

Deuteronomy 26: The Firstfruits and Tithing

The first passage of our readings for today (following The Bible Companion plan), brings us to consider Deuteronomy chapter 26. This chapter contains instructions for acceptable worship once the Children of Israel had taken possession of the land promised to them:

“And it shall be, **when thou art come into the land** which Yahweh thy God giveth thee for an inheritance, and possesses it, and dwellest therein, that ...” (Deut. 26:1).

What follows are the principles to be followed in the offering up of the First fruits, and the Tithing laws – we shall consider both aspects for our exhortation today.

When the inhabitant of the land presented their firstfruits to Yahweh, they were to approach the priest, and say a particular form of words:

“I profess this day unto Yahweh thy God, that I am come into the land which Yahweh sware unto our fathers to give us” (Deut. 26:3).

Then, the priest would take the basket, place it before altar (not on the altar), and the offeror would then recite some more prescribed words.

In this first recitation, there was an individual recognition that the people had been given opportunity to dwell in the land promised to the Patriarchs. And this was then demonstrated in the offering of the Firstfruits, which signified that the best of their labours was given to them by Yahweh. This contrasts with the earlier generation, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness. 40 years earlier, the people had sent spies into the land, and they brought back fruits to demonstrate the prosperity of the land. So Numbers chapter 13 describes to us:

“they came unto the brook of Eshcol, and cut down from thence a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon a staff; and they brought of the pomegranates, and of the figs ... and they returned from searching of the land after forty days”

So it was, that out of the 12 spies who searched out the land, only 2 brought forth the fruits thereof. The other 10 instead brought back an evil report:

“... we be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we. And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature ...” (Num. 13:32-33).

The faithful minority trusted in the power of Yahweh to give them their inheritance, but for the faithless majority, they denied the power of God to save them, and fulfil His promise in giving them the land. So it was that the people were not joined in faith to those who brought forth the fruit (Heb. 4:2). Though they had witnessed the power of El Shaddai in judging the superpower of Egypt, they lacked the faith in His deliverance.

This theme of bringing forth fruit in response to a faithful message comes out again in Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians, which contains several allusions to the experiences of Israel. Here, the apostle speaks of the good report:

“ ... whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of **the gospel**; which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; **and bringeth forth fruit**, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth” (Col. 1:5-6)

The word *gospel* signified “good news”: in the case of the Colossians, the “good” report enabled them to bring forth fruit, which testified to the grace of Yahweh and the hope of a promised inheritance. Hence, we read of the Father: “who hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: **who hath delivered us from the power of darkness**, and have translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col. 1:12-13).

Just as Israel were delivered from a power of darkness – Egypt – to go into the land of their inheritance, even so we also have been delivered from the power of sin, to be granted our inheritance. And by contrast to Pharaoh’s firstborn which died – and became the means of Israel’s salvation out of Egypt – even so it is through the death and resurrected life of Yahweh’s firstborn, that we can have hope:

“... he is the head of the body, the ecclesia, who is the beginning, **the firstborn from the dead**; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence ...” (Col. 1:18).

Returning to the offering of the First-fruits then, we find that those presenting them to the priest individually acknowledged that they had been given the land as promised. And by contrast to the faithless of the previous generation, who rejected the testimony of the Fruit, they themselves brought forth fruit as a recognition of thanks to the One who provides all.

There are powerful exhortations which emerge from a consideration of these things. We, who are baptised into the death and resurrection of Messiah, have been delivered from the world, and wait for the giving of our inheritance. But are we like the faithful minority who trusted in the power of Yahweh to save? Or do the opposing forces loom large in our minds, making us doubt whether or not He is able to save us from our sins? To doubt whether or not we will be in the kingdom is to doubt whether or not Yahweh is able to save us: we must be like Caleb and Joshua who trusted in the power of their God. And just like the recipients of God’s promise were to bring the firstfruits of the land, even we should yield to our Father “the fruit of the spirit” enumerated in Galatians 5:22-24.

TITHING

After the offering up of the First-fruits, the focus of Deuteronomy 26 shifts to the aspect of Tithing:

“When thou hast made an end of tithing all the tithes of thine increase the third year, which is the year of tithing, then thou shalt give it unto the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within thy gates, and be filled ...” (Deut. 26:12).

Then the record describes the form of words that the offeror had to say when he offered up his tithes.

Tithing itself did not originate with the Law of Moses. Genesis chapter 14 describes how that following the defeat of the kings, Abraham paid a tenth of all that he had recovered to Melchizedek, the priest of the Most High God:

“... Melchizedek king of Salam brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the Most High God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the Most High God, possessor of heaven and earth: and blessed be the Most High God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him a tithes of all” (Gen. 14:18-20).

There is an important point being established here: all things belong to the Most High God. He is “possessor of heaven and earth” – and this principle was demonstrated by Abram giving tithes to Him. The word for “tithes” signifies a tenth, and was representative of the whole. Abraham demonstrated a recognition that all that he had came from God, by giving Him a tenth part.

Like circumcision, this law was adopted into the Law of Moses. When the Israelites inhabited the land promised to Abraham, they had to offer a tenth part to Yahweh, which was then used for the maintenance of the Tabernacle and Temple worship. There were actually three Tithes levied from Israel, the first being a tithe of cattle, to be given whilst Israel were wandering in the wilderness, and the others becoming operative when Israel were in the land of promise.

The first tithe is described in Leviticus 27:

“And concerning the tithe of the herd, or of the flock, even of whatsoever passeth under the rod, the tenth shall be holy unto Yahweh. He shall not search whether it be good or bad, neither shall he change it ...” (Lev. 27:32-33).

Here, the tenth part of the cattle were selected not according to the will of man, but as they were caused to pass under the rod, whatever order that might have been. Every tenth animal was selected, and marked out to be “holy unto Yahweh,” whether it be good or bad. It was to “pass under the rod” of selection and be used by the Levites for their sustenance.

There is an interesting use of this idea of passing under the rod in the prophecy of Ezekiel, describing how Israel shall journey through the “wilderness of the peoples” on their way back to the land. This will be when Messiah returns to turn away ungodliness from Jacob:

“... And I will bring you ***into the wilderness of the people***, and there will I plead with you face to face. Like as I pleaded with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I plead with you, saith the Lord Yahweh. And ***I will cause you to pass under the rod, and*** I will bring you into the bond of the covenant: and I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against me: I will bring them out of the country where they sojourn, and they shall not enter into the land of Israel: and ye shall know that I am Yahweh” (Ezek. 20:35-38).

Here is a process of Divine Selection, whereby just as the tenth part of the cattle were chosen in the wilderness, as they passed under the rod, even so Yahweh shall choose out the faithful of His People. He will remove those animals that are bad, and choose that which is good. It will be according to His selection, and not the person who counted out the animals.

This tithe was used to sustain the Levites, who had no inheritance in the land. Numbers chapter 18 describes this:

“And behold, ***I have given the children of Levi all the tenth in Israel for an inheritance***, in return for their service which they serve, even the service of the Tabernacle of the congregation ...” (Num. 18:21, see also verse 24).

So the Levites were to be sustained by the tithes given by the ordinary people of Israel. But interestingly, of those tithes, the Levites had to give a tenth for use by the priests. So Moses was told to:

“speak unto the Levites, and say unto them, When ye take of the Children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them for your inheritance, then ye shall offer up an heave offering of it for Yahweh, **even a tenth part of the tithe** ... and **ye shall give thereof Yahweh’s heave offering to Aaron the priest ...**” (Num. 18:26, 28).

The tithing system then, demonstrated a person’s reliance upon the blessings of Yahweh, and also sustained the priesthood and the Levites, their ministers.

The second tithe was taken for use in feast/festivals. It was shared between the offeror’s household: his children and servants – and also the Levites, as described in Deuteronomy chapter 12:6-7, 12.

The third tithe is described in our chapter 26, of Deuteronomy. This Tithe was used to support the stranger, fatherless, widow – and the Levite:

“when thou hast made an end of tithing all the tithes of thine increase the third year, which is the year of tithing, and hast **given it unto the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow**, that they may eat within thy gates, and be filled. Then shalt thou say before Yahweh thy God ...” (Deut. 26:12-13, see also Deut. 14:28-29).

By this means, the tithing system also provided for the poor and vulnerable in society.

When we come to the time when Messiah was in the land, the Pharisees were very fastidious in observing the tithes, but to the neglect of what the spirit of tithing actually was:

“Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For **ye pay tithe** of mint, and anise, and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgement, mercy and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone ...” (Mat. 23:23).

Notice, they observed the Law to the letter, but didn’t keep the “weightier matters” which included pleading the cause of the poor in judgment, showing mercy to the needy, and demonstrating faith in their use of God’s provisions to them.

Under the Mosaic system, the tithes were compulsory. All of the people were to collect and provide the tenth part of their goods – they had no choice in the matter. But there was nothing preventing the wealthy individuals to give more, if they so desired. Feeling a need to support the priests and the poor of the land, they could have provided more than their tenth, if they so chose. Interestingly, we have an example in the New Testament of a woman who did just that: she was a poor widow woman who should have been the recipient of the tithes, yet she gave everything into the service of Yahweh:

“and he looked up, and saw the rich men that were casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also **a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites**. And he said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all: for all these have of their abundance cast into the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had” (Luke 21:1-4).

The point that matters, is not the quantity of that which was given: it was rather the spirit in which it was given. The rich men gave of their abundance to be seen of men, but the widow woman gave out of a genuine spirit of wanting to devote herself to Yahweh.

This is the point that emerges in 2 Corinthians chapter 8:

“... for if there be first **a willing mind**, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.” (2 Cor. 8:12).

And again, in chapter 9:

“let each man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give: **not grudgingly, or of necessity**: for God loveth a cheerful giver ...” (2 Cor. 9:7)

Israel under the Law gave of necessity, and doubtless, for the materially minded, it would also be grudgingly. But God requires a cheerful giver, like the poor widow woman.

We come then to consider the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was the First-fruits devoted to Yahweh:

“But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become **the firstfruits** of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ **the firstfruits**: afterwards they that are Christ’s at his coming ...” (1 Cor. 15:20-23).

In him, we see the perfect example of a willing offering:

“For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9)

Let us then take heed to the lesson of Giving that comes through the Firstfruits and the Tithes, devoting ourselves to the work of the Lord. For if we do this, we shall indeed be raised by Christ at his coming, to be granted our inheritance, and be with him throughout the ages to come.

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