



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 21 - 27

Deuteronomy 21

21:6-9 - "And all the elders of that city nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley, and they shall testify, 'Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it shed. Accept atonement, O LORD, for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, and do not set the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel, so that their blood guilt be atoned for.' So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the sight of the LORD."

In the special case of the discovery of the body of a slain person in the field outside of any city, the Lord directed for the elders of the nearest city to respond to this death in an unusual way. The elders were to sacrifice a heifer as an atonement for all of the people. The concept was that since the person responsible for the death of the slain person was unknown, the entire population was held responsible that innocent blood had been shed in their community. There are important spiritual principles communicated through this law. Even when human knowledge is lacking and uncertain in a case like this, the Lord knows exactly what happened and will not allow the death of any person to be ignored. The high value of each individual as an image bearer of God, and the high standard of God's justice require a life for a life when it has been sinfully taken.

The shared responsibility of the community in this special case reflects that sin, especially serious sins such as the slaying of a person affects the entire community. In other words, sin is never a purely private issue. When a person sins, they affect themselves and the person they sin against most directly, but they also affect in a corrupting way the whole community. This is because Israel was not designed by the Lord to be a political society only, but first and foremost a spiritual community. Israel was called to be God's holy nation. As a holy nation, any sin committed by any member of that nation was corrupting and defiling God's great purpose for the nation. The more serious the sin, the greater the corrupting impact on the holiness of the nation. The Lord would deal with the individual who committed the crime, but until the Lord exposed and dealt with that person, the community was accountable to deal with the defilement that the hidden sin had caused in their midst.

This principle does not carry over in the New Covenant to our connection with other members of the physical nation in which we live. Believers today are not directly affected or accountable to respond to every hidden murder committed in the society around us. However, there is a New Covenant application of this principle within the church. The hidden sin of one person within the church does have an affect upon the whole church. Christians who sin are not islands of compromise that only hurt themselves. The church, like Israel was, is identified

as God's holy nation (1 Peter 2:9). The serious sin of one person in a church does have a spiritual influence upon the rest of the church.

Paul used the illustration of the relationship between dough and leaven to identify the impact the sin of one can have on the whole church. "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?" (1 Corinthians 5:6). In the illustration, the sin of one person (in that case it was immorality) was compared to a little leaven, and the church is compared to a lump of dough. Paul's concern was that one person's sin of immorality, if not addressed, would have a leavening effect on the whole church. Perhaps an example from our physical bodies would help clarify since the church is in other passages compared to a physical body. If my body is mostly healthy, but I develop cancer in my right lung, how would I describe myself to a person inquiring about my health? Would I say, "I'm very healthy, but my lung has cancer."? Since the body is unified, if my lung has cancer, I have cancer. When one part of the body sins, it affects the spiritual condition of the entire body.

21:17 - "but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his."

This law establishes a guideline for family inheritance that is no longer followed today in our culture. The firstborn son of the family was to be given a double portion of the inheritance the father would leave. We have seen in previous laws that the inheritance was to be divided among the sons of the father. They were the leaders of the family for the next generation and were responsible to provide and care for any unmarried sisters and their mother. Among all the sons of the father, one had to be distinguished from the rest to carry on the role of family leadership for the next generation. Rather than leave that role of leadership to be determined by the sons, or to avoid the temptation of favoritism by the father in naming one favored son as the leader, the Lord appointed for the firstborn son of each family to take that role. The sovereignty of God in the birth order of the sons is an unspoken principle that under-girds this law. The firstborn son was to receive a double portion of the inheritance, which meant that the firstborn received twice as much of the inheritance than his brothers. It was that son's responsibility to carry on his father's name, lands, business, and to provide for the women within the family. The double portion corresponded to the greater responsibility that the firstborn son was to carry.

The law of the firstborn also has key prophetic element in it. It points forward to Christ and the Father's purpose for His Son to have a special role in His family. Because of Christ and the salvation He accomplished for us on the cross, we who believe are identified now as the children of God. We all have been given special inheritance rights as children of God in His family. "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ..." (Romans 8:16-17). This is an

awesome blessing of our salvation, but the Lord does not want us to lose sight of the distinct role that Son of God has among the sons of the family of God. We have all been given the privilege of being identified as sons of God, but only Christ is designated the firstborn Son. As the firstborn, He is given a double portion of the inheritance and He will forever bear greater responsibility in the family than all the other sons.

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent." (Colossians 1:15-18).

21:22-23 - "And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance."

This law addresses the method of execution in certain cases of criminals worthy of the death penalty. One of the forms of execution was death by hanging on a tree. The law declared that the person that was hanged upon a tree was cursed by God. This meant that their execution in this way was not merely an expression of human cruelty, but showed to the world that the executed person was under the judgment of God for their crime. Paul later takes this law and applies it in a direct way to the death of Christ on the cross. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us--for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Galatians 3:13). The connection Paul makes is that the wooden cross upon which Jesus was crucified qualified as the cursed tree from this law. We have seen this symbolic connection of the cross as a tree before in our study on the lampstand from the tabernacle. As Jesus hung upon the cross, He was cursed by God, when He bore in His body the judgment that we deserved. Jesus bore the curse of what we deserved for our many violations of God's holy standards, so that we could be redeemed.

Deuteronomy 22

PARENTAL ALERT—some of the following subject matter involves mature themes. Please review with discernment before sharing with your children.

22:1-4 - "You shall not see your countryman's ox or his sheep straying away, and pay no attention to them; you shall certainly bring them back to your countryman. If your countryman is not near you, or if you do not know him, then you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall remain with you until your countryman looks for it; then you shall restore it to him. Thus you shall do with his donkey, and you shall do the same with his garment, and you shall do likewise with anything lost by your countryman, which he has lost and you have found. You are not allowed to neglect them. You shall not see your countryman's donkey or his ox fallen down on the way, and pay no attention to them; you shall certainly help him to raise them up."

As we first began to study the Law of God in Exodus we saw that the Lord intended for the entire Law to be represented in two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. The ten laws on these tablets were to be understood as two groups of five laws. Each group of five laws represented a core responsibility of the Law. The first five commandments teach us about our first responsibility in life which is to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. The second group of five commandments teaches us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Jesus taught us that all of the Law of God is aimed at these two core principles. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.'" "This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'" On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:36-40).

The law in these four verses is an example of the neighbor laws. The Lord had clearly declared that every Israelite should love their neighbor as they love themselves, but human nature is always looking for loopholes. The Lord gave many practical examples of what it means to love our neighbor. As examples, Israel was not to limit their obedience to only the specific scenario described in the law. The example was meant to train the people of God so that they would be prepared and motivated to love their neighbor as God caused them to encounter their neighbors in a variety of life circumstances. The specific circumstance addressed in this section involved the care of a neighbor's straying animal. The finder's keepers concept does not apply.

If a wandering ox or sheep was found, it was certain that it belonged to someone and was a valuable loss for them. If the owner of the animal was known, the person that found it was to be responsible to return it to the owner. If the owner was unknown or lived far away, then the person that found the animal was to care for the animal until the owner came to retrieve it. We may not encounter many wandering sheep in our modern culture, but I recently had a lost dog wander into my yard and was reminded of this principle. The right thing was to hold the dog, call the owner and inform them that their lost dog had been found. The common tendency today is to ignore the situation, but as the people of God we cannot afford the luxury of not being bothered to help. We are called to represent the Lord in these practical circumstances.

22:5 - "A woman shall not wear man's clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD your God."

I love how the Lord is so direct in His evaluation of human behavior. We live in a time and culture in which the concept of political correctness has overwhelmed all other concerns, including the concerns of the Lord. Society says regarding the behavior identified in this verse, "Live and let live." The idea is that who are we to evaluate and criticize the personal choices that any other person may make. If a person wants to dress in the clothing of the other gender, and it makes them happy to do so, then the society today will not only allow it, but will make laws that protect their "right" to practice that behavior. However, the critical question to ask is not, "Who are we to judge?", but "Who is He to judge?" If such issues as this were strictly a matter of one person's opinion and desires being weighed against another person's opinions and desires, then yes we could make a case for the freedom to choose any behavior that pleased us for ourselves. That approach leaves the Lord out of the consideration. The world would prefer life that way, without any accountability to God limiting their desires and behaviors, but the Lord will not allow Himself to be ignored or disregarded.

Ultimately only one person's perspective on human behavior matters and that is the Lord. His evaluation of the practice of what is now commonly called cross-dressing is clear and bold in this verse. The Lord considers whoever practices this behavior to be an abomination. In an earlier study in the Law we identified this word, abomination, as the strongest possible word to describe the revulsion the Lord has toward this kind of behavior. It is a term that applies elsewhere to such serious behaviors as idolatry for instance. The point is that the Lord does not react to this with merely a mild displeasure, but a heart felt distaste. What is important for us to understand from the Lord's description of this as an abomination is that cross-dressing is much more than a fashion decision. It is a behavior that violates moral boundaries. Those who disagree would argue that it is a personal choice that only affects the person that dresses in this way. The Lord wanted Israel to understand that this could not be limited to a personal choice, but was a behavior that impacts the entire society.

The real issue with wearing the clothing appropriate for the opposite gender is that it blurs the clear gender lines of distinction that the Lord designed between males and females. Those gender differences were created in the biology of the physical body, and are to be appropriately expressed in the society in the clothing we observe worn by one another. To ignore or violate those distinctions is an action that essentially declares that the Lord's boundaries do not apply to that individual and serve no useful purpose for the society. Consider that the Lord designed the gender distinctions between male and female with an eternal purpose in mind. The distinction between Christ and the church are modeled for us in the clear difference between a man and woman (Ephesians 5:22-32).

22:8 - "When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you will not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone falls from it."

The parapet law is another good example of a neighbor law. This law required every home owner in Israel to build a parapet around the roof of their house. The consequence of ignoring this law was very serious. If a homeowner failed to obey the law by not building a parapet, and someone fell off of the roof, then the owner would bring bloodguilt on their house. In other words, the owner would be held responsible for the person's injury or death in such cases. This law would have no direct application in most modern home circumstances today, but the principle of the parapet law very much applies today. We still have some examples of parapet type laws in our law code today.

The parapet was a short retaining wall that was to be built around the edge of the roof of the house. The reason for the parapet was that the houses in that culture were built with flat top roofs. The roof of homes was commonly used as we would use our back porch. It was a place for entertaining guests at night, especially during the heat of the summer. If there were no parapet, it was far more likely for one of the guests to wander off the edge of the roof. The parapet was a physical barrier that identified the dangerous edge of the roof even in the dark. It was a greater expense and trouble to build a parapet, but the value of the safety of guests and family was to outweigh the cost in time and resources to build it. An example of a parapet type law today would be the law that requires private swimming pools to be fenced so that unattended children cannot wander into the pool and drown.

22:13-21 - "If any man takes a wife and goes in to her and then turns against her, and charges her with shameful deeds and publicly defames her, and says, 'I took this woman, but when I came near her, I did not find her a virgin,' then the girl's father and her mother shall take and bring out the evidence of the girl's virginity to the elders of the city at the gate. The girl's father shall say to the elders, 'I gave my daughter to this man for a wife, but he turned against her; and behold, he has charged her with shameful deeds, saying, "I did not find your daughter a virgin." But this is the evidence of my daughter's virginity.' And they shall spread the garment before the elders of the city. So the elders of that city shall take the man and chastise him, and they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver and give it to the girl's father, because he publicly defamed a virgin of Israel. And she shall remain his wife; he cannot divorce her all his days. But if this charge is true, that the girl was not found a virgin, then they shall bring out the girl to the doorway of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death because she has committed an act of folly in Israel by playing the harlot in her father's house; thus you shall purge the evil from among you."

When one compares the laws that govern our society today, with the Law of God, certain laws really stand out in God's Law due to there being no similar law in the laws of our society today. This section is an example of that noticeable difference. We could describe this section as laws concerning virginity. Can you imagine the reaction in our culture if this were suddenly to become a law today? The first thing we should gain from reading the laws of virginity is the value; the great significance the Lord places upon virginity. Today, many young people grow up exposed through TV, movies, music and pop culture with a perspective that virginity is something to be lost as quickly as possible due to it being a source of social awkwardness. The Lord would have His people be far more concerned with purity and honoring his standards and patterns for our sexuality than with not fitting in with a promiscuous culture. We are not supposed to "fit in" if fitting in requires us to cross personal boundaries that the Lord established for His glory and our good. The standard established by the virginity laws requires personal decisions that many will sneer at today. The standard is simple. Each person was intended to only have sexual relations with the person they marry, and those relations are only to begin following their wedding ceremony. The parents of the girl in question in Israel were to be prepared to provide physical proof of her virginity to the community in cases where here purity was questioned. We can see from this that her sexual activity affected her standing with the Lord, her family, and the community.

Deuteronomy 23

23:9, 14 - "When you go out as an army against your enemies, you shall keep yourself from every evil thing... Since the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy; and He must not see anything indecent among you or He will turn away from you."

The success or failure of Israel as a military force was determined more by the spiritual condition of the soldiers than it was by the strength, size or strategy of the army. This law emphasizes the point that their battles were engagements in a holy war, not a natural war, and that the key to victory for Israel was the state of their relationship with the Lord. Here, the Lord required for the men in the army to march out to battle in a condition of holiness. Since the Lord is holy, and Israel was called to be the army of the Lord and represent Him in the battle, it was essential that they maintain personal holiness leading up to the battle. They could not presume to compromise the Lord's moral and ethical standards before the battle, and then go out to fight and expect to be blessed by God in the battle. The Lord was not requiring personal perfection of Israel here, but He was requiring that they not compromise their obedience to the Lord.

The Lord warns Israel that if they commit or allow indecency in their midst, that the Lord will see it and discipline them for it by turning away from the army of Israel in the battle. To turn away is an image describing the Lord turning His face from Israel. This would be the opposite of this familiar blessing. "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: The LORD bless you, and keep you; The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.' So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them." (Numbers 6:23-27). The position of the Lord from which He blesses His people is when His face is turned toward them. When the Lord turns away from His people He withholds His blessing and instead brings disciplinary judgment upon them. In a battle circumstance the blessing of the Lord will result in victory over the enemy and safety for those who fought on behalf of the Lord. If the Lord turns away His face from Israel in the battle, the result will be their defeat, and the death of their soldiers.

The holiness of the camp is the single most critical factor in the battles to come. If the camp of Israel is holy then the victory of Israel's army in their battles is assured. This is because the Lord had promised to fight on their behalf, and when the Lord fights He always wins. If the camp of Israel was compromised in sin, then the outcome of the battle would be defeat. The lesson involved in this contrast of battle outcomes would be costly in terms of human life, but the Lord considered this lesson more important than even the safety of Israel's soldiers. The point is that God's holiness is more significant than our comfort and safety.

He will not allow those who are called to represent Him to violate His holiness without serious consequence.

There is an important New Covenant application of this principle for the church. In the New Covenant, the army of God is the church. The war in which the church is engaged is not a natural war fought with natural weapons, but a spiritual warfare fought for spiritual territory (II Corinthians 10:3-6, Ephesians 6:10-17). The spiritual condition of the church is not less important than it was for Old Covenant Israel, but more important. Our safety and victory in the spiritual battles we face as believers is tied to our faithfulness to walk before the Lord without compromise before the battle begins. If I am walking in disobedience, rebellion, or violating the boundary lines of what the Lord has commanded, then should I expect the Lord to bless me with safety and victory in the battles I face? It is not uncommon for believers to face defeat in some personal battle, all the while involved in some known compromise of God's holy standards, only to wonder why God did not bless them in the battle.

23:19-20 - "You shall not charge interest to your countrymen: interest on money, food, or anything that may be loaned at interest. You may charge interest to a foreigner, but to your countrymen you shall not charge interest, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land which you are about to enter to possess."

This law placed a specific economic restriction on loans within the nation of Israel. An Israelite was not allowed to loan money at interest to another Israelite. This restriction did not apply to loans by Israel to people from other nations. At first glance, this law seems somewhat unfair to those that would be making the loan since it seems to deprive them of a legitimate way to make money. However, this restriction should be interpreted as another specific example of the "love your neighbor" principle of God's Law. The leaning of money in ancient Israel was somewhat different than common loans today. In our modern society and economy, loans are offered and taken for a wide variety of reasons. A loan is commonplace for buying a car, purchasing a home, repairing a home, making investments, paying for a college education, as well as many other reasons. Many of the normal applications of loans today are for things that are wanted or chosen rather than circumstances of real need.

In the ancient world in which this law was first issued a loan almost always was sought in the circumstance of severe personal need arising out of an economic crisis. For instance, if the harvest for the family crops was lost due to a storm or drought, then a loan from a wealthy person might make the difference between the family starving to death and surviving the crisis. It was not uncommon for a wealthy person to take advantage of the economic adversity of people to gain through the charging of interest on a loan to those in desperate need. The Lord commanded His people to not take advantage of their fellow Israelites in this circumstance. This law was designed to train all Israelites to consider the needs

of their brethren with compassion to encourage a merciful response to help their brothers survive the crisis. The law was aimed at building a family perspective into Israelite society. The idea was that they would not take advantage of their own closest family in that way in an economic crisis, and that they were to treat all the other people of God as though they were family.

This law from Leviticus gives us some additional helpful detail on the intention behind this law in Deuteronomy. "Now in case a countryman of yours becomes poor and his means with regard to you falter, then you are to sustain him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. Do not take usurious interest from him, but revere your God, that your countryman may live with you. You shall not give him your silver at interest, nor your food for gain." (Leviticus 27:35-37).

In considering how this law should be applied by believers today, we are not meant to take advantage of this by expecting interest free loans from wealthy Christians around us for any and every purpose. A loan for some non-essential reason between believers could have an interest charge attached to it without violating the spirit of this law in any way. However, in the case of a believer today in a serious economic crisis, those believers that could afford to do so, should consider helping that hurting believer with an interest free loan until they have made it through the crisis. Those who belong to Christ are truly members of the same spiritual family and should help one another in times of crisis as true brothers and sisters would.

23:21-23 - "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you. However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God, what you have promised."

The act of making a vow was to be handled with the most serious consideration. A vow was simply a personal promise but with increased significance. The difference between a promise and a vow has to do with the sanctions that are attached to the vow. One can make and subsequently break a promise with the only loss being to the reputation of the person breaking the promise. When a vow is taken and then broken, there is some specific loss, or consequence attached to the breaking of the vow. As an example that continues in our culture today, there is a legal consequence to the violation of wedding vows. If the breaking of a wedding vow results in divorce, there is an economic loss of property and money involved as ordered by the court in authority. In the same way, this law warns all Israel of the spiritual consequences of making a vow to the Lord and then failing to keep that vow.

The Lord did not require Israel to make vows to Him, but He did hold them responsible for the vows they made. The wording, "the LORD your God will

surely require it of you" meant that the Lord would hold any Israelite that made a vow to the Lord accountable to perform everything the vow required. If the person making the vow failed to keep it, then the Lord considered it a sin of unfaithfulness and would bring a specific consequence upon them. This law was intended to train Israel to recognize the high priority in which the Lord holds faithfulness and personal integrity. He is a person of His word. When God says He will do something, He will always be faithful to keep His commitment. As His people, we are called to follow His example and pattern of integrity.

PARENTAL ALERT—some of the following subject matter involves mature themes. Please review with discernment before sharing with your children.

Questions from Deuteronomy 22:

Question: Deuteronomy 22:13-17 - How would a man know if a woman was a virgin or not? What was the garment that the father could produce as evidence?

Answer: There was a common custom in that culture, which is still followed by some eastern cultures today, of the father of the bride saving either the bed sheet or the night garment of the newly married wife from the wedding night. The blood stain from her first sexual intercourse on the sheet or garment was considered proof to the community of her prior virginity in case her previous purity was to be questioned.

Deuteronomy 24

24:1-4 - "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance."

This law sparked a great controversy in the time of Jesus. Two of the leading rabbis of that time held conflicting interpretations of this law. One held to a relatively conservative view that the law authorized husbands in Israel to divorce their wives in the case where the wife was discovered in some morally indecent

circumstance. The other leading rabbi held a liberal interpretation in which the key word "indecency" was taken in the broadest possible sense. He taught that the husband was authorized to divorce his wife if she displeased him in any way. According to that view, he could divorce her if he did not like her cooking, or any number of other reasons. Both views actually miss the intent of the passage, with the liberal view being the worst of two weak interpretations. It required Jesus clarifying this law and the true intent behind it for us to understand it as God meant it.

"Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:3-9).

In this exchange between Jesus and some Pharisees, they refer to this Deuteronomy passage and ask Jesus to comment on this rabbinical controversy. They asked Jesus this question because He had just declared that God never intended for divorce to end marriages. Jesus affirms that the Lord's original purpose in establishing marriage was for those who are married to remain married for life. The Pharisees objected that Moses had commanded the practice of the certificate of divorce. The response of Jesus to their challenge would have stunned both the Pharisees and those who were listening to the exchange. Jesus makes the point that Moses never commanded, but rather permitted divorce. The difference is significant. A commanded divorce would imply that God wanted people to divorce in certain circumstances. A permitted divorce means that God did not want it, but did allow divorce in the case of indecency. Jesus adds that this allowance of divorce was only given because of the hardness of the hearts of God's people. In other words, there were some circumstances in a marriage that were so grievous and irresolvable due to the hardened hearts of those married that God allowed them to divorce.

Because of human nature's tendency to find and abuse legal loopholes even in God's Law (or perhaps especially with God's Law), the Lord Jesus clarified the actual meaning of the controversial word "indecency" in the law. What God meant was the indecency of adultery. Only in the case of adultery by one of the marriage partners would a divorce be a permitted option. This was because the adultery effectively broke the covenant one flesh bond of the marriage. The main point we are to draw from this law in Deuteronomy is the value and importance

the Lord places upon marriage. We rightly teach people to exercise care, wisdom and discernment before entering into a marriage. We should follow the instruction of Jesus and exercise even greater care, concern and caution before ending even a seriously troubled marriage.

24:10-15 - "When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not enter his house to take his pledge. You shall remain outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. If he is a poor man, you shall not sleep with his pledge. When the sun goes down you shall surely return the pledge to him, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it will be righteousness for you before the LORD your God. You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns. You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he will not cry against you to the LORD and it become sin in you."

In the previous chapter we studied a law forbidding the charging of interest on a loan made by an Israelite to his countrymen. This law adds another important aspect to the laws governing loans in Israel. This law addressed the common practice of the giving and receiving of a pledge in a loan. The pledge was somewhat similar to our modern practice of requiring collateral for a loan. Collateral is something the borrower offers to the lender to secure the loan. In the case of a loan default the lender can take possession of the collateral offered by the borrower. The pledge functioned in a similar way, but with one difference. When the borrower received the loan, they would give some item of value to the lender at the same time as a pledge that they would repay the loan. The pledge might be a cow, a sword, or anything of value acceptable to the lender. The lender kept the pledge until the loan was repaid. If it was never repaid then the pledge became the property of the lender.

This law addresses two aspects of the practice of giving the pledge. The first aspect forbid the lender from entering the home of the borrower in seeking to obtain the pledge. The lender was to remain outside for the borrower to bring the pledge out to him. This law insured the dignity of the borrower and required the lender to treat the borrower with respect. He could not take the circumstance of the loan as an indication that he was now like the master of the borrower.

The second aspect of this law addressed the special case of a borrower in a circumstance of serious poverty. In the most severe situation of poverty, the borrower might have no item of value to offer as a pledge for the loan other than his outer garment. That outer garment would double as a light blanket at night when sleeping for the poor person. If the poor borrower offered his cloak as pledge, and the lender accepted it, the requirement of this law was that the cloak must be returned by nightfall. In other words, the practical need of the poor man to have the comfort of his outer garment to cover him while sleeping took

righteous precedent over the economic concerns of the lender. In this law, the Lord is training the hearts of His people to be considerate and compassionate toward one another in circumstances of real need.

24:19-22 - "When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing."

This law is commonly called the law of gleaning. It regulated the way in which each farmer in Israel harvested his crops. Like the law of the pledge for loans above, it was designed by the Lord to train the hearts of Israel in compassion and generosity. No human being is born into this world generous by nature. All people tend to be selfish, greedy, and stingy by nature. Parents do not need to train their children to not share their things, but to share them. With this law, the Lord was training Israel to be generous toward those in their midst with a real need for food to eat just to survive. When harvesting their fields and orchards, the farmers in Israel were not to collect every last piece of fruit from the trees, or every last grain from the stalk. They were not to harvest a field twice which would be aimed at gathering all available food from that field. Even in the case where a sheaf of gathered grain was forgotten and left in the field, the farmer was not to return to pick up that sheaf. Instead the forgotten sheaf was to be viewed as an expression of God's sovereignty causing them to leave it in the field as an unexpected blessing for the poor and needy.

Once the field was harvested, the farmers were to allow the poor in the vicinity access to their fields without rebuke or reprisal. The poor were to be allowed to glean the field, or gather any remaining food left behind by the harvest workers. This gleaned food was a blessing from the Lord to sustain the alien, orphan and widow who were typically the three neediest groups in Israel. This law was not a national welfare system. The key difference was that gleaning the field was actually work. The poor and needy did not grow the food and did depend upon the generosity of the farmers, but they were to work for their own food by gathering it for themselves by gleaning. They were not beggars who waited for a hand out, but the needy that were given the blessing of being able to work to gather their own food without any additional cost other than their time and effort.

Questions from Deuteronomy 23:

Question: Deuteronomy 23:1 - How did this law affect Daniel?

Answer: This law restricted males whose genitals had been removed from entering the assembly of the Lord. This did not restrict membership in the covenant nation of Israel, but it did restrict participation in the ceremonial requirements of the Law. The men of Israel were to enter the assembly of the Lord to participate in the feasts of the Lord for instance. Daniel was a eunuch, and would have been restricted by this law if he had lived during a time when Israel was keeping the feasts of the Lord in the land of Israel. Since Daniel lived during the Babylonian, and later the Persian captivity, he was not affected because Israel was not able to keep any of the feasts of the Lord in captivity. The law focused on the physical circumstances of the male Israelites as a spiritual symbol of their fitness to carry on the covenant responsibilities by fruitfully producing the next generation of the covenant. It was never intended as a discrimination for purely physical reasons against those in this circumstance. Isaiah 56:3-5 later shows us that the Lord did embrace those who were physical eunuchs, but whose hearts were right with Him. Daniel was certainly one of those described in the Isaiah passage.

Question: 23:15-16 - In Deuteronomy 22:1, they were commanded to return a neighbor's sheep that strayed (escaped). Why wouldn't that apply to a slave?

Answer: This was a law which required Israelites to provide a safe home for escaped slaves. There are two factors that differentiate the standard of this law from the one requiring the return of a straying animal to a neighbor. First, there is a significant difference between a human being and an animal in God's creation patterns. The human being, even one in a circumstance of slavery, bears the image of God and was to be treated with the dignity and respect appropriate for one who was made in God's likeness. Second, this law anticipates a circumstance in which a slave who has been mistreated by their master from a foreign nation has escaped and fled that nation. The slave has fled to Israel. God commanded that the escaped slave be well treated and provided a new home in Israel. This was in a sense a law of special circumstance evangelism in which the Lord would draw some into the covenant nation through their personal tribulation elsewhere. The goal of the law was for the slave to be absorbed into the society of Israel through conversion. The kind treatment the slave would first encounter would be a powerful influence upon their heart to represent the grace of God to them.

Deuteronomy 25

25:1-3 - "If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked, then it shall be if the wicked man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall then make him lie down and be beaten in his presence with the number of stripes according to his guilt. He may beat him forty times but no more, so that he does not beat him with many more stripes than these and your brother is not degraded in your eyes."

The Law of God is much more than an ancient justice code with no modern use or application. These laws were given by God through Moses to His people to address specific circumstances of an ancient culture, but each law also reveals something to us of the justice of God. His justice is not outmoded or without application to the modern world. The principles reflected in this law are necessary for all laws of punishment in any culture at any time in history. Ignoring these principles in legal codes of punishment today will result in a broken society as the laws of that society are either too lenient or too harsh and fail to embody true justice.

There are only three options for any law of punishment established by every society. Every law of punishment is either too lenient, just, or too harsh. The goal of all laws of punishment should be to perfectly reflect God's standards of justice. The best punishment is that which represents God's justice to the person being punished and the society that observes and learns from the punishment inflicted on the one who violated the law. If the punishment inflicted is too lenient, then the society suffers from insufficient consequences for criminals and an ever increasing crime rate. If the punishment is too harsh, the society also suffers, not so much from the criminals, but at the hands of an oppressive and unjust legal system that has itself violated the standards of God's justice. It is not the opinion or feeling of society that determines whether a law is too lenient, too harsh, or actually just. Only the revealed Word of God is a trustworthy guide to show society the right standard of what is truly just in each circumstance.

Here, in this law from Deuteronomy we see a punishment prescribed that would seem too harsh for most modern societies. In certain cases of criminal behavior, God determined for the criminal to be beaten in the court with up to forty stripes. On the other hand, the number of stripes was limited to no more than forty. In these two details we have a clear standard that insures punishment will not be too lenient or too harsh. In other words, the principle is that the punishment fit the crime. There are some societies today that require punishments that are too harsh. Our legal system here in the USA tends to the too lenient side. As just one tragic example, every day in our court system, convicted murderers are given jail sentences in relatively comfortable jails with television privileges, workout facilities, and recreational opportunities for a short number of years.

How would our society be changed if certain crimes were punished in court, the same day as the trial, with a beating of 10-40 stripes? Those who deserved such a punishment would suffer a heart impacting consequence, and all who observed their punishment would be influenced to avoid ever committing a crime deserving such a painful sentence. There was a time in our society where such punishments were part of our justice system. No coincidentally, the society did not have nearly the number and degree of crimes deserving such a response. When these kinds of punishment were declared "cruel and unusual" by our Supreme Court and outlawed, the society patted itself on the back as evolving to a more enlightened and compassionate society. The elimination of such punishment unwittingly has shown more concern for the criminal than for the society that these punishments were intended to protect.

25:4 - "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing."

This short law might have been overlooked by believers today, if the Lord had not inspired Paul to show us a deeper application. At first glance it does not seem to have any application for anyone that does not happen to own an ox. Since most of us do not own an ox, this law has often been ignored. However, as with all of the laws of God, the Lord chose this specific circumstance of a threshing ox to teach us a principle that has a broader application. In the time this was first written, oxen were commonly used to help in the harvest of grain crops. The grain would be gathered in bundles as it matured and taken to a threshing floor in a barn. Oxen would be used to trample the grain stalks to separate the grain from the stalk. The point of this law as it pertained to the oxen was that the farmer should consider the practical need of the ox doing this work for him. The oxen could be muzzled to prevent it from stopping to eat any of the grain it was trampling. However, the Lord commanded that the farmer keep the ox unmuzzled while doing this work, and that the ox be allowed to eat some of the food it was helping to harvest for the purpose of keeping its own strength up.

Paul quotes this verse from Deuteronomy twice in his letters and applies it to the practice of the church in both cases. Paul sees a parallel application to the responsibility of the church to provide for the practical needs of those who serve the church in ministry. "For it is written in the Law of Moses, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING." God is not concerned about oxen, is He?" (I Corinthians 9:9). "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." (I Timothy 5:17-18). In the Corinthians quote, Paul connects this law in a very interesting way. He asks the question of whether God is concerned about oxen. The intended right answer to this rhetorical question is no. God does not care about oxen in the way Paul means.

The point is not that God could not care less about oxen. Obviously, God cares about all of His creation including the oxen. Other passages tell us that God cares enough about all of His creatures that He provides food for them all. However, there is an important implication of Paul's question. What we are meant to understand is that God does not care so much about oxen in comparison with all other creatures that He would reveal a special law to Moses to insure the well being of oxen. Paul rightly understands that the Lord used the example of a farmer allowing an ox to eat from the grain to teach His people the principle of providing for those that serve us. The most significant expression of this principle affecting the church is the care the church shows for those that serve the church in ministry. The church is not to view such servants of the Lord with a perspective of entitlement and neglect to make needed provision for them according to the will of God. This principle is the Biblical basis for the practice of most churches to provide a salary for the pastor that leads in preaching and teaching the Word of God.

25:13-15 - "You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a large and a small. You shall not have in your house differing measures, a large and a small. You shall have a full and just weight; you shall have a full and just measure, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you."

This law was aimed at establishing and enforcing God's standard of righteousness on all business dealings in a commercial setting. The details mentioned here of a bag, large and small weights and measures, and differing weights and measures addresses a common practice in business in that day. It concerned commercial transactions such as a purchase from the public market. In any transaction where an amount of goods were bought or sold a scale was used to weigh out what was being exchanged. The weights in the bag of the business man were supposed to be a set amount that was accurate. For instance if a customer wanted to buy a pound of beef, the vendor was expected to place an accurate one pound weight on one side of the scale so that the amount of beef sold to the customer was actually one pound. An unscrupulous business man could deviously take advantage by using a heavier than normal weight when they purchased their supplies from the farmer, and a lighter than normal weight when they turned around and sold it to the customer.

This law reveals God's concern for ethics in business. God intends for His people to always be as ethical in all business dealings as He is. Our standard of business is not what is common to other business men, or what we may be able to get away with doing, but our standard is the integrity of God. This applies for us in all our business, whether as a provider of products and services, or as a consumer. The Lord intends for His people to stand out in contrast to the way the world commonly does business.

Questions from Deuteronomy 24:

Question: Deuteronomy 24:1-4 talks about divorce. In our country, Most of the churches were taught DIVORCE is not God's will but ANNULMENT is permissible base on the biblical reason that is written. Question: What is the difference between Divorce and Annulment? Which of the two can be applied by the church (if needed)? I know very little about this area and I believe you can give me a clear biblical explanation. Thank you very much.

Answer: In your country the Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion. Annulment is a way of ending a marriage that was devised by the Catholic church that allowed church members to end unwanted marriages without committing the mortal sin (in Catholic teaching) of divorce. In other words, it was a way to divorce without having to use the word divorce. That was the exact kind of thing the Pharisees did with the Law of God that Jesus rebuked. There is no specific teaching in the Bible regarding annulment. Most of the uses of annulment are invalid and actually violate the Lord's standard for marriage.

However, I can see one use of annulment that would not violate the spirit of the Word of God regarding marriage. The concept of the annulment of a marriage is that a true marriage never actually took place, and the annulment is formally declaring that the couple was married in name only. In the special case of a new marriage where one of the persons in the marriage refuses to consummate the marriage and become one flesh with their partner, I can see a valid use of an annulment. In such a case, the marriage would have technically occurred, but the refusal to consummate the union would invalidate the marriage and the other person could be given a way out of the marriage without violating Biblical principle (in my opinion).

Deuteronomy 26

26:1-5, 10 - "Then it shall be, when you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it and live in it, that you shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground which you bring in from your land that the LORD your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, 'I declare this day to the LORD my God that I have entered the land which the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.' Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. You shall answer and say before the LORD your God, 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation... Now behold, I have brought the first of the produce of the ground which You, O LORD have given me.' And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God;"

In anticipation of the entrance into the Promised Land, its conquest, and its settlement, the Lord ordained a special ceremony for Israel involving their first harvest. All of the people that would grow new crops in the land were to take part of the first harvest and place it in a basket. They were to carry that basket with their firstfruits to where the tabernacle was located. Once there, each one bringing a basket of firstfruits was to make a special declaration in the presence of the Lord with the priest as a witness. The person was to declare that they had entered the land which the Lord had sworn to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give to His people. They were to declare something that was in essence an obvious fact. The point of the declaration was not to inform anyone that they had entered the land, but to formally confirm that they had done so. The reason for this formal confirmation was to give a public testimony to the faithfulness of the Lord to His promise. It was a powerful way to honor the Lord for His faithfulness to them. The principle of giving testimony to the honor of the Lord is one that has a continuing application for our lives. We should follow the example of these Israelites when the Lord gives us opportunity and declare openly the ways in which He has shown His faithfulness to us. Do give such a testimony gives glory to God and strengthens the faith of the believers who hear it.

There was a second part of the ceremony of the firstfruit offering. After the priest took the basket filled with the firstfruits and placed it before the altar in the courtyard of the tabernacle, the person making the offering was to declare a summary of their national history in the presence of the Lord. Again, the purpose of this summary was not to inform the Lord of what He already knew better than they did. The purpose of rehearsing this summary of the nation was to acknowledge how far the Lord had brought them as a nation and to honor Him for having brought them through all their trials and struggles into the exact place which He had promised. Once each one gave this testimony of their journey they

were to worship the Lord with their offering of the firstfruits. As they left the basket in the presence of the Lord they were to state that it was a harvest which the Lord had given to them. The offering was not giving to the Lord something they had produced for themselves, but returning to Him a portion of what He had provided for them. The harvest came from Him, and the firstfruit offering returned a portion of His gift in grateful acknowledgement of His gracious provision for them. Believers today who struggle to give a consistent tithe to the Lord in the offerings of the church would be strengthened in their good intentions by recognizing that every dollar they currently possess was given to them by the Lord. To take a dime out of that dollar the Lord gave them, and return it as an offering of gratitude and honor to the Lord, is not a burden but a blessing.

26:11-13 - "and you and the Levite and the alien who is among you shall rejoice in all the good which the LORD your God has given you and your household. When you have finished paying all the tithe of your increase in the third year, the year of tithing, then you shall give it to the Levite, to the stranger, to the orphan and to the widow, that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied. You shall say before the LORD your God, 'I have removed the sacred portion from my house, and also have given it to the Levite and the alien, the orphan and the widow, according to all Your commandments which You have commanded me; I have not transgressed or forgotten any of Your commandments.'"

The tithe was not given in the same way every year. On every third year the tithe was not offered at the tabernacle to the priests, but was to be distributed by the one making the offering in the same town in which they lived. The Lord ordained who was to benefit from this third year tithe. It was designated for the Levites, the strangers (people who had immigrated to Israel from other nations), the orphans and the widows. There was no welfare system in Israel. There was no government financial assistance. The Lord wanted each household to take responsibility to help those in their midst in true need. The tithe belonged to the Lord, and since it belonged to Him, it was His right to direct each household in where and how to give the tithe. The tithe given to these four needy groups was not to be used for any frivolous things, but was meant to purchase necessary food for them. The Lord wanted the orphans and widows and the others to eat and be satisfied with the tithe. As we saw with previous laws, this law was designed by the Lord to train the hearts of all Israel in compassion and generosity. By connecting the provision for the needy with the tithe, the giver would associate their generosity with the Lord as they were learning to be more like Him. The recipients of the blessing of the tithe would also associate the provision with the Lord, and not just the random kindness of the people. The people who received the tithe would not only have their practical need for food met, but their faith in the Lord would grow stronger.

The one who gave the tithe was also to say certain words in the presence of the Lord as they offered the tithe. "I have removed the sacred portion from my house,

and also have given it to the Levite and the alien, the orphan and the widow, according to all Your commandments which You have commanded me; I have not transgressed or forgotten any of Your commandments." The implication of these ordained words was that the tithe was an obligation and not an option. The Lord viewed this portion of each household's finances as belonging to Him and not to them. They were not given a choice to give it or withhold it. If any household in Israel chose to withhold the tithe and keep it for themselves, they were in essence robbing the Lord of what was rightfully His, and robbing themselves of the blessing the Lord promised for their obedience in this. They could keep it and smugly think that they were better off, but to keep the tithe was to lose, not gain.

26:17-19 - "You have today declared the LORD to be your God, and that you would walk in His ways and keep His statutes, His commandments and His ordinances, and listen to His voice.

The LORD has today declared you to be His people, a treasured possession, as He promised you, and that you should keep all His commandments; and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, for praise, fame, and honor; and that you shall be a consecrated people to the LORD your God, as He has spoken."

This portion shows us that all of these laws that the Lord commanded for Israel were part of a larger covenant relationship the Lord had established with Israel. Their acceptance, submission and obedience regarding God's Law was a declaration that the Lord was their God. The laws were reminders that the Lord had called His people to walk in His ways, keep His laws, and listen to His voice. To be part of the covenant meant far more than simply being identified with a specific religious group. The covenant redefined the lives of those whom the Lord drew into covenant relationship. They were no longer to live as they wanted, in the way they chose, for the reasons that made most sense to them. They were called to a higher kind of life. They now lived according to the Lord's ways, by the His standards, and for His greater purpose.

As Israel responded to this covenant call, the Lord promised to commit to them with covenant commitment. These verses are like marriage vows that the Lord proclaims for all to hear as He committed Himself to Israel as His special people. He uses the special name for Israel that He had spoken before to Moses at Sinai (Exodus 19:5). Israel would be the Lord's treasured possession. This same special term applies in the New Covenant to all true believers in Christ Jesus (I Peter 2:9). It means that the Lord looks upon His people as that which is most important to Him of all things in creation. The Lord pays attention to everything He has created, but He gives even more special attention and care to His treasured possession.

Deuteronomy 27

27:2-8 - "So it shall be on the day when you cross the Jordan to the land which the LORD your God gives you, that you shall set up for yourself large stones and coat them with lime and write on them all the words of this law, when you cross over, so that you may enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you. So it shall be when you cross the Jordan, you shall set up on Mount Ebal, these stones, as I am commanding you today, and you shall coat them with lime. Moreover, you shall build there an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones; you shall not wield an iron tool on them. You shall build the altar of the LORD your God of uncut stones, and you shall offer on it burnt offerings to the LORD your God; and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and eat there, and rejoice before the LORD your God. You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very distinctly."

The Lord directed Israel to establish a permanent monument once they crossed the Jordan River and officially entered the Promised Land. The monument was to be made large stones which had been coated with lime. The result would be large bright white stones that would be exceptionally visible. Israel was to write on the stones all the words of the Law of God. The writing was to be very distinct, which means that it was to be easily readable to anyone that might pass by the monument. The monument would symbolize the foundation of Israel's possession of the Promised Land. The significance of these stones was that Israel was a nation of the covenant, and that they were a people ruled by God and accountable to His Law. Other nations were based upon whatever code of laws the people chose for themselves, but God's holy nation did not have that luxury. Israel was blessed by a clear revelation of God's standards for all of life, and would always be held accountable by Him to that higher standard. The visible and distinctive nature of the stones and the Law written upon them would stand as a silent witness to Israel, and anyone entering the land that this was the Lord's nation.

The application for the New Covenant is every bit as significant, and even more so. For us, there are no external white stones with distinctive writing for us to read and remember to whom we belong, and the standard for our lives. The external monument, so to speak, of God's communication to us is His revealed Word, the Bible. Every time we see a Bible, our hearts should remember that God has not turned us loose to live life however we see fit, but that He has called us among all people in the world to live visibly distinctive lives for His glory. Ultimately, our lives are to embody the concept pictured in the stones established at Mount Ebal. We are to be people of the Word of God. Anyone that looks at our lives should see a reflection of His ways and His standards lived out in all the areas of life covered in His Law.

27:11-15 - "Moses also charged the people on that day, saying, "When you cross the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. For the curse, these shall stand on Mount Ebal: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. The Levites shall then answer and say to all the men of Israel with a loud voice, 'Cursed is the man who makes an idol or a molten image, an abomination to the LORD, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets it up in secret.' And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen.'"

There was a very interesting spiritual ceremony that the Lord ordained for Israel once they entered the Promised Land. This ceremony was to follow the establishment of the white stones with the Law. The entire nation was to divide into two groups by tribes. Six of the tribes were to stand together on the slopes of Mount Gerizim. The other six tribes were to stand on the slopes of Mount Ebal. These two mountains were located very near each other with a narrow valley between them. They were so close that the people on one mountain would be able to hear what was said from the other mountain if the speaker was loud and clear. The purpose of having the entire nation stand on these two mountains was for everyone to hear and commit together to the recitation of the blessings and the cursings of the Law. The idea confirmed in this dramatic enactment of a key feature of the covenant was that the Law of God was not ever to be considered a set of holy suggestions for Israel from the Lord. Even today, people tend to read the Bible and interpret it as a record of God's intentions of what He would want us to live like in an ideal world. The Bible is treated by far too many as if it showed us how we should live, without any realistically hope that we actually will follow its principles and live by its standards.

The nation divided by the command of the Lord to stand on these two mountains was a visible object lesson teaching them that there are actually only two ways to respond to the obligations of covenant and the accountability to God's Law. The two ways are obedience and disobedience. The people will either do what God had taught and commanded or they would not. There was no third group of people in the valley between these mountains. Either we will live on Gerizim and be blessed for our obedience, or we will live on Ebal and be cursed for our disobedience. The Lord wanted it to be extremely, unmistakably clear that those in disobedience should not expect the blessing of Gerizim, or that those in obedience need not fear the curses of Ebal. Sadly, I have encountered many believers who live in conscious disobedience to the ways and Word of God and still expect to be blessed simply because they are a Christian, in spite of their disregard for God's standards.

As each half of the nation stood on these two mountains, the Levites were to declare in unison in a loud voice for all the people on both mountains to hear the blessings and the cursings of the Law. In this section, only a few of the representative cursings are listed, but in chapter 28 we will see the detailed list of the blessings and cursings along with the actual experiences the Lord would

attach to both. When the Levites pronounced each blessing and curse, the people were to listen carefully to what was declared. Then after each pronouncement, the people on each mountain were to respond in unison with a single word, "Amen." The word was packed with meaning for this situation. It meant more than what it has come to mean in modern religious culture. Today, in Christian circles, saying amen is usually reserved for the last word in a prayer and is commonly considered to be similar to saying "the end." The Hebrew word amen conveys the concept of "so be it." That is the meaning the Lord intended Israel to hold in their hearts as they together said amen after each one of the blessings and cursings pronounced on this day.

The significance of their amen, was that Israel was together declaring in the presence of the Lord that they were agreeing with the Lord's pronouncement of blessing or curse upon their lives based upon their own obedience or disobedience to the Law. The substance of their response was to say after each curse was declared for instance, "Yes, Lord, we agree that we deserve to be cursed by you if and when we disobey your Law." This was no light and fluffy ceremony welcoming them into the Promised Land. There was no more dramatic way for the Lord to convey the serious responsibility they were embracing of living their lives by His Law. Even if they were to later change their minds and decide they wanted to live by a different standard (and they would), the Lord would still hold them accountable to the covenant commitment they made this day.