

Deuteronomy 26:1-19

This chapter deals with two aspects of the ceremonial law governing the people of God. Tithing and first fruits.

Maths was my weak point in school and has been ever since but a tenth or a tithe is a percentage or fraction that I can work with. Simple. 10%. Lets read a little more about tithing;

Numbers 18: ²⁶ *Speak to the Levites and say to them: "When you receive from the Israelites the tithe I give you as your inheritance, you must present a tenth of that tithe as the LORD's offering.*

So the tithe went to the Levites. Let's see if we can learn any more about it.

Deut 14:23 ²² *Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. ²³ Eat the tithe of your corn, new wine and olive oil, and the first-born of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always.*

Now this sounds different from the tithe in Numbers 18. The tithe cannot be both given to the Levites and be consumed by the farmer. So, QED we have two tithes. 20%. One which goes to the Levite, and one which the producer keeps. But then in our reading :12 the tithe goes to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. A third tithe!

Now this rather messes with the commonly embraced and quite broadly accepted principle within the church of tithing. If you ask the average Western evangelical Christian what is the portion of income that should be given to God, (not that they necessarily do but they have often been taught) they will reply the tithe, ten percent. If you have a tv system that offers hundreds of channels you will doubtless whether for entertainment or instruction have strayed into the realm of Christian TV and you wont have been there very long before the subject of finance will have come up and I would be surprised if you haven't had Malachi 3:8-10 quoted in support of the principle of giving to God by tithing;

⁸ *'Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. 'But you ask, "How are we robbing you?" 'In tithes and offerings. ⁹ You are under a curse – your whole nation – because you are robbing me. ¹⁰ Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.*

Tithe the TV evangelist says, tithe the preacher says. Give your ten percent. But what is clear is that its not quite that simple. It wasn't ten percent. Lets briefly look at the tithes. The Numbers 18 passage refers to a tithe we'll call the Priests Tithe. The Levites were like God's civil servants, they administered the system of theocratic government that God had set in place, they taught, they operated the judiciary, and officiated in the tabernacle with the offerings and sacrifices. So given that they were not engaged in any commercial activity they required supporting and the work of the tabernacle required funding as around 700 animal a year were required for sacrifice, this support is provided for them in the form of a tithe, a tenth of the produce of the land went to them.

I have heard plenty of teachings and sermons on tithing, but this tithe, I didn't know it existed; this again was a tithe of the produce of the land. The shepherd would hold out a stick every tenth new born goat, sheep, cow, ox, the stick would fall on them touching them with a red dye. They were marked out, they belonged to the Lord. (If there weren't ten, then none was marked so it isn't 10 percent, strictly - God was gracious to the struggling) They had to be separated, were said to be holy, they belonged to God. The same went for the new wine, the olives, the pomegranates, the figs, wheat, and barley. A tenth of everything that the land had produced separated to God, a tithe, Holy. It couldn't be borrowed from, loaned or used in emergencies. It was God's.

And what did God require people did with this tithe? Well, they were to saddle their donkeys and camels, load them with the tithe and journey to Jerusalem. And now what? Give it to the priest, offer it as a sacrifice? No! Now it was time to celebrate. And if everything that the land had produced was too much to carry all the way to Jerusalem, sell it in your town, bring the money to Jerusalem and use it to buy whatever you like! It's true, let's read Deut 14: 22-26

²² *Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. ²³ Eat the tithe of your corn, new wine and olive oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always. ²⁴ But if that place is too distant and you have been blessed by the LORD your God and cannot carry your tithe (because the place where the LORD will choose to put his Name is so far away), ²⁵ then exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the LORD your God will choose. ²⁶ Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice.*

It is no wonder that the Psalmist David writes, 'I was glad when they said to me, let us go up to the house of the Lord'. It was party time, festival, celebration. Who wouldn't want to go. It was a loud, vibrant, exuberant time. If

you have been around Stamford Hill & Golders Green, you will have seen the men in white stockings, black breeches, long black coats, curly side burns & big black hats. Ultra orthodox or Haredi Jews; conservative in the extreme. I used to visit Jerusalem quite often for work & stay with friends in the old city but would always get wakened every morning before it is healthy to be so by these Haredi Jews, not their prayers, not the blowing of a Shofar, but by wild exuberant dancing and worship. The Jews knew & know how to celebrate.

But what was the purpose of this revelry? :23 *that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always.* How did reverence emerge from revelry? Probably through remembrance! The diet of these people, for 40 years, had been manna, quail & water. They were now in the land the Lord had given them, enjoying the produce of the land He had given them. I imagine my parents feeding me the same meal not for a week or two but decades, and I was then invited to a party at a friend's house where there were foods I had neither seen nor tasted, in abundance, which I could eat till I could eat no more, not even a wafer thin mint. Wow! What a friend! Wow what a God.

Do you resent a Christendom that has presented a God with His hand out to receive, when his character revealed here is to give and for us to enjoy what He gives.

And then :12 we have the third tithe. What another 10%? Is God a socialist? The Hebrew calendar worked on a 7 year cycle. Year one & two, a tithe for the Priests & a tithe for the Party, Year 3, a tithe for the Priests and a tithe for the Poor. God's preferential option for the poor. In the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez, regarded as the founder of liberation theology, "God demonstrates a special predilection toward those who have been excluded from the banquet of life." Year 4 & 5 a tithe for the Priests & a tithe for the party. Year 7, no tithing, the gates are left unlocked and anyone takes what the land naturally produces.

And so if we believe we should tithe according to the bible, it isn't just 10% to the ministry of the church, it is first 10% to the church, 2nd 10% to a festival fund and every third year the 2nd tithe goes to the poor, the widow and the orphan.

But from my reading I'd suggest that the principles of the OT law of tithing carry through into the NT, rather than the precise practise. As Paul tells us in Galatians, 'the law was a trainer, a tutor, a guardian'. The guardian Paul was referring to was a trusted slave who taught & ruled over a child until they reached manhood. The law was a guardian until Christ.

The principles; in the OT the tithe has to be given to the Levite. Paul tells the church in Corinth 1 Corinthians 9:14,

the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should received their living from the Gospel

And then in Galatia Gal 6:6

the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor.

And the same concept Paul teaches Timothy telling him that those who teach and instruct, those who run the church well, they are worthy of adequate financial support.

So that's the Priest's Tithe. Then we get into Corinthians and Paul is instructing the believers there as he says he has done the Galatians, to put money aside on the first day of the week which Paul would collect to be given to the poor in Jerusalem who were suffering as a result of famine. No percentage is prescribed and no commandment is given, in fact Paul makes it clear in 2 Cor 8:8 '*I am not commanding you.*' The giving is to be free from pressure, as you decide in your own heart. But Paul does insert a challenge, 'Remember this, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, but he who sows generously will also reap generously. So there we have the Poor tithe.

So we see the principles of the Priests tithe and the Poor Tithe but conspicuous by its absence is the Party Tithe, where the abundance of today's provision is remembered in light of the time in the desert. Where in calling to mind God's provision our hearts rejoice and are reverent. When we think of where we were then and where we are now. It didn't take long before it dawned on me, the extravagant meal that Jesus instituted, where symbolically his body is the meal we partake of, where we remember and are reverent, where we leave our homes and gather and rejoice.

When you have come into the Land!

The Promised Land. There is a place to which God is calling every one of us His children. It isn't primarily a physical location it is a call into a mature relationship with Himself.

His first call to those He has created is come out of Egypt. Jane and I owned a business and the country of origin of all of our beautiful products was Egypt, yet some Christians disapproved because they said, we are told to come out of Egypt! Egypt represents a spiritual place not necessarily a physical place, it represents slavery,

bondage, the restriction of liberty and expression. For the Israelites there was much to enjoy in Egypt, so many reasons to remain, when there was a dispute with Moses, in Numbers 16 the people referred to Egypt as a 'land flowing with milk and honey'. The land of Egypt had plenty of everything the world had to offer, architecture, art, technology. The beds we use for the night shelter are functional but lacking comfort, that's because its time they were updated, the same model is on display in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. I kid you not! Life in the land of Egypt had it's upside, but all of this was in the context of being a slave, owned, lacking freedom. When you are a slave, even when you escape, you are still a slave and the property of your owner, when you were found you were returned to your owner. A slave could not be set free by their own action, they need deliverer.

The spiritual parallel is apparent, leaving that which holds us in bondage to sin is no easy or straightforward matter, even acknowledging we're slaves to sin is a major hurdle, but that's where it starts! And that is where our deliverer meets us. And who is our deliver, Jesus. Moses led a nation out of the land of Egypt, Jesus offers to lead us out of Sin, and certain spiritual death.

The second call from God is to get out of the desert. It seems counter intuitive to suggest anyone would want to stay in the desert, real or metaphorical. I would suggest that the desert is that zone we choose because what we perceive on offer from God is not going to be easily apprehended. The Israelites camped at Kadesh Barnea and sent the 12 spies into the land God had promised to them and the assessment that 10 of them returned with convinced the Israelites that the promise God had made to Abraham, then to Jacob and to Moses, He wasn't able to keep! He could part the Red Sea, enable them to win the battle with the Amalekites, cover the desert with food for them to eat, He had made their knees knock in fear as He had descended on Mt Sinai. None of which He had promised to do but that which He has said He would do - they doubt! The God who had proved Himself to them time and again, they didn't believe He could be trusted. And the bizarre thing for me as in my mind I'm sitting there with them looking across the Jordan valley is that He was there, visible to them in the form of a cloud. Joshua & Caleb are bellowing, of course we can do it.

So how does this challenge me and you? The Israelites rebelled, they decided, the quail, the manna, the water from the rock was the more secure option. They would continue to depend on God but in a way that they knew and they had become familiar with. Ah the familiar, how it can coax us into complacency.

What has God put on your heart that to this point is a fuzzy vision, but there is a growing sense of God speaking to you, challenging you, calling you on? Wisdom is found in counsel; seek it out making sure that among them is one with the spirit of Joshua & Caleb.

The Promised Land, we link it with concepts such as the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, it has a mythical 'Neverland' ring to it, contributed to by the image evoked by, 'a land flowing with milk and honey'. But what the Hebrew scholars tell us that it means is. 'Fruit trees grow in many different terrains, but their produce overflow with nectar only when the land is especially fertile, when the trees are particularly well-nourished. Similarly, livestock survives in many habitats, but only overflow with milk when they are in particularly fertile pastures'. So it isn't a scenario of Willy Wonka-esque streams of honey & milk, but rather the abundant produce of a well managed fertile land. Jane & I have lived among farmers and the management of fertile land is a demanding task. The Promised Land is the full on engagement with the calling that God has on your life, it is a well worked land, not some spiritual utopia with all that your heart desires on tap!

When Jane and I were in South Africa in rather traumatic circumstances we had to leave our first business premises, but at the 11th hour God opened the opportunity for an amazing property. Prime location, maximum visibility, showroom space, storage, and a good sized living accommodation at the back with a swimming pool. Everything we needed all in one location. And what capped it off was it had two massive Jacaranda trees in the front whose flowers are a unique, beautiful mid-purple, which also happened to be the principal colour of our company logo. Everything was falling into place. We signed the lease and invited our home group around to pray through the place as there had been a lot of weird stuff going on there with the previous occupants. One of the home group pointed out that the name on the gate posts at the entrance to the property was Onze Rust, which to the non-Dutch speaking among us means, Our Rest. Amen & Hallelujah! We had entered our promised land. The road to dominance of the home & garden décor market was assured.

The highlights of the subsequent 5 years trading were; 2 uncomfortable brushes with bankruptcy, 3 burn-outs, 2 me 1 Jane, 5 break-ins and we left South Africa significantly poorer than when we arrived! How does that equate with Promised Land? Because we saw miracles in those battles and I mean, miracles. Miracles that we wouldn't have seen had we opted for the security of the desert/mediocrity.

Entering The Promised Land doesn't require a geographical move, the Promised Land is that place to which your spirit and my spirit knows God is beckoning.