

BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger... John 6:35

DEUTERONOMY 17-20

These chapters cover various instructions. We will not cover them all, but simply touch on those which might have relevance for us.

CHAPTER 17 – Unblemished Sacrifice

17:1 *"You shall not sacrifice to the LORD your God a bull or sheep which has any blemish or defect, for that is an abomination to the LORD your God."*

This, we well know, is a vitally important pre-condition for the ultimate sacrifice:

1 Peter 1:18-19 *"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, **a lamb without blemish or defect.**"*

As time went on, King David understood the sacrifices that truly pleased the LORD, as he wrote in Psalm 51:16-17: *For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.*

Malachi too, saw beyond his time:

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the LORD you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. "So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty. (Mal. 3:1-5)

Again we see emphasis on the subject of justice, linked to acceptable offerings. The first chapter of Isaiah makes this clear connection also; as does Paul in James 1:27, "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

The NT also speaks of sacrifices:

1. *You also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to **offer up spiritual sacrifices**, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:5)*
2. *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye **present your bodies a living sacrifice**, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1).*

3. "By him therefore **let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually**, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. And do not: forget to do good and to share with others for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Hebrews 13:15-16).

Q. Translate these scriptures into practical terms for our day to day lives. What are our 'acceptable, spiritual sacrifices'?

17:6-7 *"Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness. "The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you.*

This law was well and truly in place in Jesus' time, as we see in various NT scriptures, including 2 Cor. 13:1 *"Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."*

John cites a discourse Jesus had with the Pharisees, where He said: "It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness of Me." Of course, that claim didn't hold water with the Pharisees. We know that many Jewish leaders agreed that Jesus had a demon, and when He said: "Most assuredly I say to you before Abraham was, I AM," they took up stones to throw at Him then and there (Jn. 8:48-59). That was tantamount to blasphemy and could not be forgiven.

17:8-9 *"If a matter arises which is too hard for you to judge.... And you shall come to the priests, the Levites, and to the judge there in those days, and inquire of them; they shall pronounce upon you the sentence of judgment. You shall do according to the sentence which they pronounce upon you in that place which the LORD chooses. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they order you.... Now the man who acts presumptuously and will not heed the priest who stands to minister there before the LORD your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall put away the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear and fear, and no longer act presumptuously."*

If a judgment was too difficult ('hidden') and the punishment could not be agreed upon, it was taken to a higher court consisting of Levitical priests (*Sanhedrin*). **The judgment handed down in the higher court could not be brought into question.**¹ The only court higher than the *Sanhedrin* was the Heavenly Court of the LORD. The members of the *Sanhedrin* were to be learned priests and this court was presided over by the High Priest. The *Sanhedrin* had its own police force which could arrest people, as they did Jesus. While the *Sanhedrin* heard both civil and criminal cases and could impose the death penalty, in New Testament times it did not have the authority to execute convicted criminals. That power was reserved to the Romans, which explains why Jesus was crucified—a Roman punishment—rather than stoned, according to Mosaic Law.²

This puts into perspective the response of the crowds when asked by Pilate, "What then do you want me to do with the One you call the King of the Jews?" They shouted back: "Crucify Him!" Their own law said they could not go against the judgment of the *Sanhedrin*.

¹ 40 years before the Temple was destroyed (i.e. 30 ad) there was an increase in the killing rate and the *Sanhedrin* moved to other sites so they would no longer be obliged to judge cases involving the death penalty.

² Wikipedia.

17:14-20 – Appoint a King

When you come to the Land ... and possess it and settle in it, and you will say, I will set a king over myself, like all the nations that are around me. You shall surely set over yourself a king whom the LORD, your God, shall choose. The command to appoint a king is considered one of the 613 commands of Torah. However, there are stipulations that must be followed:

- He must be an Israelite whom the LORD chooses.
- He must not own too many horses which is an association with trusting in the world's ways.
- He must not have too many wives lest his heart turn away.
- He must not multiply silver and gold for himself.
- He was to write two copies of the Torah in a book, one was stored in the king's treasury, the other was to be carried with him at all times *"and he shall read from it all the days of his life."*
- ...so that his heart does not become haughty over his brothers. (v20)

After the people demanding a king and choosing Saul to rule over them, the LORD raised up David, a man after His own heart. A former shepherd, David was renowned for his passion for God, his touching psalms and musical abilities, his inspiring courage and expertise in warfare. God promised him that He would establish his seed on the throne of David forever. David, the shepherd-king, although not free from sin himself, worshipped God with abandon and joyfulness. His reign ultimately pointed to Yeshua, the true and greater David—the true and greater Shepherd-King, who perfectly worshipped his Father with abandon and joyfulness, and became so undignified as to lay down his life for his sheep on the cross. Regarding the stipulations for a king, Yeshua was beyond exemplary on every point – as for the two copies of Torah, He Himself was the Word made flesh, so He certainly “carried it with him at all times,” and I’m sure one was also “stored in the king’s treasury”.

The Jewish people had certain expectations regarding the Messiah ushering in the Kingdom of God, but, of course, Jesus didn't meet their expectations—despite the prophecy from Zechariah 9:9, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey...” Compare with Rev. 19:11-16.

Q. Might we also be selective in our expectations regarding His return?

CHAPTER 18 - A Prophet like unto Moses

18:15 *The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear....* 19 *"And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him."*

This is one of those rare passages in the Torah where Moses gives an explicit promise concerning the Messiah. He claims he first heard these words from the Lord at Horeb.³

A prophet's function was not as a functionary of the Temple; he was there to communicate the commands and will of God. Whilst the Jewish leaders often found prophets' words unpalatable, the Torah expresses unequivocally that: “to him shall you hearken”. (v.15) Note Jesus' words: *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing but you were not willing."* (Lk 13:34, Mt 23:37)

³ Most scholars consider Sinai and Horeb to have been different names for the same place.

Verse 15 beckons us to examine Moses' life more closely to see the parallels which provide a precursor to 'the prophet who is to come'. How was Yeshua, a Prophet like Moses? Like Moses, He was an Israelite, a Leader, a Prophet, a Lawgiver, a Saviour, a Teacher, a Mediator between God and man – speaking the words God gave him to speak, and there are many more parallels between Moses and Jesus.⁴

The Jews of Jerusalem apparently understood this verse in Deuteronomy to be prophetic of the Messiah because they sent priests to John asking him if he was the prophet they were expecting. (Jn. 1:21); Peter quotes these verses in relation to Jesus in Acts 3:22-23 22:

22 For Moses truly said to the fathers, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you. 23 And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.'

Hebrews 11: 1 is another verse in the New Testament that is clearly linked to this verse:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.

A more obscure, but extremely relevant passage comes from John 4, in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well. The Samaritans only recognized the five books of Moses as God's Word—they did not hold the writings and the prophets—and it is to this promise that the woman refers when she says to Jesus: "I know the Messiah is coming, when he comes **He will tell us all things,**" to which Jesus replied, "I who speak to you am He." Her testimony drew many Samaritans to hear Him for themselves, and they subsequently believed that he was indeed "the Christ, the Saviour of the world."⁵

Jesus Himself made it very clear that he knew he was the prophet sent by God (e.g. Jn. 7:16, 12:49), yet many who heard him, though astounded at his wisdom, found reason not to believe – like those from his home town. (Mk. 6:1-6)

18:20 – False Prophets

But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.'

A court-imposed death penalty was the punishment for false prophets. However, judgment of the authenticity of a prophet proved problematic, especially if the message required putting aside any Torah law. *Rashi* explains that one can follow the prophet only if he has been firmly established as a truly righteous man in Israel. This might explain why the Pharisees were continually trying to trip Jesus up in matters of law, especially accusing him of breaking the Sabbath.

We can see how this law, together with not questioning the judgment brought down by the Sanhedrin, put the Jewish people in a bind.

⁴ <https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/21-ways-yeshua-is-a-prophet-like-moses/>

⁵ The Samaritan woman is much maligned – unfairly I believe. If you are interested in a deeper perspective on this well known story, I have prepared a teaching which I would be happy to send you.

CHAPTER 19 - Cities of Refuge

Moses now returns to the subject of cities of refuge, which were set up to protect unintentional sinners and to provide atonement for innocent blood shed unintentionally.⁶ This time, he refers to the cities that will be set apart *within* the land.⁷

This chapter is always read in the Hebrew month of Elul – a time of self-reckoning and seeking refuge through repentance, in preparation for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).

“At every stage of a man’s religious life there is the possibility of shortcoming for which there must be refuge and atonement. A refuge is a place to which one flees; that is, where one lays aside one’s past and makes a new home. Elul is the burial of the past for the sake of a better future, and it is necessary preparation for the blessings of Rosh Hashanah, the promise of plenty and fulfilment in the year.”

I suspect this is where the Christian tradition of fasting during Lent comes from, although the church places this in the lead up to Easter/Passover. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the Cities of Refuge *do* point to the Cross.

In the previous chapter they are told to have no pity for the false prophet and to have no fear of putting him to death; and here, they are commanded to do everything possible to facilitate the accidental killer’s access to a city of refuge. Can you see the connection between these two subjects? In a sense, everyone is in some way complicit in the death of Yeshua – God’s ultimate prophet: “It was my sin that held Him there, until it was accomplished, His dying breath has brought me life...”

In a passage traditionally applied to the appointment of the cities of refuge, St. Paul describes the strong consolation of fleeing for refuge to the hope set before us, Heb. 6:18 “...we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.”

The Law Concerning Witnesses – 19:15-21

Justice is a vitally important component of any peaceful society and it is intrinsic to the very nature of God. Verses 15-21 rule that the testimony of one person alone, is not sufficient to convict anyone of any iniquity, sin, or guilt. But the matter will stand on the testimony of two or three witnesses. The NT makes several references to this law, for example:

Matt. 18:16 *But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*

2 Cor. 13:1 *...Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*

Paul also uses it as a warning in Hebrews 10:28-29 *Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?*

This law also goes beyond earthly justice, as we see in 1 John 5:8 “The Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree”; and we also read of God’s two witnesses in Revelation 11:3.

⁶ See Exodus 21 study for full coverage.

⁷ You may like to refer to the study of Numbers 35 to more fully understand this subject

The law then moves on to false witness: if someone is found to be a false witness before the judges, after careful enquiry, *“then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother... and those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you.”*

As we have seen with other laws, strict punishment is often used as a strong deterrent against committing a sinful act. In this case it is interesting to note the final verse: 21 *Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*

We first saw this law in Leviticus 24:20 where it applied to deliberate injurious acts against another person. It was never meant to sanction personal revenge. Rather, it helped appointed judges to impose punishments that were appropriate – neither too lenient nor too harsh. The Law itself stated: *“You must not take vengeance nor hold a grudge against the sons of your people.”* (Lev. 19:18). Here, however, it is expanded to include evil intent toward another through false witness.

Jesus knew that some had misinterpreted the rule of “an eye for an eye.” He corrected them when he said: *“You heard that it was said: ‘Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.’ However, I say to you: Do not resist the one who is wicked, but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other also to him”* (Matt. 5:38, 39). Jesus taught that love and forgiveness, not vindictiveness, would identify his true followers.

CHAPTER 20 – When you go out to battle...

1 “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 is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. 2 So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people. 3 And he shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel: Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies. Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them; 4 for the Lord your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.’

Two points to take note of:

- v.2 ‘the Priest’ is specific and singular.
- v.3 notice how many different ways they are told ‘do not fear’.
- God fights for you, to save you.

This chapter has some very profound implications. We will touch on some of them.

The only official function of this specially designated priest was to speak to the people and proclaim the commandment that they must not fear or lose heart, but trust in the salvation of the one who brought them up from the land of Egypt. As the servant of God, he was the one who could convey this message.

Q. How might these verses speak to us as Christians?

Take note that this comes after the cities of refuge law, which, as we have seen, points directly to salvation for those who flee to Messiah for refuge—they need to be prepared to meet the enemy, but without fear – he has been defeated on the cross.

v.5 “Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying: ‘What man is there who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. 6 Also, what man is there who has planted a vineyard and has not eaten of

it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man eat of it. 7 'And what man is there who is betrothed to a woman and has not married her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man marry her.'

What can we make of these verses? They seem to contradict the theme of being ready for battle without fear. Interestingly, the Hebrew word translated as 'eat' here is *כָּלַל* *châlal*, and is translated as 'redeemed' in the Jewish Chumash: v.6 "And who is the man who has planted a vineyard and not redeemed it?"

If we look more closely, we will see that these verses clearly point to the Messiah:⁸

"Y'shua could not come as a Warrior (thus as Deliverer of the people) in His first coming. This seems evident in 20:1-7, where three exemptions are given for military service. Messiah is exempt from waging war for every reason listed. He is, in fact, still building 'a House' (not built with hands), but has not completed it and has not yet dedicated it. In addition He has planted a vineyard (Israel) but has not yet 'redeemed' it. Lastly, He is 'betrothed', but has not yet 'married' His Bride. When and until these prerequisites are met He cannot come as Man of War as prophesied."

v.8 And the officers shall speak further to the people and say, "is there any man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own.

Now, on a personal level: Fear contaminates! It may be more likely present in the one who is betrothed, who has just built a house or planted a vineyard—as he may be too concerned for what he has left behind to concentrate on the battle—but this verse stands separated from those before it. Fear cannot be present in any form if we are fighting the enemy – and as we know, 'the devil prowls around like a lion seeking whom he may devour'. Fear weakens, it contaminates, it gives advantage to the enemy of our souls. *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer, petition and thanksgiving, present your requests to God... (Phil. 4:6)*

v.10 "When you go near a city to fight against it, then proclaim an offer of peace to it. 11 And it shall be that if they accept your offer of peace, and open to you, then all the people who are found in it shall be placed under tribute to you, and serve you.... But if it does not make peace with you..."

The chapter goes on to speak about the total destruction of the enemy: Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.

We will see an interesting follow-up to this story in the next study – Deuteronomy 21.

⁸ I acknowledge yourlivingwaters.com, which cited Glenn McWilliams, Shofitim commentary, for this insight.