

Deuteronomy 29 Reminders, Warnings, and Threats for Covenant Failure

People are willing to do a lot of things to guarantee their own prosperity and success. Some people work 12 hours or more a day to become prosperous. Some people attend schools for many years to get the kind of training that will lead to prosperity. Some people read self-help books to help them gain success in life.

Imagine if someone claimed, “If you simply follow these steps, I can guarantee success.”

In the book of Deut, God as much as guarantees success for Israel if they will do one thing—obey God’s commands. God’s plan is to establish Israel in the PL in fulfillment of his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He wants to see Israel prosper in the PL. And God himself promises success and prosperity; they’ll be healthy, wealthy, prosperous, and powerful, but on one condition – obedience/loyalty to God. If they fulfill the terms of the covenant, God will guarantee success and prosperity.

Disobedience, on the other hand, and especially idolatry, will guarantee both failure and utter disaster. Cf., the 53 verses of cursings in chapter 28.

So Moses is appealing once again to the people that they remain faithful and obedient to the covenant when they enter the PL. In this chapter, Moses is leading the people to reaffirm their covenant with God.

God does not promise *us* earthly success and prosperity like he did for Israel, but the principle is the same: Obedience to God leads to blessing; disobedience leads to disaster.

Let’s see how this principle works out for Israel in Deut 29.

I. .1 Introduction

- A. This passage is a covenant renewal statement. Moses is leading the people in a re-affirmation or renewal of the covenant that God made with Israel on Mt. Sinai. Moses wants Israel to reaffirm this covenant before they enter the PL.

“besides the covenant he made with them in Horeb” – that was the law of Moses that God gave to Israel about 40 years before this point.

- B. The covenant that Moses is talking about here is a summary or re-statement of the law that God had previously given Israel. As Israel is about to enter the PL, it’s important that they renew their commitment to this covenant.

App: Do we have a covenant renewal ceremony for the church? Yes—the LS.

II. .2-9 Reminders of what God had done for Israel

A. .2-3 God brought them out of Egypt with great signs and wonders,

1. Many of those who were listening to Moses had seen the miracles that God had done during the exodus from Egypt—the “great trials ... signs ...wonders.” They were eye-witnesses of these incredible events.

2. .4 Yet the people did not appreciate how blessed they were. They did not grasp what the Lord was doing.

Moses attributes this lack of understanding to the fact that God had not given them “a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear.” They had experienced all of these miraculous events, yet they still lacked loyalty to God. They were still a rebellious and stiff-necked people who did not appreciate how amazing these things were.

De 5:29 ‘Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!’

B. .5-6 God (through Moses) led the people forty years through the wilderness

1. Their clothing did not wear out.

2. They did not have the staple foods that sustained life in the ancient world—bread and wine. How did they survive? God provided manna, water, and even quail miraculously.

3. .6c God’s miraculous provision for them should have showed them that the Lord was their God. These signs and wonders should have confirmed to the Israelites that God was their one and only God. He was providing for them, and they should respond by loyalty to him.

C. .7-8 God gave Israel victory over the people of the east side of the Jordan River—Sihon and Og, the kings of that region. Israel conquered this land and gave it to the 2½ tribes of Israel.

Trans: So the implication of all of this is that Israel ought to be faithful and loyal to God because of all the things God had done for them.

App: Most of us have not experienced these kinds of miraculous events in our own lives, but God has done great things for us as well. We ought to respond to God's goodness to us by being loyal and faithful to God.

III. .9 Reminders that obedience was the key to prosperity in the Promised Land

- A. .9 In light of all that God has done ("therefore"), Israel is obligated to "keep the words of this covenant." God had fulfilled his side of the contract—he'd brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with great signs and wonders.
- B. What God required of them as they enter the PL was obedience to his commands. Their only hope for success was loyalty to God and strict adherence to the terms of the covenant.

After all that God had done for them, they ought to be loyal to God and committed to obeying his commands.

App: In our modern world, many people do not display much loyalty. Especially in times of difficulty or conflict, people simply change their allegiances and move on to the next thing with little regard for past blessings. They drop their previous commitments and pick up new interests like it's no big deal. They seem to forget about the source of past blessings.

IV. .10-13 Reminders regarding to whom the covenant pertains

It appears that Moses had gathered all the people and was leading them through a ceremony to re-commit themselves to the covenant. They are standing before God, and Moses is exhorting them to be faithful.

- A. .10a-11 The covenant applies to "all of you." The whole nation stands before the Lord. Moses called all of them to reaffirm this covenant; all of them need to remain loyal to it.
 - 1. .10b the leaders and all the men of Israel
 - 2. .11 the children, wives, and strangers/servants
 - 3. .12 everyone should re-commit himself to this covenant.
- B. .13 God's purpose/intent is three-fold:
 - 1. to demonstrate that Israel is God's own chosen people—"a people for himself." The Jews are the chosen people. Prosperity in the PL would demonstrate God's intent to bless his people.
 - 2. to demonstrate that he is their God—"that he may be God to you." Prosperity and blessing in the PL would show that God is powerfully working on behalf of his obedient people.

Once again we see this theme – I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Moses is confirming the covenant, reminding them about who they are, reminding them that they are God’s covenant people.

3. to demonstrate that this is the fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had promised to give the land of Canaan to Israel, and now that promise is being fulfilled.

C. .14-15 The covenant covers this and succeeding generations.

1. .14-15 Moses is reaffirming/renewing a “covenant and oath” here.

The word “oath” may also be translated as “curse.” The covenant has both blessings and curses associated with it—blessings for obedience, curses for disobedience.

2. .15 Moses is making this covenant with those who were there and with those who were not there. Some were standing there “before the Lord our God,” but some were “not here with us today.”

Whom does Moses have in mind? Who was not there?

- a) He’s talking about future generations, those who would grow up in the PL. Covenant loyalty for the *current* generation would have a profound effect on the *next* generation.
- b) The nation must consider the spiritual welfare of succeeding generations. Their descendants must also adhere to this covenant. The future prosperity of Israel depends on covenant loyalty from generation to generation.

App: This is still an important biblical principle. Each generation of Christians should be concerned about the next generation of Christians. We should be instilling a sense of loyalty to God and obedience to his word within our children. Cf. Deut 6:5f.

V. 16-29 Threats against those who violate the covenant

What would be the results of covenant *unfaithfulness* for Israel?

- A. Individuals, families, and tribes may be cursed.

1. .16 The people had seen God's mighty hand at work in Egypt and in the wilderness for the past 40 years.

2. .17 The people had also seen the "abominations" of pagan idolatry in Egypt and among the nations they passed by.

Israel had plenty of exposure to and knowledge of pagan idolatry. So Israel should know better than to be attracted by the false worship of the Canaanites.

3. .18 Moses goes on to warn about several possibilities that he is trying to prevent from happening.

.18 The words "so that there may not be" have the sense, "make sure that there is not..." Moses is saying, "Be careful not to allow this kind of thing to happen."

What might happen?

a) .18a A man, woman, family, or tribe turns away from the Lord to serve pagan idols.

b) .18b a root bearing bitterness and wormwood

"bitterness" refers to the venom of snakes or to poisonous plants.

"wormwood" was a plant known for its bitter pulp and is often associated with poison.¹

The two words used together emphasize or heighten the sense of poisonous, venomous bitterness that result from covenant defection.

So the poison of idolatry could spread throughout Israel if the nation allows it for even one person or a family. They must make sure that idolatry does not take hold even for one person. Everyone must remain loyal to God.

¹ Jack S. Deere, "Deuteronomy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 314.

- c) .19 This verse describes one who hears the words of this curse and refuses to listen/pay attention—i.e., he knows that judgment will fall on those who disobey—yet continues to follow the dictates of his own heart. He thinks the curses of the covenant will not apply to him; he'll escape the consequences of his own sinful actions.

Such a person would be the “root” that would bear bitter and poisonous fruit—i.e., his unfaithfulness would promote more idolatry. Families and even entire tribes may become guilty of defection from the covenant under the influence of one bad actor.

.19end “as though the drunkard could be included with the sober” – Moses denies the idea that an idolater could hide out among the faithful without anyone noticing. Just like people notice a drunk among a group of sober people, so God will notice one idolater among everyone else who is faithful. One person's idolatry will bring down judgment on the whole nation.

App: Many people today believe that they will escape the consequences of their own sinful actions. They think that the punishment that God threatens for disobedience will not apply to them. They think that they can disregard God with no consequences. They are wrong about that.

Further, we see the principle that one bad actor can have a devastating effect upon the whole group. This is why we have to practice church discipline occasionally.

- d) .20 The Lord would not spare him. Apostates will not go unpunished. God's jealousy would burn against such a person, all the curses would settle on him, and God would blot out his name from under heaven. I.e., he would die without descendants; his name would not continue on.
- e) .21 The Lord would mark him for adversity and all the curses of the law would fall on him.

App: The Bible assures us that God is love. However, God is also righteous and holy. God invites all to be saved, but those who rebel and refuse the invitation will be cursed.

There is only one means of salvation—John 14:6; Acts 4:12. Those who refuse the salvation God provides will not be saved.

Even for Christians, God may bring severe discipline upon those who sin willfully and flagrantly. 1 John mentions a “sin unto death.” Cf. 1 Cor 11:22f.

B. .22-23 The land would be cursed.

Moses continues the list of terrible things that will happen if Israel defects from the covenant and falls into idolatry.

1. .22-23 If individuals become idolatrous, idolatry might well spread to the entire nation. The whole land would then suffer.
2. God would mark individuals for adversity as well as the land where they live. If they disobey and fall into idolatry, God would throw them out of the PL.
3. .22 The next generations, and even foreigners, would recognize that God has cursed the land with plagues and sicknesses. The sins of the family or tribe are visited upon the land. The whole place would be destroyed and overthrown.
4. Vs. 23 stands in stark contrast to what the PL ought to be. It is a land flowing with milk and honey; a productive and prosperous land. Yet if Israel is disobedient, what will it be? Vs. 23. The disaster will be like the judgment that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah and the other cities that God destroyed with them (Gen 14, 19). I.e., God is threatening utter desolation and destruction if Israel defects from the terms of the covenant.
5. .24 The potential disaster would be so great that all the nations would question why the Lord did this; why was God so displeased with his people?
6. .25 The answer
 - a) .25 They forsook the covenant. Covenant unfaithfulness will lead to utter destruction and desolation of the whole land. That’s what God is threatening—even before they enter the PL, Israel should know that God will take it all away if they become disloyal to him.
 - b) .26 They became idolatrous.

- c) .27 God's anger would be aroused against the land, and he will curse it. When it happens, it will verify the truth of what God had said.
- d) .28 God uprooted them in his anger, wrath, and indignation. He cast them into another land.

The text says literally "in anger and rage and great wrath."

Why would God be so angry about this? Because they broke the covenant that they had agreed to. They pledged their allegiance to God; they promised that they would obey his commands. If they then turned away and became disloyal and disobedient, it would naturally stir up God's righteous wrath.

App: Anyone who doubts that God has wrath against sin is simply not paying attention to the many statements in the Bible that affirm God's wrath against sin.

Thankfully, if you are saved, you are no longer under God's wrath. God does not deal with us according to our sin. God extends grace and mercy toward us because of our faith in Christ.

But if your faith is not in Christ for forgiveness, then God's wrath remains on you. Cf. John 3:36.

All of these potential terrible outcomes would happen if Israel forsakes the Lord, and especially if they fall into idolatry. So this a warning not to forsake the Lord. Remain loyal to him and all will be well. But if you forsake him and disobey him, the nation will experience utter devastation.

- C. .29 Will Israel remain loyal to God, or will they slide into idolatry? The future is one of those "secret things" that belongs to God alone. We don't know the future; only God knows that.

We cannot do anything about those secret things. We know what God has revealed, and that's what we must take into consideration. In the context, what God has revealed is the importance of covenant faithfulness and the tragic results of covenant defection.

App: We are responsible for what God has revealed to us. With knowledge comes responsibility. What Israel knows is that they should keep the terms of the covenant. They should be obedient to God's law. They must adhere to God's revealed word as they face the future.

That was true for Israel, and it's also true for us. We do not know what is in the mind of God for the future; these things are secret. But we have God's revelation to us, and we are responsible to "do all the words" of the revelation that pertains to us.

In this chapter, Moses continues the theme of potential blessings and curses for Israel. If they remain faithful and loyal to God by keeping the terms of the covenant, Israel will enjoy immense blessings. They are virtually guaranteed to be successful and prosperous in the PL, a land flowing with milk and honey, if they simply keep the terms of the covenant obediently.

But if they choose to disregard God's law and violate the covenant, then the opposite will be true; they'll experience God's curses upon them. If they start worshipping idols, they'll become like Sodom and Gomorrah. God in his wrath will curse them and expel them from the land.

Every so often, it's good for us to be reminded about the potential blessings and cursings that may be in store for us. If we humbly obey God's commandments, we stand to enjoy many blessings. But if we stubbornly violate God's word, we will experience stern discipline. God blesses obedience and curses disobedience. That was true 3500 years ago, and it's still true today.

So the best thing to do is – vs. 9.