

## **Blessings and Curses (pt.1)**

Deuteronomy 27:1-10; 28:1-14

This morning is my 52nd sermon on the book of Deuteronomy, though for Moses it is only his third. His first address to the people of God as they were about to enter the promised land of Canaan is recorded in the first four chapters of the book. The second sermon, beginning with the giving of the ten commandments, is found in chapters 5 through 26. It's a long sermon, and we, of course, took a long break from our study of Deuteronomy when we were only meeting for worship only once each Sunday because of COVID-19. This third address is, then, his final words, his final message to the people of God, the people who were bound to God by what we call a covenant.

A covenant is a relationship between two people, or between two parties. We still use that word to describe the marriage relationship, it is a covenant relationship. That is to say, there are stipulations that define the relationship, stipulations that the parties of a covenant are obliged to keep. In more legal terms, a covenant is a contract. In the homeowners association to which we belonged in Atlanta, there were stipulations about things that were prohibited or required of all the homeowners in the subdivision. Perhaps the modern day example that has most in common with the covenant between God and his people is what simply call a mortgage. The stipulations in a mortgage include the blessing of a loan. A bank or mortgage company lends you money, typically quite a lot of money. And you promise to pay it back, a certain amount each month with a specified interest rate. And the blessing of that covenant is that you gain the title to a house or a piece of real estate. And you live there. It is your home.

There is a curse in that covenant, however, namely the lien

that the bank puts upon your title. The lender gains the right to actually take possession and ownership of the property if you fail to pay your mortgage each month. It is a covenant relationship.

I want you to think in those terms this morning, for this third sermon in the book of Deuteronomy, because it that sort of a covenant relationship that God has established with his people, the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. It is a relationship that is well defined in terms of blessings and curses, and that will be our focus for the next two sermons—today the subject of blessings, the blessings of the covenant; next week the curses.

I'll begin by identifying what I am calling,

### **I. A COVENANT RENEWAL CEREMONY.**

That is what Moses is describing here, a formal ceremony designed to reinforce the covenant relationship which existed between God and his people. In the Old Testament, such outward and external ceremonies were quite common. We read in our text,

v.2-8

Writing upon whitewashed stones was a typically Egyptian practice, and the prohibition against the use of an iron tool could be either an emphasis upon the temporary nature of this preliminary altar compared to the more permanent temple structure to be later built, or it could be the sense of forbidding any tool that would give the impression that the altar someone owed its existence to the design and skill of a man. In any event, without attempting to interpret all of the details that are provided for us, the idea is of a ceremony that demonstrates and renews the sense of the covenant relationship between God and his people.

Let me suggest that we have had just such a ceremony today, in the context of the New Testament. Namely, baptism. Baptism is a sign of the covenant between God and his people. That covenant is best expressed by God's own declaration, "I will be your God and you will be my people." Then, a sign is given, which is, in the age of the New Covenant, the sign of water. Water baptism. It is a sign that we belong to God, that we belong to his covenant community. And that sign represents God's promise to cleanse us of our sins, to wash us, to remove both the guilt and the pollution of our sin. That covenant promise is so clearly expressed in the words of the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezek. 36:24 "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. 25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

So the ceremony we observed this morning is a renewal, a reminder and declaration, of that promise.

A wedding is another such covenant renewal ceremony. Typically, a ring is used as the symbol, the sign of that covenant relationship. And in that ceremony, a man and a woman vow and commit themselves to a covenant with each other, a covenant before God, a covenant defined ultimately by what we simply call faithfulness.

Again, those are examples of similar covenant renewal ceremonies that give us some context and ability to understand what is going on here in Deuteronomy 27-28. In our text, in this covenant relationship God has established with his people, we see, first of all, reference to law.

## **A. Covenant and law.**

v.1

Moses comes back to that idea again in,  
v.8-10

So law has its place in a covenant. To use the example of a mortgage, the stipulation of the law is the obligation of the monthly payment. In the example of a marriage, the stipulation of the law is the duty of faithfulness. And so it is, in the covenant God establishes with his people, he expresses to them his law, which is the definition of his will for the living out of their lives.

I've said it a lot in our study of Deuteronomy. I say it a lot no matter what text I am preaching from. The law is not the foundation upon which we become the people of God. Obedience to the law is not the means by which we obtain our status as the people of God. To use the theological language so plain in the New Testament, we are not justified by the law. But by faith. And that is clear in the Old Testament as well. Going back to the ten commandments themselves, note always how the law is introduced. Note the importance of the preface to the Ten Commandments.

Deut. 5:6 "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

And why did he do that? We don't have to guess.

Deut. 7:6 "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. 7 The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; 8 but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers,

the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 “Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments.”

That brings me to my second point with regard to this covenant renewal ceremony, the emphasis upon,

### **B. Covenant and promise.**

Notice, v.3

Never lose sight of that most basic reality. Everything that is about to happen to the people of Israel as they take possession of land of Canaan is because of God’s promise. Everything happens here because of God’s promise. God’s covenant promise. “I will be your God and you will be my people.” More fully,

Ex. 6:2 And God spoke to Moses and said to him: “I am the LORD. 3 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name LORD I was not known to them. 4 I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, in which they were strangers. 5 And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel whom the Egyptians keep in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. 6 Therefore say to the children of Israel: I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. 7 I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. 8 And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the LORD.’ ”

That’s the covenant. That’s the promise. And there is not contradiction between the law and that promise. As Paul makes so perfectly plain in,

Gal. 3:15 “Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man’s covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it. 16 Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as of many, but as of one, “And to your Seed,” who is Christ. 17 And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. 18 For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise.”

The law, as Paul continues in Galatians 3, is a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. And it remains the revealed will of God for the lives of his covenant people. But the foundation of the covenant is the promise. It is the promise of grace. And so we often call this the covenant of grace.

Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Thus, as the covenant people of God, as the object of his saving grace, we respond to him with our worship. And I am expressing it that way because I want you to see that the exact same principle is at work in both the Old and New Testaments. The principle of the promise of God’s grace becoming the foundation and the motivation for all of our worship. Our worship is but a response to the outpouring of his grace. We do it differently, of course, then and now. But it is the same principle at work. And so we see in our text,

### **C. Covenant and the devotion of worship.**

That's what this ceremony is all about.

v.4-7

Notice how our worship is defined in that last verse, verse 7, "[You shall] rejoice before the LORD your God."

Remember from the last chapter,

Deut. 26:8 "So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. 9 He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, "a land flowing with milk and honey"; 10 and now, behold, I have brought the firstfruits of the land which you, O LORD, have given me.' "Then you shall set it before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God. 11 So you shall rejoice in every good thing which the LORD your God has given to you and your house, you and the Levite and the stranger who is among you."

That's our worship, and the offerings we give to God today are to be the expressions of our devotion as well. So we don't set up stones on Mount Ebal and write on them. We don't build altars in order to sacrifice animals. But we do "rejoice before the Lord our God." And this Old Testament principle still applies to us today,

Deut. 12:5 "But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. 6 There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. 7 And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the LORD your God has blessed you."

Psalms 40:16 "Let all those who seek You rejoice and be glad

in You; Let such as love Your salvation say continually, "The LORD be magnified!"

Let's skip ahead to chapter 28 now, to continue a focus on the blessings of the covenant. We'll look at the second half of these same two chapters next week, in terms of the curses of the covenant. But we read further of the blessings in chapter 28. And the chief definition of that blessing is the very existence of our covenant relationship with God in the first place. In other words, he chose us to be his people. He loved us first, while we were still his enemies, alienated from him because of our sin. He loved us. He chose us. And that is the starting point whenever we address the whole matter of...

## **II. COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS DEFINED.**

What is our relationship with our covenant God? To ask the same question a little differently, what is our identity before God? Who are we and how are we defined? I think the best way to answer those questions is by emphasizing that we are...

### **A. A people with special privileges.**

A special people with special privileges!

Going back again to the previous chapter,

Deut. 26:8 "Also today the LORD has proclaimed you to be His special people, just as He promised you, that you should keep all His commandments, 19 and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, in name, and in honor, and that you may be a holy people to the LORD your God, just as He has spoken."

Here this morning we read more about those special privileges.

28:1-2

Then there is a passage similar to the sermon on the Mount, when Jesus speaks what call the beatitudes, v.3-8

So what is the point? Simply put, that we are a people with special privileges. This text comes to us in the context of the Old Testament nation of Israel, and so the blessings are related to the normal, everyday life of that nation. But they represent the spiritual blessings which are ours in Christ! The special privileges we have begin with the freedom we have to call God our father, and to be seated with Christ even now in the heavenly realms.

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence.”

And we have the blessing of an inheritance as well!

1 Peter 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

It gets better. We have the special privileges of God’s blessings because we are...

## **B. A people belonging to our God.**

That’s is our identity, both personally and corporately, together. We are God’s own people. We belong to him. And that means he has set us apart to be his people. He has set us apart from the people of the world. That’s what it means to be holy!  
v.9-10

Go back to Exodus 19, just before the giving of the ten commandments,

Ex. 19:5 “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. 6 And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

Deut. 14:2 “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”

And just to be sure that you realize that these same words are still used to describe and define God’s people today, we read in,

1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

We are a people who belong to God. We who believe in Jesus, we are a holy nation. We are his own special people. His covenant people. And we are,

## **C. A people promised a glorious inheritance.**

The people of Moses’ day understood that promised inheritance in terms of the land. And it was a good land.

We have a good land promised to us as well. A land, not flowing with milk and honey, but a land with city gates of pearl, streets of gold with a sea of glass. The heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.

Rev. 21:1 “The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. 22 But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. 24 And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. 25 Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). 26 And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it.”

That is our promised inheritance as the covenant people of God today.

Now, let me come full circle here this morning. I began with an emphasis on covenant and law. And we have come to the very climax of the gospel itself with this promised inheritance. And Moses returns his thought to the covenant people as,

#### **D. A people made responsible for their actions.**

v.13-14

So our obedience to the law becomes our response to the promise of the gospel, as it always should be. Our responsibility as God’s covenant people is the responsibility of those who have been given great privileges, those who have received great grace. And and recipients of that grace, as the covenant people of God, we are called to be faithful.

Let me end with this marvelous thought. As God’s covenant people, we are called to be faithful. But even when we are not, when we are faithless, God remains faithful to his promise. And so, as God’s covenant people, his own special people, called to be holy because he is holy, still we have a mediator so that when we do sin, we don’t lose the blessings of the covenant. It is the covenant of grace!

1 John 2:1 “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”