

“Living the Good Life”
Deuteronomy 28:1-68
June 1, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

We are concluding this morning our series of sermons on Deuteronomy, and we do so with this chapter that is filled with a long list of blessings upon those who obey God, and an even longer list of curses upon those who don't obey. We have noted before how the entire book of Deuteronomy is structured like ancient treaties that were not uncommon in the days of Moses. These were treaties between a more powerful king and kings of lesser power and influence. These treaties typically concluded with a section like this, in which the more powerful king would say, “Here are the good things that will happen to you if you keep the terms of this treaty, and here are the very bad things that will happen to you if you fail to keep this treaty.”

God uses this same structure to speak about his covenant with his people. This is God's way of speaking as clearly and simply as possible about the consequences of following him or failing to do so. Someone told me this week of an episode of the comedy show, *The Office*, in which an employee was explaining to the boss, Michael, something about a budget report. As this finance person was talking about the details of the report, Michael interrupts and says, “Can you explain it to me the way you would to an eight-year-old?” So he begins again to explain in simpler terms, only to be interrupted a second time, “Can you explain it to me the way you would to a five-year-old?” God is speaking to his people as simply as he can, saying, “These are the good things that will happen if you keep me as your God and obey me, and these are the very bad things that will happen if you abandon me and start following other gods.” In short, God is explaining what constitutes a good life. Let's look at this more carefully.

I. The Good Life Described

The good life is to live a life full of the blessings listed here and one free of the curses found here. Let me make just a couple of points about these blessings before we turn most of our attention to the curses. The blessings listed here seem to extend from the promises God made to Abraham. When God called Abraham, he promised him a great name, a great land and a great people. The blessings listed here are in the same terms. So God says that he will **“set you high above all the nations of the earth”** (v. 1). And he promises to give them fruitful wombs so that they become numerous. Many blessings are about the land, upon which God will send rain for fruitful crops. He will multiply their livestock and give them material prosperity. And just as God told

Abraham that he would be blessed in order to be a blessing to the other nations, so he tells his people here the same. **“And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you”** (v. 10).

Before giving the list of these blessings, Moses says that they will **“overtake you”** (v. 2). It’s a verb with a rich meaning. First, it means that God will see to it that these blessings pursue us, like a hunter relentlessly pursuing his prey. They are inescapable. Second, it comes when you’re not looking for it. When something overtakes you, it comes from behind. It comes upon you when you’re not looking for it. Many people pursue God in order to be blessed, but blessing doesn’t come that way. If God is pursued only to receive blessing from him, then God is made secondary to the blessing. It is the blessing that is the great desire of our hearts, not God. Those who pursue blessings first of all never find themselves truly blessed. But those who pursue God first of all find blessing to be inescapable. The third thing this word teaches us is that the timing of this being overtaken by blessing is uncertain. It happens when God says it should happen. Many of these blessings take a significant amount of time, things like growing a nation and an expanding family. The prosperity promised here often will happen only in the next life.

Did you notice that the list of curses is about three times as long as the list of blessings? Why is that? I think it is because of God’s mercy. He wants to warn us as clearly as possible about the many indications that life has gone astray and is heading for trouble while there’s still time to correct it. If you had a bottle of poison in your house, wouldn’t you want it to indicate its true nature as clearly as possible? I was talking with someone a few weeks ago who almost died when he inadvertently drank a bottle full of antifreeze that he had put in a Gatorade bottle. He drank it only because it was mislabeled. By his grace, God wants to make sure the poison bottle of sin is not mislabeled. In this long section, he is writing over and over again, “Poison! This will kill you!”

If you read through these curses in one sitting, they are absolutely devastating. The same verb is used of the curses that was used of the blessings—they shall *overtake* you. The attempt will undoubtedly be made to escape these things, but escape will prove impossible. I am struck by the pervasive nature of these curses. They touch every area of life. They include physical discomfort and sickness, plague, drought, economic collapse, defeat by one’s enemies, growing isolation, family breakdown, exile to a foreign nation, and many more.

We don’t have time to look in detail at these curses, so let’s just sample a few of them. Notice first of all the summary of these curses in verse 20. **“The Lord will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of**

the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me.” Notice those two words “confusion” and “frustration.” Confusion is part of God’s curse. Do you remember how when God would come to fight for Israel, he would often bring confusion upon their enemies? To live in confusion is a sign of being under God’s judgment. I have noticed in life that while following the Lord is certainly not easy, it does bring a simplicity and clarity to life. There are many things in life a follower of Christ may not understand, but we are not confused about the most important things. We know that we belong to God. We know that he is worth forsaking all to have him. We would make the decision I read about last week that a Christian in Nigeria made. When the Islamist militant group Boko Haram entered his house late one night, they told him that they would allow him to live if he would renounce Christ and convert to Islam. He said that he could not do so, whereupon he was immediately shot. Christians are not confused about where life is found, and we know that holding on to Jesus is the anchor of our lives. Frustration is also listed as part of being under God’s judgment. Frustration happens when nothing a person does succeeds. Goals may be met, but they prove empty and unable to satisfy.

Another of these curses that strikes me is the one about isolation. In time of need, there will be no one to help. **“And you shall be only oppressed and robbed continually, and there shall be no one to help you”** (v. 29). Then in verse 31, all of his animals (the equivalent today of all one’s assets) are stolen from him, **“but there shall be no one to help you”** (v. 31). We are created as social creatures, relating to other people in interdependent relationships. But that is disrupted here, and the one under God’s curse finds himself all alone with no one to help.

And then there’s this staggering curse mentioned in verse 67. **“In the morning you shall say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and at evening you shall say, ‘If only it were morning!’ because of the dread that your heart shall feel, and the sights that your eyes shall see.”** In other words, things get so terrible that you just know that with the passing of some time they are bound to get better, mostly because you can’t see how they could get any worse. But as time passes things get so much worse that you find yourself longing for the previous time when you thought they were as bad as they could be.

The application I want to make of this is for our students heading off to college. There is a view that is common in our culture that views one’s college years as the time to be wild and rebellious, a time to sow your wild oats before settling down into mature adulthood. There is almost the view that if you don’t live wildly in your college years, you are missing out. That couldn’t be further from the truth. The truth is that to sow your wild oats is actually to drink deeply of the poison of God’s curse. Even when God is merciful to rescue people from this, there is the residue of this curse for the rest of one’s life. So choose to walk the path of blessing. That brings us to our next point.

II. The Good Life Found

We need to be very careful to make sure we understand exactly what this path of blessing is. The text is clear in teaching that obedience is necessary for this blessing. The opening verse says plainly, **“And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God...”** The word “obey” is used six times in this chapter. Clearly, the path of blessing is the path of obedience and the path of cursing is the path of disobedience. That is emphasized repeatedly through the text. But where does obedience come from? Some conclude that it comes simply from believing that the blessings and curses of this text are determined by one’s level of obedience. The history of Israel shows otherwise.

Israel’s history following the book of Deuteronomy was an up and down history. They had times where they followed the Lord, but even more times when they failed to do so. As Moses had warned in this chapter, their rebellion eventually led to their exile in 586 B.C. When Israel came out of their Babylonian exile and returned to their land, they were determined never to let that happen again. They developed very elaborate systems to make sure that they obeyed God’s law. They added many laws to make sure they didn’t even get close to disobeying God. But it didn’t work. The party of the Pharisees resulted from this determination to obey God. When God finally shows up in the person of Jesus, his greatest enemies turn out to be those who seemed to be most zealous to obey God.

The problem was that they missed something Moses had taught in Deuteronomy 28. They missed the fact that obedience to God comes only in a relationship with God. Moses had said that repeatedly in this passage. He said in verse 20 that their evil deeds stemmed from the fact that they had forsaken God. They did not serve the Lord with joyfulness and gladness of heart (v. 47), but instead became ungrateful. They did not fear **“the glorious and awesome name”** (v. 58) of the Lord their God. It is impossible to sustain a life of obedience unless you know God and have a relationship of trust with him.

Those of us who live this side of the coming of Jesus have a great advantage in this area of having a relationship with God. We know the love of God through Jesus. It is significant that one of the ways the New Testament speaks of our salvation is in the terms of blessing and cursing mentioned in this chapter. So Paul says in Ephesians 1 that all who are in Christ have been blessed **“with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”** (1:3). The blessings of Deuteronomy 28 overtake those who are in Christ. And when Paul speaks about the death of Christ, he puts it in terms of cursing. **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us”** (Gal. 3:13). It is only as we receive the love of God through Christ that we will find

ourselves on this path of blessing, because in Christ we know God and come joyfully to serve him.

III. The Good Life Lived

Once we find the good life in a relationship with God through Jesus, how do we live such a life? In other words, what should be our motivation as we walk before God in obedience? Verse 47 helps answer this question. **“Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies.”** We serve with joy and gladness of heart because of the way God has loved us. We receive that love and rest in it, and then we obey. We believe these blessings and warnings, and we make every effort to obey God, but we do so as we rest in his love for us.

There is nothing that motivates like the love of God. Some think that scaring people through these warnings is the best way to motivate people. Fear can certainly motivate us to flee, but it cannot change the heart. And it is only when the heart is changed that we will be able to obey God. It is the love of God that changes the heart.

CONCLUSION:

At the Good Friday service, I told the story of a man who served as a chaplain and was given an assignment to serve in the psychiatric ward where all the most seriously ill patients were sent. The walls were padded, and the patients were incapable of even the simplest conversations. The most common sounds he heard were cries of agony and hysterical, maniacal laughter. He didn't know what to do, but he sensed the Lord telling him to just sit and sing of the love of Jesus. So he sat in the middle of the room and sang “Jesus Loves Me.” “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong; they are weak, but he is strong.” As he sang, he became more convinced of the truth of the words. So he sang the chorus with emphasis. “Yes, Jesus loves! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.” The first few days, nothing happened. But then someone joined him in singing. Gradually, others began to sing along until there was a choir in the lockdown unit of the psychiatric ward. And then patients began improving, and over the next months, the majority of patients improved enough to be moved out of this ward. The love of Jesus, who has taken the curses of this chapter, and who has earned for us the blessings of this chapter, will change any life. Receive that love and go forth in obedience.