

Blessings and Curses (pt.2)

Deuteronomy 27:11-26; 28:15-68

I wondered as I began to prepare this sermon this week, what exactly you might be expecting from my preaching today if you read ahead a bit and prepared yourself for the worship service. There are lots and lots of verses about the curses of the covenant. I didn't even read through them all.

I divided up these two chapters so that we would study the blessings of the covenant last week and the curses today. That seemed like a good idea to me last week, but I wasn't so sure this week. As I thought about this sermon a little bit before I actually started to work on it specifically, I was actually wondering myself what I might have to say. What am I going to say about all these curses? And how am I going to say it in such a way that you just don't go home all depressed?

Curses are an integral part of a covenant relationship, and so when God established that covenant with his people in the Old Testament, curses were embedded in that very agreement. As I mentioned last week, a covenant can be thought of in some sense like a mortgage—an arrangement and commitment that brings a homeowner the great blessing of the home itself, a home to live in as your very own, with the title as well. But the curses of that covenant are obvious—if you fail to pay the mortgage, the bank or mortgage company have the right to take ownership and possession of the home. It's called a foreclosure.

So today we come to the curses God has defined in his covenant with his people as they are about to enter the promised land of Canaan. Let me reemphasize a very important point, as a reminder. This is in the Old Covenant, before the coming of Christ, so that God's work of redemption which he has planned

and determined to bring about through the life and work of his son Jesus, that work of salvation is lived out in the history of this nation. So this isn't JUST history. This is redemptive history, the history of Israel that is itself a type and picture of the whole scope of God's work of salvation. With that, let me emphasize first that,

I. CURSES AFFIRM THE GOODNESS OF GOD'S LAW.

Curses are, of course, the promised punishment for disobedience to God's law. And I have to express repeatedly that the law was never the means by which God would allow his people to become his people. The law was never the means by which someone would be justified, never the path by which you could be made right with God. The covenant is, and always was, a covenant of grace. The foundation of the covenant is God's own promise, I will be your God and you will be my people. In the language of the New Testament, we read of such marvelous grace in,

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."

But what about the law? Well, simply put, the law is the way in which God's covenant people are called to live out their lives, in a manner "worthy of the calling with which you were called," as we read in Ephesians 4.

And in that context, the law is good!

God's promises to his people Israel were good. They were gracious. The land was flowing with milk and honey. And so the law, with its curses, is still a testimony of the goodness of God as expressed in the law. And thus, we read,

v.26

That repeated phrase is more than just a liturgical formula. It is an acknowledgement by God's people of the stipulations of this covenant relationship. Having been saved by grace, shall we sin that grace may abound? Of course not. So whenever the law would be read, even when these curses of the law would be pronounced upon lawbreakers, the emphasis was still upon the goodness of the law.

So, when Jesus was asked a trick question in the New Testament, a question about the law, and the priority of which laws were most important, he gave a very profound answer. Rather than cause an argument by picking one particular law as opposed to another, he summarized the law in terms of the command to love

Mat. 22:36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" 37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

A command to love. That's certainly a good thing, isn't it? If any of you saw the livestream of Dale and Celeste's wedding yesterday, clearly you saw them fulfilling that commandment, a command to love. It was just written all over their faces, they could hardly contain it. That's the law of love, and you saw the goodness of that law, the enjoyment and blessing of the law itself.

Well, that's what I want you to be able to see even in these threatened curses, with the emphasis upon those two great commandments to love God and to love one another. And that's what we have in chapter 27. First,

A. The goodness of the law to love God.

That's what it is all about. We, the bride, loving our bridegroom. So...

v.14-15

Thus, cursed would be the man who marries a faithful woman and then goes out and pays for a prostitute! Cursed would be such foolishness! Cursed would be the one who rejects the one true and living God, who had revealed himself so plainly to the people of Israel in the Old Covenant. Cursed is the one who would reject that self-revelation of the covenant God in order to worship idols and statues, or any other carved or molded image. Cursed is such a one, because the command to love God with all your heart is such a good thing, for God himself is so completely and perfectly worthy of such love.

Cursed is the one who responds to the love of God by creating for himself an abomination, and in secret, worships that very creation of his own hands. Rather than loving the one who has made heaven and earth and everything in them. Even that curse points out the goodness of that greatest of all the commandments, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."

Similarly, these curses affirm,

B. The goodness of the law to love one another.

And there is quite an emphasis here on what we usually call the second table of the law, commandments six through ten, all of

which deal with our relationships with one another. And beloved, these laws are good. And their goodness is magnified by the severity of the curse imposed upon those who would violate them. Just read through them, and see the references to the ten commandment.

v.16-18

Do you see the priority of doing justice, of treating one another with righteousness, of refusing to engage in anything abusive or harmful, especially to those who are vulnerable.

v.19

Don't forget James' clear definition,
James 1:27 "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

Deuteronomy has plenty to say about keeping yourself unspotted as well.

v.20-24

Then a return to the subject of abusive behavior,
v.25

Again, and again, the goodness of the law is affirmed. "And all the people shall say, Amen!" So be it. We agree.

Beloved, this is the great commandment,

Mat. 22:37 "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Let's go back to the idea of curses, and look at the second half of chapter 28. Actually, it's quite a bit more than half. We looked at verses 1-14 last week, the blessings. And the curses go from verse 15 all the way to verse 68. That's a lot of curses. So what is there for our benefit today? Let me put it this way, quite broadly.

II. CURSES REFLECT THE REBELLION OF THE HUMAN HEART.

In other words, we study these curses because the curses themselves teach us about the condition of the fallen human heart. The sinfulness of the fallen human heart, a sinful nature inherited from Adam and Eve, by every human being every born, except Jesus himself. And what is so very striking at the very outset, is that this...

A. Sin incurs the curse of death.

So, the point of all these curses defined for us here in Deuteronomy 28 is, in one very real sense, an exposition of a single verse in Genesis 2, a simply instruction God gave to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Gen. 2:15 "Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

The Apostle Paul would say the same thing, so directly and pointedly.

Rom. 6:23. "...the wages of sin is death."

And death is not only the prescribed judgment of God upon sin, physical death, as a curse, is also the event that triggers the

eternal judgment before God.

Heb. 9:27 “[I]t is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.”

We need to be reminded of that, even as believers. Even as those for whom the promise applies, that,

Rom. 8:1 “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Even for us who, by faith, are sure and certain that we have been freed from that curse, we still need to remember, with much consciousness, that sin brings about death. The nature of sin is such that it earns the condemnation of death. It’s not OK. You can’t go on sinning so that grace will increase!

Look at how that sentence of death is made clear in our text. I’ll read just some of the verses, representing them all.

28:16-24

Even further,
v.25-29

It just goes on and on. The point is simple, straightforward. And, I suggest, it is the same message that comes to us in the last book of the New Testament,

Rev. 19:11 “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. 12 His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. 13 He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. 15 Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the

nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Beloved, it is always and forever true. Sin incurs the curse of death.

But these curses give us further insight as well, insight about the fallen human heart.

B. Sin reveals an ungrateful rebellion.

Rebellion, that is rebellion against God. And ingratitude, rebellion that forms as a rejection of his goodness. Look at v.45

That’s rebellion. And that is the very nature of sin. “You did not obey the voice of the LORD your God.” It wasn’t just a mistake. It wasn’t just confusion, or a distraction. It wasn’t an accident or something you couldn’t avoid. It was a choice that you made. A decision. A commitment. It is a stark reality. “You did not obey the voice of the LORD your God.” And Jesus would be sure to teach us that your actions, those choices you have made not to obey the voice of the Lord your God, were actually choices that originate in your own heart.

Mat. 15:18 “But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. 19 For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. 20 These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”

Sin is rebellion. It is always helpful to identify it that way. But it is actually more than that. It is worse than that. It is ungrateful

rebellion. The reality is that sin is not simply disobeying God in rebellion against him, but when it is committed by believers, by God's own people, it is a rejection of his goodness. It is an expression of ingratitude. A lack of thankfulness, which we ought always to have in every consideration of his great work of salvation. So we read in,

v.45-46

A sign and wonder of what? What was the purpose of these curses in the minds of the people of Israel? They were to be a constant reminder, a sign and a wonder of their ingratitude. They have rejected the good blessings which God promised them in that same covenant. As we read in,

v.47

That's the point. Because of God's work to redeem his people out of Egypt, out of that house of bondage and slavery, because of God's promise to give to his people a good land flowing with milk and honey, they should have been filled "with joy and gladness of heart." They were to receive an "abundance of everything," according to verse 47. Turn ahead just a bit to,

Deut. 32:8 "When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, When He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples According to the number of the children of Israel. 9 For the LORD's portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance. 10 "He found him in a desert land And in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. 11 As an eagle stirs up its nest, Hovers over its young, Spreading out its wings, taking them up, Carrying them on its wings, 12 So the LORD alone led him, And there was no foreign god with him. 13 "He made him ride in the heights of the earth, That he might eat the produce of the fields; He made him draw honey from the rock, And oil from the flinty rock; 14 Curds from the cattle, and milk of

the flock, With fat of lambs; And rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, With the choicest wheat; And you drank wine, the blood of the grapes. 15 "But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; You grew fat, you grew thick, You are obese! Then he forsook God who made him, And scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation. 16 They provoked Him to jealousy with foreign gods; With abominations they provoked Him to anger. 17 They sacrificed to demons, not to God, To gods they did not know, To new gods, new arrivals That your fathers did not fear. 18 Of the Rock who begot you, you are unmindful, And have forgotten the God who fathered you."

That's the worst aspect of our ongoing sin, that it demonstrates ingratitude. Not just rebellion, as bad as that is. But rebellion in the form of a rejection of the goodness and mercy of God in his promise of salvation. And that is the heinousness of ongoing sin today, for believers, for Christians. It is not that you lose your salvation every time you sin. But rather, you rebel against the mercy of God who has promised to save you.

The curses of this chapter are again put in that context in, v.58

You should fear his glorious and awesome name. The Lord Your God. Yahweh. Elohim. You should honor him, and worship him, him alone. Because he is so kind in the promises of his grace. And that motivation should still be with us today, as Christians. Again, not fearing his condemnation when we sin. But heartbroken at the ingratitude of our rebellion.

Paul puts it this way when he writes to the Romans, Rom. 2:4 "Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"

It's not the proverbial two by four beating you over your head that is the means by which you are brought to repentance. It is "the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering." It is his goodness that should lead you to repentance. And your sin, my sin, the sin that continues in our lives as Christians, is a rejection, an ungrateful rejection, of that very goodness.

One more point in all of this, however. I have thus far emphasized the benefit of these curses in terms of the lives of God's true believers. These curses, while not threatening us with condemnation as true believers, should still be profitable in bringing us to repentance. But there is a point at which,

C. Rebellion removes the privilege of claiming the blessings of God's covenant promises.

In other words, there is a point in terms of our human rebellion that these curses really do become a curse. And the world in which we live needs to hear and to heed that warning. Even as Paul would continue in,

Rom. 2:4 "Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? 5 But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 6 who "will render to each one according to his deeds": 7 eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; 8 but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, 9 tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; 10 but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 11 For there is no partiality with God."

So there is a warning. And clearly there is a warning here in Deuteronomy 28. For example,
v.48-51

That description would go on. And it is rather gruesome in the language of God's judgment. We read,
v.59-62

The warning is simple. You no longer have the privilege of claiming the blessings of God's covenant love. For ultimately,

D. Rebellion results in a righteous condemnation.

Of the wicked. Of those who show themselves and prove themselves to be the wicked. The point is, when God pronounces that judgment, he remains righteous and just to do so. They get what they have earned, what they deserve. And God bears no evil in exacting this righteous judgment.

v.63

In the context of Old Testament Israel, we then read,
v.64-67

The wicked will return to the slavery of eternal condemnation.
v.68

2 Cor. 5:10 "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

That day of judgment brings no fear of terror for the true believer, for the one who trusts in Jesus, for on that day, we shall have an advocate. A propitiation. We shall have Jesus, whose death satisfied all the demands of God's perfect justice.

But for those who rebel against God in their rejection of that promise of life, only death will remain. And Jesus will be the judge.

Rev. 19:13 “He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. 15 Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”

There is such a simple and direct application of all of this for us today. I have read Romans 2:4 as it is written in the Bible as a question. Let me make that question into an exhortation, that we all might hear. And by hearing, believe. And by believing, receive this promise of eternal life.

“[Do not] despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, ... knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance.”

Even as you read and study these curses of the covenant, dear friends, know that it is the goodness of God that should lead you to repentance.