



▸ *Covenant Relationship* ▸

BELIEVERS FIND GOD'S BLESSINGS THROUGH OBEDIENCE.

DEUTERONOMY 28:1-6,15-19

We've all seen it. The parent is down on one knee, talking to her child as he is about to head out for the first day of a new school year. "Now, you have your backpack? Good. Remember to do what the teacher tells you. No acting up. Don't forget to bring home any papers I need to sign. Don't lose your lunch money. And have fun!" At this point, the parent isn't telling the child anything new. He or she is reinforcing and putting a new emphasis on what the child has heard countless times.



What wise "messages" did your parents repeat to you over and over again? What impact did hearing those words have on you?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

DEUTERONOMY 27:1–28:68


Deuteronomy contains Moses’s messages to the Israelites before they entered the promised land. The first (1:1–4:49) recalled their history as they traveled from Mount Sinai to their then-current location on the Plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River and across from Jericho. His second message (5:1–26:19) reviewed the Ten Commandments and how to apply them in the promised land.

The final verses of Moses’s second message (26:16–19) serve as a summary of chapters 12–26. They remind God’s people to obey God’s commands. Doing so affirmed that the Lord was their God. Additionally, God promised to elevate His people above all other peoples. These four verses firmly connect what came before (chaps. 1–26) with what came afterward (chaps. 27–28).

Twice, verses 16–19 use the word “today,” undergirding the commitment God has for His people and His people have for Him. Ancient Near Eastern covenants and/or treaties included statements of mutual commitment. These covenants and treaties also included promised rewards for honoring the agreement and, in contrast, consequences of disobeying it. This is the emphasis of today’s text, Deuteronomy 27–28.

God instructed His people to have a ceremony once they entered Canaan. They were to celebrate their entrance into the land and seal the terms of the covenantal agreement. This ceremony was to take place on two mountains in Samaria. Mount Ebal, the northern of the two, rises to about 1,400 feet; Mount Gerizim rises to 2,850 feet. Half the tribes would gather on Mount Ebal and the others on Mount Gerizim. The people were to set up an altar on Mount Ebal and offer sacrifices to God there.

In the saddle between the two mountains is Shechem. This was the site of Jacob’s well, where, centuries later, Jesus met a Samaritan woman. Her forefathers had worshiped on “this mountain,” meaning Mount Gerizim (John 4:20).

 **As you read through Deuteronomy 27:1–28:68, underscore “today” and “this day.” How do these add a sense of importance for God’s people to make a decision or commitment?**

EXPLORE THE TEXT

FAITHFULNESS (DEUT. 28:1-6)

¹ “Now if you faithfully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all his commands I am giving you today, the LORD your God will put you far above all the nations of the earth. ² All these blessings will come and overtake you, because you obey the LORD your God: ³ You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. ⁴ Your offspring will be blessed, and your land’s produce, and the offspring of your livestock, including the young of your herds and the newborn of your flocks. ⁵ Your basket and kneading bowl will be blessed. ⁶ You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.”

VERSES 1-2

Most covenants and treaties in the ancient Near East began with a list of anticipated curses for those who violated the agreement. This chapter does the opposite; it begins on a positive note. It first states the promised rewards for honoring the covenantal agreement (vv. 1-14). The altered order certainly would have caught the attention of those listening.

Beginning his declaration with *now* indicated Moses was about to say something instructive and significant (see 4:1; 10:12). Again, he challenged the Israelites to faithfully obey and carefully follow what God had said. This had been a recurring directive throughout Moses’s speeches. With this command came a promise: God would elevate His people far above all other peoples on the earth. What a far cry from where Israel had begun.

God was reemphasizing His commands *today*. His doing so compelled His people to make a decision and a commitment.

The word “bless” occurs seven times in verses 2-6. It appears in verse 2 in noun form as *blessings*; the remaining six are verbs. The emphasis of these verses is on God blessing His people.

The root behind the Hebrew verb translated *overtake* means to reach or take hold of something or someone. It was used in the story of the Egyptian army pursuing Moses and his people as they neared the Red Sea. Scripture says, “The Egyptians—all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, his horsemen, and his army—chased after them and *caught up with* them as they camped by the sea” (Ex. 14:9, emphasis added).

One does not passively *overtake* something or someone. Determination and effort are involved. The promise was that God's blessings would actively pursue His people. With the promise, though, came a contingency. God's blessings would pursue and take hold of His people because they made it their practice to ***obey the LORD*** their ***God***.

The Lord stated one of His blessings in verse 1. God promised to place His people ***far above all the nations of the earth***. Again, this was not something the people could achieve under their own power. They had neither the resources nor training to make such an achievement. Only the power and presence of God could make that happen.

VERSES 3-6

Verses 3-6 outline a six-fold covenant blessing God promised His people. The promises are listed in short, crisp sentences; some contain only three Hebrew words. This style of declarations would have made remembering them easier. Thus, the Hebrews could easily quote these words in worship—or put them to music—as a way to recall God's promised blessings.

The term translated ***blessed*** carries the idea of being prosperous. In modern culture, we tend to think of prosperity in terms of financial resources. The Hebrew word did not have this limitation. To be *blessed* meant to have one's life filled with benefits. God is the ultimate source of all blessings (Jas. 1:17). Further, the Hebrews understood that God gave His blessing so the recipient might be a blessing. In other words, the original recipient was a conduit through which God's blessings flowed to others. Being able to bless others was a sign of living a prosperous life.

This is a far cry from the false teaching about prosperity theology that many proclaim today. Many claim that God will give people material goods and riches if they will only—fill in the blank. What God was promising the Israelites was to honor those who honor Him with proper actions and motives. God will not be mocked and cannot be manipulated. He expects those who serve Him to do so out of love and gratitude, not out of selfish greed. What God desires is a broken spirit and a humble heart (Ps. 51:17).

Fertility among flocks, fields, and families was the most important contributor to the long-term survival of a household, people, or nation. The text uses the same Hebrew word three times in this one verse to refer to fertility. The literal translation is “fruit” or “fruitfulness.” Thus, the verse declares, “Your fruit will be

blessed, your land's fruit, and the fruit of your livestock will be blessed." The picture is of abundance.

Context affected how the Hebrews heard this message. The Israelites were going into the land of Canaan. Baal and Astarte, the primary deities of the Canaanites, were known as fertility gods. Pagans worshiped them, prayed to them, and gave them offerings, believing that these so-called gods could bring an abundance of children, harvest, and cattle. Worshipers of these deities often participated in sexual activities, believing their actions would motivate the gods to bless their harvests and homes. This lure was part of the reason God repeatedly told His people to destroy every vestige and site of Canaanite worship.

What an affirmation of the Lord, the God of the Hebrews. He alone was the One who could cause families, cattle, and harvests to be fruitful. For His people, God's bounty and abundance were comprehensive. Every area of their lives would be blessed.

Preparing grain and baking bread was a wife's daily responsibility in the Jewish world. Wives would grind a bit of grain and then mix it with water, a bit of salt, and sometimes fermented dough or drink. The fermentation acted as yeast or leaven and caused the bread to rise. Women would knead the dough in a wide, shallow bowl, typically made of terracotta or wood. To make a daily supply of bread took about an hour. Although loaves could last up to four days, most wives baked them daily.

People typically used a basket to transport harvested grain and other foods from the field to the kitchen. Other times, though, people would use the basket to store and transport prepared foods, such as bread (Lev. 8:26,31; Deut. 26:2; Matt. 14:20). The promise that God would bless the **basket** and **kneading bowl** meant He would meet the families' most basic needs, including daily bread.

Verse 6 complements the promised blessing of verse 3. It emphasized that people would be blessed wherever they were—whether in the city or the country. This verse emphasizes that God's people would be blessed wherever they went. The phrase **when you come in . . . when you go out** meant moving freely for both personal and business purposes.

Once in Canaan, most of God's people lived in small villages and were farmers. Their daily tasks included tending to their fields, orchards, and vineyards. This meant they had to pass through the city gate.

Merchants would sell their wares, goods, and food in the city gate. This still occurs at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem.

Fresh fruits, vegetables, baked goods, scarves, and items of clothing are sold there even today.

Additionally, in Canaan, the Jewish elders would sit at the city gate, often on benches carved of stone. From there, they would render decisions about important matters and settle issues and disputes between people and families (see Ruth 4:1-8). Remains of these stone benches are still visible at some biblical sites, including Beersheba and Gezer.



What do these verses say about the faithfulness of God toward His people? How would these promises encourage God's people to remain faithful to Him?



How do these promised blessings differ from the prosperity theology that is commonly taught and preached today?



KEY DOCTRINE: *Man*

Only the grace of God can bring man into His holy fellowship and enable man to fulfill the creative purpose of God. (See John 1:16-17; Romans 5:20-21.)

DISOBEDIENCE (DEUT. 28:15-19)

¹⁵ **“But if you do not obey the LORD your God by carefully following all his commands and statutes I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overtake you: ¹⁶ You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. ¹⁷ Your basket and kneading bowl will be cursed. ¹⁸ Your offspring will be cursed, and your land’s produce, the young of your herds, and the newborn of your flocks. ¹⁹ You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out.”**

VERSE 15

Verse 15 begins to outline the curses the Israelites would experience if they failed to obey God's commands and statutes. The list of prescribed disasters and miseries (vv. 15-68) is longer than the list of blessings for obedience (vv. 1-14). This was common in ancient agreements. Evidently, negative reinforcement was more effective in eliciting compliance than promised future rewards.

Mirroring the pattern in the first six verses, the word "curse" occurs seven times in verses 15-19. It appears in verse 15 in noun form as **curses**; the remaining six, translated as "cursed," are verbs. The emphasis of these verses, then, is on God removing His blessing; the result would be that the *curses* would reach and take hold of the disobedient. The application of these curses reflects point by point what we read in verses 1-6.

VERSES 16-19

To be cursed *in the city* and *the country* meant the person was cursed wherever he or she was. Being opposites, and yet used together, *city* and *country* meant everywhere. This grammatical device is similar to our saying that we've searched high and low for something. That means we've searched everywhere we can imagine.

This thought of being cursed everywhere had to be horrifying. It meant that all of life's activities were cursed. It was a life of hardship and humiliation, of difficulty and deprivation. These verses outline some of those challenges.

Leviticus spoke of God bringing judgment on those who rebelled against Him. For the disobedient, God said He would break "the staff of your bread"—meaning one's supply of bread (Lev. 26:26, KJV). This verse may have been the thought behind bread being called the "staff of life." Like a staff, bread enables one to walk.

For one's **basket** and **kneading bowl** to be cursed meant that obtaining the most basic necessity of daily life was going to be a hardship. In other words, God's curses were going to hit people right where they lived.

Whereas fertility among flocks, fields, and families was a picture of abundance, God's bringing a curse on those sources would result in poverty, scarcity, and deprivation.

The curses affecting the Israelites' offspring, produce, herds, and flocks would come as diseases and drought (Deut. 28:22-24, 60-61). Many would die. God said, "Though you were as numerous as the stars of the sky, you will be left with only a few people, because you did not obey the LORD your God. Just as the LORD was glad to cause

you to prosper and to multiply you, so he will also be glad to cause you to perish and to destroy you” (vv. 62-63a).

As if that was not troubling enough, God said desperation would drive parents to do the unthinkable. As the people faced warfare and starvation, they would resort to eating their own children (vv. 53-57).

To be able to enter and exit freely meant life was good and normal and that enemies and illnesses were not impeding the people’s movement. If no one was coming or going, the city or village likely was facing a crisis, under siege, or abandoned and desolate (Zech. 7:14). That situation meant everyday life had come to a grinding halt.

The picture in the curses is of a life of misery. This, though, is not God’s desire. The purpose of the curses was to draw God’s people back to Himself. He is holy; it is His nature and His character. He calls His people to be holy and wholly devoted to Him (Lev. 20:26; Deut. 26:16; 1 Thess. 4:7; 1 Pet. 1:16). He is still calling His people to commit ourselves to Him today and all our “todays” going forward.



What do these curses say about God’s nature and character?





BIBLE SKILL: *Read and reflect on a Bible passage.*

Read Deuteronomy 28:1-6. Try to imagine a life where every aspect of it experienced God’s blessing. What would that look like in your life? How and where would God’s blessing manifest itself? Now read verses 15-19 and try to imagine life totally apart from God’s blessing. How might the thought of such an awful alternative motivate people to live faithfully by God’s commands? God wanted to see His people demonstrate their faith in Him through obedience to His commands. How does James describe that concept (Jas. 2:18)?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Believers should enjoy the blessing that comes from following God's commands.
- + Choosing to disregard God's commands leads to humiliation.

 **God blesses us so that we can be a conduit of His blessings to others. In what way do you share His blessings? Be ready to discuss with your group specific ideas about sharing those blessings with someone. What action plan can you make to be a blessing to a certain individual?**

 **This week, as you “do good deeds,” ask yourself, “Why am I doing this—to bring glory to God or myself?” What actions can you take to make sure your works come from a pure heart?**

Memorize Deuteronomy 28:9.

Prayer Needs