

Sermon – 09/07/2006 pm

Covenant Curses

Study Text: Deuteronomy 28:15-68

Sanctions were attached to the covenant the Lord made with the children of Israel. These sanctions included curses as well as blessings. In fact the space allotted to curses in this chapter is about four times more than that to blessings. This is in keeping with the nature of man, for we are inherently sinful. In the weakness of the flesh we are more prone to doing evil than good, to breaking commands than keeping them (*cf.* Romans 7:18).

The commandments themselves are stated in a negative format because of this sinfulness of the human heart. We need boundaries to guide us into holy living. Even with divine commands we still rebel and want to go our own ways. So the Lord clearly declared the consequences of breaking the commands of the covenant.

Modern secular education is fundamentally flawed on this point. Many educationists believe that children are inherently good, so if they left to develop without interference they will become morally upright and respectable citizens. Our Maker is not so foolish. He knows that every individual is sinful from birth, and that without instruction will become corrupt in every aspect of life. Paul tells us in Romans chapter one what happens when God gives up on a person, leaving them to walk by their own moral compass. The TV program ‘Big Brother’ is but the beginning.

Curses Instead Of Blessings

The list of blessings, promised if the people obey the covenant commandments, are followed by a corresponding list of curses *if you do not obey the voice of the Lord and carefully observe all his commandments* (28:15). If the Lord is powerful to bless in any place he is also powerful to curse in any place also. There is no escaping the omnipresent God.

Where can I go from your Spirit, or where can I flee from your presence asks the Psalmist (Psalm 39:7). There is no such place. This is good news for the one who is seeking the Lord, but bad news for the one hiding from the Lord because of sin – as Jonah discovered. Similarly, there is a curse upon your coming in and your going out (28:19). The curse of God will surely come, even if he is longsuffering and slow to anger.

The curse for disobedience would in effect remove the blessing that the Lord promised upon family, flocks and fields. Plenty of goods would become scarcity, and feasts would become famines. The curse for disobedience would turn increase into decrease. The word ‘curse’ in Hebrew actually means ‘to be small’. These curses are not vindictive, but are in fact warnings given by a merciful yet holy God.

This chapter goes on to detail a whole range of curses that the Lord would send upon his people if they turned from him to other gods, and disobeyed his word. In a similar account in Leviticus 26 the curses are in a sequence – ‘if you do not obey then this curse will come, and if you still do not obey another curse will come’. Here in Deuteronomy there is no such ordering. There is considerable repetition, as we might expect given the seriousness of these

sanctions and the difficulty of getting proud hearts to listen to God's word – look at the empty seats around you!

The Lord was able to strike his people in any way he chose in order to bring about repentance. Satan as we know was constrained as he tested Job, but not so the Lord. The Lord is powerful to strike the flesh, the work of man's hands, and even the whole society. Disease, disaster, defeat and finally dispersion or exile, were all listed as divine curses.

Disease

The Lord will strike you with consumption, fever, and plague, as well as boils, tumours, scab and itch (28:22, 27, 35, 60). This was no idle threat for the Lord had already struck the Egyptians with disease. Not only the flesh but the mind also is within the realm of God's power. He *will strike you with madness and confusion (28:28).*

The Lord is able to strike a rebellious person with sickness or disease. Did he not strike Moses' sister with leprosy, and King Uzziah also? The Lord struck King Herod and he died when he failed to give glory to God (Acts 12). In the church at Corinth many were weak and sick because of the manner in which they partook of the Lord's Supper (I Corinthians 11). As C.S. Lewis wrote 'sickness is sometimes God's megaphone'.

With modern medicine we have wonderful cures for most diseases but not all. We have drugs to relieve pain but not all pain. Sadness and indeed madness are sicknesses we hear a lot about these days. They are afflictions which the Lord can bring upon those who fail to obey his word.

Disaster

The Lord can withhold the rain in order to punish his people as we have seen previously in this book (11:17), and in the ministry of Elijah. Without rain there would be famine and the people would perish. Alternatively the Lord could send locusts or worms to consume their crops, just as he did in Egypt (28:38f).

Defeat

You shall have no one to rescue them (28:31). The Lord was not only their provider, he was also their protector. If they broke the covenant he would withdraw his protection and allow his disobedient people to be oppressed by their enemies. *You shall be oppressed and crushed continually (28:33).* Their wives, children, flocks and crops would all be plundered. It is very humiliating and distressing to watch your enemy walk off with all that is precious to you, while you sit by helplessly.

Defeat was not only distressing to the people, but dishonouring to the Lord their God. They were people who enjoyed great blessing from the hand of the Lord, and so were *the head and not the tail (28:13)*. But when the Lord gave them up they would become the tail (28:44). They would be mocked by other nations. Their disobedience and rebellion brought shame upon the name of the Lord directly and indirectly.

It is the same for those who call themselves Christians. To suffer for being a Christian brings glory not shame to the Lord. But to suffer as a murderer, a thief, or evildoer brings shame and dishonour to the name of Christ (I Peter 14f).

Dispersion

The climax of the curses was exile, and much of this chapter describes exile and dispersion. Under the terms of the covenant the Lord brought them into this good land, the land of Canaan. Curses for breaking the covenant would eventually bring about disinheritance, a ‘cutting-off’ from the land. Covenants were literally ‘cut’. Animals were cut in two in a covenant making ceremony. This symbolised what would happen to the one who broke the covenant.

As the people of God were gathered by the Jordan at this time of covenant renewal, Moses explained in great detail what would happen if they did *not carefully observe all the words of this law that are written in this book* and fear the glorious and awesome name of the Lord (28:58f). They would be scattered from one end of the earth to the other, and there they would serve gods of wood and stone. They would be cut off from their inheritance in the good land.

The Lord would bring a nation from afar against them (28:49). A fierce and barbaric people would besiege the cities of Israel. In utter depravity the people would lose all human dignity and turn to cannibalism (28:53). They would be carried off into exile, into a place where they would find no rest (28:65). They would become slaves once again, but slaves of no worth (28:68).

Does this all seem too horrible to contemplate? Well it was meant to, but it made no difference. The people still rebelled and these very curses came upon them, as history records. In 722BC Northern Israel was overrun by Assyria and scattered. In 586BC Southern Israel was attacked by Babylon. Jerusalem was put under siege for two years before the city was burnt and the people carried into exile. Again in AD70 the Jews were scattered when the Romans destroyed the temple in the city of Jerusalem.

New Covenant

To be ‘cut off’ was part of discipline in the New Testament church. Just as these curses were aimed at restoration, so was church discipline. Jesus said that a brother who refuses the discipline of the church should be cut off and regarded as a heathen (Matthew 18). Paul gave the same instructions to the church at Corinth. *Put away the evil person from among you* (I Corinthians 5:13). Ultimately he commanded that the unrepentant sinner or blasphemer be handed over to the enemy, namely Satan (I Corinthians 5:5). We have already seen how the Lord struck Christians at Corinth with sickness for violating his commands concerning the sacrament.

The writer to the Hebrews actually refers to those who rejected the law of Moses, stating that worse punishment can be expected by those who trample to Son of God underfoot and treat the precious blood of Christ as a common thing (Hebrews 9:29). Remember *it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* (Hebrews 9:31).

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