

Choose to Obey

March 1, 2009

Purpose: To help us consider the benefits of serving God and the consequences of turning away from God

Key Bible reference: Deuteronomy 28

Key Verse: Deuteronomy 28.2

Biblical Background: In the ancient Near East, treaties between the great kings of empires, or suzerains [SOO-zuhr-uhns], and their subject kings, or vassals, often concluded with a section of blessings and curses. The blessings would come to the vassals if they were faithful to the treaty's requirements. But if the treaty was violated, the curses would take effect. The suzerain could promise to help the vassal in time of famine or threaten the vassal with conquest and destruction. But not all the curses and blessings in the treaty would be realistically within the suzerain's power. Treaties also mention supernatural blessings and curses, such as abundant crops if the treaty obligations are met and famine or plague if the treaty is violated.

Human beings were not the only parties concerned that the treaty be honored. The gods were also summoned to witness the treaty and to insure by blessing and curse that its terms were kept. Many biblical Scholars have argued that in its final form, Deuteronomy is structured like the old suzerainty treaties of the ancient Near East, with Israel as the vassal and the Lord as the suzerain.

At the very least, it is clear the language of ancient treaties has influenced the Book of Deuteronomy. Like their counterparts at the end of such treaties, the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28 are meant to insure that the covenant between God and Israel is not broken. In Deuteronomy 28:1-14, the blessings obedience will bring are detailed.

Deuteronomy 28:1-2. If Israel is obedient, "all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you" (verse 2). The word translated "overtake" in the NRSV is mostly used in contexts of pursuit and capture by enemies. (See, for example, Exodus 15:9.) Here, however, it is not enemy but blessing that overtakes the people of Israel. The image is unusual but powerful: If the people of Israel are obedient, they will be overwhelmed with blessings!

Foremost among the promised blessings is one we have heard mentioned before, in Exodus 19:5: "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." In Deuteronomy 28:1 Moses assures faithful Israel that "the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth." But Israel's position as God's treasure, exalted above all the peoples of the earth, depends upon Israel's faithfulness and obedience.

Verses 3-6. These six poetic blessings are brief, emphatic, and very specific. The fields, flocks, and herds of Israel are blessed. Harvests will be abundant, and livestock will increase (verse 4). But not all the blessings have to do with agriculture and produce. Note that not only farm animals but people are to be blessed with increase; "the fruit of your womb" (verse 4) is blessed by God. The city dweller is blessed as well as the farmer (verse 3). The blessing in verse 5, "Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl," seems to represent a

blessing upon the individual home: Even housework is blessed by God! In summary, Deuteronomy 28:6 says, "Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out." All Israel's activities will be under God's blessing.

Verses 7-14. These verses seem to be a meditation on the specific blessings of verses 1-6. Israel's pre-eminence among the nations is spelled out in particular circumstances. The enemies of Israel will be routed in battle: "They shall come out before you one way, and flee before you seven ways" (verse 7). All the nations will see that the Israelites are chosen by God and will fear them (verse 10). Moreover, Israel will be so prosperous that the Israelites will lend to the nations (verse 12). In brief, "The LORD will make you the head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom" (verse 13).

Also stressed is the promise of fertility in the land. "The LORD will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings," Moses promises (verse 12). Remember that the Canaanites believed their god Baal to be responsible for the rains in season and for the fertility of the crops. Perhaps this is why Deuteronomy 28:14 specifically warns against "following other gods to serve them." Not only do all these blessings come from God, they come from God alone. No other power can give Israel security among the nations or prosperity at home. Israel's entire allegiance must be given to God; there can be no compromise.

Verses 15-68. A glance at the verse numbers alone shows that there are far more curses than blessings in this chapter. The emphasis on curse rather than on blessing shows the urgency of the command for obedience. Israel must not rebel, for rebellion will mean destruction and death. For this reason the consequences of disobedience are spelled out at length and with brutal vividness.

Many of these curses are the inverse of the blessings promised in verses 1-14. So Deuteronomy 28:16-19 turns Deuteronomy 28:3-6 inside out. Deuteronomy 28:25 reverses 28:7 (not Israel's enemies, but Israel itself shall go into battle as one, only to flee brokenly in seven directions). And Deuteronomy 28:44 undoes the promise of 28:12-13 (Israel shall be indebted to its neighbors; "they shall be the head and you shall be the tail"). Other nations will no longer respect and fear Israel. Instead, "You shall become an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth" (verse 25).

With bitter irony Moses warns the Israelites that if they rebel against God, the plagues of Egypt will come upon them (verses 27-29). Remember that the plagues were understood as God's warfare against Pharaoh. Should the people of Israel rebel against God, they will become God's enemies. God will battle against them with plague and famine and will withhold God's gifts of rain and fertility (verses 20-24, 38-44).

The curses go into horrible detail in describing the deprivations of war. Israel shall labor for others, who will take their livestock and produce as tribute (verses 30b-31, 33-34). Engaged couples will be separated when the women of Israel are taken by others (verse 30a). The children of Israel shall be taken away as slaves "while you look on; you will strain your eyes looking for them all day long but be powerless to do anything" (verse 32).

Deuteronomy 28:47-57 turns to conquest, the ultimate threat in ancient treaty curses. "Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything," the text says,

"therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and lack of everything" (verses 47-48).

Foreigners will come against Israel, "a nation whose language you do not understand, a grim-faced nation showing no respect to the old or favor to the young" (verses 49-50). In terrifyingly graphic language, Deuteronomy 28:52-57 describes the horrors of life under siege, when starvation will drive the Israelites to cannibalism. Curses similar to these appear in the treaties of the Assyrians, who were infamous for preserving order by state-sponsored terror.

A state that rebelled against Assyrian rule could find its cities and fields burned and its population deported to distant lands. This was the fate the Northern Kingdom met in 722 B.C. The northern capital of Samaria was destroyed, and as much of the population of the north as could be seized by the Assyrian army was deported to provinces throughout the Assyrian Empire. This is what is meant by the "lost tribes of Israel"; those people of the northern tribes exiled by the Assyrians were never heard from again.

Some of the curses in Deuteronomy 28:15-68 seem to presuppose a situation later than the reigns of Hezekiah (715 B.C.-687 B.C.), when the first written text of Deuteronomy's law code is probably to be dated, or Josiah (640 B.C.-609 B.C.), when the code was expanded into something close to our Book of Deuteronomy. The curses in Deuteronomy 28:36-37 and 28:62-68 deal with exile. To Israelites living in the period of the Babylonian exile, after 587 B.C., the covenant of Deuteronomy offered a way to make sense of Israel's history.

Why did Jerusalem fall? From the standpoint of Deuteronomy 28, the answer seemed clear: Jerusalem fell because the people were unfaithful to the Lord and had forgotten the Law. To these persons Deuteronomy 28:62-63 would have spoken with particular power: "Although once you were as numerous as the stars in heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey the LORD your God. And just as the LORD took delight in making you prosperous and numerous, so the LORD will take delight in bringing you to ruin and destruction; you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to possess."

The texts of Exodus through Deuteronomy speak of the creation of the nation Israel out of a ragged band of slaves. But this text speaks of Israel's destruction—the undoing of God's ancient promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:5). Following Jerusalem's destruction by Babylon in 587 B.C., the exiles experienced this "uncreation" firsthand.

In Deuteronomy 28:36-37 and 28:62-68, the exiles encounter this experience of being scattered "from one end of the earth to the other" (Deuteronomy 28:64). They find the despair that led many to forsake their ancient faith for "other gods, of wood and stone" (verses 37, 64) and the despair of the uncertainty of their daily lives (verse 66). Finally, they interpret their own fate in terms of that of the slaves delivered from Egypt. Their exile is a new captivity by which the Lord has returned them to bondage "by a route which I promised you would never see again" (verse 68). But the exiles have been brought so low they are not even fit for slavery. If they offer themselves now as slaves to the Egyptians, they know that this time "there will be no buyer" (verse 68).

With the Exile it seems that Israel has come full circle. Yet out of this forsakenness will come a new identity and a renewed faith for Israel, a faith expressed in the text of the Pentateuch. God who had delivered Israel from Egypt will deliver God's people once again.

Prayer: O God, help us live as your faithful people. Give us wisdom to discern the attitudes and actions that lead to a blessed community and those that lead to suffering. Help us choose your justice, mercy, and righteousness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Credits

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