

## **Our Curse-Bearer**

### **Leviticus 26**

This morning we reach the end of the book of Leviticus and the end of our series. There's actually one chapter left, but scholars see it as an appendix that was added to the end of the book to underline the importance of funding for the tabernacle. But the end of the main body of the book is chapter 26, which we'll cover today.

As I stated earlier in the series, the book of Leviticus is a continuation of the story of Exodus and of the rules and regulations of the covenant that God was establishing with his chosen people at Mt. Sinai. It was this people whom he chose, rescued out of slavery, adopted as his own, blessed, protected, and would one day bring into the Promised Land of Canaan.

So the structure of Leviticus has been largely influenced by the pattern of an ancient covenant, and as we reach the end of the book, we see an extensive description of the blessings that would come with obedience to the covenant, as well as the curses that would happen if the people violated the covenant and rejected their Rescuer and God.

We're going to interpret this chapter in light of its original context, but if you're familiar with OT history and know what happened later on you can't help but see how all these things ended up playing out in Israel's tumultuous story. So a big portion of this chapter reads like a warning to the original readers, but it also reads as a preview for what would happen in later generations.

But I also can see that this chapter isn't just about Israel's history, it relates to us as well. It tells us a lot about all of humanity, revealing God's heart and desire for mankind, how badly sin screwed everything up, and God's underlying faithfulness and mercy that didn't just leave us in our sin, but provided a way for forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration to all the promises and blessings God has always wanted for us. So after interpreting this chapter in its original context, we're going to think about how it reveals God's desire for us as well as the story of redemption that we're part of.

Read Leviticus 26:1-2.

*You shall not make idols for yourselves or erect an image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land to bow down to it, for I am the Lord your God. <sup>2</sup>You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the Lord.*

This is basically a restatement of the foundational principles of the covenant. All the details and commands that we've seen throughout this book are basically summarized in these verses. Yahweh says to them: "I am the Lord your God. You are my people. Therefore you shall not worship any other gods or follow the idolatrous practices of the other nations. You are mine. Keep my Sabbaths and show reverence to my sanctuary where I dwell in your midst."

After this, he goes on to give an extensive explanation of all the blessings he would give them if they would obey these things, followed by an even more extensive explanation of all the curses they would encounter if they rejected him and violated the covenant. First the blessings...

Read Leviticus 25:3-13.

*"If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely. <sup>6</sup>I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will remove harmful beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land. <sup>7</sup>You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you. <sup>10</sup>You shall eat old store long kept, and you shall clear out the old to make way for the new. <sup>11</sup>I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. <sup>12</sup>And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. <sup>13</sup>I am the Lord your God, who brought you 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.*

Doesn't that sound wonderful? This is really a description of ultimate paradise and there are three components to it. First, there would be prosperity – bountiful harvests and food – no hunger, need, or want. Plenty of produce and fruit of every kind. Second, there would be peace – all enemies would be removed along with harmful beasts, no army would infiltrate. Anyone who threatened their borders would be chased away or struck down by just a few. And third, the presence of Yahweh – he himself would dwell in their midst to bless them. He would walk among as a benevolent King, in a relationship of harmony with his people.

Peace, prosperity, the presence of God – one of the Hebrew scholars I listened to noted that it was a return to the Garden of Eden. If they would do the things they promised they'd do and walk in obedience to the ways of Yahweh, they would have Eden all over again.

I think these verses do a great job of expressing the true heart of God for his people. His desire was to dwell with them, protect them, and bless them abundantly as they experienced fullness of joy and life in him. I think this also reveals his very purposes for creating mankind in the first place and what his desires are for us. And these desires haven't changed.

But something has changed – drastically and tragically – mankind chose to reject all of God's goodness and blessing and turn to sin instead – *“Nope, we'd rather experience life and creation our own way, and you, Creator and giver of life and all these good things, you get out of the way. We don't want you telling us what to do.”* Sin entered the world in the Garden of Eden and was passed down from generation to generation bringing corruption and rebellion to all mankind including the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai who were entering into this covenant with God. Sin was permeating the covenant people, therefore the covenant warnings of blessing weren't enough, there also had to be covenant promises of punishment – curses that would befall them if they rejected God and chose to walk in sin and disobedience instead.

So as we continue in Leviticus 26 we encounter a large and intense section of curses that's way longer than the section of blessings. But the reason it's so much longer isn't because God is so quick and eager to pour out judgment, it's actually because the opposite is true. God is patient and long-suffering

and would bring about a certain level of punishment and suffering so that his people would come to their senses and repent of their sins. And if they didn't, and hardened their hearts even more, the punishment and suffering would get worse so they would turn back. It's like discipline in parenting. We only punish as much as is necessary to bring about repentance and it's only when lighter punishment fails that we have to get more severe.

So in this section of curses, there are actually 5 Levels of punishment, revealing that God's desire was to only punish as much as necessary to turn his people back to obedience. So I'll read some of these verses and summarize the rest.

Read Leviticus 26:14-20.

*"But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, <sup>15</sup> if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, <sup>16</sup> then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever that consume the eyes and make the heart ache. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. <sup>17</sup> I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down before your enemies. Those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when none pursues you. <sup>18</sup> And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your sins, <sup>19</sup> and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. <sup>20</sup> 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.*

So in this first level of punishment they would experience the loss of many of the blessings that would have been theirs if they would have obeyed. And that was meant to lead them to repentance. But if they didn't, there was a second level, and that's described in verses 21-22. If they continued to rebel, God would then allow wild beasts to multiply in the land – snakes, lions, bears – who would kill their children and livestock to the point where the population would greatly decrease.

If they still didn't repent, there was a third level described in verses 23-26. If they continued to harden their hearts and refuse to listen and turn back to God, he would bring an invading army to strike them and when they fled to

fortified cities they wouldn't be safe because God would send deadly disease to break out in those cities along with severe famine. The army would overtake them and they would be defeated. This was to humble them and turn them back to him, and if they still refused, things would get even worse.

The fourth level is probably the worst level and is described in verses 27-33 and at this point we see the terrifying unleashing of the fury and vengeance of the Lord because of the total rebellion, wickedness, and hardness of his people. I'm going to read these verses so we can see how horrifying it would be to face God's furious wrath.

Read Leviticus 25:27-33.

*But if in spite of this you will not listen to me, but walk contrary to me, <sup>28</sup> then I will walk contrary to you in fury, and I myself will discipline you sevenfold for your sins. <sup>29</sup> You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters. <sup>30</sup> 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. <sup>31</sup> And I will lay your cities waste and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing aromas. <sup>32</sup> And I myself will devastate the land, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled at it. <sup>33</sup> 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.*

These are some of the most terrifying verses in the Bible. And they could start to make you think that's what God is like, but that's not what God is like. These describe God's righteous, controlled, and fitting response to how horrific mankind can become in their stubborn rebellion against him. This is not describing what it's like when God loses his mind; this is describing what it's like when God justly and fairly punishes a people whom he has created, saved, rescued, and blessed abundantly, when they reject him, violate their promises to him, and continually rebel against him in increasing levels of wickedness and insanity, year after year, decade after decade, all while receiving clear warnings that this is what's going to happen if they don't repent.

As bad as this punishment is, you can see that God has not yet destroyed his people. He leaves survivors who will be scattered among the nations. And the final level of punishment describes what it will be like for them in verses 34-39. They will live in the land of their enemies and be filled with panic and fear. They will have no power to stand against their enemies but will die and rot away there.

So as we see this long section of curses and think of it in the context it was originally given, we can see it would have been a severe warning for the Israelites on Mt. Sinai – but a warning given out of mercy so that the people would live in obedience. God’s desire was the blessings, not the curses.

And we see that again in the last section of this chapter. Even if all these terrible curses came to pass and the people were in exile facing eventual annihilation, God would still be merciful if his people would turn back to him.

Read Leviticus 26:40-46.

*But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me,<sup>41</sup> 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,<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> But the land shall be abandoned by them and enjoy its Sabbaths while it lies desolate without them, and they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they spurned my rules and their soul abhorred my statutes.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> But I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the Lord.”*

There would still be hope, even if the people ended up in exile. If they would humble themselves and turn from their sins, God would remember his covenant with them.

So that's how the main message of Leviticus and the terms of the covenant wrap up. And I want us to think a little bit about what this has to do with us today. How can the blessings and curses of the old covenant have anything to do with us today? Well, I think they have a lot to do with us because even though this is a covenant with Israel, and not with us, it represents the same covenant that God has with all mankind whom he has created for his glory.

In God's covenant with man, which we first see in the Garden of Eden, he provides amazing blessings for those who walk in obedience – paradise, bountiful and amazing food, peace, prosperity, no enemies. But for those who disobey and walk contrary to his ways, he promises curses and condemnation: “Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or you will surely die.”

This covenant is the same for all of mankind. The problem is, there isn't a single human being that can walk in obedience to God, or even want to. Ever since the Garden, we are bent on rebellion because in the Garden, mankind turned to sin and sin entered the human race, corrupting our nature from the inside out. Rather than wanting to walk in obedience to our Creator and God, we want to do the opposite and do our own thing. We want to rebel. All we like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.

That is the way of mankind, corrupted with a sin nature. It's guaranteed failure. Israel was never going to obey that covenant – they couldn't. And as their story went on it was like Leviticus 26 became the script. There were times of obedience and blessing, but mostly there were cycles of disobedience and punishment. And all the curses that we just read about came to pass in order, and the people ended up in exile.

And it's easy for us to look at them and think of how foolish they were, but the reality is that were it not for the grace and mercy of God in our lives, we would be doing exactly the same thing – not walking in obedience to our Creator and enjoying all his blessings, but walking in disobedience even as we faced greater levels of punishment and suffering.

But one of the things we see in Leviticus 26 is God's kindness and mercy and desire to forgive and reconcile and restore sinful people. And because that's

who he is, he made a way for that to happen – a way for the curse to be removed. He sent his only Son to bear our sin and guilt and take on himself the punishment we deserved by dying on the cross. Paul says he became a curse for us so we could be saved. When Jesus suffered and died on the cross, you know what he went through? He became the recipient of all the curses for sin that we read about in Leviticus 26. He became the object of God's fury and wrath and absorbed it all completely in our place. "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" He became sin who knew no sin that we might become the righteousness of God. By doing this he condemned sin in sinful man and made the way for us to be forgiven through faith in him. The covenant curses no longer have a hold on those who are in Christ because he bore them in our place.

And not only that, but he also gave us a new heart and new Spirit. He replaced our spiritually dead heart with a heart alive to him. And by the power of his Spirit, it is no longer impossible for us to live in obedience to him. He is working in us that which is pleasing to him and bringing us into alignment with God's will. As we walk in obedience to him we experience his goodness and his blessings here and now, and one day, when this world passes away and is made new and we receive our glorified bodies – free from the nature of sin, we will experience the fullness of his blessings – peace, prosperity, and the presence of God – forever and ever and ever...

So let us humble ourselves before him and lead lives of obedience for his honor and glory. Let us worship him with glad hearts and open hands to receive all he has and is for us in Christ.