



Leaves From the Tree

Studies from God's Word

In 2005, Pastor Tim Bourgeois began a daily bible reading to encourage Tree of Life Christian Church and the larger body of Christ to read the entire Bible cover to cover.

The following series of articles are transcripts of Pastor Tim's original emails.

Please use these articles for meditation, personal devotion, Bible study, or your own daily Bible reading.



DEUTERONOMY 14 - 20

Deuteronomy 14

14:1-2 - "You are the sons of the LORD your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave your forehead for the sake of the dead. For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."

The Lord forbade Israel here to follow the practices of the Canaanites in their funeral rituals. In those cultures the surviving mourners would perform some dramatic sacrificial action in order to demonstrate the degree of their anguish over the death of the one mourned. These actions included shaving the front part of the hair of the head, and the mourners cutting themselves in various places to bleed for the dead. These actions were exaggerated rituals that grew out of a pagan culture that viewed death with a hopeless anguish. The Lord allowed His people to express appropriate sorrow at the death of a loved one, but He wanted His people to demonstrate in their response to death that their faith was firm in the Lord. They were not to react with hopeless self mutilation because their trust was to be in the Lord as the God of both life and death.

The Lord wanted His holy people to be distinguished from the nations around them in every aspect of life and death. The Lord reminds them of His call to Israel to see themselves as His special people. When the Lord refers to Israel as a people chosen by Him, "for His own possession", it is a translation of a key term that was originally used by the Lord to describe Israel when He first brought them out of Egypt to Sinai (Exodus 19:5). The Hebrew word is *segullah*. It refers to a special treasure. It describes that which is most valued by the person that possesses it. The concept is that Israel is identified by the Lord as His *segullah*, that which He treasures in the earth above all else. Because they are special to the Lord, He has a special purpose for them which involves them living according to the standards He established for them in His Law in every area of life.

14:3-8 - "You shall not eat any detestable thing. These are the animals which you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope and the mountain sheep. Any animal that divides the hoof and has the hoof split in two and chews the cud, among the animals, that you may eat. Nevertheless, you are not to eat of these among those which chew the cud, or among those that divide the hoof in two: the camel and the rabbit and the shaphan, for though they chew the cud, they do not divide the hoof; they are unclean for you. The pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, it is unclean for you. You shall not eat any of their flesh nor touch their carcasses."

This section of Deuteronomy 14 rehearses the same concerns addressed previously in Leviticus 11. The subject is what we call the food laws of the Law of

God which forbid certain foods from being eaten by any Israelite. Due to the common confusion of many believers even today regarding the true purpose for the food laws I am going to repeat the detailed explanation that I gave in Leviticus 11.

"The food laws in this chapter became the basis for most of what later became called the Kosher laws of Judaism. Many of those standards are still practiced today in the segment of the Jewish community concerned to keep them. This section is also one of the most commonly misunderstood and misapplied section of God's Word among believers. The aspect of this section that is straight forward and beyond debate is that the Lord commanded His people to refrain from eating certain animals, fish, birds and insects while also allowing them to eat others of the same categories. The four categories covered in this section follow the original categories established in creation in Genesis. The category forbidden is identified as unclean by the Lord, while the allowed category is identified by Him as clean. It is the attempt to explain the meaning of the terms clean and unclean and why God made these distinctions a law for Israel that the debate has developed over the generations. Here are the main views of what these laws are designed to address. Keep in mind that there are true believers that hold each of these views. The four explanations are:

- **Arbitrary:** this view believes that there is no reason behind these distinctions. God simply made arbitrary diet boundaries for His people to test their obedience and to teach them to be different from the Gentile nations. Many Rabbis through history have held this view as well as many Christian Bible teachers. The weakness of this view is that God is not characterized by arbitrary standards, and in all of His law has His own wise reasons for why He commands and forbids certain things for His people.
- **Religious:** this view holds that God did not want His people to eat the animals that were commonly worshipped and sacrificed to pagan gods. It is true that God forbid His people from following the pagan practices of the cultures around them. The weakness of this view though is that many of the animals Israel was allowed to eat were also worshipped and sacrificed to false gods. The bull for instance, was a clean animal that could be eaten by Israel, but it was worshipped by Egypt.
- **Hygienic / Health:** this is the most common view held through history and the certainly the view most believers hold today in trying to understand the Old Testament food laws. It holds that God gave these laws to benefit the health of Israel by teaching them to avoid contact with dead animals that could carry dangerous bacteria and infectious diseases. The prohibition on eating these animals sees the Lord restricting the diet of Israel for their health much like some people in our culture today choose to not eat red meat for health concerns. The weakness of this view is that the Lord never

mentions health as His motivation in establishing these laws, but holiness. To mix health and holiness confuses physical and spiritual categories. Additionally it is difficult to maintain the health distinction on a scientific basis since new research would indicate that many of the unclean animals are as nutritious as the clean ones. This view is completely undermined when we bring in New Testament information on this subject as we will see below.

- Symbolic: this view holds that the clean and unclean animals were meant by the Lord to represent as symbols the spiritual differences between people in covenant with God (Israel) and people outside the covenant (Gentiles). I'm convinced that this is the correct way to interpret these laws. Their symbolic purpose only extended to the coming of Christ and the beginning of the New Covenant. As a result, they no longer physically apply to believers today. We are free to choose to eat animals from either category as part of our diet today without violating any concerns of the Lord.

There are several New Testament passages that address the concerns of the Old Testament food laws, but for the sake of space these two passages will be sufficient to show us how we should understand them. The first passage is from the teaching of Jesus. In this passage He was responding to a concern raised by the Pharisees over Him allowing His disciples to eat food from the marketplace without first going through a ritual cleansing. In His response Jesus declared a principle which Mark correctly identified as radically changing all of the Old Testament food laws. "And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.)" (Mark 7:18-19). In the New Testament, all of the previously unclean animals listed in Leviticus 11 and the parallel chapter in Deuteronomy 14 have now been declared clean by the Lord Jesus. This should prove conclusively that the food laws were never meant as health laws. If so, the Lord would not have changed them in the New Testament or else we would have to conclude that He cares less about our health than He did about the health of Israel. If pork was a bad meat to eat for health reasons in the Old Testament, it still is today, as is shrimp, and catfish, all of which were forbidden, but are now allowed.

The second passage is from Peter's experience recorded in Acts. "But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider

unholy." This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky... And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean." (Acts 10:10-16, 28).

In this event, God caused Peter to fall into a trance. He then gave him a vision. In the vision Peter was commanded by God to kill and eat animals that were identified as unclean in Leviticus. Even though it was God commanding, Peter at first objected out of concern to not violate the food laws. God insisted and implied that if He was commanding him to eat, that the food was clean because of His command. God repeated this vision experience for Peter three times to make sure it sunk in for him. As soon as the vision ended there were Gentiles that God had sent that had arrived at the house who appealed to Peter to come preach the gospel to them. Then, later in the chapter Peter describes this experience to others and what he had learned from it. The lesson was that God was speaking to him through the imagery of the unclean animals about the spiritual condition of the Gentile nations. The point was that they were spiritually unclean because they were outside of covenant relationship with God, but that through the gospel of Christ, those who believed were now clean."

14:22 - "You shall surely tithe all the produce from what you sow, which comes out of the field every year."

The Lord repeats the law of the tithe here and in the verses that follow gives some additional details for the ceremonial practice of the tithe. What we should notice again is that the tithe was not an optional practice. The tithe was commanded in the Law. The Lord emphasizes the requirement here by declaring that Israel "shall surely tithe." The basic law of the tithe mandated that every household in Israel was to take a specific 10% portion of their increase and return it in an offering to the Lord to be made in the place He ordained (this would occur at the temple in Jerusalem in future years). The increase that was tithed involved all of the crops that each family grew, any additions to their herds and flocks, and any money earned by labor or investment. Each head of the household in Israel was responsible to keep track of their own increase and to set aside the Lord's portion to give it back to Him.

There was no central agency that tracked each Israelite down for failure to pay the tithe like our government's Internal Revenue Service. The tithe was to be given at the tabernacle and later the temple to the priests, but the head of the household was accountable to take it there. If any household refused to offer the tithe, no one would come and enforce it. The Lord designed it so that the loss of the blessing of the tithe was the consequence of failing to offer it. This passage from the prophet Malachi highlights the extent of the blessing that the Lord ordained for those who trusted in Him and faithfully offered the tithe. The Lord demonstrated in the consequent blessings the reward of obedience in the tithe as well as in the cursings the consequences of disobedience in the tithe.

"Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes, says the LORD of hosts. All the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land, says the LORD of hosts." (Malachi 3:8-12).

Questions from Deuteronomy 13:

Question: How should we apply Chapter 13 vs. 6-11 in the new covenant, assuming our country was honoring God's law as we should? (What did the Puritans do?)

Question: 13:6-11 - Were they to literally kill their family members that followed other gods or was it more symbolic for them to separate themselves from anyone who follows other gods? Obviously we would not practice this in literal terms today, but why is this section not applicable today in literal terms, while other sections of Scripture are to be practiced today in literal terms?

Answer: The appropriate way for Christians to consider all of the Law of God is how it should be applied today, not whether it should be applied. Many believers today dismiss these laws completely as though the Old Testament had no application today at all. Paul's statement directs us to the right perspective regarding the Law and the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures. "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." (II Timothy 3:16-17). This portion in Deuteronomy 13:6-11 is profitable for Christians to teach us, reprove us, correct us, and to train us. For instance it teaches us about God's holy standard of allegiance to Him above even close family relationships. It corrects our natural inclinations to put family above Him. It trains our hearts in the difficult but necessary response in such cases.

The question of whether this requirement of the law was to be literally practiced by the Israelites of that day, the answer is yes, in such a case they were responsible to bring any family member that had defected from the Lord and was serving a false god to the city gates and with the full participation of the elders of the city and the other inhabitants of the city they were to execute God's judgment upon the unfaithful family member. From the big picture perspective, the unfaithful person was like a spiritual cancer in the body of Israel that must be cut out before it spread and affected more of God's holy nation.

Regarding the question of whether we should literally practice this death penalty judgment upon family members that serve other gods today, the answer is found in a helpful distinction among the laws of Moses. The laws of Moses contain elements that are ceremonial, civil, and moral. The ceremonial elements are fulfilled in Christ and have a spiritual, but no literal application today. An example of a ceremonial element is the laws requiring animal sacrifice for sins. Christ's death on the cross fulfilled what those laws required and so we do not literally sacrifice any animals today as they did, but we still apply the spiritual significance of the need for a blood sacrifice.

The moral elements of the law are still applied today in the New Testament. Murder is still as wrong today as it was then. The same is true for adultery, theft, idolatry, etc. The moral aspect of the penalties required for violating these laws should still inform our perspective in teaching us what a person deserves for violating the standards of God's law. The difficult question boils down to the civil elements of the Law of God as they are applied today. Israel, as God's holy nation was given these laws to be the civil statutes that governed their behavior as a society. There is no society today that follows all of God's Law in literally applying all the civil statutes as the standard for the society. The theological question is whether God intends for every society in the world today to do so. I believe that the Lord established Israel in history with this Law as a teaching standard for all societies, but that God does not require every society to follow this standard literally. Even Israel never successfully applied all of the Law literally.

The issue every society must face though is what standard will be used as the basis for the laws of that society. If God's Law is not the standard, then some human standard will be substituted for it. As an example, God says that murder is evil and that murderers should be punished with execution by society. The society can decide to give murderers a lighter punishment, and the consequences of that choice will reveal over time the wisdom of following God's standard rather than the human standard.

In the question of how Christians should apply Deuteronomy 13:6-11 today, our society does not allow a death penalty for worshipping false gods, so a literal application of this judgment is out of the question. However, the moral principle can and should still be applied. If one member of a believing family chooses to turn away from the Lord and serve another god, then the family should make the difficult decision to not associate with that member. "But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one." (I Corinthians 5:11). This Corinthians passage is a New Testament application which we are accountable to practice today in such cases.

Deuteronomy 15

15:1-3 - "At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the LORD'S remission has been proclaimed. From a foreigner you may exact it, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother."

The Lord established a series of seven year cycles into the calendar of Israel culminating with a fiftieth Jubilee year at the end of the seventh cycle. Each of the seven year periods were a partial expression of the principle of the Jubilee. The Jubilee was a periodic preview of the great salvation that would come to Israel with the arrival of the Messiah. In the same way, the final year, or seventh year of each cycle was designed to demonstrate an aspect of the blessing of salvation in practical terms. The seventh year was a sabbatical year of economic rest from the burden of debts. This law required the entire nation of Israel to practice a release from debts incurred during the previous seven years. Every creditor in Israel was required to release every debt owed by a fellow Israelite without any obligation to ever repay the debt. The requirement did not apply to foreigners, or those who were not part of the covenant.

As you can imagine, this law had serious economic repercussions. For the Israelite in debt, the seventh year of release was a wonderful provision to be freed from their debt and to be given a new start with a clean slate. However, for the creditor who was responsible to release the debt, this required release was in effect taking money out of their pocket. The Lord was not taking unrighteous advantage of the creditors however, because He promised to greatly bless them for their obedience to this law. It was true that the creditor would lose in the short term whatever money was owed to them, but by trusting and obeying the Lord, what they would gain in the long run would be greater than what they would lose. This system set limits within the economy of Israel so that a permanent class distinction of rich and poor was avoided, and the poor in Israel were given the opportunity to rebuild their financial lives.

Beyond the financial aspect of this law was the greater spiritual symbolism it portrayed. The Bible continually uses the imagery of debt to picture the spiritual condition of a person in sin. When we sin we incur a spiritual debt to God's justice. The nature of this debt created by our own sin is that it is huge, oppressive, and inescapable. It is a debt we could never have repaid. Left to ourselves we would have been crushed under the weight of our debt forever. The Lord did for us what we could not do for ourselves. In offering His Son on the cross for our sins, He canceled the debt that was against us and forever released us from it. "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees

against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." (Colossians 2:13-14).

15:4-6, 11 - "However, there will be no poor among you, since the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, if only you listen obediently to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today. For the LORD your God will bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you... For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'"

There is another example of an apparent Bible contradiction in these verses. In verse 4 Moses declares that there will be no poor among Israel. In verse 11 Moses says that the poor will never cease to be in the land. Some have struggled with the contradiction between these two statements. We should recognize that Moses made both of these statements and he made the second statement shortly after the first statement. He did not see any contradiction in what he had said and we should not either. The apparent contradiction is resolved when we place the two statements in their intended categories of Israel's ideal future being compared with its actual future. The first statement that there would be no poor in Israel was a description of the national blessing that was promised and available to Israel, but which was contingent upon their obedience and faithfulness to God's Law. The emphasis was that if Israel obeyed the Lord in these laws that the Lord would bless them so greatly as a nation that no Israelite would be poor. This describes an ideal future of consistent obedience by Israel bringing consistent and overflowing blessing by the Lord. However, the blessing of the Lord in the covenant with Israel was not an unconditional blessing, as though the Lord would always bless Israel no matter what they did in response to God's Law.

The second statement is a description of what Israel would actually experience in the future. Israel would not be consistent in faithfulness and obedience. In reality, Israel would disobey the Lord more than they would obey Him in the future. Their disobedience and unfaithfulness would be met by discipline and judgment by the Lord. One expression of the Lord's judgment would be economic as the Lord would spank Israel in their wallet to gain their heart's attention. The inevitable result of this economic judgment was that there would always be poor among the people of Israel.

15:12-17 - "If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free. When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today. It shall come about if he says to you, 'I will not go out from you,' because he loves you and your household, since he fares well with you; then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also you shall do likewise to your maidservant."

This law addressed the handling of an Israelite slave in an Israelite household. Keep in mind that the slavery described here was fundamentally different than the common image of slavery such as we saw in the USA prior to the American Civil War. Slavery in Israel was closer to indentured servanthood. Slaves in Israel were indebted servants. They were not made slaves by force, but actually chose this form of slavery as a way to work out from under a crushing debt. It was similar to a short term contract in which the "slave" sold their service for a period of years to the person to whom they owed a debt they could not satisfy. The Israelite slave had specific rights under God's Law and were to be treated well by the master. In this passage we see the options given to the slave at the end of their contracted slavery. In the seventh year the slave was given their freedom. Their debt was considered paid because of their six previous years of service. The master was obligated to not only set the slave completely free, but was also to generously provide from his own flock, grain store, and wine vats enough to give the freed person an economic head start in their new life.

The law also provided an unexpected option for the slave. If the slave had been treated well by the master, and the slave did not want to leave the household of the master, then the law mandated a way for the slave to become a permanent part of the master's household. The motive in such cases was the love that the slave had developed for their kind master his household. The master was to take an awl, which is like a large nail, and the master was to nail the slave's earlobe to the front door of the master's house. This was not a punishment, but a dramatic expression of a permanent relationship being formed between the slave and master. It marked the slave as belonging to that household by their own choice. A spiritual parallel is found in the Christian life. Jesus set us free from our slavery in salvation. Yet, the believer should not view their new found freedom in salvation as an opportunity to be free from obligation to the Lord. He sets us free so that we would choose from our love for Him to be permanently bonded to Him as our Lord and Master. Paul lived with this perspective uppermost in his heart as he described his own relationship to the Lord. "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus..." (Romans 1:1). "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God..." (Romans 6:22).

Deuteronomy 16

16:1-6 - "Observe the month of Abib and celebrate the Passover to the LORD your God, for in the month of Abib the LORD your God brought you out of Egypt by night. You shall sacrifice the Passover to the LORD your God from the flock and the herd, in the place where the LORD chooses to establish His name. You shall not eat leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat with it unleavened bread, the bread of affliction (for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste), so that you may remember all the days of your life the day when you came out of the land of Egypt. For seven days no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory, and none of the flesh which you sacrifice on the evening of the first day shall remain overnight until morning. You are not allowed to sacrifice the Passover in any of your towns which the LORD your God is giving you; but at the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name, you shall sacrifice the Passover in the evening at sunset, at the time that you came out of Egypt."

This chapter reviews and affirms the laws for the three annual feasts ordained by the Lord for Israel; the Feast of Unleavened Bread which was connected with the celebration of Passover, the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, and the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. The Feast of Unleavened Bread required all households in Israel to change their normal diet for one week each year. They were not allowed to eat leavened bread. In the description of the unleavened bread in this chapter it is called "the bread of affliction." The name of the bread is significant and was chosen by the Lord to be a continuing reminder for Israel as they participated in this feast each year. The eating of unleavened bread was intended to remind them of the time Israel spent as slaves in Egypt.

Of course, the experience in Egypt was not a pleasant memory, and it would be normal for the average Israelite to want to avoid remembering such an unpleasant experience. Usually celebrations are connected to happy memories. The idea here is that the Lord wanted Israel to be reawakened to the national memory of the affliction of their former lives as slaves. The celebration was not focused upon their slavery, but on the awesome deliverance that the Lord had accomplished for them in setting them forever free from their slavery. The celebration of their freedom was enhanced by the clear memory of their previous slavery. Forgetting the awful reality of their slavery would decrease their appreciation of the Lord's deliverance. Remembering their slavery was not a happy experience but remembering that the Lord had set them free from slavery was the single greatest reason to celebrate the goodness of the Lord in their lives.

There is a similar reason why churches that are concerned with the appropriate use of Biblical symbolism continue to use unleavened bread in the celebration of

the Lord's Supper. We use unleavened bread in the Communion meal that we share as a church because of the intentional connection between the Old Testament Passover event and the death of Christ upon the cross. Paul draws this connection for us when he refers to Jesus in this way. "Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed." (I Corinthians 5:7). Each time we eat the bread of the Communion meal, we should recognize that it symbolizes the sacrifice of the body of Christ for us, but it also communicates to us the affliction of our life before Christ. Our lives before salvation were lives of affliction because we were all slaves to sin. It was only because Christ sacrificed His life for us on the cross that we have been forever delivered from our slavery.

Israel was not allowed to celebrate the Passover wherever, or however they chose to do so. They were required by law to travel to the place where the Lord would establish His name (which would be Jerusalem). They were also commanded to celebrate it at a specific time of day. They were to sacrifice the Passover lamb in the evening at sunset to correspond to the time of day that the original event occurred on the first Passover. The point of the timing of the event was that the Lord wanted Israel to always associate the Passover with a real event in history. Like with any religious ritual or practice, there is a real danger over time for the people who participate in the ritual to lose track of the origin and meaning of the ritual and to place all emphasis on the external form of the ritual. The Lord ordained these rituals for His people, but they were intended to be reminders of the event which the ritual symbolized. Even today, the Lord is not pleased when a person takes the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper without remembering and understanding the significance of the death of Christ on the cross as God's salvation for our lives.

16:13-15 - "You shall celebrate the Feast of Booths seven days after you have gathered in from your threshing floor and your wine vat; and you shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your towns. Seven days you shall celebrate a feast to the LORD your God in the place which the LORD chooses, because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful."

The Feast of Booths was designed to correspond to the completion of the annual harvest of crops in Israel. It was a commanded feast like the other feasts of the law and was therefore not optional for all of Israel. As we have previously studied the symbolic purpose of the Feast of Booths was to remind Israel how the Lord had led them as a nation through the forty years of their wilderness journey as they lived in tents, or booths for that entire generation. It was an annual humbling reminder of their origins as a nation and that they only enjoyed the blessings of the Promised Land because the Lord had carried them through the wilderness. However, the seriousness of this reminder was not intended by the Lord to

dampen their joyful celebration of the fullness of the blessing they enjoyed in the Promised Land. As the entire nation was required to move out of their comfortable homes for the days of the feast each year, it was meant to refresh their hearts in an appreciation of all the Lord had done for them. The Lord wanted them to consider these things, but He wanted every single Israelite to "be altogether joyful." The joy of the Lord in the remembrance of His great salvation was the purpose of the Lord in commanding these annual feast days.

16:16-17 - "Three times in a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, at the Feast of Unleavened Bread and at the Feast of Weeks and at the Feast of Booths, and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed. Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you."

On these three annual special occasions, each adult male in Israel was commanded to leave their home and daily responsibilities, and travel to Jerusalem to the temple of God. Whether a man lived one mile away from Jerusalem, or one hundred miles away, each one was required to make go up to Jerusalem to honor the Lord. Obedience to this law was sacrificial no matter the distance traveled. Every man had to trust the Lord for the cost of these annual trips, as well as trust the Lord to watch over their homes, fields and herds while they were away in Jerusalem. In addition to the cost of attending these three annual feasts, there was one more costly requirement for every man in Israel. It was commanded that no man "appear before the LORD empty-handed." This simply meant that it was not acceptable to just show up in Jerusalem for these three feasts and to consider that whatever they had spent to travel there was a sufficient offering to the Lord. Every man was expected to bring an offering to the Lord once they arrived at the temple in Jerusalem. The amount or value of the offering was flexible to allow for the differences in the economic circumstances for each man, but what was required was that they must bring something of value to offer to the Lord. To show up in the presence of the Lord empty handed was to communicate to the Lord that His salvation was of no value to that person. The principle is not that we bring an offering to the Lord to purchase our own salvation, but that if we truly value what He has done in saving us, that it is only right for us to express our appreciation and gratitude to Him in a tangible way with an offering of real value.

16:18-20 - "You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you."

The system of law and judgment that the Lord ordained for His holy nation Israel was based upon one single critical principle; justice. The warning of the Lord about the priority of this principle in the society of Israel was emphasized by the Lord in an interesting way. In our translation the words "and only" are in italics to identify for us that those words are not represented in the original Hebrew text. The actual original wording would be more literally translated as follows; "Justice, justice you shall pursue..." The word justice is repeated in a common Hebrew figure of speech. To repeat a word in this way would focus extra attention on it and insure that the reader gets the main point of what has been written. The great principle of the law system in Israel was to forever be justice. The natural compromises of the principles of justice that every human society inevitably makes in the application of law was to be avoided at all costs. Israel's system of law as a society was intended to represent the Lord's character and standards. All of His ways are just and righteous. It was the responsibility of the nation to appoint judges that had a rock solid commitment to justice and whose character would not be influenced by the bribes and other wicked influences that would seek to cause them to pervert justice in their rulings.

Deuteronomy 17

17:2-7 - "If there is found in your midst, in any of your towns, which the LORD your God is giving you, a man or a woman who does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, by transgressing His covenant, and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host, which I have not commanded, and if it is told you and you have heard of it, then you shall inquire thoroughly. Behold, if it is true and the thing certain that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, then you shall bring out that man or that woman who has done this evil deed to your gates, that is, the man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death. On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst."

This is another passage that is particularly difficult for people to swallow who read the Bible casually. It identifies a particular kind of violation of God's Law which required the death penalty for violators. Because it was a religious violation and our culture today is so ingrained with a freedom of religion perspective, this passage seems out of place. It was not out of place in The Lord's covenant nation though. This law requiring a strong response to the worship of false gods was a follow up to the requirements established by the first two of the Ten Commandments. "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth

beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God," (Deuteronomy 5:7-9). This law identifies the penalty that was to be carried out when the first two commandments of the Law were violated. The offence addressed by the Lord does not view the choice to worship other gods as an expression of good and healthy freedom, but as an act of evil in the sight of the Lord, and a transgression of His covenant. In other words, it was a betrayal of the covenant relationship between that person and the Lord and was the highest treason possible in Israel. As such, it was to be answered appropriately with the most serious penalty under God's Law; death.

17:14-17 - "When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,' you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman. Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way.' He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself."

Moses anticipates a future time in which Israel will desire a king to rule the nation. At this point, there is no human king over Israel. When the Lord first brought Israel out of Egypt and to Sinai, He revealed to them that they were being formed by Him into a kingdom. "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." (Exodus 19:5-6). Their identity as a kingdom was not a future development, but occurred as soon as the Lord declared it to be so. The implication of the Lord identifying Israel as a kingdom was that there was a king that ruled over Israel. A kingdom is defined as government by a king. There can be no kingdom without a king. The king of Israel was the Lord. This was what set Israel apart from all other nations of the world. All other nations were ruled by human rulers, while Israel was ruled directly by the Lord as King! The Lord ruled through the messages He proclaimed to Moses, His prophet. Moses was not the king, but represented the authority of their heavenly King.

In future generations, Israel would begin to cry out for a human king to rule over them so that they could be like the other nations. The concept of a human king was not offensive to the Lord because in this passage He authorizes Israel to appoint a king to rule over them. However, there were critical guidelines for Israel to follow in establishing a king to rule over the nation. What was offensive to the Lord is that Israel would ignore these guidelines for choosing a king and in ignoring His laws for the king, they would dishonor the Lord as their great King.

The first guideline is that the man chosen to be king must be the Lord's choice, not the popular choice of the people. The vast majority of people do not look on candidates to be king with the same perspective of the Lord. The elections held in our nation every four years to select the President are a clear display of this distinct difference between what the Lord values in a leader, and what the world values most. The general population is more concerned with external qualities or the perception of what how that person will benefit them, than they are with the qualities that concern the Lord. This verse below is how the Lord described the different perspectives and priorities that concerned Him in choosing a king for Israel. "But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7). When Israel chose their first king, they selected Saul, who was tall, strong and attractive, but whose character was flawed. The Lord chose David, who was among the least likely candidates, but whose heart was filled with the qualities that the Lord values.

The second guideline was that the king must be chosen from among Israel. Anyone born from another nation was excluded from the kingship. This guideline was designed to protect the interests of Israel. A man born from another people would naturally be inclined to favor the interests of his birth nation in his decisions. It was this law that influenced the decision of the founding fathers of the USA to make a similar requirement in the Constitution for the office of the President. The wisdom of God is shown in this law because even if an exceptional foreigner truly valued Israel over his own birth nation, the people of Israel could never be certain that he ruled with undivided interests.

The Lord also gave three warnings to all future kings of Israel. As we will discover in our study of the kings of Israel, most of the kings including Solomon ignored these warnings to their own detriment. The warnings prohibited the king to multiply horses, wives, or gold for himself. The multiplication of horses was a temptation for the king to rely on his own military strength. Horses were used for the chariots that were the equivalent of tanks in ancient warfare. The gathering of large numbers of horses would make the king vulnerable to the pride of superior strength. A king who did so was leaning on his army for security, rather than the Lord. The second warning of not multiplying wives was intended to safeguard the king's heart. The Lord warned that multiple wives would turn the king's heart away from the Lord. Certainly, Solomon who took hundreds of wives for himself had to learn the wisdom of this warning the hard way. Solomon's wives eventually turned his heart away from the Lord as many of them influenced him to join them in honoring their own gods. The third warning of not multiplying gold and silver touches again the issue of security and power. Would the king misuse his authority by making himself rich through taxation, or would the king recognize that the Lord had appointed him to the role of king in order to serve the Lord and His people?

17:18-20 - "Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel."

This is my personal favorite law of all of the laws for the king of Israel. If I could choose one law to make a law today for the President of the USA, my choice would be this law. It appointed an unusual responsibility for every future king of Israel. As you can imagine, whenever a new king is appointed and begins to rule over the kingdom, there are many important responsibilities demanding his time and attention. We should notice which responsibility the Lord named first for new kings in Israel. When each new king first entered into his role as king, his first responsibility was to write. The king was to write for himself a copy of the law recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. He was to do so in the presence of the Levitical priests. The priests provided a necessary accountability to insure that the king completed the task required by the Law. They also would insure that the copy of the Law that the king was to write was an accurate copy without errors. Of course, there was no printing press at that time in history, so the king could not simply order a new copy of Deuteronomy from the local Bible bookstore. However, as king, he could certainly have ordered the Levitical priests to make the copy of the Law for him so that he did not have to spend the time hand writing it himself. Had he done so, the king would have violated this law.

The point of having the king write his own personal copy of the Law was to force Him to pay close attention to it. If the priests copied it for him, there was no way to be sure whether the king would ever read it. By hand copying it line by line, word for word, the king had to read every single word in God's Law. There was no other way for him to be able to accurately copy it. I have personally hand written large sections of the Bible in order to taste for myself what this law was meant to accomplish in the heart of the king. The benefit of hand writing the Scriptures is that it forces the writer to slow down and pay attention to every single word. I have noticed details in writing the passage for myself that I might have passed over in reading. It was designed to encourage a form of Biblical meditation. The goal of the Lord in having the king write this copy was that his heart would learn to fear the Lord, and that he would be more inclined to faithfully observe and practice all of God's Law. The Lord commanded that the king should do more than write it and then ignore it. The king was to "read it all the days of his life." Regular reading of God's Word would set much needed internal boundaries upon the king's heart. The strong influence of the Word of God would keep his heart from being exalted in pride and would keep him on track with the Lord's purpose for His people.

If daily reading in the Scriptures was God's commanded heart prescription for the most important role of the king of His holy nation, we can be certain that the Lord would have us follow this same prescription in whatever role and responsibility He has appointed for us. It is a proud and arrogant person that is convinced that they do not need the daily influences of God's life training Word upon their heart. The wise and humble person recognizes the need and runs daily to the spiritual provision God has supplied for our hearts in the Scriptures.

Deuteronomy 18

18:9-14 - "When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do so."

Moses warns Israel of the dangers of various forms of spiritual deception that they will encounter in Canaan. The societies of the seven Canaanite nations were steeped in the spiritual practices listed in these verses. All of these activities listed are practiced in our culture today with the exception of the first one listed. The continuing practice of these activities is a shameful example of how far our society has drifted from its biblical moorings to tolerate and in some cases even celebrate these things. Moses commands Israel to not learn to imitate what the Canaanite nations consider viable religious and spiritual pursuits. The opinion of the Canaanites was that these things were good, helpful, useful and necessary for the welfare of their lives. The Lord looked at the same practices and identified them as "detestable." The word used describes that which is so disgusting that it stirs a loathing toward that thing. The Lord calls these practices disgusting and detestable, and yet all the Canaanites regularly filled their lives with these things. He also knew that Israel would be tempted to imitate what they observed the Canaanites doing because of a misguided fascination.

The list of detestable practices starts with the most wicked activity possible in which the people sacrificed their own children by burning them in a fiery offering to their gods. It also included divination which is practice of making life choices based upon signs interpreted through various natural elements. A modern example of divination is the use of Tarot Cards to "read" what a decisions a person should make. Witchcraft is aimed at influencing future events by

incantations. An interpreter of omens was concerned with telling the future, or what we today would call a fortune teller. A sorcerer was a person that used drug concoctions to induce spiritual experiences. Spell casters claimed spiritual power to change the fortunes of anyone upon whom they cast their spells. Mediums, spiritists and those who called up the dead were all messengers for spirit beings who claimed to be either humans that had died, or angels or demons. This last category is particularly popular today with several TV shows that portray these practices in a favorable light.

To the Lord, none of these activities were a light matter. It was not just that the practice of these things was detestable, but the Moses declares in this passage that "whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD." The practitioner becomes as detestable to the Lord as the practice. The point is that these things are so corrupt that any person that practices becomes as corrupt as the practice. There is no way to be involved with these activities and not be affected by them. The truly sad thing is that some Christians engage in various forms of these practices without realizing how deeply they are corrupting their own hearts.

The interest in spiritual things behind these practices is understandable. The knowledge of the future, what decisions are best to make, and the power to change one's life circumstances are all appealing. It is no mystery that so many people are drawn to these activities and become fascinated with them. What is not advertised, however, is that all of these things are demonic in nature and depend upon demonic activity. To engage in these practices is to turn from the Lord and turn to demons for knowledge, wisdom, and power. The Lord will not long tolerate such serious and dangerous disobedience in His people. In this warning, Moses identifies these practices as one of the main reasons the Lord was going to drive out the Canaanite nations from the land. However, this warning is a two edged sword. If Israel engages in these detestable practices then the Lord will judge them as He did the Canaanites.

18:15-19 - "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.' The LORD said to me, 'They have spoken well. I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him.'"

This is one of the prophetic announcements about the special role that Christ would play in the future of Israel. Moses declares that another prophet like himself will be raised up by the Lord at some future point. This is not a general description of the many prophets God will send with His messages in the future,

but a description of a special prophet even among all the prophets of God. The role of prophet was a special role in Israel in which God chose and sent individuals with a specific message from Him for His people. Moses, though, was unique among all the prophets that followed in the Old Testament. Moses was the lawgiver. The Lord chose to reveal the Law only to Moses. Every prophet that followed Moses through Israel's long history never added a single word to the revelation of the Law. All prophets that followed came with messages from God that called the people back to God and His Law.

Jesus is the special prophet that Moses was describing in this passage. Like Moses, Jesus came to establish a covenant between God and man. Moses was God's messenger for the covenant of the Law and Jesus was God's messenger to establish the New Covenant. "For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17). We can be confident that this prophecy is pointing directly to Jesus because Peter links this passage from Deuteronomy with Christ (Acts 3:19-26). The meaning of this prophecy is that Jesus is the one mediator between God and mankind. There is no message from God other than what He has revealed in His Son.

18:20-22 - "But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him."

The danger of spiritual deception was always present throughout the generations in Israel. The Lord build safeguards into the Law to halt the spread of false and deceptive spiritual influences among His people, Israel. One of the worst problems that would be faced in the future was the issue of false prophets. A false prophet is a person that claims God has appointed them as His messenger, when He has not appointed them and has not given them a message. False prophets could either be under demonic influence in the message they brought, or some of them simply invented their so called message out of their own imagination. The Lord applied a stringent standard to those that presumed to speak as His messenger when He had not sent them. All false prophets were to be stopped from deceiving Israel by the application of the death penalty. It was a strong and strict guideline, but it insured the continuing integrity of the Law of God in Israel and protected Israel from being led astray by these deceivers. True prophets had nothing to fear. But this law gave every false prophet a reason to think long and hard before presuming to misrepresent the Lord.

Deuteronomy 19

19:14 - "You shall not move your neighbor's boundary mark, which the ancestors have set, in your inheritance which you will inherit in the land that the LORD your God gives you to possess."

In ancient days the division between the land of two households was identified by boundary markers such as a large stone, or pillar. There were no fences or walls such as we use in most neighborhoods today to identify the division between one person's property and another's. This simple law forbids anyone from moving their neighbor's property marker. The reason a person would be tempted to move their neighbor's boundary mark would be to illegally and unethically take advantage of their neighbor to gain a portion of their land for themselves. Moving the boundary mark was a way to steal land from a neighbor. Because the boundary mark was the way land ownership was verified, to move a marker was a devious way to take what belonged to the neighbor and at the same time render it very difficult for the neighbor to prove that a portion of his land had been stolen. Once the marker was moved, unless there were witnesses to the crime, the person that moved the marker could just begin to use the stolen land as their own. The Lord's response to this wicked practice is named in a later chapter of Deuteronomy in the list of the curses for violating the Law. The person that moved the boundary marker was cursed, which meant that the Lord would bring His judgment upon that person (Deuteronomy 27:17).

On the other side of this law of the boundary marker we are meant to recognize the principle of personal property established in God's Law. God intended His people to be property, or land owners. A man's land was a special gift from God for God's purpose. The Lord gave the land and it was to be preserved in the family of that man by inheritance from generation to generation. This principle of land ownership carried both a practical and spiritual benefit. The practical benefit was obvious in that land provided a foundation for each family to have a home, and a way to make a living through farming or herding. The spiritual benefit was even greater. The Lord's original creation purpose for mankind was to rule over the earth as His representative (Genesis 1:26-28). Land ownership with all of the responsibilities that are involved serves as a reminder of the first instructions God gave to Adam when He placed him in the Garden of Eden and commissioned him to cultivate it and keep it (Genesis 2:15). Stealing another man's land undermines his ability to provide for his family practically and the Lord's reminder of his purpose as God's image bearer spiritually.

19:15-21 - "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed. If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days. The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. The rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you. Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."

The legal system that the Lord ordained for Israel was dependant upon witnesses. There was no allowance for what we call circumstantial evidence such as we see portrayed on TV shows such as CSI, or Monk where a criminal is identified on the basis of physical evidence alone. The Lord commanded that an eye witness was required to convict a person of a crime. Even a single eye witness was not sufficient to convict due to the possibility of that single witness misusing the law to harm another. The minimum standard required was the testimony two or three witnesses to the crime committed. The obvious question stirred up by this strict standard is what would happen in the case of a person that commits a serious crime when there were no eye witnesses. Would that person escape accountability to the Law? The answer is no. A criminal might escape immediate judgment in the absence of any eye witness, but they would not escape judgment ultimately. Keep in mind that the Lord designed the legal system in Israel in such a way that justice was not limited to human courts. The Lord was and is the final justice behind the human system. The criminal that escapes justice in this world will face it at the throne of God. The One Who sees every action of every person will bring to justice anyone that seemed to escape in this life.

The familiar standard of God's justice is repeated again in this passage; "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." This is a commonly misunderstood standard. It is often taken to express a harsh and bloodthirsty requirement of punishment. That is simply not true and not the reason God established this standard. It is called the Lex Talionis, or Law of Retribution. The intention was not to create a nation of people with no life, one eye, missing teeth, one hand and foot. The purpose of the law was to teach Israel the seriousness of crime, to minimize the development of sin in the society, and to limit the expression of retribution allowed under God's Law. It is easy in the moment of temptation to commit a crime to forget the equal and well deserved pain the judgment of the Law will impose upon the criminal. This strong reminder would promote a much needed restraining influence upon the hearts of those tempted. The eye for an eye standard limited the severity of the justice system by reflecting an appropriate punishment fits the crime standard.

Questions from Deuteronomy 18:

Question: 18:20-22 - "But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him." It says that when a prophet speaks presumptuously, we need not to be afraid... A lot of so self claim prophets as we call it, are speaking words directly to a person and it's not happening (sometimes judgmental). Now words are power, is it possible that what they speak over the person will affect in some ways?

Answer: No, there is no reason to be concerned about the "power" of the words spoken by any false prophets today. The Lord told Israel in this passage that they should not fear the words of the false prophets because they had no power. Their words would only be powerful if they were speaking a true message from God, and then the power would be the power of God, and not their own power. The Bible teaches us that our words are very important, and that our words have a great affect upon our lives. However, the affect of our words upon our life is not a creative power such as the so called Faith Teachers describe. Our words affect our lives because the Lord holds us accountable for every word we speak. Of course, our words also affect other people when we speak to them, but that is not a power, but an influence upon their perspective and attitude. The main point from this passage that addresses your question is that the words of false prophets have no power because they are not speaking for God.

Deuteronomy 20

20:1-4 - "When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, is with you. When you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people. He shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted. Do not be afraid, or panic, or tremble before them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.'"

All of chapter 20 is concerned with the battles yet to be fought as Israel enters the Promised Land and encounters the Canaanite nations as well as some distant nations on the far borders. In each case, should expect to enter the battles ahead is a position of military and numerical inferiority. It is usually wise

for a nation faced with an opponent with greater numbers and arms to avoid going to battle. In most cases in history, the smaller, less equipped nation loses the war. However, the battles ahead would not be determined by superior numbers or by greater weapons of war. The determining factor would be which nation in the battle was in covenant relationship with the Lord and which was under His blessing as a result.

The way Israel was to enter into each battle was significantly different from the normal way that nations begin a battle. It has been customary throughout history for the general or leader of an army to address the army first and give a speech designed to stir the hearts of the soldiers for the battle ahead. The success of the army in battle in large part correlates to how successfully the leader moves the hearts of his men before the battle. This principle also applies to how the Lord prepared the hearts of Israel for the battle, but the concern of the Lord was to stir more than the emotions of the army of Israel. As we should expect, the Lord ordained a spiritual preparation for battle. Rather than have the general of the army come and give an emotionally stirring speech, the Lord appointed for the priest (probably the high priest) to come and address the army of Israel. The priest was to deliver a message to all the soldiers that was a word of exhortation and encouragement. The exhortation was a strong word to not fear, panic or tremble before their enemies. This was not just a positive thinking message. The priest was to urge them not to fear because their success in the battle ahead was no based upon themselves, but upon the Lord.

The encouragement in the priest's message was that they would be entering the battle with the greatest possible companion. The Lord would be going with them into the battle. The Lord would not be going into the battle as an interested observer either. He was going with Israel to fight for Israel. He would fight for Israel against their enemies to save Israel from their enemies. This was an amazing promise of the Lord's presence and participation with them in the battle. How should it change the perspective and attitude of the army of Israel to be confident that they were not fighting alone but with the Lord fighting at their side? They could enter each battle with supreme confidence in the outcome before the battle even started. The only factor that mattered was not the relative size or strength of the armies, but which army had the Lord fighting on its side. That army with the Lord on its side could not lose!

The application for our lives should have a similar dramatic impact on our perspective and attitude. We each face our own battles as we seek to follow the Lord and live a godly life in this fallen world. The battles in which we engage are against spiritual foes that are greater and stronger than us. If we were to fight alone, we would certainly be overwhelmed and defeated. Yet, our victory is certain. We can and should face our battles with strong confidence in victory, not because we are sufficient for the fight, but because we do not fight alone. Every battle into which the Lord leads us, He does not simply stand and watch as we are crushed against impossible odds. When the Lord leads us into battle, He

fighters for us. When the Lord fights, He also wins. The Lord has never yet lost a single fight. "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" (Romans 8:31).

20:5-6 - "The officers also shall speak to the people, saying, 'Who is the man that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would dedicate it. Who is the man that has planted a vineyard and has not begun to use its fruit? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would begin to use its fruit. And who is the man that is engaged to a woman and has not married her? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her.'"

Before the battle, the army was to evaluate itself. Some within the gathered army were given permission to not participate in the coming battle. There were three exemptions the Lord allowed for the soldiers. The exemptions were in the categories of home, field and marriage. There is a similar theme to all three exemptions. Battles were to be fought by those young enough to have the strength and energy required for the fight. However, as young men, some would not have been established in these three important areas of life. The home exemption allowed the young soldier who had built a home, but had not yet moved into it to leave the army and go confirm his ownership of the home by dwelling in it. This allowed the young man to establish a home for his family before he placed his life in jeopardy in battle. The field exemption involved a young man who had planted a vineyard but had not yet enjoyed the fruit of his harvest. This exemption allowed him to establish a livelihood for his family before entering into battle. The final exemption addressed an engaged man who had not yet married. We will see in a later chapter that the young man in such a circumstance was to go and marry his betrothed and take a year to enjoy his marriage before entering into battle. These three exemptions of home, field and marriage insured that continuity of the nation from generation to generation so that future generations would survive the loss of any man who fell in battle.

20:8-9 - "Then the officers shall speak further to the people and say, 'Who is the man that is afraid and fainthearted? Let him depart and return to his house, so that he might not make his brothers' hearts melt like his heart.' When the officers have finished speaking to the people, they shall appoint commanders of armies at the head of the people."

After the priest came to give his word of exhortation and encouragement, and after the exempt soldiers departed, the officers who led the army were to stand and declare one final standard for the army before the battle began. The officers were to ask if there were any remaining soldiers in the army that were afraid and fainthearted. Any who were afraid were to depart and not go into battle. At this point, no one should have been afraid. After the message from the priest

regarding how the Lord would go with them and fight for them, each soldier should have been encouraged and ready to fight. But, in the case of those whose worries and fears for their personal safety were overwhelming their confidence in the Lord and His purpose in the battle, the allowance was made for them to leave the front line and return to their homes. Once these fearful soldiers departed, the army was smaller in numbers, but stronger where it counted most; their hearts.

The greater concern was not that the army would have one less sword to fight, but that the army would no longer have that fearful influence in its midst. The priority in the army of Israel was its confidence in the Lord. The faith of the army in the Lord was far more important than the size of its fighting force. The principle illustrated here is the tremendous impact we have on one another during the critical moments of our battles. Our faith in the Lord as we face our own battles has the potential to strengthen the heart of the people beside us for their own battles. In the same way, our fear has the potential to discourage other believers and weaken them by our example. We can help anchor the hearts of our Christian brothers and sisters by trusting the Lord in the battle, or we can cause their own hearts to melt in fear. Remember, what is at issue here is not whistling in the dark or talking ourselves into greater self-confidence. What is at issue is whether we believe the Lord is committed to us in the battle, and whether we believe He is strong enough to defeat whatever we may face.