

Blessings and Curses

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[0 : 00] Would it be great if you could turn your Bibles back to Leviticus chapter 26. Well, I know I've mentioned our dog Toby before, but he's recently cost us so much money.

I'm going to get my money's worth and use him as an illustration again. Because last month he ate and swallowed a sock. I mean, who eats socks? Dogs, apparently.

And so we had to have surgery and stay several nights in dog hospital. It cost us a bomb and now we have pet insurance. At the time I did suggest a cheaper option.

But that did not go down well with my daughter. Because my daughter is determined to have a dog in her place enjoying her blessings like hugs and treats.

I mean, just look at those eyes. Of course, to receive her blessings and enjoy them, Toby needs to obey Megan's laws like sit and stay and don't eat socks.

[1 : 08] And if Toby, though, disobeys, then he misses out on those blessings and suffers punishment instead, like being cut off from the family, you know, outside, away from Megan's hugs and treats.

And today we see that God is determined not to have a dog, but a people in his place enjoying his blessings. But to receive these blessings and enjoy them, Israel had to obey.

If they disobeyed, then they'd miss out and suffer the opposite of blessing, which is curses instead. And which is not what God prefers to do.

In fact, as we look at the second part of the chapter with the punishment, we'll see that he even does it in a way to try and bring them back to him to enjoy the blessings.

But first of all, the chapter begins and ends with a reminder of God's old covenant command. So if you look in your Bibles at verses 1 and 2, he mentions two of the Ten Commandments, you know, no images or idols and the Sabbath day.

[2 : 13] And the Sabbath is particularly mentioned because in Exodus 31, in the screen we read that it's actually a sign of the covenant between God and Israel. God saved them from Egypt and set them apart to be holy, different to the world, to enjoy his rest.

The very thing that the Sabbath day pointed them to, which is why it was a sign of the covenant.

And at the end of the chapter, he also says, if you just flick over the page to the end, verse 46, right at the last verse, these are the decrees and laws and the regulations that the Lord established at Mount Sinai between himself and the Israelites through Moses.

In other words, this is the old covenant through Moses. These are the commands from Exodus and Leviticus that they are to obey so that they can receive and enjoy his blessings, which brings us to point one in your outlines and verse three in your Bibles.

Let's have a look there at verse three. Come back to the beginning almost. He says, Here is prosperity, isn't it?

Lots of crops with lots of food, which they will enjoy in safety, because next comes peace. Excuse me. Verse six. I will grant peace in the land and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid or remove wild beasts from the land and the sword will not pass through your country.

[4 : 05] You'll pursue your enemies and they will fall by the sword before you. Five of you will chase a hundred and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand and your enemies will fall by the sword before you.

Here is peace. A peace from wild animals, peace from wild people, I guess, enemies. There's no more war in their land. That's something which our world could do with, couldn't it?

And part of the reason for this peace here is that their enemies will take one look at Israel and flee and then fall before them. You see how verse eight says, Five of you Israelites will chase away a hundred enemies.

A hundred of you Israelites will chase away ten thousand enemies. So there will be peace. Prosperity, verses three to five. Peace, verses six to eight. And then even more prosperity, nine to ten.

You see verse nine? I will look on you with favor and make you fruitful and increase your numbers. And I will keep my covenant with you. You'll be still be eating last year's harvest when you'll have to move it out to make room for the new.

[5 : 13] Here is not just prosperity, but abundant prosperity, isn't it? And it's not just abundant food. It's also family because verse nine says they'll be fruitful and increase in numbers, numbers of people, that is.

Here are the physical blessings of peace and abundant prosperity that come with the physical land of Canaan that they are entering. But wait, there's more.

The crescendo of these blessings are actually not physical, but spiritual. Verse 11. I will put my dwelling place among you and will not abhor you.

I will walk among you and be your God and you will be my people. The expression, I will be your God and you will be my people speaks of a right relationship between God and his people.

And here it's a close relationship for God will live and walk amongst them. I mean, that's quite a blessing, isn't it? To have the God of the universe amongst you, with you.

[6 : 26] You'd feel pretty blessed, wouldn't you? And these spiritual blessings are actually the important ones. Firstly, because they get to enjoy relationship with the God of the universe.

But secondly, because if he is with you, then he'll ensure that those physical blessings come too. A few guys from our service play basketball on a Monday night.

My son is part of the team. They've even asked me to join. But to play amongst them would not be a blessing to them. And so I score sometimes instead.

But imagine, though, if Michael Jordan, he's a bit old now, but I don't know who today's equivalent would be. You know, the equivalent of Michael Jordan today joined their team and played amongst them.

That would be quite a blessing, wouldn't it? Not only because you'd get to know and enjoy friendship with this extraordinary player, but also because you'd be pretty certain of a prosperous season because of this player, wouldn't you?

[7 : 26] Or so too with Israel and God. And so the spiritual blessing of God amongst them and with them is actually more important. They can enjoy that relationship and be certain of peace and prosperity because of God later.

But if, if they obey. Not to, by the way, earn God's blessings. I'm not sure I particularly like the word reward at the top of the heading.

It's not actually part of the original Bible, those headings. It's not so much to earn God's blessings. God already wants to give them to them freely. But rather it's to receive and enjoy those blessings. Imagine for a moment, it's a bit like my daughter, Megan. She goes to pet barn up the road, buy some dog treats for Toby. She has them on the kitchen bench as a gift for him.

But then he, she says, sit. And until she, he obeys, he won't receive them or enjoy them, will he? I mean, they're already there ready for him.

[8 : 30] It's a gift for him. But to receive and enjoy that blessing of that dog treat, he needs to obey. It's the same idea here. In fact, God has always wanted to bless his people freely as a gift.

I mean, does that language of being fruitful and increasing in number, plus God walking amongst people, reminds you of another place at the beginning of the Bible?

Maybe Genesis, Garden of Eden? There is God's people, Adam and Eve, in God's place of Eden, enjoying God's blessing as he walks amongst them in the cool of the day, Genesis 3 says.

Even at creation, God always had a desire to bless his people as a gift. It's why he saved Israel to be his people.

It's why he's bringing Israel into their promised land of Canaan, to be in his place. And here are the blessings he's got ready to give them. But the way to receive them and enjoy them is to obey.

[9 : 34] Because if they disobey, then you'll have to punish them with curses instead. Point 2, verse 14. But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws, and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then this is what I will do to you.

I will bring on you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and sap your strength. You will plant seed in vain because your enemies will eat it. I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies.

Those who hate you will rule over you, and you'll flee even when no one is pursuing you. The word curse doesn't come up here, but this punishment is the very opposite of the blessings we saw before.

Instead of safety, here is terror. Instead of ruling over their enemies and defeating them, it's the opposite, isn't it? Instead of pursuing the enemies, five of them against a hundred, well, now they flee when no one is pursuing them.

The opposite of blessing is curse, and that's what we see here. But notice this is not for breaking a law here and there. After all, they had sacrifices for less serious sins, even the Day of Atonement. [10:53] Nor is this an individual committing serious and defiant sin. They also had punishment for those serious sins, for the individuals who did that, which was to be cut off from God's people.

Rather, apart from a few faithful in Israel, this is the whole nation rejecting God's whole law. Notice in verses 14 to 15 how God builds a picture of wholesale rejection.

Notice how he kind of heaps up, not listen, not carry out, reject decrees, abhor, which means treat with disgust his laws, fail to carry out, not some, but all his commands.

You see, this is gross, persistent disobedience, which leads to violating or completely breaking the covenant.

Verse 15. In other words, this is walking away from God as God, which means God would be justified in walking away from them, but he doesn't.

[11:54] He punishes them justly, yes, but also so that they might come back to him. Have a look at verse 18 to 24. He says, if after all this, you will not listen, you still won't listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over.

I will break down your sovereign pride, try and get them to come back, and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze. Your strength will be spent in vain because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of your land yield their fruit, the opposite to the blessing we saw before.

If you remain hostile towards me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your affliction seven times over as your sins deserve. I will send wild animals against you and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle, and make you so few in number, opposite to being fruitful in number, that your roads will be deserted.

If in spite of all these things, you still do not accept my correction, but continue to be hostile towards me, I myself will be hostile towards you and will reflect you for your sins seven times over and on it goes.

Now, when we read seven times over, it sounds very harsh to us, but it's actually symbolic at this point. It's symbolic earlier in Leviticus as well. So, for example, in chapter 16, where they sprinkle the blood seven times, it doesn't mean that they're kind of seven times more cleansed from sin.

[13:22] It just means thorough or complete cleansing from sin. And so here that seven times over is symbolic for complete or thorough punishment for their sin.

It's just, it's deserved. But it's not just deserved punishment, verse 21 in the middle of the screen there, as your sins deserve.

It's also in order to bring them back. Do you notice in verse 19 at the top of the screen there, it's to break down their stubborn pride. And at the bottom of the screen in verse 23, it's God's correction to bring them back to him.

A loving parent will punish their child when they deserve it and to teach them. If you let a disobedient child off the hook all the time, they'll grow up thinking that that kind of bad behaviour is okay when it's not.

I'm not suggesting we never show grace, by the way, but if we constantly let them off the hook, they'll assume that it's okay to do these horrible things. Discipline involves not just punishment, but also correction because you love them.

[14:35] You want what's best for them. Or so too here. Although admittedly, this is pretty tough love, isn't it? Reminds of a letter with a picture that was sent from a grandmother who wrote, when my grandson is naughty, this is how I punish him to teach him.

Signed, tough love grand. And here is the picture. Now, I assume this is a photoshopped joke. I'm pretty sure that child is not on the outside of the car doing 99 miles an hour or whatever it is. But here in the Bible, this is no joke because their very existence as God's people was at stake. And God, though, does this gradually, bit by bit, to bring them back. And if they still don't listen, he increases the severity. And again and again. In fact, I know when we look at this and we see that the curses are so long, you know, and over the page, and the blessings look so short, we think, oh, is this God of the Old Testament mean all the time? I'm sure you've heard people say that. I have. But actually, the longer list shows God's loving desire not to give up on them. You see, the curses could have been really short.

[15:55] Verse 14 and 15, the nation rejects God's whole law. And so, verse 16, God rejects them all. Done. Full stop. That'd be three verses. That's a really short list of curses, isn't it?

But he doesn't stop there. Yes, he punishes them as their sins deserve, but then he gives them another chance to be his people. If they still don't listen, he ups the ante and gives them another chance and another and so on and so on.

That's why the list is longer. Because he doesn't want to give up on them. And he does it over hundreds of years.

This longer list of curses actually shows God's loving determination to keep trying to bring them back to him. The God of the Old Testament is the same God of the new, loving and just.

But the longer list also shows the extent of Israel's disobedience, doesn't it? I mean, the fact that, you know, time and time and time and time again, they keep disobeying. They don't listen until eventually their stubborn sin sends them to exile, cuts them off from God and his blessings.

[17:04] Just turn over the page to verse 33 and we'll pick it up there. Towards the top of the page, verse 33. This is where we read of exile.

Verse 33 says, I will scatter you among the nations. That's exile. And will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste and your cities will lie in ruins.

You see, their persistent and deliberate disobedience means they're no longer in God's place of Canaan enjoying God's blessings. And God would actually be justified in just leaving them in exile, writing them off.

But amazingly and graciously, he doesn't. Look at verse 40. Come down to verse 40 towards the bottom of the page. He says, But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors, their unfaithfulness and their hostility towards me, which made me hostile towards them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies, exile, then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sins, I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham and I'll remember the land.

Notice verse 40. If they confess their sins and pay for their punishment, verse 41, then verse 42, God will remember his covenant with Abraham that was elaborated through Moses.

[18:38] In other words, he will restore the covenant. That's what it means to remember. It means to act. And so to give them a chance to confess and be restored, verse 44, the top of the next column, yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them.

I am the Lord, their God. But for their sake, I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God.

I am the Lord. You see, even though they deserve to be written off completely, God won't destroy them utterly, will he? But give them another opportunity to confess and be restored.

How gracious is our God? Though this opportunity comes only after they've paid for their previous sins in the land. But again, the big point is God is lovingly determined, you see, to have a people in his place enjoying his blessings.

So much so that he planned, always planned, to make a new covenant through Jesus, point three. You see, God knew the human heart will always tend towards disobedience.

[20:02] As I've said before, you never have to teach a child or a dog, it seems, to do the wrong thing. It just comes naturally. And we've seen it with Israel's history.

In fact, as our second reading said, God found fault with the people. They just kept disobeying. And so God made two key differences with this new covenant. At first, he will forgive and remember their sins no more.

We have permanent forgiveness in the new covenant. And second, God will put his law in their minds and write it on our hearts so that we'll want to obey.

Our hearts will seek to obey. God will do this, of course, by his Holy Spirit. And both his Spirit and our forgiveness come graciously through Jesus. And this is what Galatians says on the screen, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, the curses we've seen by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a cross, a tree. And he's done it for two reasons. And so that, in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham, which in this case is forgiveness and a right relationship might come to us, Gentiles.

[21 : 17] And so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. We saw before that Israel could be restored if they confessed and paid for their own sins.

Well, guess what? We can be restored to a right covenant if we confess and trust in Jesus to have paid for our sins. Which would you prefer?

I know which I would prefer. And for us who do trust in Jesus, he then gives us every spiritual blessing as we read in Ephesians 1.

Now, I know we'd often love physical blessings too, like a better body that doesn't get sick or sore. That would be good. Better prosperity, I'm pretty sure most of us would be happy to accept more money.

And better peace, as I said before, is something our world desperately needs. And we do have some physical blessings, like being able to meet together physically to encourage one another, but not all of them.

[22 : 23] Yet, again, the spiritual blessings are the more important ones, remember? Because they mean we can enjoy a right relationship with the God of the universe who is with us now. And God with us means we can be certain of enjoying every physical blessing later when he brings us into our promised land, the new heavens and the new earth, the world to come, the new creation.

And what's more, God gives us these spiritual blessings now by faith, not obedience. They're ours by faith in Christ. that's how much he wants to bless us.

Now, you may be wondering then, well, what's the point in obeying? Well, there are lots of reasons. The big one the Bible gives, it's our grateful response to God's grace towards us.

Now, to live for him, Jesus, who died for us. Also, because a genuine faith will show itself in obedience. It also helps us to fulfill our purpose as God's holy people and priests.

I mean, it's a bit hard to be a holy people if you always disobey, isn't it? Obedience is also for our good. Not eating socks is a good thing. And it also enables us to enjoy these spiritual blessings we have.

[23 : 46] You see, unlike Israel, we receive them by faith, but like Israel, we enjoy them by obedience. Let me explain. Forgiveness is a blessing we have by faith, isn't it?

But the way we enjoy it is by obeying God's call to repent and say sorry. If we never obey that call to confess our sins and say sorry, then we won't get to keep enjoying the blessing of forgiveness we have.

You see? Or we have the blessing of access to God by faith. But if we never obey his word that says to pray regularly, then we don't get to enjoy that access we have by faith, do we?

We have the blessing of being God's precious children and holy nation. That's by faith. But if we don't obey, then we'll never enjoy living out our purpose as God's holy nation, making disciples of all nations.

You see, we receive these blessings by faith, but we enjoy them by obedience. But again, the big point is that God is so determined to have a people in his place enjoying his blessings, that he graciously gives his son to pay for our sins so that we can have permanent forgiveness and God's Holy Spirit so that we can not just become his people, but we can continue as his people.

[25 : 17] Israel, they kept coming out of the exile and they kept disobeying God. Their hearts never really returned to God. But Jesus' death brings permanent forgiveness when we disobey and God's Spirit who will help us to obey, who will keep us trusting in Christ.

And so we never walk away so that we will make it to our promised land and every physical blessing too. How good is our gracious God?

And so by way of response, firstly, do you believe in Jesus? It's the only way to receive permanent forgiveness and God's Spirit to become his people and continue as his people.

And for us who have, then will we thank God for his grace towards us, that he's given us everything we need, not only to become his people, but continue as his people.

And he's paid for it all through his son. When Toby ate that sock and needed surgery, Megan was so determined to have her dog in her place, enjoying her blessings, that she offered to pay for his sin by covering the cost of surgery.

[26 : 35] I was tempted to let her, but we didn't. But you see, God is so determined to have us as his people in his place, enjoying his blessings.

He does pay the cost in his son. He pays for all our sins so that we have permanent forgiveness and God's Holy Spirit. And we might continue until he brings us home.

Are we thankful for God's grace? And finally, will we pray that God's spirit would help us to obey so that we might enjoy those blessings we have by faith more and more?

Let's do that now. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you so much for your grace towards us in Jesus, that through his death we have permanent forgiveness and your Holy Spirit, that we might continue as your people, enjoying your spiritual blessings now with the certainty of bringing us home to enjoy every physical blessing later.

Help us by your spirit we pray to obey you in response to your grace and that we might enjoy your blessings more and more.

[27 : 52] We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.