they were plucked. From a heavenly and eternal standpoint that would have been a grave mistake to refuse the Lord's gracious offer; but from a limited earthly viewpoint they would have fared no better or worse than any other nation or people. It is the same for folks today when we are given the opportunity to join Israel's Covenant and the Messiah of that covenant, Yeshua, Jesus Christ. By our own free will we can say yes or no; the yes will forever alter our eternal future and in some ways our earthly experiences. A no will not generally damn us to poverty or sickness or unhappiness during our lifetimes but rather our "no" will exclude us from a relationship with the Lord and the primarily SPIRITUAL blessings that come from it during both our natural life and our spiritual eternity.

But there is a second part to that Covenant pattern and it is that acceptance of the Lord's covenants brings with it its provisions; those covenants have terms and conditions. If a man decides **not** to enter into a Covenant relationship with God, then the terms of the covenant that He has offered has no bearing on that man because he's not part of the covenant people. However if one DOES decide to accept the offer of a Covenant relationship with God then whoever does so indeed has an obligation to obey all the terms of that covenant. And just as that was the case in Moses' era, so it remains today and until heaven and earth pass away.

It will be worth our while to take some time this week to set the stage for what we're about to study over the next several weeks because some ideas and concepts that seem so normal and ordinary and self-evident to us (because it's all we've ever known) are actually quite revolutionary in their nature so the impact of those ideas and concepts gets lost. A couple of weeks ago I used our American Constitution as an illustration of some principles and problems that men face when trying to govern our earthly societies, so I'll use the Constitution yet again to make a point because we're at least somewhat familiar with its structure and intent.

Our Constitution was based on an idea (or better, an ideal) of self-governance and self-responsibility. While the idea of democracy was revolutionary to some degree, various elements of it were previously attempted by ancient Rome (in having a governmental body called the Senate that theoretically represented the people). Other elements of our Constitution were modeled after the famous Magna Carta of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which limited the power of the king such that he was supposed to obey established laws of the kingdom just as the common citizens had to. So our Constitution was really but another (though significant) step towards an ideal of democratic self-rule, not a complete departure from everything that had ever been thought of or attempted.

Yet as radical as our Constitution was seen by many in year of its establishment it cannot begin to describe the unprecedented detour taken by the Covenant of Mt. Sinai from all that had been known up to this point in history particularly as it pertains to social justice. Because up to this point there was ONLY one source of law and justice for ANY of the earth's societies: the law and justice as declared by its king. The concept first introduced to the Israelites out in the Wilderness that a god (instead of a human king) would issue this amazing system of laws and ordinances and rituals by which even the ultimate ruler of the government was to obey boggled the ancient mind. And as happens in such cases of radical departure from the norm, it often doesn't even feel real to most people. It seems rather like a fantasy or something that is far from their grasp (such as a dream or a vision) and so it's hard to put it into practice. It is also rather easy to misinterpret what was meant because there was so little about many of these new concepts that an Israelite could relate to; often it was simply easier to mix in a few elements of The Law of Moses with ways and customs they had always practiced; or perhaps to look at what other cultures that surrounded them did and modify things a bit.

Up to the time of Moses (and it is still largely so within most religions of the world except for Judeo-Christianity) people were in constant search for what the various gods demanded of them. Since they believed that most things that happened TO them were the consequences of decisions by one god or another, the people desperately wanted to know which god had intervened in their life, and why that god chose to do what he or she did, and was there any way to appease or manipulate that god. But almost universally, it was all for naught because it was understood that the gods and their desires were generally unknowable. Serendipity ruled; the whims of the gods controlled everyone and everything, and there was little to no logic for what these gods decided except that like for a typical earthly monarch the motives were self-

centered.

I tell you frankly that we have absolutely no way to identify with this ancient mindset unless we've perhaps been deeply involved in a non-Judeo-Christian society. But since most of us have not been raised up in that kind of environment, let me tell you in a nutshell that life was always uneasy because hanging over your head was knowledge that some god or another could disrupt your existence at any instant and you might never know why or what you had done to bring that god's wrath upon you. It was a truly terrible predicament.

I recently ran across an ancient poem that dates back to about the time of Abraham, from roughly 2000 B.C. Segments of this poem have been incorporated into records of several different ancient societies over a period of many centuries so highly regarded was it that it poignantly expressed the common plight of the human race across all cultural boundaries and eras. I'm going to take up more time than I probably ought to and read a good portion of it to you because it so soberly captures the dilemma that the whole known world lived in (and much of it still does) who did not know the one true God. My hope is that two things will be accomplished by our looking at this 4000 year old tome. First that it helps those studying Torah to understand the mindset and psyche of the ancient world that Moses and the Hebrews of the Exodus lived in; a mindset that infected their thinking with such false beliefs. And therefore how difficult it was for these Hebrew refugees from Egypt to grasp and assimilate that which Yehoveh was offering to Israel. And second so you can see how incredibly blessed and fortunate we are that God has the character and attributes that He does, and that He has graciously made Himself and His laws and commands known to us. God possesses a character with attributes that we accept just very matter-of-fact and take for granted, but these attributes were unthinkable and even confusing for the people during the time the Torah was being recorded because it was such a radical departure from what they and the rest of the world practiced.

This 4000 year-old anonymous poem is called, "The Prayer to Every God".

### **Prayer to Every God**

May the fury of my lord's heart be quieted toward me.

May the god who is not known be quieted toward me;

May the goddess who is not known be quieted toward me.

May the god whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me;

May the goddess whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me.

May the heart of my god be quieted toward me;

May the heart of my goddess be quieted toward me.

May my god and goddess be quieted toward me.

May the god [who has become angry with me]<sup>40</sup> be quieted toward me;

May the goddess [who has become angry with me] be quieted toward me.

(10) (lines 11-18 cannot be restored with certainty)

In ignorance I have eaten that forbidden of my god;

In ignorance I have set foot on that prohibited by my goddess. (20)

O Lord, my transgressions are many;

great are my sins.

O my god, (my) transgressions are many;

great are (my) sins.

O my goddess, (my) transgressions are many;

great are (my) sins.

O god, whom I know or do not know, (my) transgressions are many;

great are (my) sins;

O goddess, whom I know or do not know, (my) transgressions are many;

great are (my) sins.

The transgression that I have committed, indeed I do not know;

The sin that I have done, indeed I do not know.

The forbidden thing that I have done, the prohibited (place) on which I have set foot, indeed I do not know.

The lord in the anger of his heart looked at me; (30)

The god in the rage of his heart confronted me;

When the goddess was angry with me, she made me become ill.

The god whom I know or do not know has oppressed me;

The goddess whom I know or do not know has placed suffering upon me.

Although I am constantly looking for help, no one takes me by the hand;

When I weep them (the gods and goddesses) do not come to my side.

I utter laments, but no one hears me;

I am troubled;

I am overwhelmed;

I cannot see.

O my god, merciful one, I address to you the prayer,

"Ever incline to me";

I kiss the feet of my goddess;

I crawl before you. (40)

(lines 41-49 are mostly broken and cannot be restored with certainty)

How long, O my goddess, whom I know or do not know,

before your hostile heart will be quieted? (50)

Man is dumb; he knows nothing;

Mankind, everyone that exists--what does he know?

Whether he is committing sin or doing good, he does not even know.

O my lord, do not cast your servant down;

He is plunged into the waters of a swamp; take him by the hand.

The sin that I have done, turn into goodness;

The transgression that I have committed let the wind carry away;

My many misdeeds strip off like a garment.

O my god, (my) transgressions are seven times seven;

remove my transgressions;

O my goddess, (my) transgressions are seven times seven;

remove my transgressions; (60)

O god whom I know or do not know,

(my) transgressions are seven times seven;

remove my transgressions;

O goddess whom I know or do not know,

(my) transgressions are seven times seven;

remove my transgressions.

Remove my transgressions (and) I will sing your praise.

May your heart, like the heart of a real mother, be quieted toward me;

Like a real mother (and) a real father may it be quieted toward me.

This is both heartbreaking and depressing, is it not? It expresses the utterly hopeless condition of mankind and the pathetic condition of the world's religious systems past and present to do anything positive about it. But it was this condition that the Hebrews as well as everyone else on planet earth were born into. It expresses how all humanity looked at spirituality in general and how their lives were but as worthless pawns for these gods. Now here comes along this god, this Yehoveh, and He throws the Mother of all curve balls at the world through Moses and Israel. He tells them exactly who He is, precisely what He regards as good and evil and what He expects of every man and woman who loves Him, and even commits Himself to operate within the bounds of His own unchanging justice system that He has established with Israel. He says there is no other God to even consider and therefore not to bow down to or fear that which doesn't exist; and that He expects obedience to Him to be done out of love and gratitude not fear and paranoia. Why? Because He loved mankind first because He created us. He cares about the tiniest element of their lives and wants a personal relationship with each of them. The Lord even says that these principles He has given to Israel form the foundation for the whole Universe; they have always been, will always be, and that they can count on Him staying the same from eternity past to eternity future.

Nothing could be further away from the hopelessness of all mankind as expressed in that ancient poem than what the Lord God offered to Israel.

How does a society or even one lone individual transition from the kind of desperate thinking expressed within this poem (and universally understood to be just the way things are) to comprehending the Laws and the love of God, practically overnight? Answer: you don't and you can't. So Israel really didn't get it; it flew in the face of everything they knew. They could hear the words but it didn't translate to understanding. So they fouled up, back slid, repented, back slid some more, adopted ways that seemed right to them, committed apostasy, had reformations, and fell away again in this constant cycle that at one moment veered towards God and in the next moment moved away from Him.

Moses witnessed Israel at its best and at its worst over 4 decades. It must have been daunting and frustrating for this anointed leader but before he died he spent what I'm sure were several days, if not weeks, expounding in this sermon on the mountains of Moab about the astounding (if not downright nearly **not** believable) covenant of relationship that the Creator of all things, the King over all Kings and Lord over all Lords, had made with this rag-tag group of people who had done nothing to merit it. That is what we are reading in Deuteronomy, and this is the condition of the Hebrew thinking and beliefs that are trying to be overcome.

We modern Believers need to have the greatest empathy and understanding for the Hebrews (instead of the contempt that is more typical) for what seems like their constant failures and returns to wickedness that we read about in the Bible. We also need to understand why the people of Israel didn't (and today's Orthodox Jews don't) view these laws of God as a burden as do most Christians; far from it. The Law was and remains their greatest joy for (at last!) here is a God who revealed Himself, made clear His character, His demands and intentions, and His rules and regulations. No more wondering about some unknown god that might pop up to interfere in your life. No more despair about what the world of the gods might do to you, just for their own pleasure. Do you want a relationship with the real God? Well, says Moses, here is who God is and this is how you do it. And it won't change tomorrow, or the next day, or forever. And we, today, are the beneficiaries of all Israel endured as they attempted to assimilate the awesome, seemingly otherworldly, ways of the Lord. Is it any wonder that Saint Paul tells gentiles not to boast because of their newfound relationship with God? A relationship that comes as a result of our Jewish Messiah whose advent came within the context of Hebrew history? And is it any wonder that Paul also tells us it is our duty and our DEBT as Believers to repay the Jewish people in tangible ways for delivering to us the Word, both in stone and in flesh, as it was transmitted to them?

Let's keep this all in mind as we live out our daily existence and as we read Deuteronomy chapter 12 together.

### READ DEUTERONOMY CHAPTER 12 all

A major change is about to occur; Israel is no longer going to be a cohesive (although large) group of people who live carefully arranged around a centralized sanctuary known as the Wilderness Tabernacle; a sanctuary that as they relocate, goes with them. Instead as they cross the Jordan River and take possession of the Promised Land they are going to be dispersed according to tribe and clan over several thousand square miles of Canaan (into assigned and separate districts). With this rather drastic change in their daily living conditions, the logical and practical question that must be answered for the citizens of Israel is: so **where** do we worship and sacrifice? After all, if the requirement remained that only ONE place is permitted for worship and sacrifice then by definition that place will be nearby for some tribes of Israel and far away and a long journey for most of the others.

The subject of the central and single sanctuary is the driving force behind the laws and the precedents that will be set down in the next few chapters. And concern over the myriad of false gods and their places of sacrifice scattered around Canaan has something to do with the decisions that resulted in somewhat altered rules and regulations.

Let me also point out that another major change is in process: Israel is no longer going to be a Bedouin-type of society that moves around from oasis to oasis in the desert, but is about to become a settled agrarian society just as the laws given through Moses on Mt. Sinai anticipated. After all, the 7 Biblical Feasts are each primarily (at least from an earthly physical point of view) agricultural feasts, which certainly are not central (or even possible to observe) within a society of wandering herdsmen.

We need to take notice of this process because the reality of history is that societies change and evolve with time; and therefore we need to understand the deep principles behind God's justice system so that we can be true to those abiding principles within the circumstances that each new generation faces.

The first verse of chapter 12 makes it clear that the rulings that are about to come applies to their taking possession of Canaan. And that rule number one is that all shrines and altars and temples and places of worship of the Canaanite gods must be destroyed. Although it zooms by us in only two verses, there is a rather good description of the common characteristics of the places where the Canaanites worshipped. Verse 2 speaks of high mountains, hills, and under trees. Then verse 3 speaks of the kinds of items that marked those places of worship: altars, standing stones, sacred poles and carved images (of their gods).

We've talked about the ancient pagan worship practices before, but since it is brought before us front and center again let me take just a moment to summarize and review. Wherever

possible an altar of sacrifice was located upon the highest local place (even if it was but a mound) because it was believed that the gods generally preferred to reside on mountaintops. In fact the mystery of the meaning of one the earliest Biblical titles for God (El Shaddai) has only recently been solved. Due to some breakthroughs in deciphering the Akkadian and Ugarit languages, several ancient Hebrew terms are now clearly defined because its long been known that Akkadian and Ugarit were the languages out of which the Hebrew language was born. Shaddai means, "mountain"; so El Shaddai means God of the Mountain. Naturally that fits with the mindset of all the world's inhabitants in earliest Biblical times, and it also fits with the incident when God introduces Himself to Jacob as El Shaddai while Jacob is walking through some mountains on his way to Mesopotamia.

Now a "high place" simply indicated a location that is "higher" (in altitude) than what surrounded it (in addition of course to meaning a place of worship of a god). If a tribe resided on a flat desert plain, a high place for them could be simply a pile of earth and stones no more than 3 or 4 feet higher than the desert floor. If one was in an area of low rolling hills, then the "high place" was the highest of the nearby hills that was reasonably accessible. If one was in a more mountainous area, than generally the high place had to be erected on the highest of the nearby peaks.

We find the Hebrews engaging in exactly the same sort of practice. In the area of Jerusalem for instance, Mt. Moriah is generally the high point of the city (technically the Mt. of Olives is OUTSIDE of Jerusalem), and so the Temple to God was erected there.

But we also see mentioned in verse 2 about altars being erected under trees. It was common among the pagan religions to build an altar of sacrifice in a grove of evergreen trees, or they would even plant a grove of trees around the altar. The reason was quite simple: evergreen trees represented fertility and sacrifices for fertility were among the most common of all pagan sacrifices. A term we'll occasionally run across in the Bible is Asherah, and Asherah literally means "grove", like in an olive grove. Sometimes Asherah is translated as pole but that is doubtful except that where it was not possible or practical to have a tree planted there might have been a grove of poles (wooden tree trunks, dead of course) that represented the trees. Another term we'll run across is Ashteroth, which is the formal **name** of the fertility goddess (as you can readily see the two terms Asherah and Ashteroth are related).

Around these Asherah (tree groves), in addition to their altars of sacrifice, they would at times place a carved pole. Simply envision a Totem Pole; the Totem Poles we're familiar with are a little more elaborate than what was typically carved in the ancient Middle East but their purpose was essentially the same; they marked that particular place (and the altar built there) as a place to sacrifice to the specific gods and goddesses represented in that carved pole. The standing stones spoken of are also sometimes called pillars; but in our modern way of thinking the word pillar gives us the wrong impression. We tend to think of these marvelously tall, cylindrical, decorated stone pillars of a Roman building; but that's not what this was. A

standing stone was literally a large flat stone, set upright, and at times with wording chiseled onto it; but often as not the stone had no markings. The stone generally was used in its natural state; a stonecutter did not shape it. Often it was a monument that simply says that something important took place at this spot. Other pagan religions saw the symbol of their god in that stone and it was an object of worship.

Now key to all this is grasping that anybody could build an altar or shrine to their god anywhere without divine authorization. The Land of Canaan was absolutely peppered with altars and poles and sacred groves dedicated to the various gods. Single families would build their own private altars; towns would build communal altars; kings would erect their own, and more elaborate, altars. And naturally these altars would be constructed nearby for the sake of convenience of the worshipper. The Israelites were fully aware of all this because it was but standard practice in the entire known world at that time. And the reason that God, through Moses, is going through all this detail about altars and shrines is because the Hebrews would have naturally assumed (without given it a second thought) that they would do the same thing as everyone else; they would have built altars and groves to Yehoveh at multiple locations nearest to (what would be) their many settlements.

Therefore in verse 4 Israel is instructed NOT to worship Yehoveh in this manner (groves, trees, totem poles, etc.). Rather says the Lord, there will be a certain place where worship of the Lord is to be located (meaning the place where the Tabernacle is to be erected and sacrificing is to occur) and nowhere else. And ONLY at this single central place are the 12 tribes of Israel to journey and bring their offerings, tithes, and sacrificial animals.

One of the things being legislated against in this instruction was also standard operating procedure for that era: the co-location of a place of worship and sacrifice of one god with the place of worship and sacrifice to a different god. An altar was not a place where one could bring a sacrifice and offer to just any god. Every pagan altar and every high place was dedicated specifically to a certain named god or goddess. But building an altar was hard work and time consuming so as people moved in and out of areas, and conquerors came and went and brought with them their own set of gods, and as a local god's popularity would rise and fall, usually an existing altar or a high place was simply re-dedicated from one god to the next god. Yehoveh says that Israel is not to do that for Him.

Let me throw out a couple of points to ponder and then wrap things up while connecting all this to God's plan for mankind: just like in the Wilderness where there was but ONE place for all Israel to sacrifice, so it is to be in Canaan. But the REASON for this is not given. It could be as simple as God wanting things to operate in the exact opposite of what all the pagan religions did. What we do know for sure is that the central sanctuary (the Wilderness Tabernacle) got moved on several occasions to different places in Israel and there did not seem to be any direct objection by God to these moves of the sacred tent sanctuary.

Another point concerns this command to topple and destroy all the high places of the Canaanite gods. This command (though completely real and meant to be carried out) has to fall into the same category of being a heavenly “ideal” just as the territorial boundaries the Lord has laid out to encompass all of His Holy Land were a heavenly ideal. Israel, to this day, has never fully possessed all that “ideal” territory.

What’s an ideal? It’s the expression of perfection. It is the notion of the ultimate state that something can attain. Ideals are, humanly speaking, rarely if ever achieved. God’s ideals will ALL be achieved.

In reality Israel never attained the ability to so exercise control over Canaan as to destroy every pagan shrine, altar, and Asherah. Even during the powerful reigns of David and then his son Solomon (considered the zenith of Israeli national power) it was never accomplished. Yet we also can conclude that neither of these ideals failed to occur because the Lord was unable nor because the goal was not seriously attainable, but because Yehoveh made Israel’s success in achieving these goals contingent on their obedience to Him (we’ve been reading about that, haven’t we?). And as we’ll see in coming chapters and books of the Old Testament, Israel stumbled greatly in that regard and therefore the fulfillment of the ideals that God offered to them have been deferred and won’t be attained until Messiah comes again and rules over all the earth.

I point this out because if there is one major reason for us even **NEEDING** a Messiah to carry out God’s plan, it is that the fullness of realizing God’s ideals could not be brought in while depraved men still ruled the world. That may sound like just another nice Christian platitude but the truth is that **IF** man could, realistically, have followed all of God’s commands, then a Messiah would not be necessary. But with the fall of Adam from his state of being created as the ideal man, a Messiah became the only route to the fulfillment of these heavenly ideals because man now knew evil.....and we liked it.

But understand, God’s commands didn’t fail; God’s Word didn’t fall short, rather God’s creatures failed. And the creatures I’m speaking of are **all** humans (not just the Israelites); the only creatures with a free will that approximates the free will that the Lord possesses. Further, The Covenant of Moses wasn’t faulty, men were faulty. Therefore with the advent of Messiah 2000 years ago, that covenant was renewed (as said Jeremiah 31), but the one who administered the covenant shifted from Moses to Jesus. Moses was a faulty man and therefore a faulty Mediator; Yeshua was a faultless man (the ideal man) and therefore a faultless Mediator. Until the ideal man (the Messiah Jesus) who is also God returns, and until He rids the world of every human who opposes God, and until the Evil One who tempts and accuses mankind is locked away, and until Our King rules in glory and perfection and without tolerance for sin, the ideals of God will never be fully met on earth.

Yet just as when the Lord laid out the Torah for Israel and He told them it was **not** too hard for them, neither is it too hard for us, His Believers (at least in the **ideal** sense). We were created with the ability to physically accomplish all these commands and laws of the Lord. But with the fall into sin of our human father, Adam, it sealed our fate as being a race of failed creatures that could not bring about God's ideals. But Messiah Yeshua can and will.

We'll continue in Deuteronomy 12 next week.