

Hearing Gods Grace: Gods Great Warning

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[0 : 00] How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart. Do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

Praise be to you, O Lord. Teach me your decrees. With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees. I will not neglect your word.

Thanks, Kirsty. So if you want to turn back there to page 204, we're going to be looking at chapters 27 and 28 with the help of Paul MacFarlane. Thanks, Paul.

Hi, everybody, and thanks for having me again. Well, Kate and myself just finished reading Deuteronomy a couple of weeks ago in our daily reading plan. And as you know yourselves, as you've been going through, it's maybe not the first book that you'd point somebody to if you wanted them to find out about the Bible.

Certainly if you wanted them to know Jesus. But since as Hebrews 1 verse 1 says, In the past, God spoke to your ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways. Then the law, which Kirsty was just reading and was referring to, given by God through the prophet Moses, as one of the chief ways in which God spoke, is definitely worth looking at.

[1 : 44] So just thought I'd say that in case there are some visitors and there are some visitors. So today we're looking at Deuteronomy 27 and 28. Now, if you haven't heard before, Deuteronomy, slightly different from the other books in the Pentateuch.

The first five books, the law, although there's a degree of overlap with the summarizing and the repetition. Deuteronomy is framed a little bit like a legal contract.

It's the covenant agreement between God, Yahweh, Jehovah, however you choose to pronounce it, the one true and living God and his people. Now, the book of Deuteronomy might be classified in the same ancient literary genre as other ancient contracts or treaties between rulers and their peoples.

Like the Hammurabi Code or their Syrian treaties, you've maybe seen the Hammurabi Stihl in some museums. I think it's in Louvre at the minute. But anyway, that's no concern.

You can't get away with saying all poetry is the same. One person wrote one poem and the rest just copied them. Think the original was Seamus Heaney. Or all biographies are the same, they're just copies of David Beckham.

[2 : 51] And you can't get away with saying that every ancient Near East treaty is the same either. Now, the section blessings and curses comes just before the end of the contract when witnesses are called.

And that comes at the end of chapter 30. And what we have here in these two chapters is basically the warning section in the rental agreement for God's land. Now, in my rental agreement with our house, we also have a similar section on blessings and curses just before you have the signatures at the end.

And if you don't keep them, you're going to get chucked out. You're going to be exiled from your property or from the landlord's property. And if you're renting, I recommend that you have a look at your terms and agreements as well, because you never know what you might be faced with.

Well, anyway, obviously it's not the same. It's not quite the same. But we are here at the end of a contract. And after the terms of proper behaviour on God's land, God warns what will happen if they do otherwise.

Now, before we read some of it, just also to say that here we have the contract blueprint. As you know, they're not actually there yet. They're just outside the promised land. And so at this point,

before they get the keys handed over, so to speak, they're presented with a contract which they will sign upon entering.

[4 : 07] And that takes place in Joshua chapter 8 and again in Joshua 24 when the covenant is renewed. And you can read about that later. That's where it's all what we read about here is all actually acted out or done.

Now, chapters 27 and 28, as Alex was saying, is quite long. It might take about 15 minutes to read it all. Otherwise, it would be good to read through and it's good to do long readings. But we're going to read through some sections of chapter 28 and summarize the rest and the best and the worst bits before hopefully coming to look at the point of it all.

So have chapter 7 open in front of you, or chapter 27, sorry. Now, I'll just summarize the first few verses. The section begins with Moses and the elders commanding the people.

They're saying, when you cross over the Jordan, when you come to enter the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey, keep all the commands that you've been given. And then Moses says, when you pass over, they're to set up these great stones, these great monuments, cover them with plaster and write the law on them.

Then there's also separately, it might not be apparent the first time you read it, but there's also separate to that, there's the building of an altar using stones from the field, just as Abraham would have done almost half a millennium ago, in the very same position, in the very same location, where God first promised him the land for his descendants.

[5 : 31] So we'll read from verse 9 to verse 12, first of all. 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.

Obey the Lord your God and follow his commands and decrees that I give you today. On the same day, Moses commanded the people, When you've crossed the Jordan, these tribes shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. And these tribes shall stand on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. And then so in Joshua, we read of these two groups of tribes, Divided at the feet of the two mountains, to the north and to the south, And then next, what we have is a list of twelve curses for specific evils, To which the people, all twelve tribes, respond by shouting, Amen. And now these twelve curses really are separate from the groupings of blessings and curses that we see in the next chapter, that come in chapter 28. So here we have curses for idolatry, dishonoring parents, envy or stealing, Malicious deceit and withholding justice, sexual immorality, and murder.

Now, in first reading, they might seem fairly random, but if you look closely, they're all interestingly within the context of secrecy, aren't they? Setting up an idol in secret, doing certain things in secret, or secret sins, or something that you might seem to otherwise get away with.

[7 : 05] It's the kind of thing that perhaps would be very hard to make a case for in court. Like, it's kind of hard for a blind man to say, That's the man that led me off the road, because obviously he can't see him.

Or the setting up an idol in secret the night before, somebody hasn't seen him. So these are in the context of secrecy. So basically, for the sneaky brute who likes to find a way around all the system and all the laws that have been given in the previous chapters, if the law from the previous chapters doesn't find you out, then you'll be cursed instead.

Twelve curses for the twelve tribes. The complete and perfect judgment of the law. Then finally in verse 26, Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.

So the intention here with these curses is that nothing is left out. The law is completed. That's the intention. So then we'll move on and look a bit more at chapter 8. In chapter 28, we have the blessings and the curses proper for the agreement.

Now rather than to supplement the law, as the previous twelve curses did in chapter 27, then chapters 28, Curses and Blessings, refer to the whole covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people in the land.

[8 : 23] Now we'll read the first 19 verses of chapter 28, and then I'll summarize the following few paragraphs and read the couple of final verses. So 20 of verse 1, let's read it. If you obey fully the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands that I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth, all the blessings will come in you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God.

You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock, the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.

You will be blessed when you come in and when you go out. The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you in one direction and flee from you in seven.

The Lord will send a blessing in your barns and in everything you put your hand to. The Lord your God will bless you in the land he has given you. The Lord will establish you as his holy people as he promised you an oath.

If you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in obedience to him, then also the peoples of earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord and they will fear you. The Lord will grant your abundant prosperity and the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground, in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you.

[9 : 42] The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty to send rain on your land and season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. The Lord will make you the head, not the tail.

If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom. Do not turn aside from any of the commands I give you today to the right or to the left, following other gods and serving them.

However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees that I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you.

You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. The fruit of your womb will be cursed and the crops of your land and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.

You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out. Verses 20 to 24, basically you'll be cursed with confusion and rebuke and everything you put your hand to. The Lord will plague you with diseases, wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat, with drought, with blight and mildew, which he will plague you until you perish.

[10 : 50] 25 and 26. You will be defeated by your enemies, fleeing from them in seven directions, and you will become a thing of terror to all the kingdoms on earth. Your carcasses will be food for all the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away.

27 to 29. The plagues of Egypt, tumors, festering sores, incurable skin diseases, madness, mental terror. You will be unsuccessful in everything you do.

Day after day, you will be oppressed and robbed with no one to rescue you. 30 to 34. You will lose your crops, the wine, your olives, to locusts and worms and diseases, your animals slaughtered, your donkey stolen, sheep given to your enemies, your own home that you build will be stolen before you get to live in it.

Your wife will be taken away before your wedding day. Your children will go into captivity, and you will wear out your eyes, watching for them day after day, powerless to lift a hand.

Nothing but cruel oppression all your days. The sights that you will see will drive you mad. You will go into exile to worship other gods of wood and stone, to a nation far away from the ends of the earth, which will have no pity.

[11 : 58] They will besiege all the cities and the land that the Lord has given you. 53 to 58. The siege will be so terrible and so awful, that even the most gentle will be selfish and unsharing in the cannibalism of the dead.

You will become a thing of terror, a byword, and an object of ridicule among the peoples where the Lord will drive you. And these curses will come on you, because you did not obey the Lord your God, and observe the commands and decrees he gave you.

The curses will be a sign, and a wonder to you, and your descendants forever. Let's read the last two verses. You who were as numerous as the stars in the sky will be left but few in number, because you did not obey the Lord your God.

Just as it pleased the Lord to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted for the land you are anything to possess. Well, let's just pray a little bit about it before we think about these verses.

Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that it is truth. And we thank you that, as we heard earlier, that, Lord, how we see you, how we keep our way pure, how we know about you is

through your word itself.

[13 : 07] And this indeed is your truth, even though it was written so many years ago. And, Father, we pray that as we look at it, try to understand it, and understand it in the context that you will teach us what you would have us to know. And, Father, if there's any thoughts in us that would be just in rebellion to kind of hearing what you would have to say, or, Father, if we find it difficult to accept, we pray that you would teach what your word says.

Also, if there's things I'm saying that's not true, that you would take those away as well. And, Father, that you would just have us learn what you'd want us to know. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, in thinking about these verses, the blessings and curses here, it might be good to look at it under three headings of things that we see about God.

But first of all, just to mention that since, as I was praying about the context, since this is a contract of blessings and curses for Israel, it doesn't directly apply to us.

That means that, it doesn't mean that we have been cursed by God if we are suffering. All suffering, I suppose, of course, comes from the original and the general curse that the whole creation falls under because of sin.

But we, as Christians, need to be very careful about declaring that some suffering in our lives or in someone else's life comes as a direct judgment and a direct curse from God because of sin.

[14 : 32] So, anyway, the first point is that God is sovereign. Now, that means, in opening, I suppose, that God is not a dictator. We tend to think of a dictator as someone who just makes rules or makes laws and enforces them.

Now, that's really just authority. There's nothing wrong with that. If you don't like that, then you've got an authority problem. But a dictator, by enforcing the law, tries to remove the option or the opportunity or the freedom to break the law.

He's into pre-crime prevention, absolute control. Now, God, on the other hand, is the king. He is the sovereign who operates like a loving father.

He allows the opportunity to sin by not removing the freedom. But, in the end, all sin and rebellion will be punished because he is sovereign. Now, when we look at the curses, we see that God declares himself not only as the owner of the land, but he declares himself as the sovereign king of the land and the sovereign king over all nature, over the whole creation.

So, let's look at the verses here. He has power over the harvest, verse 11 and 12. He has authority over the crops, the rain, verse 24. The growth of the olives and the grapes, 39 and 40.

[15 : 51] He has authority over the insects, like the locusts, 38 and 42. He has control over our health and even our mental well-being, verses 28 and 34.

He has control over fertility and childbirth, verse 4 and verse 18. Now, also as a sovereign king, he has authority over all mankind and all the nations of the earth.

Israel could go from being a people who had been rescued by God, and there's a number of verses here that refer to being rescued from Egypt. It could go from a people who had been rescued by God to a people being hunted by God, by other nations.

Verse 39. The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you do not understand. Now, I remember watching an episode of Human Planet.

It's a bit more, it's a bit better than Planet Earth, because at least it has people in it, and people aren't all evil. But I remember watching an episode of Human Planet, and it's about Mongolia, and the hunters, they each would have an eagle.

[16 : 57] And the plan was that they would keep it for a year and train it to hunt foxes. And anyway, they would have the eagle perched in their wrist, and they would ride up to a vantage point on one of the mountains.

They'd spy out the fox. Presumably the fox might see them too, but because they were so far away, the fox probably wouldn't be too concerned. But they would spy out the fox, and then they would lift the face mask off the eagle, loose its feet, and let it fly and swoop down and attack the prey.

Now, the eagle's doing the attacking, but it's the hunter that sent it. And in a similar way, God says that he has control over the nations, just like maybe the hunter might send the eagle to swoop down and a prey.

And the foreign language means that basically this eagle that's coming isn't going to pay any attention to your bargaining or your cries for mercy. So Lord is sovereign over all the affairs of this

world, over our health, over the harvest, over our produce, over the nations.

He's sovereign throughout creation in every aspect of our lives. Now, that doesn't mean, of course, as I was saying in terms of the dictator, that everything that happens is fatalistically planned and couldn't have happened any other way, but that in the end, everything will be brought under the rule of his judgment and justice as his law is brought to all.

[18:15] Now, the curses here function as a rather severe warning of what it would be like to break faith with this covenant God who is faithful to them.

God is long-suffering. He's forgiving and gracious. And so even when it comes to the time when Israel is going to be exiled because of sin, God puts it off because of his mercy.

But the sad reality is that we know from history that this is actually what happened to Israel in the end. What was in the beginning a warning comes to be actual history, the events that are played out in the course of history.

The unfruitfulness, the famine, the sieges, the destruction, the exile, they all come to pass because God is sovereign.

So we learn that God is sovereign. The second thing we want to think about is that actually God is a God of love. Now, a simple cut and paste and a word count on the computer, which isn't very difficult, will show you that there are almost five times as much material given to the curses than there are to the blessings.

[19:28] And so the knee-jerk reaction, the instinctive reaction, is to say and to wonder. Now, if God on one hand is holding out the promised land and all the blessings, then why is there the need, on the other hand, for so many nasty curses?

Is this just fear-mongering and manipulation? How can we say that God is love? Now, well, I made a joke at the start about the rental agreement, but thinking again of the illustration of a rental agreement, you have a wealthy landowner, goes into the slum.

That's not how I got my rental agreement. But the wealthy landowner goes into the slum, finds someone who is enslaved and in all sorts of trouble, takes pity on them, buys them out of their debt, deals with their problems.

After a while, it comes to the point that the wealthy landowner secures a house for them to live in. The previous tenant was due to be evicted for all sorts of illegal activity. And so he's going to be evicted.

And the landowner comes to the tenant, this new friend, and he says, you can live here free of charge. I'll give everything you need. I'll provide for you. And you can stay here for as long as you want.

[20:34] I just need you to sign a contract before I hand over the keys. Because I can't have you doing all sorts of illegal stuff and all the rest, just like the previous guy did. And I'd have to evict you and I'd have to press charges if that kind of thing happened.

Now would you say that the man in the story was loving because of all that he had done? Or was he cruel because of the conditions that he imposes? What do you think? Surely we'd say that he was loving.

How much more can we say this for God? God offers the people of Israel, the people he had brought out of Ur through Abraham, rescued out of Egypt, led through the wilderness.

He offers them a promised land flowing with milk and honey, a land of prosperity and freedom. He says elsewhere in Exodus 19, Now is that not an act of love?

Well maybe we can accept this as love, but that might bring us on to a similar question then. Is love conditional? Well we could say that an act of love in isolation might be unconditional, but to have a loving relationship, surely it has to be conditional.

[21:58] It sounds nice to say that God's love is unconditional, but the biblical reality is that when we explore it more, that it's not really. God's love is impartial, he doesn't show favouritism, but it's not unconditional.

When we think of unconditional love, what we think of, or what we might mean, is that God's love for us doesn't depend on something we have done previously. We can't ever get to the point where we can earn it, either before or after we have experienced it.

But the idea that somehow God will continue to love us in a relationship, no matter what we will do, or no matter what we can do, isn't actually all biblical.

Now can you imagine a child, we'll say a teenager, because they're easier targets, asking the parent, do you love me? Will you always love me? Will we always have a loving relationship? And the parent says, yes. And the teenager says, well, would you still love me, or would we still have a loving relationship, if I despised you and everything that you'd done for me? If I turned my back on you, and spat on the ground every time your name was mentioned?

[23 : 06] If I rid every reminder of you from my life, and hoped every day that you would die? If I took great pleasure in breaking your heart? Do you think then that we still have a loving relationship?

What do you think? Well, then you don't really love me, do you? Because if you loved me, you'd love me no matter what we do, and our relationship would always be the same. What God is saying to the Israelites, is that a matter of fact, because I have loved you so much, provided for you, cared for your needs, and that I hold in my hand before you the very end of your salvation, and entry into the promised land full of blessing, because I have loved you so much, I only expect that you be faithful, and love me for it.

And if you turn your back and curse me, in disobedience, then I will curse you, and utterly destroy you. Now we're not talking here about perfect keeping of the law.

The whole sacrificial system, and the legal system, was put in place to deal with pretty much nearly every variation of sin. What we're talking about here is covenant unfaithfulness, complete disdain, and hatred for the very relationship, like cursing a friend on the face, burning a contract, burning the contract in front of the generous landlord.

And in Jeremiah's day, that's exactly what happened actually. Jeremiah 36, right before the exile, Jeremiah writes out the words of the Lord, and sends them to Jehoiakim, the king of Judah.

[24 : 41] And as each paragraph is read, he snips off a little bit, and he throws it in the fire. God says in Jeremiah 36, I will bring in them, and in those living in Jerusalem, and the people of Judah, every disaster I pronounced against them, because they have not listened.

See, without conditional love, you can't have a relationship. You can have acts of unconditional love, but without conditions, you can't have a mutual relationship.

God is sovereign. God is love. Finally, he is our God. Now it might seem kind of funny, but the question is, I suppose, how do you go from a God who makes a covenant, with an ancient people, to be their God, their provider, their protector, the one who sustains them, and keeps them, to us today?

Now, well, the old covenant, it failed, because the relationship was between God, and the people of Israel. Jerusalem, if you think of Matthew chapter 5, Jerusalem was the city and the hill, the light to the world, which apparently could not be hidden.

But the light of God, was hidden under a bowl, because of Jerusalem's sin, because of Israel's unfaithfulness. Israel, as a nation of human beings, just like we would be, were prone to wander, and feel, and fall.

[26 : 02] It wasn't their fate, as if they had no choice. Many of the individuals, throughout the history, of Israel, followed and honoured God. But as a nation of Israel, it turned its back, on its God, and its very provider, and protector, and the one who saved them, out of Egypt.

As such, Israel, also represents, humankind as a whole. The awful curses, the sad history which followed, they're not written, so that we can pass judgment, and pass judgment, on Israel.

It's the same choice, for all mankind. Granted the highest, possible privilege, an intimate relationship, with God, provision, protection, salvation.

As human beings, we naturally choose, to take advantage, of the freedom given to us, to sin. To disobey. To turn our back, on God. The very one, who gave us life, itself.

Then our own reaction, is to blame God, for not, being a dictator. As if it was his fault, for actually allowing us, to mess up our whole lives, to begin with. See love, has conditions, and freedom.

[27 : 13] But we can't keep them. And that's why, they get the famous expression, we always hurt the ones, we love. But thankfully, all our relationships, don't have to end there, with a series of disappointments, collected hurts, broken hearts, and grudges.

That brings us back, to Hebrews 1. In the past, God spoke to our ancestors, through the prophets, at many times, and in various ways. But in these last days, he has spoken to us, through his son. Because of grace, which all comes through the cross, from the beginning of creation, right up until the very end. Because of grace, the relationship, between us and God, doesn't depend on our

human efforts.

It doesn't depend on our ability, to keep the covenant conditions, ourselves. But it hinges on the conditions, that Christ, has perfectly fulfilled. so that when we fail, and when we fall, and when we sin against God, and hurt each other, in our relationships, and the communities, that we find ourselves in, we can have forgiveness, and hope, and freedom, from all the curses, and all the punishment, that we deserve.

And we can look forward, to the promised land, that nothing, or that, you know, the promised land, which nothing can be taken, can take away from us.

[28 : 37] Because what Christ, has done for us, on the cross. Paul, after quoting from, Deuteronomy 27, verse 26, he quotes, Cursed is anyone, who does not uphold, the words of the law, in Galatians 3.10.

He goes on to say, that through Christ, we have redemption, from the curse, of the law, because he became, the curse for us.

He experienced, all the horrors, all the awful feelings, that we would expect, to experience, from these curses, in Deuteronomy 28, Christ the sovereign king, took them, and he wore them, on his head, like a crown of thorns, king of a cursed creation, king of a cursed world, so that we, could enter into, this covenant, relationship with God.

An everlasting relationship, secured by the Holy Spirit, who lives in us. And that's how we go from, this ancient treaty, with these people of Israel, to us today.

It's not dependent on us, it's dependent on Christ though. God is sovereign. God is love. He is our God. And we can know him, and have a relationship with him, through Jesus.

[30 : 02] Amen. Do you have a, closing hand, Alex? Yeah. Mm. Mm. Yes.

Yes. Mark for a dozen times, and Tom embracing, Alexander with all the righteous smashed, and the risks, and the safely wounds his father, the Lord, and the GE is perfect.