

DEUTERONOMY

Chapter 27

The Altar on Mount Ebal

Now Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, “Keep the whole commandment that I command you today. 2 And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. 3 And you shall write on them all the words of this law, when you cross over to enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you. 4 And when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. 5 And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. You shall wield no iron tool on them; 6 you shall build an altar to the LORD your God of uncut[a] stones. And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, 7 and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God. 8 And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly.”

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 *cover 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 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. (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 Levitical priests said to all Israel, “Keep silence and hear, O Israel: this day you have become the people of the LORD your God. **10** You shall therefore obey the voice of the LORD your God, keeping his commandments and his statutes, which I command you today.”

11 That day Moses charged the people, saying, **12** “When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. **13** And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. **14** And the Levites shall declare to all the men of Israel in a loud voice:

15 “‘Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret.’ And all the people shall answer and say, ‘Amen.’ **16** “‘Cursed be anyone who dishonors his father or his mother.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ **17** “‘Cursed be anyone who moves his neighbor's landmark.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ **18** “‘Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ **19** “‘Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ **20** “‘Cursed be anyone who lies with his father's wife, because he has uncovered his father's nakedness.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ **21** “‘Cursed be anyone who lies with any kind of animal.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ **22** “‘Cursed be anyone who lies with his sister, whether the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ **23** “‘Cursed be anyone who lies with his mother-in-law.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ **24** “‘Cursed be anyone who strikes down his neighbor in secret.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ **25** “‘Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ **26** “‘Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.’ And 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 *now 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 shall stand on Mount Gerizim.* All six were descendants of Jacob by Leah and Rachel (see Ge 35:23–24). (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 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 *makes a carved or metal image.* 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 *dishonors his father or his mother.* Cf Ex 21:17, which mandates the death penalty for anyone who curses his parents. (CSB)

27:17 *neighbor's landmark.* Marking the property line. (TLSB)

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)

27:24 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 doing them. It is not enough to assert allegiance to the law; one must live according to its stipulations. (CSB)

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)