DEUTERONOMY

Chapter 27

*The Altar on Mount Ebal*

**Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: “Keep all these commands that I give you today. 2 When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the Lord your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. 3 Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you. 4 And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today, and coat them with plaster. 5 Build there an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones. Do not use any iron tool upon them. 6 Build the altar of the Lord your God with fieldstones and offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God. 7 Sacrifice fellowship offerings there, eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord your God. 8 And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up.”**

**27:1** *elders*. Since Moses would not be crossing over the Jordan, the elders, along with Joshua, would be responsible for spiritual leadership in the future. (TLSB)

**27:2–8** Setting up stones inscribed with messages to be remembered was a common practice in the ancient Near East. (CSB)

**27:2, 4** *coat them with plaster.* So that the writing inscribed on them would stand out clearly (see v. 8).(CSB)

This method of preparation and writing is well attested in the ancient world and is typically Egyptian in technique. (TLSB)

**27:3, 8** *all the words of this law.* The stipulations (see note on Ex 20:1) of the covenant that Moses’ reaffirmation contained. (CSB)

**27:4** *Mount Ebal*. North of Shechem, opposite Mount Gerizim. (TLSB)

**27:5–6** *altar* … *uncut stones*. Specially constructed of field stones to celebrate the occupation of the Promised Land and the renewal of God’s covenant with His people. Archaeologists have found cut stone altars at Dan and Beersheba, which were likely used for pagan sacrifices. In the 1980s, archaeologists excavated a site on Mount Ebal that may have contained a large altar and courtyard, which was compared to Joshua’s altar (Jsh 8:30). The interpretation of the site remains disputed. (TLSB)

**27:5** *Build … an altar of stones.* Different from the altars of the tabernacle, both in form and in use (see note on Ex 20:25). (CSB)

**27:1–8** The Lord’s command regarding Mount Ebal emphasizes the importance of God’s written Word and God’s desire that His people respond joyfully with sacrifices of praise. He encourages us to treasure His Word rather than the words of humans. Thanks be to God that He has given us the Word made flesh to save us from the word of the Law by the word of blessing in the Gospel. • Move me, Spirit of God, to sing from the heart: “How precious is the book divine, by inspiration giv’n! Bright as a lamp its teachings shine to guide our souls to heav’n. Amen.” (*LW* 332:1) (TLSB)

*Curses From Mount Ebal*

**9 Then Moses and the priests, who are Levites, said to all Israel, “Be silent, O Israel, and listen! You have now become the people of the Lord your God. 10 Obey the Lord your God and follow his commands and decrees that I give you today.” 11 On the same day Moses commanded the people: 12 When you have crossed the Jordan, these tribes shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. 13 And these tribes shall stand on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali. 14 The Levites shall recite to all the people of Israel in a loud voice: 15 “Cursed is the man who carves an image or casts an idol—a thing detestable to the Lord, the work of the craftsman’s hands—and sets it up in secret.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 16 “Cursed is the man who dishonors his father or his mother.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 17 “Cursed is the man who moves his neighbor’s boundary stone.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 18 “Cursed is the man who leads the blind astray on the road.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 19 “Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 20 “Cursed is the man who sleeps with his father’s wife, for he dishonors his father’s bed.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 21 “Cursed is the man who has sexual relations with any animal.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 22 “Cursed is the man who sleeps with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 23 “Cursed is the man who sleeps with his mother-in-law.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 24 “Cursed is the man who kills his neighbor secretly.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 25 “Cursed is the man who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!” 26 “Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.” Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”**

**27:9–10** The priests added their voices to that of Moses in admonishing all Israel to keep God’s command. (TLSB)

**27:9** *You have now become the people of the Lord*. The language of covenant renewal. (CSB)

Reference to the covenant renewal reported in 26:16–19. (TLSB)

**27:12–26** *Levites shall declare*. Since the tribe of Levi is included with those who bless the people (v 12), the curses spoken by the Levites in vv 15–26 must be distinguished from those mentioned in v 13. (TLSB)

**27:12** *these tribes shall stand on Mount Gerizim.* All six were descendants of Jacob by Leah and Rachel (see Ge 35:23–24). See 11:30 and note. (CSB)

*to bless.*No blessings appear in vv. 15–26, which consist entirely of 12 curses (see 28:15–68). Blessings, however, are listed and described in 28:1–14. (CSB)

**27:13** *these tribes shall stand on Mount Ebal.* Reuben and Zebulun were descendants of Jacob by Leah; the rest were his descendants by the maidservants Zilpah and Bilhah (see Ge 35:23, 25–26). (CSB)

**27:15–26** These specific sins largely correspond with sins more generally forbidden in the Ten Commandments. All these sins are also condemned in other OT laws. *Cursed*. God’s curse is the sole penalty imposed on those guilty of the sins described in these verses. Such a curse from God on a person or thing (such as a house; cf Zec 5:4) was understood to have destructive power. (TLSB)

**27:15** *carves an image … casts an idol.* In violation of the first commandment of the Decalogue (see note on Ex 20:1). See 4:28; 5:6–10; 31:29; Isa 40:19–20; 41:7; 44:9–20; 45:16; Jer 10:3–9; Hos 8:4–6; 13:2. (CSB)

*Amen!* Not simply approval but a solemn, formal assertion that the people accept and agree to the covenant and its curses and blessings (see vv. 16–26). (CSB)

This affirmation of agreement is equivalent to pronouncing the curse on one’s self, with one’s own mouth. (TLSB)

**27:16** See 5:16; Ex 20:12 and note. (CSB)

*dishonors his father or his mother*. Cf Ex 21:17, which mandates the death penalty for anyone who curses his parents

**27:17** See note on 19:14. (CSB)

*neighbor’s landmark*. Marking the property line. (TLSB)

**27:19** See 24:17–18 and note. (CSB)

**27:20–23** *his father’s wife* … *his sister*. Appears to refer to one’s stepmother and half sister. Mention of these sexual sins is an indication that such immorality existed in the surrounding cultures, and perhaps even in Israel. (TLSB)

**27:20** Cf. 22:30; see Lev 18:8. (CSB)

**27:21** See Ex 22:19 and note; Lev 18:23; 20:15–16. (CSB)

**27:22** See Lev 18:9. (CSB)

**27:23** See Lev 18:8. (CSB)

**27:24–25** See 5:17; Ex 20:13; 21:12; Lev 24:17, 21. (CSB)

**27:24** Such secret murder might go unpunished by authorities, but God’s curse remains. (TLSB)

**27:25** Anyone who accepts payment to commit murder, but does not carry out the crime, is still cursed. (TLSB)

**27:26** Quoted in Gal 3:10 to prove that mankind is under a curse because no one follows the law of God fully. (CSB)

*by carrying them out.* It is not enough to assert allegiance to the law; one must live according to its stipulations.

Whoever fails to keep a law is cursed. (TLSB)

**27:9–26** The old covenant promised blessings to those who kept God’s Law and curses to anyone who did not (cf Gal 3:10). To say “Amen” to God’s law is not enough. God demands perfect obedience (Jas 2:10). Israel broke the old covenant with their sins, as does everyone (cf Jer 31:31–34). But Jesus Christ is the mediator of a new covenant. His death redeems us “from the transgressions committed under the first covenant” (Heb 9:15). The remedy for sin’s curse is to believe with Luther that “this is our highest comfort, to clothe and wrap Christ this way in my sins, your sins, and the sins of the entire world” (AE 26:279). • Holy Spirit, comfort me with the sure knowledge that Christ has removed sin’s curse. Amen. (TLSB)