

Rejoice in the Lord or Be Cursed

The Blessings of Obedience and Curses of Disobedience

Scripture: Dt. 26 - 28

Sermon Series: *Deuteronomy: The Final Words of Moses*

Topic: Joy, Law, Moses, Blessing, Cursing

Introduction

The portion of Scripture before us this morning are chapters 26-28 and the first verse of 29 in the book of Deuteronomy. These are the last words of Moses before he dies and the people of Israel enter into the Promised Land. These words conclude the second speech of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy.

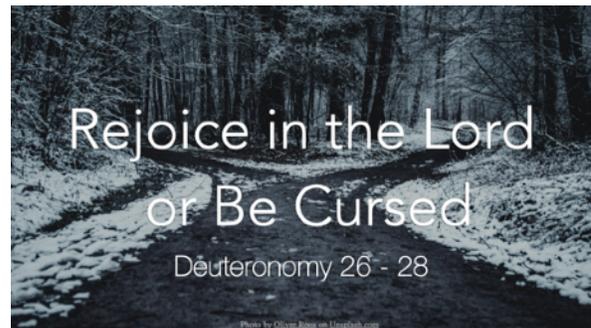
In these three chapters, Moses is presenting the people with essentially one command, they either “rejoice in the Lord or they will be cursed.”

Moses, in his mind, moves forward to the time after the people have entered the Promised Land.

In chapter 26 he instructs them to worship the Lord by honoring him with a tithe, a donation, of a portion of the first-fruits of their first harvest. They were to take this to the Lord at the appointed place and *rejoice* before the Lord for all the bounty that he would give them.

In chapter 27, he instructs them to construct on Mount Ebal a memorial that includes the written text of the law after they cross the Jordan river. There they were to offer a sacrifice and then eat it with *joy* before the Lord. After this they were to renew the covenant with the Lord by reminding themselves of both the blessings and the curses of the covenant.

In chapter 28 Moses lists of the blessings that would come upon them if they obeyed the Lord and he also listed—in excruciating detail—all the curses that would come upon them if they refused to *rejoice* in the Lord. This is a stunning reminder that the terms of the covenant include both great blessings for obedience and great and terrible curses for disobedience.



Rejoice in Tithing (26)

Moses begins by commanding them to tithe from the first-fruits of their first harvest as way of worshiping God through giving thanks to him for his abundant blessing. This worship also included being reminded of their painful past life of slavery in Egypt.

¹ “When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, ² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there.

Deuteronomy 26:1-2 (ESV)

This was to be a pilgrimage to the place where God would chose to make his name dwell, which we now know is Jerusalem. So every year this tithe was to be given as an act of worship and as a confession of their faith in God. They were to make two declarations.

First Declaration to LORD

After going to the priest with their offering, they would first say to him,

‘I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.’

Deuteronomy 26:3 (ESV)

This declaration acknowledges that the tithe they are bringing to the Lord has come as a result of them both entering into the land the Lord promised them and that he is the source of their blessing. The Lord has kept his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and he has blessed them with food.

Second Declaration to LORD

Then the priest would take the tithe from them, place it by the alter before the Lord, and then they would respond by recounting their history saying,

⁵ ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. ⁶ And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. ⁷ Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸ And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. ⁹ And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.’

Deuteronomy 26:5-10 (ESV)

This declaration is a vow and a kind of “confession of faith.” It serves as a testimony of their relationship together. It serves to remind the people of God’s love for them, his deliverance of them from bondage, his superiority over false gods (of Egypt), his intention to bless Israel, and their commitment to honor him and be devoted to him. After making this declaration, they were to *worship the Lord with rejoicing* because of the goodness of the abundant harvest.

¹⁰ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. ¹¹ And you shall **rejoice** in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner¹ who is among you.
Deuteronomy 26:10-11 (ESV)

After having made vows to the Lord their God, there was to be a celebration dinner. They were to eat a portion of the tithe as family and do so with rejoicing before the Lord because of all the good that he had done for them. Moses reminds them that they were to do this “**with all your heart and all your soul**” (26:16). All the people were to wholly devoted to the Lord because of his good provision for them.

LORD’s Declaration to Israel

God himself would then respond to this worship with his own declaration of love and devotion to the people of Israel.

¹⁷ You have declared today that the LORD is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice. ¹⁸ And the LORD has declared today that you are a people for his **treasured possession**, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, ¹⁹ and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised.” Deuteronomy 26:17-19 (ESV)

We do we have here? The exchange of gifts, the exchange of vows, and a declaration of faithfulness and love. This is not dissimilar to a wedding ceremony. In fact, in the next chapter, this is almost exactly what Moses commands the people to do after entering into the land. They are to have a formal ceremony.

Rejoice in Renewing the Covenant (27)

Moses now turns his attention to two things that they were to do after entrance into the Promised land. They were to go to Mount Ebal and build a memorial containing the text of the law and they were to repeat the terms of the covenant with rejoicing.

¹ Their tithing at Jerusalem was to take place every year, while in the third year the tithe of the harvest was to be kept locally and given to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow so that there would be food for everyone, including the poor.

¹ Now Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, "Keep the whole commandment that I command you today. ² And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. ³ And you shall write on them all the words of this law... ⁴ And when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. ⁵ And there you shall build an alter to the LORD your God... ⁶ And offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, ⁷ and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God. ⁸ And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly."
Deuteronomy 27:1-8 (ESV)

Moses, here joined by "the elders of Israel," is telling the people that they were to *renew the covenant with God with rejoicing*. They were to construct a stone memorial that contained all the words of the law, "*written very plainly*" (Dt 27:8). At the time of the writing they were also to build an alter, offering on it "*burnt offerings*" (for the purpose of atonement of sin²) and "*peace offerings*" (for the purpose of celebrating acceptance by and communion with God³) on it, and then they were to eat those sacrifices while "*rejoicing before the LORD*" who was with them and had kept his promise to bring them into the land. Once again we see God's intention to bless his people with goodness, food, and joy in his presence.

Then, after writing the law, then the *Levitical priests*⁴ were to recite the terms of the covenant, by repeating loudly⁵ the blessings and the curses of the covenant. This was to take place on a particular mountain in Shechem, which is located about 5 miles north of Jericho.



Map from ESV Study Bible

This location is important because Shechem is the location where God first established his covenant with Abraham by promising to give this land to his descendants (Gn 12:6-8). In the very place where God first made a promise regarding the land, he would also renew that covenant with Abraham's descendants.

² Leviticus 1.

³ Leviticus 3.

⁴ Deuteronomy 27:9, 14.

⁵ Deuteronomy 27:14.

What is Covenant?

It may be helpful to be reminded what a covenant is. God entered into a covenant with Abraham⁶ by promising to bless him by multiplying his descendants to be as numerous as the stars in the heavens and giving this land to them. Thus, a covenant is “an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of the relationship.”⁷

The terms of God’s covenant with Israel involves both blessings and curses. This aspect of the covenant was to be physically demonstrated through formal division of the tribes while the blessings and curses were to be recited before all the people. Half the twelve tribes were to stand on Mount Gerizim representing the blessings of the covenant while the other six tribes were to stand on Mount Ebal representing the curses of the covenant (27:11-14). In 27:15-26,

Moses lists 12 curses to be pronounced for breaking the commandments, the majority of which are grouped the topic of what is don in *secret*.⁸ As each curse is spoken loudly by the levitical priests, the people are to respond saying, “*Amen*,” which signals affirmation and agreement. The final curse is, “*Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them*” (27:26). This essentially calls down a curse upon any Israelite who does not agree with the whole law.

After listing the 12 curses, one is left with the clear conclusion. One can obey the Lord’s commandments with rejoicing and be blessed by the Lord or one can disobey His commands and be cursed by Him.

Rejoice in Obedience (28)

In chapter 28 Moses moves into what may be the most intense and serious chapter in the whole Bible. Moses begins with 14 verses of blessings followed by 43 verses delineating the curses of disobedience, which covers every area of life.

¹ “And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. ² And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.
Deuteronomy 28:1-2 (ESV)

The Blessings

The blessings of the Lord are promised to cover every area of life. If the people will believe the commands of the Lord are good and obey them, then the LORD promises blessing in their

⁶ Genesis 15:5-18.

⁷ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 1238.

⁸ See Deuteronomy 27:15, 17, 18, 20-25.

cities and in the fields. He will bless their children and their cattle. He will bless their families and flocks. He will bless their kitchens; their baskets, and bowls. He will bless them when they go out and when they come in. The Lord would cause their enemies to flee from them. The enemies would come against them one way but would flee from them seven ways. He would bless their barns and their lands. He would bless them financially so that they would lend to others, but not need to borrow. God would make them the head and not the tail. He would cause them to go up and not come down. All these blessings he would cause to overtake them if only they would obediently follow his word. *But...*

“But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.

Deuteronomy 28:15 (ESV)

The Curses

Just like the blessings of the Lord, so are the cursing promised to cover every are of life. If the people will *not* believe the commands of the Lord were good but refuse to obey them, then God promises to curse them in their cities and in their fields. He will curse their children and their cattle. He will curse their families and flocks. He will curse their kitchens; their baskets, and bowls. He will curse them when they go out and when they come in. The Lord would cause them to flee from their enemies. The enemies would come against them one way but Israel would flee from their enemies seven ways. God would curse their barns and their lands. He would curse them financially so that they would need to borrow and not lend. God would make them the tail and not the head. He would cause them to go down and not come up. All these curses God would overtake them if they refused to obey his word.

But it gets worse. Moses goes on.

Summary of Continued Curses

Moses warns them that God would send this curses on them and more still. He would send on them mental illness of “confusion and frustration” (v.20). He would do so to such a degree that they would quickly be destroyed and perish from the land because of their evil deeds and because they had forsaken the Lord (v.20). God would also send pestilence among them until they were consumed. He would send them “wasting disease, with fever and inflammation” in their bodies, combined with “drought, blight, and mildew” in their fields (v.22). There would be no rain and the soil would be useless and as dry as powder.

The Lord would cause the enemies to come against them and defeat them. He would cause their dead bodies not be given the dignity of burial, but rather their rotting flesh would be eaten by the vultures and scavenging birds. The Lord would also bring upon them the very diseases with which he destroyed Egypt, the boils, the itch, tumors,

scabs, madness, and blindness. He would remove from them all light and prosperity and replace it with darkness, oppression, and robbery.

All that they build would be destroyed before their eyes and there would be no one to help them. Their property would be taken from them, along with their livestock and animals. They would plant a crop, but others would eat the food. They would tend to their fruit trees, but the fruit would either spoil on the vine or be eaten by wild animals or stolen by invading enemies. Their sons and daughters would have to work as slaves and would be taken from them, while they look on in tears knowing there is nothing they could do to stop it. The stranger and the sojourner among them would rise higher and higher while Israel would be brought lower and lower. They would come to financial ruin and be overtaken by poverty.

And if their rebellion continues an invading nation from far away will come like a flood and sweep them away. This nation will be brutal, hard-hearted, and show no mercy to the old or the young. Moses warns that this foreign nation will surround their cities in the siege and trap them inside with no food and no one to deliver you. The famine will be so great that disease will consume them, grief will depress them, and hunger would drive them mad. They will be robbed of all physical strength and courage while fear overpowers them. They will tear down their fortified walls in which they trusted and destroy their towns and villages. The famine will eventually be so severe that fathers would eat their sons and mothers will eat their daughters. The husband will refuse to share the flesh of his children whom he is eating with the wife he once cherished. Eventually women will even eat their own afterbirth in secret because there is nothing left to eat. Moses warns them,

⁴⁷ Because you did not serve the LORD your God with **joyfulness** and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, ⁴⁸ therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you. Deuteronomy 28:47-48 (ESV)

Moses tells them that if they are not careful to do the words of the covenant, which they have promised to do, then God would bring on them all the curses written in this book, curses so severe and lasting, extraordinary and grievous that they would eventually be destroyed and removed from the land that he gave them.

Whereas God had previously delighted to bless them, so in their rebellion he will delight to curse them. Whereas they were as numerous as the stars of the heavens, so now they will be few and far between. Whereas God once gathered them together to bring into the land, so now he will scatter them among all the peoples of the earth. In those distant nations, they will be forced to worship false gods of wood and stone—which are not God—and there will be no rest for their soul, no even a peaceful place to rest their feet, nor even a

safe place to lay their heads. They will be filled with trembling hearts and failing eyes. There will be no peace and no satisfaction. In the morning, they will long for the evening and in the evening they will long for the morning. At last the Lord will take them back to Egypt in ships, from which he previously rescued them, and there they will offer to sell themselves as slaves, but there will be no one to buy them.

Why All the Detailed Curses?

Why did Moses spend all this time spelling out in painful detail what would happen if they turned away from God? Why go into all these curses?

When I was in college, I thought of getting a motorcycle. I lived at home during college and one night at dinner I said, "Dad, I'm thinking of buying a motorcycle. What do you think?" He said, "Hmm. Not while you living under my roof." My dad was a joker and at first I thought he was joking, but I looked at him and saw that surprisingly he was serious. I was a bit stunned and sat in silence. He went on. "You can certainly get a motorcycle if you want, but if you do then you will need to move out." He then explained to me that one of his uncles had nearly been killed in a motorcycle accident and the physical effects of the crash plagued him for the rest of his life. He said, "I love you too much to let that happen to you." I thought for a minute or two. I liked living with my dad and didn't think that having a motorcycle would give me more than I would lose if I had to move out and leave my dad. So I immediately lost all desire to get a motorcycle. ***My dad's words kept me near him.***

The painful words of Moses are intended to keep the people near their God. God's commands, both the blessings and the curses, are intended to keep us near Him. Paying close attention to all the curses that would come if the people turned away from God, are intended to keep God's people near him.

Sadly, Moses' painful words to Israel ended up coming to pass. This is exactly what happened as the history of Israel unfolded. Everything happened as Moses warned, from the cannibalism during the siege (see 2 Kg 6:26-30) to the return to Egypt (Jer 42-43). ***Because Israel refused to serve her God with joy, so God made her serve her enemies in sorrow.***

Conclusion

What do these chapters say to us.

The curse is real. This whole world is already under a curse. We know this from the beginning of the Bible. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God's word, the result was a curse upon all creation. This world is presently cursed.

Joy in the Lord is real. God is the only source of true and lasting joy. At his right hand are pleasures forevermore and in his presence is fullness of joy (Ps 16:11). He seeks to share his joy by blessing all who wholeheartedly surrender to him.

The curse is lifted in Jesus. In order to enjoy the blessing of the Lord, the curse must be lifted. Jesus is one who takes away the curse.

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.
Galatians 3:13-14 (ESV)

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.
John 3:16-18 (ESV)

The curses are intended to keep you near the Lord. The effect of hearing the graphic detail of the curse of the covenant is to keep us near to the Lord. Why go away from him when being near him brings blessing and being away from him brings curses?

We have only two choices in life, we can draw near to the Lord Jesus and receive abundant blessing and joy or we can turn away from him and receive abundant curses.

As we conclude, we will do so by singing the blessing that God commanded Aaron to pronounce over Israel as they conclude their priestly duties.

²² The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,
²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you;
²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
²⁷ “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”
Numbers 6:22-27 (ESV)

Discussion Questions

1. What is the main point of these three chapters?
2. What is the definition of a covenant?
3. In chapter 26, what did the people declare to God and what did God declare to the people? In what ways are these declarations like wedding vows?
4. What from these three chapters caught your attention? Why?
5. Why did Moses spend so much time talking about the curses of covenant? What is the purpose of the curses of the covenant?
6. Where do you see Jesus in these chapters?
7. If you were to explain this portion of Scripture to a coworker, how would you summarize it?
8. What do think is an appropriate Christian response to this text?