

DEUTERONOMY 32:44-47

NO EMPTY WORD

“Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he and Joshua the son of Nun. And when Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, he said to them, ‘Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.’”¹

The Word of God has been given for the benefit of mankind. We are taught in the Word, “All Scripture is inspired by God.” Therefore, the Word of God in its entirety is declared to be “profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness” [2 TIMOTHY 3:16]. It is not part of the Word for which we are responsible; it is the entire Word that we are responsible to obey. Moreover, it is only as we weigh the Word in its entirety that we have a complete picture of the mind of God. We must not imagine that we can select portions of the Word, holding them in isolation from all other parts of the Word, to formulate doctrine.

I am continually astonished by the precision with which God presses His rightful demand for obedience—obedience that is not always forthcoming even from His professed people. There is no question concerning God’s will for mankind—God calls us to righteousness and holiness. However, since the fall of our first parents, the race has continually attempted to excuse disobedience. Our excuses did not work then, and they do not work now.

In truth, a major reason for disobedience is widespread ignorance of the Word of God. Preachers are reluctant to provide sound Scriptural exposition and the people of God seldom read the Word of God. The Bible is the national best-seller that tops the list of books ignored. Nevertheless, God places responsibility on all people both to read the Word and to do all that He commands. One place where this truth is clearly presented is found in the fifth book of the Bible after Moses wrote and recited a song in the hearing of the people of God.

TAKE TO HEART ALL THE WORDS — Moses had written down the Law and given it to the priests. He had commanded them to read it in its entirety at the Feast of Booths every seventh year [see DEUTERONOMY 31:9-13]. The purpose for this command was to ensure that all the people—including the children—were to learn to fear the LORD, having heard the Word of the LORD. Reading the Word, making it known, was to be a perpetual act among the worshippers of the True and Living God. In fact, the act of reading the Word of God was tied to the continued blessing of God as the people occupied the land He was giving them!

Moses was told that he would shortly die. This was not a surprise, because the LORD had informed him on multiple occasions that he would not be permitted to enter into the land of promise. Moses had been instructed to provide water for the people by speaking to the rock. Instead, he struck the rock, exposing his anger toward the people. As result of his disobedience, God debarred him from entering the land [see NUMBERS 20:10-13; DEUTERONOMY 1:37; 4:21, 22]. Moses’ punishment is iterated here as God reminds him that he must die outside of the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—he can see the land, but he will not enter the land.

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Moses would be required to compose a song in anticipation of the apostasy of the nation. “Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them. Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, ‘Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?’ And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods.

“Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to give to their fathers, and they have eaten and are full and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, and despise me and break my covenant. And when many evils and troubles have come upon them, this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring). For I know what they are inclined to do even today, before I have brought them into the land that I swore to give” [**DEUTERONOMY 31:16-22**].

What a sad commentary on human nature. Despite God’s goodness, despite His deliverance and provision, Israel would shortly turn from serving the True and Living God. Don’t imagine that this was a phenomenon restricted to God’s ancient people. To this day, God’s people tend to apostasy as He blessed. The cycle appears to be deliverance, blessing and apostasy. God delivers His people. They commit themselves to His service and He blesses them. Surfeited with plenty, they begin to rely on their own ingenuity rather than His power; and the acquisition of things or personal comfort becomes more importance than continued service. They drift into apostasy.

Look around you at the testimony of apostasy in our own land. Empty churches stand as silent witness to the faith of past generations, and also to the self-love that characterises this age. Ageing congregations testify to people turning to their own interests rather than continuing vigorous service to the Lord. People witness God’s goodness—His deliverance, His rich provision, His multiplied mercies—yet they pursue their own desires, forsaking God and His goodness. How does such a thing happen?

A pastor has a heart for God. He devotes himself to the Word of God, teaching that Word in power and training all whom God gives to his oversight. The people commit themselves to serve God and to build one another. They are excited to witness the power of God at work among them as lives are changed and as new people come to faith on an ongoing basis. Week-by-week they hear testimony of God’s mercy and power. They rejoice and they worship Him who lives among them.

God blesses the congregation—they acquire a building and ministries are multiplied, the powerful preaching is having an impact far beyond anything the members could have imagined when they first began services. As God blesses, the moneys He provides through the gifts of His people are used to expand the outreach of the congregation and to provide larger facilities to accommodate the growing crowds. The ministry grows and the church has a reputation of integrity and power.

However, as God blesses the congregation, He is also blessing the people with the ability to earn more so that they can do more. In time, the people began to wonder how they will keep things running. Though God has blessed, subtly the thought takes hold in their mind that they must “take control” in order to keep things together.

Tragically, those who act to exclude the will of God are not even aware of what they are doing. They argue that they “have to take control” in order to ensure that everything continues as it always has. Attendance at the services begins to dwindle, but the leadership consoles itself that “God is purifying His church.” There is always a reason for the decreased attendance, but there is also the nagging sense that they must “do something” to stop the haemorrhaging of members and attendees. Various schemes are proposed and implemented to attract more people. However, the evidence is that with every new program, a more exciting program must be imagined and introduced to keep people coming back. Ultimately, the demand on creative energy is too much and the people burn out.

Ultimately, the preservation of the building becomes the primary reason for existence, and the holy huddle meets to discuss past glories and to bemoan the hardness of society. Never does the dwindling membership consider that they have taken their eyes off the Lord. The glory of the Lord has departed, and the remaining people do not know it.

Listen to Moses’ pointed warning to the Levites. He commanded them to place a copy of the Scriptures in the Ark of the Covenant. This was not the sole copy of the Word, for he would instruct the people to read the Scriptures to their children, teaching them and training them in the Word. However, this copy of the Word was to be a witness against the people, reminding them of their responsibility before the Lord to both know and to read the Word. The witness would be needed, for, Moses said, “I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold, even today while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD. How much more after my death! Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears and call heaven and earth to witness against them. For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you. And in the days to come evil will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands” [DEUTERONOMY 31:27-29].

I recall the leader of a great movement that began over fifty years ago in the United States. One of the leaders of that movement was interviewed by a writer for a religious publication. In the course of the interview, that leader was asked, “Doctor, what is the future of this movement you have fathered.” Without hesitation, that great man responded, “Apostasy.” The journalist was flabbergasted—he was astounded. The answer was appropriate. No one founds a movement with the intention that it will become apostate. However, if the hand of man touches any work, it will tend toward apostasy. Each succeeding generation will be compelled to recapture the vision of the founders and return to the basic principles that marked the beginning of the movement.

I am hard pressed to name a major religious institution that has survived more than three generations that adheres to the principles of the founders. All have moved significantly from the vision of those that founded the institution or the movement. In conversation with the principle of a major educational institution in our country, I was astonished when I heard him declare that none of those teaching held to the accuracy and veracity of the written Word of God. He ridiculed “naïve-literalists” who actually believed that God created all things in six days.

I calmly informed him that I was a naïve-literalist. “How could you, an educated man, believe such foolishness,” he asked? “Surely you don’t believe such nonsense?”

When I informed him that I did indeed believe the Bible to be true and had defended it on several university campuses, he said, “We need to have a debate here. We would have some fun with you. None of us believe that.”

I immediately accepted his challenge, adding a single stipulation. “I will inform you constituency of the event. I’m certain that many of those good brothers will be delighted to see what you are teaching their children.”

“Oh no,” he responded with genuine concern, “you take this far too seriously.”

“No,” I said, “you take their moneys to undermine the Faith they hold. Sir, you are a charlatan, destroying the faith you profess to uphold.”

It is not different for us. If we fail to hold to the Word, if we take our eyes off the task we have received, if we cease to look to the Spirit of God to guide our deliberations, we will move down the same track, and in time we will become apostate. This congregation will be dead if we attempt to conserve the work of God, ignoring the Word of God. We are just as susceptible as every other institution if we fail to guard ourselves and if we fail to challenge succeeding generations to stand firm in this Word.

COMMAND [ALL THESE WORDS] TO YOUR CHILDREN — Specifically, Israel was charged to instruct each succeeding generation with a warning against turning away from serving the LORD. The warning would serve to cause them to adhere to the written Word in order to understand the will of God. Knowledge of God’s holiness would lead them to discover His mercy and grace; whereas, knowing his mercy and grace without knowing fear of Him would soon be perverted, leading them to focus on their own comfort rather than centering their lives on serving Him.

Briefly review the song that Moses composed. He spoke of the perfections of the LORD, acknowledging that He had acted with great mercy in choosing Israel. God had guided the people, provided for them, and blessed them with incredible mercies. Despite God’s goodness, Moses, looking forward, says:

“Jeshurun grew fat and kicked;
you grew fat, stout, and sleek;
then he forsook God who made him
and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.”

[DEUTERONOMY 32:15]

“Jeshurun” is a hypocoristicon—a pet name, or a name of endearment that God uses for Israel. However, in this case the use of this pet name serves to emphasise in the sharpest manner possible Israel’s ingratitude to the LORD God.

Moses looked into the future and saw that Israel would be richly blessed. With God’s blessing, they would have the ability to take their ease, at which time they would forsake God who had so richly blessed them. From that point, the song takes a decidedly dark turn as Moses recites the disasters that will come upon them. However, when God judges, it is always for His glory and for the good of His people. So it is that Moses concludes the song with these words:

“Rejoice with him, O heavens;
bow down to him, all gods,
for he avenges the blood of his children
and takes vengeance on his adversaries.
He repays those who hate him
and cleanses his people’s land.”

[DEUTERONOMY 32:43]

I wonder if Israel as a nation ever recited the song. I wonder if any Israeli father actually taught the song to his children. I wonder if anyone in Israel ever sang the song. Whether they ever sang the song, or even recited the song, the path Moses warned them against was precisely the path that the nation chose to walk. What is apparent in this song is that prophetic preaching—preaching that warns against violating God’s holiness—is healthy for a people. Preaching that fails to warn of the consequences of sin—all sin—leads to death for a person, death for a church, death for a religious institution and even death for a nation.

Follow the logic of Moses’ instruction to the Levites. The song he recited provided them with a pattern for prophetic preaching and insisted that they were responsible to provide precisely such preaching. Failure to heed his warning would lead to loss of spiritual vitality and ultimately to judgement. The history of the nation merely fleshes out the warning that Moses delivered in this song. What is vital for us to see is that prophetic preaching—preaching that is tied to the revelation of God’s will and delivered to the generation in which we are found—always leads to commitment to the Word of God. Commitment to the Word of God leads to prophetic preaching. The two concepts are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them.

There are a variety of sermon types that the preacher may deliver. A preacher may deliver a thematic or a topical sermon in which he develops a theme, hopefully drawn from the Bible. In this instance, the preacher states a distinct proposition, and then, having furnished the thought from a particular text, makes no further reference to the text. There is a time and a place for thematic sermons, but a steady diet of such preaching will not develop strong Christians. Moreover, it is easy for the preacher to drift into riding a hobbyhorse, speaking only of themes that interest him. One significant danger that must be noted is that thematic sermons may not always be biblical. For instance, a preacher may preach vigorously against certain practises that are more readily of a cultural issue than a moral issue. The doctrinal diet from such preaching may be quite deficient of spiritual nutrition if this is the only method employed from the pulpit.

Alternatively, the preacher may resort to a textual sermon. In this instance, the preacher announces a text, drawing a thought or a series of thoughts from the text. The textual sermon is similar to a thematic sermon, but it has the advantage of setting some limits to how far from the text the preacher may wander. Again, the dependence upon this particular sermonic type can easily lead to spiritual malnutrition as the preacher focuses on texts that appeal to him rather than seeking out what is beneficial for the congregation. Obviously, this type of sermon may lend itself to abuse if the preacher is unaware of the Word in its entirety and if he fails to relate the text to the greater body of the Word.

The third primary sermon type is the expository sermon. The expository sermon is nothing less than the communication of the mind of God as revealed through the text. Expository preaching limits the range of thought to what is written in the portion of the Word chosen for exposition. Often, expository sermons are delivered as a series that begin with the first verse of a Book of the Bible and continue through the particular Book on an ongoing basis until exposition of the entire Book has been provided. Expository preaching emphasises the unity found in the Word, endeavouring to relate the revealed mind of God to the congregation.

Any of the sermon types can be prophetic, but expository preaching especially, will be prophetic because it compels the preacher to seek the divine unity expressed through the Word and apply that unified declaration of God to those who listen. Expository preaching is not complete until it has concluded in a call to fulfil the will of God. Thus, expository preaching that is true to the Word, will always be prophetic preaching.

The logic inherent in Moses' words compels us to acknowledge that whenever a people who are called by God's Name no longer receive prophetic preaching—whether because they insist on less demanding messages or because the preacher has ceased to demonstrate integrity in handling the Word—the people will cease to be a biblical people. Untaught, they will turn from being a people of the Word. Though they may possess an apparent piety and boast of a degree of morality, they will have fulfilled every criterion qualifying them as an apostate congregation, “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” [2 TIMOTHY 3:5]. As the people drift away from the Word, they will cease demanding prophetic preaching. Shortly, such people will meet the dreadful criteria pronounced by the Apostle when he speaks of professed Christians who “will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” [2 TIMOTHY 4:3, 4].

A congregation which neglects prophetic preaching is headed toward spiritual disaster. Though that church may gather a large crowd, it will lack cohesion and shortly the congregation will reflect the condition that described Israel in the days of the Judges. We read of that time, “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” [JUDGES 17:6; 21:25]. Lacking grounding in the Word of God and ignorant of the will of God, the people do what they think is right, which is seldom pleasing before the Lord.

THIS WORD IS YOUR VERY LIFE — “Be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.” The relationship between the warnings Moses issued and the Law he had received points out the relationship between prophetic preaching and the written Word of God. Prophetic preaching (e.g., the warnings Moses delivered) is dependent upon the Word of God. Where the people are knowledgeable of the Word of God, they will demand prophetic preaching.

Notice in particular what is said concerning the Word which God has given. This Word is “your very life.” And, “by this Word you shall live long.” It should be obvious that God places a high premium on His Word. This Word which He has written is given for man's benefit. Of course, Jesus is identified as “the Word of God” [REVELATION 19:13], which gives some understanding of the value in God's estimate of the written Word which He has given. Clearly, this Word is powerful; Peter even informs us that “the earth was formed ... by the Word of God” [2 PETER 3:5]. Indeed, “the universe was created by the Word of God” [HEBREWS 11:3]. However, an even more cogent indication of the power of the Word is the knowledge that we “have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God” [1 PETER 1:23].

Throughout Scripture, those who gave the Word referred to what they wrote as the very words of the Living God. Think of the prophets and their repeated testimony. “The Word of the LORD that came to Hosea” [HOSEA 1:1]. “The Word of the LORD came to Jonah” [JONAH 1:1]. “Now therefore hear the Word of the LORD” [AMOS 7:16]. “The Word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth” [MICAH 1:1]. “The Word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi” [ZEPHANIAH 1:1]. “The Word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet” [HAGGAI 1:3]. “The Word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah” [ZECHARIAH 1:1]. This was the identical testimony that was delivered by Ezekiel [e.g. EZEKIEL 21:1], Jeremiah [JEREMIAH 1:4] and Isaiah [e.g. ISAIAH 38:4]. All alike recognised that God spoke by them and the words they wrote were the very Words of the Living God.

Because God has given His Word, causing it to be written down for our benefit, we are responsible to know that Word and to live by that Word. When He faced the temptation of the devil, Jesus spoke a powerful truth by citing the words Moses had written in **DEUTERONOMY 8:3**: “Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” This statement both anticipates and echoes what Moses says in our text. We live by the Word. By implication, we die when we neglect the Word. Perhaps it is more precise to say that we are dead if we ignore the Word, but the blessings of God that were related to length of days and provision are related to whether we receive the Word or ignore it.

Two differing, though related concepts are identified in the promise God makes through Moses in our text. He offers “life,” which is related to the Word, and “long life” resulting from adherence to the Word. The promise of “life” speaks of the quality of living with which the days are filled, whereas the promise of long life speaks specifically of temporal blessing of the length of days. The offer of “life” is a recurring theme throughout the Book of Deuteronomy. Listen to some of these promises.

“Listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live” [**DEUTERONOMY 4:1**]. Paying heed to all that God commands is the path to life. “You shall walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess” [**DEUTERONOMY 5:33**]. “The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live” [**DEUTERONOMY 8:2**]. “Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live” [**DEUTERONOMY 16:20**].

It is not in merely knowing the word God has spoken that one lives, but it is doing what God commands that ensures life and blessing. “If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it” [**DEUTERONOMY 30:16**].

Israel received what Moses wrote as the Word of God because they knew that it was the recorded “voice of the Living God” [see **DEUTERONOMY 5:26**]. Between the Word and the God who speaks, there is no essential distinction. We know from the High Priestly prayer of the Master that, “This is eternal life, that [the people of God] know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” [**JOHN 17:3**]. There is a correlation between prophetic preaching and the Word that God has given. This is evident from the text. That correlation becomes even more evident as we hear the words Jesus spoke when He sent out the seventy-two. Jesus said, “The one who hears you hears Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me, and the one who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me” [**LUKE 10:16**]. According to this Word, to reject prophetic preaching—that message that is founded on Scripture and which declares the mind of God—is to reject Christ; and to reject Christ is to reject God. There is no middle ground. Either we esteem the Word of God, receiving the preaching of the Word, or we reject God.

The interrelationship between the Word of God, the Father Himself and Christ Jesus is made stronger still when John writes, “If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” [**1 JOHN 5:9-12**].

This mirrors the charge Jesus made to the Pharisees. “The Father who sent Me has himself borne witness about Me. His voice you have never heard, His form you have never seen, and you do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe the One whom He has sent. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life” [JOHN 5:37-40]. To reject what God has written is to reject His Son; and to reject His Son is to reject the life that He offers. Underscore in your mind that all Scripture points to Christ the Lord.

In reviewing the serious charge that Jesus made against the religious leaders, a warning must be iterated to all who hear the message today. There is a tendency throughout society to ignore the Word of God. Tragically, many professed Christians create their own doctrines, creating standards that they achieve and commending themselves that they are pleasing God. Unfortunately, whenever we attempt to substitute our own standard for that revealed through the Word we dishonour God and render His Word of no value. When we create our own standard, we fall under the scathing condemnation of the Master who warned, “You have nullified the Word of God on account of your tradition” [MATTHEW 15:5].² In adding to the Word, or in ignoring the Word, we are attempting to create our own standard for pleasing God.

There is another danger that is equally alarming, and that is to study the Word, learning all about it, without applying it in our lives. I recall the first time I realised such a situation could exist. I had left home to work on with crew building compressor stations for a pipeline that was to run through the middle South in the United States. I stayed in a rooming house, together with a number of men from the crew. One man in particular caught my attention. Each evening he sat on the porch, rocking in a rocking chair and reading from a large King James Version Bible.

One evening I engaged him in conversation. We were discussing life in that area, and in particular the somewhat common practise of reducing the corn crop to a liquid that was more easily transportable, and I suppose, more readily sold for cash. I had observed several of the men on the crew to have such liquid varieties of corn for lunch and I questioned it. As that man rocked he spoke of his own still back home. Then, he made a comment that left me aghast when he mentioned that he had planted some “revenueurs” who had come “snooping around.” I could not reconcile someone who was conversant with the Bible and yet failed to put it into practise.

I have learned in the intervening years that though his failure to apply the Word was shocking, he was not exceptional in the religious world. In fact, the practise of knowing a great deal about the Bible without knowing the Author of the Word is more common than we might imagine. Seminaries and Bible colleges often are staffed by people that are exceptionally well versed in the details of the Bible, and yet their lives testify that they are ignorant of the Author of the Word. Let me caution you that we, also, are susceptible to stumbling into the same trap. If we study the Word for the mere acquisition of information without permitting that Word to mould our lives, we are no different from those who despise the Word of God. The scholars whom Herod consulted when the Magi arrived knew all about the birth of Messiah, but they were unconcerned to worship Him [see MATTHEW 2:3-6]. We can blindly stumble into the same condition if we fail to hear the clarion voice of the Master as we read His Word.

This Word is your life. Are you a Christian? Are you walking in the Word? Are you obeying what God commands? Or are you obeying the traditions of men? God calls all who have faith in the Son of God to identify with Him, openly confessing Him by following Him in baptism as believers. Are you obedient? Believing Him, we are to serve where He appoints us, and He does appoint His people. Are you serving where He has appointed you?

² The NET Bible First Edition (Biblical Studies Press, 1996-2006)

Above all else, God calls us to faith in the Son of God. Have you believed? Do you have the evidence of this life by the presence of the Spirit living in you? God calls us to life, inviting us to faith in the Risen Son of God. The Word of the Lord says, “‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we preach), because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and thus has righteousness and with the mouth one confesses and thus has salvation. For the scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:8-13**].³

³ The NET Bible First Edition, op. cit.