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Christ in the Covenant Curses? Deuteronomy 28 and the Gospel

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Introduction

Is the Jesus who says to “love your enemies” (Matt 5:44) really the same God who will “take delight in bringing ruin” upon his people (Deut 28:63)? How can Christ be seen in all Scripture when the covenant curses are included? This paper argues that the covenant curses are often misunderstood, and are actually at the center of God’s heart of love, even pointing forward to the Messiah.

Many scholars have analyzed and documented different structures within the covenant curses.¹ One of the most comprehensive analyses finds numerous smaller chiasmic structures within Deut 28, both in the blessings and the curses, and the center of the overall chiasm in the curses as the direct reversal of the blessings (Deut 28:30-31).² Others note how the covenant curses are closely connected with other ancient Near Eastern curse lists, although also quite different, indicating either a common source or borrowing with significant adaptation.³ Many of the

¹ For a list of several, see Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12* (WBC 6B; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 670-685; Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 276.

² Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*, 670-80.

³ Woods, *Deuteronomy*, 276; Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 339. In addition, Kitchen notes that the biblical curses are within “the broad pool of traditional curse topics and formulae that had long existed and grown up through many centuries, of which we now see only glimpses” (Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003], 294). Recent research has found many parallels among imprecations across all genres and localities, especially formulas from the 7th and 8th centuries BC (Melissa

curses in Deut 28 are identical or closely connected with Leviticus 26, either adding to or adapting.⁴ The original biblical foundation for these blessings and curses reaches back to Gen 12, in God's initial call to Abram; and some see an intertextual and literary pattern with the curses in Gen 3:11-14 as well.⁵

Much time could be spent delineating and dealing with these issues, but instead this paper seeks to bring together multiple pieces of evidence that showcase Christ in the covenant curses.

1. The covenant structure of Deuteronomy

First of all, many scholars have noted that the covenant in Deuteronomy is formatted like ANE covenants, especially the Hittite suzerainty treaties. The gracious salvation of the suzerain (cf. Deut 1-4) is the basis for the gratitude to be shown through the obedience of the vassal (cf. Deut 12-26).⁶ Thus, the curses only come upon someone who is not grateful for the salvation of the suzerain, and lives in rebellion instead (e.g., Deut 28:20, 47, 58). The reason to keep the covenant is that God has already blessed the people abundantly and rescued them. They have done nothing to save themselves or bring about good in their lives.

As per the typical format of the Hittite treaties, Israel would also have expected blessings and curses to be part of the covenant. However, curses came first in the Hittite treaties, making Deuteronomy unique to focus on blessings first.⁷ In addition, most other ANE covenants only had curses, not blessings at all. There are fewer blessings than curses in Deuteronomy 28, but the whole book is about God blessing the people, and is full of all that He has done for them.⁸

Fulfilling the curses is just as much a part of the covenant as the blessings. God's honor is at stake in this. Deuteronomy 29:21 gives

Ramos, "A Northwest Semitic Curse Formula: The Sefire Treaty and Deuteronomy 28," *ZAW* 128 [2016]: 205-220.

⁴ Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012], 646.

⁵ Nachman Levine, "The Curse and the Blessing: Narrative Discourse Syntax and Literary Form," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (2002): 189-199.

⁶ Block, *Deuteronomy*, 646. See also multiple chapters in K. Bergland, L. S. Baker, Jr., F. Masotti, and A. Rahel Wells, eds., *Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2020).

⁷ J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (AOTC; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2002), 400.

⁸ Peter C. Craigie (*Deuteronomy*, 340) notes that those ANE sources that have both blessings and curses also have much longer curse sections than blessings sections.

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further consequences for the person who blatantly turns away from God and continues in that path, although it is not clear whether he will automatically be separated by his actions, or whether this is a direct action that God takes. The cause of the separation is the evil that the person did, and all of the curses will come upon him. In a way, the curses are an oath in the same way that the blessings are.⁹ God is just as responsible for keeping his word about the curses as about the blessings.¹⁰

In addition, unlike many of the other ANE gods, YHWH makes his requirements very clear in the covenant, with no arbitrary punishments (e.g., Deut 5; 28:15). God's Torah is not complicated, it is very clear, unlike the laws of the other nations, where many times the people did not even know what they were supposed to do to please the gods.¹¹ In Deut 30:14, Moses reminds the people that not only is God's word not far away or high or low, it is exceedingly nearby, in the hearts and in the mouths of the people. God wants the hearts of the people so that he can write his Torah there, but also their mouths, perhaps meaning that they can speak it and understand it, as well as feel and believe it. The Torah is not too mysterious or beyond comprehension, but they know it and can read it and are fully aware of it.

2. God's first and ultimate desire is to bless all people

God's ideal way of reaching the world is through blessing his people, so that everyone will want to know why they are so healthy, happy, and holy (cf. Gen 12:2; Isa 2:1-4). Sojourners and servants were also involved in the covenant ratification in Deut 29, implying that this was really to refer to all people, not just meant for Israel.

God is the only one who brings the blessings, whereas the curses are often talked about as "this will happen to you" and less with language of "God will do this to you." The blessings are basically the opposite of the curses, and the people have a choice to make as to which one will come upon them.

Deuteronomy 28:1-2 asks the people to have self-reflection and awareness of how they are doing, continually comparing to the ideal to

⁹ Loyalty oaths were common in the ANE, especially in relation to covenants and curses (Ramos, "A Northwest Semitic Curse Formula," 219).

¹⁰ Block notes that the curses mean that the covenant is still in effect and has not been done away with yet (*Deuteronomy*, 666).

¹¹ Daniel I. Block, *How I Love Your Torah, O Lord! Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 8-20.

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which God has called them, but not in a legalistic sense. God's desire is to bless them abundantly. This does not indicate that God thinks more highly of Israel than other nations, simply that as he blesses them this will attract others all the more, and they will also have more resources to bless others and carry the good news to them. God is waiting to give these blessings.

The elements of the covenant are the same here as in Jer 31, when God simply renewed it because the people broke it in every way possible (cf. Jer 31:32). God becomes heartbroken when the covenant is broken, and a jealous lover. When the people break the covenant, he has righteous indignation against evil and rebellion (Deut 29:23). After all he has done to try to reach their hearts, they still turn away, so he seeks redemptive punishment, or whatever it takes to turn them back. However, he continues to bless them during times of probation for over 400 years and then again after they come back from exile.

In light of this, one may wonder about Deut 28:37, where Israel will become a horror and taunt to other nations. Other nations will make fun of them because they are in exile and their God appears powerless (cf. Ps 137). They will also be a desolation to the other nations, in that their land is utterly desolate, and this is a horror to people who never thought it could happen. Rather than being a blessing to the nations, when the people turn away from God they will basically be a curse to the nations (Deut 29:24). The other people who saw all that God did to rescue Israel, will now see their destruction and will not understand. They will wonder why God did what he did, and why he is so angry.

Thus, the curses can also seem to make other people not want to follow God, unless it becomes clear that it is the people's fault and God is trying to get them to come back to him. In support of the latter, Deut 29:24-26 contains a further condemnation of Israel, in that it was obvious to the other nations that Israel should have remained faithful to the Lord, since he had done so much for them. The nations also seem to know that these other gods were not who Israel should have served or worshipped, since they did not know the other gods and were not given these other gods by the Lord.¹² The nations also know YHWH, as they mention his name in their questions, indicating that they are aware of his power, and

¹² These verses give an interesting perspective on the other gods, seemingly reflecting what the nations would have thought, that the top god allotted certain gods to each nation, and those were the gods they were to serve. Thus, since Israel had Yahweh, they should have been obedient to him.

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perhaps have even considered following him. The curses help the nations see that God is trustworthy and follows through on what he says he will do. In this way, the curses could be viewed both as a punishment and a blessing, in that Israel is not utterly destroyed as they deserve. The other nations see that Israel deserves total destruction, but God is merciful and gives them hope despite their utter rebellion. In this way, the curses can still lead other nations to follow God rather than turn away.

3. People always have a choice between blessings and curses; disobedience is a heart issue

Right in the middle of the discussion of the some of the worst curses, Moses reminds the people that these are all optional, conditional on the choice of the people to follow God or not.¹³ There was no need to enforce the curses, as long as the hearts of the people were given to God, and in right relationship with God (cf. Deut 6-11). The cause of the people going astray in Deut 28:14 is clearly that their hearts were after other gods, and they choose to serve them instead of the Lord.

In Deut 28:18, Moses describes the results of turning away from God, which is actually a heart attitude change. Obedience in Deuteronomy is not a legalistic requirement, but God longs for their hearts. The turning away leads to walking in the ways of other gods, as well as serving them, opposite the two things that result from a heart following after God's ways. When serving other gods, what follows is bitterness, poison, and wormwood. The implication is that following God brings good fruit, pleasant and helpful to all; while following other gods makes one unpalatable, and probably leads to poisoning oneself as well as others.¹⁴ The response to the covenant by someone whose heart has rejected God is that he will bless himself, rather than receiving God's blessings. In addition, he will still think that he has peace, because he is going his own way, rather than having to follow God's rules which he seems to think are going to take him away from peace.

Deuteronomy 28:28-29 reiterates that the heart problem is the main thing the people are facing. There is no one to save them, but this is not because God does not want to; they do not seem to want a savior, just like what happens in Judges. The people cry out to God when they are

¹³ Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*, 700.

¹⁴ The root analogy is similar to what Jesus uses about the vine in John 15. If the root is bad, that leads to bad fruits, because you cannot change the fruit unless you change the root.

oppressed, and God does send a savior for them, but then they turn away again right after and are even worse than when they started (cf. Judges 1-2). Deuteronomy 28:36 also discusses how the people will be sent into exile as part of the curses, but there they will still worship other gods, suggesting that even the covenant curses will not always bring about repentance.¹⁵ The people are hardened against God, serving instead the gods that are simply wood and stone and not gods at all (cf. Deut 4:28).

Deuteronomy 30 continues the theme of covenant, but further indicates that God takes clear responsibility for the people going into exile and coming back, while the people's responsibility is a heart responsive to God and his grace. In verses 1-2, the people return both with their hearts and with their whole person, and then God returns them to their land. There is also a play on words with the Hebrew root *shub* in these verses. As the people's hearts turn (*shub*) in v. 1, and their whole selves turn (*shub*) in v. 2, God returns (*shub*) their captivity (*shubut*, also from *shub*), and returns (*shub*) them from all the places where they were scattered.¹⁶ These repetitions help people to see the connections between their hearts and God's actions, as well as to see that God's heart is always inclined towards them, since they are the ones who have left.

4. God always gives warnings, and the curses are his last resort

God gives warnings and probationary times throughout the discussion of the covenant curses (e.g., Deut 29:16-28). The curses actually seem to be one of the ways God motivates people to follow him.¹⁷ Block makes the case that because Moses is a pastor, this is an altar call to "get the hearers' attention, to arouse fear, and to warn the people what it would be like to fall into the hands of an angry God."¹⁸

The curses seem to be the last resort before exile. The chapter moves through worse and worse scenarios until God has to kick the people out

¹⁵ It is not clear whether the despair of their hearts while in exile is something God allows for the purpose of redemption, which is the case when considering the book of Deuteronomy as a whole, or whether this is simply the result of giving into sin over and over. Either way, it seems to the people that there is no hope anymore, and they begin to not even look for it (Deut 28:65). They also have flashbacks while in exile, and have lost all joy in the soul. These last verses in Deut 28 make clear that this is a heart issue still; the people are afraid that they have lost God.

¹⁶ The word is used again in Deut 30:8, 9.

¹⁷ See Woods (*Deuteronomy*, 282), who also notes that the concept and togetherness of blessings and curses goes back to Genesis, making clear that God is ruler over all of life.

¹⁸ *Deuteronomy*, 664.

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of the land. This could almost be a narrative situation, and seems to follow this pattern.¹⁹ If the people do not repent with the problems in land, person, and enemies, then God will send them away and give the land to others. The people will continue to serve other gods, but he is hopeful they will one day come back to him (Deut 30), especially since serving the other gods is like going back to slavery (Deut 28:64).

God is loathe to bring the curses, even though there are more curses than blessings.²⁰ Deuteronomy 29 and 30 are key to understanding Deut 28. Deuteronomy 29 makes clear that these curses are only on someone totally given over to evil, and the narrative describes a situation in which that could happen to Israel. Deuteronomy 30 concludes that God wants the people to choose life, and he wants to bless them.

This concept seems opposite to Deut 28:63, where God seems to indicate that He will rejoice in causing the people to perish, just as He rejoiced before to multiply them. But this has to be taken in the context of the covenant as a whole and the next two chapters in particular. God's rejoicing seems to be more about covenant satisfaction than actual joy, especially because God is angry here, and very sad and broken-hearted.²¹ In addition, Deut 6-11 and 30 make clear that God would find much more joy in saving the people and rescuing them from their oppressors than he would in destroying them. Deuteronomy 30:9 uses the Hebrew word *shub* ("return") again to say that God will once again rejoice over the people for good, implying that they were rejoiced over all along, but that God had to bring curses on them because of their breaking of the covenant over centuries. Now he is delighting to bring goodness back to them, as that is what he really wanted to do all along.

¹⁹ Woods sees this differently, in that God initially said he would wipe out Israel, but now he is choosing instead to disperse them, and have fewer numbers (*Deuteronomy*, 281). More work needs to be done to ascertain if the prophets follow this in chronological order.

²⁰ The greater number of curses could motivate obedience, but also may indicate that "Israel will fail in its attempt to keep the demands of the covenant" and curses will come, but God's grace will also come in Deut 30 (*Deuteronomy*, 283).

²¹ Daniel I. Block notes that "for Israel to go after other gods is to trample underfoot the history of divine grace" (*The Triumph of Grace: Literary and Theological Studies in Deuteronomy and Deuteronomical Themes* [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017], 274). He also makes clear that while "others attributed such calamities to demonic forces and hostile deities, Yahwism refuses to take the easy way out. These statements reflect the other side of Yahweh's passion: When his people trample underfoot his grace, his passions will be ignited against them" (Block, *Deuteronomy*, 661).

5. *Curses are redemptive*

The punishments of the covenant curses were intended to be redemptive, not the ultimate end result. God did not want to bring these curses on the people, and in fact waited as long as possible to bring the curses. For hundreds of years, the people were rebellious and worshipping other gods, but God bore long with them, and only brought upon them slight consequences, or small pieces of the curses. The final outpouring was his last-ditch effort to save the people, to wake them up from their sin-sick stupor.²²

Difficult situations are often what bring people back to God, although God prefers to use gentler methods first. But God will do anything possible to save people, because he cares most about eternal life. This life is important, but if suffering is necessary to bring people to repentance, he is willing to do that.²³ In addition to turning one's eyes to heaven, suffering leads people to self-denial, even if the suffering is the consequence of sin. In addition, the curses give people an opportunity to choose faith and lean on God's promises.

Most curses do not cause death, even though the people deserve to die because of their sins. God is merciful. God's compassion is highlighted in Deut 30:1-6, making clear that his purpose of scattering them was redemptive, so that their hearts would return to him.

6. *Many curses are simply the result of sinful choices*

The curses mentioned in Deuteronomy 27 are all related to the breaking of the Decalogue, including graven image making, dishonoring parents, lying, stealing, hurting the vulnerable, perverting justice, committing adultery, murder, taking a bribe, etc. This includes all of the Ten Words except Sabbath and bearing God's name.²⁴ Significantly, the specifics of the curses are not mentioned in Deut 27, perhaps to give the gravity of what the people will be doing when they break the covenant. The consequences that follow in Deut 28 make more sense in this

²² Block sees this as well (*Deuteronomy*, 666), noting the connections with Dan 9:9-14.

²³ Raymond Brown also notes that people "learn more through adversity than in prosperity" and blessings can "lead to spiritual apathy and indifference" so this is why there are more curses. "It is not that God is vindictive; the curses are merciful warnings" (*The Message of Deuteronomy* [The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993], 268).

²⁴ McConville notes that all the curses are "directly corresponding to certain provisions of the law" (*Deuteronomy*, 409).

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context. These are serious matters, many of which are punishable by death.²⁵

In addition, most curses in Deuteronomy 28 are the result of sin, or the consequences of Israel's choices. For instance, Deut 28:15-19 simply reverses the blessings, and does not give direct agency to God, just indicating that he allows these things to happen. Deuteronomy 28:30-34 also describes the terrible things that will happen to the people, separate from the causality of God's actions. Deuteronomy 28:39-44 discusses many curses related to natural disasters, and destruction by enemies, once again without mentioning that God directly caused them.

One of the more challenging aspects of the covenant curses is that some curses seem to put the consequences on the children when it was their parents' fault for sinning. For instance, the wounds that God causes carry on to their offspring in Deut 28:59. However, this might also be an example of epigenetics, or that the children partake in the sins of their parents, not so much that God is punishing the innocent children for sins they did not commit (cf. Exod 34:7; Joshua 7). God makes clear in many other places in Scripture that he does not blame the children for the sins of their parents and vice versa (cf. Ezekiel 18; 33).

7. Other curses come directly from God, but most of those are simply what God allows

Sometimes God does take direct responsibility for the curses, as in Deut 28:20-24. The Lord sends the curses until the people are destroyed and perish. This verse makes it clear, however, that the people were the initiators, as they were the ones who forsook God first, even after all God had done for them.²⁶ In addition, the people do not all perish, so this is hyperbolic language, and likely part of the stock language of ANE curses. God also causes pestilence, drought and disease.

Deuteronomy 28:25-26 seems to be somewhere in the middle, where God allows nations to strike Israel and animals to eat their carcasses, but he does not directly command it. This is also opposite the blessings, in that now Israel will be fleeing in seven directions, whereas it was the

²⁵ Block indicates that two types of behavior bring about God's violence towards Israel: sins that break the "integrity of human relationships" and sins that break the "integrity of God's relationship with His people" (*The Triumph of Grace*, 271). In addition, these sins make the people no longer holy and no longer able to be called God's people because of their defilement.

²⁶ Although it is not clear whether they forsook God first and then did evil, or whether their evil deeds led them to forsake God.

enemies before who were fleeing. In Deut 28:49-58, there are many curses related to the cruel enemy that God will raise up. However, while God takes responsibility for allowing this enemy nation to attack Israel, the way they do so and the consequences that result are not necessarily his direct action. Instead, the nation is also wicked, and will be punished eventually too (cf. Deut 30 and many of the prophets, like Hab 2). The people do not seem to turn to God in this case, trusting in the walls of their city, not asking God for help but looking to themselves.

During the siege, the people will resort to eating their own children (Deut 28:53-57). However, once again, God brings the enemy nation, and since the people are unrepentant, this is one of the consequences that the oppressor brings. Interestingly, when this situation does happen in Jeremiah, the people could have surrendered and not experienced such dire straits, but the king did not listen to Jeremiah (Jer 21:8-9; 27:1-11; 38:17-23). So even then, God was trying to keep the curses from happening to their full extent.

8. *Curses are connected to the plagues/wilderness/imprecatory psalms; God does not play favorites*

There are many connections between the covenant curses and the plagues on the Egyptians (cf. Deut 28:27, 35), highlighting the reversal in situations, with the plagues now falling on Israel rather than Egypt.²⁷ These connections also hint that God was trying to save Egypt through the plagues. He gives them many warnings as well, and they understand who God is, especially Pharaoh, but choose to turn from him (although many do leave Egypt with Israel). God then directly states that he will bring on the people the “disease of Egypt” of which they had been afraid (Deut 28:60).²⁸ The people escaped in Egypt due to God’s providence and their repentance and trust in him, while the Egyptians did not escape. Now the people of Israel are rebellious and not trusting in God, and they receive the same things that Egypt did. God does not play favorites, he is always fair and consistent. In addition, serving the other gods is portrayed as going back to slavery (Deut 28:64), although the people are so messed up, no one will now buy them as slaves (v. 68). However,

²⁷ Woods, *Deuteronomy*, 278.

²⁸ Brown notes that the plagues, slavery, and diseases of Egypt are all mentioned, since it is as if Israel is going back there (*Deuteronomy*, 270).

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many of these curses were likely hyperbolic as well, since not all of them came into being.²⁹

There are also connections in Deut 29 with God bringing the people into the wilderness, but reminding them that he was still there with them, never leaving them. He was working miracles that they could see to help them believe in miracles that they could not see. Thus, the covenant curses are kind of an extension of this time, which the people have already experienced. This is probably also why they understand the curses and do not rebel upon hearing them. They understand that the years in the wilderness were for the purpose of redemption and repentance, and so any further times like that would be for the same purposes.

Even the imprecatory psalms are based on the covenant curses, as the psalmists implore God to fulfill the covenant and bring the curses upon the wicked enemies of his people (cf. Deut 30:7; Ps 137).³⁰ The eschatological character of the imprecatory psalms showcases the desire of God's people for the curses to vindicate them and come upon God's enemies at the final judgment time, not necessarily at that moment.³¹

9. Many connections between the curses and Job's experiences; not all suffering is from the curses

The connections between the covenant curses and Job's suffering are numerous: loss of children, flocks, health, and all possessions. Since most of the aspects of the curses happen to him, despite his innocence and blamelessness (Job 1-2), it is clear that that not all bad things happening to people indicate that God is angry or that the covenant curses are being invoked. Sometimes Satan tries to destroy God's followers, and God allows it within the cosmic conflict between good and evil for some reason that we do not always understand fully.³²

²⁹ See Block, *Deuteronomy*, 652.

³⁰ For further discussion of the imprecatory psalms, see G. J. R. Kent, "¡Rómpeles los dientes! ¡Aplasten las cabezas de sus hijos! Salmos imprecatorios como apelación al Juez," in R. Davidson, & E. Horna, eds., "Me invocarás, y yo te responderé" *Estudios selectos en el Salterio* (Lima, Peru: Ediciones Theologica-Universidad Peruana Unión, 2018), 327-357.

³¹ Allan M. Harman, "The Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations of the Psalter," *The Reformed Theological Review* 54 (1995): 65-72.

³² For further discussion, see John C. Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018).

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Habakkuk, along with many psalms and other prophets, also addresses these issues of theodicy, asking the questions about why these things happen, and indicating the complexity of Scripture regarding prosperity and adversity.³³ In other words, it is not always as simple as Deuteronomy seems to portray; the followers of God do not always receive blessings, and rebellious people do not always receive curses.

10. God always brings hope with the curses

God promises to bring the people back after the exile, and to save a remnant (cf. Deut 30:1-10). Deuteronomy 30:4 makes clear that God has not forgotten his people. No matter where they are at, even far off at the ends of the earth, God will bring them back, reiterating what God states in v. 3 as well, in that the punishment is always for the purpose of bringing back, if there is any possibility. While God takes responsibility to banish the people, he also promises to bring them back, even though that is easy to forget when in punishment. The prophets echo this in their discussions and applications of the covenant curses (e.g., Isa 1; Ezek 5-6).

Ultimately, God is the one who promises to change the hearts of the people, and cause them to follow the right path, if they are willing (cf. Deut 10:16; 30:6). God is the one who will circumcise their hearts and those of their children as well. So even though the people are supposed to circumcise their hearts in Deut 10, Deut 30 indicates that they cannot do it, and God takes responsibility for doing it. Circumcision of the heart is what leads to loving God with all the heart and the whole person (as in Deut 6:4-9), so even that is not possible on their own. God strongly desires the people to live, and this is the reason for every interaction He has with his people.

In addition, God promises to make them actually better off than they were before the curses came upon them. Deuteronomy 30:5 indicates that God is the cause of good things for the people, and the cause of their multiplication. When he brings them back, they will be even greater than how prosperous and numerous their fathers were. God wants to make them even better than they were before the exile. That is how much God loves them and wants to bless them and give them hope for the future.

³³ Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*, 673.

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11. God takes the curses on himself so that no one has to experience them

Unfortunately, Israel does not end up being willing to accept God's grace, and already shows their rebellion at the time of Deuteronomy (e.g., Deut 9:6-26). As a result, God goes a step further and even more graciously offers to take the curses on himself. He already walked through the covenant pieces in Gen 15, promising to be cut in half himself for the sake of the people.³⁴

God ultimately takes the covenant curses upon himself when the Messiah dies for the sins of the people (e.g., Isa 1 and 53 have many direct links to Deut 28). For instance, the same wounds and diseases in Deut 28:61 are those that the Messiah takes in Isa 53, even though the people deserve them in Isa 1.³⁵ The only individuals who receive the covenant curses and do not benefit from this substitutionary sacrifice are those who refuse to accept it, and become totally given over to evil, choosing wickedness and death over righteousness and life (cf. Deut 30). Paul continues this argument in Gal 3:10-14, by quoting from Deut 21:23 and 27:26 to make the case that Jesus took the curses on himself on the cross in order to bring blessings to believers in him.³⁶

Conclusion

Deuteronomy 28:45-48 makes crystal clear that the reason for the curses is that the people did not listen to the voice of God or obey him. And because of this, the curses become a sign or witness to what God has tried to do to reach the people, and how they instead chose to walk away from him. God really wants their hearts, not a list of rules that they follow. When joy and gladness and right motives are there, and when people choose to follow God with their hearts and have gratitude for all that he has done for them, then they will naturally follow his law and commandments and do what he desires, as in any true love relationship. Service to God is not drudgery, but the highest delight and honor (Deut 28:47). But rather than serving God in joy, the people chose to serve

³⁴ Willson states that YHWH “ensures his promise of blessing to Abram by committing his very life to the covenant” (Mary A. Willson, “‘Cursed is Everyone Who is Hanged on a Tree’: Paul’s Citation of Deut 21:23 in Gal 3:13,” *Trinity Journal* 36 [2015]: 239).

³⁵ For further discussion, see Richard M. Davidson, “Isaiah 53, Substitution, and the Covenant Curses—Part 1,” *New England Pastor* (2009): 4, 7.

³⁶ Willson notes that other NT passages also allude to Deut 21:23 and apply it to Christ’s death on the cross (“‘Cursed is Everyone Who is Hanged on a Tree,’” 239).

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their enemies in a terrible state, with no food or water or clothes, lacking everything (Deut 28:48). They basically gave up the royal position and abundant wealth they could have had, for their own pride of heart and desire for sin. Service to God is freeing and joyful, but service to their enemies is like wearing a yoke of iron on their necks, ending in destruction.

The ultimate cause of the covenant curses is not God, but the people's choice to not listen to God's voice or heart for them. This implies that the natural result of sin is death, whether God inflicts it directly or not. We would all be dead if it was not for God's grace to keep us alive to make a different choice. J. G. McConville points out that "curses operate, therefore, rather like prophetic oracles of judgment, which intend, not to declare judgment inevitable and fixed, but to turn people from their sins."³⁷

Deuteronomy 30:18 indicates that the end result of turning one's heart away from the true God and worshipping other gods is death. God is not able to bless even though he desires to bless, and the people will not live long. Even though God will still lead them into the land he has promised them, they will perish. Unfortunately, this is actually what happened, as the Israelites listened to the temptations of other gods, and God could only do so much while respecting free will. But Moses still reminds them in this verse that God is giving them the land, and he is doing everything possible to help them to prosper and be blessed. But the people have to choose to follow God. God truly wants their heart, out of which flows obedience, not legalism. The heart either chooses to love God and walk in his ways, or it chooses to turn way, and not hear God, and the result of that is to be banished and start worshipping and serving other gods (Deut 30:17).

And yet, God never left the people, even in punishment. The conclusion of Deuteronomy is not with the curses, but continues with Deut 29-30, which are all about life and hope. Life is contrasted with death, good is contrasted with evil; life is associated with good, and God wants them to live, not die. Following God's commandments first of all means to love him (Deut 30:16). When a person truly loves God, that person follows after him, walking in his ways, which involves turning of the life and all that one does towards God's ways and patterning one's

³⁷ McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 410.

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life after his life. Even more, ultimately God himself is life.³⁸ When people choose God, love God, and cling to him, he is their very life.

In light of these aspects of the covenant, and the preponderance of blessings in the overall structure of Deuteronomy, the covenant curses are not contra grace, but clearly exhibit God's love and justice intertwined, which is then fully manifested in Christ on the cross. The eschatological aspects of the covenant blessings and curses, including repentance and restoration for all believers, indicate their appropriate relationship to the present as well, highlighted by numerous NT applications.³⁹ Indeed, the curses that finally come on the wicked who are in total rebellion against God are even more heightened than in the OT, as they end with eternal death not just the first death (cf. Heb 10:28-31; Rev 6ff).⁴⁰ And the blessings that finally come on those who accept Christ's sacrifice to take the curses they deserve, are also more heightened in the NT, resulting in eternal life and communion with their Redeemer (cf. Rev 21-22).

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³⁸ God is the only who makes their lives long. The Torah is life, and if the people choose to love God, they will naturally follow it; but God himself is the actual life.

³⁹ William D. Barrick, "The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 16 (2005): 95-126.

⁴⁰ For further discussion on this concept, see Matthew McAfee, "Covenant and the Warnings of Hebrews: The Blessing and the Curse," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57 (2014): 537-53.