

The Carrot or the Stick

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[0 : 00] Alright, since King Lee mentioned it, I thought I'd better explain the title. Now, some of you might be too young, but you might remember or recall maybe your parents or someone older talking about carrots and sticks.

And really where this saying comes from is that it is a technique, as you see on the slide, where a rider uses, when trying to get a stubborn mule or donkey to go where it wants, uses both the carrot and the stick.

You dangle the carrot in front of it to incentivize it, and then you wield the stick on its rear end to punish it if it doesn't respond to the carrot. Alright, because I know normally you guys wouldn't be enticed by carrots, but actually it's the donkey that's being dangled the carrot.

Alright, now we use it in a lot of other similar situations, this phrase. And so we, for example, you may have heard that the boss might dangle the carrot of promotion in front of you, but threaten the stick of firing if you don't perform.

Or in international diplomacy, you get a superpower that offers financial incentives as the carrot to a smaller country to do what it wants, but then threatens with trade sanctions if the country does not comply.

[1 : 22] And so in our chapter today, it would seem, hearing what we've just heard, that God similarly dangles the carrot and wheels the stick with his people Israel.

But whereas I prefer to use the word carrot and stick, the Bible calls it blessings and curses. Alright, it's here at the end to wrap up the book of Leviticus, almost, as a way of communicating that now that I've given you my laws, God says, you Israel, you have two ways to live, two roads to choose from, the carrot or the stick.

But first, if you look with me again in verse 1 and 2, there is again a reminder to obey, obey the laws. So verse 1, do not make idols to set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it.

I am the Lord your God. Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the Lord. So we see here the negative of not worshipping other gods correspond then with the other side, the positive of worshipping God and observing the Sabbaths and revering the sanctuary.

Now here the Sabbath, you notice, is in the plural. So it's not just about the weekly Sabbath, but all the Sabbaths, the festivals and the Sabbath and the Jubilee years which we've been looking at.

[2 : 51] When Israel celebrates these occasions, there are signs not just of obeying and resting in God, but really living under God's blessings, where they bring their gifts, all that God has blessed them with, to the temple at the festivals to offer to Him.

Likewise, to revere the sanctuary, it's not about just going to the temple and showing respect to it, but offering the right sacrifices and offerings at that place, so that their sins can be properly atoned for.

So in a way, verses 1 and 2 sum up all the commands in Leviticus, to keep all the laws. By doing so, they bring blessing unto themselves for the Sabbath, and thus they are holy, just as the Lord, their God, is holy.

So what we have then in the next few verses is a tantalizing vision of what happens when this blessing occurs, the carrot, if you like. I summarize it in the outline in two ways, if you look at it. I say that the land will be fruitful, verse 4 and 5, and living at peace, verse 6 to 8, so will the people be blessed in number, abundance, God's presence, and honor, verses 9 to 13.

[4 : 09] So let's look at that, and I'll read it again in verse 3. It says, You will still be eating last year's harvest, when you will have to move it out to make room for the new.

I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians.

I broke the bars of your yoke, and enabled you to walk with heads held high. And to me, I don't know, but it's such a beautiful picture, isn't it?

Of blessing, of safety, of security, living under God, where He provides and He protects. I particularly like that one about where they're eating last year's harvest, and they have to make room for the new.

Can't even eat and finish it fast enough. It's a bit like on Christmas Day when there's just so much food, you have to put all the leftovers in the fridge, and then you know that next day, on Boxing Day, there'll be another banquet or feast, and you just have to eat up what's in the fridge so that there's room enough for the Boxing Day leftovers to go back into the fridge.

[6 : 12] It's a picture of abundance and festive rest, isn't it? Not a worry in life. And really, it's sort of an echo of life as it was when Adam and Eve was in the Garden of Eden.

So a beautiful picture. Very enticing, isn't it? For you don't want to live like that. Now conversely, if they fail to obey God's commands, then, well, we see now that the picture is not so pretty.

It's a long section, and so we haven't read the whole thing. But even as we were hearing verses 14 to 22, you get a flavor of what the stick is like, isn't it?

So let's read. If you will not listen to me, verse 14, and carry out 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 I will do this 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.

[7 : 21] 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 will flee even when no one is pursuing you. If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over.

I will break down your stubborn pride 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.

If you remain hostile toward 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 that your roads will be deserted.

What a big contrast to what we've just heard. But notice a few things. First, disobedience to God's laws is also a breaking of covenant.

That is, it's not just failing to obey a list of rules. What's gone wrong here is a breakdown of relationship with God. God has kept His side of the covenant.

[8 : 36] He's been faithful to His promises, but Israel has not reciprocated. Secondly, we also see that these punishments are for repeated violations.

Each time, they want Israel to wake up, to take note that they're actually going astray. It's a bit like the rumble strips on the road if you are driving, you know, and you veer off, you go, and then you know you're going off course.

And that's meant to steer you back onto the road itself. But if you ignore that warning, then what's the next thing that happens? You hit the, if you're on the highway, guardrails, isn't it? Now that's pretty bad, guardrails, but at least, you know, your car will be damaged, yeah?

But they're called guardrails for a reason, isn't it? To guard you from something else, because if you keep going, and you crash off the road entirely, you're in the ditch or whatever, and then not only will your car be destroyed, probably your life will be gone as well.

And so the initial warnings here of diseases, deprivation, because the crops are being stolen and defeated by enemies, bad as it sounds, is almost nothing, not so bad after all, compared to what will follow.

[9 : 50] But then in verse 18 we read, if after all this, if after all this, they still fail to listen, then more punishments occur, more severe, more intense than the first time.

The phrase is seven times over. That's how it's being used to describe. And what is God's aim here? It is to break down their stubborn pride and hard hearts. And so what's described then is a widespread famine.

Iron sky means no rain. That is, you're looking up and it's like your color-born roof. Iron. Nothing comes through it. The bronze ground means the soil is so hard that nothing grows from it. But if despite this, the people continue in their stubbornness, stubbornness, then again we see more punishment. Wilder animals will ravage the land, kill their children, and destroy their cattle. Each time there is an escalation, isn't it? But only if they fail to repent. Thus we see further on, verse 23, if in spite of these things you do not accept my correction, but continue to be hostile toward me.

[11 : 05] Or verse 27, if in spite of this you still do not listen to me, but continue to be hostile toward me. It's only when they ongoingly refuse to listen to God that God wretchets up the punishments, isn't it?

But it also means that God is always open for them to repent. You know, they don't have to continue. If they turn around, God will stop.

But if, in spite of the warnings, God say, they don't, then the rest of the chapter follows. God is dialing up the volume of His megaphone until finally Israel is driven out of the land by sword. He's scattered to the nations. The land which we've been looking at as being God's vehicle of blessing for them, it's taken away from them. And what's ironic is, if you look at verse 34, God then says that the land that lies desolate will finally enjoy the Sabbath rest that it was denied. Then the land will enjoy its Sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate and you are in the country of your enemies. then the land will rest and enjoy its Sabbath. All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it did not have during the Sabbath you lived in it.

[12 : 35] You know, God would prefer if Israel was in the land enjoying that same rest with the land. But if they refuse to, if they are stubborn, then the rest and peace that was denied the land will still be at least granted by God to it.

but sadly, this time, without the people in it. And so, if verses 3 to 14, what we saw earlier, paints a picture of God's blessing, then now here, as we get to verse 36 to 39, we're given a picture of what Israel finally faces as their ultimate fate under God's hand of punishment.

So on the slide, as for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight.

They will run as though fleeing from the sword and they will fall even when no one is pursuing them. They will stumble one over the other as though fleeing from the sword even though no one is pursuing them.

So you will not be able to stand before your enemies. You will perish among the nations. The land of your enemies will devour you. Those of you who are left will waste away in the lands of their enemies because of their sins and also because of their ancestor's sins they will waste away.

[13 : 57] It's a pretty bleak and depressing picture, isn't it? And I'm sure some of you might be saying, I don't know, God, are you being a bit too vindictive here?

A bit too harsh? Does Israel really, really deserve this? And why is it that the section on blessing is so short? Eleven verses, whereas the punishment section is nearly two and a half times longer. Verses 14 to 39. Really, God, are you obsessed with punishing Israel? Why? Well, I want to argue that actually that's the wrong way of looking at it because as I said earlier, these punishments are all conditional.

They only occur when Israel continues to be hostile to God. Now, on the other hand, the blessing section is relatively short because once Israel obeys, the moment they do, God's fullest blessings flow immediately.

It's not like, you know, they're in a computer game where there are progressive levels of blessings that they have to unlock. Right? That they do a bit of obedience and they get the level one rewards and then they do the next and they get level two.

[15 : 11] No. The moment they obey, all of God's full blessings flow. Hence it's so short. On the other hand, the punishments are different, isn't it?

Because they only increase with severity each time they refuse to listen. Thus, God is sort of saying over and again, we hear words like, if after all this you disobey, if you continue, you remain hostile, if in spite of these things you refuse my correction.

All of it is conditional, isn't it? On ongoing disobedience. But of course, I think the length of the second section also tells us something about God Himself.

That He is a God that does not give up on His people, even though it's easy to. It's just like a human father or mother who really loves their children, God doesn't disown Israel even though He could. Instead, God repeatedly gives them a chance to turn back. It's really with a heavy heart that He has to dial up these punishments. All with the view that, you know, finally, Israel might get it.

[16:25] They might listen. Which is why I think at the very end, we still have verses that hold out hope for restoration and reconciliation.

So verse 40, but if they will confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors, their unfaithfulness and their hostility toward me, which made me hostile toward them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies, then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember my covenant with Jacob, my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham. and I will remember the land for the land will be deserted by them and will enjoy its Sabbath while it lies desolate without them. They will pay for their sins because they rejected my laws and abhorred my decrees.

Yet, in spite of this, 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.

[17:36] I am the Lord. And so, even right there at the end, God says that the moment there is confession, there is humility, God will relent.

He will not destroy them completely. And even right there at the end, He continues to say that I am the Lord their God. He does not disown them.

And the reason why He does that is because of His own faithfulness. He remembers His covenant. Yes, Israel has to be, has to have their sins paid for, but He will not renege on His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, of Jacob.

God will not give up on them. Israel may be unfaithful, but God will remain faithful. And then finally, if you notice verse 46, notice when God said all of this, it's to Moses, isn't it?

On Mount Sinai. Long before, long before they entered the land. In other words, God already knew back then how stubborn and proud and hard-hearted Israel will be.

[18:46] It's not like some parents do, you know, when they give birth to children, they look at the baby and they go, oh, these are simply adorable, such saints, only for them to grow up and realize, you know, what problems they are.

I'm not speaking from personal experience at all. No, God already knew from day one, didn't He, that He was choosing a rebellious and stiff-necked people.

He knew the kind of relationship He was getting Himself into, that He would be let down by their disobedience. And if you look at Israel's history, it all comes true. And yet, God went and called them to Himself anyway.

He loved them anyway. And so, what we have here really isn't signs, aren't signs of a harsh and vindictive God, but a gracious and compassionate God, abounding in mercy, slow to anger.

But sadly, as I said, what God warned Israel would happen, happened. didn't it? They disobeyed repeatedly until God did have to scatter them, send them into exile. And yet, even then, as God promised, He never gave up on them.

[20:00] In fact, God went one step further, didn't He, by sending His Son Jesus because it was Jesus who paid for their sins. Yes, they were punished, but their punishment did not pay fully their sins, did it?

Jesus had to come to pay for Israel's sins. Now, friends, I think we too are in the same situation, aren't we? Just like Israel before God, we too have to pay for our sins, and to be honest, we're no better, are we, than Israel.

Because we, by nature, we have stubborn hearts too as well, don't we? Now, if you think otherwise, maybe one or two of you might, just ask yourself this.

how hard is it for you to admit that you're wrong? Our natural inclination is always to be defensive, isn't it? Even when we know we're wrong, we find a reason to downplay our error, isn't it?

I'm sorry, but I was hangry. I'm sorry, but you made me do it first. It's so hard to say sorry without the buts, isn't it?

[21:14] It's always caveats. We can't just say I'm sorry because that is my fault, 100%. Now, thankfully, there is one person in this world, Jesus, who is sinless and yet humble.

And Jesus willingly paid for our sins by dying on the cross for us. We like to insist that we are right even when we are wrong. Well, Jesus did the opposite.

He took the fall for us even though he was right. And in doing so, he fulfilled Israel's side of the covenant with God and thus is able to offer anyone who puts their faith in him the benefits of this covenant.

God fulfilled his side of the covenant and Jesus fulfilled Israel's side of the covenant. And so when we have faith in Jesus, we fall into the first section of our passage today, don't we?

We enjoy the blessings not of a physical land but spiritually we have all of the blessings given and promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

[22 : 25] We enjoy all of this through Jesus, don't we? Of course, the key is to believe in Jesus and trust in what he's done for us on the cross. And so friends, if you do want to enjoy all those blessings, then please put your trust in the one who fulfilled the covenant on behalf of Israel, that is Jesus.

But part and parcel of this faith, for those of us who have, is to live holy lives as God commands, to obey Christ's teaching as God's law, to hear his voice and to respond to it obediently.

And you know, the good news is that as Christians, God has also given us his spirit, so that we are able to, we have the power to do what God commands.

But, to obey the spirit still means we are to be careful not to fall into the sin of Israel, as described here in Leviticus chapter 26. Now, there is actually one sin behind all the sins, and we see it there in verse 19, for God said that he sent them punishments firstly to break down their stubborn hearts, their stubborn pride.

And then again in verse 41, God promises that when their uncircumcised heart, that is their proud hearts, are humbled, he will remember them.

[23 : 52] And time and time again, what God bemoans is their refusal to listen to him. That is the number one thing behind Israel's wrongdoing, their pride and their failure to listen to God's voice.

And so likewise, in our New Testament reading, which Emily did for us today, the writer of Hebrews urges his readers from Psalm 95, that whenever they hear God's voice, if you hear today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

That's the number one thing. You see, as Christians, we may have entered God's rest, just as Israel did by entering the promised land.

They too were freed from slavery, the same as us being freed from slavery to sin when we believe in Jesus. And yet, for them and for us, the writer of the Hebrews says that there is a final Sabbath rest still to enter.

And so it is important for us not to forfeit this by having stubborn and hard heartedness that refuses to hear the voice of God in his word.

[25 : 05] And to guard against that requires ongoing humility, continually submitting ourselves to God's word and allowing the spirit to convict and then to change us.

Now I know that you ladies, some of you and maybe even some men, you like to keep your hands and skin soft and supple by applying moisturizing lotion.

Today in the morning, I asked what brands they use, and two men came up to me straight after and said, Neutrogena Norwegian Formula. So not product placement, but apparently that's the best.

In the same way, we need to maintain soft and supple hearts as well, don't we? And the spiritual moisturizer we need for that is humility.

And so friends, I wonder how you're going with that moisturizing. Are you regularly hearing God's words so that the spirit can search your hearts?

[26 : 08] Or have you known that God has been trying to tell you something for a long time now and all you've been doing is covering your ears? When you know you're wrong, do you admit and confess freely to God?

Are you continually checking your motives to see if there is selfishness and pride and hidden agendas in what you're doing? These are the things that we need to keep doing in order to remain humble, to guard against our hearts becoming hard.

That is, not hearing God when he speaks, refusing to hear his word. And this sort of attitude, I would say, is actually more important to you as a Christian than trying to be outwardly perfect.

You know, to show everyone in the world that you are so holy or you're doing all the right things, that you're moral, you're upright and you've got all the right social causes down pat. Instead, what is

more important is to have a humble, broken, and contrite spirit, the one that God will never turn away.

And if we keep doing that, then we will surely, surely enter into God's final rest for eternity. So let me pray and ask that God might soften and keep our hearts soft so that we might live for him.

[27 : 36] Father, purify our hearts. Help us not to harden our hearts. when our natural reflex to sin is to be proud and self-righteous. Teach us instead to confess our sins, to seek forgiveness through Jesus.

Shape our affections and desires so that when we hear your voice and listen to your son's teachings, our delight is to obey you and with the Spirit's help to be able to do so.

Father, answer us, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.