

Deuteronomy 28:20-24

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Moses elaborates on the curses the Suzerain (Ruler) God will bring on Israel if they fail to abide by His covenantal laws. These curses are in the form of natural disasters, diseases, and agricultural failures.

This section is the first elaboration of curses God would bring on Israel if they broke His covenantal laws. It includes several forms of maledictions. The word *LORD* (Heb. "Yahweh") begins all the verses except v. 23. The repetition of the term *LORD* thus emphasizes the covenant relationship between the LORD (Yahweh, the Suzerain) and the Israelites (His vassals).

Israel had agreed to abide by the terms of the covenant expressed in Deuteronomy chapters 5-26 ([Deuteronomy 26:17](#)). This continues a script for a major ceremony that was to be carried out once Israel entered the Promised Land ([Deuteronomy 27:13](#)). This section continues the cursings that were to be stated by six tribes standing on Mount Ebal once Israel had entered the land and conquered this part of Canaan ([Deuteronomy 27:13](#)).

Moses now tells Israel, *The LORD will send upon you curses, confusion, and rebuke, in all you undertake to do* (v. 20). The word translated *curses* implies being banned from receiving some benefit. It is used in this section as an antonym or opposite for "blessing." Here, it would mean that the one(s) not obeying the covenant would be banned from receiving benefits (blessings) from the sovereign LORD. Disobedience to God's covenantal laws would result in *curses* coming to the Israelites.

Along with *curses*, Yahweh would send *confusion* upon Israel. This word (Heb. "mehūma") has the basic meaning of that which was a severe disturbance. Such a disturbance would result in panic or trouble. This was what the Suzerain (Ruler) God had planned for the Canaanite nations ([Deuteronomy 7:23](#)). In this passage, however, the word is used to describe Israel's defeat.

God would also send a *rebuke* upon Israel. This word refers to an admonition or action that expressed rejection and disapproval *in all they undertake to do*.

All these calamities would come upon Israel as punishment *until* they were *destroyed and until* they *perish quickly*. The underlying cause for Israel's judgment was *on account of the evil of their deeds, because* they had *forsaken* (Heb. "āzab," to "leave", "abandon") their Suzerain (Ruler) God. God made it clear that the Israelites would be judged because of their sins, not because He is unfair or uncaring. Israel's sinful deeds would cause their destruction.

This ceremony, in which the entire nation was to participate, would make it abundantly clear that their future path was up to them to choose. They would decide whether or not to be blessed, based upon their decision whether to follow the commands of God's law, and keep their word to obey the covenant into which they had entered with Yahweh, their LORD.

Moses also told Israel that the LORD would *make the pestilence cling* to them *until He* had *consumed* them *from the land where they were entering to possess it* (v. 21). The word for *pestilence* (Heb. "deber") is a generic term, so the precise type of disease is unknown. It is clear that it is chronic (as seen in the phrase *cling to*). It might be a disease that causes an untimely death because the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint, or LXX) translates *pestilence* as "death." In any case, it refers to a plague or some form of terrible disease (epidemic) that the Suzerain God would send upon Israel to consume them in the Promised Land.

Furthermore, Moses listed seven maledictions to explain the comprehensive nature of God's judgment on His people. The first four are *consumption, fever, and inflammation, and fiery heat* (v. 22). The term *consumption* (Heb. shahepet," used only here and [Leviticus 26:16](#)) refers to any chronic wasting disease, possibly prolonged or recurring attacks of fever. The word *fever* (Heb. "qaddaḥat," also used only here and [Leviticus 26:16](#)) is a generic term that refers to a high body temperature. The term *inflammation* (Heb. "dalleqet," used only here) means "fever-heat" and has to do with a recurring chill. The term *fiery heat* is burning fever. These four words vividly describe how the LORD will inflict His disobedient people with infections that result in very high fever resulting in their loss of health and their wasting away.

The final three maledictions are *the sword, blight, and mildew*. Some think that the word translated *sword* (Heb. "ḥereb") should rather be translated "drought" (Heb. "ḥōreb"), a shortage in the water supply. This seems to be the preferred

reading in this context. So, God threatened to strike His people with natural disasters—drought, *blight*, and *mildew*.

The term *blight* (Heb. “shiddāpōh”) refers to the effect produced by hot east winds blowing for days at a time. It can potentially dry up vegetation and destroy crops (Isaiah 37:27; Psalms 90:5-6). The term *mildew* (Heb. “yēraqōh”) can mean “paleness” or “lividness,” and refers to a disease that attacks grain, possibly damaged by the destructive east winds. The words *blight* and *mildew* used together is an idiom for describing a disaster to crops (1 Kings 8:37; 2 Chronicles 6:28; Amos 4:9; Haggai 2:17).

The effects of God’s judgment would be complete, smiting both people and plants alike. These seven afflictions would persistently *pursue* Israel *until* they *perish*.

Moses then said that *the heaven which is over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you, iron* (v. 23). This imagery of *heaven* being *bronze* meant that the cloudless sky would only contain the sun whose heat would always bear down upon them and would not allow rain clouds to form. Similarly, the statement that *the earth which is under you, iron*, meant that the *earth* would be so hard and unworkable that it would not allow seeds to be sown and not soak up any rain. The picture here is that the whole environment (sky and earth) would not be able to produce any crops. The result would be famine upon the land.

This meaning is highlighted in the last verse when it says that *the LORD will make the rain of your land powder and dust* (v. 24). That is, the only *rain* that the Suzerain God would drop on Israel would be *powder and dust*, not crop-nourishing moisture. In fact, this dusty rain *from heaven* would *come down on Israel until they were destroyed*. The proposition to Israel was quite stark, and completely up to them. Which road would they choose?

Biblical Text:

²⁰ The Lord will send upon you curses, confusion, and rebuke, in all you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and until you perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken Me. ²¹ The Lord will make the pestilence cling to you until He has consumed you from the land where you are entering to possess it. ²² The Lord will smite you with consumption and with fever and with inflammation and with fiery

heat and with the sword and with blight and with mildew, and they will pursue you until you perish. ²³ The heaven which is over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you, iron. ²⁴ The Lord will make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed.