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Disobedience and Cursing

Leviticus 26:14-46

Intro: Covenants were the legal agreements common in the Ancient Near East. Similar to modern contracts, they were made between 2 parties, whether individuals or groups, and much like all legal contracts, there were benefits promised for upholding the agreement and punishments promised for breaking it. As for the promised punishments, it was also common in covenants and other legal documents of the time that the curses far outnumbered the stated blessings. In our text, the blessings are outlined in 10 verses (3-13) while the curses run from v14–39. In Duet 28, there are 13 verses of blessings and 53 verses of curses. In the Code of Hammurabi, the 6th king of Babylon, there are 16 lines of blessings but there are some 280 lines of curses. This consistent literary occurrence speaks to our own human nature, which is usually more motivated by fear of threats than by the promises of blessing. When we look at Israel's history we find that neither divine threats nor promises of blessings were able to keep them faithful.

Before we dive into the curses, we must first establish that this long list of curses in ch26 does not imply in any way that the Lord was eager to bring these punishments on His people. The curses would come only if they rebelled against His law, which He repeatedly warns them not to do. Even when the curses do appear in Israel, they are not petty acts of anger but acts of discipline meant to restore His people to the life for which they had been created. What this long list does imply is the importance of Israel being faithful to the covenant and the Lord's commitment to bring justice to bear against those of His people who reject His covenant and thus, reject His purposes for the world.

As we move through the curses today, we should notice that many of them are the exact opposite of the blessings from our last study. In response to their obedience, the Lord promises abundant rain, harvests and food. The result of disobedience will be drought, famine and starvation. Obedience will bring peace in the land, feelings of security, freedom from wild beasts and victory over enemies; disobedience brings war, fear, decimation by wild beasts, defeat and exile. Obedience brings health and population growth

while disobedience bring disease, decimation and death. Obedience results in the Lord dwelling in the midst of His people; disobedience results in the Lord turning away from them as His people. The contrast between obedience and disobedience is clear and undeniable. We were created to obey the Lord and enjoy the rich blessings that come from covenant fellowship with Him, not to turn from Him and experience His justice against our stubborn rebellion.

The word “if” has been called one of the shortest but also one of the most important words in the English language. The textbook definition is 2-fold: 1) a supposition or uncertain possibility; 2) a condition, requirement or stipulation. History records that after Philip II of Macedonia had invaded southern Greece and had soundly defeated some of the key city-states in the region, he turned his attention to Sparta and sent them a message with a menacing question: “Should I come to you as friend or foe.” The terse Spartan response was: “Neither.” Losing his patience with Sparta, he sent them a final message: “If I invade Laconia, I shall turn you out.” The Spartan response was simply: “If.” Clearly, they assumed Philip’s “If” was leaning towards an uncertain possibility, which was ultimately their undoing. Philip invaded Laconia, devastated much of the region and ejected the Spartans from various parts of it.

Between ch26-27, the word if appears some 32 times. The history of Israel can’t fully be understood apart from the ifs contained in the Lord’s covenant with them. There are 3 critical if statements that appear in ch26: “If you walk in My statutes” (3); “But if you do not obey Me” (14); “But if they confess their iniquity” (40). When it comes to Jewish history, if is a very big word. The entire history of Israel, as well as their future, can be accurately plotted with just these 3 phrases. Even in our own relationships with the Lord, if carries a lot of weight.

14-15 – In a marriage relationship, it’s one thing for a spouse to be imperfect, but it’s quite another thing entirely for that spouse to abandon the marriage altogether. The Lord knows Israel won’t be perfect; that’s why He mercifully provides atoning sacrifices and the Day of Atonement. But, they must never abandon their covenant relationship with Him. In fact, the phrase break My covenant (15b) is used elsewhere to describe rejecting the covenant completely by means of gross disobedience. If Israel elected to go that route, they would be choosing to call down the covenant curses upon

themselves. Israel's special relationship with the Lord brought with it the obligation to obey His voice and glorify His name. Privilege brings with it responsibility and no nation has enjoyed more spiritual privileges from the Lord than Israel.

People today tend to take a negative view of the Lord bringing these curses to bear on His people but this is like thinking poorly of parent who disciplines their child after fair warning. As we read through these horrible curses, our modern sensibilities often lead us to ask how could a loving God not just allow these things to happen, but cause them to happen. This is the wrong question. What we should be asking is how hard does a nation's heart have to be to endure such horrible consequences and still persist in their stubborn rebellion? The Lord is giving the Israelites the opportunity to decide their future and if it turns out to be blessings or curses, it will be the result of their own doing.

16-17 – The blessings from the previous section seem to indicate that through obedience, Israel will experience a recovery of the blessings of Eden. It also states that the Lord will look on them with favor. In this section, however, because of their disobedience, His looking at them will take on a different character. Instead of experiencing the peace of Eden, the Israelites will live in a state of terror, which appears to be related to the diseases and fevers that would harm them physically and exhaust them emotionally. Not only will their enemies pillage their harvest and food stocks but the Lord Himself would oppose them, which is the very opposite of His desire for His people. The initial result of disobedience would be tragic: their enemies would defeat them and rule over them and their feelings of terror would continue (**17b**).

18-20 – These judgments from the Lord were meant to teach Israel the importance of obedience. Because of this, the word punish is better translated as discipline. God never disciplines His people just because they deserve it, He does so because He loves them and wants to correct their foolish behavior. The purpose of these judgments is restoration, not annihilation. When discipline is rejected, it often has to be repeated and strengthened and complete (7 times more) discipline is now to be expected.

The core problem with chronic, continued disobedience is pride in one's own power. This judgment begins with breaking the pride of their power, a

deadly sin that leads people to think they have no need of God or His ways. Even blessings can lead to pride when people forget these come from the Lord's hand and not their own strength. A disobedient Israel will not know the benefit and fruit of their own work. Their strength would bring no reward. They would do all the required work for farming but there would be little produce from the land or fruit from their trees. By removing these blessings through drought and famine, the Lord will remind Israel that they are completely dependent on Him, not just for life but for abundant life.

21-22 – Literally translated, v**21** begins: “If you walk with hostility against Me...” This is the exact opposite of what the Lord requires of His people, as **Micah 6:8** declares. As Israel continues in her disobedience, the Lord will multiply their plagues and sorrows – according to their multiplied sins. The word plagues actually refers to punishments. The resulting discipline is decimation from wild animals. I can think of a hundred better ways to die than being mauled by a lion or bear. Many of the residents of town near or above the Arctic Circle leave their vehicles unlocked so that pedestrians would have a place to go in case they were to meet up with a polar bear.

Typically, when populations have problems with predators, the predators end up taking it in the teeth but the Lord promises the opposite for a disobedient Israel. If being fruitful was a blessing in the ancient world, becoming few in number was a clear sign of being cursed. Attacks from wild animals will cause much destruction to their families and their livestock; so much so that their main thoroughfares would be empty of commerce. Sadly, Israelite families would experience the loss of children as a result of their parent's unfaithfulness. You would think that parents would be willing to do just about anything to ensure that their children are protected but obedience was too much to ask.

23-26 – If Israel were to respond to these punishments and calamities with humility and repentance, the Lord would regard them as having been reformed by Him. If they didn't allow these terrible things to reform them, more calamities would come. In this case, the punishment fits the crime. If the Israelites continue to be hostile towards the Lord, He will be hostile towards them. To avenge (5) is to bring justice to bear against those who have committed wrong. Elsewhere in the OT, this aspect of the Lord's justice is directed at others on behalf of His people. Here, it is directed at His people because they have broken the covenant.

War would cause the Israelites to withdraw into walled cities, but they will not be safe there as the Lord would then send a plague among them. This plague would be so devastating that they wouldn't be able to defend the city and would be given over into enemy hands. To add insult to injury, the siege of the city would also result in famine, with food supplies running so low that 10 women would have to divide up the bread from 1 round of baking to feed their entire families. There would be so little flour that they would have to measure out small quantities for each person.

27-28 – The hits just keep on coming! This passage constitutes a cascading crescendo of curses where Israel's towering sin and rebellion is utterly crushed under the weight of the righteous justice that the Lord releases on them. The goal is still discipline but the punishments used to achieve it go far beyond the previous curses in both number and severity. The harder the heart, the stronger the hammer needed to break it. As the curses intensify in bringing sorrow and destruction, it becomes clear that those who escaped the first few sets of curses would actually be better off dead, since their lives would consist of constant terror, death and wasting away to nothing.

(**29**) Earlier curses involved losing children and suffering famine during a siege but here they're combined in the most gruesome way: the famine during the siege would be so terrible that they would lose their children by eating them.

(**30**) Israel was commanded to remove all false worship from the land and not to actively engage in it. If they did, the punishment would fit the crime: the Lord would destroy those false worship centers and defile them with the dead bodies of their worshippers, who would become as lifeless as the idols they worshiped. The Lord would abhor them, which is the opposite of His intent for His people. If only they would embrace His covenant from the heart!

(**31**) It's not known whether these sanctuaries refers to orthodox or idolatrous worship centers. Either way, they'd be destroyed, a clear sign Israel wouldn't have the favor or protection of whomever they worshiped there; emphasized by the fact that any offerings they'd make to the Lord would be rejected. A husband can't proclaim his love to his wife if he's in the midst of an affair; nor could Israel proclaim her love to the Lord while prostituting herself to other gods.

(**32-33**) In those days, this would be a sign that the people's god was very

angry with them. In Israel's case, the land was made desolate only to be filled up again with her enemies. Exile was a horrible curse as the land was central to the covenant promises. Israel present in the land was one tangible sign that the covenant continued. This, too, would be taken away; leaving them with no physical evidence that the Lord was willing to maintain the covenant with such a sinful people. Removal from the land would be like separating from your spouse: excruciatingly painful.

(34-35) Exile would allow the land to make up for and finally enjoy all the Sabbath rests and Jubilees it was supposed to enjoy when Israel inhabited it. Israel failed to obey the Lord but God's not mocked: He ensured the land had rest. (36-37) The picture here is one of sheer terror: they wouldn't even settle safely in the land of their enemies! They would live in constant fear for their lives (Esther). They would escape death only to live in constant fear. (38-39) This refers to a physical wasting away. They would survive all of the above only to dwindle and wither away. The initial suffering would come because of the sins of previous generations but the suffering will continue because of the current generations own sins.

As shockingly harsh as these curses sound, there is still much mercy and grace in this list. First, we see the curses were meant to correct rebellious behavior, to bring Israel back into a right relationship with their covenant King. Secondly, although the Lord says over and over that He would punish, chastise, curse and reform Israel, He never once said that He would forsake Israel. That alone is grace but there is more grace to come.

40-45 – At some point, Israel will be compelled to admit their treachery against the Lord, be sicked by it and repent of it. At that time, and only at that time, will the Lord show them His amazing forgiveness and mercy. An uncircumcised heart was a heart that didn't submit to the covenant's requirements. It was possible to engage in the external rites of the covenant relationship with the Lord and yet never submit your heart to God Himself. When that's the case, there's no reason to assume you're a member of the covenant.

This is why Israel needed humbled hearts: admitting their sin was wrong and turning from it, all while acknowledging that the Lord was perfectly just to punish them for their sin. Their confession and repentance was just as necessary as their exile from the land. But, when the confession and repentance were forthcoming, the Lord says He will remember the covenant

He made with Jacob, Isaac and Abraham. Saying He will remember it doesn't mean He has ever forgotten it; it means He will fulfill its promises. The Lord not only remembers His covenant and His people, He remembers the land – His land intended for His people was still the object of His special attention and care.

The Lord declares these blessings as though they had already come to pass, they're as good as done. Another sign of the Lord's merciful character is in the fact that even though Israel will break the covenant by means of severe disobedience to the Lord's command, the Lord refuses to follow their example. Despite that fact that Israel will "walk out" of the covenant relationship – much like a spouse walks out of a marriage – the Lord affirms that He will remain constant and sure. When Israel was at her worst, the Lord refused to break His covenant with them. In fact, He had been faithful to deliver them out of Egyptian bondage and He can be trusted to deliver them from bondage again.

When Israel obeyed the Lord's commands, they would experience the covenant blessings that all humanity was created to enjoy. When they disobeyed, they would experience the covenant curses humanity was not created to endure. It is clearly blessing, not curses, that the Lord longs for His people to experience. This was the original goal of creation and remains the ultimate goal of redemption. Of course, while the majority of the blessings listed in 3-13 focus on material things, they culminate with the greatest blessing of all: a relationship with the Lord Himself, what God has desired from His creation all along.

How does all this apply to NT believers? Some say that [Gal 6:7](#) shows that we're still under the same principle of blessings and curses. But, Paul's not promoting a principle of spiritual karma that promises we will always prosper when we do good and always suffer when we act badly. Paul's merely speaking about managing our resources. We may fool ourselves into expecting a lot when we only sow a little, but we can't fool God – and the result of our poor sowing will be evident.

No, [Gal 3:13-14](#) makes it clear that Jesus received all the curses of the law upon Himself as He hung on the cross. Jesus bore the curse so that we (even Gentiles) might bear the blessings of Abraham, the blessings of righteousness and life by faith, but these blessings only come to those who

are found in Christ Jesus. Denominational affiliation counts for nothing; neither do the external evidences of Christianity (baptism/ communion). You can't experience the blessing of Abraham by participating in a ceremony or attending service regularly, you will only experience them as you place your faith and trust in Jesus to be your Savior.

If the differences between blessings and curses are so obvious in ch26, how much more will this be true of eternity?

Come to Christ in faith and obedience and allow Jesus to receive the curse on your behalf. 😊