

The Glory of His Judgment: Deuteronomy 28:15-68

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most devastating effect of sin on mankind is the way it causes us to treat gravely serious matters with lighthearted frivolity. We take spiritual realities that should give rise to trembling awe and turn them into catchy jingles fit for a wink, a smile, and a few good laughs.

Take Fred Coats and Haven Gillespie's hit, *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town*. "You better watch out. You better not cry. You better not pout. I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town. He's making a list. And checking it twice. He's gonna find out who's naughty and nice. Santa Claus is coming to town. He sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good. So be good for goodness sake."

The song captures something of our cultural attitude toward morality. We like to hold onto moral categories like good and bad. But we've jettisoned all the moral foundations, including the idea that someone will actually hold us accountable for the way we live. We still hope people who've hurt us get what's coming to them! But the whole idea of accountability outside myself has become a relic of days gone by, at least in the west. Like Santa, it's a whimsical myth, a figment of our imagination, a bygone expression of our collective longing for justice.

Besides, as long as I'm a decent person, what's the worst thing that can happen? So what if I miss out on a few presents from a fat old guy in a red suit! Who takes him seriously anyway? No one's perfect and I'm certainly enjoying the ride. So you do you. I'll do me. And we can all keep hoping everything works out in the end, whatever that means. Three cheers for St. Nick!

What's the oldest lie in the universe? Genesis 3:4, "But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die.'" Friend, does your own conscience not whisper the contrary, if you turn off the music, stop swiping your credit card, and listen? The collective witness of Scripture doesn't whisper. It shouts. It proclaims. It lovingly warns from beginning to end – over and over and over again.

"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his

angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done” (Matthew 16:26–27). “For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:30–31).

The divine judgment promised in Deuteronomy 28 isn’t an anomaly. It’s not an otherwise loving God having a bad day. And it’s certainly not something you should apologize for, Christian, or try to explain away. It’s our only hope, which is why God’s judgment is one of the most frequent themes in the Bible. Wickedness will be punished. Righteousness will be rewarded. Justice will prevail because God will prevail. We’re not talking about a holiday myth. We’re talking about the moral foundation of the universe. Your choices matter, friend.

The second half of Deuteronomy 28 isn’t a comfortable passage to read. It’s not supposed to be. Because it’s a warning. The path of disobedience is the path of death. Verse 15, “If you will not obey the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments...then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.” The fact that Moses devotes nearly four times as many verses to the reality of God’s judgment than to the reality of God’s blessing does not mean God is more eager to judge than he is to bless. It simply reflects which part of his character we are most prone to forget!

Moses’ pastoral aim is to motivate Israel to choose the path of life instead of the path of death. So he impresses on their minds in graphic detail the seriousness of disobedience. My aim this morning is the same. Deuteronomy 28:15-68 is an exceedingly helpful meditation on the nature of God’s judgment. For it remains a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Why is that the case?

1) GOD’S JUDGMENT IS JUST

By just I mean every expression of divine judgment in these verses is more than a spiritual reality. It’s exceedingly good. It perfectly accords with what is true and right, which is another way of saying God’s judgments are just. The justice of God’s judgment repeatedly surfaces in the reasons Moses gives for his judgment. Consider all the verses where Moses uses phrases like “Because,” “If,” or “On account of” to explain what will compel the Lord to punish Israel.

At a basic level, it’s their disobedience of God’s law revealed in his Word. Verse 15, “If you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes...all these curses shall come upon you. But even the

way Moses describes their disobedience points to a deeper issue. Disobeying God's word isn't like breaking the speed limit on State Route 288. If you get pulled over for going 78 mph, you're not personally sinning against the officer. You simply violated a legal requirement. You pay the fine and move on – hopefully a bit slower.

That's not what disobeying God's Word is like. When we disobey God's Word, we're not just breaking a random rule. We are rejecting God himself. Spiritual disobedience is always relational. Why? Because God's Word is a personal expression of his authority. Notice Moses doesn't simply say "Because you did not obey" in verse 45. He says, "Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God." Verse 20 is even clearer. It's "Because you have forsaken me."

And here's where Deuteronomy 28 forces us to answer a crucial question. Why is personally rejecting the Lord such a big deal? Why is it more than a religious issue? Why is it a justice issue such that to reject him is to justly bring down the curse of his judgment upon yourself? It's a justice issue because of the weight of his glory, my friends, because of the honor and reverence he deserves.

Whenever we disobey God's Word, we're belittling him, we're shaming him, we're standing before infinite majesty, before the God who is exceedingly worthy of praise, and saying, "You're not glorious at all. You're not awesome in the least. I know better than you do, which is why I'm going to live my life my way instead of your way."

To disobey the Lord is to withhold the worship due his name. Look at verse 58, "If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions..."

The greatest injustice in the universe is not how white people have historically treated black people in our nation or how fishermen have treated dolphins. Nor how your boss may treat you next month in your annual performance evaluation. The greatest injustice in the universe is how all of us have failed to stand in awe of our Creator, the King of the Ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, to whom belong honor and glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Timothy 1:17)!

The fear of which the Lord is exceedingly worthy, the fear we express through obedience or withhold through disobedience, does not consist of living in terror of his judgment. It's not a "Mind your p's and q's lest you get smacked." It's a trembling awe, a heart-felt delight in his beauty that compels us to serve the Lord with gladness! Verse 47, "Because

you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything.”

Begrudging obedience, towing the line, or morosely doing your duty is not a moral step up from disobedience. It’s an act of disobedience because divine justice lays claim to more than your actions. It lays claim to your affections. Psalms 100:2, “Serve the LORD with gladness!” Are loving what is supremely worthy? Are you delighting in what is supremely beautiful? Are you pursuing pleasure in what is eternally satisfying? That’s what the glory of God justly demands.

Do the police care whether you delight in driving 65 mph down State Route 288? Not at all. As long as you’re keeping the speed limit, they don’t care whether you do it joyfully or not! Obeying the Lord is radically different because the weight of his glory demands that he be honored by all that you are, friend, starting with your heart, not just your outward behavior. Joyful obedience isn’t an option for extroverted Christians or emotional Christians. It’s the only kind of response to God that pleases God!

Why did Israel fail to fear the Lord with gladness? It’s because she chose something else as the center of her joy. Verse 47, “The abundance of all things.” Mark 4:18-19, “They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”

The ultimate test of devotion to Yahweh is how you relate to him when you have everything. When you have everything the world lives for – the house, the cars, the money, you name it – do you continue to wholeheartedly obey him? Or do your possessions slowly but surely steal away your affections? The obedience justice requires is grounded in the glory of who God is, which is why his judgment rightly falls on those who fail to love him with all their heart. If we are silent, the very stones will cry out.

2) GOD’S JUDGMENT IS PERSONAL

In this respect, the curses in verses 15-68 are just like the blessings in verses 1-14. They come directly from the hand of God. Eighteen times in the second half of the chapter, the Lord is the subject of all the active verbs of judgment, even when other agents are involved.

Verse 20, the LORD will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration...” Verse 21, “The LORD will make the pestilence stick to you...” Verse 22, “The LORD will strike you...”

Verse 24, “The LORD will make the rain of your land powder...” Verse 25, “The LORD will cause you to be defeated.” He will bring. He will send. He will scatter. He will give.

When his glory is trampled on, God acts for the sake of his name. He defends his honor. He upholds his renown without apology or hesitation. Verse 63, “As the LORD took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the LORD will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you.” He is not passive or reluctant. He delights to take seriously what must be taken seriously. He brings the day of reckoning, the day of justice to pass.

Whenever you suffer at the hands of wicked men in a broken world, the curses in Deuteronomy 28 are a refuge for your soul. They are your only hope. Human judges may fail you. Human justice may turn a blind eye. God will not. Evil will be punished. Righteousness will be rewarded. Why? Because God is personally committed to vindicating the glory of his name.

Here's what else that means. When you feel guilty on account of the wrong you know you have done, the curses in Deuteronomy 28 compel you to take seriously what God takes seriously. Your guilt and shame before a holy God are real. You can try to drown them with hours of entertainment or cover them up by doing better. You still deserve God's judgment.

And on the day Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, you will suffer the curse of death, the curse that even now hangs over your life. He will personally sentence you to “Eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Why does the personal nature of God's judgment make us so uncomfortable? Why do sinners like us, apart from the Spirit's work in our lives, stop our ears, run away, and decry all who dare proclaim or believe such things? It's because we don't want to admit the problem of evil isn't just something around us. It's something within us. Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

When we choose to disobey the Lord, we are lining up in opposition to the personal judgment of God. We are challenging him at the goal line, so to speak. Friends, we cannot prevail. He is completely in the right. We are completely in the wrong. And you cannot sprint to the edge and do an end run around his judgments. Why not?

3) GOD'S JUDGMENT IS UNAVOIDABLE

The all-encompassing nature of the divine curse in Deuteronomy 28 is frightening. Verse 16, you will be cursed in all places. Verse 19, you will be cursed at all times. Verse 17, you will be cursed in every domain of your existence. No part of your life will escape untouched.

The list of horrors isn't an exaggeration. Every one of them came to pass centuries later when the Assyrians and Babylonians carried Israel off into exile on account of her disobedience. These include sickness, drought, famine, defeat, death, mental illness, disability, oppression, slavery and humiliation. They continued until Israel was destroyed. God promises as much nine times in the second half of the chapter. I will not relent. I will not hold back. I will not turn a blind eye. Verse 20. "The LORD will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly."

Resistance is futile, Israel. If you abandon the Lord of Life and try to create life for yourself, it won't work. Verse 29, "You will not prosper in your ways." In verses 30-31 and verses 38-41, Moses piles up image after image to describe the vanity of every human effort to find life apart from God.

"You shall betroth a wife, but another man shall ravish her...You shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it...You shall plant a vineyard, but you shall not enjoy its fruit...Your ox shall be slaughtered before you, but you shall not eat any of it...You shall carry much seed into the field, and shall gather in little...You shall have olive trees, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil...You shall father sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours."

Israel, if you choose the path of sin, there will be no deliverance. There will be no salvation. There will be no escape. Verse 52, "The high and fortified wall, in which you trusted" will "Come down throughout all your land." You will be utterly unable to save yourself from my hand. Verse 29, "There shall be no one to help you." Verse 31, "There shall be no one to help you." Verse 32, "You shall be helpless." And when you become so desperate for food and shelter that you will try to sell yourselves back into slavery in Egypt, verse 68, but "There will be no buyer." If you abandon me, Israel, your latter condition will be even worse than it was at first.

And yet some are still tempted to say, “So be it. I don’t need God or his blessings. I don’t like his rules. I don’t want his land. And I’m not interested in the whole ‘Relationship with Yahweh’ thing. I’ll do my own thing in my own land and be just fine, thank you very much.” It won’t work, my friend. We like to reduce the truth of God’s judgment to a list of potential beliefs on a buffet of spiritual options. Scripture says it’s the final chapter of the story for every human being who has ever lived. It’s unavoidable.

God’s commitment to his own glory guarantees we will never reject the Lord of Life and find life. Have you ever wondered why God’s moral assessment in Genesis 3:22 ends so abruptly? “Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—’” He simply stops. Why? Because such an outcome is so unthinkable, so utterly grievous, that it cannot even be spoken.

Israel, you can’t reject the Lord of Life and find life. Even in exile, your suffering will continue. Look at verses 65-66, “And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot, but the LORD will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you. Night and day you shall be in dread and have no assurance of your life.”

Some of you know what that feels like. That’s exactly how you felt before the Lord brought you to your senses. Some of you feel that right now. You might look successful to everyone around you. But on the inside, you’re dying. You’re languishing. You feel hopeless because you have no hope. And with every passing day, every passing year, the day of your death and the hour of your judgment draw closer. Hebrews 4:13, “No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

God’s judgment is just. God’s judgment is personal. God’s judgment is unavoidable. But it’s also something more. And it’s the divinely intended effect of the entire passage.

4) GOD’S JUDGMENT IS A CALL TO REPENTANCE

The biblical context of the curses in chapter 28 is significant. They are found in a covenant document – the entire book of Deuteronomy. What is a covenant document designed to do? It’s designed to establish and preserve relationship. The curses in Ch. 28 function like warning signs for Israel on the road of relationship with Yahweh.

If you've ever driven a new road in the middle of nowhere, warning signs are a precious gift. They're not a burden. I've never heard a driver say, "Man, why do you have to tell me there's a cliff on the right. Why can't they just let me drive off the road and figure it out for myself!" No. We're grateful for warning signs.

And that's exactly how the reality of God's judgment in chapter 28 should function in our lives. It wakes us up from spiritual stupor and shouts, "Danger ahead." Christopher Wright says it well: "The whole point of the chapter is to warn the Israelites of the consequences of certain behavior so that they can avoid them. The curses are not 'fated.' Only if they engage in persistent rebellion against God's grace and blessing will such consequences become unavoidable."

When Israel eventually rejected the Lord as her King, she lost every good gift she had ever received from his hand. It's why many of the curses in the second half of Deuteronomy 28 are the exact opposite of the blessings in the first half of Deuteronomy 28. And we're not talking about minor blessings. We're talking about promises of land and offspring at the core of God's covenant with Abraham. Sin is like that. It claims to offer joy. But the moment we say "Yes," we find ourselves enslaved to the enemy of our souls. It's dehumanizing. It's self-destructive. Exhibit A? The cannibalism Israel would succumb to in verse 53, "And you shall eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters, who the LORD your God has given you, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you." The path of disobedience is always the path of death.

There's only one alternative. It's the path of life. The path of repentance. The path of turning away from sin and toward the Lord. Mind you. Walking that path, heeding the warning of Deuteronomy 28, does not mean waking up every morning and trying to be better, do better, or obey more. It won't work. You will inevitably stumble and fall. You will never be good enough. So what does it mean? It means looking to God to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. It's what the Christmas season is all about!

When all the curses came to pass in Israel's national life, they proved the covenant remained in force. He kept covenant, even when Israel did not. He vindicated his glory in judgment, just as he said. Friend, that is the very same faithfulness that drove the Son of God to become the Son of Man, to come to earth clothed in human flesh.

Why did Jesus do it? He did it to live for us, securing the eternal favor and blessing of God through perfect obedience for all who trust in him. And he did it to die for us. He received in his body and soul: the full weight, the full grief, the full horror and shame of

every curse written in this chapter and immeasurably more until he died. The cross of Christ is a monument to God's justice. It shouts, "I will not allow the guilty to go unpunished. My judgments will prevail."

Isaiah 53:4–5, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."

Behold the wonder of the cross, brothers and sisters! In the very act of upholding divine justice God opens a fountain of infinite mercy. For Jesus did not endure part of the curse of God against our sin. He endured all of it. He fully and completely exhausted the judgment of God such that for all who trust in him and his sacrifice, no more curse remains!

Which is why, as the people of God, we don't avoid God's judgment, pretend away God's judgment, or apologize for God's judgment. We glory in God's judgment! Because it is a judgment he fully and completely satisfied at the cross of Christ. And now we know for certain that when the Lord returns, it will not be to punish his people, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. The judgment of God at Calvary calls us to hope in Jesus, trust in Jesus, and hold fast to Jesus because in Jesus, as R.C. Sproul once said, "The One from whom we need to be saved is the very One who saves us."

CONCLUSION

So how should Jesus' work on the cross affect the way we think about God's judgment in places like Deuteronomy 28? First, it reminds us that his judgment is real. Whenever you are tempted to think, "This sin isn't a big deal, I can walk this road and still enjoy God's favor and blessings," remember Jesus. See him suspended between heaven and earth suffering on account of your sin. God's judgment is real.

Second, it reminds us we have no hope apart from Christ. Christian, you must continue to hold fast to Jesus. You must continue to walk the path of repentance, the path of faith-fueled obedience, all the days of your life. Warnings of judgment like Deuteronomy 28 are not meant to prompt you to smugly say, "Well now, since I'm a Christian, I don't have to worry about such things." God forbid! Respond to the warning by holding fast to Jesus, friend. And keep on holding fast to Jesus by obeying Jesus in every area of your life.

Hebrews 10:26–27, “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.”

Third, Deuteronomy 28 reminds us that wherever we experience painful consequences in this life on account of our sin, such an experience is ultimately an expression of God’s kindness. If you’re a Christian, God is disciplining you as one he dearly loves. If you’re not a Christian, he is lovingly getting your attention before it’s too late. Foretastes of the judgment to come are one of God’s chosen means of bringing us to an end of ourselves that we might come to our senses and repent.

Finally, Deuteronomy 28 empowers us to forgive and refuse to hold grudges against other people because we know that no matter what they've done, justice will be satisfied. Either Jesus is punished for their sin or they will be punished for that sin. Either way, you will be vindicated – not through your judgment, but the Lord’s. Romans 12:19, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”

The path of disobedience is the path of death, brothers and sisters. Heed the warning, hold fast to Christ, and choose the path of life. Let’s pray and ask for the Spirit’s help.