

The Ultimate Curse

Deuteronomy 27

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

I. Introduction

- a. The **Book of Deuteronomy** consists of three speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness.
- b. In **Deuteronomy 27**, we have come to the beginning of Moses' third address (of three). The three speeches are as follows:
 - i. **Speech No. 1: Deuteronomy 1-4** (first four chapters)
 - ii. **Speech No. 2: Deuteronomy 5-26** (twenty-two chapters; to which we have devoted 25 lessons in the current series)
 1. This section covers all the specific laws and regulations.
 2. It includes:
 - a. Giving of the Ten Commandments, retold
 - b. What is sometimes referred to as "the heart of the Old Testament"
 - c. The greatest commandment (**Deuteronomy 6:4-5**)
 - d. "Man does not live by bread alone..." (**Deuteronomy 8:3**)
 - e. Kosher dietary laws restated (**Deuteronomy 14**)
 - f. Rules for future kings (**Deuteronomy 17**)
 - g. Most detailed prophecy, "a prophet like Moses..." (**Deuteronomy 18:15-19**)
 - h. Laws regulating divorce and remarriage after divorce. (**Deuteronomy 24:1-4**)
 - i. Lots of instructions to take care of the poor and needy, and treat others well. (illustrating application of the second greatest commandment)
 - j. Many timeless principles, some introduced here in rather enigmatic form, but later explained in the New Testament

- i. “Expel the wicked person from among you” (church discipline)
 - ii. “By the mouth of two or three witnesses” (church discipline)
 - iii. “Do not muzzle the ox” (support for teachers/leaders)
 - iv. “Do not plow with bull and donkey together” (reminiscent of Paul’s teaching on holiness and separation from the world in **2 Corinthians 6:14**, based on “do not be unequally yoked”)
- iii. **Speech No. 3: Deuteronomy 27-34** (last eight chapters of the book)
 - 1. The final wrap-up, including warnings and blessings, depending on whether the Israelites obey or disobey what has just been handed down.
 - 2. The death of Moses and the handoff of leadership to Joshua.
- c. **Deuteronomy 27**, at the start of Moses’ third address, he begins by telling the Israelites about one specific thing that the entire nation must do together soon after they enter the Promised Land (which therefore will be after Moses dies).
 - i. It will involve all the people and will require them to build a new special altar.
 - ii. Features of the events described in this chapter include:
 - 1. The structure that is first described here is built by Joshua, as chronicled in the **Book of Joshua**.
 - a. Prominent Biblical archaeologists have strong reasons to believe they have discovered this very structure, as built by Joshua about 3,000 years ago.
 - 2. There are multiple references to *curses*.
 - 3. One famous line in this chapter provides the key to a *major problem* with the Law of Moses that the apostle Paul will quote and explain, over 1,000 years later. It foretold the need for Christ to come and to be crucified.

II. An Altar and Plastered Stones on Mount Ebal

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 27:1-10**.

- b. The instructions here were as follows:
 - i. They are to build a special altar on Mount Ebal.
 - 1. Made of natural, uncut stones.
 - 2. Offer offerings of sacrifice there.
 - 3. Eat and be filled, and rejoice.
 - 4. Then write all the words of the Law they had just been given, onto large stones that had been plastered with a lime coating.
 - ii. They were to do this right after they cross the Jordan River and enter Canaan.
 - iii. These instructions were to reinforce the fact that the Lord had called them to *obey all of His commands* that He had given to Moses.

III. Curses from Mount Ebal

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 27:11-26**.
 - i. After they cross the Jordan:
 - 1. Six tribes (including Joseph here as one tribe, and also including Levi) were to stand on Mount Gerazim to bless the people.
 - a. Mt. Gerazim was later to become the focal point of worship for the Samaritans, who built a temple on that mountain. When Jesus is at the well in Samaria, this comes up in His conversation with the Samaritan woman.
 - b. “The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. *Our fathers worshiped on this mountain*, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”
(John 4:19-24, NKJV)

2. The remaining six tribes were to stand on Mount Ebal (where the previously mentioned altar was to be built, along with plastered stones with the Law written on them), to curse the people.
 3. The Levites would pronounce loud curses (that would befall the people if they were disobedient to the Lord) in the hearing of all the Israelites, and all the people would confirm each curse with an *"Amen!"* (= *so be it*).
- ii. Summary of the curses:
1. There were twelve curses here.
 2. The first eleven are tied to specific commands in the Law of Moses, but the last one is a general, over-arching curse.
 3. A couple of these curses are tied to the Ten Commandments. Several relate to various forms of sexual depravity. Some fall under the umbrella of how we treat our neighbors, the need to show love and concern in how we treat them (loving them as we love ourselves, as summarized in the second greatest command, in **Leviticus 19:18**).
- b. **Questions:** Of all the things in the Law of Moses, why do you think these specific things were picked for the first eleven curses? Is there anything that might tie this seemingly random collection of commands that are specifically called out and cursed? What, if anything, might they have in common?
- i. How likely do you think it might be that an Israelite man would wake up some morning and be tempted along the following lines, concluding:
 1. "I think I'd like to carve a piece of wood or a rock and worship it." *OR*
 2. "I think I would like to have sexual relations with one of my cattle, or with my sister or mother-in-law."
 - ii. **Seems to Me:** These mentioned sins were among the practices of the nations that lived in Canaan. They were idolaters and engaged in all kinds of sexual depravity and godless, violent behavior.
 1. Abraham was told that his descendants would not inherit the Promised Land until the sin of the Amorites was "filled up" (**Genesis 15:16**).

2. In **Wisdom of Solomon 12-14** it speaks about the lifestyle of the Canaanites, and those who worship man-made idols instead of God. It describes them as:
 - a. Involved in sorcery and unholy rites.
 - b. Murders of children.
 - c. Cannibalism, eating human flesh and blood.
 - d. “They keep neither life nor marriages pure...Everything is mixed together: blood and murder, theft and treachery, depravity, unfaithfulness, tumult and perjury, corruption over what is good, ingratitude, corruption of family, breakup of marriages, disorder, adultery and debauchery....” (**Wisdom of Solomon 14:23-28**)
3. It seems to me that the Lord was especially concerned about the impact that godless, depraved people of the land would have on His people.
 - a. “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits.’” (**1 Corinthians 15:33**, NKJV)
 - b. **Challenges for Us:** We find ourselves in the midst of a morally declining society that has largely let go of God.
 - i. We are surrounded by the influences of:
 1. Online and social media
 2. Public schools and secular educational agendas
 3. Local bookstores filled with new books promoting various forms of decadence
 4. Fascination with the occult (including the extreme popularity and darkness of Halloween here in New England)
 - ii. Some think that moving to a less urban area, or focusing on old social customs or external things will keep us from these influences. However, evil influences are everywhere in our culture (not limited to the urban areas).
 - c. There is no substitute for studying and meditating on the Word of God, which Peter refers to as “a light that

shines in a dark place” (**2 Peter 1:19**). As **Psalm 1** says, the man who meditates in the Word of God day and night shall be as a tree planted by streams of water that will flourish under all conditions.

- i. In **Deuteronomy**, we are pointed to the word of God and its warnings to keep us on track in the midst of temptations from the world around us.
 1. “You shall teach them [*the word of the Lord*] to your sons, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and it shall be immovable before your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (**Deuteronomy 6:7–9**, LXX, OSB)
 2. Lesson from the daily manna for 40 years: “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God...” (**Deuteronomy 8:3**)
 3. In **Deuteronomy 17**, the king was to write down the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy) in his own hand, and read it all the days of his life.
 4. Here in **Deuteronomy 27**, the people were to write the entire **Book of Deuteronomy** on stones. In **Deuteronomy 31**, they were told to read the entire thing to all the people once every seven years.
- ii. Some among us may be tempted to think that if we just relocate and retreat to somewhere “spiritually safer”, we will be able to escape the world’s wickedness for us or our children. Maybe, but maybe not. Consider:
 1. Paul didn’t encourage anyone in Corinth to uproot themselves and move out of an extremely depraved, immoral port city.

2. Places like Rome, Athens and Ephesus were centers of idolatry and all kinds of depravity, where churches were planted.
3. “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.” (1 Peter 2:11–12, NKJV)
4. “Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.” (1 Peter 4:1–4, NKJV)
5. The Great Commission was *to go out to all the world and make disciples*; to be lights in a dark world. Not just to find safe places to try to avoid the world. The world will find you (with its materialism, comfort, worldliness on the inside). But to make it, we must be constantly focused on the word of God. All of it. That involves dealing with our own lives, not avoiding any of the commands of Jesus and the apostles.

IV. Joshua was Faithful to Moses’ Instructions

- a. Read **Joshua 9:3-8** in the LXX/OSB (corresponding to **Joshua 8:30-35** in most other Bibles).

- b. Joshua did exactly what Moses instructed him to do. Joshua is a heroic example of faith for us to imitate, outstanding among all the men of the Old Testament for his consistent faithfulness to the Lord.
 - i. The altar was to be built on Mount Ebal.
 - ii. Only uncut stones were to be used.
 - iii. The sacrifices made on it were to be as prescribed.
 - iv. The “Second law” [= Deuteronomy] of Moses was to be written on the stones.
- c. Joshua took no shortcuts. Like Noah (in building the ark) and Moses (in constructing the tabernacle and regarding Passover), Joshua followed the Lord’s instructions exactly.
- d. He read the entire law (**Deuteronomy**) to all the people. Consequently, the people could not later claim they were unaware of some of the commands contained in it.
- e. **Question:** Has this altar, built by Joshua, ever been discovered?
 - i. (Credit the discussion that follows on this point goes to Mark Felsher, who brought these things to my attention.)
 - 1. For background information related to the altar found on Mount Ebal by archaeologists, consider the following resources.
 - a. <https://myisraeliguide.com/mount-ebal-the-altar-of-joshua/>
 - b. <https://www.thetorah.com/article/joshuas-altar-on-mount-ebal-israels-holy-site-before-shiloh>
 - ii. Mount Ebal is in Samaria, next to Shechem (a village mentioned in several Old Testament stories), essentially where modern-day Nablus is, on the West Bank.
 - iii. In the 1970s and ‘80s, Israeli archaeologist Adam Zertal explored a site on Mount Ebal that matches the description of the altar built by Joshua.
 - 1. It was made of undressed stones.
 - 2. It had a ramp (rather than steps) going up to it, as described in **Exodus 20**.

3. It was square in shape as described in **Exodus 27** (versus Canaanite altars, which were round).
4. He found over 3,000 animal bones of kosher animals, mostly under a year old, all having been burned in an open fire.
5. There were Egyptian scarabs found on the site that date the site to the time of Joshua (about 3000 years ago). This is the only site on Mt. Ebal that has been dated to this period.
6. Flat, plaster-covered stones were used to bury the altar after its use was completed.

V. The Ultimate Curse

- a. Re-read **Deuteronomy 27:26**.
 - i. “...Cursed is every man who does not abide in all the words of this law to do them.’ Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’”
 1. This is the final curse, a catch-all.
 2. And all the people said “Amen!”
- b. Paul will use this statement in a significant way in his letter to the **Galatians**, to explain why the Law of Moses was inadequate (and had to be superseded by faith in Christ).
- c. Several of the New Testament letters feature explanations of why Christian converts do not have to follow the Law of Moses. (See **Acts 10-15**, **Colossians**, **Ephesians**, **Romans**, **Hebrews**, and especially **Galatians**)
- d. In **Galatians**, some Christians from Jewish backgrounds were claiming that Christians had to still be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses. Even Peter was influenced. Paul rebuked Peter for this, and explained to these Judaizers FROM THE LAW OF MOSES why the Law was inadequate.
 - i. Paul points to the promise made to Abraham (**Genesis**), and other evidence from the Five Books of Moses, including two points from **Deuteronomy**.
 - ii. Read **Galatians 3:5-14**.
 1. Everyone under the Law is under a curse!
 2. After all, no one followed EVERYTHING in the Law.
 3. To save us, Christ suffered the cursed death on the cross (from **Deuteronomy 21:22-23**), although he did nothing wrong. He

became a curse on our behalf through His death, freeing us from the curse we were under.

- a. Paul challenges those who seek to put their faith in the Law. He shows from **Deuteronomy 27:26** that everyone who strives to do this is under a curse!
4. There was no provision *in the Law* to un-curse people, once they came under a curse.
 - a. In contrast, under the *new covenant*, if we confess our sins and repent, we can be forgiven.
 - b. Jesus provided the only way that this curse can be lifted. We have been redeemed from the curse.

e. **Relevance for Us**

- i. Some groups within the Christian world still try to bind parts of the Law on us (tithing, Sabbath observance, etc.).
 1. Consider what Paul said in **Colossians 1:13-17**. Christ wiped out the Law that stood against us. The things in the Law (food and drink, festivals, sabbath observances, etc.) were merely shadows of what would later be revealed.
- ii. However, all those trying to follow the Law and be justified by it *are still under a curse!*
- iii. Let's not be cursed! The Law was never adequate for our salvation. That would be available only through faith in Christ (which encompasses obeying all of His teachings and following His example).