

What is a Blessing and How do they Come?

Deuteronomy 4:1-8

Part 2

With Study Questions

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Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers is giving you. ² You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you. ³ Your eyes have seen what the Lord did at Baal Peor; for the Lord your God has destroyed from among you all the men who followed Baal of Peor. ⁴ But you who held fast to the Lord your God *are* alive today, every one of you. ⁵ "Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should act according *to them* in the land which you go to possess. ⁶ Therefore be careful to observe *them*; for this *is* your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation *is* a wise and understanding people.' ⁷ "For what great nation *is there* that has God *so* near to it, as the Lord our God *is* to us, for whatever *reason* we may call upon Him? ⁸ And what great nation *is there* that has *such* statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day (Deuteronomy 4:1-8)?

Preface

Whether it's politics, family, church, education, business, law enforcement, fire safety, disaster relief, building permits and codes, we recognize the need for wise leadership. We make the assumption that wise leadership, generally speaking, will produce the best results. It certainly is possible to have wise leadership and end up in the middle of a natural disaster – where government collapses, family suffers, church is persecuted, businesses fail, law enforcement is overturned, etc.

Nonetheless there is a greater chance of things going well if people in leadership (all people for that matter) make wise decisions. I know people who have been careful to exercise, maintain a healthy diet and get regular check-ups only to die at a young age from an undetected disease or accident. I've also known people who ate whatever they wanted, never

exercised and smoked two packs a day who lived into their eighties. The latter is not an argument against the validity of the former. Generally speaking, the person who exercises wisdom in caring for their health will fare better than the other.

I've used two terms in the above paragraphs that I would like to define in biblical terms: "wisdom" and "going well." Wisdom is a proper understanding of statutes, judgments, commands and law of God (Deuteronomy 4:1-6). The term "going well" in this context, can be equated to the blessings which result from wise decisions. This all may seem quite simple, yet this biblical concept has, at one end, been abused and at the other end, been attacked or negated altogether.

Review

We spoke last week of the pernicious promises coming from the Word/Faith movement where the blessings of God are promised as if they come immediately to every individual who is faithful or obedient enough to extract them from God. Juxtaposed to this are other worldly Christians who dismiss any observable blessing in the material world being attached to the pursuit of wisdom as it is revealed in God's law.

A flagship chapter in the Bible promoting the blessing/curse principle is Deuteronomy 28 where numerous blessings are associated with obedience while curses come from disobedience. The argument, in short, is that the blessings and curses are particularly directed toward Israel as God's covenant people in the Old Testament. They, according to this view, should not be viewed as universal (that is they only applied to Israel) nor should they be viewed as historically enduring (that is they do not apply to New Testament/Covenant Christians or nations in a material sense).

What appears to be under attack is an absolute and objective definition of wisdom (since God's prescribed law doesn't apply) and the anticipation of observable good coming from wisdom (since God's promises applied only to Old Testament Israel). According to this view the promise found in 2 Chronicles...

...if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their

wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

...simply has no application to any nation other than Israel in the Old Testament. In all fairness, when one reads Deuteronomy 28 we see specific references that could not at all apply to anyone but Israel. When God threatens to take them back into Egypt in ship (Deuteronomy 28:68) that certainly can't apply to me – I've never been to Egypt. But, of course, if we read the Bible this way very little will apply to us. When Paul warns the Corinthians against being "puffed up" and then informs them that he will be coming to them "shortly" (1 Corinthians 4:18, 19), we shouldn't think that doesn't apply to us because Paul will not be coming shortly.

Certainly there is an intensified application to the Corinthian church, since the letter is written specifically to them; but God's truths are universal and eternal and, therefore, apply to all men everywhere. So even though there is an intensified application to Israel in the Old Covenant as it pertains to blessings and curses, we should not think it doesn't apply to all men everywhere in all venues (government, family, church, business, etc.).

Keep in mind three things: First, the surrounding nations of Israel were expelled (literally vomited) from the land because they transgressed the very law God had given through Moses (Leviticus 18:24-28). Isaiah informs us of the universal obligation to keep the law of God and the attending curse to those who don't. In a statement which certainly includes Babylon, Moab, Assyria et al, we read:

The earth is also defiled under its inhabitants, Because they have transgressed the laws, Changed the ordinance, Broken the everlasting covenant (Isaiah 24:5, 6).

Second, it would be the law given through Moses that revealed to the surrounding nations the glorious wisdom of God.

Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. ⁶ Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all

these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'⁷ "For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him?⁸ And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day (Deuteronomy 4:5-8)?

Third, Paul has no problem calling upon the law of God as the means by which the New Covenant Christian ought to govern his life, with its attending blessings and curses (1 Corinthians 15:33; 2 Corinthians 9:6, 7).

How Do Blessings Come?

We had to acknowledge that blessings or curses (at least in a primary and outward sense) often have little or nothing to do with human behavior. Job is the obvious example of one who was cursed even though he was **"blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1)**. Nonetheless, the Bible does often speak of a sort of cause and effect, or if/then principle, when it comes to blessings or curses.

James writes of **"doer the work"** (*ergon*) of the law being blessed **"in what he does."** In the Fifth Commandment, and repeated by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6, the honoring of parents results in things going **"well"** and **"long life on the earth."** And there are more Proverbs than we have time to examine where we see this principle at work. The Apostle Paul does not shrink back from utilizing this principle in his instruction for New Covenant Christians (1 Corinthians 15:33; 2 Corinthians 9:6, 7).

Reformed Theology

We also showed this principle to be conspicuous reformed theology, Calvin mentioning that in obedience to the law that "in this life it will be well them"¹ and the promise of "present blessings"² to those who obey God's commandments.

¹Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Ephesians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Eph 6:3). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

²Calvin, J. (1997). *Institutes of the Christian religion*. Translation of: Institutio Christianae religionis.; Reprint, with new introd. Originally published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846. (II, viii, 4). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Blessings Not Earned

Last time we also discussed how the idea of this being a simple cause and effect notion of God is not entirely accurate. Christians don't believe in Karma or Daoism. The law itself is a blessing from God and the blessings which come from obedience to the law are gracious blessings as well. We can never make God our debtor. I may tell my children that if they clean their rooms I'll take them to Disneyland. But that doesn't mean they've earned Disneyland – they need merely try to get in the park without me to see how that doesn't work.

The Ultimate Blessing

We also spoke of the ultimate blessing – a blessing which does have a mighty cause and a sure effect – that is the God-given power to see that truth of who Christ is and the attending blessing of having His righteousness imputed sinners.

This brings us up to date. This morning's questions include: How Good Must One Be? How Come Blessings/Curses Don't Come? Can A Blessing Become a Curse or Vice-Versa?

How Good Must One Be?

With all this talk to blessings and curses, how good must one be in order to receive the blessing and avoid the curse? If there is anything a Christian must acknowledge, it's that we don't want our obedience to the law to show up when God judges us unto eternal life or death. Certainly before God our righteousness is as a filthy rag and our hearts are desperately wicked (Isaiah 64:6; Jeremiah 17:9). But I think it is a mistake to assume that this means that God doesn't recognize goodness in man at some level. We read of good people in the Bible:

Job is called "**blameless and upright**" (Job 1:1); Jesus called Nathanael an Israelite "**in whom is no deceit**" (John 1:47); Josiah, Jehoahaz, Amaziah were all kings who did what was "**right in the sight of the Lord**" (2 Chronicles 34:2; 2 Kings 14:2-4; 15:1-4), even though this

certainly did not mean they were sinless. In the case of Amaziah it is even pointed out that he was not as righteous as David, having failed to remove the places of idolatry. Cornelius is called a “**devout man**” who “**feared God and gave generously**” (Acts 10:1, 2). So at least in some sense we read of good people.

Any truly virtuous person will recognize how truly sinful they are before a holy God. They will also recognize that any virtue they have is a result of God’s grace. But I think we err when we utterly discount human goodness or sinfulness when it comes to the means by which God blesses or curses in this life.

We live in a culture where Christian leaders drive their \$30,000 cars to their well-furnished offices earning \$100,000 salaries only to write about how there no blessings are associated with obedience. They forget the price paid by faithful Christians in the past to afford them this privilege. As Paul writes:

I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church (Colossians 1:24).

Paul did not suffer to expiate sins. He suffered for the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. The devil, the world and the flesh are not interested in providing comfort, offices, convenience, transportation, etc. for the Christian (actually, they might be, but we’ll get to that).

Suffice it to say that God is not setting before man an absurd task when He informs us that wisdom yields blessings. And in a temporal or material sense, the promised blessings can be partially enjoyed” to the extent of the “fitness [of the] recipients.”³ When Solomon writes, “**Righteousness exalts a nation, But sin is a reproach to any people**” (Proverbs 14:34), he is not merely telling us of our need for a Savior, but also our need to pursue righteousness which will exalt (*rum* – to raise up or elevate) a nation. And to the extent that a nation pursues righteousness, it can anticipate blessing. Of course this brings our next question: How come the blessings or curses don’t come?

³Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Harmony of the Law : Calvin's Commentaries on the Four Lastbooks of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

How Come Blessings/Curses Don't Come?

Although we can, have and will continue to see the general blessings and curses of God throughout history, we must acknowledge at the same time, that in a specific way, God's blessings are inscrutable. It's as if we want to see the plan of redemption played out in a half-hour sit-com. We pray for things – good things and they don't happen. Evil things and evil people wield power and seem to be at ease on their thrones. Good people suffer and are surrounded by heartache, disease, destitution.

It's like watching *Lost* and wondering who's evil and who's good – Who's winning and who's losing? When do we get to find out what it's all about? This problem is not foreign to Scripture. In Psalm 73 we read of the confusion and lamentation of the Psalmist who found himself **“envious of the boastful”** (vs. 3) for they were **“not in trouble as other men”** (vs. 5). **“Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish”** (vs. 7).

The Psalmist sinfully engages in introspection, saying **“Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain and washed my hands in innocence”** (vs. 13). This is followed by a very large UNTIL in verse 17. **“Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end. Surely you set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors”** (vss. 17-19).

We must be careful not to evaluate blessings or curses in such a depthless manner. Jesus makes it quite clear that the individual man born blind was not blind because of his sin or the sin of his parents (John 9:1-3). He also makes it obvious that when the tower of Siloam fell and killed 18 people that they weren't **“worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem”** (Luke 13:1-4).

We have spoken of how Proverbs is full of the “if/then” principle. But right after Proverbs in the Bible comes Ecclesiastes which frustrates Solomon who was unable to get any read on the if/then principle – calling it all **“vanity, no profit under the sun”** (Ecclesiastes 2:11). He became so frustrated that he **“hated life”** (Ecclesiastes 2:17). Solomon observed that what happens to the man also happens to the animal – they both die (Ecclesiastes 3:19). He observed the **“oppression of the poor and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness”** (Ecclesiastes 5:8).

In the day of prosperity be joyful, But in the day of adversity consider: Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, So that man can find out nothing *that will come* after him. ¹⁵ I have seen everything in my days of vanity: There is a just *man* who perishes in his righteousness, And there is a wicked *man* who prolongs *life* in his wickedness (Ecclesiastes 7:14, 15).

Solomon's conclusion?

Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, Whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14).

God most certainly has a plan for the ages. It is a plan of redemption wherein He saves the lost through the preaching of Christ and Him crucified. There are elements of God's plan of redemption which are inscrutable and unsearchable. God also has a plan for history where good works yield good things. As a mild rebuke for the other worldly theologians of our day, we must bring the words of Christ to bear. When Peter pointed out that he had left all he had to follow Jesus.

So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, ³⁰ who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time – houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions – and in the age to come, eternal life (Mark 10:29, 30).

When Jesus speaks of receiving hundredfold "**now in this time**" the context is "**houses, family, lands,**" material things. He also mentions "**with persecutions.**" We can't ignore either portion of the statement. Christians are injected into sinful societies like so much medicine into a diseased body. For a while the disease appears to win. The medicine

appears to die and be absorbed into the very corruption it was designed to heal. But the injections keep moving forward and eventually the disease is overcome.

This isn't to say the world will ever be free from sin prior to the coming of Christ. It is to say that the power of the gospel is the power of God, which includes the sanctifying work of His Spirit and there is no power on earth that can quell it. The medicine will work. We must be very careful trying to evaluate whether or not a particular event, whether an era in history or natural disaster, fortune or misfortune is inextricably linked to specific behaviors. It would be foolish to say the earthquake in Haiti is a result of their sin.

What we can know and believe is that, in general, if we seek to obey the law of God in love and respect for God, that His law is the supreme prescription for love of God and love of man and will yield benefits in this life – whether we have the ability to identify them or not. This brings us to our final point. Is it possible for a blessing to become a curse or vice-versa?

Can A Blessing Become a Curse or Vice-Versa?

Earlier I said that the devil has no interest in the comfort of Christians. Then I parenthetically indicated that maybe he does. God warned the Israelites that once they became comfortable, once they had **“eaten and are full”** that they should beware, lest they **“forget the Lord who brought (them) out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage” (Deuteronomy 6:10-12)**. It was for that reason that Solomon writes:

Give me neither poverty nor riches – Feed me with the food allotted to me; ⁹ Lest I be full and deny *You*, And say, “*Who is the Lord?*” Or lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my God (Proverbs 30:8, 9).

Can an apparent blessing become a curse? I believe so. I also believe apparent curses can yield a blessing. If those apparent blessings from God cause our hearts to become slack and faithless, the blessing becomes a curse. The commitment to cultural insignificance found in our other worldly brothers will change drastically if they or their loved ones are led

to the curse of destitution, labor camps or burnings. Of course destitution, labor camps and burnings can be a blessing (1 Peter 3:13, 14).

The author of Hebrews uses the metaphor of the land to show how a blessing from God can produce men who are cursed. Specifically talking to those who had receiving the blessing of doctrines and enlightening of the gifts of God, he writes:

For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God;⁸ but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned (Hebrews 6:7).

So the bottom-line question in all of this is not whether we can identify the blessing in some material sense, but rather will we ever trust and obey the God from whom all blessings flow. For the man who is under the curse of the law, the law the law brings curse. And every blessing is nothing but a testimony against the ungrateful heart of a sinful creature. Simply put, there is no true eternal blessing for those who are still under the curse. And there is only one way to be redeemed from that curse.

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "*Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree*"),¹⁴ that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Galatians 3:13, 14).

Keep in mind friend that every time we count our blessings, every time we see the good things by which we are surrounded and recognize them as blessings, those very blessings will testify against us if we don't thank and trust the God from whom they come. The true and eternal blessing comes upon us in Christ Jesus through the promise of the Spirit through faith.

It is through faith in Jesus Christ and the blessing of His righteousness freely given that all things are blessings to our eternal peace and His eternal glory.

Questions for Study

1. Is it helpful, in this world, to make wise decisions (pages 2, 3)?
2. Do wise decisions always result in observable good things (pages 2, 3)?
3. Define wisdom and blessing (page 3).
4. How does wisdom relate to blessing (pages 3, 4)?
5. How do we determine whether the blessings or curses in the Bible apply to us? What is the difficulty (page 4)?
6. Does the law of God apply to other nations than Israel? Explain (pages 4, 5).
7. Generally speaking, how do blessings come (page 5)?
8. Are blessings for obedience “in this life” a reformed distinctive (pages 5, 6)?
9. Are blessings earned, or merited, by people (page 6)?
10. What is the ultimate blessing (page 6)?
11. Does the Bible speak of people being good in any sense (pages 6, 7)?
12. How come blessings or curses don't appear to come (pages 8-10)?
13. How can a blessing become a curse or vice-versa (pages 10, 11)?