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Obedience and Blessing

Leviticus 26:1-13

Intro: We are working our way through the final section of Leviticus (25-27). These last 3 chapters are arranged in a specific order: most of ch25 deals with laws about redemption; ch26 concerns blessings for covenant obedience and curses for covenant disobedience while ch27 returns its focus back to more laws about redemption. Set between 2 chapters dealing with redemption, ch26 brings the idea of covenant to the forefront in a way that hasn't been seen so far in **Leviticus**. Covenants were common in the Ancient Near East, much like a modern contract, they were legal agreements entered into by 2 parties and upheld by common interest for good and the threat of real punishments.

There are several different covenants that appear in the OT that God makes with humans and there are 7 basic elements that appear in each of them. 1) Unilateral: As Creator of the universe, when God enter into a covenant with man, He alone determines the terms of the covenant. There are no negotiations. The only proper human response is to reply as Israel did at the foot of Mt Sinai, "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do" (**Ex 19:8**). Of the 8 occurrences of the word covenant in our text, 6 of them are referred to as "My covenant." 2) Promise: 1 or both parties to the covenant make promises to the other party. The very essence of the Mosaic covenant is God's promise that He repeats in **12**. 3) Bond/Relationship: The Lord of the universe owes no one anything and isn't obligated to anyone. But, in a covenant, He now puts Himself under obligation. He binds Himself to the covenant partner and obligates Himself to keep His solemn promises. He also brings the covenant partner into a familial relationship with Himself; adopting them into His family. 4) Stipulations: Some say that God's covenant with Abraham was unconditional but in truth, all God's covenants are conditional; either for entrance into the covenant, maintenance of the covenant or both. The human party must agree to the covenant and must, by faith and faithfulness, keep the terms of the covenant. The terms of the Mosaic covenant are the commands, laws and decrees listed in **Exodus - Leviticus**. 5) Blessings and Curses: All covenants have blessings and curses, either explicitly listed or implied. The blessings, of course, are the promises and the curses are the punishments that are brought on the

partners if they fail to keep covenantal commitments. 6) Signs: Covenants contain 1 or more covenantal signs (or ceremonies). These signs often reflect or resemble the curse of the covenant; sort of like a “cross my heart, hope to die...” symbolism. There’s no reference to a sign in ch26 but when this covenant went into effect in Ex 24, it involved sacrificial blood. 7) Mediators: God’s covenants are given to a large group of people through 1 mediatorial figure. In the OT these figures are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. Moses is the mediator of the covenant in ch26, faithfully delivering it to God’s people.

Before we dive into the text, it should be noted, first and foremost, that the blessings that are listed here aren’t some magical formulas spoken for good and neither are the curses magical formulas spoken for evil. Neither is this an attempt by the Lord to bribe or threaten His people into obedience. To see this list as just another version of the old “carrot and stick” routine is to accuse the faithful Israelites of merely acting from a mercenary heart, which would be to completely misconstrue what this list is calling for. The truth of it is, this chapter has little to do with the motivations of the Israelites. Instead, the blessings and curses listed here describe the actions of a personal God towards those who either embrace His covenant from the heart or reject it.

As we will see, the blessings are arranged into 4 groups, starting with bountiful harvests, then moving from blessing to blessing until they culminate with the promise of the Lord Himself dwelling in the midst of the Israelite camp. This is nothing less than a return to the Garden of Eden. The curses are listed in 5 groups, beginning with fear, disease and defeat by enemies, then spiraling downward from one curse to another, ending with starving Israelites eating their own children and being slaughtered by their enemies, driven from their land and loathed by the Lord. This is nothing less than a living hell.

The contrast between blessing and curses couldn’t be clearer and it emphasizes a theme that appears throughout Scripture: the posture we take before the Lord determines whether we experience blessing or cursing. And, while this chapter is focused on Israel’s experience in the here and now, it will be equally true for everyone’s experience in the world to come (Mt 7:21-27).

1-2 – These verses allude to the beginning of the Sinai covenant, the first 2

of the big 10, in order to introduce the theme of the passage; namely, that the Israelites must be faithful to the covenant commands of their sovereign God. The end of the chapter will return to this same theme so the framework for interpreting the passage is the Lord's sovereignty and His covenant relationship with Israel.

As the introduction, these verses emphasize the necessity of obedience in right worship. Of course, this was the first and the foundation of all the laws – Yahweh, the Lord, the covenant God of Israel; He alone must be worshiped and He must be worshiped as He alone prescribes. Correct worship of the Lord must never involve any form of idolatry, whether it's an idol, carved image, sacred pillar or engraved stone. This 4-fold description of various idols is the most comprehensive concentration of references to image making in the Bible, effectively ruling out any and all types of idol worship.

The root of the word translated as idol literally means worthless, insufficient and inadequate. Images are a general term for idols that are fashioned from various materials into the form of either an animal or a human. The point of this first commandment is that the Israelites were not to show loyalty to such powerless and worthless things, but to the Lord their God who redeemed them with great power from Egypt to be His people. The foolish act of turning to idols; actually, to look to them for help meant they were turning their backs to the Lord who delivered them from the bondage of slavery with His strong right arm, displaying His mighty power on their behalf time and time again. To reject the Lord for idols was not just foolishness, it was an intentional breach of the covenant and a rebellious sin.

Secondly, an important part of the way Israel honored the Lord was by being faithful to observe the Sabbath and by regarding the Lord's sanctuary with reverence. To observe the Sabbath was to affirm the covenant and all it entailed. In the same manner, since the Lord lived in their midst in His sanctuary, they were to follow His covenant commands obediently, thus showing due reverence to His holy presence. Having the Lord as a neighbor should have a radical impact on how a person lives. As we saw in our studies of previous chapters, the way we regard the holy things of the Lord is the way we regard the Lord Himself. To obey and reverence Him is to acknowledge His supreme Lordship over our lives.

3 – Earlier passages in Leviticus emphasized the point that obedience to the covenant commands was necessary if Israel was to enjoy the covenantal blessings (18:4-5; 25:18-19). What those passages briefly stated is spelled out in detail in today's text. Coming immediately after a general call to covenant faithfulness (1-2), this verse makes it clear that such faithfulness is a necessary condition if the covenant blessings are to come. Next time, we'll also see that ch26 also explains that disobediently rejecting the covenant will result in Israel experiencing covenant curses.

This section is sometimes read as though it were describing a merit-based relationship with the Lord: a relationship that's earned by obeying the law. But this is to misunderstand the role of obedience here. Obedience in the OT is seen as the proper response to grace and, in particular, to the gracious Lord who has already redeemed His people and entered into a covenant relationship with them. Naturally, as in any relationship, faithfulness is necessary if the relationship is going to continue, a point Jesus also makes in [John 14:15](#) ("If you love Me, keep my commandments"). But this kind of faithfulness doesn't create the relationship. Only the Lord can do that, and it's the privilege of His people to respond with grateful obedience and to enjoy the blessings of their redeeming King.

The whole point of the blessings and curses was to allow Israel to fulfill the Lord's purpose for them in the world. The Lord was determined to reveal Himself to the rest of the world through Israel, either by making them so blessed, the world would know that only their God could have blessed them so; or by making them so cursed that only their God could have cursed them so much and yet, still cause them to survive. The choice of how Israel would reveal their God to the rest of the world was ultimately up to Israel!

This list of blessings fall under 2 categories must needed by human beings. 1st is material provision and protection. The Lord has created us as physical creatures so His blessings often manifest themselves in physical ways. Now, where proponents of the prosperity gospel go wrong is that they insist on making material blessing's the ultimate goal of the Christian life and they erroneously claim that these blessings will come automatically and abundantly as long as we have enough faith. Of course, it would be equally wrong to go to the opposite extreme and declare that the Lord is only concerned about the soul. Jesus himself teaches us to pray for our physical

needs (daily bread) and He even promises that our heavenly Father will provide for them (Mt 6:33; Phil 4:19).

But we're also spiritual creatures, so the 2nd category of blessing addresses the very thing the human soul needs most: relationship with the Lord Himself (11-12). In fact, this blessing come last on the list because it's the climax of them all and, more importantly, if it wasn't for this blessing, all the previous material blessings would be empty. To know the Lord is the greatest good we can ever experience.

4-5 – Abundant crops. Unlike Egypt, which had the Nile, the land of Israel was almost completely dependent on rainfall to produce crops. These rains had to come in...season. The heavier rains fell during the initial growing season (Dec-Feb) while the lighter rains (latter rains) came during the final ripening season (Mar- April). The Lord promises to provide these perfectly, producing such bumper crops that the Israelites will still be harvesting them when it was time to plant the next year's crop. The Lord also promises them safety (5b), so they wouldn't need to fear enemies coming to steal their food, which was something we saw happen quite frequently in the Book of Judges (6:1-6).

6-8 – Peace in the land. The people of Israel will be able to lie down and sleep peacefully, knowing that all possible threats had been removed from the land, whether they were evil beasts (wild predators: lions and bears) or enemies bearing the sword. When war was unavoidable and did eventually come their way, only a few Israelites would be necessary to chase and defeat their enemies because the Lord would be with them.

This particular promise could only have a supernatural cause and the principle behind this blessing is remarkable. The ratio of 5 to 100 is 1 routing 20 but the ratio of 100 to 10K is 1 routing 100! As amazing as this may sound, since we're talking about close-quarter, hand-to-hand combat here, the OT records many instances of this very thing. Gideon and his army of 300 men routed and defeated 135K Midianites, while Jonathan and his armorbearer alone defeated an entire Philistine garrison. In II Kings 7 we saw that God merely sent the sound of a mighty army through the camp of the Syrians laying siege to the city of Samaria. From that story, you could say that God used 4 lepers to defeat a Syrian army of many thousands. From the conquest of Canaan to David's mighty men, we can see this

promise come to pass over and over. In fact, in [Ex 23:28](#), the Lord promises to send hornets before Israel to drive out the pagan inhabitants of the land. This shows us that God didn't need Israel to conquer Canaan but Israel did need to obey and rely on the Lord in order to conquer the land He had given to them.

9-10 – Fruitfulness of womb and of crops. The language of v9 echoes the covenant promises made to Abraham ([Gen 17:6-7](#); [22:17](#)), which are now the covenant promises to his descendants, the Israelites. If Israel was faithful to obey the Lord's law, He promised to multiply their population. Unlike some societies today that abort babies and frown upon large families, the Israelites wanted many children and considered large families as a blessing from God. New generations were needed to maintain the economy, to help sustain the various clans and tribes and to protect the nation. Most importantly, new generations were needed to carry on the faith and to fulfill the Lord's purpose for Israel in the world. A decimated population was to be avoided as it would be rightly seen as judgment from the Lord.

Now, if the Israelites started to wonder where all the food would come from for all these people, the answer is clear: the Lord would make each harvest so bountiful that they wouldn't be able to eat it all in 1 year!

11-12 – The Lord's presence. This was the greatest blessing promised because every other blessing depends on it. All the previous blessings would make the land of Israel like the garden of Eden but this promise returns to the Lord's original goal in Eden: walking among His people as their God. This goal, this desire, is evident from the beginning of the Bible to the end, and all in between. From the experience of Adam and Eve ([Gen 3:8](#)); to the Exodus ([pillar of cloud/ fire](#)); to the vision of the prophets ([Ez 37:26](#)); to the coming of Jesus ([Jn 1:14](#)); to His presence with the church ([II Cor 6:16](#)); to the future climax of all of history when God will again walk among His people and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes ([Rev 21:3-4](#)).

13 – Finally, Israel should be faithful to obey the Lord if for no other reason than the fact that He is their redeeming God. Egyptian slavery was oppressive, reducing God's people down to the status animals dragging heavy burdens attached to yokes around their necks. The Lord's redemption was gracious: being both unearned and undeserved. But, it freed the

Israelites from the heavy burdens of the Egyptians and transferred them into the service of the Lord. They could now walk and carry themselves with heads held high, as is fitting for royal servants of the King of kings.

This final blessing speaks of freedom and dignity. It almost reads like the NT, where God proclaims the liberty of His people and then invites them to walk in it. The image here is of a slave bowed by an enormous burden. He suddenly has the weight removed. This accurately describes both the establishment as well as the essence of Israel's special relationship with the Lord. It also describes the exact same relationship we can have and enjoy with the Lord today.

The Lord's presence was both Israel's greatest need and her greatest blessing. What other nation had the sanctuary of the living God in their midst and their God walking among them? Sadly, Israel's eventual disobedience would turn the temple into a den of thieves, forcing the Lord to destroy the temple and exile His people from their land. When we lose the sense of the Lord's presence and we fail to value the privilege that it is to serve Him, then we begin to despise His Word and disobey His commands.

But, why did the Lord establish His relationship with Israel in this manner? If you think about it, the people of Israel were little more than children in the faith. Moses showed up on the scene after 400 years of bondage and it's clear from their reaction to his arrival and subsequent leadership out of Egypt and through the wilderness, their grasp on the character and nature of their God was limited. Children primarily learn through a system of reward and punishment. You can't sit young children down and give them a lecture on ethics and expect them to understand it but you can promise to reward them if they obey and punish them if they disobey. This approach will protect them from harming themselves, giving them time to mature and better understand why obedience is the key to a happy life. Children must gradually learn that both commandments and punishments are expressions of love for their own good.

The covenant was actually the Lord's lease agreement with Israel to help them enjoy and maintain possession of the land He had promised to give them. They owned the land because of the Lord's promises to Abraham but they could not enjoy the land unless they obeyed the laws that God gave to Moses.

As children of God today, believers have already been given everything we need for life and godliness (II Pt 1:3) because we now possess every spiritual blessing...in Christ (Eph 1:3). But, to possess these blessings is one thing; to enjoy them is something else entirely. As we trust God's promises and seek to obey His commandments, we draw upon our spiritual inheritance and are able to walk successfully and serve effectively. Like Israel in the land of Canaan, we have battles to fight and work to do, but as we walk in obedience to the Lord, He enables us to overcome the enemy, claim the land and enjoy its blessings. 😊