

The Good News and the Bad News

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, speak to us from your word, we pray. Write it on our hearts that we may believe it and trust it and obey it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

What a dangerous chapter this is, Deuteronomy chapter 28. For it is used and abused in so many different ways.

It promises early on blessings of wealth, blessings of crops and animals, prosperity when you come in and go out. And it is one of the passages that preachers of what's called a prosperity gospel will use to advocate that really what God wants is that we be rich, that we be wealthy and prosperous. And that if we live obedient lives, then God will shower wealth and prosperity on us. That's the message in effect of some of those tele-evangelists like Jim Backer a few years ago before he ended up going to prison for fraud and losing his ministry and wife and so on.

It's in some ways really the message of Hillsong, the biggest church in Australia, a prosperity gospel, that we be rich, as indeed is advocated by a recently published book that argues that the Hillsong Church is really a prosperity gospel and quite a dangerous gospel.

[1 : 25] This is a passage that promises, blessed shall be the fruit of your womb. And there are not a few couples who've been wanting children, who've read this verse and seen it as a promise of God and claim that therefore they would have children and God would provide children for them.

And imagine the damage that does if they don't have children. And there's even damage, of course, theologically if they do. It promises in verse 1 that you will be the chief nation.

God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And so if you come from the nation that is supposedly highest of all the nations of the earth, what pride or arrogance can give that this passage can give rise to?

I read the comments of an American preacher on this passage during the week and claiming that this shows in some way that America is loved of God as the favored nation of God on earth because it's the chief nation on earth.

And of course, this passage is abused by those who simply read it out of its context and say, if we obey, God will bless. If we don't obey, God will curse.

[2 : 37] And the theology that that gives rise to is often called a works theology, that simply you'll be favored by God, accepted by God or saved by God simply if you obey God.

And if you don't obey, then he won't accept you. This is a dangerous passage. Because it's so easy and so frequently misread and misunderstood.

In the ancient world where two countries or kings would make a treaty together, there were passages like this in those treaties. Archaeologists have found them from ancient Hittites and Assyrians and others.

A passage that in effect says, If you as the conquered nation or the submissive nation do not do these things, then this is how we'll treat you.

But if you do do these things, this is how we'll look after you. It reminds us that Deuteronomy 28 is part of a bigger package in effect. For us, the book of Deuteronomy.

[3 : 38] It's a bit like a covenant or treaty document between God and Israel. Not that God has conquered Israel and forced them into submission under him, like the ancient Hittites did to Egypt and so on.

But rather that God in grace and mercy has saved Israel and redeemed them, brought them out of Egypt, brought them now to the verge of the promised land, where they're standing looking over the Jordan into the promised land.

That is, the relationship between Israel and God is already there. It's established by God's grace. This is how to respond to that relationship, how to respond to God's grace by faithful obedience.

It's not about how to create a relationship with God. It's not about how to win God's favor. But it's how to live as the chosen, loved people of God, recipients of his grace to them.

If we fail to see Deuteronomy 28 in that context of being part of the covenant of the Old Testament between God and Israel, then we'll do great damage reading this wrongly.

[4 : 44] Remember that God chose Abram back in Genesis 12. And from Abram, God chose his descendants, which ultimately became the nation of Israel. God chose them not because of anything good or morally righteous in Abram or in Israel.

Indeed, Deuteronomy is at pains to show that Israel is consistently rebellious to God, consistently fails God in its past history. But God in love and grace chose Abram, chose his descendants, has loved them, has saved them, has brought them out of Egypt, has cared for them for 40 years in the wilderness and brought them to the verge of the promised land and promised them the land that they're about to inherit and promised them these blessings contingent on their faithful obedience in response to him.

Deuteronomy 28 is a motivational passage, a passage full of incentive to obey because of the blessings God promises and full of warnings in the last part of the chapter of what will happen if they do not obey.

Again, incentive to obey, to avoid the curses or the warnings that will come upon them. We need to be careful too about who is being addressed here.

It's Israel. It's ancient Israel, 1400 BC, under the leadership of Moses just before he dies. It's Israel a nation, but not just any nation.

[6 : 09] God's words here would not apply to Egypt or Canaan, to the Assyrians or the Hittites. They are for Israel alone, a specific nation, because they are the descendants of Abraham.

They are the people of God fundamentally. That is, it's addressed to those who are the people of God who happen to be the nation of Israel. But it's not primarily addressing a nation so much as primarily addressing the people of God.

Notice that it's spoken then to a group of people and not to an individual. So it's not saying, Mr. Fred or Mrs. Mary, if you obey God, then you'll have lots of children and you personally will be wealthy and so on.

But rather, to the nation as a whole, this is the general picture of God's blessing. It does not necessarily mean that every single Israelite will be abundantly wealthy.

Indeed, the laws of Deuteronomy make it clear that that may not be the case, but corporately there will be sufficient for all to live in abundance, so long as there is generosity and giving from those who have more to those who have less.

[7 : 23] There's danger, you see, in applying this passage simply to an individual, even to an individual who belongs to the people of God, because it's actually addressed to the group of God's people, in this case, ancient Israel.

The other caution we need to note is note where this blessing will take place. This is one of the things that absolutely bamboozles me about the prosperity gospel that use passages like this. This is talking about a specific land, the land over the Jordan River to its west that goes to the Mediterranean Sea, that goes as south as the deserts of Sinai and north beyond the Lebanon to the Ephraim.

That's the land that will be the location of these promised blessings and curses. It's not Australia or America. It's not any land like it's not any people. It's ancient Israel in that land.

And that's the context, the location of these promised blessings and curses. In that promised land that lies ahead of Israel, that was promised 600 years before to Abram and is now within hand's grasp almost for ancient Israel, God promises blessings if.

[8 : 42] If you will only obey, verse 1. In verse 2, if you obey the Lord your God. In verse 9, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways.

In verse 13, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God. Verse 14, if you do not turn aside. If, if, if, if, if. At least five times. These are promised blessings if the people of God are obedient to the commands of God.

The commands that are captured for us in chapters preceding, chapters 12 to 26 in particular. But even before that, not simply external commands, but things like loving God with all your heart, serving him, fearing him, cleaving to him, as well as the detailed commandments of generosity, of sexual morality, of economic laws and worship and so on.

14 verses of blessings. Great verses. Encouraging, exciting verses. Blessed shall you be in the city. Blessed shall you be in the field.

What about those who are not quite in the city and not quite in the field? You know, Doncaster, sort of outer suburb sort of thing. And, and verse 6, blessed shall you be when you come in and blessed shall you be when you go out.

[10:00] But what if you're not doing either of those things? In ancient Hebrew, they would put together, in effect, polar opposites coming in, going out, city, field. And they mean everything in between.

Everything. The whole kit and caboodle. The whole package. It means everything. In English, the best approximation of that that I've come across is, imagine you've lost something and you're searching for it.

And people sometimes say, I've searched high and low for it. Well, you don't say, well, search in the middle. You see, when you say, I've searched high and low, you mean I've searched everywhere. And that's what it means here. Blessed are you in the city, the field, when you come in, when you go out.

That means any place, any time. It's an overall comprehensive blessing. It's a prosperity. Blessed shall you be in your crops and in your animals and in your children as well.

The blessing extends to the defeat of enemies in verse 7. So if in the promised land you're then attacked by an outsider, God will bless you by giving you national security from enemies.

[11:01] You'll defeat the enemies. They'll race off seven ways, the end of verse 7 says, because they'll be in disarray and defeat. But notice also what's part of this blessing, something that's so often ignored in those who simply consume these verses as personal wealth and prosperity and are thoroughly then human-centered.

This passage actually remains God-centered. In verse 10, all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord and they shall be afraid of you.

You see, these verses are not simply about creating a luxury paradise for ancient Israel to indulge in and boast in. It's not about creating a huge sort of national resort for wealth and rows of Rolls-Royce cars and mansions that are magnificent houses to live in.

It's not about that sort of wasteful, luxurious indulgence that prosperity so often seems to be in our age. These blessings on Israel would serve a bigger purpose of God.

You see, in the Old Testament, God's purpose is not just to indulge Israel, to spoil them with the blessings of the land, and that's it. God's purpose in the Old Testament is always for the salvation of the world.

[12:25] And the means by which he seeks to save the world is through his choice of Abraham and Abraham's descendants. And God's model, in effect, is to set up Israel as a holy nation, geographically distinct in the land, whereby Israel is obedient and righteous under God, will reap God's blessings so that other nations will say, there's something special here, we want to know what this is about, and we want to know their God.

That's actually earlier in Deuteronomy, in chapter 4, exactly that sort of idea is expressed. In Deuteronomy 4, we read that Israel is to observe in the land all the commandments.

This will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who when they hear all these statutes will say, surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people. What other great nation has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?

That is, Israel's obedience under God serves the mission of God. It will become an attraction for other nations to come to God, as they see the blessed nation of Israel.

That's why God's going to pour his blessings on an obedient Israel, not to spoil and indulge them, but for the sake of the whole world. That's always God's purpose in both Old and New Testaments.

[13:46] In the Old Testament, the motion is, I think the scientists call it, centripetal motion, that is towards the center. The idea being that Israel will be like a light, a beacon of blessing, so that other nations are drawn in like moths to light.

And that's often the picture you find in the Old Testament, as it looks forward to the end times in some of the prophets, that the nations will stream to Israel and stream to Jerusalem.

In history, we hardly ever see it being fulfilled in the Old Testament. Perhaps the greatest exception and where it is a glimpse of fulfillment is in the wealth of the reign of Solomon, where the Queen of Sheba, whether she comes from Ethiopia or Yemen, they're always debating with each other about

that.

She probably came from Sheba, I presume. And she came to acknowledge not only Solomon, but Solomon's God. But soon after that, the kingdom divided and began to disintegrate in history in Old Testament times.

God's mission is for the world. And that's what the little verse 10 is reminding us about. It's not prosperity for its own sake, but rather blessing on Israel for the sake of the other nations.

[14:59] And that's what God promised Abram in Genesis 12. Those who bless you, I will bless. Indeed, through you shall all the world be blessed. And that's what this passage is reminding us of here.

Of course, in New Testament times, the same purpose of God is there, although the direction shifts a little bit. So our obedience and righteous lives, not just as individuals, but as a church, is also meant to be an attraction to the world.

Not that we're all congregating together in a particular land, all the Christians of the world, but rather we're deliberately to be scattered amongst the world, but still living holy lives that will draw people to God.

Indeed, as Jesus gave that great commission before he ascended to heaven, the most distinctive word in it is go. Something you don't see in the Old Testament, where the idea is of drawing the nations to Israel and to God.

Now God's people are to go into the world. But still the priority on our holy lives, on our character and integrity, not just as individuals, but as a church, is meant to be an attraction and a beacon to draw people to the God of the universe.

[16:15] All of this is premised on if. If only you will obey. But then it turns in verse 15.

But if you will not obey. And then follows not 14 verses to balance the first 14, but 54 verses of curses, which show an imbalance.

And actually as we read those curses from verse 15 to 68, we're not going to read them all, but it begins with if you will not obey. But when you get to say verse 45, the if has almost been forgotten. Verse 45, all these curses shall come upon you. Verse 47, because you did not serve the Lord, these things will come upon you. That is, it moves from the hypothetical if to when.

Because the expectation of Deuteronomy, like we saw last week in chapter 27, is not if Israel fails, but when it fails.

[17:24] And that's the implication, it seems, of the weight of curses in this chapter. Now what a picture these curses paint. It's a fairly horrific picture.

It's of poverty, not wealth, of scarcity. It's of disease. So verse 21, the Lord will make the pestilence cling to you. Verse 22, the Lord will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, fiery heat and drought and blight and mildew.

Imagine going to the doctor and being told that. Verse 27, the same, the Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt, with ulcers, scurvy and itch of which you cannot be healed.

It's not a very pretty diagnosis. As well as the physical ailments, come the emotional distress. Verse 28, for example, the Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind.

There'll be drought. Verse 23, a very evocative picture, the sky over your head shall be bronze and the earth under you iron. That is the sky will be hard.

[18:28] No rain will come from it. The ground will be dry. There'll be no moisture in it. Something that we can understand, I guess, in recent months in our own country. As well as that, instead of defeating the enemies, there'll be defeat by the enemies.

Verse 25, the Lord will cause you to be defeated. And instead of the enemies going in retreat in seven directions, the end of verse 25, later in verse 25, it says, and you will flee before them seven ways.

And that leads on in various verses that follow. So to subservience to those other nations. Verse 36, in effect, implies that the Lord will bring you and the king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your ancestors have known.

That is, as subjects of that nation, back to slavery in effect, as Israel had experienced in Egypt. As well as that, one of the pictures that runs through these curses is of frustration and futility.

That there's sort of an anticipation of fulfillment or joy, but it just dissolves or withers away in front of you. So in verse 30, you shall become engaged to a woman, but another man shall lie with her.

[19 : 44] You shall build a house, but not live in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but not enjoy its fruit. That is, you sort of take the first step towards anticipated blessing, and then it's like a mirage in front of you that disappears.

The futility, the frustration of unfulfilled expectation. The same sort of picture occurs a number of other times. Verse 38, you shall carry much seed into the field, but gather little in.

The locust shall consume it. You'll plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink the wine nor gather the grapes. The worm shall eat them. You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off.

And perhaps the end result of all of this at the end, or in verse 36, is you shall serve other gods, gods of wood and stone. That is, you'll be taken away not only from the land, but from God, and forced into idolatry of the land that has conquered you.

The second half of this series of curses in particular seems to show an unwinding of God's salvation that he's brought to Israel already.

[21 : 02] So from verse 47 to the end of the chapter, the picture is that whereas God has redeemed Israel and brought them out of slavery and brought them out of Egypt to the promised land, in a sense, it'll go backwards, in reverse, all the way back.

So in verse 48, for example, there you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you. Back to slavery, as it was at the beginning of the book of Exodus. Verse 49, the Lord will bring a nation from far away from the end of the earth to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand.

That is, they'll be exiled from the land, conquered by an enemy. And later on in verse 64, it talks about the Lord will scatter you among all peoples. What God has been doing since the beginning of Exodus is to gather and bring his people together to the land and then it will unwind as they'll be scattered to the ends of the earth in defeat and in exile.

Perhaps the most horrific part of this whole chapter comes in verse 53 as it anticipates this enemy nation coming to besiege Israel, to surround Israel.

Verse 53 tells us, in the desperate straits to which the enemy siege reduces you, you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your own sons and daughters. Something that we can scarcely imagine ever doing.

[22 : 23] Cannibalism to stay alive. You see, when an ancient city was besieged by an enemy, the food would run out, the water would run out. The idea was that the enemy would just sit around you and wait till you gave in, till you died.

And Israel here would be so desperate that in order to stay alive they might even eat their own children. Verse 60 talks about returning to the diseases of Egypt.

and verse 62 talks about having been numerous as the stars in heaven, an expression we've seen a couple of times earlier in Deuteronomy that shows fulfillment of promise to Abraham.

Now in fact there'll be few in number. It's an unwinding of all the promises to Abraham, an unwinding of all the actions of God, taking us back to a people who in effect are nothing.

Well it's a horrific picture these curses but this is a crucial chapter to understand the Old Testament because of course Israel's history shows us time and time again they did not obey and the curses of the second half of Deuteronomy 28 were eventually seen in their history.

[23 : 37] But it's not just simply that one glimmer of disobedience and God comes down like a foot on them and squashes them. We actually see these curses in Israel's history from a patient and merciful God.

So time and time again God would send a drought or a pestilence or a famine as a warning so that they would remember this chapter and they would turn and come back to him.

But in Israel's history they were stubborn and never recognized the warning signs. So for example in the prophet Amos in chapter 4 Amos says quoting God I sent you a famine but you didn't turn to me I sent you a drought and yet you did not come back to me I sent you blight and mildew but you did not repent of your sins I sent you an enemy to defeat you and still you did not turn back to me. That is this chapter becomes so crucial to interpret Israel's history. They ought to have known this chapter they ought to have recognized the drought the mildew the plague the famine the drought whatever and recognize hang on a minute we're going the wrong way we need to turn back to God. But they didn't not even under the provocation of prophets like Amos. And so God in his patient mercy kept in a sense staying off the final judgments that would come at the end of this sequence of

curses.

[25 : 03] After the kingdom divided in 721 the northern kingdom went into exile. That was another warning sign for the south for Judah and Jerusalem and still they did not heed God's word.

And so finally in 586 BC a foreign nation from far away swooped down like an eagle under their general Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonians came they besieged Jerusalem and exactly what these curses anticipated happened Jerusalem inhabitants some at least committed cannibalism in order to stay alive as Jerusalem was besieged for many months.

but eventually it fell destroyed to rubble its leaders and elders carted off to exile in Babylon where the distress that's anticipated here was expressed you read the book of Lamentations to see that Psalm 137 how can we worship the Lord in a strange land the distress that's anticipated here was realized some hundreds of years later when finally God's patience ran out.

you see Deuteronomy 28 is a key for understanding the history of the Old Testament for understanding the droughts and famines the defeats that God brought where does a passage like this intersect with us we might simply say well clearly this has nothing to do with us clearly it's realized in Old Testament history and therefore it's out of date it's sort of interesting historically but does it actually intersect with us we're not Israel we're not dealing with this land we live in a different time after the times of Jesus and yet so often I hear of Christians who say well I've just had the flu is that God's curse on me is God punishing me or is every defeat in war a sign of God's curse or punishment is Australia's drought because we're disobeying God is it that the wealthiest nation on earth is necessarily therefore God's favored blessed nation well lots of cautions because this passage is dangerous because it's so easy to read wrongly this is about a particular land particular people in a particular time as I've tried to make clear we can't simply say it applies to any nation to any people in any time it's clearly the people of

God ancient Israel clearly a particular geographical land at a particular time however the trajectory of this passage does intersect with us it does lead forward and still teach us and still challenge us of course we are descendants of Abraham we who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ not racially but spiritually as the New Testament makes so clear to us you see the descendants of Abraham ultimately are those who believe in Jesus whether they're Jews or non-Jews we are children of Abraham and the Abrahamic promises still stand but in a far bigger way than Abraham understood or the Old Testament understood and the promise of land which is so geographically defined in the Old Testament is transferred and enlarged and enhanced in the New Testament so it's a promise of a heavenly land a heavenly inheritance that is guarded for us a new Jerusalem that is its capital city at the end of the Bible so we cannot say that somehow that land still holds some magnetic appeal for God but rather was a foretaste of a heavenly land which is our inheritance and so the promised blessings of the first part of this chapter apply for the children of

[28 : 55] Abraham today but located in the heavenly land that is our inheritance but what is even more special is that the New Testament makes it clear that we're already citizens of that land and already recipients of its spiritual blessings so Paul writes to the Ephesians in chapter 1 we have received already every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus well how can that be where do the curses apply and that's where the trajectory of this passage also helps us as well as encourages us because as we saw last week we stand under a curse because we fail God's law but the great joy and the mercy of God that gives rise to that joy is that the curse has been removed by the one who was perfect the perfect descendant of Abraham on the cross of Christ when the curse is removed so that we may be though we don't deserve it the recipients of the blessing of

God we remain in a covenant relationship with God like ancient Israel was the new covenant has a similar sort of structure it's a relationship established by God's grace to which we respond or meant to respond with faithful obedience as was ancient Israel this passage leads us to the Jesus who took away the curse for us though we don't deserve it so that we may be confident in receiving the spiritual blessings of God but there's one other final point by way of where this trajectory of this passage drives us to for as I made clear its purpose here of blessing is that the world would come to God and that purpose of God is not lost for of course the purpose of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is exactly that that the peoples of every tongue and race of every tribe and nation will come to God through the people of

God and though we're not to be gathered into a special land to live as a nation of Christians anymore we're deliberately living amongst all the nations of the world but the quality of our life together as the people of God as a church ought to be so different from our world's standards so full

of good character and love and mercy and integrity that our world will take notice that as we invite as they are attracted they will come to see the God of all blessing and the God of the Lord Jesus Christ and they'll come to turn and place their faith and trust in him let's pray oh God we thank you that you are the God from whom all blessings flow we thank you that you are the God who has removed the curse from us by the sacrifice of your son Jesus Christ Lord God strengthen us to obey with faith your standards and laws not so that we may be rich and blessed but so that this world may know that you are God and come to you and bring glory to you and to Jesus Amen and God will even Him particularly as to my I power and to seulement