

# Deuteronomy 28:27-37

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*The LORD will afflict the Israelites with various kind of diseases if they fail to obey the covenant.*

Moses continues giving a script to Israel for a ceremony they are to perform once they have crossed over into the Promised Land. The script contains blessings for obedience, and cursings for disobedience to the covenant. This followed the ancient form of a suzerain vassal treaty.

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 here continues the script for this ceremony, as a part of his instructions to Israel just prior to entering the land (Deuteronomy 27:1-13).

Israel's disobedience would cause them to suffer greatly at the hands of their Suzerain (Ruler) God. In this section, Moses listed various afflictions which would come upon Israel when they failed to follow God's commands. These afflictions are both physical and psychological in nature.

Moses warned Israel that *the LORD will smite you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors and with the scab and with the itch, from which you cannot be healed* (v. 27). The term *boil* (Heb. "shehîn") seems to refer to a type of skin inflammation (Leviticus 13:18). The LORD inflicted this disease upon the Egyptians in the sixth plague (Exodus 9:8-12). Here, God threatened to strike Israel with this same disease when they failed to obey His commandments. Along with *boils*, God would also strike Israel with *tumors* (Heb. "'ōpel," a thickening of tissue—possibly hemorrhoids), *scab* (Heb. "gārāb," a chronic rash), and *itch* (Heb. "heres," a disease that causes fluids to ooze out of the body). Although the exact meaning of these terms is disputed, they all refer to various skin diseases from which Israel would not *be healed*.

The next affliction involves diseases that are psychological in nature. The *LORD* would *smite Israel with madness and with blindness and bewilderment of heart* (v. 28). *Madness* (Heb. "shiggā'ōn") refers to a state of

insanity or mental illness. Though *blindness* (Heb. “iwwārôn”) is literally a loss of sight, in this case it is likely used figuratively to refer to being disoriented. The *bewilderment* (Heb. “timmaḥôn”) of heart refers to confusion of the mind (Zechariah 12:4). In modern terms, these might be encompassed with a term like “poor mental health.”

As a result, the Israelites would *grope at noon* (v. 29), trying to find their way as *the blind man gropes in darkness* (Job 5:14). Noon is the time of day with the greatest sunlight. But they would *grope at noon*, because no amount of light would show them the way. This likely speaks to the degree of mental confusion to which they had sunk.

Paul states a similar progression for those who choose to walk against the ways of God, the ways of unrighteousness. In Romans 1:24,26,28, Paul states a progression of God’s wrath upon unrighteousness, in that God turns us over to our own destruction. The progression begins with us deciding to follow our own lusts. Then we become addicts to our own lusts. The last stage of the progression is a “depraved mind” that can no longer discern what is good or true. This is likely what is in mind here with the idea of the disobedient Israelites sinking to a state where they would *grope at noon*.

They would lose perspective and not be able to think clearly about anything and thus would *not prosper in their ways*. The spiritual blindness would also leave them vulnerable to being *oppressed and robbed continually, with none to save them*. This would ultimately lead to Israel’s total failure. Such confusion, failure, and vulnerability would probably lead to a complete loss of hope, especially in light of the fact that nobody would help them.

The previous two verses described chaos in Israelite society. In v. 30, the LORD addressed that the chaos would afflict life in the home as well. Here, an Israelite man might *betroth a wife, but another man would violate her* (v. 30). He might *build a house but would not live in it*. He might *plant a vineyard but would not use its fruit*. This makes clear that when Israel abandons God’s self-governing ways, and departs from loving their neighbors as themselves, they will sink into mutual exploitation. Families will be destroyed from infidelity. Women will be exploited. Property will be pilfered. As Israel sinks into a “strong exploit the weak” culture, the prosperity from society of mutual cooperation will unravel, and their society will crumble into darkness.

This would be true for Israel's livestock as well. The strong will begin to take livestock from those who cannot resist them. Moses stated to the people that *your ox shall be slaughtered before your eyes, but you will not eat of it; your donkey shall be torn away from you, and will not be restored to you; your sheep shall be given to your enemies, and you will have none to save you* (v. 31). The ox and the donkey were vital to work on a farm and were considered wealth during this time.

This curse prevented the Israelites from enjoying their own prosperity because these valuable animals would be given to someone else. This would remove all incentive to work, as people would realize that the fruits of their labor will be exploited by others. So the nation will sink into poverty.

The ox was a large domesticated animal used for farm work such as plowing, as indicated by Deuteronomy 22:10. It was used to transport burdens. The donkey is a beast of burden, used to carry both goods and people (Genesis 22:3-5; Exodus 4:20; 23:12; 1 Samuel 25:20). People would lose their productivity in labor as their assets are exploited by others.

The sheep was also a domestic animal and was the chief wealth and livelihood of farmers in ancient times, providing food to eat and milk to drink. God's people would watch their enemies kill their oxen but would not be able to eat any of the meat. Thus, they would suffer a miserable quality of life, even facing starvation. On top of that, there would be *none to save them*.

In addition to losing their animals, the Israelites would lose their children and would be powerless to do anything about it. Moses told them *your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look* (v. 32). They would also experience the pain of being separated from their children *and yearn for them continually*. The Israelites would look in vain for their children because their enemies would take them away. Once again, *there will be nothing they can do*. The strong will exploit the weak, without regard to familial ties.

They would also *be oppressed and crushed continually by a people whom they did not know* (v. 33). A people (or "nation") with whom the Israelites never had any dealings would *eat up the produce of their ground and all their labors*. Along with the theft of the livestock in v. 31, having their crops eaten by their enemies would also cause starvation and more hardship. Their enemies would feast and enjoy their lives at the expense of the Israelites. The actions

of these enemies would drive Israel mad because they would *never be anything but oppressed and crushed continually*.

Seeing the world around them collapsing day after day, the Israelites would *be driven mad* (see v. 28) *by the sight of what they see* (v. 34). They would lose mental acuity as they witnessed and then experienced all the afflictions that were coming upon them. This will all happen if they refused to obey their Suzerain God, and fail to keep their word to honor the covenant they entered into with Him (Deuteronomy 26:17).

Again, Moses mentioned that the Suzerain LORD would *strike Israel on the knees and legs with sore boils* (v. 35), the same disease seen in the sixth plague on Egypt (Exodus 9:9-10). Even walking would be painful because these *sore* (lit. "evil") *boils* would flare up on the *knees and legs*. Adding to this misery was that they *cannot be healed*. It would be so bad that the boils would afflict a person's whole body, *from the sole of their foot to the crown of their head*.

In the last two verses in this section, the LORD declared that He would also send His covenant people into exile. He would *bring them and their king whom they set over them to a nation which neither they nor their fathers had known* (v. 36). The violators of God's covenant would return to slavery and exile as they had experienced in Egypt. There, they would *serve other gods* which were lifeless because they are made of *wood and stone*. They would be forced into making offerings to them as a way of paying homage to them. Yet these lifeless *gods* would not be able to help Israel.

As a result of all these curses, Israel would be brought to a very low state and, in the eyes of other peoples, would *become a horror* (v. 37). This is the opposite of Israel's status if they obeyed the covenant (see v. 13). Here, other people would be shocked at their condition. They would become a *proverb* because they would be remembered as those who suffered serious mistreatment at the hands of others. People from every place would remember Israel as those who were seriously victimized and humiliated.

Finally, the Israelites would become *a taunt among all the people where the LORD drove them*. That means, other people groups would ridicule Israel. They constantly would make fun of them.

All this was set forth in a ceremony to be performed by the entire nation, that they would understand the gravity of their choice whether or not to actually walk in the ways of the covenant into which they had entered with their Suzerain God.

### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>27</sup> The Lord will smite you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors and with the scab and with the itch, from which you cannot be healed. <sup>28</sup> The Lord will smite you with madness and with blindness and with bewilderment of heart; <sup>29</sup> and you will grope at noon, as the blind man gropes in darkness, and you will not prosper in your ways; but you shall only be oppressed and robbed continually, with none to save you. <sup>30</sup> You shall betroth a wife, but another man will violate her; you shall build a house, but you will not live in it; you shall plant a vineyard, but you will not use its fruit. <sup>31</sup> Your ox shall be slaughtered before your eyes, but you will not eat of it; your donkey shall be torn away from you, and will not be restored to you; your sheep shall be given to your enemies, and you will have none to save you. <sup>32</sup> Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and yearn for them continually; but there will be nothing you can do. <sup>33</sup> A people whom you do not know shall eat up the produce of your ground and all your labors, and you will never be anything but oppressed and crushed continually. <sup>34</sup> You shall be driven mad by the sight of what you see. <sup>35</sup> The Lord will strike you on the knees and legs with sore boils, from which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head. <sup>36</sup> The Lord will bring you and your king, whom you set over you, to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone. <sup>37</sup> You shall become a horror, a proverb, and a taunt among all the people where the Lord drives you.**