

SESSION TWENTY – ONE

THE FUTURE OF THE COVENANT NATION

Deuteronomy 27:1—34:12

I. INTRODUCTION

The Abrahamic covenant carried the provision that YHWH would bless the nation. However, the nation was learning that the blessings were contingent upon obedience. Therefore, the nation needed to know how they were to obey YHWH to get the blessings, and the Law told them what to do. Deut 4:44—26:19 was a further clarification of the Law, instructing them in covenant lifestyle. Now the expectations of YHWH have been set before them, and the nation is called upon to make a choice. The new generation is called upon to renew the covenant with YHWH before going into the land. However, they are fully warned about what lies ahead. There will be both blessings and curses, and each succeeding generation will be responsible and held accountable for keeping the covenant. Although the certainty of failure by future generations is inevitable, restoration is possible . . . there is hope.

II. STRUCTURE

There are two main units to this section. The first is 27:1—30:20 involving the ratification of the covenant and a call for commitment to the covenant. The second is 31:1—34:12 which primarily deals with the final events of the life of Moses, the theocratic administrator of the nation since the exodus. These acts and events provide for the continuity of the covenant.

- A. Ratification and Commitment to the Covenant (27:1—30:20)
 - 1. Ratification Ceremony in Canaan (27:1-26)
 - 2. Declaration of Blessings and Curses (28:1—29:1)
 - 3. The Opportunity of Response (29:2—30:20)
 - a. Call to Covenant Oath and Warning of Rebellion (29:2-29)
 - b. Restoration and Obedience to the Covenant (30:1-20)
- B. Covenant Continuity Upon Moses' Death (31:1—34:12)
 - 1. Carrying on of the Covenant (31:1-30)
 - 2. Song of Moses for Israel's Wayward Future (32:1-47)
 - 3. The Blessing of Moses and His Death (32:48—34:12)

III. RATIFICATION AND COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT (27:1—30:20)

A. Ratification Ceremony in Canaan (27:1-26)

The previous section detailing the specific expectation for the unique people of YHWH, although not necessarily exhaustive, did provide a clear-cut picture of the demands placed upon a people who would be God's unique treasure among all the nations of the world. As an evidence of their awareness of what they were being asked to commit themselves to in obedience, the nation was instructed to carry out a covenant renewal ceremony once they had established themselves in the land of promise. As substantiation that they were taking seriously this covenant, they were to pronounce blessings and curses from the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim. This ceremony along with the altar they had to build would stand as a testimony to

the people of the obligations they were assuming. Clearly, they were accountable for their faithfulness in keeping the covenant.

Between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim lay the city of Shechem (east of modern Nablus), about 32 miles (51 km) north of Jerusalem. Abraham had built his first altar to YHWH in this location (Gen 12:4-9), and from there had made proclamation in the name of YHWH. This had been the site from which YHWH indicated that this was the land that He was going to give to Abraham's descendants. Now the generation under Joshua would make proclamation concerning their covenant with YHWH in this same area. In a parallel manner, they would construct memorial stones and an altar at Mt. Ebal. Thus, the ceremony was a fitting memorial to God's faithfulness. What He had promised to Abraham, now He was being faithful to give to the nation.

A further part of the ceremony would involve the division of the people into two groups, half of whom would be placed on Mt. Gerizim to proclaim blessing and the other half of whom would be placed on Mt. Ebal to proclaim curses. The ceremony brought out the strong dichotomy between obedience with blessing and disobedience with cursing. The people were to be one or the other; God was not interested in any "half-way" obedience.

B. Declaration of Blessings and Curses (28:1—29:1)

A long listing of the blessings and curses would provide a basis for the nation to understand the Lord's actions with her at any moment in history. As the nation listened, Moses carefully described to them the nature of the blessings and curses. There would be blessings for obedience (28:1-14) and curses for disobedience (28:15—29:1). The principle was simple: "blessings are conditioned on obedience!" This would be the principle by which God would deal with the redeemed people when they were in the land. This chapter is very important, especially when we come to the prophetic books. The details described in Deut 28 are reflective of whether or not the nation is under discipline. One prominent example would be the blessing of rain (28:12); for the nation to experience drought would reflect God's displeasure with them. The blessing of rain and harvest, security from enemies, and freedom from sickness could all be theirs if they obeyed.

On the other hand, curses would be progressive, and could even culminate in foreign invasion and exile . . . going into captivity (and hence removal from the land of promise). The attending circumstances would bring the nation to its knees and crush their spirit. This is reflected in 28:34, "*And you shall be driven mad by the sight of what you see.*" Compare Deut 28:52-57 with 2 Kgs 6:24-31 and Lam 2:20; 4:10. Just as the LORD had brought them into the land, He could take them out of the land in discipline. They would be attacked (49-51), besieged (52-57), and finally scattered among Gentile nations (36-37,41,64). Deut 28:64 should be noticed, as this verse looks to an exile that is much more extensive than the exile in Babylon. "*The LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth . . .*" This is the situation the Jews are in today. They are scattered and they are under discipline, but that does not mean the Abrahamic covenant with God is broken.

These curses are described in 28:46 as a "sign" upon the nation (recall the signs used to substantiate God's command to Pharaoh). The signs were to remind the nation that they had not been obedient. As the signs went on, they would be indicative of Israel's resistance and a reminder of their obligation. The invading nations would be a key disciplining agent (28:47-48). A pattern would be established like this:

sin . . . invasion . . . repentance . . . deliverer raised up

This pattern became very prominent in the period of the judges. The people during this time saw the invasions as a sign against them. During the united kingdom there was peace and

victory because of relative obedience. During the divided kingdom, the northern kingdom failed to heed the signs and went into exile (722 BC). Eventually the southern kingdom went into exile in 586 BC. There was an extension for the southern kingdom because of the reforming kings. With the book of Daniel (written during the Babylonian captivity), we discover that the nation would have to submit to "the times of the Gentiles," a period to last from the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC until the reign of the Messiah. Thus the signs of Deut 28 were played out in Israel's history and were given to turn the nation back again (cf. 28:58-59).

Deut 29:1 alerts the reader that the covenant being made in the plains of Moab is not identical to the covenant at Sinai. The covenant elaborated in Deuteronomy is "*besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb.*" They are similar in many respects, although the latter Deuteronomic covenant has the advantage of history and experiences. Some premillennial teachers (e.g., J. D. Pentecost) view Deut 28–30 as the "Palestinian Covenant" because of the stress on the land. They would take this to be an unconditional covenant distinct from the Mosaic covenant, and which enlarges and amplifies the land promises of the Abrahamic covenant. Personally, I would prefer to view Deuteronomy as a renewal of the Mosaic covenant with the new generation in which are many promises related to the land. But the covenant is not limited to chapters 28–30 nor does it exclusively concern the land. However, it does assure us that Israel has a future in the land (though for a repentant future generation).

C. The Opportunity of Response (29:2—30:20)

The previous chapters had carefully delineated the covenant which Israel was being asked to renew and enter into. The nature of obedience, the expectations of obedience, and the accountability of obedience had all been carefully considered. Now the nation was being challenged to respond: to renew the covenant and continue in obedience. A reminder was given that the choice to renew the covenant was a part of the ongoing divine program instituted with Abraham (29:13). However, the nation was duly warned that the ultimate discipline of invasion and exile would fall upon a future disobedient generation, although restoration and regathering would still be possible.

1. Call to Covenant Oath and Warning of Rebellion (29:1-29)

Deut 29:4 marks a key thought for the theology of God's program with Israel: "*Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear.*" Israel had the advantage of being able to draw upon the experience of deliverance from Egypt (note vv 5-9) as well as the experiences of the wilderness, yet something was still vitally lacking. They did not yet truly perceive God's work or realize their need. Before the nation could fully submit in obedience to YHWH and thereby gain the blessings, YHWH would need to bring about an inner transformation with them. They needed a circumcised heart! This can only come from YHWH (it must be given to them), and Israel will never have the proper relationship with YHWH until He does this supernatural work. This provision will be given to the nation through the New Covenant (Jer 31:31ff.).

In this present age, believers in Christ are participating in some of the blessings of the New Covenant (e.g., the complete forgiveness of sins). However, Israel *as a nation* has yet to enter into the New Covenant (cf. Rom 11:27). Deut 30:6 looks forward to Israel receiving a "circumcised heart," an event which finds its fulfillment when the New Covenant is established with Israel in conjunction with the Second Coming of Christ. Then Israel will be regathered to the land of promise and given a heart to know the LORD. This is in preparation for the millennial rule of Christ on earth from Jerusalem.

Between the time of Moses and the time when Israel would be brought into the New Covenant and given a "circumcised heart," the nation would have to experience God's

discipline for her disobedience. Mild discipline would come upon numerous generations (in proportion to their disobedience), but eventually the disobedience would climax in one particular generation that would experience the fullness of the curses. As a result, that generation would become a lesson to all nations:

"And all the nations shall say, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this land? Why this great outburst of anger?' Then men shall say, 'Because they forsook the covenant of the LORD . . .'" (Deut 29:24-25).

Whatever happens with Israel, we can be assured that her circumstances will never be accidental. They will always be providential! The curses on the land will be in proportion to Israel's disobedience to the covenant she had made with YHWH.

2. Restoration and Obedience to the Covenant (30:1-20)

Chapter 29 anticipated that Israel would surely fall away and receive the curses that God warned her of. Exile and captivity would come, because eventually the nation would turn away from YHWH in disobedience. However, restoration was possible. The restoration envisioned in Deut 30:1-10 anticipates not only the return from the Babylonian exile but the ultimate restoration in the far distant future. In fact, this passage serves as a paradigm of how the LORD will deal with any generation of Israel that repents and is restored. The point is that national repentance was a pre-condition for restoration and return to the land (cf. Daniel's prayer; Dan 9:4-19).

In my master's thesis, I summed up the discussion of Israel's restoration as outlined in Deut 30:1-10:

The matter of Israel's restoration is given extended treatment in the Old Testament, arising primarily from Deuteronomy 28–30. This passage appears to have become the basis for much later prophetic material, particularly the use of the terms "repent" (שׁוּב) and "restore your fortunes" (שׁוּב שְׁבוּרָה). This latter phrase is descriptive of Israel's restoration:

The earliest usage of שׁוּב שְׁבוּרָה is in Deuteronomy 30:3, where it is explained in full by the details which follow (30:3-9). The usage of the phrase in the prophets indicates that, when used of Israel, it became a technical term for the eschatological restoration of the nation: the national redemption (cf. Hos. 6:11; Joel 4:1; Jer. 29:14; 30:3,18; 37:7,11).

Deuteronomy 30:1ff. forms the basis of Israel's restoration in which several key elements are involved: (1) dispersion among the Gentiles (30:1); (2) national repentance - "return to the LORD your God" (30:2); (3) regathering of the nation to the land (30:3); (4) effecting of the New Covenant with Israel—a circumcised heart to love the LORD (30:6); (5) retaliation upon persecuting nations (30:7); and (6) prosperity upon Israel. Verse 10 reiterated the essential condition—"if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul." Thus, Israel's national repentance is a precondition for her redemption. Furthermore, the regathering of Israel from all the nations will follow the national repentance.¹

The summation of the message of the book is presented in 30:19-20: choose life in order that you may live! This was the avenue to the outworking of the Abrahamic covenant.

¹J. Paul Tanner, "The Function of Zechariah 13 Within the Prophet's Final Oracle," (ThM thesis, Dallas Seminary, 1981), 37.

IV. CONCLUSION OF MOSES' LEADERSHIP (31:1—33:29)

The Pentateuch closes with the death of Moses. Although the nation must renew the covenant, possess the land and live in it many days, Moses could not continue on with the nation in their future. God would only let him glimpse the promised land from a distance: "*Then the LORD said to him, 'This is the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there'*" (34:4). Nevertheless, the covenant must continue and the nation advance in God's plan. Therefore, these chapters make provision for the continuity of the covenant and leadership for the nation. Joshua is raised up to take over where Moses left off.

V. EPILOGUE (34:1-12)

The blessed leadership of Moses during this crucial period of the nation's existence called for a tribute upon his death. Hence, his death is aptly noted with the fitting appraisal: "*Since then no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face*" (34:10).

A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

Take a moment to meditate upon Deut 31:6: "*Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.*" As you go out to serve the LORD and follow His will, you can count on Him. He will not leave you alone, but He will be there with you. With that promise, we can face any challenge. We do not have to be the slaves of fear, for He is with us.