

DEUTERONOMY

Lesson 38 - Chapter 28

Deuteronomy chapter 28 is the mid-point of this special 4-chapter section of Deuteronomy that runs from chapters 26 through 30. These chapters are among the most studied and revered by the Hebrew Sages and Rabbis, for the meaning and impact of these passages is at once straightforward AND simultaneously deep and mystical. We are going to spend some serious time here, so get comfortable.

We are also going to encounter those passages that the Israelites undoubtedly saw as the most serious threats against them should they disobey God and the terms of the covenant that this 2nd generation of the Exodus from Egypt has resoundingly agreed to with their oaths, declarations, and ritual ceremonies.

These threats from God are generally labeled as “curses”. Of course as is the nature of Yehoveh’s justice system, in addition to the curses for those in disobedience and who turn away from Yehoveh, there are the blessings for those who stay near to God and demonstrate their trust and love for Him by means of their obedience.

Since curses are at the center of what we’ll study today, before we read Deuteronomy chapter 28 (a very long chapter) I would like to take a few minutes to demonstrate that what Paul meant in the 3rd chapter of Galatians about Christ becoming “a curse” for us (His disciples) does NOT mean that somehow there is now a one-sided single dimensional relationship with the Lord by which all Believers can ever expect from God is His help and prosperity, and thus we are never subject to any kind of discipline from Him when we sin and rebel and turn our backs on Him.

In other words we have an important question that needs to be answered: what **does** Paul mean by the phrase “the curse of the law”, and that since Christ has become “a curse for us” that we are no longer subject to it?

First let’s read that brief statement of St. Paul’s in Galatians: ^{CJB} ***Galatians 3:10 For everyone who depends on legalistic observance of Torah commands lives under a curse, since it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not keep on doing everything written in the***

Scroll of the Torah."¹¹ *Now it is evident that no one comes to be declared righteous by God through legalism, since "The person who is righteous will attain life by trusting and being faithful."*¹² *Furthermore, legalism is not based on trusting and being faithful, but on [a misuse of] the text that says, "Anyone who does these things will attain life through them."*¹³ *The Messiah redeemed us from the curse pronounced in the Torah by becoming cursed on our behalf; for the Tanakh says, "Everyone who hangs from a stake comes under a curse."*

Since we have been looking in chapter 27 of Deuteronomy at a list of "curses" upon those who violate God's laws, we have to be careful NOT to confuse the list of "curses" (meaning the prescribed punishments for the various acts of sinning against God) with the phrase "the curse of the law". Let me say that again: we have a whole series of "curses" (plural) for doing evil over and against THE CURSE (singular). And it is this misunderstanding between "curses" and "THE CURSE" that has led to so many Christians walking around blissfully expecting that a) they have nothing to fear from our God no matter what they do, and that is because b) NOTHING we can ever do would cause Him to discipline us for our actions. In other words, God would never punish a Believer for sinning.

I'm not going to spend time going over the various "curses" for breaking God's laws that we have studied, because it's a long list and they are generally self explanatory. But what is "the curse of the Law" that Paul was talking about in Galatians?

I think the best way for us to see that distinction is to examine a few Bible verses that employ the term "the curse" in a variety of contexts.

First, Isaiah 24. ^{CJB} **Isaiah 24:1** *Look! ADONAI is stripping and destroying the land, turning it upside down and scattering its inhabitants-² cohen and commoner, slave and master, maid and mistress, buyer and seller, lender and borrower, creditor and debtor.³ The land will be completely stripped, completely plundered, for ADONAI has spoken this word.⁴ The land fades and withers, the world wilts and withers, the exalted of the land languish.⁵ The land lies defiled under its inhabitants; because they have transgressed the teachings, changed the law and broken the everlasting covenant.⁶ Therefore a curse is devouring the land, and its inhabitants are punished for their guilt. It is why those living there waste away, and the people left are few.*

Why does the text say that "a curse" (singular) is devouring the land, instead that God is simply enacting the large number of "curses" (plural) or punishments that come from breaking the several laws the Israel is accused of breaking? Is it that God is but invoking one particular curse out of a long list of possible curses? No; and I'll show you why.

Let's move next to Jeremiah 42: ^{NAS} **Jeremiah 42:15** *then in that case listen to the word of the LORD, O remnant of Judah. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "If you really set your mind to enter Egypt, and go in to reside there,"¹⁶ then it will come about that the sword, which you are afraid of will overtake you there in the land of Egypt; and the famine, about which you are anxious, will follow closely after you there in Egypt; and you will die there.¹⁷ "So all the men who set their mind to go to Egypt to reside there will die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; and they will have no survivors or refugees from the calamity that I am going to bring on them."'"¹⁸ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "As My anger and wrath have been poured out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so My wrath will be poured out on you when you enter Egypt. And you will become a curse, an object of horror, an imprecation, and a reproach; and you will see this place no more."*

I chose to use the NAS translation of Jeremiah because it is more literal than our usual CJB. The CJB tends to use what scholars call a "dynamic" translation rather than employing a literal word-for-word translation. A dynamic translation attempts to put in modern terms what the author concludes that those ancient Hebrew words MEANT. Therefore if we look at our CJB we'll see that in place of translating the Hebrew word **qelalah** in Jeremiah 42:18 as "curse" (which is its common meaning), instead it says "the object of condemnation", which is what "a curse" meant. This indicates that for the one who has "come under a curse" (as a result of rebellions against God) he is one who is "the object of God's condemnation".

Let's add another verse that gives us yet another context for understanding what the term "the curse" means, and we find it in Proverbs 3:33: ^{CJB} **Proverbs 3:33** *ADONAI's curse is in the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous.*

So once again we see that God's curse is not quite the same thing as the various curses (punishments) one receives for breaking some of His laws and commands. Rather the term "God's curse" means God's condemnation. If a Hebrew steals something, then he is placed under one of the appropriate specified curses listed in the Law. So if he has injured a brother, and thus has broken fellowship with the Lord, the Law says he must make restitution to the rightful owner, plus add a little more as a penalty, plus make a sacrifice of atonement to God at the Temple Altar. Note that this thief was NOT condemned because in the Bible (just like in our society) condemned technically means to be put under the death sentence (unless the term is just used poetically or as a metaphor). When the Bible says a person is condemned it means that person is due the death penalty. And that death penalty can mean physical death, or it can mean spiritual death, or it can include both.

Now listen to a verse we'll be studying in a few weeks from Deuteronomy 30 that starts to put even a sharper point not only on the meaning of the term "the curse" but also on the term "the blessing". Because just as a listing of curses is not the same thing as "THE CURSE", so is a listing of blessings not the same thing as "THE BLESSING".

^{CJB} Deuteronomy 30:15 "Look! I am presenting you today with, on the one hand, life and good; and on the other, death and evil-¹⁶ in that I am ordering you today to love ADONAI your God, to follow his ways, and to obey his mitzvot, regulations and rulings; for if you do, you will live and increase your numbers; and ADONAI your God will bless you in the land you are entering in order to take possession of it.¹⁷ But if your heart turns away, if you refuse to listen, if you are drawn away to prostrate yourselves before other gods and serve them;¹⁸ I am announcing to you today that you will certainly perish; you will not live long in the land you are crossing the Yarden to enter and possess.

This passage essentially defines what God means by the terms “the blessing” and “the curse” of the Law. The “blessing of the Law” is life and good; “the curse of the law” is death and evil. Life and good versus death and evil. It is common expression among the Jews to say that the Torah is life; meaning that to FOLLOW Torah brings the life that God wishes to give to all who trust in Him. Conversely to NOT follow Torah brings death, the opposite of life, because that means the violator does NOT trust Him.

When Yeshua died on the Cross He didn't take away God's punishments upon His followers, He simply took away the condemnation of the eternal death. Christ certainly didn't abolish PHYSICAL death for us (at least in the present world) as is self-evident. As we see in the Tanach (the Old Testament) the vast majority of the sins committed against the Lord had some sort of punishment associated with each (curses), but only a handful of those sins ever invoked the death penalty (THE curse), so it is with modern day disciples of Jesus. Generally speaking we can and will commit sins against the Lord, and at times we will experience God's hand of discipline in the form of certain divine punishments upon us. However what we are spared from is eternal separation from God as a result of those sins, which is what all men deserve. Disciples of Yeshua are spared from the eternal death penalty, spiritual condemnation, permanent separation from God.....THE CURSE.

The choice being offered here in Deuteronomy to the 12 tribes of Israel by means of the Mosaic Covenant, and the very similar choice that is offered by the renewed Covenant in Yeshua our Messiah is between THE blessing or THE curse; or as the Bible has shown us, between the blessing of Life and the curse of Death.

With that preparation, let's read all of Deuteronomy chapter 28 together.

READ DEUTERONOMY CHAPTER 28 all

The first word of chapter 28 is “IF”. IF maybe the biggest word in the Bible in terms of spiritual impact. The proposition is that “IF” Israel will follow the terms of the covenant, THEN God will bestow His blessings upon Israel.

I have mentioned in the past (as have most Bible teachers taught) that the Mosaic Covenant is called a conditional covenant. This is as compared to the Abrahamic Covenant that was an unconditional covenant.

As Paul went to great length to explain, a good way to look at an unconditional covenant (specifically the Abrahamic Covenant) is that it consists purely of a promise. The Covenant God made with Abraham was not based on IF Abraham will do something THEN God will respond by keeping His promise. Rather it was that God promised a whole series of things to Abraham because Yehoveh asked Abraham if he'd like to have these things (all of these things were blessings) and Abraham responded, “Yes”.

The most typical way that the Abrahamic Covenant is thought of is as a unilateral covenant; it's a one-way bargain from God to man with God doing everything and nothing is required from Man in return. Therefore scholars typically describe the Mosaic Covenant as bilateral, in that it is God to Man but with God expecting something in return; both sides have obligations to the other.

I want to slice that onion just a little thinner because while I generally agree with those descriptions we can also get the wrong idea about the true nature of the covenant made on Mt. Sinai with Moses as the Mediator, and just what “conditional” means. The Abrahamic Covenant is (I think we'd all agree) based on God's grace. God simply gave it to Abraham as a free gift just as He gave mankind salvation as a free gift; our duty is but to accept it. However the same is also true of the Mosaic Covenant. Let me explain: a pretty good analogy to a covenant is a contract (it's not precise but its close enough for discussion). We all understand contracts; we have them when we buy a house or a car. Sometimes we have contracts with our employers, especially in the entertainment or sports fields. And the idea is that the contract is essentially a series of mutual obligations. If one side fails to live up to one or more of their contractual obligations then the usual result is that the courts get involved. Rarely is the contract merely voided as the penalty for one side or the other violating the contract's terms.

Here's the point: the Mosaic Covenant was a gift to Israel, an act of divine grace. Once the covenant was accepted by Israel the violation of the covenant did not mean that the covenant was voided; it only meant that certain penalties kicked in (just like in most contracts). Essentially in exchange for the blessings that the Lord offered, Israel declared that they were willing to accept certain consequences (called the curses) if they failed to live up to their part of the deal.

However just as with almost all contracts the Mosaic Covenant was not voided and thrown in the trash because terms were broken. Rather some penalties that were written into the contract were activated (naturally the penalties were strictly on Israel's side because God never changes or goes back on His word). Several years ago I had a home built for my family and as part of the contract I negotiated a firm completion date. If the contractor completed the house earlier than the agreed to date they received a certain dollar amount for every day they completed it before the due date.....they received a blessing. However if they failed to finish by the due date they were dunned a like amount for every day PAST the due date.....a curse. But even if they failed to make the due date the contract wasn't cancelled; it's just that a built-in curse was enacted IF they didn't do what they had agreed to do. There were other penalties built in as well for other kinds of situations but none voided the contract.

The thing is that the Mosaic Covenant did NOT operate such that if Israel brought God's curses down upon itself (all of which were terms written into the covenant, no small print and no surprises) that the covenant was voided; it was only that whereby blessings would have been bestowed on Israel by means of obedience to the terms, instead there would be those consequential curses for violating the terms. The Covenant remained intact. The Covenant was not voided because Israel didn't have to do anything to keep it intact. Rather, once the divine gift of the Covenant was ratified by Israel (the whole congregation agreed to it just as Abraham ratified the covenant with him by simply agreeing to it) then all that was left was for its terms to play out over time. The difference between the two covenants of Abraham and Moses was that Abraham's had no penalties (no curses) because Abraham had no obligations; but the Mosaic Covenant DID have penalties (curses) because Israel DID have obligations.

The Mosaic Covenant is alive and well; in fact, the New Covenant in Christ is but the Mosaic Covenant renewed and written on our minds (hearts) with Yeshua as the source of both purification and atonement for those who accept its terms. And also with Jesus as the renewed covenant's Mediator. Just as an Israelite was not permanently removed from God's grace for misbehavior (except if it was the kind that essentially proved his lack of trust and submission to God), so it is that no Believer is permanently removed (in general) from God's grace for misbehavior. But think about this: under Messiah's covenant we DO have obligations, don't we? Most Christians still acknowledge our duty to adhere to the 10 Commandments. Some think there are no more than the 10 Commandments over our heads but I don't agree that that's all there is. Even if I did, the fact is there we have 10 concrete obligations for every Believer, each (obviously) capable of being violated. So our New Covenant DOES have obligations, and therefore it is NOT precisely in the mold of the Covenant of Abraham.

Consider this: if (as some say) the Mosaic Covenant replaced the Abraham Covenant, and then the New Covenant came along and replaced the Mosaic Covenant, why couldn't another future covenant (currently unknown to us) supersede and replace the New Covenant? Certainly the Hebrew people knew of no plan of God to make the Abrahamic Covenant obsolete. Nor did they know of a plan to make the Mosaic Covenant obsolete. They DID know that the currently operating covenant was to be renewed, transformed and put into their hearts,

but that's about it. Whether it should have been or not, the New Covenant in Jesus seemed like an unwelcome surprise to even the most learned of the Jews.

So if we accept the false notion that God made a number of covenants in the past and from time to time suddenly sprung a newer one on His people that voided the previous one, why should we be so confident that Yehoveh won't suddenly spring on us an even newer covenant in the near future that makes the New Covenant in Christ obsolete? Those who would validate such a thing have certainly said that to do so would be well within God's proven pattern. By the way, that is essentially what Islam says happened; they say they venerate Yeshua but that Mohammed was the bearer of an even newer message from God than Jesus. It's not at all that Jesus' message was false; it's just that God has now overruled Jesus and replaced His prophet Jesus with Mohammed.

Mormonism says that they have a covenant newer than the New Testament brought to them by their prophet Joseph Smith, called the Book of Mormon, and that it supersedes the New Testament. Why should the same Christians who claim that God makes covenants, declares them to be forever, and then replaces them with new ones object to Mormons believing that this is exactly what God did through Joseph Smith?

The answer to that rhetorical question is that God won't spring a future covenant on us that void His prior ones because He doesn't create forever covenants and then void them; that is simply not His pattern. And the New Covenant has not voided either the Mosaic Covenant or the Abrahamic Covenant as replacement theology dictates.

The next thing we notice in verse 1 is that significant Hebrew word **shema** is used to gain Moses' audience attention. That is in English we read, "If you listen". What it says is "if you **shema**.....". Let me remind you that **shema** MEANS to listen **and** obey. It does NOT mean only to hear, because in modern English the words listen and hear are passive. We can sit right where we are and listen or hear and feel no obligation to take action. **Shema** means to HEAR what God has to say and then proceed to DO IT! I cannot stress enough that what I'm telling you is not allegory; rather this IS the meaning of the Hebrew **shema**.

And the Lord says that IF Israel will obey Him, and will faithfully observe His commandments **then** the Lord will give Israel the greatest of privileges; privileges above those given to the rest of the people on Earth, whom He also loves. He says that He promises to give these blessings to Israel as His part, if Israel will do their part and obey Him. I stress as I did earlier, it does NOT say that if Israel disobeys God then the Covenant itself gets revoked.

There are 6 blessings that being chapter 28 that focus on prosperity and fertility. Prosperity and fertility are at the heart of life and of good things. Verse 3 says that by being faithful to the

covenant Israel will be blessed (in Hebrew, **baruch**) in the city and in the countryside. This is what scholars call merism, which is a big word that simply indicates a Hebrew grammar structure designed to show that everything in between the two extremes that are given is included. So the idea is that whether it is in the largest most sophisticated and most populous cities, or out in the smallest simplest villages in the least populated areas of the Land (and everything in between) Israel in its entirety will be the receivers of God's blessing IF they obey His laws and commands.

Next is what is known as the 3-fold blessing of verse 4. The idea is that every kind of life that is good and useful and permitted for use by the Hebrews will be blessed in Israel: human life, domestic animal life, and plant life. The Hebrew word that is usually translated in this verse as cattle is **behemah** and it means all animals suitable for being domesticated (not just cows). Typically it more specifically (but not in every case) refers to animals that are suitable for food or suitable for sacrifice, or both. This is a good place to point out that Bibles typically (and correctly) translate the 3-fold blessing as "the FRUIT" of the womb, the cattle, and the land (meaning earth or soil). I think a better translation is "issue" of womb, cattle, and land because too often we take the word fruit to mean something good. In fact the Hebrew **peri** doesn't necessarily make the fruit (meaning what the parent human or animal or plant produces) to be of good quality or value. But in this case the **peri**, the fruit, what results from Israel's people, animals, and land will be blessed based on obedience to the Lord.

Continuing in that vein verse 5 says that as a result of the blessed fruit of the land, the vessels used for gathering the produce will also be blessed (made full) and the kneading bowls used to make bread will be blessed (by always having plenty of grain from which to make bread dough). So the overall idea is an abundance of food.

Verse 6 is really a Hebrew idiom. It says that "your coming in and your going out" will be blessed. It is actually a phrase that was used to denote military activity. In the most literal sense it is getting across the idea of entering and going out. But in its idiomatic sense it speaks of going out to battle, achieving victory, and coming back home safely. So of course it connects directly to verse 7 about how Yehoveh will go before the army of Israel and win the battle against Israel's enemies before it even begins. And this is expressed in another Hebrew expression of how an enemy army will arrive in a nice organized marching column (by a single road), but it will flee in all directions in panic (flee by 7 roads). The 7 doesn't mean a literal seven, it just means "in every way possible".

In verse 8 that Lord will fill the barns full of produce and bless all of the Israelites' undertakings. The idea is that one's labor (whatever it might be) will be productive, and whatever one is trying to produce will turn out well.

Yet in the middle of Moses' sermon about all the wonderful blessings in store for Israel, he

pauses for effect. He stops naming all the wonderful blessings and reminds Israel of the requirements and condition necessary for this to happen: the Lord will declare Israel to be His holy people IF THEY KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD.

Since Moses reminded those standing before him, allow me to remind those of you present before me: that this is such a direct parallel and connection with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I came to the conclusion some time ago that if you can become comfortable and familiar with this parallel then you will have a most useful tool by which to show your family and friends just how connected are the Torah and the New Testament writings.

Now turn to Matthew 5:1 and let me demonstrate this joyful and eye-opening pattern that we just read here in Deuteronomy by which we get a list of blessings, interrupted by the covenant Mediator (Moses in Deuteronomy, Jesus in Matthew) to remind those in his audience that the blessings he is pronouncing DO have a caveat; obedience to God's commands is required.

READ MATTHEW 5:1 – 20

Notice in both cases how it is a recital of blessings, blessings, blessings.....and then a pregnant pause with the Mediator interjecting that no one should misunderstand what he's getting at. That OBEDIENCE to God's commands is the price for joining this covenant and for remaining in the blessings of the covenant.

As Paul says in Romans 11: ^{CJB} **Romans 11:17 *But if some of the branches were broken off, and you- a wild olive- were grafted in among them and have become equal sharers in the rich root of the olive tree,¹⁸ then don't boast as if you were better than the branches! However, if you do boast, remember that you are not supporting the root, the root is supporting you.¹⁹ So you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in."²⁰ True, but so what? They were broken off because of their lack of trust. However, you keep your place only because of your trust. So don't be arrogant; on the contrary, be terrified!²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he certainly won't spare you!²² So take a good look at God's kindness and his severity: on the one hand, severity toward those who fell off; but, on the other hand, God's kindness toward you- provided you maintain yourself in that kindness! Otherwise, you too will be cut off!***

Notice that just as in the Mosaic Covenant, the watchword is "IF". IF you maintain yourself in that kindness....otherwise you (we) will be cut off!!

I hope that you take the time to write this down, go over it, and show Deuteronomy 28 side-by-

side with Matthew 5 to someone you know who still thinks that the Old Testament is dead and gone and/or that obedience to God's commands is a thing of the past and supposedly has no place in the life of a Believer. That to obey God's written commands is legalism and thus to be avoided like the plague. Because that person is standing on a very slippery slope.

Next week we'll begin to look at the extensive list of curses that makes up the bulk of Deuteronomy chapter 28.