

The Blessings and Cursings of the Covenant

Deuteronomy 28

Deuteronomy 28:1-14 – *“Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the Lord your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. ² And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the Lord your God:*

³ Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country.

⁴ Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.

⁵ Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

⁶ Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

⁷ The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways.

⁸ The Lord will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you. ⁹ The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways. ¹⁰ Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you. ¹¹ And the Lord will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. ¹² The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. ¹³ And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, if you heed the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them. ¹⁴ So you shall not turn aside from any of the words which I command you this day, to the right or the left, to go after other gods to serve them.”

Background Notes

In Deuteronomy 27 Moses gave instructions to the children of Israel about the covenant renewal or ratification ceremony that was to be carried out when they entered the Promised Land. In that ceremony, the blessings and the cursings of the Mosaic Covenant (Deuteronomy 27-28) were to be read and ratified, with half of Israel standing on the slopes of Mount Gerizim to approve the blessings, and half of Israel standing on the slopes of Mount Ebal to approve the curses. In the second half of Deuteronomy 27, twelve specific curses were listed. In the first section of Deuteronomy 28 a second list of curses followed the section of blessings in verses 1-14.

Doctrinal Points

1. Blessings follow obedience to God's word.

Notice the **“if”** in verse 1. The “if” indicated that the Mosaic Covenant was a **conditional** covenant (v1-2). God promised all these blessings (v3-14) conditional on their obedience. **If** the people were obedient to God's Word, their homes, families, flocks and herds, and farms would be blessed. They would be victorious in warfare and prosperous in business. They would be exalted among the nations – the head or leader, not subservient. But notice again the conditional **“if”** (v13). Blessings follow obedience to God's Word.

This is still true today. In the New Testament, Christians are not guaranteed the **physical** blessings of the Old Testament Mosaic Covenant (such as good health and financial prosperity) as a reward for obedience to the Word. But **if** we love the Lord and keep His commandments, we are guaranteed every **spiritual** blessing that God has to offer (see John 15 & Ephesians 1). Blessings follow obedience to God's Word.

2. Cursings follow disobedience to God's word.

Read Deuteronomy 28:15-68. Notice the word “if” indicating that conditional nature of the Law in verse 15: *“But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.”* The list of curses is about four times longer than the blessings, to emphasize the seriousness of breaking the covenant.

The first six cursings (v16-19) corresponded to the first six blessings of verses 3-6. For disobedience, there were the curses of destruction (v20) and disease (v21-22). In addition, the curse of drought (v23-24), the curse of defeat in battle (v25-26), the curse of the physical and mental diseases of Egypt (v27-29), the curse of all the horrors of being defeated and conquered by foreign powers (v30-35), the curse of becoming captive slaves in a pagan land (v36-37), the curse of crop failure and economic ruin (v38-42), and the curse of being the tail and not the head of the nations (v43-44) – all were reversals of the blessing of verse 13.

Verses 45-48 predicted that all these curses would indeed come upon Israel because they would disobey the Lord.

“Moreover all these curses shall come upon you and pursue and overtake you, until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you. ⁴⁶ And they shall be upon you for a sign and a wonder, and on your descendants forever. ⁴⁷ “Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of everything, ⁴⁸ therefore you shall serve your enemies, whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in need of everything; and He will put a yoke of iron on your neck until He has destroyed you.”

Verses 49-57 listed the curses of the coming Babylonian siege, including cannibalism: *“The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you will not understand,⁵⁰ a nation of fierce countenance, which does not respect the elderly nor show favor to the young.⁵¹ And they shall eat the increase of your livestock and the produce of your land, until you are destroyed; they shall not leave you grain or new wine or oil, or the increase of your cattle or the offspring of your flocks, until they have destroyed you.⁵² “They shall besiege you at all your gates until your high and fortified walls, in which you trust, come down throughout all your land; and they shall besiege you at all your gates throughout all your land which the Lord your God has given you.⁵³ You shall eat the fruit of your own body, the flesh of your sons and your daughters whom the Lord your God has given you, in the siege and desperate straits in which your enemy shall distress you.⁵⁴ The sensitive and very refined man among you will be hostile toward his brother, toward the wife of his bosom, and toward the rest of his children whom he leaves behind,⁵⁵ so that he will not give any of them the flesh of his children whom he will eat, because he has nothing left in the siege and desperate straits in which your enemy shall distress you at all your gates.⁵⁶ The tender and delicate woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground because of her delicateness and sensitivity, will refuse to the husband of her bosom, and to her son and her daughter,⁵⁷ her placenta which comes out from between her feet and her children whom she bears; for she will eat them secretly for lack of everything in the siege and desperate straits in which your enemy shall distress you at all your gates.”* You can read about these horrors of the siege and warfare in the book of Lamentations.

In verses 58-68 the curses of the coming exile, the destruction of the nation and dispersion of the Jewish people were predicted. *“If you do not carefully observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, THE LORD YOUR GOD,⁵⁹ then the Lord will bring upon you and your descendants extraordinary plagues—great and prolonged plagues—and serious and prolonged sicknesses.⁶⁰ Moreover He will bring back on you all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you.⁶¹ Also every sickness and every plague, which is not written in this Book of the Law, will the Lord bring upon you until you are destroyed.⁶² You shall be left few in number, whereas you were as the stars of heaven in multitude, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God.⁶³ And it shall be, that just as the Lord rejoiced over you to do you good and multiply you, so the Lord will rejoice over you to destroy you and bring you to nothing; and you shall be plucked from off the land which you go to possess.*

⁶⁴ *“Then the Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known—wood and stone.⁶⁵ And among those nations you shall find no rest, nor shall the sole of your foot have a resting place; but there the Lord will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and anguish of soul.⁶⁶ Your life shall hang in doubt before you; you shall fear day and night, and have no assurance of life.⁶⁷ In the morning you shall say, ‘Oh, that it were evening!’ And at evening you shall say, ‘Oh, that it were morning!’ because of the fear which terrifies your heart, and because of the sight which your eyes see.⁶⁸ “And the Lord will take you back to Egypt in ships, by the way of which I said to you, ‘You shall never see it again.’ And there you shall be offered for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you.”*

What an accurate description of the history of the Jewish people! After the Roman conquest and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, many Jewish slaves were transported to Egypt in ships, fulfilling verse 68. Persecution of the Jewish people down through the centuries was also predicted here. Notice again the reason for these curses: *“If you do not carefully observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, THE LORD YOUR GOD”* (v58). The rejection of Jesus as Messiah would be a part of Israel's disobedience to God's prophetic words. Cursings follow disobedience to God's Word.

This was true of Israel under God's Law, and it is true in reference to unbelievers today. John 3:36 says that anyone who rejects the Lord Jesus as the Son of God *“abides under the wrath of God.”* Believers are free from that curse because Jesus took the curse God's wrath against sin when He died for our sins on the cross as our Substitute, and we by faith obey God's Word and believe. But for unbelievers, cursings follow disobedience to God's Word.

Practical Application

Don't “put yourself under the Law.”

Some Christians love to apply the blessings of the Law to themselves. They apply every blessing from physical health and long life to good weather, good crop production and financial prosperity - as long as they love the Lord and obey His Word. There are two big problems with this thinking and this kind of improper interpretation.

First - the ***“blessings of the Law were not given to Christians,”*** and they are not guaranteed for Christians in the New Testament. And second, what about the cursings of the Law for those who don't obey the Word?

Some Christians love to claim the blessings of the Law - but they don't want the cursings to apply! When have you ever heard a “health and wealth prosperity” preacher mention the cursings of the Law? But you can't have it both ways. So don't “put yourself under the Law.”