

Instructions for a Covenant Renewal Ceremony

Deuteronomy 27

Deuteronomy 27:1-13 - *“Now Moses, with the elders of Israel, commanded the people, saying: “Keep all the commandments which I command you today.² And it shall be, on the day when you cross over the Jordan to the land which the Lord your God is giving you, that you shall set up for yourselves large stones, and whitewash them with lime. ³ You shall write on them all the words of this law, when you have crossed over, that you may enter the land which the Lord your God is giving you, ‘a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord God of your fathers promised you. ⁴ Therefore it shall be, when you have crossed over the Jordan, that on Mount Ebal you shall set up these stones, which I command you today, and you shall whitewash them with lime. ⁵ And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall not use an iron tool on them. ⁶ You shall build with whole stones the altar of the Lord your God, and offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God. ⁷ You shall offer peace offerings, and shall eat there, and rejoice before the Lord your God. ⁸ And you shall write very plainly on the stones all the words of this law.” ⁹ Then Moses and the priests, the Levites, spoke to all Israel, saying, “Take heed and listen, O Israel: This day you have become the people of the Lord your God. ¹⁰ Therefore you shall obey the voice of the Lord your God, and observe His commandments and His statutes which I command you today.” ¹¹ And Moses commanded the people on the same day, saying, ¹² “These shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, when you have crossed over the Jordan: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin; ¹³ and these shall stand on Mount Ebal to curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali.”*

Background Notes

In Deuteronomy 26 Moses gave the children of Israel directions for two different rituals or ceremonies. They were responsible to continue these rituals when they entered the Land of Promise. One was the ritual of the annual Feast of First Fruits, and the other was the extra tithe every third year for the poor and needy throughout the Land. The instructions for these two required rituals concluded Moses' second address to the children of Israel, who were gathered together in the staging area on the plains of Moab, ready to cross over the Jordan River and possess the Promised Land.

Chapter 27 contained the instructions of a “covenant renewal” ceremony that was to be carried out by the children of Israel after the conquest of the Land had begun.

Doctrinal Points

1. The importance of the Mosaic Covenant was emphasized by covenant renewal.

The instructions about the covenant renewal ceremony were first given back in chapter 11, as part of Moses' second address to the people. Deuteronomy 11:29-32: *"Now it shall be, when the Lord your God has brought you into the land which you go to possess, that you shall put the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal. For you will cross over the Jordan and go in to possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you, and you will possess it and dwell in it. And you shall be careful to observe all the statutes and judgments which I set before you today."*

In Deuteronomy 27 further instructions were given for this covenant renewal ceremony that was to take place when they entered the Land of Promise. At the end of chapter 26, the children of Israel pledged themselves to obey the Lord and keep the statutes and commandments and ordinances of the Mosaic Covenant. That oath of allegiance was really like an initial covenant of renewal before they crossed the Jordan River. Chapters 27-28 provided instructions for a second covenant renewal that was to take place after Israel crossed the Jordan River and began to possess the land of promise and blessing.

The city of Shechem was situated between two mountains, Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim, in the central part of the land in the area (where Nablus is located today). Shechem was where the Lord appeared to Abraham when Abraham came into the land, and it was there that Abraham built an altar to the Lord (Genesis 12). Shechem is also the spot where our Lord met the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4). Water can still be drawn from that well today.

The renewal ceremony by which the Mosaic Covenant would be ratified in the Land was to take place as follows: after their initial conquest of the Land, the children of Israel were to build an altar to the Lord on Mount Ebal, north of Shechem. The altar was to be built of uncut stones in accordance with the Law - it was not to be like the pagan altars of cut stone. Furthermore, in addition to the altar, large lime-covered stones were to be set up on Mount Ebal, with the Law inscribed on these stones. We don't know how much of the Mosaic Covenant was included on these stones, but probably it was at least the blessings and curses of the Law.

After the stones and altar were in place, and sacrifices and peace offerings were made, then the covenant was ratified by half of the tribes of Israel going up on the slopes of Mount Gerizim (the mount of blessing), and the other six tribes going up on the slopes of Mount Ebal, where the curses or penalties of the Law would be reiterated. The Levitical priests would stand with the Ark of the Covenant in the valley between the mountains and conduct the ceremony. The tribes on Mount Gerizim would voice the blessings of the Law, and the tribes on Mt Ebal would state the curses of the Law.

The children of Israel carried out these instructions when they came into the Land, after the initial stage of the conquest was over. Joshua 8:30-35: *"Now Joshua built an altar to the Lord God of Israel in Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses: "an altar of whole stones*

over which no man has wielded an iron tool. "And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the children of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the Law of Moses, which he had written. Then all Israel, with their elders and officers and judges, stood on either side of the ark before the priests, the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, the stranger as well as he who was born among them. Half of them were in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded before, that they should bless the people of Israel. And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and the cursings, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, with the women, the little ones, and the strangers who were living among them."

So we see the importance that God placed on ratifying the Mosaic Covenant with His people. The importance of the Mosaic Covenant was emphasized by a covenant renewal ceremony.

2. The importance of the Mosaic Covenant was emphasized by covenant "curses."

Deuteronomy 27:14-26 - *"And the Levites shall speak with a loud voice and say to all the men of Israel: ¹⁵ 'Cursed is the one who makes a carved or molded image, an abomination to the Lord, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets it up in secret.' "And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen!'*

¹⁶ 'Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

¹⁷ 'Cursed is the one who moves his neighbor's landmark.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

¹⁸ 'Cursed is the one who makes the blind to wander off the road.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

¹⁹ 'Cursed is the one who perverts the justice due the stranger, the fatherless, and widow.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

²⁰ 'Cursed is the one who lies with his father's wife, because he has uncovered his father's bed.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

²¹ 'Cursed is the one who lies with any kind of animal.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

²² 'Cursed is the one who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

²³ 'Cursed is the one who lies with his mother-in-law.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

²⁴ 'Cursed is the one who attacks his neighbor secretly.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

²⁵ 'Cursed is the one who takes a bribe to slay an innocent person.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

²⁶ 'Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law by observing them.' "And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

These verses contain the first section of curses, or penalties - most of which are quite specific. A second set of curses, which is more general, was listed in Deuteronomy 28. Eight of the twelve curses listed in Deuteronomy 27 involved

violations of the Ten Commandments. It may be that these specific curses were chosen because they concerned sins that could be committed in secret. The twelfth curse (v26) was more of a summary. It was quoted by the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:10, in the context of the impossibility of the Law bringing salvation to anyone because no one can keep the Law. Galatians 3:10-11: *“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.”*”

The fact that the stones containing the written Law were set up on Mount Ebal, and not on Mount Gerizim (the mountain of blessing), emphasizes that everyone is under the curse of the Mosaic Covenant, and that there is **no** salvation for sinners in the Mosaic Covenant. The importance of the Mosaic Covenant was emphasized by covenant curses.

Practical Application

Praise the Lord that there were two groups of stones on Mount Ebal!

A careful reading of this chapter clearly shows that there were two sets of stones set up on Mount Ebal. The lime-covered stones containing the Law were grouped together, and the uncut stones provided the altar. Aren't you glad for this second group of stones - the altar? It clearly pictures salvation from the curse of the Law. We can be saved from the curse of the law only because our Lord went to the altar of the cross on Calvary, and died as a Sacrifice for our sins. The fact that the stones were uncut, and were not in any way shaped or adorned by human effort, emphasizes the truth that salvation from the curse of the Law does not come about by human works - or in any way adding human works in with the saving work of Jesus Christ.

I'm so glad there were two kinds of stones on Mount Ebal - not just the stones containing the Law, but the uncut stones of the altar as well. Praise the Lord that there were two groups of stones on Mount Ebal!