

'Blessings and Curses' Deuteronomy 28:1-20

St Nicolas 10.00am Sunday 19 August 2018

A husband was reading an article to his wife about how many words women use a day compared to men ... apparently 30,000 compared to a man's 15,000. In reply to her husband, the wife suggested, "The reason has to be because we have to repeat everything to men." At which point the husband turned to his wife and asked, "What?"

That silly bit of nonsense came to mind as I was reflecting on our first Bible reading this morning – Deuteronomy 28:1-20. It's the next in our series of sermons based on the book of Deuteronomy and is on p204 for any of you who wish to follow more closely what I am about to say.

The reading contains many blessings and curses. However, because we chose to cut the reading at v20 rather than read the entire chapter, it may not be apparent to you just how many curses there are: roughly four times as many curses in this chapter as there are blessings. Why is this? We're not told. But I quite warm to theologian Joyce Baldwin's theory...

"This is probably due to the fact that, human nature being what it is, the threat of a severe judgment on the covenant breaker seems to act as a stronger stimulus to correct behaviour than any promise of blessing."

Could that be right? Could it be that we respond much better to sticks than we do carrots? I'll let you decide! For myself, I tend to think we need both. I wouldn't particularly want to eat a stick. But there again, I wouldn't want to toast a marshmallow on the end of a carrot! So we need both, I think, but perhaps sticks, in the end, do tend to be more persuasive.

So to remind you, the people of Israel are on the plains of Moab preparing to enter the Promised Land. They – or at least their ancestors – were here or hereabouts some forty years prior. But because of their sin, their entry into the Promised Land was delayed in order that the Lord could help them learn a thing or two. But at last here they are again, ready to enter the land.

It is in that context that Moses issues these blessings and curses. This is a kind of covenant, in fact, although not one to replace the covenant the people received when they were at Mount Sinai, but rather an additional one to run alongside that original covenant. Through this covenant Moses warns the people, in effect, that their future wellbeing and prosperity is not guaranteed. Yes, the LORD has given them the land. Yes, the LORD will go with them and fight for them. But their future wellbeing and prosperity depends on their response to the covenant now issued at Moab.

Be faithful, and all will be well, he says. Indeed, perhaps the overriding promise of blessing is to be found there in v1 when Moses promises, "the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth", a promise that is echoed in v10, "Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you."

However, be disobedient, he says, and curses covering pretty much every area of life - physical discomfort and sickness, plague, drought, economic collapse, defeat by enemies, growing isolation, family breakdown, exile to a foreign nation, and many more besides - will overtake you.

The curses in vv16-19 are really a mirror image of the blessings that are stated in vv3-6, while v20 kind of summarises what is at stake here: "The LORD will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him."

When I lived in north Kent I was privileged to work with young offenders. I would chair *Youth Offender Panels*, and one of the things we had to do was agree with the young person before us a programme of action to try and help them not to get into trouble again.

Well it will be no surprise to any of you to learn that time and time again one of the things we discovered was that the young people who had got into trouble had not really thought about the *consequences* of their offending behaviour. They had just done something and not really thought about what impact it could have on others. And so one of the things we frequently did was to require them to attend a short course called something like 'Offending Behaviour and Consequential Thinking'.

Moses says to these people, your response to this covenant has consequences. Respond faithfully and all will go well. Respond with disobedience, and it will not be good.

Well look, I have no intention of going through this chapter verse by verse commenting on every blessing and curse. For a start, I am not convinced that a detailed analysis of the curses would send you out from here with a skip in your step, full of the joy of the LORD.

But neither, I suggest, would it be the best way of responding to what we read here, because in the end if we become too focused on the detail, analysing each blessing and curse as if they were some previously undiscovered and wonderfully fascinating species of rare butterfly, we'll miss the point of them.

They are not, I suggest, intended to be poured over and dissected. Rather, they work together to present a cumulative message, to paint a vivid picture if you like, to underline the point that as these people enter the land, the choices they make will have consequences for the extent to which the LORD will bless – or curse - them, both as individuals and as a nation.

When it comes to us, I suggest our situation is not so different from that which confronted the people here, and certainly not as different as people often imagine. Yes, it is true that, as New Testament people, we tend to operate with far fewer obvious lists of dos and don'ts and blessings and curses than did the people of God in the Old Testament.

And yet we are not so different from the people standing before Moses insofar as it remains the case for us too that the choices we make will have consequences for the extent to which we will know the Lord's blessing, both as individuals and as a church.

With that in mind, it may therefore be helpful to ask ourselves three questions ... at least. Maybe more, but at least these three.

1. To what extent does it truly matter to us that we know the LORD's blessing on our lives, both as individuals and as a church?

When he was preaching a couple of weeks ago, Chris made the very important point that our culture lives the pretence that we are the lords of life, but in truth God is the Lord of life.

Of course, one would not expect those who are not Christians to live as if God is the Lord of life because, in many ways, a definition of someone who is not a Christian could well be 'a person who lives as is they are the lord of life'.

However, it must be admitted that sometimes it is not simply those who are not Christians who live like this; sometimes we Christians are in danger of living like this too.

Many years ago, I stumbled across these words of Eddie Gibbs...

"Many of us Christians have become extremely skilful in arranging our lives so as to admit the truth of Christianity without being embarrassed by its implications. We arrange things so that we can get on well enough without divine aid, while at the same time ostensibly seeking it. We boast in the Lord but watch carefully that we never get caught depending on him."

So let me ask again: to what extent does it truly matter to us that we know the LORD's blessing on our lives, both as individuals and as a church? Does it matter? Or are we, if truth be told, somewhat self-sufficient and actually quite content being in charge of our own life?

It seems to me that if we are truly to know the life that God intends for us, fullness of life as Jesus described it, then it is vitally important to desire the Lord's blessing on our lives, both as individuals and as a church.

2. To the extent that it truly matters to us that we know the LORD's blessing on our lives, to what extent are we living faithfully rather than disobediently?

Read the book of Deuteronomy and you gain a fair idea what it meant for the people of God at that time to live faithfully rather than disobediently. However, wise is the person who doesn't take the Old Testament and apply it lock, stock and barrel, without sensible interpretation, to their life today.

What I am saying, then, is that we can't simply take all the instructions given to the people of God by Moses as they stood on the plains of Moab and expect them to be relevant to us. Not all of them will be even if some, applied wisely, still will be.

Better in the main to take our lead from the New Testament, even if sometimes, in reading the New, we will be pointed back to the Old.

So my question is really the question, 'To what extent are seeking to live our lives according to biblical teaching ... teaching that concerns every area of life – areas such as prayer, church, money, time, ethics, our work ... to name but a few?'

And we must not of course overlook the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to know what it is to live faithfully rather than disobediently.

Here is Ezekiel 36:26-27, a pretty well-known couple of verses: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

We need, therefore, to heed those inner convictions that may be the Lord prompting us to head in a particular direction; that may be the Lord helping us to know what it means to live faithfully rather than disobediently.

Second question, then: to what extent are we living faithfully rather than disobediently?

And then, third and finally...

3. To the extent that we are living faithfully rather than disobediently, what kinds of blessings might we expect?

Read Deuteronomy 28 – our Bible reading this morning – and, as we have already seen, you get a fairly good idea what blessings the people could expect to receive in response to their faithfulness.

Living, as we do, in the era of the New Covenant, the Lord's blessings, I suggest, are a lot more nuanced. In other words, we can't guarantee that if someone is living faithfully, the crops of their land, or their basket and kneading trough, will be blessed. It doesn't quite work like that.

So those who propagate what is sometimes called *the Prosperity Gospel* – the idea that if you are faithful to God, particularly in the area of financial giving, you will be blessed with greater wealth – are wrong.

Nevertheless, it does remain the case that faithfulness to God leads to blessing. This is not an exhaustive list – I am sure about that – but I am thinking here of the blessings of answered prayer, peace of mind, guidance for daily decision making, any one of a number of spiritual gifts, and even reward in heaven.