

Exegetical Notes, Deuteronomy 27:1-26

“The Ceremony at Ebal”

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Deuteronomy 27:1-26

Verses 1-8

Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: “Keep all these commands that I give you today. ² When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the LORD your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. ³ Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you. ⁴ And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today, and coat them with plaster. ⁵ Build there an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. Do not use any iron tool on them. ⁶ Build the altar of the LORD your God with fieldstones and offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God. ⁷ Sacrifice fellowship offerings there, eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the LORD your God. ⁸ And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up.”

- There are two specific commandments given to Israel. First, they are to obey the law that Moses received from God. Second, upon entering the promised land, they are to set a monument on Mt. Ebal that will remind them to obey the law. This is important because the law of God is regarded as an act of God’s grace given to guide God’s people to blessing. It is not a negative or prohibitive thing. It is the embodiment of love which leads to an ethic that brings blessing.
- The monument is to be made of large stones which have been plastered, covered with white plaster. The people are to write the words of the law on these stones. An altar is to be built before them of undressed stone. Fellowship offerings are to be sacrificed on this altar on the day the people enter the land. The people are to eat the sacrifices together with gladness as a thank you to God for the direction he provided them through the law.

Verses 9-10

Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, “Be silent, Israel, and listen! You have now become the people of the LORD your God. ¹⁰ Obey the LORD your God and follow his commands and decrees that I give you today.”

- Israel had formed a covenant with the Lord. The Hebrews were now his people. He would bless them, if they obeyed him. Blessing was based on obedience.

Verses 11-12

On the same day Moses commanded the people:

¹² When you have crossed the Jordan, these tribes shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. ¹³ And these tribes shall stand on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali.

- On the day Israel entered the land, the twelve tribes of Israel were divided into two groups, six tribes in each group. One group stood on Mt. Ebal and the other group on Mt. Gerizim. The group on Mt. Ebal would pronounce curses and the one on Mt. Gerizim would pronounce blessing.
- The act was a pictorial representation of the basic reality. Obedience brought blessing. Disobedience brought suffering and/or curses.
- Mt. Ebal became known as the mount of cursing and symbolized life without obedience to God’s law. Mt. Gerizim became known as the mount of blessing and symbolized a life lived in obedience to the law of God.

Verses 14-26

The Levites shall recite to all the people of Israel in a loud voice:

¹⁵ “Cursed is anyone who makes an idol—a thing detestable to the LORD, the work of skilled hands—and sets it up in secret.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

¹⁶ “Cursed is anyone who dishonors their father or mother.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

¹⁷ “Cursed is anyone who moves their neighbor’s boundary stone.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

¹⁸ “Cursed is anyone who leads the blind astray on the road.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

¹⁹ “Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow.”

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²⁰ "Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his father's wife, for he dishonors his father's bed."

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²¹ "Cursed is anyone who has sexual relations with any animal."

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²² "Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother."

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²³ "Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his mother-in-law."

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²⁴ "Cursed is anyone who kills their neighbor secretly."

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²⁵ "Cursed is anyone who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person."

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

²⁶ "Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out."

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

- The Levites speak. As the priests they have the responsibility of interceding for the people before God and of declaring the word of the Lord to the people. First, they are charged to utter 12 curses that will fall on the people for specific violations of the law.
- After each curse the people are required to say "Amen." This is the word which indicates that they have understood what was said and agree with it.
- Each of these violations of the law involves a secret sin. They are things which are done in private and of which the community is unaware. Since they are not known publicly, there is no public retribution for them. However, even secret sins are not hidden from God.
- Curse number 1 deals with worshipping an idol in secret. This act is cursed because it will not lead to blessing.
- Curse number 2 deals with dishonoring parents. While this may not be seen by the community, it still blocks blessing.
- Curse number 3 deals with moving boundary stones. Even if the mover of the stone gets away with the act, the act is cursed and denies blessing.
- Curse number 4 deals with a person who deliberately leads a blind person into a walk or into a pit. This might be regarded as a cruel practical joke. But God does not find it funny. It will not bring blessing to the one who does it.

- Curse number 5 deals with someone who cheats a person who is not a Hebrew, an orphan, or a widow. They may get away with the crime, but God will withhold his blessing from those who do such a thing.
- Curse number 6 deals with a man who sleeps with his father's wife. This woman is not his natural mother but another woman to whom his father is married. This act will not bring good to him who does it.
- Curse number 7 deals with having sex with an animal. It is forbidden and denies blessing.
- Curse number 8 deals with a person who sleeps with his sister or step-sister. It is forbidden. The act will not bring blessing to him who does it.
- Curse number 9 deals with a man who sleeps with his mother-in-law. It is forbidden. The act will not bring blessing to him who does it.
- Curse number 10 deals with a man who secretly kills his neighbor. Even though the truth may never be known, the act is forbidden and will not bring blessing to him who does it.
- Curse number 11 deals with a person who accepts a bribe which results in the death of an innocent man. This is regarded as murder. The act will not bring blessing to the one who took the bribe.
- Curse number 12 is a general curse upon anyone who agrees to keep the law of God but secretly does not. On the surface, this person may appear to be righteous and holy. However, the truth is known to God. Obedience is more than lip service. Those who do not obey God will not find blessing.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Ceremony at Ebal*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)