

Deuteronomy 23:1-8
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In our current section on case laws (Deut 19:1—26:19), we are considering how the nation of ancient Israel was to practice righteous living after they entered the land of Canaan (Deut 16:20), how righteousness was measured by conformity to God’s laws (Deut 6:24-25), and obedience would result in the Lord’s blessings (Deut 11:26-28). In this section, Moses addresses immigration laws in ancient Israel, limiting who could worship in the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:1-8).

Moses opens, saying, “No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD” (Deut 23:1). The phrase, “one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off” is rendered more literally as “a man whose testicles have been crushed or whose penis has been cut off” (CSB). The practice of emasculation was done on servants who guarded a man’s harem, and was practiced by men who were radical devotees of pagan worship. Daniel Block states, “this prohibition seems have been influenced by pagan religious rites of self-castration, perhaps as an ascetic act of self-torment or in pious imitation of the gods.”¹ The phrase, *the assembly of the LORD* (יְהוָה קָהָל *qahal Yahweh*), occurs six times in this section (vss. 1-8), showing God had concern for the sanctity of the congregation that met Him for instruction or worship. Previously, Moses had emphasized the positives of gathering for worship (Deut 12:7, 12; 16:11, 14), but here emphasized the negatives that excluded one from fellowship. Being excluded from worship among the Israelites did not mean one was excluded from the covenant community as a whole. Earl Kalland states, “Most likely this law did not exclude one from residence in areas where Israel was to live but rather from the benefits of full-fledged citizenship and most particularly (and maybe only) from participation in religious rites in the homes and at the tabernacle and later at the temple.”² Such exclusions based on physical defects were not limited to non-Israelites, as Levites with physical defects could not serve as priests at the tabernacle/temple (Lev 21:16-23). Even animals with physical defects were not eligible for sacrifice (Lev 1:10; 4:32).

Another person excluded from gathering at the assembly of the LORD was one born of illegitimate birth. Moses said, “No one of illegitimate birth shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of his descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall enter the

¹ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 534–535.

² Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 140.

assembly of the LORD” (Deut 23:2). The phrase, *one of illegitimate birth*, translates the Hebrew noun מְזֻזָּר *mamzer*, which refers to a “bastard, [or] child of incest.”³ This could refer either to one who was the offspring of a pagan prostitute (cf., Deut 23:17-18), or perhaps from an incestuous relationship, which was practiced among the Canaanites (Lev 18-20). Such an exclusion might have sought to deter Israelites from pursuing immoral relationships.

Moses continued, saying, “No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD,⁴ because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you” (Deut 23:3-4). It should be remembered that the Ammonites and Moabites were the offspring of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his two daughters (Gen 19:30-38). Whatever their parentage, God prohibited the Ammonites and Moabites from participating in the worship of the Lord because they sought to curse His people (Num 22:1-6, 22-24, 31-33). Thomas Constable writes:

The main reason for the exclusion of the Ammonites and Moabites was the extreme hostility that these nations demonstrated toward Israel when Israel was approaching the Promised Land. Evidently Ammon participated with Moab in resisting Israel’s passage, in seeking to curse the Israelites with Balaam’s assistance, and or in corrupting the Israelites through sacred prostitution (Num 22–25).⁴

As Israel traveled toward Canaan, they were met with hostility and opposition as Balak, the king of Moab (Num 22:4), hired Balaam to curse the Lord’s people (Num 22:5-6). The word *curse* translates the Hebrew verb קָלַל *qalal*, which means to treat as *small, little, or insignificant*. This same word was used by God when He set forth the promises pertaining to the Abrahamic covenant, saying He would bless or curse others depending on how they treated Abraham and his descendants. God told Abraham, the progenitor of Israel, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses [קָלַל *qalal*] you I will curse [אַרָּרָר *arar*]” (Gen 12:3). Allen Ross sates, “Those who blessed Abram would receive blessing from God; that is, those who supported and endorsed him in his faith would actually find enrichment. Conversely, if anyone treated Abram lightly, he must

³ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 561.

⁴ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Dt 23:1.

be cursed.”⁵ God’s promise to bless or curse was based on an unconditional covenant that started with Abraham and extended to his descendants forever (Gen 17:7; Num 24:9). Concerning the curse in Genesis 12:3, Arnold Fruchtenbaum states:

The first word for curse is *kalal*, which means “to treat lightly,” “to hold in contempt,” or “to curse.” To merely treat Abram and the Jews lightly is to incur the curse of God. The second word for curse used in this phrase (him that curses you will I curse) is *aor*, from the Hebrew root *arah*, which means “to impose a barrier,” “to ban.” This is a much stronger word for curse than the first one in the phrase...Therefore, even a light curse against Abram or against the Jews will bring a heavier curse from God.⁶

This cursing from God is seen in His opposition the Ammonites and Moabites when they sought to curse His people. Moses tells us, “Nevertheless, the LORD your God was not willing to listen to Balaam, but the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the LORD your God loves you” (Deut 23:5). God’s people were under His divine protection, and no satanically inspired curse would penetrate the wall of fire around them. Solomon wrote, “Like a flitting sparrow or a fluttering swallow, an undeserved curse goes nowhere” (Prov 26:2 CSB). In fact, not only did God prohibit Balaam from cursing the Israelites, He directed him to bless them instead (Num. 23:7-10, 18-24; 24:3-9). Balaam’s actions angered Balak, who said, “I called you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have persisted in blessing them these three times!” (Num 24:10). God’s protection from opposing military and spiritual forces was because He loved His people and desired their best. For Israel, knowing God’s blessing was tied to their obedience to His directives (Deut 11:26-28). When they stepped outside God’s will, they opened themselves up to all forms of evil as well as divine discipline.

Because the Ammonites and Moabites sought Israel’s harm at the time of their journey from Kadesh Barnea into the land of Canaan, God said, “You shall never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days” (Deut 23:6). Here was the boomerang effect, in which those who sought to curse God’s people wound up bringing a curse upon themselves. This verse should be understood as referring to those who continued in hatred and hostility toward God’s people and were excluded from treaty relationships. Daniel Block writes:

⁵ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 263.

⁶ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel’s Bible Commentary: The Book of Genesis*, 1st ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2008), 242.

Previously Moses had noted Yahweh's love as the motivating force behind his election and rescue of Israel from Egypt (Deut 4:37; 7:8) and his lavish blessing (Deut 7:12), but here it underlies Yahweh's protection from hostile military and spiritual forces. Because the Moabites and Ammonites had opposed Yahweh and his agenda regarding the Israelites, the Israelites are never to seek their peace or their welfare. Since "a treaty of friendship" functions as a general expression for well-being in covenantal contexts, this may be a ban on treaties with Ammonites and Moabites.⁷

But God's dealing with Ammonites and Moabites did not exclude displays of grace. Remember, God had previously given the Ammonites and Moabites land south of Israel, and His people were to leave them alone (Deut 2:9, 19). Though the Ammonites and Moabites were collectively under divine judgment, and this because of their negative volition and hostility toward Him, He knew there would be descendants who would trust in Him and become part of the blessed community. This was the case with Ruth the Moabitess, who loved God and His people (Ruth 1:16-17), and was even included in the line of Christ (Ruth 4:13; Matt 1:5). Eugene Merrill writes:

Disbarment from the assembly was not synonymous with exclusion from the covenant community itself as the one example of Ruth the Moabite makes clear. Having determined to return with her Israelite mother-in-law to Bethlehem, she vowed: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). This was more than mere wishful thinking or personal resolve, for Ruth went on to marry a leading citizen of Bethlehem (4:13), and she eventually became a great-grandmother of King David (4:21). There can be no doubt that Ruth was welcomed among the people of the Lord as one of their own though presumably never with access to the assembly.⁸

In contrast to the hostility of Ammonites and Moabites, Moses said, "You shall not detest an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not detest an Egyptian, because you were an alien in his land" (Deut 23:7). The Edomites were the descendants of Esau (Gen 36:1, 8), who was born to Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 25:21-25), and therefore in the Abrahamic line and biologically related to Israel as a "brother." Furthermore, Israel was not to detest the Egyptians. Though Israel had lived in Egyptian captivity for four centuries, their basic needs of safety, shelter, and food were met. Though Pharaoh and his administration were hostile to Israel, it does not appear this was the case with the

⁷ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, 536.

⁸ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 309.

Egyptian people themselves. As a result, Israelites were not to treat the Egyptians in a negative way. God Himself opened the door for the Egyptians, saying, “The sons of the third generation who are born to them may enter the assembly of the LORD” (Deut 23:8). This meant that after a time of exclusion, Egyptians could be allowed to worship in Israel alongside Israelites, assuming they had trusted in Yahweh and were willing to abide by His directives in the covenant community.

Present Application

All Christians are called to walk with the Lord and to submit ourselves to Him for service. This means, in part, devoting ourselves to the study of Scripture (2 Tim 2:15; 1 Pet 2:2), offering our bodies for service to the Lord (Rom 12:1-2), living holy lives (1 Pet 1:15-16), regularly confessing our sins to God (1 John 1:6-9), sharing the gospel with others (Mark 16:15; Rom 15:15-16), assembling for worship (Heb 10:25), offering praise to God (Heb 13:15), doing good works (Gal 6:10; Heb 10:24), sharing our resources with others (Heb 13:16; cf. Phil 4:18), living selflessly for the benefit of others (Phil 2:17; cf. Phil 1:21-26; 2:3-4), praying constantly (1 Th 5:17), giving thanks (1 Th 5:18), and walking in love (Eph 5:1-2; cf. 1 Pet 1:22). These are just a few of the Christian duties that are to be obeyed by all believers.

However, apart from the general duties of all Christians, there are specific qualifications for some who would serve in a special way. For example, serving as a church *elder* or *deacon* means meeting certain qualifications; specifically, church *elders* are appointed by God (Acts 20:28; cf. Eph 4:11), consist of men only (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6; cf. 1 Tim 2:12-14), and must be doctrinally, morally, and spiritually mature (1 Tim 3:1-7).⁹ Failure to meet these qualifications disqualifies one to serve as a church elder or deacon within the local church.

Furthermore, there are some Christians who should be excluded from Christian fellowship, and these include believers who are continually teaching false doctrines or pursuing sin (this is not the occasional sin, but ongoing sin that harms the spiritual walk of others). The reason we should avoid such persons is partly because “bad associations corrupt good morals” (1 Cor 15:33). When writing to Christians in Corinth, Paul said, “I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person,

⁹ The function pastors is to solve doctrinal problems in the church through biblical discussion and research (Acts 15:4-11, cf. Acts 16:4), work with “the whole church” on ministry matters (Acts 15:22), shepherd the church through general oversight (Acts 20:17; 28), guard against false teachers and their false doctrines (Acts 20:28-32), guide believers to spiritual maturity (Eph 4:11-14), be servant-leaders (1 Th 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13:7, 17), work hard at “preaching and teaching” (1 Tim 5:17; cf. Gal 6:6; Eph 4:11-14; 1 Th 5:12), receive financial support from those who benefit from their ministry (Gal 6:6; 1 Tim 5:17-18), and offer support and prayer for those who suffer (Jam 5:14).

or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one” (1 Cor 5:11). Disassociation was for the purpose of maintaining personal holiness with the Lord. We always hope the sinning Christian will come to his/her senses and come back into fellowship; however, we must maintain distance until they do. In another place Paul wrote, “I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them” (Rom 16:17). And, “We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us” (2 Th 3:6). Such actions are never easy, for we love fellow believers and desire friendship with them. However, our walk with God must always take priority, for He is our greatest Friend, and allegiance to Him secures for us all that is strong and good and meaningful in life. And if/when the erring believer turns back to the Lord and resumes their walk-in-the-Word, then all will be as it should, and fellowship within the Christian community can be restored.