In the late 1960s, Dr. R., who had an international reputation as a leading Jewish scholar, returned to East Germany to pursue his research in Holocaust studies. Little did he know that this visit would bring a radical change, not only in his studies, but in the whole course of his life.

For several years he had been trying to locate a certain minister who had repeatedly risked his own life to conceal Jewish refugees and help them escape from the Nazis. Now he finally had an address for the minister. As he stood on the doorstep, his heart was pounding; he wondered what he would learn from this man about the kind of faith that would produce such actions. The minister welcomed Dr. R. He had read some of his books. As they shared tea, they became acquainted and talked about some of the minister’s experiences during the war. Then the minister made a remark so startling that Dr. R. was sure he must have misunderstood the minister’s German. “Dr. R.” he said, “you know that the Holocaust was God’s will for the Jews.” “Wh... What do you mean?” stammered Dr. R. “You have read Deuteronomy 28,” the pastor replied. “You know that God promised to curse the Jewish people if they broke their covenant with him. Not only the Babylonian Captivity and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but the Holocaust was God’s carrying out those curses. If you believe the Scriptures, you have to believe what I am saying.”

Dr. R. had no immediate answer for what the minister had said, especially since this was no anti-Semite, but a man who had repeatedly risked his own life to save hundreds of Jews. The professor thought a lot over the next few months about the minister’s views. Looking back on it years later, he saw that conversation as the turning point in his life. Eventually he abandoned his faith in the God of the Bible. Today he teaches Asian Studies and considers himself to be a Buddhist.

Dr. R. gave up his faith because he could not believe in a God who would punish his people in the way that Deuteronomy 28 describes. We may not agree with the professor’s conclusion, but his story focuses our attention on the importance of what this section of Deuteronomy teaches. God has two sides to His nature: not only does He bless His people through His grace and mercy, but He also punishes His people through His wrath (see Romans 11:22).

**THE TWO MOUNTAINS (27:1-12)**

In chapter 26, the long address by Moses to the people in the plains of Moab (begun in chapter 5) comes to an end with this exhortation to renew their commitment to the Sinai covenant:

This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul. You have today declared the Lord to be your God, and that you would walk in His ways and keep
His statutes, His commandments and His ordinances, and listen to His voice. And the Lord has today declared you to be His people, a treasured possession, as He promised you, and that you should keep all His commandments; and that He shall set you high above all nations which He has made, for praise, fame, and honor; and that you shall be a consecrated people to the Lord your God, as He has spoken (26:16-19).

Chapter 27 describes Moses’ anticipation of a covenant renewal ceremony which was to take place once the people had crossed over the Jordan into the Promised Land. They were first to set up large stones, white-washed or plastered with lime to provide a background for the writing of the main provisions of the covenant. This procedure reflects Egyptian practices of the time. The stones were to be set up on Mt. Ebal, about forty miles north of Jerusalem, near the town of Shechem, which would become an important cult center in the days of Joshua. There they were also to build an altar of uncut, unworked stones and offer two types of sacrifices: burnt offerings for Yahweh, totally consumed on the altar, and peace offerings which the people would eat in a joyful celebration. Then the words of the law would be clearly engraved on the stones as a silent witness that the covenant had been renewed.

Then Moses and the Levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying, “Be silent and listen, O Israel! This day you have become a people for the Lord your God. You shall therefore obey the Lord your God, and do His commandments and His statutes which I command you today” (27:9, 10).

Next, Moses gave instructions for the tribes to take their places for the ceremony, six tribes on Mt. Gerizim for the blessings of keeping the covenant and the other six tribes on Mt. Ebal for the curses that would follow disobedience. According to the description of the actual ceremony in Joshua 8:30-35, the ark of the covenant, accompanied by the Levitical priests who carried it, was placed between the two mountains, with six tribes on either side of it in front of the respective mountains.

THE CURSES OF THE SHECHEM DODECALOG (27:15-26)

Twelve curses, often referred to as the Dodecalog, comprise a prohibition of images (15), four breaches of family or social duty (16—19), four cases of sexual sin (20—23), and two cases of murder (24, 25). A final curse was pronounced on any who did not keep the whole law (26).

As Craigie points out, it is difficult to find a single, unifying theme that would explain the choice of the particular crimes which would merit the curse. However, he suggests that secrecy (see “in secret,” vv. 15, 24) might be the theme:

That is to say, there were certain crimes committed which by their very nature might not be discovered and therefore would not be brought to trial. If secrecy is the theme, then the curses pronounced here make it clear that crime is not determined merely by its discovery and punishment; whether or not an illegal act was ever discovered, it was nevertheless a crime against God and therefore deserved the curse of God.

In Galatians 3:10-14, Paul seizes on the final curse of verse 26 to prove his point that the law cannot bring salvation:

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “The righteous man shall live by faith.” However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, “He who practices them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

THE BLESSINGS (28:1-14)

Chapter 27 relates Moses’ instructions for a covenant renewal ceremony that would take place in the near future when the people entered the Promised Land. Chapter 28 can be


2Ibid., 331.
described as a sermon by Moses on the theme of the blessings and curses connected with the covenant. His points are clear and simple: Blessings will follow obedience to the covenant stipulations, while violation of the covenant will bring curses. Oh, that the people had taken this sermon to heart!

Now it shall be, if you will diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth (28:1).

A cursory reading of this chapter would suggest that Moses was presenting a system of merit, with rewards and punishments based upon human performance or the lack thereof. Indeed, many of the Jews would later understand the Mosaic covenant in these terms. However, to accept such an interpretation is to misunderstand the context and the emphasis of this passage and of the whole Book of Deuteronomy.

The thrust of Moses’ teaching was that God’s grace had brought the people of Israel safe thus far, and grace would lead them home to the Promised Land. God took the initiative to send Moses to lead the stubborn, stiff-necked Hebrews out of Egyptian bondage. In His grace, He had tolerated the Israelites’ rebellions in the wilderness. The lavish extravagance of His grace was now shown in His promise to make these ragged, homeless descendants of slaves into the highest of the nations. God’s patience and promises were grace from first to last. His promises always precede performance. As illustrated in the great grace passage in Ephesians, salvation comes first; human obedience is a response to the gifts of God, not a condition.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:4-10).

God’s blessings covered every aspect of the life of Israel, including city life and rural life (v. 3), fertility for humans and animals (v. 4), the means of production (v. 5), and finally the whole range of human activity (v. 6). The expression “come in... and go out,” as seen in verse 6, is often used in the Old Testament to indicate a person’s ability to conduct the affairs of daily life (31:2; cf. Joshua 14:11; 1 Kings 3:7; Psalms 121:8; Isaiah 37:28).

THE CURSES (28:15—29:1)

The curse section begins with an introduction in verses 15 through 19; every blessing in verses 1 through 6 here finds its converse in a curse. Thompson suggests that the lengthy curse section may be divided into three parts: (1) the curses in verses 15 through 44, which conclude with the warning of verses 45 and 46; (2) those in verses 47 through 57, which refer to dangers from Israel’s enemies; and (3) those in verses 58 through 68, which give warning of Israel’s exile and despair.

The first thing that strikes the reader about this passage is the seemingly inordinate length of the curse section when compared with the blessing section. This is best explained by the fact that it comes near the end of Moses’ final sermon to the people before their entry into Canaan. Moses had put up with the stubborn and stiff-necked people for forty years in the wilderness. Now, as a new generation was preparing to receive the promised blessings from Yahweh, Moses took advantage of one last opportunity to emphasize to the people that blessings can only come from obedience. Disobedience will inevitably bring the terrible curses here enumerated. It was not just Israel that needed such a strong emphasis on the terrible consequences of disobeying God. As Craigie says:

When the substance of Deut. 28:15-68 is read with a knowledge of the subsequent history of Israel as a nation, the curses seem to assume an awful inevitability. And when it is recalled further that the Israelites were

3J. A. Thompson, Deuteronomy (London: Inter-Varsity, 1974), 271.
4Craigie, 341.
not an exceptional people, but reflected in their perversity the nature of sinful man, then the inevitability of the curse weighs equally on the modern reader. It is at this point that this gospel message of the New Testament casts light into the darkness evoked by the curse. The point can be illustrated with a quotation from William Blake’s poem, “The Everlasting Gospel.”

Jesus was sitting in Moses’ chair.
Their brought the trembling woman there
Moses commands she be stoned to death.
What was the sound of Jesus’s breath?
He laid his hand on Moses’ law.
The ancient heavens in silent awe,
Writ with curses from pole to pole
All away began to role.4

MOSES’ FINAL EXHORTATIONS
(29—30)
Moses summoned the people to commit themselves to a renewal of the covenant before they entered into the land of promise to claim it. According to 29:1, this covenant made in the plains of Moab was “besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb.” Forty years had passed since the people had met Yahweh at Horeb (Sinai); conditions had changed and further changes would occur as the people settled in Canaan. The provisions of the law were modified and amplified to meet these changing conditions. Only in this sense does this book fit the title given it in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, “Deuteronomy,” meaning “second Law.”

Thompson points out that these two chapters reflect the overall pattern of a Near Eastern treaty, with a review of the Lord’s past work of deliverance (2—9), a call to enter into the covenant (10—15), a warning that the curses of the covenant would fall on the disobedient (16—29), a promise of ultimate restoration based upon repentance (30:1-10), and finally a call to accept the covenant (30:11-20).5 We will look at some selected passages in order to survey the main points of Moses’ speech which have continuing significance for us today.

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law (29:29).

The Israelites were like all of us in many ways. One similarity was their desire to know more than God had revealed, especially about the future. Here Moses reminded them, and reminds us, that the things that God has revealed are sufficient for us. He also re-emphasized the responsibility to pass God’s revealed will on to future generations (see 6:6-9).

Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. . . . if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul (30:6, 10b).

It is not at all uncommon to hear someone express the idea that the difference between the old covenant and the new is that the old covenant was a religion of outward act and ritual, while the new one involves an inward religion of the heart. Indeed, many of the Jews kept the law as if it were primarily a matter of actions rather than faith; Paul pointed out their error in Romans 9:30-33.

Moses emphasized at the end of his sermon the same point that he had made at the beginning (6:4, 5): What God wants above all is His people’s love and wholehearted devotion, not just outward ritual obedience and lip service. The great Old Testament prophets would reiterate this theme and would transmit it to Jesus and the apostles. Truly to love God with all of one’s heart, soul, and might is the first and greatest commandment. However, notice that the “circumcision of the heart,” an act of God (v. 6) more than of man, was predicted for the future. Only under the new covenant, when God puts His Spirit in our hearts, are we fully enabled to carry out this greatest commandment (see Jeremiah 31:31-34).

For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?” But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it” (30:11-14).

5Thompson, 278.
Here Moses declared the law to be one of those things that had been revealed to Israel (it was not one of the secrets kept in the heavens, 29:29). The keeping of the law was something that Israel could and must do. Perhaps Moses was speaking prophetically, looking forward to the fulfillment of the law in Christ. Certainly in Romans 10:1-10, Paul adapted this passage to the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; ... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them (30:15, 19, 20).

When God’s Word is faithfully proclaimed, there will always be, either implicitly or explicitly, a call for decision. Moses put the choice in terms of the clearest possible contrast: It is a matter of life and death. Thus it always must be. The way of God is the way of life; to choose against God is to choose death. Choosing to follow God is not only choosing life; it is choosing a way of life. “For this is your life and the length of your days.”

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