

BLESSINGS OR CURSES?

There is a story about a mountain climber who wanted to climb a high mountain. He began his adventure after many years of preparation. Since he wanted the glory just for himself, he decided to climb the mountain alone. The night felt heavy in the heights of the mountains, and the man could not see anything -- all was black, zero visibility and the moon and the stars were covered by clouds.

He was almost at the top when he slipped and fell into the air falling at great speed. The climber could only see black spots as he went down and the terrible sensation of being sucked by gravity. He kept falling...and in those moments of great fear, it came to his mind all the good and the bad episodes of his life. He was thinking about how close death was getting, when all of a sudden, he felt the rope tied to his waist pull him very hard. His body was hanging in the air...only the rope was holding him.

In the moment of stillness, he had no other choice but to scream, "Help Me God!" All of a sudden, a deep voice coming from the sky answered, "What do you want me to do?" "Save me, God!" yelled the climber. "Do you really think I can save you?" asked God. "Of course I believe you can!" "Then cut the rope tied to your waist." There was a moment of silence, the man decided to hold on to the rope with all his strength.

The rescue team tells, that the next day, a climber was found dead and frozen, his body hanging from a rope. His hands were holding tight to it...but he was only 10 feet away from the ground. Every day we have to choose whether to take God at His word or not. Will we believe Him or trust the circumstances that we see around us.

God has poured out His blessings upon us as His children. However, often we choose to get in the way of those blessings by our own decisions and actions. Every day we choose to receive or reject. We choose either blessings or curses. This was the case with Israel:

Deut. 11:26 See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse-- 27 the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; 28 the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known. 29 When the LORD your God has brought you into the land you are entering to possess, you are to proclaim on Mount Gerizim the blessings, and on Mount Ebal the curses.

There are many times in the Old Testament when God asked Israel to take a moment and remember what He had done for them. There are times in our lives when it is wise to do the same thing. Back in the days before GPS when navigating a ship it was important to regularly take measurements in order to make course corrections. New years is a time when many people do the same thing. They stop for a moment, look back at where they have come from and make course corrections for the coming year.

The book of Deuteronomy was a time like this. The Lord had lead Israel out of captivity in Egypt and brought them to the promised land. Because they were not ready He had made them wander in the wilderness for 40 years. The time of wandering was over and now they were about to enter into the promise land. God spoke through Moses to the nation of Israel to review with them everything that had happened and everything they had been told. He was giving them a choice. They could choose to obey or disobey, to be blessed or to be cursed. To demonstrate this point in a very clear way He instructed the people to take part in a ceremony of decision.

The people would stand between the 2 mountains (Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal) and hear the choices and then make a decision – to be blessed if they obeyed or cursed if they disobeyed.

Latter in chapter 27-30 God would lay out more specifically exactly what the Levites were to say. After each blessing and curse was recited by the Levites the people would respond by saying “Amen”. This was not just a formality, it was a solemn and formal assertion that they would do it.

When Israel entered the promised land they faced their first 2 cities – Jerico and Ai. These 2 cities showed very clearly the difference between blessings and curses. Against the large and fortified city of Jericho they obeyed the Lord and they had a great victory. Against the small and undefended city of Ai through Achan’s sin they disobeyed and were defeated.

Now, with these 2 battles behind them the Israelites reached Shechem and carried out what Moses commanded them to do (Joshua 8:30-35).

1. Blessings from Gerizim (vs. 27)

Deut 28:1 If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. 2 All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: 3 You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. 4 The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock--the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. 5 Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. 6 You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out. 7 The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. 8 The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you.

Obedience to the Lord means blessing. We receive an abundance and produce more than expected. Here in Deuteronomy 28 the Lord gives some examples of how obedience leads to productivity.

You will be productive in your family and relationships
You will be productive in your work and finances
You will be productive in your witness and ministry

Obedience leads to blessings. When Israel went against Jericho they faced a mighty enemy in a fortified city with a huge protective wall. They won the battle not because of their military might but because they were obedient to God. Even though they did what seemed like foolishness, because they followed orders God gave them the city.

You may be thinking that this sounds a lot like what is referred to as the “health and wealth” gospel. If I follow God and I am a good person then I am guaranteed to be rich and successful. That isn’t true at all.

Obedience to God does not mean that He is always going to shower you with everything you want or that you will never have any more problems. That is not how God’s blessings work. When you choose to obey God and follow Him it means that He can then use you for His purpose to build His kingdom. Sometimes this blessing is obvious and the fruit is apparent. Sometimes we will only understand it when we get to heaven. Whatever the case, faithfulness is always rewarded.

Years ago the book *The Prayer of Jabez* came out to mixed reviews. Some loved it and others hated it because it seemed to guarantee God's blessings.

1 Chr 4:10 Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request.

The one thing I liked about the book is that I believe that we do often miss out on God's best for us simply because we don't ask for it and are out of His will. One example or area of choice that the Bible clearly speaks about is the area of tithing. The bible says that we should not put God to the test but it does say that we can test Him when it comes to tithing:

Mala 3:10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. 11 I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty.

This passage is very clear. If you tithe God will bless you. If you don't, He won't.

I know that we live in very difficult economic times. At times like this we cannot afford to miss God's financial blessing in our lives. People say "I can't afford to tithe." You cannot afford NOT to tithe. The word tithe means a tenth. You give one tenth of your income to the church you attend.

If you are not tithing it is between you and God. The tithing police are not going to show up at your door to arrest you. You are only hurting yourself. I have heard of people who stop tithing if something happens in the church that they disagree with. That does not hurt the church, it just hurts you. It is like being in a fight and punching yourself and expecting the other person else to bleed. You don't tithe because you agree with everything that happens in a local church. Tithe because God has told you too.

Not indicating who you are because you do care if you get a tax receipt is another foolish thing to do. The Government of Canada has said that it wants to honor and reward people who give. It is one of the only times that the Government is actually on OUR side because it recognizes the good work that the church accomplished in society. It is willing to return to you some of the money that you give to the church so that you can give EVEN MORE back to the church. To not take advantage of that is just bad stewardship. It is like the man who was given the talent and buried it. He was told that at the very least he should have put it in the bank to collect interest. USE THE ENVELOPES and submit the tax return! The government already takes too much of our money, let's get some of it back for ministry.

Likewise there are other choices we can make that will open the floodgates to God moving in our lives. Often a single choice we make or fail to make can become a point where we grow or plateau in our Christian faith. Disobedience can stop our growth at a certain point. A single step of obedience can release us from this and get us growing again. As we chose to step out in faith in obedience God opens new doors and possibilities to us.

One step forward in obedience is worth years of study about it. -- Chambers in Our Daily Bread

A wealthy businessman, who was well known for being ruthless and unethical, told Mark Twain that before he died, he wanted to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He said that when he got there he wanted to climb to the top of Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments.

When he got to the top of the mountain he wanted to read aloud the Ten Commandments. "I have a better idea," replied Twain, in his typical wit, "Why not just stay in Boston and keep them."

Let me ask you as we head into the new year and a new start, is there some area of your life where you feel you have been disobedient to God and as a result have lost out on His blessings to you? If so let me encourage you again from Mount Gerizim that God will reward those who follow Him in obedience.

2. Curses from Ebal (vs. 28)

If you want to read the scariest chapter in the Bible, read Deut 28:15-68. It is scary stuff.

Deut 28:15 However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:
16 You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. 17 Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. 18 The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. 19 You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out. 20 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.

Israel was defeated at Ai not because they had greater military might. Israel had just faced a far greater enemy and had defeated it. Israel failed because of Achan's disobedience. They went into battle without God's power and protection. They sought to fight in their own strength. We all need God's power and protection in our lives.

If obedience to God results in blessings, then disobedience to the Lord results in a curse. This was true with Adam and Eve and is true to this very day. When Adam and Eve sinned all of humanity and creation itself was cursed. Bad choices lead to bad consequences.

One of the questions I hear non-Christians ask is why, if God exists, is there still pain and suffering in the world. Whenever there is a natural disaster people ask "How could a loving God allow such a thing to happen." The truth is that these disasters are not caused by God but by us. God made the world and it was good until we sinned and creation itself fell with us (Romans 8).

What's wrong with the world today? I am -- GK Chesterton

Have you ever heard a parent asking a child if they want a spanking or not. I am sure that the child would say no – they would never CHOOSE a spanking. Unfortunately we often choose the curses. We often choose by our actions to reject God's blessing.

If you break the law and go to jail, you cannot blame God for your plight. It is your own fault. I have worked with many people who have made bad decisions and are still paying for their mistakes. God loves them but they still have to face the consequences of their actions. Did you make some bad decisions last year? Is there an area of your life where you are not walking according to God's will? If so let me warn you again from Mount Ebal. This year choose blessings and not curses.

If your going to walk in known disobedience and try to resist the devil you are wasting your energy.

When Norman Vincent Peale was a boy, he found a big, black cigar, slipped into an alley, and lit up. It didn't taste good, but it made him feel very grown up...until he saw his father coming. Quickly he put the cigar behind his back and tried to be casual. Desperate to divert his father's attention, Norman pointed to a billboard advertising the circus. "Can I go, Dad? Please, let's go when it comes to town." His father's reply taught Norman a lesson he never forgot. "Son, he answered quietly but firmly, "never make a petition while at the same time trying to hide a smoldering disobedience."

Remember the movie Finding Nemo? Nemo's father loved him very much. He watched over Nemo and protected him. But one day Nemo disobeyed his father and swam beyond the reef. He was suddenly scooped up by a diver and taken away on a boat. Nemo's disobedience caused him to be separated from his father and imprisoned. Eventually Nemo remembers his father's love and is able to escape. Unfortunately this is not always the case.

3. Standing in Shechem

Between Mount Gerizim and Ebal was the town of Shechem. This was a very important place historically. When Abraham was first called by God he left Haran and when he arrived in Shechem the Lord appeared to him and told him that his descendants would be given that land. He built an altar there to the Lord.

After Jacob had wrestled with the Lord and met Esau he traveled to Shechem and bought a piece of land there and dug a well (Jacob's well - Jesus met the Samaritan woman there). Joseph was later buried here. It was there that Joshua, just before he died, reminded the people of the decision that was before them.

Joshua 24:15 But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." 16 Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! 17 It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. 18 And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."

Today we too are standing in Shechem. From one side we hear of God's blessings. From the other we hear His curses. The decision that the people faced that day was not a difficult one. It was simply choosing between right and wrong, good and evil, blessing or curse. It was not a trick question and nothing was hidden.

Deut. 30:11 Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. 12 It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 14 No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. 15 See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. 16 For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

Today our undiscovered country is the future. As we walk into this new land – a new year with all of its possibilities lets remember that we are standing between two choices. We can choose between blessings and curses.

As we move into the new year there will be new challenges and new opportunities which we will face. There will be many Jericos along the way. Today we are standing in Shechem. Lets hear again the blessings from Gerizim and the curses from Ebal and lets choose to follow Jesus whatever the cost as we enter into this new year.

One's philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes. . . . In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility. -- Eleanor Roosevelt

If you saw the movie The Kings Speech you know the story of King Edward VIII, who became king after his father's death in 1936. Only months into his reign he caused a constitutional crisis in England when he proposed marriage to Mrs. Wallace Simpson, an American woman who had divorced her first husband and was seeking a divorce from her second husband. Amid a nationwide public debate, the Prime Minister cautioned the king not to marry, so as to keep his throne. He had to make a choice. The king agonized for several days over the impending crisis in Parliament and his deeply personal dilemma. On December 10, 1936, with his three brothers beside him, the King signed with firm hand the instrument of abdication.

The eleven months of his reign ended. His younger brother King George VI succeeded him to face many difficult days during the second world war. He was king until his death in 1952 when his daughter Elizabeth II became queen.

God has a plan for our lives, He has called us to serve Him. It is our job to be faithful to the calling that we have received. As believers we can choose to serve or we can, like King Edward, abdicate the throne. We can choose to walk away from the blessings that God wants to give us.