

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

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We're nearing the end of Leviticus. Leviticus 26, a rather lengthy chapter. I'll read some selected verses to give you a sampling of what this chapter involves. We'll systematically look at each section.

Verses 1–2 begin with a general statement of introduction to the theme, a summary of what the law requires: “Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone on your land to bow down before it. I am the LORD your God. Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD” (NIV).

Verses 3–13 have to do with blessings upon Israel if they keep the law, the covenant, which has been given: “If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain” (NIV). And God promises a number of blessings. Verses 14–39 are the consequences for disobedience to the covenant God is making with Israel: “If you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror” (NIV). And then a number of things are illustrated.

Finally in verses 40–42 there is a provision for when judgment has happened. If people are repentant God commits Himself to do certain things for them: “If they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers—their treachery against me and their hostility toward me, which made me hostile toward them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies—then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember my covenant” (NIV).

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

There was a common custom in the world at the time of Moses for treaties or contracts or covenants between individuals or between nations for these treaties to be concluded with a series of blessings and cursings. Blessing on these parties to the contract if the terms of the contract were kept. And curses upon the parties if any of them broke the terms of the contract. Knowing that that was the kind of social structure of the day, God, in His covenant with Israel, uses the kinds of contractual language which would be a part of agreements, and as the Book of Leviticus draws to a close, there are the blessings and the cursings for keeping the contract or the covenant which has been initiated by God.

#### **I. We need to get in focus what this covenant was all about, what the blessings and cursings were about.**

Then we'll take some moments to look at the application to our lives today.

**A.** As with any contract or covenant of the time there would be, before the blessings and the cursings were given, kind of a summary of the essential points. The whole Book of Leviticus has been an outline for us of what God is wanting in the covenant He is making with His people Israel. But in verses 1–2 we find two points especially lifted out at the beginning of the blessings and cursings sections, two points that were very fundamental to God. That is the second and fourth commandment. Don't make idols. And, remember to keep one day in seven holy; use it as a time of worship.

It might kind of surprise us that out of all the commandments and all the regulations given in Leviticus these two would have been selected as representing the totality of the law. Yet these two are very significant because perhaps of all the commandments these two most form the identity of the people of Israel. And still do today. Here were people who didn't have idols like other nations of the day. And here were people that took one day out of seven for worship and

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

had a specific place, a sanctuary with regulations for God to be worshipped. Other nations would have laws on adultery like the Israelites. Others have laws on murder. Others have laws on lying and cheating and stealing. But Israel was especially unique because of its requirements in regards to having no idols and keeping one day holy out of seven. This forged their identity as a people. Therefore these are the terms of the covenant that are highlighted right at the beginning.

We don't have a problem with people worshipping things made with hands today in terms of idols. They do worship things made with hands but not in sense of idolatry. I doubt any of us in this room have had the experience of worshipping something we made—an idol. Yet idols can be mental or metal.

Many times an idol in our way of living is an untrue concept of God, which nevertheless we give allegiance to and we declare as truth and as representing God. I'm convinced that even sometimes as believers we erect mental concepts, mental idols of God which are totally false.

Like, "God doesn't care about me," or "God will forgive whatever I do so it doesn't matter what I do." Part of that is true. God will forgive. But to take this cheap grace attitude toward God is doing something violent to His nature and character. Or, "God is going to do what He wants whether I pray for it or not." That's kind of a denial of the power of prayer, that the Lord has taught us to intercede and be co-makers with Him of His will. Another, "God could never use me." Yet God can use each one of us. You know what's really necessary for God to use us is simply a willingness to be a servant. If you're willing to be a servant and have a servant's heart you'll always find God will use you. You don't have to worry about your gifts of ministry or whether you're qualified. If you're just willing to be a servant and meet the needs that you see, God will have a ministry for you. There's a tremendous ministry always available for servants.

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

**B.** The blessings of keeping the covenant are given, verses 3–13. There are basically four things promised. Fruitfulness, verses 4–5 and 9–10. The land will be fruitful. There will be rains and bountiful harvest and crops. There will be a surplus of food so that we're told in verses 9–10 you push out the previous year's food when the new harvest comes in. There will be fruitfulness in regard to children. There would be peace and security, verse 6: "I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid" (NIV). Victory in conflict is promised Israel if they keep the covenant, verses 7–8: "Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand" (NIV). You don't look at odds that are facing you. You look at what God has promised you and go with it. You can put an army to route.

Then the fourth thing that's promised as a blessing is personal communion with God, verses 11–13: "I will put my dwelling place among you... I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people" (NIV). Wonderful promises that God makes to His people for being faithful to His covenant.

**C.** But there are punishments for breaking the covenant. In fact, more space deals with the punishment than with the blessings. Perhaps God knows how we're going to choose. Verses 14–39 give the punishments for breaking the covenant. Five stages of punishment are outlined. That's because God treats us in a way the punishment is not punitive, it's redemptive. It's designed to help us walk in His will so at first He doesn't just throw the book at us. Something slight will happen that is meant to draw us back to Himself.

These first phase in verses 14–17 is terror. Psychological terror. Sudden terror. Then certain things go with that—physical sickness and another person is going to eat of your produce and you'll be defeated in war. If you don't learn the lesson the second stage sets in.

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

Verses 18–20, punishment will be seven times intensified then add to them complete drought.

The heavens will be brass, the earth bronze.

The third stage in the event they don't return is verses 21–22. The punishment of the first two stages are repeated seven times over then more are added. Wild beasts will come among you, rob you of your children and your cattle. You'll be so few in number that the roads will be deserted.

Then the fourth stage sets in, verses 23–26. Again punishment seven times over the first three stages will be intensified. Add to that plague, POWs, and scarcity—plague for disaster that happens to crops, POWs—prisoners of war taken away, and scarcity.

Then the fifth stage, verses 27–39. If you still rebel and don't keep the covenant then punishment seven times over all the first four punishments will be intensified and added so that you will eat your own children. In other words there will be a siege against the place. And the siege will be so powerful and the people will be so hungry they will literally eat their own children. We know from 2 Kings 6:24–33 that this actually happened during a siege by Syria. A woman called up to the king that she had a problem. She talked about the fact that another woman said, “Give me your son so we may eat him today and tomorrow we'll eat my son. So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, 'Give up your son so we may eat him.' But she had hidden him.” She asked the king to deal justly with her. Jeremiah in Lamentations talks about the Babylonian captivity and the horror of women who had boiled their own children and eaten them.

That terrible devastation would be augmented by idolatrous places, ruined cities and sanctuaries, devastated land, dispersion, and the remnant left in the land were fearful. Israel of course experienced these punishments. The prophet Jeremiah explains it in Lamentations 2:17 when he says, “The LORD has done what he purposed. He has carried out his threat as He ordained long

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

ago. He has demolished without pity. He has made the enemy rejoice over you and exalted the might of your foes.”

Then the last devastation occurs but God keeps the doors open and says, “If you return restoration is always available. I will turn my heart toward you.” Verses 40–46, “I will remember the covenant.”

That’s basically the blessings and cursings that go with the covenant God made with His people Israel. They are still in focus and have meaning for the people of Israel.

We want to look at the lessons of the covenant for us. It seems I can observe some stages develop that God teaches us in His Word in respect to suffering. Three stages: grade school stage, prep school or college stage, and then grad school stage.

The grade school stage is what God specifically promises to Israel. It’s Pavlovian conditioning: obey me and I’ll dump prosperity out on you. Don’t obey me and you’re going to suffer.

The prep school stage is when all of a sudden you find in the Old Testament people like Job that have kept God’s covenant and find that they’re suffering. And they’re saying why. They’re mystified by the fact that God doesn’t seem to be blessing the righteous, and the wicked seem to be the ones that seem to be having prosperity.

Then the grad school stage is Jesus and the New Testament church. Instead of being physically blessed for their obedience to God in the new covenant, they are going through horrible persecution and death and suffering and deprivation of property and the like. They’re learning as a whole group of people what it is to suffer.

It’s very intriguing that when you look at the word “blessing” in the Old Testament it most often is associated with the idea of material prosperity. But when you look at “blessing” in the New Testament it’s translated fifty-five times, not one time does it refer to physical blessing. It always

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

refers to inward spiritual kinds of things that happen in our lives. The inward change that takes place over us because we are a people whom God has graced with blessing. So New Testament people have to look at Leviticus 26 from a whole different kind of a focus.

This is one of the difficulties with the modern prosperity doctrine. While there are truths to the modern prosperity doctrine many people suffer and are poor because they have very negative attitudes. They need those attitudes to be corrected. But at the same time when you look at the New Testament covenant as compared to the Old Testament covenant you see that Jesus never made a kind of contract like that with His disciples. He said instead, I send you out and you will have suffering. You'll lose and yet you win. You lose all things for My name's sake. But it will be added back to you in this life and in the life to come.

It won't necessarily be added back in terms of things physical. When we look at Leviticus 26 we must be careful that we not be guilty of lifting a text out and claiming it without sufficient understanding how it takes place in the light of the totality of God's revelation in the Scripture.

### **II. I see some vital principles coming out of Leviticus 26 as a filter through the New Testament for us.**

**A.** One is this. The blessings and the punishments apply to the nation as a whole rather than to solitary individuals. This is a covenant God makes with the whole nation of Israel, not with a specific individual or family. Thus it would be improper to take this and say, "If I on an individual level am faithful to God, God is committed in His Word to dump all kinds of prosperity on me," because this was originally written to the nation, and not to an individual. But it should be said that whenever nations have lived by God's laws they have been prosperous. I think in America we have such a land of plenty—not only our great natural resources and the like, but it's a fact that in the fabric of our system of law or jurisprudence there has been Judaic

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

Christian base, a sense of morality and ethic of right and wrong, a sense of decency, a respect for family, for government, for people, a respect for the freedom that God has placed within the human spirit to express liberty. Where nations have honored those commitments and those principles God has dumped out blessings. The blessing is if you sow flowers you'll reap flowers, if you plant crab grass you'll get crab grass. There is a sense in which we as an entire body, as a nation are faithful to some elemental laws of God. Even though we may not be faithful to the gospel. In our background there is that focus in our society.

**B.** The second principle that I think flows out of this passage is when you look at the New Testament alongside the teaching of prosperity of Leviticus 26 you come to the conclusion that genuine prosperity is to be sought within us rather than outside us. The blessing that we really seek, the prosperity we really seek is internal first of all. Even in the Old Testament, external prosperity never came except there was an internal consistency of life lived with God. And internal faithfulness to the Lord. An internal prosperity always preceded external prosperity. It's not the things you have that make you prosperous, it's what is happening in your life internally. If when everything is stripped away from you and you look in the mirror you're glad you're you, you're comfortable with that, and you're fulfilling God's potential for your life that's the greatest prosperity.

If our values are in our things, our things will one day be taken away from us. If they're in our children, our children will one day grow up. Our values should be in family but I'm talking about something beyond that. A prosperity that makes its root in the eternal person of God Himself and what God has for us to be as an individual, if I can be what God wants me to be and if I can experience what God wants me to experience, then I can be prosperous because I can be



## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

steadfast in His will. I can have a genuine prosperity that is within and then God can put whatever He wants on the outside and I can handle it.

**C.** The third implication that flows out of this passage is that our disobedience exposes us to hurtful consequences that could have been avoided. The chastisement of the Lord is here. He wants to bless but as Hebrews says He also disciplines because He is a loving parent. He disciplines and only loving parents discipline. Unloving parents let you do whatever you want to do.

God is not a permissive parent when He makes threats. The history of Israel is replete with examples of God carrying through on His threats. As painful as they are to carry out, He carries them out nevertheless. This is true not only of the Old Testament community of Israel, it's true for us as New Testament believers. That the Lord says there's certain things you do that will have consequences in your life for doing them. There are scars that we can bring upon ourselves and even when we are forgiven, even when God forgives us, there yet can be consequences that are going on from our actions that we have lost control of because the consequences live on.

The Lord is saying to us be careful about our lifestyle. Jesus even cares about not creating a stumbling block for little ones, new people in the faith, children, to stumble on. Because when we do wrong it may be forgiven but perhaps the bad example we've set for someone else has been an irretrievable thing for them. I want to be able to always look people and my children straight in the eye and be able to say, "I never gave you a reason for turning away from the Lord." That would be to set up consequences I don't want to live with. Our disobedience exposes us to hurtful consequences.

**D.** The fourth thing that flows out of this text is God is always calling us to Himself no matter what kind of condition we're in. God is always calling us to Himself. He's saying, "My arms are

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

always wide open. My grace is always available. But if you're going to experience it you must come into it. You must repent. You must come into that grace. Otherwise it cannot be given you." This is so different than what many people think about God. They think that somehow if you've been away from God for a period of time or you've never come to God then you sort of have to crawl your way in. Get on a probation system for awhile and maybe look good to God and He's going to inspect you. But the thing is, God always likes you. God's grace is already there. God is in a constant state of grace. God is in a constant state of forgiveness. God never has a bad day. He is in a constant state of availability to us. All we need to do is present ourselves to Him and say, "I'm here to be enveloped by Your grace. To return to You and be restored." God then sets about restoring us. First immediately in a relationship with Him and then He sets about rebuilding the things in our life that have gone wrong. Sometimes those take days and months. Certainly with Israel it took time to rebuild what had broken down. But God helps us to rebuild when we come back into the state of His grace.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father, You are always ready to clasp us close to You. You're in a constant state of forgiveness and a constant state of grace. We pray now especially for those here in this room who may come here very tentatively, perhaps as guests and visitors among us. Wondering if there's real understanding by You as to their condition and what's happened to them in life. Wondering if somehow they can be really right with You. Or what they've got to do to get in a place of being right with You. Here, Lord, is Your wonderful Word which tells us that all we need do is express our need to You and You are already in a state to receive us. Your forgiveness and your mercy are there and You remember Your covenant. Not in this case the covenant You made with Jacob. But the covenant ratified in our Lord's words where He said, "This is My body

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

which is broken for You. This is My blood of the new covenant which is shed for the forgiveness of sins.” We are included in this covenant and we thank You for that. Bless those today Lord who have come to this service outside of You and bring them to Yourself in these closing moments. Bring us to a new hope and a new faith that You can sort out the disappointments, the disillusionment, the punishments in our life, which we’ve brought upon ourselves. We may be eating the fruit of the seed we have sown. It may have been bad seed and we’ve got real bad fruit now. But we can come to You and You can begin the process of restoration in our lives. We trust You for that.

There are people in this body going through suffering. Some may be going through it needlessly because their attitudes are so bad and they’ve somehow got lost in self-pity and blame and the poor-me attitude. We pray that You would renew their hearts and renew their minds after the pattern of Christ Jesus. And may a new affirmation come into their life. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). We pray, Lord, for others whose attitudes and heart is right but who are nevertheless going through adversity of one kind or another. There are those in the body of Christ telling them You’re going through this because You don’t have faith. They’re cut down all the more. May they be assured by Your Word today that Your blessings are not always external and not even primarily external. But the blessing which You offer is the blessing of union with You. You will live in us. We may not understand everything that’s happening to us now. We may not have all the answers. We may be a little bit like Job. But we know You and You have all the answers. We’ll understand if we don’t now. In the meantime give us faith, faith to believe You for a miracle, and faith to persevere if there is none, and to just keep walking with You, Lord, in Your footsteps. Lord, if there are people here today who are living with harmful consequences in their life because of actions which they have

## **BLESSINGS AND PUNISHMENTS**

### **Leviticus 26**

taken, Lord, You can't begin to do anything about unscrambling those consequences until we come to You and admit that we were wrong. Maybe parents, whose children are far away from You, maybe the parents' example is the reason those children have gone astray. There's no hurt quite like that hurt. When we confess to You that we were a bad example You're able to begin a new work in our life. You can begin reaching our children, even our grown children in a new way so that from us can come streams of healing and forgiveness. We believe that while man cannot unscramble an egg, and while its true that many times we must live with our consequences, we believe that You can unscramble an egg. We believe that You can fix things that are broken beyond repair. You can do this too but You wait for a responsive heart to You. Let Your blessing be upon us, Lord, rather than Your punishment. We seek to know You and be known of You. In Jesus' name. Amen.