

Deuteronomy 27-31

God grants His Covenant blessings to us by His sovereign Grace, but requires gracious responses of obedience from us—also by His Grace

BACKGROUND, CONTEXT, AND MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

1 / I know we will try to ingest and digest a huge portion of Deuteronomy in this lesson, but I do want us to at least survey—section by section—**chapters 27-31** and fit it in with the purpose, scope and sequence, and flow of the narrative of the Book of Deuteronomy.

2 / To begin with, I have told you in an earlier lesson that **Deuteronomy** is divided into three distinct sermons, or discourses, that Moses delivered to the Promised Land generation of Israelites as they were staged and poised to cross over the Jordan into the inheritance that Yahweh has been promising them from the time He made and gave the covenant promises to Abraham.

3 / You can find these three sermons in these sections [you can tell where the sermons begin by a transition—an explanatory historical context setting that announces the occasion and purpose of each sermon]:

- a. **chs 1.1—4.43: First Discourse / Sermon**
- b. **chs 4.44—28.68: Second Discourse / Sermon**
- c. **chs 29—30: Third Discourse / Sermon**
- d. **chs 31—34: Some last words of Moses**

4 / So these chapters—**27-31**—will actually ‘straddle’ the second and third sermons, but I want to include them in this lesson because they will illustrate some of the other points I want to make.

5 / Which brings me to another important point I have made in an earlier lesson: and that is, how the Book of Deuteronomy is an example of a common document that was delivered by a ruler or overlord to the people who were his subjects. It was called a *suzerain-vassal covenant or treaty*. Let me repeat here what the distinguishing features of that covenant were [because we will find most of them in this lesson passage]:

[1] **a preamble**: identifying and introducing the speaker, usually the suzerain, the author of the treaty/covenant [**Deut 1.1-3**]

[2] **a historical prologue**: rehearsing how the suzerain’s sovereignty over them had come about—his authority and right to rule them—and an announcement of his benevolence and good will toward his vassals [**Deut 1.4—3.29**]

[3] **stipulations/requirements of obedience**: detailing what is expected of the vassals; ‘terms and conditions’ of their obedience under the suzerain’s sovereignty [**Deut 4.1—26.19**]

[4] **a statement regarding the document’s display, storage, or terms for its periodic recital**—so they would not neglect or forget it [**Deut 27.1-8; 31.9-13, 24-26**]

[5] **a list of witnesses** to confirm the authenticity, verity, and to which the suzerain may appeal [usually the nation’s patron deities]—in Israel’s case...

-Moses calls on the heavens and earth to witness Yahweh’s covenant [**chs 31.28; 32.1**]

-he composes a song—a ‘national anthem,’ as it were [**ch 31.20-32.47**]

-the song includes an oath by Yahweh [**ch 32.39-42**]

-and the very words of the Book of the Torah will serve as an enduring witness [**ch 31.24-29**].

[6] **curses for disobedience and/or blessings for obedience**: among the nations, these blessings and curses would be effected by their patron national gods or imposed on them by the suzerain according to the performance of the stipulations—in Israel’s case, Yahweh Himself will bless and curse [**ch 28**].

6 / So, as we go through **chapters 27-31**, we’ll point out how and where especially #s 3, 4, and 6 are clearly highlighted in this lesson passage.

I | chapter 27

27.1-2a / stipulations/requirements of obedience.

After summing up everything he has commanded from Yahweh so far, Moses charges them again they must **“Keep the whole commandment that I command you today.”** Then Moses proceeds to remind them again of Yahweh’s faithfulness to His covenant promises: **“And on the day you cross over Jordan to the land The LORD your God is giving you...”** This covenant promise that Yahweh first delivered to Abraham is repeated over and over in Deuteronomy as a testimony to Yahweh’s unfailing faithfulness to everything He has promised.

27.2b-8 / So these instructions are given to them *in prospect*—they must do what he is commanding them to do in a future day when they are finally in the Promised Land. Moses commands them to take some stone tablets and **“write on them all the words of this Law.”** He even tells them where these stone tablets will be displayed: **“on Mount Ebal.”** We’ll see in vv 11-14 that there are actually two mountain peaks where they will stage these ceremonies he’s going to prescribe: **Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim.** These two mountain peaks faced each other with the city of Shechem in the valley.

--They shall also build an altar to make sacrifices and offerings to Yahweh. Those instructions also mirror the instructions given in **Exodus 20.22-26.** This is very important: Yahweh’s repeated instructions are that when they build an altar to Him, they shall not wield their own instruments to build it. They must use only ‘uncut’ stones that He has already created and provided for them. Of course, this prefigures Christ our Altar [Hebrews 13.10].

27.9-28 / When they have crossed Jordan into the Promised Land, they must recite both the **curses for disobedience** to Yahweh’s covenant from Mount Ebal [ch 27.14-26 & 28.15-68] and the **blessings for obedience** from Mount Gerazim [28.1-14]. Both curses and blessings are specifically and publicly announced so that everyone knows what Yahweh commands and prohibits.

II | chapter 28

28.1-14 / These verses contain the abundant and inevitable blessings Yahweh will bestow upon them **“...if you faithfully obey the voice of The LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments that I command you today...”** And the summation of all these blessings is expressed in this statement: **“...The LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.”** It is repeated again in other words in vs 13: **“And The LORD will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of The LORD your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them.”** Pay careful to those words because Yahweh is going to warn them of the dire consequences of their disobedience. If they do NOT keep faith with Yahweh’s covenant by their loving obedience to His Grace, then they will forfeit and lose their exalted position of preeminence and sovereignty among and over the other nations of the earth. See verse 44: **“...He [your enemy nation] shall be the head, and you shall be the tail.”**

28.15-68 / Now here’s our main takeaway from ch 28...and this will help us understand Israel’s disastrous trajectory throughout the rest of their OT history—especially when it comes to their fates of deportation from their Land and captivity among the nations of the world in their latter years when the northern kingdom falls to the Assyrians and the southern kingdom is taken into captivity to Babylon.

--Yahweh is putting them on notice and forewarning them here, even before they enter the Promised Land, that they will be defeated, driven out of their land, and taken into captivity to foreign nations if they do NOT obey His covenant.

--These are the ultimate curses Yahweh will bring upon them for their disobedience. Besides the physical curses which will befall them by the unproductiveness of their land; the diseases and pestilences which will plague them; *there is the ultimate curse of being captured, enslaved, deported, and oppressed by foreign nations!* See, for example, verses 32-34, 36-44, 49-51, 52-57, 64-68.

III | chapter 29

This chapter describes the renewal of the covenant their parents—the Exodus generation—made with Yahweh at Sinai. Their fathers at Sinai solemnly promised Yahweh: **“All that you have said we will do; all that you have commanded we will obey!”** Moses now calls on this generation to renew those covenant vows—and live by them, live up to what they, too, are promising they will do. **Chapter 29.29** is where we find those words we quote so often: **“The secret things belong to The LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this Law.”**

IV | chapter 30

30.1-10 / Here is a tender promise Yahweh makes to them: *When everything I am forewarning you will come to pass if and when you do not obey my covenant, and you do go into captivity into strange, foreign, and cruel lands, if you will repent of your faithlessness and return to me, I will bring you back and restore your good fortunes of my blessings once again.* What we do need to see here, though, is: these promises will be fulfilled **ONLY** in the New Covenant that Yahweh will make with Israel in our True Israel—Christ!

--The key verse to note is v 6: **“And The LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love The LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”** This circumcision of our hearts can be effected only by the new birth.

30.11-20 / vv 11-14 is a Gospel promise. Read those verses with your NT ears. Where have you heard these same words repeated? *They are in Romans 10.5-11.* There Paul teaches us that God’s Gospel is accessible to all who will hear and receive it by faith.

V | chapter 31

31.1-8 / Moses has been forbidden to enter the Promised Land because of his own act of rebellion against Yahweh back in **Numbers 20**, especially v 12—the waters of Meribah...when Yahweh told him to speak to the rock to give water for Israel, and he struck the rock instead. This is a pitiful, recurring theme that comes to us over and over, even here in **Deuteronomy**. You can find Moses’s pitiful plea to Yahweh to reconsider in **Deut 3.23-29**. It is repeated again and the account of the transfer of leadership is in **ch 32.48-52**. But here, Moses charges Israel to trust Yahweh to do for them as He has promised—and gives a public affirmation and encouragement to Joshua.

31.9-13 / NOW...go back to the articles of the *suzerain-vassal covenant* we have referred to before: ‘**a statement regarding the document’s display, storage, or terms for its periodic recital**—so they would not neglect or forget it [**Deut 27.1-8; 31.9-13, 24-26**]’ Here is one of those provisions. We have already seen how they were commanded to inscribe again the words of this Law on the stone tablets for public display in **ch 27.1-8**. Here is another ordinance concerning its periodic recital: **“At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths [Tabernacles], when all Israel comes to appear before The LORD your God at the place that He will choose [remember chapter 12], you shall read this Law before all Israel in their hearing.”**

31.14-18, 23 / Here is another formal, public affirmation of Joshua’s Divinely-appointed and commissioned leadership of Israel into Canaan. This ceremony was also intended to give a public testimony that Yahweh’s authority was now conferred upon Joshua. Israel must listen to, learn from, follow, and obey Joshua as he speaks from Yahweh—just as they had been commanded to obey Moses.

31.19-22 / This is an introduction to ‘The Song of Moses’ that Yahweh inspired Moses to write as a memorable testimony to Yahweh’s faithfulness to His covenant—and to His people. We’ll talk more about this song in our next lesson.

31.24-29 / I want us to pay special attention to this paragraph. Because here is another provision of the article of the *suzerain-vassal covenant* that we have often referred to—I'll repeat it here one more time: **'a statement regarding the document's display, storage, or terms for its periodic recital—so they would not neglect or forget it [Deut 27.1-8; 31.9-13, 24-26]'**

--In this instance, Yahweh commanded Moses to **"Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of The LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you."**

--I want to make a couple statements about the significance of this event—both for them and for us...

[1] This **Book of Deuteronomy** was placed in the Ark of the Covenant to serve as a binding, enduring testimony and witness to Yahweh's authoritative and faithful Word—both His covenant promises to bless them and also His punitive consequences for their faithless disobedience [**Hebrews 9.1-4**]. ALSO, if you read **2 Kings 22**, you will find there the stirring historical account of how the temple had fallen into decades of disuse and disrepair, so much so that the copy of the Book of the Law that the kings were all required to write for themselves [**Deuteronomy 17.18-20**] had long been forgotten and covered over with rubble in one of the storerooms of the temple. King Josiah ordered the temple to be cleaned out and the worship of Yahweh restored. In the process of deep-cleaning the temple, Hilkiah the high priest reported,

⁸ And Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the LORD." And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. ⁹ And Shaphan the secretary came to the king, and reported to the king, "Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house and have delivered it into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the LORD." ¹⁰ Then Shaphan the secretary told the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read it before the king. ¹¹ When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes. ¹² And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Micaiah, and Shaphan the secretary, and Asaiah the king's servant, saying, ¹³ "Go, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found. For great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us." [2 Kings 22.8-13].

In response to King Josiah's humble repentance, Yahweh assured him he would be spared from the inevitable destruction coming upon Judah and Jerusalem—but the nation's faithless disobedience had reached its tipping point. The forewarned curses were already scheduled; and He would do as He warned He would do in **Deuteronomy 28**.

[2] It's significance for us is to stand in awe of how the Word of The LORD was first given, how it has been preserved, and how it has come all the way to us in the same form in which it was given! ***Just look at what we are doing! We are reading these words—the very same words that Yahweh first gave to Moses!*** Yahweh told Moses to preserve it and store it for safekeeping in the Ark of the Covenant. It was kept, and the scribes who followed in the generations to come copied it over and over. And now it has come all the way to us, and here we are reading those same words in our own language! And we must love it, treasure it, keep it, and do it!

I want to make a Gospel confession and appeal to faith in Christ here. Going back to **ch 30.11-14**, which Paul will call **'the word of faith that we proclaim'** in **Romans 10.8**—it is as plain as Moses's and Paul's messages that the only way we can be righteous before God is NOT by our fulfillment of the law's requirements by our human efforts and works, BUT only by faith in the substitutionary sacrifices God has provided to atone for all our sins and transgressions. Even Moses was proclaiming: *"You cannot satisfactorily keep these laws—only your innocent substitutionary sacrifice can be credited with both the obedience to the law and the punishment for your disobedience!"* But, when Christ comes [and has come!], HE will perfectly fulfill both the law's required obedience and suffer God's wrath against our disobediences. And so, in this way, **"For Christ is the end [completion / fulfillment] of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes!"** [Romans 10.4].