

AM Deuteronomy 27:9-28:6, Galatians 3:10-14

Curses and Blessings

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[0 : 00] I'm going to read now from the scriptures. We have two readings. The first is from Deuteronomy chapter 27. Those who are with us regularly will know that whenever I've been preaching over the past few months, I've been speaking on verses from Deuteronomy. I'm going to read from Deuteronomy 27 verse 9 down to chapter 28 verse 6.

And I feel perhaps I should give what they call nowadays a trigger warning. That there are some very unpleasant things in this passage. But it is the word of God.

So Deuteronomy chapter 27, reading from verse 9. Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, Keep silence and hear, O Israel.

This day you have become the people of the Lord your God. You shall therefore obey the voice of the Lord your God, keeping his commandments and his statutes, which I command you today.

That day Moses charged the people, saying, When you have crossed over the Jordan, These shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin.

[1 : 45] And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali.

And the Levites shall declare to all the men of Israel, In a loud voice, Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, An abomination to the Lord, A thing made by the hands of a craftsman, And sets it up in secret.

And all the people shall answer and say, Amen. Cursed be anyone who dishonours his father or his mother, And all the people shall say, Amen.

Cursed be anyone who moves his neighbour's landmark, And the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road, And all the people shall say, Amen.

Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, The fatherless, And the widower, And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be anyone who lies with his father's wife, Because he has uncovered his father's nakedness, And all the people shall say, Amen.

[3 : 22] Cursed be anyone who lies with any kind of animal, And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be anyone who lies with his sister, Whether the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother, And all the people shall say, Amen.

Cursed be anyone who lies with his mother-in-law, And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be anyone who strikes down his neighbour in secret, and all the people shall say Amen.

Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood, and all the people shall say Amen. Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them, and all the people shall say Amen.

And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.

And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.

[4 : 49] Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds, and the young of your flock.

Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading ball. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

And now we turn over also to Galatians chapter 3. Just a very short reading from there, but a very important reading which will give you the clue as to why I've chosen to preach on such an extraordinary passage of the Old Testament.

Galatians 3 and verses 10 to 14. For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse.

For it is written, Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law.

[6 : 12] For the righteous shall live by faith. But the law is not of faith. Rather, the one who does them shall live by them.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.

So that in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised spirit through faith.

Good to end on that note of Christ and faith after such a dark beginning in our reading. Well, let's turn now once again to the Word of God in Deuteronomy, chapter 27.

And I'll read again the very last verse, verse 26.

[7 : 23] A very dark verse, but as we shall see, it has a silver lining. Deuteronomy 27, 26.

Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.

And all the people shall say, Amen. Amen. Some of the greatest events in the Bible took place on mountains.

In Genesis 22, Abraham was ready to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah until God stepped in and provided a ram.

In Exodus 3, Moses met with God at the burning bush on Mount Horeb. Then in Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments were given in that same mountain, also called Mount Sinai.

[8 : 39] Moses went up and down that mountain several times, receiving the law and receiving instructions for the tabernacle. And there he saw the glory of God.

In 1 Kings 18, Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. And he too later met with God on Mount Horeb.

In Psalm 48, Jerusalem is said to be on Mount Zion. In the New Testament, in Matthew 4, Jesus is taken up onto a high mountain in the temptation.

In Matthew 5, you have the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 17, you have the Transfiguration on a mountaintop.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. He appeared to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee.

[9 : 49] And he finally ascended from the Mount of Olives. Well, here in Deuteronomy 27, we have another incident.

A very strange incident. Involving not just one mountain, but two. Moses, you remember, has gathered the Israelites in the plains of Moab, ready to cross over, over the Jordan, into the Promised Land.

But now, in verse 12, he commands them that after they have crossed the Jordan, when they are in the land, they are to divide up into two groups and stand on these two mountains, Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, which are two mountains either side of the valley of Shechem.

And there they are to hear the blessings and the curses of the law. So we read in verse 12, when you have crossed the Jordan.

These shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali.

[11 : 25] The context is the renewal of the covenant made originally with Israel at Mount Sinai. We didn't read it, but in verses 1 to 8, they're commanded to set up stones on Mount Ebal with all the words of the law written upon them.

They are to build an altar to the Lord. They are to offer sacrifices to the Lord. And then in verse 9, he announces, This day you have become the people of the Lord.

His covenant people. Therefore, you shall obey the voice of the Lord your God, keeping his commandments and statutes, which I command you today.

They're not his people because they obey, notice, but because they are his people. Therefore, they must obey.

The curses and blessings of the law are then recited in chapters 27 and 28. And finally, the covenant is sealed in chapter 29.

[12 : 41] What we have here, therefore, is a simple choice set before Israel between blessing and cursing.

Obey the law and you will be blessed. Disobey and you will be cursed. This extraordinary ritual of standing on the two mountains was designed to imprint these things upon their minds.

To show them the gap between blessings and cursings. There's a vast chasm between them. Blessing over there.

Cursing far away over there. And the repeated amens are Israel's agreement to the covenant.

If you enter into a legal agreement today, you will be asked to sign in the presence of witnesses. And you may even be asked to initial each page of the document to show that you agree with everything.

[14 : 06] That effectively is what Israel is doing here. They are agreeing with the law of God and with each law individually. And they are doing so publicly.

Heaven and earth are their witnesses. They have agreed that God's law is just and they have committed themselves to keeping that law.

law. So far so good. But there is a problem here. A big problem. Has anyone ever completely kept God's law?

Are we not all going to end up on Mount Ebal with the curse? how can any of us expect to be on Mount Gerizim with the blessing?

That's the problem that is playing upon Paul's mind in Galatians 3. He had been a Pharisee remember he'd committed himself to keeping the law of God and he tried desperately hard to obey God's law that he might inherit the blessing and he discovered the hard way that you just can't do it.

[15 : 35] So what is his answer? Well his answer there in Galatians is based upon verses in Deuteronomy. We've noticed before how the New Testament frequently quotes Deuteronomy.

Well Paul quotes it twice in that short passage that we read. In Galatians 3 and verse 10 he quotes our text today. Deuteronomy 27-26 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse for it is written Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them.

But then also in Galatians 3-13 he quotes from another verse in Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse 23 which is the answer Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us for it is written written in Deuteronomy written in the same book that speaks of the curses cursed cursed is everyone who hangs upon a tree.

And that is the silver lining to our text. Though it speaks of a curse it points us to Christ. Well I want us to look today briefly at these curses and blessings in Deuteronomy and then at that glorious gospel of redemption which Paul draws out of it in Galatians 3.

So first the curses and the blessings in Deuteronomy. The Levites were to read out with a loud voice twelve curses upon those who disobeyed the law and all the people were to answer Amen.

[17 : 43] We agree with that. Now at first sight these twelve laws might seem completely random even slightly bizarre but there is a kind of logic here.

They do actually follow the pattern of the Ten Commandments giving examples of five of them. Not every sin is listed just a representative selection of them.

Some of them sadly very common others thankfully very uncommon precisely because they are so horrible. But together they show how broad the commandments are.

Twelve curses. The Ten Commandments are sometimes called the Decalogue. The Ten Words well here you have a dodecalogue.

Twelve words. First there is idolatry. The Ten Commandments had said you shall not make any graven image.

[18 : 57] Now in verse nine that's elaborated cursed be the man who makes a carved or a cast metal image an abomination to the Lord especially if it's set up in secret.

and all the people say Amen. Then respect for parents. The Ten Commandments said honour your father and your mother.

Well here it is in reverse cursed be anyone who dishonours his father or his mother. And all the people say Amen.

Then three laws concerning justice. Verse 17 cursed be he who moves his neighbour's landmark. Verse 18 cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road.

Verse 19 cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner the fatherless and the widow. All of these are related to the eighth commandment.

[19 : 59] You shall not steal. You shall not take away his land or his safety. or his justice. They also reflect the royal law of love.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself which is an Old Testament commandment from Leviticus 19. They show how much the Lord cares about the poor.

And they are still very relevant today. The needs of the disabled, the needs of the refugee, they're right here in these verses. And let me add, if it's wrong to mislead a blind man along the road, how much worse is it to mislead blind souls with false doctrine?

Once again, the people say Amen and I hope in your heart you too say Amen to these laws. we then have these four laws about sexual morality verses 19 to 23 incest of various kinds and bestiality.

I hasten to add that lying with an animal doesn't mean allowing your pet dog to sleep at the end of your bed. I mentioned to a Christian friend what I was preaching on this Sunday and that was his reaction.

[21 : 31] Oh but I like to have my dog sleep on my bed. Well let me assure you that's perfectly alright. What he's speaking of here is much much more serious.

The Ten Commandments said you shall not commit adultery. Here that law is expanded and all the people say Amen.

Now I suppose most people today would say Amen to these laws though we live in dark times don't we when people are pushing the boundaries particularly in sexual matters.

How we need the purity of God's law. Then there are two laws about violence. Verse 24 curse be anyone who strikes down his neighbour in secret.

Verse 25 cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood. The Ten Commandments said you shall not kill. Well here is an expansion of that law.

[22 : 38] And all the people said Amen. But then comes the killer blow in verse 26. Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of the law by doing them.

And that means as Paul says all the words of this law. Up to this point you might have been thinking smugly well I'm okay then.

You may have been ticking them off on your check wrist and saying well no haven't made any graven images today. Haven't moved any landmarks. Certainly haven't slept with any animals.

Well good. I'm pleased to hear that. but have you kept the whole law in every letter? If not there is a curse upon you.

What that curse is is not described here. That comes later in chapter 28. But basically it is the opposite of all the beautiful blessings that are described at the beginning of chapter 28.

[23 : 56] Just listen to these lovely blessings. In verse one it says if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today.

The Lord your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And there follows this list of material blessings which Israel would enjoy if they obeyed.

Blessed shall you be in the city blessed shall you be in the field your trade will prosper your farm will prosper blessed shall be the fruit of your womb your children will be numerous and grow up happy and healthy and the fruit of your ground your cattle your herds and your flock they'll all multiply blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl blessed shall you be when you come in and when you go out.

Obey and you will be blessed. Disobey and you will be cursed. You will experience the very opposite of all those blessings.

Yes I know it's not as simple as that. Sometimes the wicked prosper and the godly suffer. But that's another sermon.

[25 : 22] This is the general principle. Blessing or cursing which is it to be? That's the question set before Israel. And it is still set before us today.

Except that our sights are set not just on material blessings but upon spiritual blessings. blessings. But how can we obtain God's blessings when we have disobeyed God's law?

And if we can't even obtain these material blessings how can we hope for spiritual blessings? How can we who have broken God's law hope for God's favour and for God to give us eternal life?

Let's come now to Paul's answer in Galatians 3 and you may like to have that passage open before you. Paul is writing this letter to counter a heresy that had been spreading around the churches.

The true gospel says that we are saved by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ but a false gospel was spreading saying that you needed faith plus works.

[26 : 43] Paul shows in verse 10 how foolish that is by quoting this verse in Deuteronomy. All who rely on works of the law are under a curse for it is written Deuteronomy 27 26 curse be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them.

Total obedience that's what's required. If you fall short of that to the extent that you fall short you are cursed and we all do fall short as Paul says in Romans all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

He quotes another Old Testament scripture in support of this verse 11 it's evident that no one is justified before God by the law for the righteous shall live by faith quoting Habakkuk but the law is not of faith rather the one who does them shall live by them.

So what are you doing trying to be saved by the works of the law? That's a hopeless task. If you're relying upon your good works you will be cursed.

The law is uncompromising. but then he returns to Deuteronomy for the glorious answer to our problem.

[28 : 16] Quoting this time from Deuteronomy 21 verse 23 he says Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us for it is written cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.

Well you might say that doesn't sound a very encouraging text. It actually comes in a rather unpromising passage in Deuteronomy about capital punishment.

If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death and you hang his body on a tree his body shall not remain all night on the tree but you shall bury him the same day for a hanged man is cursed by God.

Would you have seen the gospel there if Paul hadn't shown it to you? I'm not sure I would but Paul has shown it to us. You see Christ was hanged on a tree nailed to a wooden cross made from a tree and the requirements of that law in Deuteronomy were dutifully fulfilled.

He was not left overnight on the cross but he was taken down and he was buried the same day as the law required. But here's the point.

[29 : 43] He had not committed any crime worthy of death. Pilate said as much in Luke 23 15 nothing deserving of death has been found in him.

Indeed Jesus had not committed even the smallest of sins. He alone among all mankind had kept the law in every detail.

So why was he dying? He was dying in our place bearing our sins as an atoning sacrifice to redeem us from sin.

Peter says he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree. As Isaiah says the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He who had obeyed the law and deserved the blessings endured the cross, the curse that was due to us, so that we might receive the blessing that he deserved.

[31 : 00] Paul concludes in verse 14 he did this so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promised spirit through faith.

The blessing of Abraham is in Genesis 12 I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Abraham received that blessing by faith. He believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness. But now Paul says in Christ that is extended to the Gentiles like these Galatians and like us and whoever believes in Christ will be blessed and that blessing is summed up in the gift of the spirit.

Now how astonishing it is to think of Christ bearing the curse for us. Christ being treated as if he had committed those terrible sins in Deuteronomy 26, 27.

But that is what had to happen for us to be saved. He had to bear the sin of the world. He had to have the whole catalog of sin laid upon him.

[32 : 40] All the sins of his people however horrible they may be. Amongst those who are saved are people who have committed even those very sins that we read out in Deuteronomy.

Idolatry, dishonoring parents, theft, leading the blind astray, perverting justice, sexual immorality, violence.

Christ had to take all those terrible sins upon himself and die for them on the cross as if he had committed them himself.

He who was the image of God treated as though he made images. he who worshipped his heavenly father and who loved and honoured and obeyed his earthly parents treated as if he had dishonoured them.

He who healed the blind treated as though he led the blind astray. He who was pure treated as if he had lain with animals.

[34 : 08] he who saved life treated as if he had taken it. And all the people look on and say Amen.

They all agreed with it. It's an almost unbearable thought, isn't it? Yet Christ did that out of love for us.

your sins, my sins, if we're his, they are there too on the cross.

Christ's precious blood was shed for us to redeem us from the curse of the law so that we might receive the blessing of God instead.

So how should we respond to all this? Well, first of all, of course, with faith. Trusting in Christ as our Redeemer.

[35 : 13] It's rather striking that those who stood on Mount Ebal were standing right next to an altar, reminding them that they needed forgiveness and that forgiveness comes through the blood.

we need forgiveness and we have forgiveness but only if we trust in Christ. There must be repentance also.

We see here in Deuteronomy just how terrible sin is, how it deserves a curse and how it required Christ's death.

How can you not weep over your sins and turn from them? And obedience should follow.

Christ having redeemed us from the curse of the law doesn't mean that we can go on disobeying the law. On the contrary, God's law remains a shining guide for us in the ways of God.

[36 : 21] Yes, the ritual laws have gone, but the moral law still remains our guide. God but above all, we should respond with worship.

When we see our Redeemer crucified for us, bearing unimaginable sins for us, and bringing unimaginable blessings to us, blessings beyond those of Deuteronomy, blessings not just of this world, but the blessings of the world to come, enduring hell on the cross, so that we might enjoy heaven forever.

Surely, our hearts should be full of wonder, love, and praise. Amen. Amen. We're going to close our service now with Psalm 32 on page 38.

Speaking of the great blessing of forgiveness, forgiveness. Psalm 32 verses 1 to 7, beginning, How blessed the one who has received forgiveness for his sin.

Thank you.