

CHAPTER 27

Moses having very largely and fully set before the people their duty, both to God and one another, in general and in particular instances, — having shown them plainly what is good, and what the law requires of them, — and having in the close of the foregoing chapter laid them under the obligation both of the command and the covenant, he comes in this chapter to prescribe outward means,

I. For the helping of their memories, that they might not forget the law as a strange thing. They must write all the words of this law upon stones (v. 1-10).

II. For the moving of their affections, that they might not be indifferent to the law as a light thing. When they came into Canaan, the blessings and curses which were the sanctions of the law, were to be solemnly pronounced in the hearing of all Israel, who were to say Amen to them (v. 11-26). And if such a solemnity as this would not make a deep impression upon them, and affect them with the great things of God's law, nothing would.

DEUTERONOMY 27:1-10

THE EXHIBITION OF THE LAW

Here is,

I. A general charge to the people to keep God's commandments; for in vain did they know them, unless they would do them. This is pressed upon them,

1. With all authority. *Moses with the elders of Israel*, the rulers of each tribe (v. 1), and again, *Moses and the priests the Levites* (v. 9); so that the charge is given by Moses who was king in Jeshurun, and by their lords, both spiritual and temporal, in concurrence with him. Lest they should think that it was Moses only, an old and dying man, that made such ado about religion, or the priests and Levites only, whose trade it was to attend religion and who had their maintenance out of it, the elders of Israel,

whom God had placed in honour and power over them, and who were men of business in the world and likely to be so long so when Moses was gone, *they* commanded their people to *keep God's law*. Moses, having put some of his honour upon them, joins them in commission with himself, in giving this charge, as Paul sometimes in his epistles joins with himself Silvanus and Timotheus. Note, All that have any interest in others, or power over them, should use it for the support and furtherance of religion among them. Though the supreme power of a nation provide ever so good laws for this purpose, if inferior magistrates in their places, and ministers in theirs, and masters of families in theirs, do not execute their offices, it will all be to little effect.

2. With all importunity. They press it upon them with the utmost earnestness (v. 9, 10): *Take heed and hearken, O Israel*. It is a thing that requires and deserves the highest degree of caution and attention. They tell them of their privilege and honour: “*This day thou hast become the people of the Lord thy God*, the Lord having avouched thee to be his own, and being now about to put thee in possession of Canaan which he had long promised as *thy God* (^{<017>}Genesis 17:7, 8), and which if he had failed to do in due time, he would have been ashamed to be called thy God, ^{<016>}Hebrews 11:16. Now thou art more than ever his people, therefore *obey his voice*.” Privileges should be improved as engagements to duty. Should not a people be ruled by their God?

II. A particular direction to them with great solemnity to register *the words of this law*, as soon as they came into Canaan. It was to be done but once, and at their entrance into the land of promise, in token of their taking possession of it under the several provisos and conditions contained in this law. There was a solemn ratification of the covenant between God and Israel at Mount Sinai, when an altar was erected, with twelve pillars, and the book of the covenant was produced, ^{<020>}Exodus 24:4. That which is here appointed is a somewhat similar solemnity.

1. They must set up a monument on which they must *write the words of this law*.

(1.) The monument itself was to be very mean, only rough unhewn stone plastered over; not polished marble or alabaster, nor brass tables, but common plaster upon stone, v. 2. The command is repeated (v. 4), and orders are given that it be written, not very finely, to be admired by the

curious, but very plainly, that he who runs may read it, ^{<312>}Habakkuk 2:2. The word of God needs not to be set off by the art of man, nor embellished with the *enticing words of man's wisdom*. But,

(2.) The inscription was to be very great: *All the words of this law*, v. 3, and again, v. 8. Some understand it only of the covenant between God and Israel, mentioned ^{<637>}Deuteronomy 26:17, 18. Let this help be set up for a witness, like that memorial of the covenant between Laban and Jacob, which was nothing but a heap of stones thrown hastily together, upon which they did eat together in token of friendship (^{<134>}Genesis 31:46, 47), and that stone which Joshua set up, ^{<623>}Joshua 24:26. Others think that the curses of the covenant in this chapter were written upon this monument, the rather because it was set up in Mount Ebal, v. 4. Others think that the whole book of Deuteronomy was written upon this monument, or at least the statutes and judgments from Deuteronomy 12 to the end of Deuteronomy 26. And it is not improbable that the heap might be so large as, taking in all the sides of it, to contain so copious an inscription, unless we will suppose (as some do) that the ten commandments only were here written, as an authentic copy of the close rolls which were laid up in the ark. They must write this when they had gone into Canaan, and yet Moses says (v. 3), “*Write it that thou mayest go in,*” that is, “that thou mayest go in with comfort, and assurance of success and settlement, otherwise it were well for thee not to go in at all. Write it as the conditions of thy entry, and own that thou comest in upon these terms and no other: since Canaan is given by promise, it must be held by obedience.”

2. They must also set up an altar. By the words of the law which were written upon the plaster, God *spoke to them*; by the altar, and the sacrifices offered upon it, they spoke to God; and thus was communion kept up between them and God. The word and prayer must go together. Though they might not, of their own heads, set up any altar besides that at the tabernacle, yet, but the appointment of God, they might upon a special occasion. Elijah built a temporary altar of twelve unhewn stones, similar to this, when he brought Israel back to the covenant which was now made, ^{<189>}1 Kings 18:31, 32. Now,

(1.) This altar must be made of such stones as they found ready upon the field, not newly cut out of the rock, much less squared artificially: *Thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them*, v. 5. Christ, our altar, is a *stone cut out of the mountain without hands* (^{<213>}Daniel 2:34, 35), and therefore

refused by the builders, as having no form or comeliness, but accepted of God the Father, and made the head of the corner.

(2.) Burnt-offerings and peace-offerings must be offered upon this altar (v. 6,7), that by them they might give glory to God and obtain favour. Where the law was written, an altar was set up close by it, to signify that we could not look with any comfort upon the law, being conscious to ourselves of the violation of it, if it were not for the great sacrifice by which atonement is made for sin; and the altar was set up on Mount Ebal, the mount on which those tribes stood that said *Amen* to the curses, to intimate that through Christ we are *redeemed from the curse of the law*. In the Old Testament the words of the law are written, with the curse annexed, which would fill us with horror and amazement if we had not in the New Testament (which is bound up with it) an altar erected close by it, which gives us everlasting consolation.

(3.) They must eat there, and *rejoice before the Lord their God*, v. 7. This signified,

[1.] The consent they gave to the covenant; for the parties to a covenant ratified the covenant by feasting together. They were partakers of the altar, which was God's table, as his servants and tenants, and such they acknowledged themselves, and, being put in possession of this good land, bound themselves to pay the rent and to do the services reserved by the royal grant.

[2.] The comfort they took in the covenant; they had reason to rejoice in the law, when they had an altar, a remedial law, so near it. It was a great favour to them, and a token for good, that God *gave them his statutes*; and that they were owned as the people of God, and the *children of the promise*, was what they had reason to rejoice in, though, when this solemnity was to be performed, they were not put in full possession of Canaan; but God has *spoken in his holiness*, and then *I will rejoice, Gilead is mine, Manasseh is mine*; all my own.

DEUTERONOMY 27:11-26

THE CURSES FROM EBAL

When the law was written, to be *seen and read by all men*, the sanctions of it were to be published, which, to complete the solemnity of their covenanting with God, they were deliberately to declare their approbation of. This they were before directed to do (⁶¹²Deuteronomy 11:29, 30), and therefore the appointment here begins somewhat abruptly, v. 12. There were, it seems, in Canaan, that part of it which afterwards fell to the lot of Ephraim (Joshua's tribe), two mountains that lay near together, with a valley between, one called *Gerizim* and the other *Ebal*. On the sides of these two mountains, which faced one another, all the tribes were to be drawn up, six on one side and six on the other, so that in the valley, at the foot of each mountain, they came pretty near together, so near as that the priests standing betwixt them might be heard by those that were next them on both sides; then when silence was proclaimed, and attention commanded, one of the priests, or perhaps more at some distance from each other, pronounced with a loud voice one of the curses here following, and all the people that stood on the side and foot of Mount Ebal (those that stood further off taking the signal from those that stood nearer and within hearing) said *Amen*; then the contrary blessing was pronounced, "Blessed is he that doth not so or so," and then those that stood on the side, and at the foot, of Mount Gerizim, said *Amen*. This could not but affect them very much with the blessings and curses, the promises and threatenings, of the law, and not only acquaint all the people with them, but teach them to apply them to themselves.

I. Something is to be observed, in general, concerning this solemnity, which was to be done, but once and not repeated, but would be talked of to posterity,.

1. God appointed which tribes should stand upon Mount Gerizim and which on Mount Ebal (v. 12, 13), to prevent the disputes that might have arisen if they had been left to dispose of themselves. The six tribes that were appointed for blessing were all the children of the free women, for to such the promise belongs, ⁴⁰⁶Galatians 4:31. Levi is here put among the rest, to teach ministers to apply to themselves the blessing and curse which they preach to others, and by faith to set their own *Amen* to it.

2. Of those tribes that were to say *Amen* to the blessings it is said, *They stood to bless the people*, but of the other, *They stood to curse*, not mentioning the people, as loth to suppose that any of this people whom God had taken for his own should lay themselves under the curse. Or, perhaps, the different mode of expression intimates that there was to be but one blessing pronounced in general upon the people of Israel, as a happy people, and that should ever be so, *if they were obedient*; and to this blessing the tribes on Mount Gerizim were to say *Amen* — “Happy art thou, O Israel, and mayest thou ever be so;” but then the curses come in as exceptions from the general rule, and we know *exceptio firmat regulam* — *the exception confirms the rule*. Israel is a blessed people, but, if there be any particular persons even among them that do such and such things as are mentioned, let them know that they have no part nor lot in the matter, but are under a curse. This shows how ready God is to bestow the blessing; if any fall under the curse, they may thank themselves, they bring it upon their own heads.

3. The Levites or priests, such of them as were appointed for that purpose, were to pronounce the curses as well as the blessings. They were ordained to bless (⁵⁰⁰⁸Deuteronomy 10:8), the priests did it daily, (⁰⁴²³Numbers 6:23. But they *must separate between the precious and the vile*; they must not give that blessing promiscuously, but must declare it to whom it did not belong, lest those who had no right to it themselves should think to share in it by being in the crowd. Note, Ministers must preach the terrors of the law as well as the comforts of the gospel; must not only allure people to their duty with the promises of a blessing, but awe them to it with the threatenings of a curse.

4. The curses are here expressed, but not the blessings; for as many as were under the law were under the curse, but it was a honour reserved for Christ to bless us, and so to do that for us which *the law could not do, in that it was weak*. In Christ's sermon upon the mount, which was the true Mount Gerizim, we have blessings only, (⁴¹⁸⁸Matthew 5:3, etc.

5. To each of the curses the people were to say *Amen*. It is easy to understand the meaning of *Amen* to the blessings. The Jews have a saying to encourage people to say *Amen* to the public prayers, *Whosoever answereth Amen, after him that blesseth, he is as he that blesseth*. But how could they say *Amen* to the curses?

(1.) It was a profession of their faith in the truth of them, that these and the like curses were not bug-bears to frighten children and fools, but the real declarations of the wrath of God against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, not one *iota* of which shall fall to the ground.

(2.) It was an acknowledgment of the equity of these curses; when they said *Amen*, they did in effect say, not only, *It is certain it shall be so*, but, *It is just it should be so*. Those who do such things deserve to fall and lie under the curse.

(3.) It was such an imprecation upon themselves as strongly obliged them to have nothing to do with those evil practices upon which the curse is here entailed. “Let God’s wrath fall upon us if ever we do such things.” We read of those that entered into a curse (and with us that is the usual form of a solemn oath) to *walk in God’s law* ¹⁴¹⁹ Nehemiah 10:29. Nay, the Jews say (as the learned bishop Patrick quotes them), “All the people, by saying this *Amen*, became bound for one another, that they would observe God’s laws, by which every man was obliged, as far as he could, to prevent his neighbour from breaking these laws, and to reprove those that had offended, lest they should bear sin and the curse for them.”

II. Let us now observe what are the particular sins against which the curses are here denounced.

1. Sins against the second commandment. This flaming sword is set to keep that commandment first, v. 15. Those are here cursed, not only that worship images, but that make them or keep them, if they be such (or like such) as idolaters used in the service of their gods. Whether it be a graven image or a molten image, it comes all to one, *it is an abomination to the Lord*, even though it be not set up in public, but in a secret place, — though it be not actually worshipped, nor is it said to be designed for worship, but reserved there with respect and a constant temptation. He that does this may perhaps escape punishment from men, but he cannot escape the curse of God.

2. Against the fifth commandment, v. 16. The contempt of parents is a sin so heinous that it is put next to the contempt of God himself. If a man abused his parents, either in word or deed, he fell under the sentence of the magistrate, and must be *put to death*, ¹²¹⁵ Exodus 21:15, 17. But to set light by them in his heart was a thing which the magistrate could not take cognizance of, and therefore it is here laid under the curse of God, who

knows the heart. Those are cursed children that carry themselves scornfully and insolently towards their parents.

3. Against the eighth commandment. The curse of God is here fastened,

(1.) Upon an unjust neighbour that *removes the land-marks*, v. 17. See ^{<594>}Deuteronomy 19:14. Upon an unjust counsellor, who, when his advice is asked, maliciously directs his friend to that which he knows will be to his prejudice, which is *making the blind to wander out of the way*, under pretence of directing him in the way, than which nothing can be either more barbarous or more treacherous, v. 18. Those that seduce others from the way of God's commandments, and entice them to sin, bring this curse upon themselves, which our Saviour has explained, ^{<454>}Matthew 15:14, *The blind lead the blind, and both shall fall into the ditch.*

(3.) Upon an unjust judge, that *perverteth the judgment of the stranger, fatherless, and widow*, whom he should protect and vindicate, v. 19. These are supposed to be poor and friendless (nothing to be got by doing them a kindness, nor any thing lost by disobliging them), and therefore judges may be tempted to side with their adversaries against right and equity; but cursed are such judges.

4. Against the seventh commandment. Incest is a cursed sin, with a *sister, a father's wife, or a mother-in-law*, v. 20, 22, 23. These crimes not only exposed men to the sword of the magistrate (^{<611>}Leviticus 20:11), but, which is more dreadful, to the wrath of God; bestiality likewise, v. 21.

5. Against the sixth commandment. Two of the worst kinds of murder are here specified: —

(1.) Murder unseen, when a man does not set upon his neighbour as a fair adversary, giving him an opportunity to defend himself, but *smites him secretly* (v. 24), as by poison or otherwise, when he sees not who hurts him. See ^{<908>}Psalms 10:8, 9. Though such secret murders may go undiscovered and unpunished, yet the curse of God will follow them.

(2.) Murder under colour of law, which is the greatest affront to God, for it makes an ordinance of his to patronise the worst of villains, and the greatest wrong to our neighbour, for it ruins his honour as well as his life: cursed therefore is he that will be hired, or bribed, to accuse, or to convict, or to condemn, and so *to slay, an innocent person*, v. 25. See ^{<915>}Psalms 15:5.

6. The solemnity concludes with a general curse upon him *that confirmeth not*, or, as it might be read, that *performeth not, all the words of this law to do them*, v. 26. By our obedience to the law we set our seal to it, and so confirm it, as by our disobedience we do what lies in us to disannul it, ~~ABD~~ Psalm 119:126. The apostle, following all the ancient versions, reads it, *Cursed is every one that continues not*, ~~ABD~~ Galatians 3:10. Lest those who were guilty of other sins, not mentioned in this commination, should think themselves safe from the curse, this last reaches all; not only those who do the evil which the law forbids, but those also who omit the good which the law requires: to this we must all say *Amen*, owning ourselves under the curse, justly to have deserved it, and that we must certainly have perished for ever under it, if Christ had not *redeemed us from the curse of the law, by being made a curse for us*.