COVENANT UNDERSTANDING

Once again, the covenant structure gives the purpose for Deuteronomy 28 and the covenant curses. Taken out of context, the curses seem antithetical to God’s grace and character of mercy. But, throughout this week, we will consider multiple reasons that the curses are actually at the center of His grace and love!

First of all, people living in the ancient near East (those lands surrounding and including Israel), would expect curses in a covenant or treaty. For instance, in Assyrian and Hittite treaties, the curses are often much worse than here in Deuteronomy. While these sound harsh to us today, it was simply a way of encouraging loyalty in relationship at that time.

In addition, unlike most other ancient treaties, the one that God created starts with the blessings before the curses in Deuteronomy 28. God does not want to bring the curses on the people, rather He wants to bless them. This is the whole message and theme of Deuteronomy. However, the people had a choice between the two ways. God desired them to be happy and joyful and blessed, but the people often chose the way of the curses because of their stubbornness and rebellion.

Yet, even the curses are redemptive. God did not bring all of them at once but over time, seeking to bring the people back to Him through a reminder of the covenant and their commitment to Him. The prophets also used this strategy to inspire the people to return to God, warning them about the worsening curses to come if they did not repent of their evil ways.
Write out Deuteronomy 28:1–24, 47–51 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Deuteronomy 28:1, 2, 15. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
ALL ABOUT THE HEART

The covenant curses were ideally intended to come on the enemies of God and His people. Indeed, this is what happens when the people are faithful to God and trust in His salvation. And the final punishments on the enemies of God at the end of time in Revelation originate from the covenant curses. Conversely, the blessings were meant to draw people to God. As others witnessed how healthy, happy, and prosperous God’s people were, they would also desire to join Israel and worship Yahweh. This did happen in many cases, including the Egyptians and Canaanites who became part of Israel.

The covenant curses are all about the heart. When the people make the choice to turn after other gods, their hearts are lifted up and God cannot bless them in their rebellious state, so the curses come as a result. Verse 47 states directly that “because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness of heart,” the curses will come. The heart is the source of following God as well as of rebellion against God. Most of the curses were also not fatal, indicating that God desired a change of heart more than punishment.

The curses were actually a reverse of the blessings, rather than being random capricious punishments. This highlights that the people had a choice between one or the other. In addition, most of the curses were natural disasters or other nations that God allowed to come against the people, and not so much direct punishments from God. Although God takes responsibility for most things in Scripture, this has more to do with Him being the Creator and Ruler of the universe. God is not deterministic, but He gives to each one what they choose. He desires to bless everyone, while Satan desires to destroy everyone. So, when God removes His blessings, Satan gladly steps in to bring natural disasters and evil people to destroy God’s people, and then blames God for it. Job is another excellent example of this, even though he was innocent.

It is likely some of the Israelites were innocent too, even though the curses came on the nation as they turned away from God as a whole. There are innocent casualties in war, even in the great controversy, but this does not mean that those few true followers of God will receive the second death. In the end, God will bring vengeance and make everything right.
**PROSPERITY GOSPEL?**

While it might appear that Deuteronomy 28 supports a prosperity gospel, the covenant structure makes clear that this is not the case. God longs to bless all His faithful people, and the curses definitely come as a result of disobedience. However, many of the curses are tied to the natural consequences of sin. Thus, it is usually not that God ordains such punishment, but that those who choose sin often bring it on themselves. It is similar to the blessings; God’s laws are intended to bring health and peace, so when they are followed, the natural consequences are often positive.

However, the curses are also connected to the time that Israel spent in the wilderness, indicating that the people understood them as connected to their times of rebellion in the past. If there are no consequences for wrongdoing to encourage people to come back to God, as sinners we will go on sinning rather than realizing we are going down the wrong path. The curses are also similar to many of the plagues in Egypt, and Deuteronomy 28 even specifically mentions the plagues as one of the curses (v. 21). God was also seeking to bring the Egyptians to repentance, and many of them did end up joining Israel.

Moses carefully connects some of the curses also to what Job experiences as an innocent sufferer when Satan attacks him in the cosmic conflict with God. This makes clear that not all suffering is a punishment or part of the curses. Sometimes it does not make sense to us why we suffer. Job wrestled with God, and he did not understand until the end that it was bringing him a much bigger picture of the great controversy, and that it was Satan bringing the evil upon him, not God.

As humans viewing the world through our limited perspective, we feel that because God is all powerful, He should be able to stop suffering and pain from coming to His faithful people. But it is not that simple. Suffering can come from many sources: sin, our choices, natural disasters, evil people, Satan; or it can simply be part of the great controversy that draws us closer to God and makes us long even more for heaven. It is not always possible to know the reasons for our suffering, but we can trust God through it, and know that He longs to bless us, and will do so ultimately for eternity in heaven if we stay true to Him.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Galatians 3:5–14
Isaiah 53:3–11
Deuteronomy 29:14–19
Deuteronomy 9:6–26
Deuteronomy 17:14–20
Job 1:6–22
Deuteronomy 31:10–13

What other verses come to mind in connection with Deuteronomy 28?
JESUS TAKES THE CURSES FOR YOU!

This is the most exciting part of the covenant curses! People often shy away from them because they seem so antithetical to Jesus and the gospel, but that is a complete misunderstanding of the covenant. God wants to bless us most of all, and that is why the blessings come first. God wants to save and bless us so much that He is willing to spend lots of time in sending warnings to us when we are going the wrong way. These warnings often take the form of some of the curses, as we see through the books of Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. However, the full-blown curses are God’s last resort, and He only turns to them when the nation is totally given over to evil, and the smaller curses do not work anymore. And yet, even when He sends Israel into exile, He saves a remnant. Deuteronomy 30 reminds the people that God will bring them back from the exile, and that this ultimate curse was also meant for redemption. All the prophets point to the inevitability of the exile if the people continue in their sin and rebellion, but also that God always has a plan to bring them back to Him and back to their land.

In addition, when God brings the covenant lawsuit charges (basically a covenant, but showing where the people broke it, and that the curses will come as a result) against the people, God provides a way of escape for any individual who chooses to follow Him instead of the sinful nation. Micah 7 is one example of this, where God will plead the case of any who turn to Him, and longs to redeem them. There is always hope! And ultimately that hope is in Jesus Himself, who takes the curses on Himself, instead of placing them on us who deserve them. Isaiah 1 paints the picture of the sinful nation of Israel, who are feeling the effects of some of the curses already, and warns them that if they do not turn back to God, their path will lead to more curses and ultimately death. But God wants to save them, and make their sins as white as snow (Isa. 1:16–18). And Isaiah 53 shows how God will do this, by voluntarily taking the same curses from Isaiah 1 on Himself as the Suffering Servant and dying for our sins. God wants to redeem us, and is willing to die for us to do so. This should bring our hearts back to gladness and joy as we contemplate this very center of the gospel found in the covenant curses. The final curses in Revelation do not have to come on anyone, when we choose to accept Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins. Hallelujah!

Meditate on Deuteronomy 28:1–24, 47–51 again and look for where Jesus is.

How can you praise Jesus today for taking the curses for you?

What is He saying to you through these texts?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

Prayer: How do you respond to seeing Jesus in this way?

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THE LAW REPEATED

“After the public rehearsal of the law, Moses completed the work of writing all the laws, the statutes, and the judgments which God had given him, and all the regulations concerning the sacrificial system. The book containing these was placed in charge of the proper officers, and was for safe keeping deposited in the side of the ark. Still the great leader was filled with fear that the people would depart from God. In a most sublime and thrilling address he set before them the blessings that would be theirs on condition of obedience, and the curses that would follow upon transgression. . . . “By the Spirit of Inspiration, looking far down the ages, Moses pictured the terrible scenes of Israel’s final overthrow as a nation, and the destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of Rome: ‘The Lord shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand; a nation of fierce countenance, which shall not regard the person of the old, nor show favor to the young.’ ” (White, Patriarchs and Prophets, 466, 467.)

The Blessings and Curses

“All had the privilege of seeing for themselves the conditions of the covenant under which they were to hold possession of Canaan. All were to signify their acceptance of the terms of the covenant and give their assent to the blessings or curses for its observance or neglect. The law was not only written upon the memorial stones, but was read by Joshua himself in the hearing of all Israel. It had not been many weeks since Moses gave the whole book of Deuteronomy in discourses to the people, yet now Joshua read the law again.” (White, 503.)

“Behold Your God”

“Have you, reader, chosen your own way? Have you wandered far from God? Have you sought to feast upon the fruits of transgression, only to find them turn to ashes upon your lips? And now, your life plans thwarted and your hopes dead, do you sit alone and desolate? That voice which has long been speaking to your heart, but to which you would not listen, comes to you distinct and clear, ‘Arise ye, and depart; for this is not your rest: because it is polluted, it shall destroy you, even with a sore destruction.’ Micah 2:10. Return to your Father’s house. He invites you, saying, ‘Return unto Me; for I have redeemed thee.’ ‘Come unto Me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.’ Isaiah 44:22; 55:3.

“Do not listen to the enemy’s suggestion to stay away from Christ until you have made yourself better, until you are good enough to come to God. If you wait until then you will never come. When Satan points to your filthy garments, repeat the promise of the Saviour, ‘Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.’ John 6:37. Tell the enemy that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin. Make the prayer of David your own: ‘Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.’ Psalm 51:7.” (Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1917), 319, 320.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How have you seen God bring blessings to your life despite your sin and rebellion against Him?

Where have you seen consequences of your sins in your own life?

What are some of the reasons that you have experienced suffering in the past?

How has God used difficult times in your life to draw you back to Him?

Have you had a time when you have had to choose between God’s way and running away from God?

In what areas/ways have you struggled to give God your whole heart?

In what way can you make the sacrifice of Jesus in taking your curses on Himself, more real to your heart this week?

In what ways can you share the good news about Christ in the covenant curses with someone this week?