

Lesson 28: Deuteronomy 27-30 Listen and Love and Live

Introduction

Deuteronomy: Kingdom Renewal				
Key Passage: 6:4-5				
A	B	X	B'	A'
1-3 Historical prologue	4-11 Theological exhortation	12-26 Covenant stipulations	27-30 Theological exhortation	31-34 Historic transition

Listen, love, live. Moving on to Deuteronomy 27-30, I want to focus on the call to life that Moses develops in these chapters. We have considered the call to listen, which is to hear, to obey. And we have considered the call to love God. The two are connected. If we truly love God, we will desire to hear and obey, that is the right response to the wonder and gratitude we should have as human beings in the worship of our holy and gracious creator God. Morality is not a standard we must meet to be declared righteous and acceptable. We could never meet such a standard. We are accepted by grace. Morality is God's vision of a truly good and honorable life. And we live out that vision as a response of wonder and gratitude.

This is how we have covered Deuteronomy up to this point. In our first lesson, we recognized the style of Deuteronomy as a series of speeches from Moses to this second generation out of Egypt. We also recognized the form of Deuteronomy begin based on a 2nd millennium suzerain-vasal treaty. Deuteronomy is the renewal of covenant between God and Israel, reaffirming and renewing the covenant made with the previous generation at Mount Sinai. We also recognized a simple five-part chiasmic structure of Deuteronomy. There is an A and A', a B and B' with a central section X.

In that first lesson about form and structure, we briefly considered A and A', the beginning and ending sections, chapters 1-3 and chapters 31-34. This outer frame of Deuteronomy is basically narrative. The first chapters recap for us how this second generation came to be camped on the plains of Moab looking across the Jordan river into Canaan. The narrative at the end of Deuteronomy is in the present time with Moses transitioning leadership to Joshua as he directs Israel in the renewal of covenant.

The inner frame of the chiasm is not narrative. It is theological exhortation or exposition. These are the two sections B and B', chapters 4-11 and 27-30. Chapter 4 began with a call to obedience that we hear repeated throughout section B.

¹ Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.

Listen that you may live! Moses indicates that obedience is life, and it is also your witness as the nations around you observe how you live. He goes on to remind Israel in chapter 4 that the older ones among them heard the word of God themselves out of the midst of the fire. Our God is the one who speaks. He communicates his will, so that we might obey and live. Moses also warns against the pull to idolatry which separates from God which takes us down a different path, a path of adversity and death. In chapter 5, Moses repeats the ten commandments, which fulfill two functions of Torah; (1) to provide a low bar of civil law for society and (2) to provide a high bar of holiness for those in society who believe in God and want to pursue him with all their heart. These ten commandments are a paradigm for the moral vision of God, teaching us how to love him and how to love other people. Chapter 6 continues the call to obedience. And here we get the most famous challenge to listen and love in 6:4-5.

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Listen and love. We also get in this chapter a call to teach these truths and to teach this story to the next generation. As you are in your home, as you are walking on the way, as you stand and as you sit. Teach your children, so they might listen, love, and live.

Then in chapters 7-9 Moses challenges the Israelites to remember who they are and to not become proud in their success. An ordered, moral life lived out in relationship with God leads to fruitfulness. But when you experience success, do not think it is because you are so numerous, you are so strong, you are so wise, you are so righteous, you are so good at business. Your heart is stubborn and wayward. Remember your success comes from God's grace and love. Be thankful and walk humbly with your God. The call to walk with God continues through chapters 10 and 11, ending with the command to enter the promised land and go to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, to cut covenant there, and declare the blessings and curses of the covenant as a reminder that walking with God is life and turning from God is death.

Having completed the theological exhortation of chapters 4-11, the next section follows up with specific law code. That is the central section X, chapter 12-26. We are not going to address that section in this lesson. We are not moving linearly through the book of Deuteronomy. Instead, we are going to skip over to the other theological exhortation section B' which parallels this section B. So, from chapters 4-11 we are jumping over to chapters 27-30. Then in our next lesson we will come back to the center of Deuteronomy, chapters 12-26. That lesson will be our last in Deuteronomy, and in fact, our last lesson in our Pentateuch series.

But before we end with that lesson, in this lesson we are addressing section B', chapters 27-30, listen, love and live.

B' Theological Exhortation to Covenant Obedience (Deuteronomy 27-30)

I. Blessing and Curse (27-28)

You remember that chapter 11 ended with the command, after entering the land, go up on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal and there proclaim the blessings and curses of the covenant. Well, here, we continue right where chapter 11 left off. With the start of chapter 27, we get this command to go up on the two mountains, Ebal and Gerezim and to proclaim blessing and curse. And here we actually get the content of what that proclamation is going to be. This is in chapters 27-28 where we start with curse, move to blessing, and come back to curse.

Specific curses in 27:15-26

Starting with curse, we first get a list of specific curses in 27:15-26. This list gives us examples of the kind of behavior that deserves curse, without describing the result or consequence of the curse. Let's read some of these. I will abbreviate a little.

¹⁵ 'Cursed is the man who makes an idol or a molten image ... and sets *it* up in secret.'

¹⁶ 'Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother.'

¹⁸ 'Cursed is he who misleads a blind *person* on the road.'

¹⁹ 'Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.'

²¹ 'Cursed is he who lies with any animal.'

²² 'Cursed is he who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or of his mother.'

²⁴ 'Cursed is he who strikes his neighbor in secret.'

²⁵ 'Cursed is he who accepts a bribe to strike down an innocent person.'

Each of these curses is to be followed by the refrain, "And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen.'" There is a communal agreement that this is wicked behavior worthy of punishment. Society agrees, this behavior should be punished. And when we look at this list, the only one we might consider mild in our day is the curse for dishonoring father or mother. The rest are pretty despicable. And maybe we need to reconsider the importance of honoring father and mother.

The specific behaviors selected here suggest that curse is not enforced for minor infractions of the law. The consequences of these curses are going to fall on those who continue in sin, whether hiding their sin in secret or flaunting it in public. God is slow to anger. He is not waiting with a lightening bolt to strike down immediately every act of disobedience. He may act swiftly against sin when he deems it necessary, as with Ananias and Saphira in the book of Acts, but on the whole, we see the patience of God with sinful people. In fact, we probably feel like it is too much patience. God is continually extending opportunity for sinners to repent, and he is also requiring human leadership to step up and enforce justice. God entrusts to kings and elders and priests and judges, fathers and mothers the responsibility to address injustice and perversion.

General statement of blessing in 28:1 and 13-14.

The specific examples of curse in chapter 27 are not followed by specific examples of blessing. We don't get blessed is the man who does this and blessed is the man who does this. Though, that might sound familiar to you. Because, interestingly, Jesus does that in the Sermon on the Mount, which we have already seen makes connections to Deuteronomy. You remember, Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the meek...blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness...blessed are the merciful...blessed are the pure in heart...blessed are the peacemakers...blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness (Matthew 5:3-10, abbreviated)." Jesus' list includes those who are upright in moral behavior, the merciful, pure in heart, peacemaker, but Jesus does not start there. He starts with those who see their need, who repent, who become humble. These are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek. They do not hunger and thirst after righteousness as a moral standard they proudly believe they can attain. They know they can't. That is why they are poor in spirit. That is why they mourn. That is why they come humbly. They hunger and thirst after righteousness because they have begun to see who they are, and they have begun to crave life as God sees life.

Even though we do not have a list of blessings here in Deuteronomy like the beatitudes in Matthew, we do start and end the blessing section with a general statement of blessing. The blessings start this way in 28:1.

Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.

In general then, the one who obeys is the one who receives the blessing. The idea here is not perfect obedience. That can't be the idea. Remember, the law includes the sacrificial system and the Passover and the Day of Atonement. The law assumes struggle in the moral area of life. This is a call to pursue righteousness from the heart with care and diligence, which includes asking for forgiveness when you fail and then getting back up and continuing on with God. If the Israelites will pursue God and seek to apply his law in society and in their personal lives, then they will experience blessing from God. What that blessing looks like is described in 28:2-12.

Description of blessing in 28:2-12

Here is part of the blessing. This is 28:7, 9, 11 and 12 just to get a feel for it.

⁷ The Lord shall cause your enemies who rise up against you to be defeated before you; they will come out against you one way and will flee before you seven ways...

⁹ "The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, as He swore to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways...

¹¹ The Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your beast and in the produce of your ground, in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. ¹² The Lord will open for you His good storehouse, the heavens, to give rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hand; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow.

I see four categories of blessing here. There is victory in battle against enemies. There is fruitfulness in bearing children. There is fruitfulness of labor, specifically agricultural fruitfulness from crops and herds. And I would say that verse 9 communicates the blessing of purpose. "You will be established as a holy people." That statement is reminiscent of God's promise in Exodus 19:6 to make Israel a holy nation. To be holy is to be set apart as special for the Lord to use in a special way. Holiness implies purpose.

These blessings of protection, provision, and purpose all point back to the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. That promise followed the Tower of Babel. Humankind sought in pride to establish a name for themselves, to define the worship of God in their own way, to define their own vision for human life. God tore down that tower of human pride and presumption. The Tower of Babel exemplified mankind's attempt at self-definition to pull away from the path of God, which ultimately heads down a path of destruction and death that leads to eternal separation. God stepped in to save mankind from himself. And then God chose a people who were not a people. He promised that he would give this people a name and he would make them a blessing to the nations now scattered over the earth. That promise is coming to fruition now in Israel.

And these blessings of provision, protection, and purpose point back even further, further than Genesis 12, back to Genesis 1 and 2, to the original covenant God gave Adam and Eve, to be the image of God on earth, to rule over creation, to bring about abundance, and to multiply the human family. This commission has now been given to the people of Israel.

General statement of curse in 28:15

After this passage on blessing, Moses turns back to curse in the rest of chapter 28. He stated before what kind of behavior deserves curse. But he did not state what the curse would be. What are the consequences of that behavior? This section starts with a general statement of curse on the disobedient, just like the blessing section, then it is going to move on to the descriptions of the curses. So, it starts in 28:15,

But it shall come about, if you do not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:

Obey and you will be blessed. Disobey and you will be cursed. Well, okay. That is who gets cursed. The ones who disobey. What exactly are the consequences of the curse? What's going to happen? The description comes in 28:14-68. It starts off bad then it gets worse, then it becomes downright awful.

Description of curse in 28:14-68

Here is a selection. The language of the curse is very similar to the language of blessing, though more extensive. Apparently, human beings need to be impressed more with the negative consequences for disobedience than with the positive consequences for obedience.

This is Deuteronomy 28:18, 21, 24 and 25.

¹⁸ "Cursed *shall be* the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock.

²¹ "The Lord will make the pestilence cling to you until He has consumed you from the land where you are entering to possess it.

²⁴ "The Lord will make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed.

²⁵ The Lord shall cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you will go out one way against them, but you will flee seven ways before them, and you will be *an example of terror* to all the kingdoms of the earth.

If the Israelites determine to turn away from covenant obedience, God declares he will remove protection, provision, and purpose from them. They will be defeated by enemies. Their birthrate will drop. They will not experience fruitfulness in their agricultural labor. They will not be feared or respected by the nations as a special people set apart by God. No protection, no provision, no purpose.

This is not merely a threat. This is a promise. If you reject the good path of God and determine to go your own way, then you can expect detrimental consequences. And when it gets to the point of God removing protection from Israel, the consequences have potential to spiral out of control. Warfare at its worst decimates the land. When conquering armies eat everything they can get their hands on, burn fields, cut down trees, and besiege cities, the results are famine, disease, evaporation of wealth. In the most dehumanizing cases besieged citizens in cities turn to cannibalism. This is actually described in 28:53-57. I am not going to read it. God is not saying that he will make the Israelites cannibalistic. He is saying that when they have turned so far from him that he allows armies to besiege their cities and by not walking with God they have lost moral fortitude in their own souls, this is what the result will be. They will turn against their own family members to survive.

I do not think you can get to a worse state than that, though the chapter ends with another take on the extreme lostness of Israel. This is 28:68.

The Lord will bring you back to Egypt in ships, by the way about which I spoke to you, 'You will never see it again!' And there you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer.

It would be bad enough returning back to Egypt again as slaves. But you will be so pestilent ridden and weak, that even when you offer yourself to be purchased as a slave, the Egyptians will look at you and conclude that you are not worth the food it would take to keep you alive.

Turning away from God, walking persistently on our own path, both individually and as a society, invites terrible consequences. Invites destruction and adversity.

Chapter 29 brings us back into our covenant context. Let's go there to consider how we should think about covenant curse and covenant blessing. Let's put it in context.

II. Call to Covenant with a Prophetic Vision of Failure (29)

We start with 29:1.

These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb.

That established for us the context. This is covenant renewal. These are blessing and curse in the context of covenant. The original covenant was established at Horeb, which is another name for Mt. Sinai. Now on the plain of Moab, Moses has written the book of Deuteronomy for the purpose of covenant renewal. This is not a new and separate covenant, but an update to covenant with this second generation that includes and adds to the original covenant of Sinai. Both covenants combine as one, and they are the covenant of Moses to be passed down through the generations of Israel.

And Moses is going to challenge the Israelites to submit to this covenant. Listen to that challenge. This is 29:10-15.

¹⁰ "You stand today, all of you, before the Lord your God: your chiefs, your tribes, your elders and your officers, *even* all the men of Israel, ¹¹ your little ones, your wives, and the alien who is within your camps, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, ¹² that you may enter into the covenant with the Lord your God, and into His oath which the Lord your God is making with you today, ¹³ in order that He may establish you today as His people and that He may be your God, just as He spoke to you and as He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ¹⁴ "Now not with you alone am I making this covenant and this oath, ¹⁵ but both with those who stand here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here today.

In Deuteronomy 5:3 Moses reminded the Israelites that this covenant was not just made for your fathers but is now being renewed with you. Here he tells them that this covenant is not only with you who stand here today but with those not yet here, with your descendants who are to come. The people of Israel are now invited to enter into covenant with God, today, to affirm and agree to the covenant stipulations and the accompanying blessings and curses. They are to step onto the path with God, turn their backs on sin and death, and walk forward with him.

If we left it here, we might be able to imagine this as an American style motivational speech. This is movie worthy. “You stand today before the Lord your God ... that you may enter into covenant with the Lord your God and into his oath which the Lord your God is making with you today, that he may establish you and be your God! [Stand for God! You see the curses! You see the blessings! Choose the blessings! You can do it! We can do it! Let’s stand for God!]” You can imagine the scene of joyful men and women and children; and people pumping their arms in the air and slapping each other on the back; children smiling and whooping along with the adults. “We’ve got this! We can do this! This is awesome!”

But Moses is not an American. He sounds a lot more Croatian to me. He gives them a motivational speech, but Moses follows it up with a prophetic vision of failure. It is kind of like this.

“You stand today before the Lord your God to enter into covenant with him. If you obey you will be blessed. And if you disobey you will be cursed. And you will disobey. This is just too hard for you. There is no way you are going to live up to this. I can look at you, and I can tell. Let me tell you what is going to happen. You say you are going to walk with God. And your all committed now at this moment. And you are all happy. You are all excited. But you are not going to last. You are going to turn away from God, and you are going to pursue all the bad things he told you not to. And then he is going to bring all these curses on you. No rain. No crops. Enemy invaders. And in the end, you are going to turn so far away from God that he is going to remove his protection completely, allowing foreigners to ravage the land and take whoever is left alive into exile.”

That is not very optimistic, is it? That’s not the we can do it, positive motivational speech. This is the tough reality speech. God knows from the beginning who he is dealing with. After the covenant at Sinai where that whole first generation shouted out, “All that the Lord has spoken, we will do. We will be obedient!” That is Exodus 24:7. God was not surprised that they could not make it forty days before they molded a golden calf and called it Elohim. God told them. “I am a holy God, and you are a stubborn, stiff-necked people. I don’t know how I am going to prevent myself from burning you up on the way. You simply invite punishment.”

God is calling Israel to a covenant that is lacking. And he is doing it intentionally. And it is not really the vision of life in this law that is lacking. Paul affirms in Romans 7:12. The law is holy and righteous and good. But this covenant does not cure the sinful nature of humankind. This covenant is going to teach God’s people the real depravity of the human situation while constantly pointing them to the need for a more radical salvation.

Still, this prophetic vision of failure is not a vision of complete failure. It is a vision of eventual and inevitable failure. But when the Israelites keep their eye on God and pursue him, they are able to experience life and blessing with God. He tells them he has given them what they need to know, if they will trust him in that. We read that in the last verse of the chapter, this is 29:29,

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

And he says in 30:11,

This commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach.

Moses affirms that in this law, in Genesis through Deuteronomy, the Israelites have the word that they need from God. This is the word David called sweeter than honey, more precious than gold. There is more. There are spiritual truths God has not chosen yet to reveal. And there are things that he has not yet done. There is more coming. Do not be striving after those other secret things that

God has not told you about. You can wonder about it. Focus not on the spiritual truth you do not have, but on the spiritual truth you do have. Set your mind to walking with God, loving him, loving your neighbor, seeking his kingdom, and God will work out the rest.

You can do this. That does not mean you can achieve the standard of righteousness. You can not do that. You will fail, many times in many ways. But this law accounts for that. You are accepted by grace. You have sacrifice as a means of confession and symbolic atonement. So, confess your sin. Stay open and honest before God. Stay close to God. And keep going. That is possible. And some of you will do it. Some whole generations will stay fairly close to God.

But the reality of struggle and eventual defeat is here in this prophetic vision. Failure to live for God as a people will plague you. This is 29:19-20.

¹⁹ It shall be when [that man] hears the words of this curse, that he will boast, saying, 'I have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart in order to destroy the watered *land* with the dry.' ²⁰ The Lord shall never be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and His jealousy will burn against that man, and every curse which is written in this book will rest on him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven.

Men and women will rise up in Israel who scoff at the idea of curse or the idea that they must behave in a certain way, who dismiss the moral vision of God and reject his presence and authority. There is a pattern that we are going to see in history that scholars call the Deuteronomic cycle. A generation of Israelites walks with God and experiences blessing. The next generation largely turns from God to idolatry and immorality. God removes his provision and protection allowing that generation to suffer. That is curse. At some point, the people cry out. God forgives them, saves them. And they are restored. Blessing, Curse, Restoration; Blessing, Curse, Restoration; Blessing, Curse, Restoration; we see it over and over again. It is a clear pattern in the book of Judges. It is also an approximate pattern that keeps occurring through Samuel and the book of Kings, all the way to the Babylonian exile. This is the Deuteronomic cycle. Blessing, Curse, Restoration, until the final curse comes and the people are removed from the land.

When we survey the Old Testament, we get a picture of God as one who really is slow to anger and quick to forgive. Generations move away from God, and the curse comes slowly. It takes 20, 30, 40 years. God's hand of protection is not quickly removed. But when it is, and Israel cries out from the heart, God is quick to forgive and restore Israel back into right relationship.

God is slow to anger, and he is quick to forgive. But slow to anger is not the same as not angry. God's anger burns against sin, cruelty, depravity, and injustice. God will punish. These curses are a just response from a holy God. But they are not only that. The punishment of God always includes an implicit offer of restoration. If you will recognize what is happening, if you will recognize the curse has come on you because you turned away from God, if you will turn back, you will be forgiven. If you will turn back you will be healed.

This implicit call of restoration that comes with every curse, every act of discipline from God, becomes an explicit promise in chapter 30. We have considered the curses and the blessings. We have considered the covenant context, how should we think about curse and blessing. So, now let's look at this promise of restoration.

III. Promised Restoration (30)



In the Ancient Near East, no one faulted a King for bringing against a rebellious vassal the stated curse of covenant. You rebel, you get the curses. Punishment for covenant breaking was understood. It was expected. Curse was a recognized element of covenant. But no known suzerain-vassal treaty from the 2nd millennium includes a promise of restoration back into covenant after curses have been enforced on a rebellious, vassal people, none; well, none except for the covenant established between God and Israel. It is the only covenant that

includes a vision of restoration. It is completely unique to Deuteronomy.

After the prophetic vision of failure in chapter 29, Moses gives a prophetic vision of restoration. This promise of restoration is a monument of grace in the book of Deuteronomy. The promise is given in Deuteronomy 30:1-6.

¹ So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call *them* to mind in all nations where the Lord your God has banished you, ² and you return to the Lord your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, ³ then the Lord your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. ⁴ If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. ⁵ The Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. ⁶ Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

The promise of a new heart is the promise of new covenant. The curse of exile looks ahead 900 years to Babylon. That is when the final curse is going to occur. This promise of restoration looks ahead 1500 years to Jesus. In his own day, Jeremiah envisioned the promise of the new covenant this way in Jeremiah 31:33,

“But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

After the new covenant had come, Paul refers back to this kind of language of Deuteronomy when he said this in Romans 2:29,

But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

This promise of a new heart is one of the great differences between the old covenant and the new. Deuteronomy is looking far ahead. The old covenant calls God’s people to live out the moral vision of God, without doing a new spiritual work inside the people. The Psalms testify that believing Israelites experienced an inner reality of joy and love in their walk with God. Still, they lacked this further work that is promised of the indwelling Holy Spirit. They can’t walk in the way of the Spirit. That is something secret. That is something being held until the new covenant.

There is a new reality promised with the new covenant. But as we continue on in Deuteronomy 30, there is an expectation of life with God in the old covenant context. It may not be the exact same thing as in the new covenant. But the expectation is here. As we already read in 29:29, “The secret things belong to the Lord, but the things revealed belong to us.” Israel was not called to live in the not yet revealed things of the new covenant. That is not yet. They were called to experience the life available to them in the old covenant. Life is the language of Moses. Listen, love, and live. The call to covenant obedience is a call to life. Let’s read the complete last paragraph of chapter 30. These are verses 15-19,

¹⁵ See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; ¹⁶ in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong *your* days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants,

“I set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity....So choose life in order that you may live.” This is the call to life in mosaic covenant. Let’s finish this lesson considering how covenant obedience brings about life. Here are three ways obedience brings about the blessing of life.

(1) First, the blessings of life and the curse of death can refer to the reward or punishment that comes from one in authority without any direct connection to the actual act of obedience. For example, if your commanding officer says dig a hole, then you do not expect to have blessing in your life from the digging of the hole. Whether there is a hole or not, does not enhance your quality of life. But if your act of obedience moves your commanding officer to give you extra rations or to give you early leave on the weekend, then you have experienced blessing from the right authority over you as a result of obedience. Conversely, refusal to dig the hole could get you put on punishment detail and significantly reduce your quality of life.

If God chooses to give rain or withhold rain based on the faithfulness of his people, there was not a cause and effect between the action and the rain. It is the will of God. Eating the right food or acting kindly to a neighbor or looking out for an orphan has no cause and effect relationship to the rain. But these acts of obedience may please the authority over you who may then reward you with rain.

Covenant obedience with God is not meant to be a formula by which we move God to action. Israel was constantly slipping into this. There is no record of righteousness that guarantees various kinds of blessing in exchange for the right number of righteousness points. That kind of thinking leans towards the sin of taking God’s name in vain. We obey. And we leave the timing and the amount and the kind of blessing in God’s hands. We do not attempt to manipulate God through good behavior. We pursue God by living according to his moral vision. And we trust God with the reward, the blessings of protection, provision and purpose, according to his will.

(2) There is a second way that obedience brings about life and prosperity. At times there is a direct cause and effect relationship between obedience and reward. Digging some random hole may not affect your quality of life. But digging a series of holes to be used as latrines could affect the quality of life of every soldier in the unit; or digging holes to trap animals for food or to plant crops. The commanded action may bring about both the pleasure of God in response to obedience and also some direct benefit from the action.

The purpose of the ceremonial holiness code was to make a distinction between life and death, sin and holiness in the minds of the Israelites and to set the Israelites off as special, holy to the Lord. They were to behave differently from the people around them. At the same time, eating the kosher food of Mosaic law is nutritionally beneficial, leading to better quality of life. Enforcing rest on mothers after childbirth, requiring washing after touching a dead body, burying waste outside the camp, all these actions have potential cause and effect relationships to the health and well-being of individuals and of the whole society. And it may not always be clear to us when we are obeying the commands of the law, what is the cause and effect, how does this bring benefit into my life? It can happen without us even understanding.

This is also true with the moral laws. When we are young and naïve, we may not understand how waiting for marriage to have sex is going to bring about blessing and life in our marriage relationship. We might not get it. But that does not change the fact that if you disobey, you bring pain into your life, and if you obey, you will bring blessing into your life.

When we go back through all the ten commandments, we can easily consider how the pursuit of the positive side of the moral continuum promotes blessing in the life of us as individuals and the whole community. Speaking words of life to other people, loving your neighbor, keeping covenant in marriage, working so as to have extra to give, speaking truth in business, in law, in personal

relationship, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep, all these actions have the potential to cause blessing in the life of an individual and the life of society. Family is strengthened. Business is strengthened. Government is strengthened. Life and blessings result in a cause and effect relationship with obedience. God's vision of the moral life is God's wisdom for life. There is direct blessing in living the way God instructs us to live.

(3) There is a third way that covenant obedience brings about life. This is the most important. Moses continually connects obedience with relationship. I think 10:12-13 is my favorite expression of this truth.

¹² Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ *and* to keep the Lord's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?

When we obey out of the heart, we are actively walking in relationship with God. As a result, God may smile and give us a blessing. Also, as a result, we may experience the blessing that results directly from our behavior. But then there is this third way. When we obey and God smiles, we just enjoy the fact that God smiles. God himself is our reward. When joy and satisfaction and contentment come from walking with God, then we experience the right reward of intimate relationship. Obedience brings us into relationship with our heavenly father. And joy rises out of our hearts, not at what he gives us, but because of our relationship with him. Because we feel he loves us, and we are beginning to love him back. We are not chasing after some other blessing. God is the blessing. And he is life.

Reflection Questions

1. Observe a portion of the blessing and curse section by reading Deuteronomy 28:1-26? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?

2. Does the curse section here paint a picture of God as an intensely strict teacher always hovering over you in class, in the halls, on the playground, even somehow showing up at the mall or in your home, bringing down swift punishment on every mistake or inappropriate comment?

We might be quick to say no to that characterization, but that is an approximate feeling that a lot of people have about God. He is the stern policeman in the sky, waiting, hoping for you to step out of line, so you better keep your head down and do your best to go unnoticed.

3. How does understanding blessing and curse as part suzerain-vassal covenant between God and Israel help you to put this section of the Bible into perspective? (If it helps, think about individual believers who lived under covenant with God...Naomi, Ruth, Samuel, Saul, David...how did curse and blessing apply to these people as individuals?)

4. Read Deuteronomy 30:1-20. What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?

5. How have you experienced the promise of life in your own walk with God?

a. What blessings have you experienced that came from the will of your Father apart from any cause and effect relationship to your obedience? What are some things he has done for you or given you as you have walked with him?

b. What are some blessings you have experienced as a cause and effect of your obedience? You chose to obey in some way and saw a blessing as a result of your action?

c. Have you experienced the joy of knowing God himself? What is that like for you?