

## **Deut 27:11-28:15 Blessings and Curses**

In 2019, archaeologists found a small, folded lead sheet near the West Bank in Israel, near Mt. Ebal, about 35 miles north of Jerusalem. On this lead sheet was found, allegedly, the oldest known Hebrew inscription, dated to be about 1200 BC.

The folded sheet could not be opened without ruining it. But with the use of x-ray scans, scholars were able to view and read the inscriptions on the sheet. According to one of the team members who viewed the artifact, the writing says:

[You are] cursed by the god yhw, cursed.

[You will die], cursed – cursed, [you will surely die].

Cursed [you are] by yhw – cursed.

*If* these inscriptions are legitimate, they would contain the oldest known examples of the covenant name for God—YHWH—in the Hebrew script.

However, scholars hotly debate this finding. Some scholars have looked at the materials and dismiss the idea that the inscriptions exist, or that they say what they allegedly say.

We may never know whether these inscriptions are valid. The existence of the lead sheets would certainly be consistent with the contents of the passage we are looking at in Deuteronomy. Moses commanded the Israelites to visit Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim as soon as they entered the PL and make a series of blessings and curses. We don't know if the Israelites wrote out these curses on pieces of lead, but they could have.

The blessings and cursings we find in our passage today were intended to remind the people about how they must behave themselves in their new land. If they obey the Lord, God will bless them abundantly. But if they disobey the Lord, they will suffer the curses listed here.

With all of Israel arranged on these two mountain, the Levites are supposed to lead the people in a set of curses, to which all the people are to respond, “Amen.”

That's 27:15-26. Then all of chapter 28 relates a whole series of blessings and cursings that Israel can expect, depending on how obedient or disobedient they are.

A couple of things we should recognize as we consider these lists of curses and blessings:

As I've stated many times before in our study of Deut, we are not the nation of Israel. These curses and blessings pertain primarily to Israel as it is getting ready to cross into the PL. They are in covenant with God, and they have already agreed to obey God's commands. God has promised to bless them if they obey and discipline them if they disobey. This is all part of the old covenant—the law that God gave to Israel to regulate their beliefs and behaviors.

We are not under the old covenant; we are under the new covenant. These regulations and commands do not apply directly to us. Likewise, the specific blessings and the cursings do not apply directly to us. In a general sense, God blesses obedience and disciplines disobedience. But the specifics of this passage apply to Israel, not directly to us.

Second, you'll note that most of the issues in view here are physical and earthly. They pertain to children, herds, flocks, livestock, harvests, military victories, political status, weather, land, and material prosperity. God truly did promise earthly health, wealth, and prosperity for Israel if they would obey.

God never makes promises like that in the NT. We are God's people by faith; we are even children of Abraham by faith. But God's promises to us are primarily spiritual and eternal, rather than physical, material, and political. We cannot take these blessings or curses we find here and apply them directly to ourselves.

The primary, timeless idea that we find here is still true: God expects his people to obey his commands. God expects loyalty and faithfulness. When we are obedient, God blesses us. When we are disobedient, we incur God's fatherly displeasure, and discipline often follows disobedience. If we want to enjoy life and avoid problems, it's best to obey God's commands. In fact, it's our duty to obey God's commands.

Let's consider the text and see what we can learn.

#### I. Curses and responses on Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (27:14–26)

One group, including the Levites, would state the curse on Mt Ebal, and all the people on Mt. Gerizim would respond, "Amen." Sort of like responsive reading (or antiphonal responses).

The response "Amen" is a statement of agreement; they agreed to suffer the curse if they were guilty of the violation. So Moses is reminding the people that they would experience the wrath of God if they violate God's law.

##### A. .15 a curse for idolatry; Israel must not make a carved or molded image to represent God. This curse came first, probably, because it was the most serious of violations.

The first of the 10 Commandments is “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” So idolatry is the worst of violations.

B. .16 a curse for dishonoring one’s parents; this is a violation of the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment. The word “dishonor” means “to make light of.” You dishonor your parents by disrespecting them.

*Ex 21:17 he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.*

**App:** People today need to be reminded of this one.

C. .17 a curse for moving a neighbor’s landmark; Israel must uphold property rights. Every family will be receiving an allotment of land, and all the tribes must respect those boundary markers. Moving a boundary stone amounted to theft of someone’s property.

The next two curses prohibit taking advantage of the disabled and/or underprivileged.

D. .18 a curse for causing a blind person to wander off the road  
E. .19 a curse for perverting justice for the needy; Israel must care for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.

God demanded that Israel care for the needy people among them. The NT tells us to remember the poor.

F. .20-23 curses for various forms of immorality; the Canaanite culture was exceedingly immoral, and Israel must not follow any such examples from those people. These are gross sins that God’s people must both hate and avoid.  
G. .24 a curse for attacking one’s neighbor; murder seems to be the crime in view here.  
H. .25 a curse for taking a bribe to slay an innocent person; it’s a crime to make a bribe and to accept a bribe to do this sinful action.  
I. .26 a curse for those who fail to observe “this law” – this set of curses was a summary of what God expected of his people, both in private and in public.

By responding to each of these curses with “Amen,” the people were confirming the validity of these laws. They were submitting themselves to these rules wholeheartedly and formally. They were saying, “We agree to the laws that God has given us, and we agree to accept God’s judgment upon us if we disobey.”

**App:** Almost all of these curses pertain to right behavior toward others. Only one of these has to do with doctrine/belief; all the rest pertain to sinful behavior, and particularly, how people interact with one another.

That tells us that God is very concerned that people relate to one another properly. If we violate God's standards of interpersonal behavior, we are asking for God's discipline to fall upon us. We must strive to follow God's standards for how we interact with others. Disobedience in this area can have profound consequences.

If we want to enjoy God's blessings on our lives, and if we want to avoid God's fatherly displeasure and discipline, we will strive to treat other people with love and compassion.

## II. The Blessings and the Curses from Moses (28:1–68)

In chapter 28, Moses continues to exhort his people regarding the importance of obeying God's commands. If they want to succeed in the PL, they must obey God. All the good things they could hope to enjoy are conditioned on obedience. If they obey, God will bless them beyond their wildest dreams.

### A. The blessings (28:1–14)

1. The blessings are conditional or contingent—if they obey, then God will bless them. Notice the condition of these blessings:

a) .1 “diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God” – what does that mean?

“diligently” – lit. in Hebrew “if to hear (infv) you hear (verb)” – the sense is, “if you fully listen; if you pay close attention.” The construction stresses complete obedience—heeding, carefully obeying, paying close attention to God's laws.

b) Moses was about as clear as he possibly could be about the importance of obedience. Blessings in the PL depend on strict obedience to God's commands. God intends these blessings for his *obedient* people, not for those who casually break his laws.

2. The blessings are guaranteed if Israel meets the conditions.

a) .2a The blessings will “come upon you and overtake you.” It's as if these blessings would fall upon them as they settled in the PL. God would make it happen.

b) .2b Why? “because you obey the voice of the Lord your God.” Obedience would result in blessings.

3. The blessings

The blessings are primarily earthly—i.e., physical, material, and political.

- a) .1b higher status than the surrounding nations; Israel would be preeminent among the neighboring nations.
- b) .3 city and country; i.e., wherever you live; the entire country, nationwide.
- c) .4 productivity—children, harvests, herds, cattle, flocks; God will grant them fertility and productivity.
- d) .5 basket and kneading bowl—plenty of food; no famines, no hunger
- e) .6 coming in and going out—i.e., daily work—going out to the field, working, coming home; normal events of daily life
- f) .7 defeat of enemies; they’ll flee before you seven ways; God would provide military dominance; Israel would be overwhelmingly victorious in its battles. Foes would run away disoriented and scattered.
- g) .8 storehouse and land—agricultural and financial prosperity
- h) .9 God would consider Israel to be a holy people to himself—Israel would enjoy an intimate relationship with God.

.9b Again we see the condition of obedience to God’s commands and walking in his ways as the necessary condition of these blessings.
- i) .10 other nations would be afraid of you; Israel would enjoy national strength and high reputation. Their military would be unbeatable.
- j) .11 plenty of goods, plenty of children, livestock, produce
- k) .12 plenty of rain would provide an abundant harvest; all the work of your hand; financial prosperity—Israel would lend to other nations and not borrow.

1) .13 head and not tail, a position above and not beneath; Israel would become a great and powerful nation.

.13b Here is another repetition of the condition—“if you heed the commandments...” Obedience to the commandments is necessary for these blessings to happen.

.14 Another exhortation not to turn aside from any of God’s commandments; they must especially avoid idolatry.

God promised to bless the people in virtually every way—agriculture, finance, military, politics, home and family—if they would simply obey his commands.

**Quote:** The essence of following the Lord’s commands lies in fidelity and loyalty to him.<sup>1</sup> I.e., faithfulness and commitment

The best thing for them to do was to obey the voice of the Lord.

**God required complete obedience**—vs. 1 “if you will diligently obey...all his commandments...” – then God’s blessings will follow.

Sadly, we know that Israel did not obey the voice of the Lord; they were not diligent to obey; quite the opposite. They frequently were guilty of idolatry and many other sins. They did not, indeed, could not keep the law.

**That’s what the law shows us**—our sinfulness. No one can keep the law, and because of that, we are under a curse. The NT shows us that the only solution to our sin problem is Jesus...

## 1. The curses (28:15–68)

a) Obedience would have a specific and positive outcome: God would bless them in virtually every way imaginable. But disobedience would also have a specific outcome; God would curse them in just about every conceivable way.

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<sup>1</sup> Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 168.

- b) This section contains the longest list of curses in the whole Bible. After about 13 verses of potential blessings, we find 53 verses of potential curses that Israel should expect if they were disobedient, and especially if they fell into idolatry. God has about four times as many curses in store for them if they fall into disobedience.
- c) We're not going to take the time to read and discuss all of the curses here, but it's easy to see that the curses basically are the opposite of all the blessings he just stated. God threatens to reverse all the blessings that he had promised if the nation is stubbornly disobedient.
- d) .15b These curses will "come upon you and overtake you" – same language as the blessings in vs. 2. Cf. vs. 45.
- e) .16-19 Instead of God being for them and guaranteeing their prosperity and power, he would be against them and guarantee their failure and their fall.
- f) And the curses go far beyond a reversal of the blessings. Moses goes into great detail about all the terrible things that could befall the nation if they fail to uphold the conditions of the covenant.
- g) *Read a selection of curses*—vss. 20-29.

The list goes on and on, all the way through vs. 68. Take some time to read this list.

Sadly, Israel experienced most of these curses during the rest of its history. The remainder of the OT gives solemn witness to the fact that Israel was *not* obedient for the most part and did *not* enjoy many of the blessings that God offered them. They mostly failed to keep their part of the covenant; because of that disobedience, Israel suffered the very curses God warned about.

**Quote:** Curses, confusion, and rebuke would fall on everything disobedient Israel did—until destruction and sudden ruin enveloped her. Disobeying the Lord is equated with forsaking him, because national and personal commitment to the Lord is the central command, and forsaking him is the central evil.<sup>2</sup>

Remember that all of these blessings and cursings applied specifically to God's special, chosen, treasured people—the nation of Israel. They had entered into covenant with God that he would be their God and they would be his people. They had agreed to keep God's laws. They had pledged their loyalty to God. They had agreed to these conditions—blessings for obedience, cursings for disobedience. They had said “Amen” to these curses. They didn't have anything to worry about if they would only obey the voice of the Lord their God. But if they violated God's laws, they should expect these curses to overtake them.

The Bible tells us that these OT records were given to us for our admonition and for examples for us to learn from. The primary lesson here is that God blesses obedience and he brings discipline on disobedience.

This list of blessings and cursings also shows us God's love for his people. God wants the best for us, and the best way of living is to obey God's commands. Life naturally goes far better for us when we remain loyal to God and faithfully follow his ways. God has our best interests in mind. We are far better off when we simply obey God. On the other hand, life goes worse for us when we disobey. Cf. Gal 6:7-8.

We should obey God out of a sense of love. Love ought to motivate us to obey God's commands. But another motivation for obedience is plain self-interest. Life goes better for us when we obey the commands of our creator.

Like the Israelites, we should be highly motivated to obey God's commands. We should respond with a hearty “Amen” to God's commands to us. We should be motivated to obey God and do our best to avoid disobedience.

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<sup>2</sup> Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 171.

Even for Christians, disobedience leads to God's fatherly displeasure. If we remain in stubborn, unrepentant, habitual disobedience, we may find ourselves the subject of strict discipline. Some of the same kinds of things that God threatens here could happen to us if we forsake God's commandments. If we want to enjoy God's blessings and avoid God's discipline, our best option is to remain loyal and committed to God.

I don't know if the writing on those lead sheets found on Mt. Ebal are real or if they actually contain the alleged statements. But I do know that God's promises are real. God blesses obedience and he curses disobedience. As for myself, I would rather enjoy the blessings and avoid the curses. I hope that that's what you intend to do as well.