Deuteronomy

Lesson #13

Blessings & Curses

(27: 1 – 28: 69)
Review

In Lesson #12 we addressed issues that mirror the last four commandments:

7. You shall not commit adultery;
8. You shall not steal;
9. You shall not bear false witness; and
10. You shall not covet.
As we’ve learned, Moses’ expansive 2nd Discourse (Deuteronomy 12-26) offers a vast collection of laws, statutes and ordinances that mirror the sequence of the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments are ten principles that must be applied to specific cases, in much the way the U.S. Constitution must be applied in current municipal case law. The Ten Commandments—and indeed the entire torah—comprise a living and breathing document that must be adapted to the times, cultures and places in which they are applied. We see this in how the Ten Commandments are applied at the time of Moses (1446-1406 B.C.), the time of King Josiah (641-609 B.C.), the post-Babylonian captivity period (539 B.C. and onward), the time of Jesus (6-4 B.C.-A.D. 32), and even in our own day.

Prime examples are how Jesus understands the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount (“You have heard it said X, but I tell you Y”) and in how Jesus deals with the woman caught in adultery in John 8: 1-11.
As we enter Lesson #13, we find that Israel’s covenant with God carries with it both blessings and curses: blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

In Lesson #13 we explore these blessing and curses, and we conclude Moses’ 2nd Discourse.
Just prior to introducing the main body of Moses’ 2nd Discourse (12-26), we read:

“See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: a blessing for obeying the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I give you today; a curse if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord, your God, but turn aside from the way I command you today, to go after other gods, whom you do not know.

When the Lord, your God, brings you into the land which you are to enter and possess, then on Mount Gerizim you shall pronounce the blessing, on Mount Ebal, the curse . . . ”

(11: 26-32)
Now, at the end of Moses’ 2nd Discourse, Deuteronomy 27: 1-26 “frames” the laws, statutes and ordinances by reminding us of those blessings and curses that accompany the covenant:
“Moses, with the levitical priests, then said to all Israel: Be silent, Israel, and listen! This day you have become the people of the Lord, your God. You shall obey the voice of the Lord, your God, and keep his commandments and statutes which I am giving you today.

That same day Moses commanded the people, saying: When you cross the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali.”

(27: 9-13)
Blessings & Curses

Mount Ebal
Mount Gerizim
Jordan River
Plain of Moab
Jericho
Al-[et-Tell]
Biblical Town of Shechem (Modern-day Nablus)

Mount Gerizim (Blessings)

Mount Ebal (Curses)

About 3 miles

Blessings & Curses
Stone altar on Mount Ebal.

Source: www.bible.ca

Blessings & Curses
Standing atop Mount Gerizim, the Levites shall proclaim twelve curses, and after each curse all the Israelites shall answer, “Amen!”
1. “Cursed be anyone who makes a carved or molten idol, an abomination to the Lord, the work of a craftsman’s hands, and sets it up in secret!”
2. “Cursed be anyone who dishonors father or mother!”
3. “Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbor’s boundary markers!”
4. “Cursed be anyone who misleads the blind on their way!”
5. “Cursed be anyone who deprives the resident alien, the orphan or the widow of justice!”
6. “Cursed be anyone who has relations with his father’s wife, for he dishonors his father’s bed!”
7. “Cursed be anyone who has relations with any animal!”
8. “Cursed be anyone who has relations with his sister, whether his father’s daughter or his mother’s daughter!”
9. “Cursed be anyone who has relations with his mother-in-law!”
10. “Cursed be anyone who strikes down a neighbor in secret!”
11. “Cursed be anyone who accepts payment to kill an innocent person!”
12. “Cursed be anyone whose actions do not uphold the words of this law!”

(27: 15-26)
The curses here seem particularly intrusive to modern ears in a secular democracy, and when we get to the curses in Deuteronomy 28, they will appear downright brutal and harsh.

As envisioned in Deuteronomy, Israelite society is a theocratic state, with God as its king, a human king as God’s vassal, and a population serving God, all knit together by a covenant, suzerain relationship.

In our secular democratic society we cringe at the thought of such a coercive power, where absolute loyalty and commitments are demanded and are permanent.
We do have, however, similar commitments to a democratic nation-state, in which we are subject to laws: we must all pay taxes, all obey civil and criminal laws; and all fight in wars, if drafted.

Failing to abide by the implicit social contract of our nation brings down the heavy hand of the IRS, who can attach our wages, levy our bank accounts, and confiscate our homes and businesses; the hammer of federal, state and local law enforcement; and even the loss of our freedom by imprisonment and even death.

The theocratic state and the secular nation-state differ only in the source of their coercive authority.
Such curses are commonplace among the many Assyrian vassal treaties from the same period, such as the *Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon* (672 B.C.), about three decades before Josiah’s reign.

For example:

“The Lord will send on you a curse, panic, and frustration in everything you set your had to, until you are speedily destroyed and perish for the evil you have done in forsaking me. The Lord will make disease cling to you until he has made an end of you from the land you are entering to possess. The Lord will strike you with consumption, fever, and inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, with blight and mildew, that will pursue you until you perish.”

(Deuteronomy 28: 20-22)
“May all the great gods of heaven and earth who inhabit the universe and are mentioned by name in this tablet, strike you, look at you in anger, uproot you from among the living and curse you grimly with a painful curse. Above, may they take possession of your life; below, in the netherworld, may they make your ghost thirst for water. May shade and daylight always chase you away, and may you not find refuge in a hidden corner. May food and water abandon you; may want and famine, hunger and plague never be removed from you.”

(Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, Sec. 56)

That’s really interesting. When the tribes stand on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim, I was expecting to hear both blessings and curses, but at this stage we only have 12 curses, the “Duodecade of Schechem!”

And the curses mostly address actions that are furtive or done in secret. Curious!
Yes, indeed, the kind of things that stem from hidden motives and secret, shameful desires.
That reminds me of Jesus saying: “There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known . . . what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed on the housetops” (Luke 12: 2-30).

I think this means that torah must be observed even in the most private matters, long before they ever become actions.
I didn’t think anyone knew!
Deuteronomy now turns to the blessings, first listing them in summary, and then exploring them in depth.
“Now, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord, your God, carefully observing all his commandments which I give you today, the Lord, your God, will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overwhelm you when you obey the voice of the Lord, your God:

May you be blessed in the city,
and blessed in the country!
Blessed be the fruit of your womb,
the produce of your soil and the offspring of your livestock,
the issue of your herds
and the young of your flocks!
Blessed be your grain basket
and your kneading bowl!
May you be blessed in your coming in,
and blessed in your going out!”

(28: 1-6)
We now explore the blessings in greater depth:
“The Lord will beat down before you the enemies that rise up against you; they will come out against you from one direction, and flee before you in seven. The Lord will affirm the blessings upon you, on your barns and on all your undertakings . . . the Lord will establish you as a holy people . . . all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of the Lord is proclaimed over you, and they will be afraid of you. The Lord will generously increase the fruit of your womb, the offspring of your livestock, and the produce of your soil . . . [he] will open up for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give your land rain in due season and to bless all the works of your hands . . .
“... You will lend to many nations but borrow from none. The Lord will make you the head not the tail, the top not the bottom, if you obey the commandments of the Lord, your God . . .”

(28: 7-14)
It’s a mistake to think that the blessings ascribed in Deuteronomy come tit-for-tat with obedience, to think that material prosperity must follow adherence to the covenant, but that’s simply not the case.

Deuteronomy flatly denies this, and indeed it goes even further than denial:

“Remember how for these forty years the Lord, your God, has directed all your journeying in the wilderness, so as to test you by affluence, to know what is in your heart: to keep his commandments, or not. He therefore let you be afflicted with hunger, and then fed you with manna, a food unknown to you and your ancestors, so you might know that it is not by bread alone that people live, but by all that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord.”

(8: 2-3 )
That’s a very good point. True blessing comes from our relationship with God, not from any rewards or blessings he may or may not give us. To suggest otherwise indicates a very immature faith and a shallow understanding of God.

Indeed, even if we obey God faithfully and we have a deep and abiding relationship with him, he may still test us severely:

“Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

(James 1: 2-4)

Job is a prime scriptural example of this “testing,” as are many of the Saints and heroes of the faith.
The blessings enumerated in 28: 1-14 set the rhetorical pattern for the curses that follow in 28: 15-69.

We begin by noticing another “framing” device, fore and aft of the first set of curses:

“But if you do not obey the voice of the Lord, your God, carefully observing all his commandments and statutes which I give you today, all these curses shall come upon you and overwhelm you . . .”

(28: 15)

“All these curses will come upon you, pursuing you and overwhelming you, until you are destroyed, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord, your God by keeping his commandments and statutes which he gave you.”

(28: 45)
With the introductory framing device of 28: 15 in place, we move to a summary of the curses, which mirrors the rhetorical pattern of the blessing summary in 28: 1-6:
“But if you do not obey the voice of the Lord, your God, carefully observing all his commandments and statutes which I give you today, all these curses shall come upon you and overwhelm you:

May you be cursed in the city,
    and cursed in the country!
Cursed be your grain basket
    and your kneading bowl!
Cursed be the fruit of your womb,
    the produce of your soil
    and the offspring of your livestock,
    the issue of your herds
    and the young of your flocks!
May you be cursed in your coming in,
    and cursed in your going out!”

(28: 16-19)
The first set of curses—Deuteronomy 28: 20-46—emulates Assyrian treaties in which the curses are listed in separate categories of misfortune, each category being associated with individual Assyrian Gods.

In Deuteronomy the categories are:

1. Sickness and Defeat (20-29a)
2. Despoilment (29b-35)
3. Exile (36-37)
4. Fruitless labor (38-46)
This is serious stuff!

In Judaism the entire Torah—Genesis through Deuteronomy—is read each Sabbath in an annual cycle, allowing all Jews to study the same Torah portion, week-by-week, much as all Roman Catholics study the same scriptural passages week-by-week at Sunday Mass. Each Torah portion is accompanied by a Haftarot reading, one from the Prophets.

The Jewish cycle begins in the fall, after the Feast of Tabernacles, and it ends about twelve months later. The cycle consists of 54 portions, the number of weeks in a leap year; in non-leap years, some of the shorter portions are doubled up.

Deuteronomy 26: 1 – 29: 8 is the 50th weekly Torah portion, usually read in September. Deuteronomy 28—the curses—is read with great solemnity, for history has shown that every curse in the chapter came to pass. Isaiah 60: 1-22 is the accompanying Haftarot reading.
So, let’s work through the categories in the first set of curses:

1. Sickness and Defeat (20-29a)
2. Despoilment (29b-35)
3. Exile (36-37)
4. Fruitless labor (38-46)
“The Lord will send on you a curse, panic, and frustration in everything you set your mind to until you are speedily destroyed and perish for the evil you have done in forsaking me. The Lord will make disease cling to you until he has made an end of you from the land you are entering to possess. The Lord will strike you with consumption, fever, and inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, with light and mildew, that will pursue you until you perish. The heavens over your head will be like bronze and the earth under your feet like iron. For rain the Lord will give you powdery dust, which will come down upon you from the heavens until you are destroyed . . .
“. . . The Lord will let you be beaten down before your enemies; thought you advance upon them from one direction, you will flee before them in seven, so that you will become an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. Your corpses will become food for all the birds of the air and for the beasts of the field, with no one to frighten them off. The Lord will strike you with Egyptian boils and with tumors, skin diseases and the itch, from none of which you can be cured. And the Lord will strike you with madness, blindness and panic, so that even at midday you will grope in the dark as though blind, unable to find your way.”

(28: 20-29a)
That’s a terrible catalogue of horrors: consumption, fever, inflammation; tumors, skin diseases, and the itch. Not to mention drought, famine, war and corpses littering the landscape, food for the birds and beasts!

That is terrible! I had “the itch” once when I had fleas, and you put a cone over my head. That was miserable!
Now, on to the second set of curses:

1. Sickness and Defeat (20-29a)
2. Despoilment (29b-35)
3. Exile (36-37)
4. Fruitless labor (38-46)
“You will be oppressed and robbed continually, with no one to come to your aid. Though you betroth a wife, another will have her. Though you build a house, you will not live in it. Though you plant a vineyard, you will not pluck its fruits. Your ox will be slaughtered before your eyes, but you will not eat its flesh. Your donkey will be stolen in your presence, but you will not get it back. Your flocks will be given to your enemies, with no one to come to your aid. Your sons and daughters will be given to another people while you strain your eyes looking for them every day, having no power to do anything. A people you do not know will consume the fruit of your soil and of all your labor . . .
“... and you will be thoroughly oppressed and continuously crushed, until you are driven mad by what your eyes must look upon. The Lord will strike you with malignant boils of which you cannot be cured, on your knees and legs, and from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head.”

(28: 29b-35)
Now, the third set of curses:

1. Sickness and Defeat (20-29a)
2. Despoilment (29b-35)
3. Exile (36-37)
4. Fruitless labor (38-46)
“The Lord will bring you, and your king whom you have set over you, to a nation which you and your ancestors have not known, and there you will serve other gods, of wood and stone, and you will be a horror, a byword, a taunt among all the peoples to which the Lord will drive you.”

(28: 36-37)
Finally, the fourth set of curses:

1. Sickness and Defeat (20-29a)
2. Despoilment (29b-35)
3. Exile (36-37)
4. Fruitless labor (38-46)
“Though you take out seed to your field, you will harvest little, for the locusts will devour it. Though you plant and cultivate vineyards, you will not drink or store up the wine, for the worms will eat them. Though you have olive trees throughout your country, you will have no oil for ointment, for you olives will drop off. Though you beget sons and daughters, they will not remain with you, for they will go into captivity. Buzzing insects will take possession of all your trees and the crops of your soil. The resident aliens among you will rise above you higher and higher, while you sink lower and lower. They will lend to you, not you to them. They will become the head, you the tail . . .
“... All these curses will come upon you, pursuing you and overwhelming you, until you are destroyed, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord, your God, by keeping his commandments and statutes which he gave you. They will be a sign and a wonder for you and your descendents for all time.”

(28: 38-46)
Notice how this first set of curses focuses on constructive, disciplinary warnings. Israel does not suffer because of the power of foreign gods, sheer misfortune or the blind forces of an amoral universe. Israel suffers because of a steadfast refusal to obey the terms of God’s covenant, a covenant into which they voluntarily entered.
In the second set of curses—Deuteronomy 47-69—we take a shocking turn. No longer are the curses constructive, disciplinary warnings; now they are veritable prophecies of Israel’s destruction and downfall—which, indeed, begins in 605 B.C., only four years after King Josiah’s death, and ends when Jerusalem falls to Babylon on August 14, 586 B.C.

These curses follow five movements:

1. Prologue (47-48)
2. Invasion and Siege (49-57)
3. Suffering (58-62)
4. Captivity and Exile (63-68)
5. Epilogue (69)
Let’s begin with the first movement of Israel’s doom:

1. Prologue (47-48)
2. Invasion and Siege (49-57)
3. Suffering (58-62)
4. Captivity and Exile (63-68)
5. Epilogue (69)
“Since you would not serve the Lord, your God, with heartfelt joy for abundance of every kind, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and utter want, you will serve the enemies whom the Lord will send against you. He will put an iron yoke on your neck, until he destroys you.”

(28: 47-48)
Israel had been given a clear choice:

“Now, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord, your God, carefully observing all his commandments which I give you today, the Lord, your God, will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overwhelm you . . .”

(28: 1-2)

However:

“If you do not obey the voice of the Lord, your God, carefully observing all his commandments and statutes which I give you today, all these curses shall come upon you and overwhelm you . . .”

(28: 15)

Israel chooses poorly.
Now we move to the second act of Israel’s doom:

1. Prologue (47-48)
2. Invasion and Siege (49-57)
3. Suffering (58-62)
4. Captivity and Exile (63-68)
5. Epilogue (69)
“The Lord will raise up against you a nation from afar, from the end of the earth, that swoops down like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a nation of fierce appearance, that shows neither respect for the aged nor mercy for the young. They will consume the offspring of your livestock and the produce of your soil, until you are destroyed; they will leave you no grain or wine or oil, no issue of herd, no young of flock, until they have brought about your ruin. They will besiege you in each of your communities, until the great fortified walls, in which you trust, come tumbling down all over your land. They will besiege you in every community throughout the land which the Lord, your God, has given you . . .
“. . . and because of the siege and the distress to which your enemy subjects you, you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your own sons and daughters whom the Lord, your God, has given you. The most refined and fastidious man among you will begrudge his brother and his beloved wife and his surviving children, any share in the flesh of his children that he himself is using for food because nothing else is left him—such the siege and distress to which your enemy will subject you in all your communities. The most fastidious woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground, so refined and fastidious is she, will begrudge her beloved husband and her son and daughter . . .
“... the after birth that issues from her womb and the infants she brings forth because she secretly eats them for want of anything else—such the siege and distress to which your enemy will subject you in your communities.”

(28: 49-57)
Did that really happen?
Yes, I’m afraid it did.

The Babylonians attacked Jerusalem in 605, 597 and 588 B.C. The attack in 588 B.C. resulted in a 2-year siege and the collapse of the city on August 14, 586 B.C.

The prophet Jeremiah was inside the city during the siege, and the book of Lamentations is his eyewitness account. Here’s what he writes, in part:
“Look, O Lord, and pay attention: to whom have you been so ruthless? Must women eat their own offspring, the very children they have borne? Are priest and prophet to be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord? They lie on the ground in the streets, young and old alike; Both my young women and young men are cut down by the sword; You killed them on the day of your wrath. slaughtered them without pity. You summoned as to a feast day terrors on every side; On the day of the Lord’s wrath, none survived or escaped. Those I have borne and nurtured, my enemy has utterly destroyed.”

(2: 20-22)
Now, the third act:

1. Prologue (47-48)
2. Invasion and Siege (49-57)
3. Suffering (58-62)
4. Captivity and Exile (63-68)
5. Epilogue (69)
“If you are not careful to observe all the words of this law which is written in this book, and to fear this glorious and awesome name, the Lord, your God, will bring upon you and your descendants wondrous calamities, severe and constant sicknesses. He will bring back upon you all the diseases of Egypt which you dread, and they will cling to you. Even any sickness or calamity not written in this book of the law, that too the Lord will bring upon you until you are destroyed. You who were numerous as the stars of the heavens will be left few in number, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord, your God.”

(28: 58-62)
Even after the fall of Jerusalem, Israel’s suffering will continue. When God made his covenant with Abraham, he said: “Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so will your descendants be” (Genesis 15: 5). Now, they will be few in number.

How could Israel make such terrible mistakes. This makes me very sad!
The fourth act:

1. Prologue (47-48)
2. Invasion and Siege (49-57)
3. Suffering (58-62)
4. Captivity and Exile (63-68)
5. Epilogue (69)
“Just as the Lord once took delight in making you prosper and grow, so will the Lord now take delight in ruining and destroying you, and you will be plucked out of the land you are now entering to possess. The Lord will scatter you among all the peoples from one end of the earth to the other, and there you will serve other gods, of wood and stone, which you and your ancestors have not known. Among these nations you will find no rest, not even a resting place for the sole of your foot, for there the Lord will give you an anguished heart and wearied eyes and a trembling spirit. Your life will hang in suspense and you will stand in dread both day and night, never sure of your life . . .
“. . . In the morning you will say, ‘Would that it were evening!’ and in the evening you will say, ‘Would that it were morning!’ because of the dread that your heart must feel and the sight that your eyes must see. The Lord will send you back in ships to Egypt, by a route which I told you that you would never see again; and there you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer.”

(28: 63-68)
And now the concluding act five:

1. Prologue (47-48)
2. Invasion and Siege (49-57)
3. Suffering (58-62)
4. Captivity and Exile (63-68)
5. Epilogue (69)
“These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in the land of Moab, in addition to the covenant he made with them at Horeb.”

(28: 69)
The second set of curses—Deuteronomy 28: 47-69—is filled with the language of “siege warfare,” all-or-nothing, total war: an existential threat in its purest and most brutal form.

And Israel loses.

What are we to make of all this? Does God really “take delight in ruining and destroying” Israel (28: 63)?

Deuteronomy 28 is perhaps the most difficult chapter in all of Scripture to engage as enlightened, educated readers. If we dig deeply beneath the surface, however, we may see parallels that shine a light on this very dark chapter.
With the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and the subsequent Babylonian Captivity, Israel dies; but like a Phoenix, she will rise from the ashes when Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, defeats Babylon and allows the captives to return home and rebuild.

In a very important sense, the story of Israel sets a recurring pattern of life, death and rebirth that becomes a dominant theme of Scripture, a theme that Christ embodies in its final, most complete form.

And we are called to join him.

In Israel we see ourselves: a child of God who is arrogant and self-righteous—a stubborn cow. Like Israel, we too must suffer and die if we are to rise.

That is the story of redemption.
Questions for discussion and thought

1. When are the blessings and curses to be recited on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim?

2. If the Israelites obey God’s laws, statutes and ordinances, will the blessings in Deuteronomy 28 automatically result?

3. Are there other examples of “blessings & curses” like those in Deuteronomy 28?

4. Knowing the consequences of disobeying God’s commandments, why would the Israelites not obey them?

5. How do you reconcile the loving God that we see in the Gospels with the cursing God we see in Deuteronomy 28?