

Deuteronomy 29:16-21

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Moses makes it clear that this additional covenant the LORD establishes with Israel applies not only to all those who are present but to all future generations as well. It is a covenant between the Suzerain (Ruler) God and the Israelites (His vassals) in perpetuity.

In Deuteronomy 29:2-8, Moses reminded the Israelites about what they witnessed with their own eyes concerning the LORD. They saw the LORD performing miracles (the plagues) to force Egypt to release them from slavery. They saw Him use other great signs and wonders to protect them and provide for them during their 40-year journey to the Promised Land. He also gave them both victory over their enemies and their enemies' land.

And after exhorting all of the Israelites to obey the covenant in the previous section (Deuteronomy 29:9-15), Moses then uses history to remind the current generation of Israelites concerning God's power and deliverance that they experienced when they confronted the various peoples inhabiting the land along the route to the Promised Land.

He began by telling them about *how the people lived in the land of Egypt, and how they came through the midst of the nations through which they passed* (v. 16). During Israel's journey from Egypt to the plains of Moab, they had encountered several pagan nations and occasionally had intermingled the Israelite religion with that of those nations. A clear example of this was Israel's involvement in sexual sin and in idol worship with the women of Moab (Numbers 25:1-9; Deuteronomy 4:1-4). This was a clear violation of the first commandment (Deuteronomy 5:7).

Moses continued to remind the Israelites that they had also seen *their abominations and their idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold, which they had with them* (v. 17). They had seen these things among the foreign nations, but were not to be distracted by them. The term *abomination* (Heb. "shiqquṣ") refers to that which was detestable or considered abhorrent in the sight of God (Deuteronomy 7:25). The second commandment (Deuteronomy 5:7-8) prohibited God's people from making or

worshiping such objects because those objects were “the work of man’s hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell” (Deuteronomy 4:28).

Both God’s first covenant, made with Israel at Horeb (Sinai) as well as this additional covenant were based on the principle of rule of law, the idea that God makes the rules. God made cause-effect, and consequences will be consequences, regardless of what folly humans might chase.

These history lessons were designed to warn the people, *so that there will not be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God* (v. 18). No individual (*man or woman*) or group (*family or tribe*) were to turn their hearts (the essence of one’s being) from worshipping the LORD and Him alone. In addition, no one was *to go and serve the gods of those nations* that they encountered. Turning one’s heart from the LORD to serve other pagan gods was a blatant violation of the covenant with the LORD.

God had chosen Israel to be His people because He loved them (Deuteronomy 4:7; 7:7). But God’s covenant with Israel allowed them to choose for themselves whether they would follow in God’s clearly-articulated ways, and receive blessing, or follow their own lusts and gain cursing. Thus, this additional covenant, which added to the first, also applied the principle of consent of the governed. People decided for themselves, with clearly laid out consequences based on their choice. Here God admonishes them to choose wisely.

The Suzerain (Ruler) LORD has no rivals. He is *God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other* (Deuteronomy 4:39). The other gods that the Israelites encountered were mere idols, made with the hands of man (Deuteronomy 4:28). They were not real. They were basically an excuse to follow lusts (James 1:13-14).

Therefore, as God’s covenant people, the Israelites needed to live in perfect obedience to the true God so that *there might not be among them a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood*. The *root* probably refers to the idolatry that had surrounded the Israelites, having lived in a pagan culture (Egypt) for over four hundred years. All along the way from Egypt to the Promised Land, they were exposed to idolatry of various kinds, and the fact that they were affected by this can be seen in the episode with the golden calf (Exodus 32).

The *poisonous fruit* probably refers to the toxic effects of tolerating idolatry with the community. It would result in spreading to other people, causing them to turn away from God to serve powerless gods to produce and further spread the evil of idolatry amid the Israelite community.

But this fruit would be *wormwood* (Heb. “la’āna”), a plant that produces very bitter oil. In some verses, it is used in parallel to poison (Amos 6:12), sometimes resulting in death (Revelation 8:11). Everyone was allowed to choose what to drink, so to speak. But God warns Israel that if they drink the poison of idolatry, they will suffer severe adverse consequences. This ancient paganism was basically an excuse for the strong to exploit the weak, and a moral justification to follow base lusts. It is apparent that a society of exploitation will be dramatically inferior to a society based on loving our neighbors as ourselves, which was the primary emphasis of God’s covenant (Leviticus 19:18).

Moses proceeded to explain the curses that would fall upon any rebellious idolater in Israel. He said, *It shall be when he hears the words of this curse, that he will boast, saying, ‘I have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart in order to destroy the watered land with the dry.’* (v. 19). Someone living an idolatrous life might be prone to believe that he or she would not fall under the curses described in the covenant.

Despite his idolatrous lifestyle, that person might think he or she was blessed. Yet, such a wicked lifestyle could potentially infect the entire congregation of Israel, destroying *the watered land with the dry* (or ‘the innocent with the guilty’). The core attitude of this person of rebellious spirit was to *walk in the stubbornness of their heart*. The idea is “I will decide what is right and best, and will not listen to any God.” This person ignores God’s instruction regarding what actually works, and what does not work, and seeks their own, independent way.

For this reason, Moses explained that *the LORD* would *never be willing to forgive* such a wicked person (v. 20). The phrase *never be willing* is intense in the Hebrew text, emphasizing how abominable the sin of idolatry was to the LORD. This indicates that when someone adopts this attitude, God is going to allow the consequences to play out. He is not going to cover it over. This is similar to the apostle Paul’s description of how God’s wrath pours out upon those who ignore Him and follow their own lusts; God progressively gives

them over to their own lusts. They become addicts, and eventually they can't think straight (Romans 1:24,26,28).

God will not enable such sin by mitigating its negative impact. Rather, *the anger of the LORD and His jealousy would burn against that man, and every curse which is written in this book will rest on him*. All the consequences of sin that God set forth in His covenant will fall upon them. This makes clear that such an outcome is certain.

Further, God would *blot out the name of the idolater from under heaven*. The expression *blot out* (Heb. "maḥa") means to "wipe out" or "erase" a person's name completely. Here, it is likely a figurative expression which means to leave no oral or written trace of that name on earth. This would leave the person with no descendants and no memorials. This could include physical death.

This is what the LORD intended to do to any Israelite falling into idolatry after hearing and agreeing to faithfully follow all the words of the covenant. Although the Suzerain (Ruler) God is gracious and compassionate, He would *by no means leave the guilty unpunished* (Exodus 34:6-7). God is dealing here with intentional disobedience. This is willful sin. God frequently and continuously overlooks unknowing sin (1 John 1:7). But God deals severely with willful disobedience (Matthew 6:14; 1 John 1:9; Hebrews 10:26-27).

Moses concludes this section by saying, *Then the LORD will also single him out for adversity* (Heb. "ra'a," "evil", "misery") *from all the tribes of Israel* (v. 21). It appears here that God is promising to judge severely this rebellious person in order to protect His people from their poison. He promises here to remove them swiftly. It seems God followed this principle when He inaugurated the early church, causing Ananias and Sapphira to expire when they lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11).

The Suzerain (Ruler) God would single the perpetrator out and judge him *according to all the curses of the covenant which are written in this book of the law*. God's judgment would always be fair and just because He had given His covenantal laws to His covenant people for their good (Deuteronomy 10:13). He had given them these commands that they might walk in a self-governing manner, loving their neighbors as themselves, and gain the great blessing that attends this way of life. They had agreed to follow the covenant. In this section, God promised to judge individual rebels that they might not

poison the entire nation. Later God will make clear that when the rebellion becomes sufficiently widespread, the curses/negative consequences will apply to the entire nation.

Biblical Text:

¹⁶ (for you know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed; ¹⁷ moreover, you have seen their abominations and their idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold, which *they had* with them); ¹⁸ so that there will not be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; that there will not be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood. ¹⁹ It shall be when he hears the words of this curse, that he will boast, saying, 'I have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart in order to destroy the watered *land* with the dry.' ²⁰ The Lord shall never be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and His jealousy will burn against that man, and every curse which is written in this book will rest on him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven. ²¹ Then the Lord will single him out for adversity from all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant which are written in this book of the law.