

## **REPENTANCE AND RESTORATION**

### **Teaching-Learning Resources**

#### **BAPTIST LEADER**

August 16, 1981

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Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 29:16–28; 30:1–10

Key Passage: Deuteronomy 30:1–10

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### **The Biblical Background**

This is the second lesson of Unit III, “Covenant Renewal,” based upon the third discourse of Moses (Deuteronomy 27:1–30:20). It is the eleventh lesson in this series on the Book of Deuteronomy. The previous lesson covered the first half of this exhortation to the tribes to be obedient to the covenant that Yahweh had established with them at Sinai/Horeb and was renewing with them as they prepared to cross the Jordan and possess the Promised Land. This third speech, given on the plains of Moab, reads like a sermon. Its exhortations for obedience are characterized by repetition and an emphasis on the curses that will come upon Israel if the covenant is broken. Whereas the motivational factor stressed in the second discourse was love (especially in 6:3–6; 7:7–10; 10:12–19; 11:1, 13; 15:16; 19:9), in the third discourse love is mentioned only in the conclusion (30:6, 16, 20). The motivational factor in the third speech shifted to fear. It was not the awesome wonder of Yahweh to which Moses appealed but an outright appeal to naked fear of all the horrors that would come upon Israel if the curses in the covenant had to be carried out.

This third speech has something of the flavor of “hellfire and brimstone” preaching. In 29:23, the language is explicit: “the whole land will be brimstone and salt, and a burnt-out

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waste, unsown, and growing nothing, where no grass can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim.” But in contrast to hellfire, the curse and threat of fire described by Moses are earthly fire or a heavenly fire (Genesis 19:24). All the curses listed in 28:15–68 take place here on earth during the lifetime of the Israelites. Even the curse of death ended with the moment of death. The only curse that was in effect after death was one that stated that Yahweh would blot out the name of the offender from under heaven (Deuteronomy 29:20). The curses could extend over several generations, well into the future, but they became part of the historical experience, not a part of eternity.

The reason the curses were phrased this way was due in part to the Israelite understanding of death and Sheol, the place of the dead. For some writers of the Old Testament, death was the term for a person’s being reduced to non-existence, as in Psalm 39:13, “Hear my prayer, O Yahweh... before I depart and be no more!” and in Job 7:21, “For now I [Job] shall lie in the earth; thou O Yahweh wilt seek me, but I shall not be.” The more dominant Israelite view was that when the individual died, he or she moved into a shadowy existence that was similar to sleep (Jeremiah 51:39*b*, 57*b*). The phrase “sleep with one’s fathers” was a synonym for being dead (e.g., Deuteronomy 31:16; 1 Kings 2:10). Once the sleep of death came, it was too late for curses or punishment to take effect. Job asserted that Sheol was actually a place to hide from the wrath of God, “Oh that thou wouldest hide me in Sheol, that thou wouldest conceal me until thy wrath be past . . .” (Job 14:13; but compare Amos 9:2).

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This view of no real life after death meant that all punishment for violating the covenant would have to be a part of the earthly experience of the Israelites. Consequently, Deuteronomy 28:15–68 listed all the horrible things that could happen in this life. (Similarly, all the blessings listed in 28:1–14 would be received during one’s lifetime.)

However, the curses were not intended to be final. Even if they took effect, God had a plan for restoration. As long as there was life, there was hope. While it is true that one must reap what one sows, there was always the opportunity to sow another, a different, crop. These two elements were integral to the message of repentance and restoration included in the covenant. In life there was always the possibility to change and start over again; consequently, the covenant provided for repentance and restoration of Israel.

Another factor in the covenant provisions for repentance and restoration was the nature of Yahweh. Yahweh was a God of love and mercy who desired blessing and life for the Chosen People; and through them God wanted to bless all the families on the face of the earth. The curses built into the covenant were only a means to that end.

To be sure, the curses were couched in terms of God’s fierce anger. There are numerous examples of this:

- 5:9 “for I Yahweh your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me”;
- 6:15 “for Yahweh your God in the midst of you is a jealous God; lest the anger of Yahweh your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth”;
- 9:8, 19, “you provoked Yahweh to wrath, and Yahweh was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you. . . . For

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I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure which Yahweh bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you.”

Deuteronomy 29:20, 27 could also be quoted; and one should also note Joshua 23:16; Ezekiel 5:13; 16:38; 36:6; Nahum 1:2; Zephaniah 3:8; and Psalm 79:5.

But these statements cannot obscure the fact that God related to Israel out of love, as declared in the second discourse: “Yahweh set his love upon you and chose you . . . it is because Yahweh loves you and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers . . . (Deuteronomy 7:7–8; see also 4:37 and 10: 14–15). God’s wrath, sufficient to destroy Israel, was balanced by God’s mercy, as stated in the first discourse, “for Yahweh your God is a merciful God; he will not fail you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers which he swore to them” (Deuteronomy 4:31). Likewise, in Exodus 34:6–7, God’s wrath is mentioned in the broader context of God’s mercy and loving-kindness: “Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. . . .” (For a discussion of the phrase “visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children,” see the discussion on the second of the Ten Commandments in the “Teaching-Learning Resources” of July 5.)

The concept of Yahweh’s being a God of love and mercy survived throughout the days of Israel. Micah was aware of the fact that God’s love and mercy overshadowed God’s anger and wrath. “Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger for ever because he

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delights in steadfast love. . . . Thou, O Yahweh, wilt show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as thou hast sworn to our fathers from the days of old” (Micah 7:18, 20).

Jeremiah, in looking back to the days of the Exodus and wilderness wandering, related these words from Yahweh: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness [mercy] to you” (31:3). Jeremiah employed the language of love and marriage in his desperate attempt to lead Judah to repentance and restoration as Moses had promised. To be sure, Jeremiah spoke some very harsh words to Judah, reflecting the curses listed in Deuteronomy 28:48–52, in his effort to shock some sense into them, e.g.,

Behold, I am bringing upon you a nation from afar, O house of Israel, says Yahweh. It is an enduring nation, . . . a nation whose language you do not know. . . . They shall eat up your harvest and your food; they shall eat up your sons and your daughters; they shall eat up your flocks and your herds; they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees; your fortified cities in which you trust they shall destroy with the sword (Jeremiah 5:15–17).

But the harshness of these words belongs to a “lovers’ quarrel” over infidelity. It was love that led Yahweh to assert, “Surely, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel” (3:20). Jeremiah repeated the theme of Moses, “Yahweh set his heart in love upon your fathers and chose their descendants . . . (Deuteronomy 10:15). In Jeremiah’s words (Jeremiah 2:2; 3:14), Yahweh declared, “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness. . . . Return, O faithless children, *for I am married unto you*” (the

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italicized clause is from the KJV; the Hebrew word can mean either *husband* or *master*). This same mood was reflected in Hosea, who emphasized the husband-wife love relationship as the model of Yahweh's love for Israel. In the lovers' quarrel between Yahweh and Israel, Yahweh's anger gave way to compassion. In Hosea's words (14:4–5, 7), "I Yahweh will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be as the dew to Israel; he shall blossom as the lily. . . . They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow. . . ."The curses would surely come, but they would not be God's final word to Israel.

The prophets were able to assure Israel and Judah that repentance and restoration were possible because such provisions had been built into the very fabric of the covenant. Yahweh's desire was for life and blessing. But this desire had been frustrated again and again long before Moses. Israel's failure to fulfill the covenant at any particular moment in history would not forever frustrate God's design for blessing and life. God would provide for such failure on Israel's part by welcoming at all times Israel's repentance and renewal of the covenant commitment. Upon its repentance God would restore Israel as the light to the nations.

As anticipated, the covenant was violated repeatedly, and Yahweh was forced to keep the divine word—all of it—the word of judgment and curses, but also the word of repentance and restoration. As one sows, one must reap. Israel, in violation of the covenant, had made a mockery of justice throughout the land. In the words of Amos, "O you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth!" (5:7). Those who sow wormwood will harvest the same (Deuteronomy 29:18), which is precisely what Jeremiah noted in Jeremiah 9:15, "Therefore thus says Yahweh of hosts, the

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God of Israel: Behold, I will feed this people with wormwood, and give them poisonous water to drink. . . . (See also Jeremiah 23:15 and Lamentations 3:15, 19.) The refusal of ancient Israel to repent precluded the possibility of averting the curses, and Yahweh reluctantly confessed, “I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies” (Jeremiah 12:7). Yahweh had no other choice. Formal religiosity had replaced the Ten Commandments and ethical stipulations in the covenant as the essence of true worship. Prosperity gained by injustice and greed had blinded the Israelites to the truth. Jeremiah’s questions were incomprehensible: “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?” (12:1). Both Israel and Judah had to reap the bitter fruits of destruction. The curses became realities for Samaria (Israel) in 721 B.C. and for Jerusalem (Judah) in 586 B.C. But their judgments were not Yahweh’s final word.

As Moses stated, “When all these things come upon you . . . and you return to Yahweh your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you this day, . . . then Yahweh your God will restore your fortunes, and have compassion upon you . . .” (Deuteronomy 30:1–3). This message was repeated by the later prophets. In the words of Amos, [page 49]

Thus says Yahweh to the house of Israel: ‘Seek me and live . . . . Seek Yahweh and live. . . . Seek good, and not evil, that you may live. . . Behold the days are coming . . . when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them (Amos 5:4, 6, 14; 9:13–14).

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Jeremiah's words were similar: "Therefore thus says Yahweh: 'If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me . . . I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless'" (15:19, 21; see also 4:1). This was Yahweh's word and desire. Even if the curses became a reality, not just a threat, as long as there was life, there was hope. Repentance could lead to restoration. Yahweh would permit the people to sow a new crop.

### Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

**Deuteronomy 30:3—“Then Yahweh . . . will restore your fortunes, and have compassion upon you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where has scattered you”**

The prophets who preached the message of repentance and restoration in the context of this part of the covenant looked forward to the days when the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) would be reunited. In the words of Jeremiah, "In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers for a heritage" (3:18). Ezekiel also depicted the messianic age as that time when this promise would come true. Especially noteworthy are the words of Ezekiel 36:10–12, 24 and 37: 16–28, the latter of which reads in part,

Thus says Yahweh God, 'Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all sides, and bring them to their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms'" (vv. 21–22).



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This prophecy of Jeremiah and dream of Ezekiel never came to pass. The tribes of the Northern Kingdom never returned to their territories after their exile by the Assyrians, as the tribes of Judah and Levi returned after their exile by the Babylonians. God's desire was for the curse and punishment of the Exile to serve as pressure to make Israel and Judah repent so that they might be restored. But without repentance there could be no restoration.

### **Deuteronomy 30:6—“And Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring”**

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant (Genesis 17: 10–14). But more important than the circumcision of the males was the circumcision of the heart required of all members of the community. Mention of this circumcision of the heart is made in Deuteronomy 10:16 and in Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25–26. The cutting away of unnecessary tissue was an act of purification and cleansing. In our language we speak of someone being “hardheaded” or “boneheaded,” being “a muscle head” or “a meat head.” Such terms are not complimentary. If one could, it would be beneficial to have the meat, bone, and muscle surgically removed so that stupidity could be replaced with reason. This is the idea behind the expression “circumcise the heart.” For the Israelites the heart was the seat of reason, and too many Israelites had become “hardhearted” (i.e., “hardheaded”). The stupidity that constricted the heart (the seat of reason) needed to be cut away. Arrogant and close-minded people needed to be open-minded. Yahweh could not communicate the message of repentance and restoration to “fat heads.” The excessive tissue had to be removed; the hearts/minds had to open.

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### **Applying the Lesson to Life**

The ancient Israelites were not “good little angels” above sin and error. They were just ordinary human beings, susceptible to human weaknesses and limitations like everyone else. The covenant made provision for this fact. It was structured to provide for confession, repentance, and restoration. The curses were just stepping-stones to God’s ultimate goal of life and blessing for Israel and the world. Christians are no different from the Israelites. We are just ordinary human beings trying to live up to the covenant that God has made with us through Jesus Christ. We, too, fail and violate our covenant commitment. Like ancient Israel we must reap what we sow. But we also have the same opportunity: we can sow a new and better crop. We have one advantage denied by time to Israel—we have the history of Israel to serve as a lesson book on how desperately God desires to forestall any curse or punishment. God desires life and blessings for God’s people; God is always ready for a word of genuine repentance and has promised full restoration.