

Christmas 2015

Introduction

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word “*curse*” like this: “A solemn utterance intended to invoke a supernatural power to inflict harm or punishment on someone.” Webster’s Dictionary says that a *curse* is “a prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come upon [some]one.” So in other words, if someone were to pronounce a curse on me, the success of that curse will depend on whether there is a higher, supernatural power who agrees to inflict the harm, and the injury, and the punishment that’s been wished upon me. The Bible says:

- ✓ Proverbs 26:2 — Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, a curse that is causeless does not alight.

This all assumes one human being cursing another. But what happens when God Himself is the one who curses? We read in Genesis chapter four, in the account of Cain and Abel:

- ✓ Genesis 4:10–12 — And the LORD said [to Cain], “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. And now *you are cursed* from the ground... When you work the ground, *it shall no longer* yield to you its strength. *You shall be* a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

When God curses, it’s not a prayer or a wish, but a truly terrifying announcement of doom – of punishment, and ultimately of death and everlasting destruction. In all the whole world, there is *nothing* more horrible, and fearful, and dreadful than the curse of God. In the beginning, though, there was no curse – just blessing.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word “*bless*” like this: “To... invoke divine favor upon; [to] ask God to look favorably on.” Webster’s Dictionary says that to bless is to “invoke divine care.” Just like with any human curse, the success of man’s blessing depends on the willingness of God to pour out whatever good it is that’s been wished upon me. But what happens when God Himself is the one who blesses? We read in Genesis chapter one:

- ✓ Genesis 1:27–29 — So God created man in his own image... male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “*Be fruitful and multiply* and fill the earth and subdue it...” And God said, “Behold, *I have given you* every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. *You shall have them* for food.”

When God blesses, it’s not a prayer or a wish, but the wonderful announcement of His favor – of happiness, and peace, and well-being. The single Old Testament word that sums up all the fruits of God’s blessing is the Hebrew word “shalom.” Or today, we might sum everything up with these three simple words: “*All is well.*”

The Curse Prevails

In the beginning, all there was, was blessing – *God's* blessing. Think of that. That's not how it is now. Now one of us in this room has to look past our own lives, or our own experience to know this. The Apostle Paul reflects on Adam's act of disobedience to God's command when he says:

- ✓ Romans 5:12 — Sin came into the world through one man, and ***death*** through sin, and so ***death spread to all men*** because all sinned.

Death is always the end result of curse. The terror and dread of God's curse is death. And so we try our best to ignore it; to trivialize it, to sanitize it, and to convince ourselves there's nothing in death to be afraid of.

What we see in the first few chapters of the Bible is the apparent triumph of the curse. Adam and Eve are expelled from God's presence. Cain is cursed after murdering his brother. Lamech boasts of his violence. The earth is destroyed by a flood in the days of Noah. And then we have the tower of Babel where men try to unite in rebellion against God. All this evidence adds up, seeming to say that there can be no more blessing – no more of the Lord's gracious favor that brings to us *shalom* – true peace, and joy, and happiness, and wellbeing. All is *not* well. Far from it.

But then in Genesis twelve the Lord called a man named Abram and said to him:

The Blessing Promised

- ✓ Genesis 12:2–3 (cf. 22:17-18) — I will make of you a great nation, and ***I will bless you...*** I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and ***in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.***

It was a big promise. When Abram asked how he was to know that this blessing would come to him, and through him to all the world, (15:5-8) the Lord did something *astounding*:

- ✓ Genesis 15:9–10, 17-18 — He said to [Abram], “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old...” And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other... When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land.”

What just happened? The Lord formalized His promises to Abram in a covenant; and in this covenant, God placed Himself under a *curse* should fail to fulfill His promise of *blessing*. God did this when He passed between the pieces of the slaughtered animals *alone*. What greater assurance of His promise could God possibly give? His curse – the guarantee of our blessing. When Abraham's son, *Isaac*, grew up, the Lord said to him:

- ✓ Genesis 26:3–4 — I will be with you and will bless you... and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father... And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.

And then we read in Genesis 35 of Isaac’s son, *Jacob*:

- ✓ Genesis 35:9–12 — God appeared to Jacob... and blessed him. And God said to him, “...No longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name... I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply.”

If what we see in the first few chapters of the Bible is the apparent triumph of the curse, then what we see in the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is God’s gracious *promise* and *covenant* to bless Israel, and *through* Israel, all the nations of the earth.

The Blessing and the Curse

Well, the descendants of Abraham were fruitful, and they did multiply, just as God had said. The second book of the Bible (Exodus) tells how God went to deliver His people from Egypt so that He might bring them into the land He had promised. On the way from Egypt to Canaan, at Mount Sinai, God made another covenant with Israel. In this covenant, God gave Israel the gift of His holy *law*, summed up in the Ten Commandments. In this covenant, God said that He would fulfill all His promises of blessing *on the condition* that Israel obey Him – loving Him with all of their heart, and soul, and might. (cf. Deut. 6:5)

- ✓ Exodus 19:3, 5; 24:5-8 (cf. 19:7-8; 24:3) — The LORD called to [Moses] out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ... ***If*** you will indeed ***obey*** my voice and ***keep*** my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession” ... [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “***All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.***”

The people of Israel agreed to all the terms of the covenant. In other words, they signed on the dotted line. And so now all of God’s *promises* of blessing are *conditional* upon Israel’s faithfulness to obey God’s commands and keep His laws. All along this was how things *had* to be, because in His perfect goodness, a holy and righteous God can only *bless* a holy and righteous people. (cf. Rom. 5:12-14) And so in this second covenant that God made, not only was there the promise of covenant blessings for faithful obedience, but there was also the threat of covenant curses for failure to obey. It was very simple, really. It’s always been very simple. Before he died, Moses said to the people:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 11:26–32; 30:15-20 — “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God... Therefore choose life... loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him.”

It's so *very* simple. And yet at stake is nothing less than *life* and *death* – the shalom of God's blessings or the terrors of His curse. And so when the people crossed the Jordan River and took possession of the land God had promised, the first thing they were to do was observe a special ceremony on Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal – two mountains facing each other. Moses told the people:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 27:2, 8, 12-16, 26 (cf. 11:29; Josh. 8:30-35) — You shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster... And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly... these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to **ble**ss the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the **cur**se: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. And the Levites shall declare to all the men of Israel in a loud voice: “Cursed be the man who [worships an idol]...” And all the people shall answer and say, “Amen.” “Cursed be anyone who dishonors his father or his mother.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” ... “Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.”

Can you hear the people all responding in unison from the two mountains facing each other, “Amen! Amen! Amen! Amen!”? With each echoing, resounding, “Amen!” the people were witnesses against themselves, acknowledging the justice of all God's curses should they fail to keep all the words of God's law.

In the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we saw God's awesome *promise* to bless the people of Israel, and through them, to bless even all the nations of the earth – even placing Himself under a curse should *He* fail to fulfill *His* word. Now, at Mount Sinai, and then at Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal, God reveals to His people the requirements for His blessing. *They* must keep His covenant, and obey His law. *They* must be holy, as He is holy, and pure, as He is pure. (Lev. 11:45; 19:2; 20:26) Any failure to obey will bring down upon them not God's blessing, but His curse. It's always been, and it always will be, as *simple* as that. As a sign of His *continuing* desire and purpose to bless, God Himself gave to the priests in Israel these specific words to say to the people:

- ✓ Numbers 6:24–27 (cf. 23:7-8) — The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you *peace*.

Shalom. “All is well.”

The Curse Prevails

But it was the curse that the people of Israel inherited – not the blessing. (cf. Deut. 31:24-29) Seven hundred years later, the prophet Isaiah would write these words:

- ✓ Isaiah 24:4–6 (cf. Zech. 5:1-3) — The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers... The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a **cur**se devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt.

Two hundred years after Isaiah, and so nine hundred years after Moses, the prophet Daniel would pray from his home *in exile*:

- ✓ Daniel 9:8–11 (cf. 2 Chron. 34:24-25) — To us, O LORD, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers... All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. And the *curse* and oath that are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us.

It was simple. The wages of sin was death; and all had sinned. (cf. Rom. 6:23; 3:23) The prophet Isaiah lamented: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way.” (Isa. 53:6)

The Promise Remembered

But in the midst of this dismal picture, there was a remnant of people in Israel who understood from the beginning that they could never experience God’s blessing by keeping the law. This remnant understood even from the very beginning that no matter how hard they might try, they could only, ever merit the dread and terror of God’s curse. These were the people who would have said right along with Paul in the New Testament:

- ✓ Romans 4:15; 7:10, 13 (cf. 2 Cor. 3:7, 9) — The law brings wrath... The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me... Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

And so—bereft of all hope or confidence in themselves, and seeing that all they truly deserved were the terrors of God’s curse—therefore, this remnant of the people did *the only thing that was left to them to do*. They put their faith, and hope, and trust in the *promise* of God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Somehow, they believed, God would keep **His** promise and bless His people. Somehow, one day, *all* would be *well*. After all, this was the God who placed Himself under a curse, should He fail to keep word. And so the people waited – hoping, and wondering, and living each and every day simply *by faith* – *faith* in the *promise* of God. And while this remnant waited, the people as a whole were devoured by the curse. Famine, war, pestilence, exile – death.

The Bible says that we were all born under the curse of the law, (cf. Rom. 2:14-15) and that throughout our lives, the only thing any of us have ever lived to deserve or merit is God’s curse. There should be nothing in all the world more horrible, and dreadful, and fearful to us than this. Paul writes:

- ✓ Galatians 3:10 (cf. 5:1-6) — *All* who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by *all* things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”

And James says:

- ✓ James 2:10 [NASB] — Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.

And so had *we* lived in the days of Moses, or Isaiah, or Daniel, there would have been only *one hope left to us* – the *promise* God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Would we have been among those who lived each and every day of our lives simply by faith – knowing full well what we deserved, but waiting, hoping, longing for the promise of God? The prophet Isaiah encouraged all those who waited with these wonderful words:

- ✓ Isaiah 9:1–3, 6 — There will be no gloom for her who was in anguish... The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Shalom. “All is well.” And so it happened:

The Blessing Triumphant

- ✓ Galatians 4:4–5 — When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth *his Son*, born of woman, born *under the law*, to redeem those who were under the law.

Jesus, the one and only son of God, born into a Jewish family, born under the same obligation as all of us to keep the whole law, born under the same threat of covenant curses should He fail. And yet He didn't fail.

- ✓ 1 Peter 2:22 — He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

As the *Son of God*, His perfect obedience is of infinite value. And so in the life He grew up to live, He merited the blessing for all who had ever believed the promise of God. *He* merited the blessing for all who had done *nothing more* than *believe* the *promise* of *God* – living each and every day of their lives simply by faith. (cf. Gen. 15:6) But the *curse* of the law could not just be set aside. The curse had also been fully merited by those who had believed the promise. And so now we're ready to read *these* words:

- ✓ Galatians 3:13–14 (cf. Deut. 21:22–23) — Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come [even] to the Gentiles.

Remember the night that God passed between the pieces of the animals *alone*? Remember the night that God placed Himself under a curse, should He fail to keep His promise of blessing? Well, 2000 years later, on a hill outside the walls of Jerusalem, He became our curse to keep His promise. Only in this light can we understand and rejoice in these verses:

- ✓ Luke 2:1–11, 13-14 — In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord... And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace* among those with whom he is *pleased!*”

Shalom. “All is well.”

Conclusion

Not only did Jesus merit the blessing for all those who had ever believed God’s promise, He also satisfied the demands of God’s law by suffering their curse. And not only theirs, but also the curse of all in the future who would ever put all their hope, and all their trust, and all their faith in Him. Paul says in Galatians: “The [law] imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” (Gal. 3:22)

Will you believe that God has kept His promise? Will you live each and every day of your life *simply by faith* in the one who became our curse, so that we might be able to shout with all our hearts for all the rest of eternity, “*ALL is WELL!*” Listen to John describe what the angel showed him in Revelation twenty-two:

- ✓ Revelation 22:1–5 (NASB) — Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever.