

Sermon – 02/07/2006 pm

Amen to Covenant Curses

Study Text: Deuteronomy 27:9-26

On the banks of the Jordan prior to entering Canaan, Moses reminded Israel of the covenant Yahweh or the Lord had made with them forty years before at Mt Sinai. The Lord who brought the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob out of bondage in Egypt declared that they were his chosen people and gave them his law to obey. On this occasion of covenant renewal Moses reminded them that *the Lord proclaimed you to be his special people, just as he promised you, that you should keep his commandments* (26:18).

This occasion was a milestone in their life for two reasons. Firstly Moses would soon be taken from them. They would no longer have this man whom ‘the Lord knew face to face’ as their leader. Secondly they would soon be settling in their own land, the land the Lord their God was giving them as their own possession.

Times of great changes in life are often testing times. Loss of a loved one, of a job, of a friend, of a home, or of an opportunity can be difficult and testing to our faith in God. Similarly when we come into times of prosperity, when we get an inheritance, a promotion, or some award we may forget the Lord. It is important that we remember the covenant the Lord made with us in the blood of Jesus Christ often, in order to be prepared for changes and times of testing that come our way.

Trust and Obey

What was involved in renewing the covenant? Listen and obey (28:9-10). The word for listen here means ‘be silent’. The covenant was the initiative and the doing of the Lord from beginning to end. The people played no part in drawing up this covenant.

The Lord spoke and they listened. They should have been thankful that the Almighty God is also a merciful God and not capricious like the gods made by man. The Lord did not lay burdens on them that were too heavy to bear. If they walked in the path of the Lord they would find rest for their souls (Jeremiah 6:16). *My yoke is easy and my burden is light* said Jesus (Matthew 11:30).

Obedience was not a condition of this covenant but was the outcome of it. The Lord did not make this covenant with them because they were deserving or good in any way. He did not choose them because they were a powerful nation, *for you were the least of all peoples* (7:7). It was his sovereign choice, an act of grace by Almighty God. Yet obedience was demanded according to the terms of this covenant. How the people lived reflected on their God.

God is holy and so his people must be holy. The commands God gave reflected that holiness, so it was essential to obey these commands. As they walked in obedience to the commands given by God they would not only enjoy life as their Maker intended, but would bring glory to God among the nations. *He will set you high above all nations which he has made, in praise, in name and in honour, and that you may be a holy people to the Lord your God, just as he has spoken* (26:19).

Remembering the covenant was a time to remember the grace of God. Gratitude and thankfulness should characterise God's covenant people. They will also be men and women who fear God. The God who demonstrated his power to save also had power to destroy. Under the terms of the covenant, divine sanctions were laid down. In justice God was ready to bless those who obeyed, and to curse those who disobeyed his holy commands.

Covenant Curses

Moses commanded the people what they were to do when they entered the land and came to Mt Ebal near Shechem. They were to build an altar as seen earlier in this chapter. They were also to affirm their commitment to the covenant and its commands in a special ceremony at this place. The ceremony was mentioned earlier by Moses (11:29).

Opposite Mt Ebal to the south was Mt Gerazim, with the city of Shechem in between. Half of the tribes, those descended from the sons of Leah and Rachel, were to stand on Mt Gerazim to bless the people (27:12). The other six tribes, those descended from the handmaids Bilhah and Zilpah, plus Reuben and Zebulun, were to stand on Mt Ebal and curse. This action of standing on the two mountains may have been symbolic, for all the people were to say *Amen* ('so let it be') when the Levites shouted out the curses.

Just what these curses involved we are not told in this chapter. The focus is upon the covenant violations or sinful acts that would bring down a divine curse. But previously Moses had told them that the Lord in his anger may *shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain* (11:17). The Lord could withhold the rain in those days and he did (*cf.* James 5:17-18). Do you think he cannot do the same today? In the next chapter other divine curses are outlined.

Divine curses go back to the very beginning, to the Garden of Eden. The serpent that tricked Eve into disobeying God's command was subject to God's curse (Genesis 3:14). The ground was also cursed, making man to toil to get his food. With disobedience to the divine command came the divine curse. The life of divine blessing, of fellowship with the Lord in the garden was cut off.

The twelve curses listed in this passage relate directly or indirectly to the Decalogue. The emphasis on sexual immorality (4 of the 12 curses) may be because they were entering into a land where such wickedness was widespread. You might think it was our land today they were entering, but it was actually the land of Canaan over 3000 years ago. Sexual permissiveness, prostitution, paedophilia, and even pornography, was probably there in its own primitive way.

The first curse is pronounced upon those who make carved images for worship, in violation of the first and second commandments. The altar on Mt Ebal was to be made of uncut stone. When craftsmen made things there was always the danger of corrupting the worship of God. Such images are often set up in secret, but the Lord can see such things. Sins can be hidden from man but not from God. Many of the curses in this passage are pronounced upon things done in secret.

The one who curses their father or mother is himself cursed by God. *Honour your father and mother that you days may be long and that it may go well with you* is the fifth commandment (5:16). There are many for whom life is not going well these days. How often can this be

traced to dishonouring parents or treating them with contempt? There is no conditional statement attached to this curse or the command – it is not just righteous parents.

Dishonesty and injustice, especially when targeted at the poor and needy, comes under a divine curse. Land grabbing was as prevalent back then as it is today. Jezebel is the prime example of a land grabber in the Scriptures, but there are many who follow after her. Moving a boundary marker is often a sly or secret action; something done in the night or while your neighbour is away.

The blind, the stranger, the widow and the orphan are vulnerable individuals. They are easily exploited and denied justice. But God is just and demands justice for such people. Hence the divine curse upon those who mistreat or abuse the weak and vulnerable. As a society turns away from God and his commands such exploitation and abuse will increase.

In Asian villages large family units often live under the one roof. When a son marries, his bride is brought into the family home. But she may have to frequent beds other than her husband's. In the time of Moses it was common for tribal people to live in extended family units. The sexual practices cursed here at Mt Ebal may well have been part of such households.

Sexual relations with a stepmother, mother-in-law or stepsister are each cursed in this oath taking ceremony or public affirmation of the covenant. While extended family living may be fertile ground for such immorality, so also are so called 'blended families' heralded by our society. We keep hearing about abuse of children in homes around us. The Lord has declared what families are and how people are to live together.

Bestiality, condemned in Leviticus 18:23, is here subject to a divine curse. While religious prostitution was rampant among the Canaanites, the Hittites were known for bestiality. They held that sexual intercourse with an animal effected spiritual union with their deity. What an abomination! Yet a so called great thinker of our day, Peter Singer, has no objections to such gross sexual perversion.

Curse Removed

What is the situation regarding these curses today? This is a good question. If you turn to the New Testament you will find an answer. Firstly the apostle Paul says that *as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse* (Galatians 3:10). On what basis did he say this? He found it written in the passage before us – cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things written in the book of the law (27:26). In other words, the curse remains on those who seek salvation by works. If you offend in just one part you have broken the whole law and are cursed (James 2:10).

Thankfully Jesus came and died to remove that curse. He became a curse for us by going to the Cross. *Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law* (Galatians 3:13). Are you still under the curse of the law or are you set free by the blood of Christ?

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