

# OpenTheo

## May 27th: Deuteronomy 28 & Luke 14:25—15:10

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Blessings and curses. The cost of discipleship.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 28 1. The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you. 2. They shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways. 3. The Lord will command the blessing on you in your barns, and in all that you undertake.

4. And he will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. 5. The Lord will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and walk in his ways. 6. And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you.

7. And the Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb, and in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your ground, within the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. 8. The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens,

to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hands. 9. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow.

10. And the Lord shall make you the head, and not the tail. 11.

And you shall only go up, and not down, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them. 12. But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God, or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you, and overtake you.

13. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. 14.

Cursed shall be your basket, and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds, and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

15. The Lord will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me. 16.

The Lord will make the pestilence stick to you, until he has consumed you off the land that you are entering to take possession of it. 17. The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, and with fever, inflammation, and fiery heat, and with drought, and with blight, and with mildew.

They shall pursue you until you perish. And the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron. 18.

The Lord will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed. 19.

The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them, and flee seven ways before them. And you shall be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.

And your dead body shall be food for all the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth. And there shall be no one to frighten them away. 20.

The Lord will strike you with the boils of Egypt, and with tumours, and scabs, and itches, of which you cannot be healed. 21. The Lord will strike you with madness, and blindness, and confusion of mind.

And you shall grope at noonday as the blind grope in darkness. And you shall not prosper in your ways. And you shall be only oppressed and robbed continually.

And there shall be no one to help you. 22. You shall betroth the wife, but another man shall ravish her.

You shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but you shall not enjoy its fruits. Your ox shall be slaughtered before your eyes, but you shall not eat any of it.

Your donkey shall be seized before your face, but shall not be restored to you. Your sheep shall be given to your enemies, but there shall be no one to help you. Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and fail with longing for them all day long.

But you shall be helpless. A nation that you have not known shall eat up the fruit of your ground, and of all your labours. And you shall be only oppressed and crushed continually, so that you are driven mad by the sights that your eyes see.

The Lord will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils, of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head. The Lord will bring you and your king, whom you set over you, to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, and you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you away.

You shall carry much seed into the field, and shall gather in little, for the locusts shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worms shall eat them. You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off.

You shall father sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours, for they shall go into captivity. The cricket shall possess all your trees and the fruit of your ground. The sojourner who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower.

He shall lend to you, and you shall not lend to him. He shall be the head, and you shall be the tail. All these curses shall come upon you, and pursue you, and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you.

They shall be a sign and a wonder against you and your offspring forever. Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you.

The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation, who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young. It shall eat the offspring of your cattle and the fruit of your ground until you are destroyed. It also shall not leave you grain, wine or oil, the increase of your herds or the young of your flock, until they have caused you to perish.

They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land. They shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land, which the Lord your God has given you. And you shall eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters, whom the Lord your God has given you, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you.

The man who is the most tender and refined among you will begrudge food to his brother, to the wife he embraces, and to the last of the children whom he has left, so that he will not give to any of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating, because he has nothing else left in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you in all your towns. The most tender and refined woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground because she is so delicate and tender, will begrudge the husband she embraces, to her son and to her daughter, her afterbirth that comes out from between her feet, and her children whom she bears, because lacking everything she will eat them secretly in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you in your towns. If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the Lord your God, then the Lord will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting, and he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you.

Every sickness also and every affliction that is not recorded in the book of this law, the Lord will bring upon you until you are destroyed. Whereas you were as numerous as the stars of heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God. And as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you, and you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

And the Lord will scatter you among all peoples from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot. But the Lord will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul.

Your life shall hang in doubt before you. Night and day you shall be in dread and have no

assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, If only it were evening! And at evening you shall say, If only it were morning! Because of the dread that your heart shall feel and the sights that your eyes shall see.

And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised you you should never make again. And there you shall offer your souls for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves. But there will be no buyer.

In Deuteronomy chapter 28, Moses lays out blessings and curses before Israel. The book of Deuteronomy is shaped like a covenant document. It begins with a preamble in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 1, then a historical prologue in chapter 1 verse 6 to chapter 4 verse 49, followed by general stipulations in chapters 5 to 11, which lay out the ten commandments, followed by a reflection upon the meaning of the first commandment.

Then in chapters 12 to 26 we have specific stipulations. And now in chapters 27 to 28, blessings and curses. This will be followed by witnesses and then a concern for succession at the end.

Here blessings are followed by curses. There are four times as many curses than blessings. Some commentators suggest that this is an indication of the fact that the curse would be a far more determinative reality for Israel's future as a result of their unfaithfulness.

The juxtaposition of a way of blessing and a way of curse is found on various occasions in scripture. Perhaps we could trace the theme all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil which is associated with the threat of death and the tree of life on the other hand.

Which will they choose? Or we can think about Leviticus which has a long section devoted to blessings and curses. The book of Psalms begins with a psalm speaking of the blessing of the person who meditates upon the law. Chapter 9 of Proverbs explores the contrast between the way of wisdom and the way of folly.

Matthew chapter 5 gives us the blessings of the Beatitudes which correspond with the woes of chapter 23. Various other examples could be listed. Within the opening verses we have a list of different ways in which Israel will be blessed, a sort of formula of blessing, blessed are you, and these blessings are paralleled closely with the curses in verses 16 to 19.

The blessings here are followed by promises to Israel if it is faithful. Promises of blessings upon their relations with the nations, their fruitfulness, the fruitfulness of their land and their animals, their standing before God and their standing among the nations. And the curses which take up most of the chapter begin in verse 15.

We should immediately recognise the symmetry between verses 1 to 6 and 15 to 19.

There are two ways, one leading to life and the other to death. Edward Woods observes a book-ended pattern to verses 23 to 42.

It moves from agricultural disaster to Israel being a horror to others to incurable boils to madness and blindness to exploitation of Israel to the threat of futility and then back again, exploitation, madness and blindness, boils, Israel being a horror to others and then agricultural disaster. This is the sort of calamity that will befall Israel if they break the covenant. And at the very centre of it is the threat of futility, a threat of futility that reminds us of Deuteronomy chapter 20 verses 5 to 7 and the law for the men who would be exempt from being called up for war.

Then the officers shall speak to the people saying, Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. And is there any man who has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy its fruit. And is there any man who has betrothed the wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her.

The Lord's intention for Israel is that no Israelite experience futility. But futility will be the consequence of Israel's rebellion. If Israel turns against the Lord they will not experience the fruitful and successful life in the land that the Lord has intended for them.

Rather their lives and their work will be rendered futile and be frustrated. Much of what we read in this chapter exhibits the same sort of hyper-naturalism as we saw in the book of Exodus. We can often think in terms of naturalism, the typical functioning of nature, and super-naturalism, God miraculously intervening in the course of nature.

However at many points in the Pentateuch we see hyper-naturalism, the manifestation of the Lord's power in the functioning of nature, not as a power over it or a suspension of or intervention within it, but as a power manifested through it. Nature itself accomplishes the will of the Lord, not through a breaking or suspension of its rules, but as a demonstration that nature is the creation of the Lord and is therefore subject to him. The same hyper-naturalism is displayed in these blessings and curses.

The consequences of Israel's sin will come by active divine punishment, but they will also follow as a sort of natural consequence. Israel's life is precarious in many ways. They aren't especially powerful or numerous.

They will be in a land surrounded by many more powerful nations, a difficult land to keep hold of in certain respects. They will be dependent upon the rain for their crops and agriculture. In the wilderness the Lord showed that he would hyper-naturally provide for and protect Israel if they just depended upon him.

However if they don't trust the Lord, nature will start to threaten and turn against them

in various ways. The protective hedges that the Lord has erected around them will be removed and the Lord himself will drive them off. The comprehensive character of the Lord's blessings and curses also show the extent of his power here.

God is active in every area of Israel's reality, not just in some areas. The God of Israel does not have a limited divine portfolio. He's involved in every aspect of reality.

In verse 45 the curses are described like pursuers that will overtake Israel. They will hunt them down. There is, as there often is, a poetic justice to many of the judgments.

For instance, if they will not serve the Lord, they will serve a foreign nation. If they will not cling to the Lord, diseases will cling to them. There is a threat given of an iron yoke from a foreign captor in verse 48.

This is referred to in Jeremiah chapter 28 verse 14. For thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, I have put upon the neck of all these nations an iron yoke to serve Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and they shall serve him. For I have given to him even the beasts of the field.

And the warnings here anticipate the later Babylonian captivity that Israel will be brought into. As the chapter nears its end, there are the most horrific and chilling images of what will befall Israel, some of which are actually recorded in the histories of scripture. For instance, 2 Kings chapter 6 verses 24 to 29.

Afterward, Ben-Hadad, king of Syria, mustered his entire army and went up and besieged Samaria. And there was a great famine in Samaria as they besieged it, until a donkey's head was sold for 80 shekels of silver, and the fourth part of a cab of a dove's dung for five shekels of silver. Now as the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried out to him saying, help my lord, O king.

And he said, if the lord will not help you, how shall I help you, from the threshing floor or from the winepress? And the king asked her, what is your trouble? She answered, this woman said to me, give your son that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow. So we boiled my son and ate him. And on the next day, I said to her, give your son that we may eat him.

But she has hidden her son. This particular act is seen as the most horrific act imaginable, the sign of Israel being reduced to the lowest possible condition. The final verses of this chapter describe a wasting away of Israel, as their entire history rots away and unravels.

They will be afflicted by the diseases of Egypt. They will wither away from a countless multitude into a few scattered and fear-ridden stragglers. They will eventually be shipped back to Egypt, but won't even be desired as slaves, so much will they be despised and abhorred by the nations.

And this anti-Exodus will render them much worse off than they ever were even at the first. God is the Lord and the giver of life, and those that forsake him choose death. A question to consider.

The purpose of laws and sanctions can be educative, designed to direct us towards that which is good for us in a liberating way, rather than being designed for the purpose of restricting and punishing us. What are some of the ways in which the curses of Deuteronomy 28 could be argued to have such a purpose? Luke 14.25-15.10 Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. What king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile, it is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him, and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

So he told them this parable. What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is last, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was last.

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost. Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

At the end of Luke chapter 14, Jesus expresses the cost of discipleship in the most arresting possible terms. People must hate their own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters in order to follow him. They must hate their own life.



Indeed, if they do not do these things, they cannot be his disciples. Now Jesus is clearly not telling us literally to hate others, as if the feeling of hatred towards our family members and our own lives were essential to discipleship. That is not the case.

Rather, hatred here refers to the merciless cutting off of loyalties that would supersede our commitment to Christ and following him. Faced with the claim of nothing else can take priority. The fact that Jesus makes such claims upon people, for himself, is a sign of his authority.

No mere man could rightfully make such claims upon the loyalties of others without falling into idolatry. Disciples must take up their crosses and follow Jesus. The cross that Jesus was talking about was a symbol that had power.

When Jesus' hearers heard use this word, they would be thinking about a gruesome means of execution. A person must count the cost if he wants to be a disciple of Christ. We can often present being a disciple in the most positive of terms, suggesting that it will make people's lives wonderful.

By contrast, Jesus presents discipleship as deeply demanding and alerts us to how hard it is. We try to sell discipleship like a product, while Jesus challenges prospective disciples to demonstrate their level of commitment to him. If anyone, Jesus is in the position of the buyer in the transaction.

Seems to me we haven't really reflected half enough upon the significance of these verses when it comes to Christian evangelism. We peddle a vision of what Jesus can do for us, rather than summoning people to the costly commitment of discipleship. True discipleship requires a renunciation of all these different things that would stand in the way of Christ, family, one's own life, all your possessions.

You must lose all in order to follow Christ and ultimately to gain your life and have riches in heaven. The chapter ends with a warning. Salt gives savour.

It's a sort of solid fire, but if it loses its savour, then what use is it? Salt can't salt itself. Salt is always salt for something else. Disciples that have ceased to bring a savour to the world are of no use and they'll end up being thrown out and destroyed, trampled underfoot in the other gospel account.

Chapter 15 contains a triplet of parables. These parables need to be read together. They each develop a single theme in a different way and the contrast and the progression between them matters.

As we read the parables, it's important to keep in mind that they are addressed to the Pharisees and to the scribes. They respond to their objection that Jesus is eating with sinners. The first parable is about a shepherd.

Jesus, of course, is the good shepherd and he is addressing the false shepherds of Israel. This sort of symbolism has a background in the Old Testament. Jeremiah chapter 23 verses 1 to 4. Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord.

Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people, you have scattered my flock and have driven them away and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and I will bring them back to their fold and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

I will set shepherds over them who will care for them. They shall fear no more nor be dismayed. Neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord.

And then in Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 10 to 16. Thus says the Lord God, behold, I am against the shepherds and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves.

I will rescue my sheep from their mouths that they may not be food for them. For thus says the Lord God, behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out as a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered. So will I seek out my sheep and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and we'll bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel by the ravines and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture and on the mountain Heights of Israel shall be their grazing land.

There they shall lie down in good grazing land and on rich pasture. They shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I myself will make them lie down declares the Lord God.

I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed and I will bind up the injured and I will strengthen the weak and the fat and the strong. I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

Seems to me that the shepherd here is not necessarily God, but the ideal leader and teacher of Israel who reflects God's own character. And the parable reveals the sin of the scribes and the Pharisees. They have destroyed, scattered and fleeced the flock of Israel.

They did not seek the lost. And the finding of the lost sheep leads to a feast of celebration. The joy of which reflects the joy of heaven itself.

Jesus meals with tax collectors and sinners enact this celebration of the discovery of the last. Not only are the Pharisees and scribes failing to seek the lost sheep of Israel, they

also locked themselves out of the joyful feast of celebration. The recovery of the lost sheep might also remind us of the idea of the Lord's restoring the soul of the psalmist in Psalm 23 verse 3. The parable of the lost coin is the second parable in the cycle.

The woman has 10 coins of which she has lost one. Now the 10 coins might be her personal savings, which would be very valuable to her if she were poor. Alternatively, the 10 coins might be part of a bridal garland or dowry and she has lost one of those which would be a very serious thing to lose.

The coin would be part of the mark of her marital status. Who is the woman? It seems to me that the woman might be Israel. The implication is that the recovered lost sinners of the house of Israel are akin to the marks of Israel's status as God's bride.

I wouldn't put too much weight upon that reading but it's worth considering. The other thing to notice here is that these two parables follow Luke's common pattern of having a character in a story or figure in the narrative that is a man followed by one who's a woman. This is one of the ways that Luke expresses the extent of the gospel, that it is addressed to both men and to women.

The house imagery might also be worth reflecting upon. We've already read of a swept house in chapter 11 verse 25 in relation to the casting out of Satan. We have also already seen a number of references to lamps, chapter 11 verses 33 to 36 and chapter 12 verse 35 and there might be some allusion to the temple here.

Jesus is a true son of the bride sweeping out Satan from the house, relighting the lamp of Israel and recovering the marks of Israel's marital status by recovering lost sinners. He makes the unswept and dark house of Israel the site of a joyous feast. By contrast the scribes and the pharisees are leaving the house dark, unswept of Satan and are losing the marks of marriage.

Once again the focus is upon the celebration that follows. If there is joy and celebration in heaven how much more is it justified on earth? A question to consider. The conclusion of both these parables is an invitation to rejoice with the person who has found the last item.

Within this chapter and the chapter that precedes it the theme of invitation in the context of meals is prominent. What can we learn from reflecting upon this theme as Luke portrays it within these two chapters?