

The Book of Deuteronomy, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 16: Blessings and Curses of the Covenant

Deuteronomy 27:1–28:68

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson must hold a hard line against the prosperity gospel without softening God's justice. The blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 27 and 28 were covenant words to the nation of Israel under the law given through Moses. They are not a formula by which obedient Christians can guarantee earthly health, wealth, and ease, nor are afflictions in a believer's life proof of secret sin. The student must learn to read these chapters as covenant history, true and binding for Israel, fulfilled and transcended in Christ, who took the curse of the law into Himself on the cross (Galatians 3:13).

At the same time the lesson must not let the curses be explained away into nothing. The same God who blesses also judges, and the timeless truths stand: God is just, sin carries real consequences, and God means exactly what He says. A generation that hears only blessing grows careless; a generation that hears both mountains learns the fear of the Lord. The teacher should help students feel the weight of Ebal so that the grace of Calvary lands with its full force.

Beyond the doctrine, this lesson aims at the formation of the student's heart. We are being shaped to say "Amen" to God, to agree that He is right about sin, to stop taking His patience for permission, and to rest not in our own covenant-keeping but in the One who kept it perfectly and bore the curse we earned. The goal is a Christian who reveres God's holiness and treasures His mercy at once.

Question 1

Student Question:

On Mount Ebal Israel was to set up great stones, cover them with plaster, write "all the words of this law" on them, and build an altar of uncut stones for burnt offerings and peace offerings (27:1–8). What does this combination of the written law and the altar of sacrifice reveal about how God meant His people to relate to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The ceremony at Ebal joins two things our minds often keep apart: the written word of God and the blood of sacrifice. Israel was to inscribe "all the words of this law" on plastered stones so the standard would be public and permanent, and in the same place build an altar and offer burnt offerings and peace offerings (27:5–7). God's people were never meant to relate to Him by law alone or by sacrifice alone, but by both together.

The written law set the standard. It told Israel plainly what God required, leaving no one able to plead ignorance. A covenant without a clear word is no covenant at all, and God refused to leave His expectations vague. The stones at Ebal were a monument to the truth that God speaks, that His will can be known, and that His people are accountable to what He has said.

But the altar answered the obvious problem the written law raised. The moment the standard is clear, every honest heart knows it has fallen short of it. So beside the inscribed law God commanded an altar, a place of atonement and fellowship. The burnt offering spoke of full surrender and the peace offering of restored communion, ending in a shared meal where Israel “rejoiced before the Lord” (27:7). Word and altar, standard and sacrifice, stand side by side.

For us this is a quiet preview of the gospel. The law given through Moses exposed sin but could not finally take it away (Hebrews 10:1–4). The pattern of Ebal, a clear word and a bloody altar, finds its fulfillment in Christ, who is both the Word made flesh and the once-for-all sacrifice. We do not relate to God by ignoring His standard, nor by trying to keep it in our own strength, but by His Word and the blood of His Son.

Notice too that the altar stones were uncut, untouched by any iron tool (27:5–6). Israel could not improve God’s appointed way of approach with their own craftsmanship. The way to God is God’s gift, not man’s invention, and that principle still guards the heart of acceptable worship today.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God reveals a clear standard so His people are genuinely accountable
- Word and sacrifice belong together, not law alone or grace alone
- The altar anticipates atonement, fulfilled in Christ’s sacrifice
- Uncut stones teach that the way to God is His gift, not human invention
- The peace offering and shared joy show covenant fellowship, not mere fear

Discussion Prompts

- Why does a clear written standard actually serve God’s people rather than crush them?
- How do the law and the altar at Ebal foreshadow the gospel?
- What does the command to use uncut stones say about approaching God on His terms?

Question 2

Student Question:

The whole assembly was to answer “Amen” to each curse pronounced by the Levites (27:14–26). What does it do to your heart to imagine yourself saying “Amen” to God’s words about sin, agreeing out loud that He is right?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

There is something arresting about a whole nation answering “Amen” to the curses against sin (27:15–26). “Amen” means “truly, so be it, let it stand”. The people were not merely listening; they were agreeing, putting their own voice behind God’s verdict against idolatry, dishonoring parents, injustice, and immorality.

It is one thing to hear God say sin is wrong. It is another to say “Amen”, to stand before Him and confess out loud that He is right and that we deserve what He says we deserve. This is the posture of the repentant heart. It does not argue with God or make excuses; it agrees with Him. To say “Amen” to His words about sin is the first honest step toward His mercy.

Many of us would rather negotiate. We want to soften the verdict, to plead context, to compare ourselves favorably to others. But the covenant called Israel to a full-throated agreement with God’s righteousness even when the curse fell on sins they themselves might commit. There is a strange freedom in that honesty. The soul that stops defending itself is finally able to receive grace.

When we come to the Lord, confession is exactly this kind of “Amen”. We say to God that He is right and we are wrong, and in that agreement we are met not with the curse but with cleansing (1 John 1:9). The same word we say to His commands we one day say to His promises in Christ, for all the promises of God find their “Amen” in Him (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Amen means agreeing with God, not merely hearing Him
- Repentance begins by confessing that God is right about sin
- The temptation to negotiate or excuse rather than agree
- Honest agreement with God opens the heart to grace
- Our Amen to His verdict prepares us to say Amen to His promises in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What sin in your life are you still arguing with God about rather than saying “Amen”?
- How is saying “Amen” to God’s verdict different from mere guilt?
- Why is agreeing with God the doorway to receiving His mercy?

Question 3

Student Question:

The tribes were divided, six on Gerizim for blessing and six on Ebal for curse (27:11–13), and the Levites pronounced the curses for the whole nation to hear. What does this carefully staged ceremony teach us about how seriously God takes the covenant relationship?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God did not deliver the blessings and curses in a private memo. He staged a ceremony that engaged every sense: two mountains, twelve tribes divided, Levites lifting their voices, an entire nation answering back (27:11–26). The drama itself is part of the message. God takes the covenant relationship with deadly seriousness, and He wanted Israel to feel that seriousness in their bodies.

Six tribes stood on Gerizim, the mountain of blessing, and six on Ebal, the mountain of curse, with the Levites in the valley between. The geography preached. To stand on a green mountain or a barren one, to hear blessing on one side and curse on the other, was to be confronted with the two roads set before every covenant people: obedience and life, or rebellion and death.

We sometimes imagine that ritual and ceremony are empty things, that what matters is only the inward heart. But God knows we are embodied creatures who are formed by what we see, hear, and say together. The Ebal ceremony was not theater for its own sake; it was God pressing eternal truth into a people who would be tempted to forget. The covenant was not casual, and He would not let them treat it casually.

This ought to shape how we regard our own covenant relationship with God in Christ. We come to Him through a death and resurrection dramatized in baptism, and we keep covenant week by week at His table, where we proclaim His death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). God still uses tangible, communal acts to press His truth into us, and He still takes the covenant with utter seriousness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God uses vivid, communal ceremony to teach covenant seriousness
- The divided mountains dramatize the two roads of obedience and rebellion
- We are embodied creatures formed by what we see, hear, and do together
- Ritual rightly understood serves truth rather than replacing the heart
- Baptism and the Lord's Supper are God's appointed covenant acts for us

Discussion Prompts

- What does the staging of this ceremony tell you about how God views the covenant?
- How does God still use tangible acts today to press His truth into His people?
- Where are you tempted to treat your relationship with God casually?

Question 4

Student Question:

Deuteronomy 28 opens with “blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field” (28:1–6). When you read these promises of fullness and favor, what do they stir in you, and what do they tempt you to assume about how God works?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The blessings of 28:1–6 sweep over every part of life: city and field, the fruit of the womb and the fruit of the ground, basket and kneading bowl, coming in and going out. It is a portrait of a life saturated with God’s favor, and it is genuinely beautiful. There is nothing wrong with longing for such fullness; God is a generous Father who delights to give good gifts.

Yet these verses also tempt us, and we should name the temptation honestly. It is easy to read “blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field” and quietly conclude that God’s favor always shows up as a full bank account, healthy children, and an easy road. That assumption has built whole movements that promise health and wealth to anyone with enough faith, and it has broken the hearts of countless believers who suffered and were told their faith must be weak.

The honest reader feels both things at once: the beauty of God’s blessing and the danger of misreading it. These were covenant promises to national Israel under the law, tied to that nation’s obedience in that land. They are not a contract guaranteeing earthly prosperity to Christians. Job suffered though righteous, Paul carried a thorn, and our Lord Himself had nowhere to lay His head.

So we receive the beauty of these verses while resisting the lie. God is good and He gives good gifts, but in Christ our deepest blessings are spiritual and eternal, “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:3). We learn to want His favor more than His stuff, and to trust His goodness even when the field is bare.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The beauty of God’s generosity is real and worth desiring
- The temptation to equate God’s favor with material wealth
- The prosperity gospel misreads covenant promises as a personal contract
- Faithful believers suffer; suffering is not proof of weak faith
- In Christ our deepest blessings are spiritual and eternal

Discussion Prompts

- How do you tell the difference between rightly desiring God’s gifts and idolizing them?
- Have you ever assumed hardship meant God was displeased with you? What does this passage correct?
- What would it look like to want God’s favor more than His gifts?

Question 5

Student Question:

The blessings of 28:1–14 are tied directly to “if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God”. What does this if teach us about the nature of Israel’s covenant with God, and how does it differ from the unconditional promises God makes in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The hinge of the whole chapter is one small word: “if”. “If you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God” (28:1), then the blessings; “if you will not obey” (28:15), then the curses. The covenant at Sinai, renewed here in Moab, was conditional. Israel’s enjoyment of the blessings depended on their covenant faithfulness, and their disobedience would bring the curses.

This conditional structure tells us something true about how God deals with a covenant people. He is not indifferent to obedience. Sin and faithfulness are not the same to Him, and He had bound Himself to bless obedience and judge rebellion. To pretend the “if” is not there is to misread the entire covenant.

Yet we must read this alongside the larger story. Israel could never keep the covenant perfectly, and the whole history that follows proves it. The law’s conditional promises were never meant to be Israel’s final hope; they were meant to drive a people to their knees, to teach them they could not earn their standing, and to prepare them for a better covenant founded on better promises (Hebrews 8:6–13).

In Christ the unconditional grace of God meets us. Our salvation rests not on our flawless covenant-keeping but on His. This does not make obedience optional, for we are still called to faithful, persevering trust (Hebrews 3:14). But the ground we stand on is the finished work of Christ, who kept the covenant we could not, so that the blessing comes to us as a gift of grace rather than a wage we have earned (Deuteronomy 9:4–6; Romans 4:4–5).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The covenant at Sinai was conditional, hinging on Israel’s obedience
- God is not indifferent to obedience and rebellion
- Israel could never keep the covenant perfectly; the law exposed this
- The conditional law prepared the way for a better covenant in Christ
- Grace does not make obedience optional but rests our standing on Christ’s work

Discussion Prompts

- Why was it important that Israel’s covenant was conditional?
- How does the gospel rest our standing on Christ’s obedience rather than our own?
- If salvation is by grace, why does faithful obedience still matter?

Question 6

Student Question:

The curses of 28:15–68 are longer and heavier than the blessings, descending into disease, drought, defeat, siege, and exile. Why do you think God spelled out the consequences of disobedience in such painful, unsparing detail, and how should that sober you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The curses of 28:15–68 are nearly four times longer than the blessings, and they grow more terrible as they go: disease and fever, drought and blight, defeat before enemies, plunder, madness, and finally siege and exile. God does not flinch from describing where covenant rebellion leads. He spells it out because love that warns is truer than a love that only flatters.

There is mercy in the very length of the warning. A God who did not care would have said nothing, let Israel stumble into ruin, and watched in silence. Instead He laid the whole grim road out in advance, sparing no detail, precisely so that His people might turn before they walked it. The unsparing honesty of these verses is the honesty of a father who would rather frighten his child away from the cliff than let him fall.

We live in a time that prefers its religion gentle and its warnings muted. But a faith that never speaks of consequences leaves people defenseless against sin's slow destruction. Sin really does lead somewhere, and it is never anywhere good. Deuteronomy 28 refuses to let us pretend otherwise, and in refusing it does us a severe kindness.

This should sober us about our own small compromises. The horrors of verse 53 did not begin as cannibalism; they began as the first quiet step away from God, repeated over years until a nation was unrecognizable. Great ruin grows from small unrepented sins. The warning is not meant to terrorize the faithful but to wake the careless, and we do well to let it do its work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The curses are longer and heavier, and God spells them out fully
- Warning is an act of love, not cruelty
- A faith with no warnings leaves people defenseless against sin
- Great ruin grows from small, repeated, unrepented compromises
- The warning is meant to wake the careless, not terrorize the faithful

Discussion Prompts

- Why is a love that warns truer than a love that only flatters?
- What small compromise might be the first quiet step down a road you do not want to walk?
- How can we recover a healthy, biblical seriousness about the consequences of sin?

Question 7

Student Question:

Throughout chapter 28 the same God is the source of both the blessing and the curse (28:8, 28:20). What does it reveal about God's character that His justice and His goodness are not two different Gods but one?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

One of the most important truths in this chapter is easy to miss: the God who blesses in 28:8 is the same God who curses in 28:20. "The Lord will command the blessing on you" and "the Lord will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration". His goodness and His justice are not two competing Gods but one God whose character is perfectly whole.

We are tempted to split God in half, to imagine a kind God of blessing and a harsh God of judgment and to choose the one we like. But Scripture will not allow it. The very holiness that makes God good is the holiness that makes Him just. If He were indifferent to evil He would not be good at all; a God who shrugged at injustice and cruelty would be unworthy of worship.

This means God's justice is not the opposite of His love but an expression of it. He loves what is good, and therefore He opposes what destroys it. The same heart that delights to bless the obedient cannot smile upon the rebellion that ruins His people and His world. To see both mountains is to see one God more clearly, not two Gods in conflict.

The cross is where this unity blazes brightest. There God's justice against sin and His love for sinners meet in the same moment, for Christ bore the curse so that the blessing might come (Galatians 3:13–14). We never have to choose between a just God and a loving God. At Calvary He is fully both, and we are saved by the union of His justice and His mercy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The same God is the source of both blessing and curse
- Splitting God into a kind God and a harsh God is a false reading
- God's justice is an expression of His goodness, not its opposite
- A God indifferent to evil could not be truly good
- The cross unites God's justice and His love perfectly

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it dangerous to choose only the parts of God's character we prefer?
- How is God's justice actually an expression of His love?
- How does the cross show us God fully just and fully loving at once?

Question 8

Student Question:

The siege curses of 28:49–57 describe a horror so deep that parents would turn on their own children. When you face the genuine ugliness of where sin leads a people, what does it do to the way you think about your own small compromises?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The siege curses of 28:49–57 are among the darkest verses in the Bible. A nation comes from far away, “swift as the eagle flies”, and shuts Israel up in their cities until the famine grows so desperate that gentle and refined people turn on their own children. It is meant to horrify. God lets us see the full, hideous end of the road so that we will not romanticize where sin goes.

When we face this kind of ugliness honestly, our own compromises look different. We tend to grade our sins on a curve, telling ourselves that our little resentments and our quiet dishonesties are nothing like this. But every one of these horrors began somewhere small. No nation chooses cannibalism on day one. It chooses a thousand small unrepented steps away from God, and one day finds itself somewhere it never meant to go.

Sin is a liar about its destination. It always promises that this small indulgence will cost nothing, that we can stop whenever we like, that we are still in control. Deuteronomy 28 strips the lie bare. The first compromise and the final horror are on the same road, separated only by time and repetition. That is a truth worth letting sink deep.

The point is not to wallow in fear but to take sin seriously enough to flee it now, while it is small. The good news is that we are not left to our own willpower on that road. In Christ there is grace to repent today, to turn at the first step rather than the last, and the Spirit’s help to put sin to death (Romans 8:13). The horror of Ebal is meant to send us running, not into despair, but into the arms of the Savior who bore the curse.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The siege curses show the hideous final destination of unchecked sin
- We tend to grade our own sins on a curve
- Every great ruin began with small, repeated compromises
- Sin lies about where it is taking us
- The remedy is to flee sin now by grace, not to despair

Discussion Prompts

- Why do we so easily minimize our “small” sins?
- How does seeing where sin ultimately leads change the way you treat the first step?
- How does the gospel keep this sober warning from driving us to despair?

Question 9

Student Question:

These blessings and curses were covenant words spoken to national Israel under the law given through Moses, not a guarantee that obedient Christians will be healthy and wealthy. Galatians 3:13 says Christ “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us”. How do the two mountains of Deuteronomy point us to the cross, and what timeless truths about God survive into the gospel even though the old covenant is fulfilled?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here we reach the heart of the lesson and the place where it must be handled with the greatest care. Deuteronomy 27 and 28 set two mountains before us, blessing and curse, and the honest reader cannot escape the question they raise: do these chapters mean that obedient Christians are guaranteed health and wealth, and that suffering believers must be hiding some secret sin? The answer of the New Testament is a clear and merciful no. The prosperity gospel takes covenant words spoken to a particular nation, under a particular covenant, in a particular land, and twists them into a personal contract God never made with us. We must reject that error firmly, because it slanders God and crushes the suffering faithful.

These blessings and curses were given to national Israel under the law that came through Moses. They were covenant-historical promises and warnings about that nation’s life in that land, and the books that follow show them coming true: blessing under faithful kings, curse and finally exile under rebellion. To read them as a formula by which any believer can secure earthly prosperity is to ignore the whole shape of the covenant. Christians are not under the Mosaic covenant (Colossians 2:14–17; Hebrews 8:13), and the New Testament everywhere prepares us not for guaranteed ease but for tribulation, in which God is still good (John 16:33; Romans 8:35–39).

Yet the curse does not simply disappear; it is borne. This is the staggering center of the gospel. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Galatians 3:13). On the cross the Lord Jesus, who never once broke the covenant and deserved only blessing, took the entire weight of Ebal into His own body. He stood on the curse-mountain in our place so that the blessing of Abraham, the deepest blessing, might come to us (Galatians 3:14). The two mountains of Deuteronomy meet at Calvary, where the curse falls on the only innocent One and the blessing flows out to the guilty.

This means the timeless truths of these chapters survive the passing of the old covenant, transformed and deepened. God is still just; sin still carries real consequences; God still means exactly what He says. None of that is softened by grace. What changes is that the curse we earned has been carried by Another, and the blessing we could never deserve has been secured for us in Him. The believer who suffers is not under God’s curse, for there is now no condemnation for those in Christ (Romans 8:1); the believer is being conformed to the Savior who suffered before He was glorified.

So we hold these chapters with both hands. We refuse the lie that obedience buys earthly comfort, and we refuse the opposite lie that God no longer cares about sin. We let Ebal teach us the fear of the Lord and Gerizim teach us His generosity, and then we lift our eyes to the cross, where justice and mercy embraced. The deepest blessing was never a full barn or a healthy body; it was and is fellowship with God, secured forever by the One who bore our curse. That blessing no famine can touch and no enemy can plunder.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The prosperity gospel misreads covenant words as a personal wealth contract
- The blessings and curses were covenant-historical, given to national Israel under the law
- Christians are not under the Mosaic covenant (Colossians 2:14–17)
- Christ bore the curse of the law in our place (Galatians 3:13)
- Suffering is not proof of God's curse on a believer (Romans 8:1)
- Timeless truths remain: God is just, sin has consequences, God means what He says
- The deepest blessing is fellowship with God, secured at the cross

Discussion Prompts

- How does Galatians 3:13 reshape the way you read both mountains?
- What is wrong, both biblically and pastorally, with the prosperity gospel's reading of these chapters?
- What is the deepest blessing Christ has secured for you, and why can nothing take it away?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over both mountains, the blessing and the curse, the Amens and the warnings, name one specific way the Lord Jesus is using this passage to form you, to make you take both His goodness and His justice more seriously.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

We have stood in the valley between the mountains and heard it all: the inscribed law, the altar, the Amens, the blessings of city and field, and the long descent of the curses into exile. Now the question turns inward. What is the Lord Jesus doing in you through this passage?

For some, the work will be a renewed seriousness about sin, an end to taking God's patience as permission. For others, it will be freedom from the prosperity lie, a heart that stops measuring God's love by the size of its comforts. For still others, it will be a fresh wonder at the cross, where the One who deserved only Gerizim chose Ebal for our sake.

Whatever the specific work, let it be specific. Name one mountain you most needed to stand on today. Name one way you will say "Amen" to God this week, agreeing with Him about

something you have been arguing about. Let the God who means what He says press one true thing deep into your life, and let it draw you nearer to the Savior who bore your curse and secured your blessing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Letting the passage do specific, personal work rather than general nodding
- Renewed seriousness about sin and God's justice
- Freedom from measuring God's love by comfort
- Fresh wonder at the cross where Christ bore the curse
- Saying a concrete "Amen" to God this week

Discussion Prompts

- Which mountain did you most need to stand on in this lesson, and why?
- What is one specific "Amen" you will say to God this week?
- How is gratitude for the cross changing the way you face both blessing and hardship?