

Blessings and Curses

Date: 14 November 2021, 24th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Words for Life (Deuteronomy)

Texts: Deuteronomy 26:16-29:1; Galatians 3:7-14

One of the biggest misconceptions about Christianity is that it's all about trying to be a good person so that you can go to heaven when you die. This is understandable. The Bible does have a huge amount to say about how we should live. Most famously of course are the 10 Commandments. We looked at these in Deuteronomy way back in April, and if you've read the book or heard this sermon series on Deuteronomy you'll know that it has lots of laws for all sorts of different aspects of life. In fact last week I suggested that it's a handbook for how to organise a society. We've been studying it because it has a lot to teach us about how to live as God's people. But is being a Christian then just about being a good person? The answer is No. Fundamentally, being a Christian is about being in relationship with God, more than that it's about being caught up in the life of the one true and living God who is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Today we're looking at chapters 26-28 of Deuteronomy. The big theme that stands out as you read these chapters is Blessings and Curses. Blessings for obedience to the Law. Curses for disobedience to the Law. We'll come to that in a bit. But we won't understand all the stuff on blessings and curses unless we understand the context which frames them. That context is the Covenant which God made with Israel. These ideas of Covenant, and Blessings and Curses help us to understand Jesus' death on the cross and his invitation to, through him, participate in the life of God in the power of the Spirit. That is something we all need, whether you're exploring faith with us or whether you've been a Christian for decades. Without that, we're lost, and all our striving for good is just chasing the wind. So let's get into those 3 points, Covenant, Blessings and Curses and Jesus.

Covenant - 26:16-19, 29.1

The blessings and curses in chapters 27-28 can only be understood in the context of the Covenant. In the Ancient Near East a covenant was an agreement which established a relationship between a great king and a lesser state. Another word we could use for covenant would be treaty. Scholars have noticed that the book of Deuteronomy has many of the elements of these Ancient Near Eastern treaties. The book begins with a preamble, saying who the parties to this treaty are: The Lord God and Israel. There is a historical prologue, telling the story of the previous relationship between the two parties. Then there are the laws, decrees and commands which the treaty requires of the lesser party. Then there is provision for periodic public readings of the treaty. There are witnesses and finally a list of blessings and curses that the lesser state could expect for keeping or violating the treaty. At the end of these we read in 29.1

These are the terms of the covenant the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb.

I spoke to Bill Stewart, the rector at St James Lenah Valley about today's text. He's an Old Testament scholar. He sent me an email with a picture of the earliest full text of the kind of Ancient Treaty or Covenant. It's called the "Disk Inscription of Yakhdun-Lim", king of Mari, in eastern Syria, from around 1800 BC. And, a bit like in chapter 27, it's written on a stone tablet. Bill sent me a photo.



We don't quite have an exact contemporary parallel to a covenant. A business contract is similar in that it outlines the nature of the relationship two parties are entering into and the consequences should either side not abide by the terms of the contract. Perhaps the closest example would be a prenuptial agreement. This emphasizes the intimate relationship that is about to be entered into in the marriage, and the consequences should either party violate that marriage. A covenant then is about relationship and responsibility.

So in Deuteronomy, on the eve of their crossing the Jordan and entering the promised land, Moses tells Israel the story of her relationship with the Lord God. How he rescued her from slavery in Egypt; how he revealed himself to her at Mt Sinai, and how she repeatedly rebelled against him. We pick up the story at the end of a long series of laws, from chapter 12-26. These laws are framed, before and after, in those covenantal terms blessings and curses. So 11:26 reads.

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse— **27** the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; **28** the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known.¹

In 26:17-19 Moses summarises the covenant, with its benefits and obligations, that God has made with Israel. Through this covenant Israel has become the Lord's people and he their God. On the one hand Israel has committed herself to the Lord as her God, and this means that she will obey his laws.

17 You have declared this day that the Lord is your God and that you will walk in obedience to him, that you will keep his decrees, commands and laws—that you will listen to him.

On the other, the Lord has committed himself to Israel as his people, and he will bless her.

18 And the Lord has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands. **19** He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he

¹ 11:26-28

has made and that you will be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised. Chapter 27-28 outline that final section of the covenant framework - the blessings and curses of the covenant and this brings us to point 2.

Blessings and Curses - 27-28

What can Israel expect if she keeps the covenant and walks in obedience to all that God has commanded? What can she expect if she breaks the covenant? In 27:14-16, the people of Israel accept the consequences for violating the terms of the covenant outlined in the Law. What this looks like is when Israel has crossed into the promised land, the people are to assemble and the priests tell the people a series of curses and the people respond with Amen, which means "I agree." So for example, verse 15 begins with the second commandment.

15 "Cursed is anyone who makes an idol—a thing detestable to the Lord, the work of skilled hands—and sets it up in secret."

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

Verse 19 recalls the social justice legislation of the Law.

19 "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow."

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

Then finally, verse 26 says.

26 "Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out."

Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

Keep that last one in mind when we come to Jesus.

Chapter 28:1-14 Outline the blessings God promises for keeping the covenant. The blessings begin with family blessings and then move to national blessings.

If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. **2** All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God:

3 You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.

4 The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.

5 Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.

6 You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

7 The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven.

What's interesting in verses 9-10 is that through these blessings the nations will see that Israel are God's people. In this sense, God binds his own reputation to Israel and how she is seen by the nations.

9 The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in obedience to him. **10** Then all

the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will fear you.

The rest of chapter 28, verses 15-68 detail what are the curses for disobedience. The first thing to note about them is that they are a reversal of the blessings promised for obedience.

So

You will be cursed in the city, and cursed in the country.

Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed.

The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flock.

What follows is some of the most grim reading in the Bible. There is the promise of plague, drought, military defeat, enslavement and exile. Things will be so bad that while besieged by her enemies, the people will resort to cannibalism. The plagues that God sent upon Egypt will come upon Israel and in the end they will be scattered among the nations.

When we think about blessings and curses, we can think about them in an impersonal way. That is, we can have an unconscious assumption that the universe is a kind of machine of cause and effect. If you do good then you'll be blessed, and if you do evil, then you'll be cursed. What is clear in these chapters however is that life is in God's hands. God will bless and God will curse, because these are ultimately expressions of the relationship between God and Israel. At this point we might ask, "How can God say things like this?" This chapter shows that God wants to bless his people. He has set his affections on them. He has rescued them from slavery in Egypt and taken them as his own. He wants them to worship him and to live how he calls them to live, lives of justice and generosity and peace. He knows that it is tempting to follow the gods of the surrounding nations and to live like them. And he knows that to turn away from him is to turn from life to death. The curses of this chapter function to warn Israel in the strongest possible terms not to forsake God and his ways.

Tragically though Israel did not heed God's warnings. Although he sent prophet after prophet, Israel repeatedly refused to listen. She broke the covenant God had made with her. She turned away to worship other gods. She turned away from God's law and became a corrupt and unjust society where from the king down the rich and the strong oppressed the poor and the weak. And so, after generations of warning many of the curses came to pass. The northern kingdom fell in 722 to the Assyrians. 140 years later the prophet Jeremiah records people eating their children in the siege of Jerusalem. Finally in 586 the city was destroyed and most of the remaining Jews taken into exile. It was an utter disaster.

So far we've focussed simply on understanding this text in its ancient context and in the life of ancient Israel. But does it have anything to say to us today? What difference does Jesus make to how we read it? That brings us to point 3.

Jesus

The promise to Israel of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience highlights a fundamental tension in the story of Deuteronomy and the story of the Bible. Way back in Genesis 12 God chose Abraham and promised that through his descendants all peoples on earth would be blessed. That blessing was to begin through the life of justice and righteousness that Abraham's family was meant to live. But what if they failed in this? Abraham's own life was a story of failure and unbelief, mixed with trust in God. Fast forward to Israel, and she had already spent 40 years in the wilderness because of her sin before Moses preached Deuteronomy to her. Would she stay faithful to God? Could she keep God's laws? What would happen if she broke the covenant? Would her sin undermine God's promise?

The apostle Paul speaks to this in Galatians 3. He's answering the question, how are we justified, that is, how do we come into right relationship with God? Is it through faith or through obedience to the Law? He picks up Moses' words at the end of Deuteronomy 27. This is what he says in verse 10.

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'

Paul's point is that no one can "continue to do *everything* written in the Law". We all break it. Israel broke it and so were under the curse of the covenant. But this is a picture of the state of all humanity. Our first parents doubted God's goodness, rejected his word and disobeyed God's one command, and so they and all their descendents came under the curse of sin. To rely on good deeds to put us in the right with God is futile arrogance, because we all fail. And so Paul says,

11 Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because 'the righteous will live by faith.'

But he goes on, verse 13.

13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.'

Here is the great exchange at the heart of the Christian faith. By rights, like Israel, we stand under God's curse. But out of his great love for us, because he wants us to be his children, in the person of Jesus Christ, God himself stepped in to take the curse for us. On the cross as Jesus hung on the tree, all God's righteous judgment against human rebellion and wickedness, all his fury against our grotesque idolatry that would worship ourselves and gods of our own making and so debase ourselves and defy him, that curse on my sin and your sin, fell on Jesus instead of us. He took the curses of the covenant so that we might receive the blessings of the covenant.

And so Paul continues,

14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the

Spirit.

How does Paul describe those blessings? In two ways. First, through Christ we are justified. That is, put in right relationship with God. Whereas before we stood guilty, now, because Jesus died for our sins, we stand before God holy and innocent. On the cross Jesus takes our guilt and our shame and gives us his right standing with the Father. All the bad things that we have done no longer count against us. Through the cross we are forgiven and washed clean.

Second, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the presence of God, God himself, living within us, such that our bodies become his holy temple. Later in Galatians Paul says that the Spirit is the Spirit of adoption, in whom we are brought into God's family and made his children. Such is the generosity of God that through the Spirit we share in the eternal Son's own relationship with the Father. Because of Christ's death, in the power of the Spirit we are brought into the very life of God, we share in that intimacy between the Father and the Son. What greater blessing can there be than this?

How then do we respond to the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy? First, by heeding the warnings of Deuteronomy and Israel's history. There will be a day when God will judge. To be outside of Christ is to be under the curse. It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. He wants our hearts to be set on him, and our lives to reflect his goodness, his justice, his holiness. 1 Corinthians 10 says,

Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

And again,

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. 12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 13 No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Second, if the curses of Deuteronomy warn us, then its promise of blessing is an invitation to place our faith in Christ. The curse fell on him so that we might be blessed. We receive that blessing through trusting in Christ. If you are not trusting in Christ, then you still stand under God's curse. You are cut off, alienated from God, a child of wrath. Maybe you feel that as you try to live your life your own way and quite frankly you're making a mess of it. Try as you might to fix it, nothing you do works. God wants you to come home. He wants to bless you. He's provided the way home, through Jesus, if only you would like it. So why don't you come to Jesus? Say sorry to God for trying to run your life your way. Ask Jesus for forgiveness. Invite him to be your king. Commit yourself to obeying his laws and walking in his way. And you will receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit.