

Either / Or

by Ray C. Stedman

In Joshua 24 is the account of the time when Joshua gathered the people of Israel together at Shechem and set before them the choice they had to make – whether to serve other gods or the God of Israel. On that occasion Joshua also obeyed the command of God to have the blessings and the cursings of the Law read to the people.

When I was in Israel in January, I drove through ancient Shechem and saw the mountains from which these curses and blessings were read – Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim. The curses were read from Mount Ebal and the blessings from Mount Gerazim. Right in front of them on the plain, by the way, is the well of Jacob, the well of Sychar, where Jesus sat and taught the Samaritan woman, as recorded in John 4. I thought of this great scene in Joshua as I looked at these two mountains, separated by a very narrow valley, from which the cursings and blessings were read every year. And Chapter 26 of Leviticus is the chapter which sets them forth.

These blessings and curses characterize the dealings of God with his people Israel. This is a particularly noteworthy chapter because it has been fulfilled in history. We can compare what God said would take place with what actually has happened. As we go through this chapter you will see what remarkable confirmation we have in history of all that God has said he would do with his people.

The chapter opens by repeating **two of the ten commandments**:

“You shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no graven image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land, to bow down to them; for I am the LORD your God. You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD.” {Lev 26:1-2 RSV}

In other words, here are restated the second commandment (“Thou shalt not make any graven images ... nor bow down to them”) and the fourth commandment (“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”). The reason these two are repeated here at this point is that it is the violation of the second commandment which produces curses in a life and it is the observance of the fourth commandment which produces blessings.

Idolatry – having some other god besides God – is the great threat. If you think that idolatry consists only of bowing down to actual images, you are very mistaken. America is one of the most idolatrous nations in the history of the world. Our idols are not graven images but nevertheless are gods before whom we worship – the god of materialism, the goddess of sex. The ancients had names for them. Venus was the goddess of sex and was worshipped in the form of an image. But they

were worshipping sex just as Americans do today. There were other gods – the god of war, Thor, as the Scandinavians called him. We worship the god of war. We also worship various minor deities and gods – our children, our automobiles. I see many a person on Sunday morning out polishing his god. This idolatry is what produces cursings.

But the observance of the Sabbath is what produces blessings. As we have seen in this whole book of Leviticus, the Sabbath day, Saturday, is a shadow, a picture of the rest out of which God wants man to learn to operate. It is dependence upon the work of Another, and therefore it results in calmness, absence of stress and anxiety, freedom from turbulence and tumult within. It is rest in the work of God, in his ability to work through you. That is the sabbath, and that is what produces blessings.

Following these two commandments we have the listing of **the cursings and the blessings**, beginning with the blessings. From Verse 3 through Verse 13 there are six blessings promised. See if you can pick them out as we read this passage, just as it was read every year when Israel gathered at the foot of the mountain of blessings, Mount Gerazim:

“If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And your threshing shall last to the time of vintage, and the vintage shall last to the time for sowing; and you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land securely. And I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid; and I will remove evil beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land. And you shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand; and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. And I will have regard for you and make you fruitful and multiply you, and will confirm my covenant with you. And you shall eat old store long kept, and you shall clear out the old to make way for the new. And I will make my abode among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk

among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; and I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.” {Lev 26:3-13 RSV}

What a beautiful passage! What a beautiful array of promises. And God meant every word! When he asked them to observe his commandments he wasn't referring to the ten commandments alone. He knew that fallen human nature, with its inbuilt tendency to self-sufficiency, would never be able to keep them. God knew that. He meant not only the ten commandments but all the provisions for redemption which were provided with them – the offerings, the sacrifices, the cleansings, the healings, and all the other provisions which, in type, speak of Jesus Christ. In other words, “If you walk before me,” he said, “using the provision which I have made available to you to deal with the sin and rebellion of your heart, then these blessings will be yours.” What possibilities lay before this people at this time!

The blessings are six-fold. You can see as we go through this list that there is a counterpart for each of these in the spiritual life today. God meant this materially and physically for his people Israel, but it is also a picture of the spiritual blessings which are ours in our lives today, on the same condition. So this passage has direct application to us.

- The first promise is fruitfulness. God said, “I'll make you fruitful. Your land will bring forth its fruit.” Your life will be fruitful. It will be a blessing to others. You will have an effective impact upon others.
- Second, there will be full supply: “Your threshing shall last to the time of vintage, and the vintage to the time of sowing; and you shall eat your bread to the full.” You will have all you need, every resource will be provided for you.
- Third, you will have security: “I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid.” No enemy that will come against you shall be able to overwhelm you or take you captive. God will protect you. You will have peace in your land, or,

in our terms, peace in your life. No enemy can overwhelm you, no threat can be too great for you, no attack can overthrow you; you shall be secure.

- The fourth blessing is increase: “I will have regard for you and make you fruitful and multiply you, and will confirm my covenant with you.” In the spiritual application, your life will affect others. You will find the extent of your influence moving out, reaching out to larger dimensions.
- And, fifth, you will have a divine sense of God’s presence, of fellowship with the Living God. “I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” You will have an intimate sense of communion with God.
- All of this is guaranteed by the nature and character of God, the One who delivered Israel from the land of Egypt, the One who is able, sixth, to deliver and to dignify, to make people “walk erect,” as men and women ought to walk and to live. That is the kind of God he is and that is what he says he will do.

These blessings find their counterparts in our own lives in terms of the spiritual effectiveness and fruitfulness which God will produce if we lay hold of the provision that he has made for us in Jesus Christ, and if we deal honestly and openly with him. That is all God asks. He doesn’t ask us to be sinless; he asks us to be honest. He asks us not to kid ourselves, not to try to pretend, not to erect a facade, a wall that we hide behind, not to put on a mask which is not real, but to be honest and open and to avail ourselves of the resources that he has given in Jesus Christ.

Now, Israel did not keep these blessings. Israel chose otherwise. So the next section of the book deals with the cursings. And these cursings are what has occurred in Israel’s history. You will see that they fall into six definite stages, each one worse than the previous one, which God says will develop if the people turn against him, and refuse to hear his words and to obey, and won’t avail themselves of the provisions that he has made. Now hear these, beginning with Verse 14:

“But if you will not hearken to me, and will not do all these commandments, if you

spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my ordinances, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, I will do this to you:” {Lev 26:14-16a RSV}

This too is God’s promise. These curses follow, and they too have spiritual counterparts. There are parallel punishments, or cursings, which we will experience in our lives, as the people of God, if we too refuse to walk in God’s ways and avail ourselves of his provision – if, in other words, we walk in the flesh instead of in the Spirit. And they are just as sure as the blessings would have been. Notice these six stages as we work through this passage.

1. The first is given in Verses 16-17:

“I will appoint over you sudden terror, consumption, and fever that waste the eyes and cause life to pine away. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it; I will set my face against you, and you shall be smitten before your enemies; those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when none pursues you.” {Lev 26:16b-17 RSV}

There are two parts of this first mark of God’s disciplining hand:

- First, disease would break out among the people. As you read the record of Israel for forty years in the wilderness, all the way from Egypt to the borders of the promised land, you find that they were not afflicted with disease except for special punishments of temporary disobedience on their part. God kept them from illness because he had promised them that, if they obeyed his commandments, the diseases of the Egyptians and the Canaanites would not come upon them. So when disease began to erupt among them it was a sign that they were turning from God’s word and from his will.

The counterpart is true with us. These diseases, as we have seen in this book of Leviticus, are pictures of moral blotches in our own life, of wrong attitudes – resentment, bitterness, malice, lovelessness, in-

difference. These are spiritual diseases which can afflict the believer. And when these begin to appear in your life, they are a sign that something is wrong, that there has been some disobedience, some failure to avail yourself of all that God has provided in Jesus Christ. So God has allowed the malady in order that you might turn again to him.

- There was a second part of this first stage of discipline: conflict. “You shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it.” There would be conflict with the tribes around Israel. This occurred throughout the history of this people, beginning with rather minor harassment but eventually escalating to horrendous proportions.

In the spiritual counterpart this too is true of us. Arguments arise and become conflicts, strife results in schism and separation, and factions break away. This is a sign among the people of God that they are beginning to turn from what God has provided, that they are not fully availing themselves of their possession and inheritance in Jesus Christ. And this is sent to turn them back.

2. But if it doesn't, God moves to a second stage. He gives us that in Verses 18-20:

“And if in spite of this [which was given in order to get you to listen] you will not hearken to me, then I will chastise you again sevenfold for your sins, and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like brass; and your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit.” {Lev 26:18-20 RSV}

The second stage consisted, first, of an immediate seven-fold increase of the first stage, and second, added to this would be drought. “I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like brass; and your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land will not yield its increase.” Crops would dry up and famine would come.

This occurred in the history of Israel again and again.

The counterpart on the spiritual level is depression. Drought is barrenness, lack of life, a sense of futility, of the hopelessness of it all – depression, in other words. This is oftentimes a mark of someone who is failing, either through ignorance or willfulness, to understand and to avail himself of all that God has provided for us.

3. Then there comes a third stage, Verses 21-22:

“Then if you walk contrary to me, and will not hearken to me, I will bring more plagues upon you, sevenfold as many as your sins. And I will let loose the wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children, and destroy your cattle, and make you few in number, so that your ways shall become desolate.” {Lev 26:21-22 RSV}

In the history of Israel, as drought came and their crops dried up, the wilderness areas of the land were also affected. And the wild animals, not having sufficient food, came into the villages and cities and actually attacked people right in the streets, and killed their children, just as God had said would happen.

Once again this is a picture of something in our own lives. The attack of wild beasts is a picture of that unprovoked attack which may come to an individual, some sudden threat to his well-being or even to his life which comes from an unexpected source. Other people oftentimes act like wild beasts who want to take away everything we possess and devour us. This again is often a mark of spiritual declension, as God indicates.

4. Then there comes yet a fourth stage, Verses 23-26:

“And if by this discipline you are not turned to me, but walk contrary to me, then I also will walk contrary to you, and I myself will smite you sevenfold for your sins. And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall execute vengeance for the covenant; and if you gather within your cities I will send pestilence among you, and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy.”

When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in one oven, and shall deliver your bread again by weight; and you shall eat, and not be satisfied.” {Lev 26:23-26 RSV}

In the fourth stage there is to be a seven-fold intensification of all the afflictions that have already been mentioned – disease and conflict and drought and wild beasts – and there also will be an invasion of the land. Enemies will be permitted to come in and take over. This will be accompanied by pestilence and widespread famine among the people, so that women will have to share ovens – ten women baking in one oven. And so scarce is the bread, so small the loaves, that when it is delivered people will eat them up and yet remain unsatisfied. This is a picture of famine throughout the land. You can read of the historical fulfillment of this in the records of the Kings and the Chronicles. All this actually befell this people as they persisted in their disobedience and in turning from the provision God had given.

Again in the spiritual life this has its counterparts of moral decline and of a lack of satisfaction in the things of God, a sense of restlessness and of famine for spiritual substance.

5. But then there comes a fifth stage, Verses 27-33:

“And if in spite of this you will not hearken to me, but walk contrary to me, then I will walk contrary to you in fury, and chastise you myself sevenfold for your sins. You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters. And I will destroy your high places, and cut down your incense altars, and cast your dead bodies upon the dead bodies of your idols; and my soul will abhor you. And I will lay your cities waste, and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing odors. And I will devastate the land, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be astonished at it. And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you; and your land shall be a

desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.” {Lev 26:27-33}

What a remarkable prediction – and all fulfilled in history! You know that for thousands of years the Jewish people have wandered across the face of the earth as a desolate, scattered people. Cast out of their land, exiled among the nations, with no temple of their own, no central place of worship, they have been hounded and harassed from place to place wherever they have gone. Even before they were exiled these words were literally fulfilled. They actually ate their own children in the terrible famine during the siege of Jerusalem when the Roman general Titus surrounded the city in A.D. 70 and created such starvation within the walls that the inhabitants ended up eating the dead bodies of those who perished from day to day. Josephus gives a vivid account of this actual fulfillment in history. God did what he said he would do.

But remember that this also has its counterpart in the spiritual life. There is a fifth stage of spiritual decline which means the breakup of a family, the loss of sons and daughters, atrocities of various sorts, moral perversities, the overthrowing of that which you have depended upon, the idol you thought would sustain you, whatever it might be. The result is utter devastation and, ultimately, some form of exile from the presence and power of God.

6. But there is still a sixth stage, Verses 34-39:

“Then the land shall enjoy its sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies’ land; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest which it had not in your sabbaths when you dwelt upon it. [From a previous study you remember how literally this was fulfilled. Israel was taken into captivity in Babylon for seventy years because they had failed to observe seventy sabbath years prior to that.] And as for those of you that are left, I will send faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies; the sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight, and they shall flee as one flees

from the sword, and they shall fall when none pursues. They shall stumble over one another, as if to escape a sword, though none pursues; and you shall have no power to stand before your enemies. And you shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up. And those of you that are left shall pine away in your enemies' lands because of their iniquity; and also because of the iniquities of their fathers they shall pine away like them.” {Lev 26:34-39 RSV}

One of the strange mysteries of recent history is why the Jewish people in Europe, numbering eight million or more, would be so servile and submissive to the attacks upon them by the Nazis. Why didn't they resist? Why didn't they stand up and fight? The Jews themselves are troubled by this question. They have resolved that never again will they ever allow any such attack upon them without resistance. They themselves do not understand and cannot explain how they could submit so meekly to being lined up by the hundreds and thousands and herded into gas chambers and put to death without lifting a hand to resist. But God had said, “You shall be given faintness in your heart. You will not stand before your enemies. You will be afraid. You will flee when no one pursues, and a driven leaf will scare you – you will think someone is after you.” They would be characterized by faintness, by reduction in numbers, and by a terrible longing for the day when they would be delivered. All of this stands written in history, confirmed by the acts of men following the decrees of God.

Once again this has its counterpart in the spiritual life. There comes a time of utter moral collapse, utter decline, of alienation, and of being filled with restlessness and fear and trembling. All of this God has fulfilled in history and will fulfill in an individual life.

But now notice where all this is driving. The wonderful thing is that through it all God always has a redemptive, constructive goal toward which he is aiming, Verses 40-46:

“But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery which they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity; then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land [that is, I'll remember to bring them back to it, after the land has its rest]. But the land shall be left by them, and enjoy its sabbaths while it lies desolate without them; and they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they spurned my ordinances, and their soul abhorred my statutes. Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God; but I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD.”

These are the statutes and ordinances and laws which the LORD made between him and the people of Israel on Mount Sinai by Moses. {Lev 26:40-46 RSV}

Frederick the Great of Prussia one day asked his court preacher, “Can you, sir, give me in one word proof that the Bible is true?” And the preacher said, “Yes, I can. One word: Jew.”

The record of Israel, you see, is the proof that God means exactly what he says. And yet his purpose is that he will not destroy them utterly. He will not allow them to be wiped off the face of the earth but will accomplish his purpose and bring them back at last to the land.

Now what is your reaction to all this? Does it seem to you as though God is pictured here as cruel and heartless and demanding and stubborn because he afflicts people with this kind of trouble? If so, then you have read the passage all wrong. Because this is the story of the inflexibility of love, of the ruthlessness of grace. There is love behind the cursing as much as there is behind the blessing.

Notice what God is doing. From stage to stage he says, “Now I'll do this much. And if they turn back, I won't have to do more. But if they don't,

I'll move to the next stage. Because I'm not going to give up. I'm going to see to it that they return eventually." And the process moves from stage to stage until God inflexibly drives them to the place of utter despair, to the time when they will return. This is the way God works.

This is the law of the universe, the law of inevitable consequence, of the inflexible will of a Sovereign God who is determined to accomplish the redemption of his people but who nevertheless has bound himself never to violate their free will. This means that their will must be persuaded; it will never be coerced. And there is no greater persuasion than heartbreak and despair. Have you found that out?

C. S. Lewis said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures; he speaks to us in our work; but he shouts at us in our pains."

Sometimes God must almost break our hearts, sometimes he must actually break them, before we will take seriously what he has said to us and observe the provision he has made for us in Jesus Christ.

Seated in the congregation this morning is a man whose life's story is remarkable. I know he won't mind if I share it with you because he has shared it publicly with many of us. He is an eminent psychiatrist, and for many years was an agnostic, a hater of Christianity. He scorned it and attacked it whenever he could and tried to destroy it. He abused the general idea and the specific doctrines of Christianity, making fun of it in his lectures. But God was after him. Gradually things began to fall apart in his life until finally his little boy was accidentally drowned in a pool. When that happened there was awakened in this man a hunger to be with his son again. Drawn by that longing to share life yet with that beloved little boy he began to read assiduously and to take seriously the claims of Christianity. And there gradually dawned upon him a vision of what he himself was, of how he looked before God and others. He told us that as he finished reading one of C. S. Lewis' books it suddenly broke upon him how much he had done to his loved ones by his way of life and by his attitudes toward God. He simply dropped the book and said to himself, "You ass! You fool!" And at that moment he turned to God and God healed his heart, forgave him – and he sensed it, knew it. Even though it wasn't at all pleasant to face that

time of despair, nevertheless God healed him, and he has been growing in grace ever since.

I share that story with you because I want you to see how accurate this account still is. God hasn't changed at all. This is an inevitable rule of life. There is no other choice. There are no other alternatives. If you reject light, then you must endure darkness. If you will not receive the positive, then you must experience the negative. If you refuse warmth, then you must suffer cold. If you will not go in, then you must stay out – until the time comes when you're ready to go in. There are no other choices.

God is dealing like this with every one of us today. Behind what seem superficially to be cruel and hard and difficult circumstances is the relentless love of God who says, "I will never give you up. I'll never let you go. I will never give up on you. I'll never be easy on you until I get rid of your foolish attitude of rebellious self-sufficiency which is hurting you, destroying you, and making you less than what you want to be and what I want you to be."

That is the way God works with us. We sing it in the wonderful old hymn:

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for your relentless love, your inflexible purpose that we shall be conformed at last to the image of your Son. By its very nature this kind of love is determined, if necessary, to take us through sorrow and heartbreak, sadness and tears, but to bring us out at last into a great and wide place of blessing. We thank you for it. We don't like the process, Lord, but we know that it is what delivers us, what spares us and saves us. There may be some who are running as fast as they can and who think that they can avoid the God of the universe. Lord, help them to see how foolish that is, to realize that they cannot run far enough nor fast enough to escape the Hound of Heaven who pursues them, who longs to reach them and

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heal them. And thank you, Father, that you have reached us and are still dealing with us in this same faithful way. May we cooperate and yield ourselves to you, Lord,

obey your Word and believe it, and rise up to be men and women who are free of the yoke of bondage. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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