

## The Blessings and the Curses

Leviticus 26:1-46

### I. Introduction

- A. Leviticus 26 stands with Deuteronomy 28 as one of the most important and influential chapters in the OT. Much of Israel's history recorded in the historical books as well as the oracles given by the prophets are influenced by the contents of these two chapters.
- B. The chapter calls Israel to exclusive loyalty to Yahweh, the master of the covenant, and promises blessing to the nation for their obedience, but also warns of curses that will come for disobedience.
- C. This section lies at the conclusion of the covenant revelation given to Israel at Sinai, and its position in the text reveals the treaty-like nature of the Mosaic Covenant.
- D. "A collection of such blessings and curses was the usual way to close a major legal text in biblical times.... It is a pattern that occurs outside the Bible in literature spanning the first three millennia B.C. Legal collections such as the law of Ur-Nammu, Lipit-Ishtar, and Hammurabi, Babylonian boundary stones, and Hittite, Aramean, and Assyrian treaties typically conclude with a section of blessings and curses" (Wenham, 327).
- E. The ANE parallels shed significant light on how this chapter functions in relation to the rest of Leviticus. Ross provides a helpful explanation:

"In form and content it parallels the conclusions of covenant codes found elsewhere in the Old Testament and in other ancient Near Eastern cultures (see Exod. 23:25-33; Josh. 24:20; Deut. 28). The general idea is that the great king who made the covenant (here the LORD God) and delivered the people from bondage to another nation (Egypt) demanded their absolute allegiance. The sovereign promised to continue to act beneficently toward his people if they were faithful to his covenant stipulations; but if they were not he threatened to deal harshly with them. Of course, the fulfillment of these blessings and curses depended on the ability of the king to carry them out. This was not usually a problem since the great overlord had already acted to deliver the people from their enemies. But to ensure the efficacy of the promises, the covenants were usually stored in the sanctuary so that the deity empowered the blessings and curses. In Israel, however, the sovereign God of creation and the LORD of history delivered Israel and made the treaty with them. He was fully able to muster all of nature and all nations to enact his blessings or curses."

- F. The chapter also provides a critical bridge for understanding the complex relationship between the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants. The former promised land and blessing to Israel. The latter called them to unwavering allegiance to their covenant Lord.
- G. Leviticus 26 explains the relationship between these two covenants.
  - 1. "The blessings and curses of Leviticus 26 advance the respective emphases of both the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants. The blessings relate to the Abrahamic Covenant's promise regarding land and blessing, but the cursings represent a five-stage process of Mosaic Covenant vengeance. The cursings seek to produce

- confession and guilt, humility, and restitution” (Barrick, “Inter-covenantal Truth and Relevance,” 82).
2. In other words, this chapter explains how Israel can enjoy real, tangible Abrahamic blessings in the context of the Mosaic Covenant treaty—they are experienced only through ongoing obedience to the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant. Violations to the covenant result in the removal of those blessings and the experience of divine chastisement which is intended to bring about repentance and renewed loyalty.
  3. The ongoing question which these two covenants bring out is this: does Israel’s disobedience result in the invalidation of the Abrahamic Covenant promises?
  4. As Barrick explains, “The apparent tension that the Mosaic Covenant’s promulgation creates between it and the Abrahamic Covenant makes Leviticus 26 relevant to the discussion of the progression and distinction of biblical covenants. After three disturbing apostasies in Sinai, Leviticus 26 explains the relationship between the two covenants and reemphasizes the exclusive lordship of Yahweh. Although Leviticus 26 antedates Paul’s teaching in Gal 3:17 by fifteen centuries, both proclaim the same truth: ‘the Law, which came forth four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise’” (Barrick, 81-2).
  5. The Abrahamic Covenant is the foundation for Israel’s ultimate restoration (Lev 26:42, 44). God will discipline the nation for their disloyalty, but he will never forsake them ultimately because his promises to Abraham still stand.
  6. Israel’s ability to enjoy the benefits of the Abrahamic promises will rest upon each generation’s continued loyalty to God as expressed through the laws of the Mosaic Covenant. But their failure will never result in ultimate rejection.

## II. Exposition

### A. Precept (26:1-2)

The chapter begins by setting forth the call for unswerving allegiance to Yahweh, the lord of the covenant. The two stipulations set forth are really representative of what it means to live wholly devoted to God. Thus, one could say that these two precepts summarize everything encapsulated in the 10 commandments.

1. Prohibition of Idolatry (26:1)
  - a) The terminology used here is the most concentrated references to idolatry in the OT. It utilizes four different terms—“idols,” “carved image,” “pillar,” and “sculpted stone.” This is a way of ruling out any and all idol worship.
  - b) The command underscores the necessity of absolute loyalty. God will not tolerate rival gods. He is their only master and sovereign.
2. Preservation of Sabbath and Sanctuary (26:2)
  - a) In contradistinction to idol worship, the second precept emphasizes the *proper* worship of Yahweh.

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- b) This involved observing the Sabbath—the unique sign of the Mosaic Covenant that marked Israel as God’s covenant people—and reverencing the sanctuary—the place where God dwelled and where they met with him to worship.
- c) Placing these two stipulations at the start of this chapter signified the close relationship between the blessings and curses and one’s relationship to Yahweh.
- d) “All declension and decay may be said to be begun wherever we see these two ordinances despised—the *Sabbath* and the *sanctuary*. They are the *outward* fence around the *inward love* commanded by v. 1” (Bonar, 473).
- e) “I am Yahweh your God” reminds the people that he is Lord and is sovereign over them. He is their master. This phrase provides a unifying element for the chapter (26:1, 2, 13, 44, 45).

### B. Promise (26:3-13)

#### 1. The Prerequisite: Obedience (26:3)

- a) The blessings outlined in vv. 4-12 are the outflow of the people’s obedience to the covenant.
- b) Obedience is emphasized by a three-fold expression:
  - (1) Walk in my statutes – “walk” speaks of life conduct and total obedience
  - (2) Keep my commandments – “keep” speaks of practicing the law
  - (3) Do them – “do” summarizes the previous concepts and draws them together into one idea

#### 2. The Product: Blessing (26:4-12)

The result of obedience will be the experience of tangible blessings. These blessings flow out of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. Notably, they are all tied to the land and can be expressed in six general categories.

##### a) Productivity (26:4-5)

God would provide rain during the proper seasons, resulting in bountiful production and fertility in the land. The land would produce so much that they would the harvesting season would overlap with the time for sowing.

##### b) Peace (26:6)

God would subdue the wild animals so that they would not pose a danger to the people. They would also have no worry of foreigners pillaging their crops and goods.

##### c) Power (26:7-8)

God would enable the nation to enjoy military victory over their enemies. They could be confident even in the face of overwhelming forces, because they knew that God would fight for them, allowing them to prevail.

d) Population (26:9)

God would grant fertility to the people so that they would multiply in the land (cf. Gen 17:6).

e) Provision (26:10)

God would also provide for their increased population by increasing their food supply (cf. Lev 25:22; Exod 16:4-36).

f) Presence (26:11-12)

God would be present with his people by dwelling in their midst in the tabernacle. This promise is, undoubtedly, the capstone of the blessings, solidifying that they indeed belonged to him and he to them.

3. The Premise: Yahweh is Savior (26:13)

a) The basis for God's lordship over Israel was that he rescued them from Egypt and freed them from their slavery.

b) God uses the image of the breaking of a yoke to picture how he freed them from their oppression. Their experience in Egypt caused them to stumble under the weight of their "yoke," but he caused them to "walk upright," a picture of their freedom.

c) This assertion underscores the fact that their obedience and blessing flows out of their experience of redemption, and not the other way around. Loyalty is a response to God's grace, not a condition for it.

C. Penalty (26:14-45)

1. The Cause: Disobedience (26:14-15)

a) A second conditional clause ("if...") initiates a new section dealing with the penalties for disobedience.

b) While v. 3 used a three-fold expression for obedience, here we have a five-fold one:

(1) "If you do not obey me"

(2) "[If you do not] keep all these commandments"

(3) "If you reject my statutes"

(4) "[If you] abhor my regulations"

(5) "[If you] do not keep all my commandments"

(6) "[If you] break my covenant"

c) Note that the final phrase summarizes the principle of the rest—disobedience is a rejection of the covenant, and thus a rejection of Yahweh as the sovereign of the treaty.

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d) In other words, a rejection of divine revelation is really a rejection of God himself (cf. Num 11:20; Hos 4:6).

### 2. The Consequence: Discipline (26:16-38)

The curses represent divine retribution. However, as is made clear in vv. 18, 21, 23, and 27, they are aimed at bringing about repentance and restoration. In this way, the curses also represent divine discipline.

“Throughout the Bible divine discipline is referred to: God punishes his people not merely because they deserve it, but because he loves them and wants to correct their foolish ways (Deut 8:5; Jer 30:11; 31:18; Pss 38:1; 94:12; Prov 3:11-12; Heb 12:5-11)” (Wenham, 330-1).

The curses can be divided in two five categories of increasing severity. The use of “seven times” probably signifies the comprehensiveness of the curses, and each subsequent set of curses is an increased response to Israel’s increased obstinance:

#### a) Debilitation and defeat (26:16-17)

Disease and fever will weaken the people, increasing their risk of countering invasion. God’s promise of power will reverse (cf. 26:6-8), and he will no longer be for his people, but against them.

#### b) Drought (26:18-20)

The land will lose its productivity through the scorching sun and hardened ground, reversing the productivity promised in vv. 4-5.

#### c) Devastation by wild beasts (26:21-22)

Wild beasts will ravage the land resulting in the loss of life, particularly the lives of their children. This reverses the blessings of vv. 6 and 9. He will bring the same kind of judgment on his own people as he brought on Egypt in the 10<sup>th</sup> plague. Several specific accounts of this curse are reflected in passages like 2 Kings 2:23-25; Ezek 5:17, and Amos 5:19.

#### d) Deprivation by siege (26:23-26)

The land will be susceptible to invasion by foreign armies. They will besiege cities, resulting in famine and rationing. There will be no escape for the people.

#### e) Deportation (26:27-38)

The final and ultimate curse for their disobedience will be their removal from the land. This underscores the close connection between blessing and the land. Continuing to reject God and his covenant will mean complete cessation of blessing. They will resort to cannibalism, and their cities will be destroyed and left desolate. They will be dispersed to foreign lands.

The result of exile is that the land would finally enjoy its Sabbath rests which it had not received during Israel’s prolonged rebellion (cf. 2 Chron 36:20-21).

While Israel experienced terror, paranoia, and depletion through prolonged exile, the land would lay fallow.

3. The Contingency: Repentance (26:39-45)
  - a) Divine judgment has as its goal repentance. God intends through all of the cycles of curses, to correct his people so that blessing may be restored.
  - b) Reactivation of blessing results when they confess their sin, walk in humility, and humble their uncircumcised hearts (26:40-41).
  - c) Even in exile, God clearly reminds them that their deportation does not signify his complete rejection. He will remember the Abrahamic Covenant, indicating that temporal judgment does not nullify his eternal promises (cf. Rom 11:29; 2 Tim 2:12-13).

D. Postscript (26:46)

This final verse summarizes and closes the covenant law. It also provides the historical and geographical context for the giving the law.

III. Leviticus 26 and the Christian

- A. The application of chapter 26 to NT believers is complicated and must be approached with a proper understanding of its covenantal context.
- B. Blessings
  1. The blessings presented in vv. 3-13 are tangible and are clearly tied to the land of Canaan. When Israel experienced them, they were real and tangible blessings enjoyed—productive harvests, security, power, increased population, etc.
  2. In one sense, these blessings reflect an historical context—Israel in the land in obedience to the Mosaic Covenant.
  3. In another sense, they also anticipate the blessings that will come when Christ returns and ushers in his Messianic Kingdom. The OT texts which address this kingdom often refer to the same type of blessings described in Lev 26—fertile land, physical blessing, and peace between man and the animal world (cf. Isa 11).
  4. The OT and NT speak of other blessings promised to believers—spiritual blessings like forgiveness of sins, fellowship with God, life in the Spirit, eternal life, victory over spiritual forces, etc. These are elements of blessing which the OT anticipated and described in relation to the New Covenant (Jer 31) and which the NT describes as possessions of believers even now.
  5. Ross explains, “The New Testament is filled with other promises to believers that are physical and temporal as well as spiritual and eternal. The LORD promises his people an abundant life, a life full of the blessings of the LORD. He promises to provide for his people, because he is able to supply all their needs. He loves to give good gifts to his people; in fact, he gives abundantly more than they think or ask. He desires to meet those needs and more. As Paul said in Romans, ‘He who did not spare his own

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Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, freely give us all things?” (Ross, 474).

6. At the same time, we also must recognize that we live in a time between promise and fulfillment. We know that God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ (Eph 1:3), yet daily we can experience difficulties, persecution, sickness and death.
7. Ross addresses this aptly as well: “Even though God can and does bless with material blessings today, he does not always do so. In fact, he can give spiritual blessings without physical ones, even though ultimately he will grant them all. The physical blessings related to the spiritual are not thereby nullified; they may be delayed until the kingdom of righteousness, when they will be enjoyed to the full. The top priority is for people to live faithfully in this world and trust the LORD to take care of their needs. Even so, the point remains that God blesses people who are faithful” (Ross, 474).
8. Thus, while our expectations of blessing may need to be nuanced as we study Leviticus 26, the principle of receiving and enjoying the blessings of God are still predicated on the same premise: faithfulness and loyalty to the God who redeemed us.

### C. Curses

1. Israel experienced the curses in a real and tangible way—the same way in which they enjoyed the blessings of the covenant.
2. The NT emphasizes that the curses still apply to Israel. Their rejection of Jesus resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and ultimately scattered them among the nations.
3. The judgments described in Revelation have close correlations and find their origin in the curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. While Israel remains hardened, they continue to live under the curses of the covenant, until the time of their repentance and restoration.
4. But we must recognize that these curses were meted out against a nation which exhibited unbelief. While there were believers in Israel, they were but a remnant. The nation as a whole was comprised of unbelievers. True believers do not abhor God or his Word.
5. The principle of discipline, however, rings out throughout the NT. God disciplines those he loves (Heb 12:5-11).
6. “The ultimate punishment for Israel in the Old Testament—exile—actually purged the nation of unbelievers. The closest threat that we have in the New Testament for disobedience and unfaithfulness is found in Rev. 2-3, where the LORD warns that he would remove the candlestick—their witness as the people of God. This could have been done by persecution or exile, but it has a different purpose and scope than the exile threatened in the Old Testament, which purged rebels from the nation and brought the nation to its knees. Something like persecution of Christians could be

parallel, but [we] must be very careful here because oftentimes persecution comes on the people of God when they are faithful and righteous” (Ross, 483).

D. Loyalty

1. The ultimate call for God’s people, whether Israel in the OT or the church in the NT, is unswerving love for and loyalty to God.
2. While blessing and cursing may manifest itself in various ways throughout redemptive history, the basic principle remains that faith and obedience results in God’s blessing, while disobedience results in discipline.
3. However, just as the goal of discipline for Israel was repentance and restoration, the same is true for NT believers. God wants us to be holy. At times he may bring hardship upon his people for the sake of growth and repentance. When that happens, we must see God’s hand and respond as he has designed—with faith and repentance.