

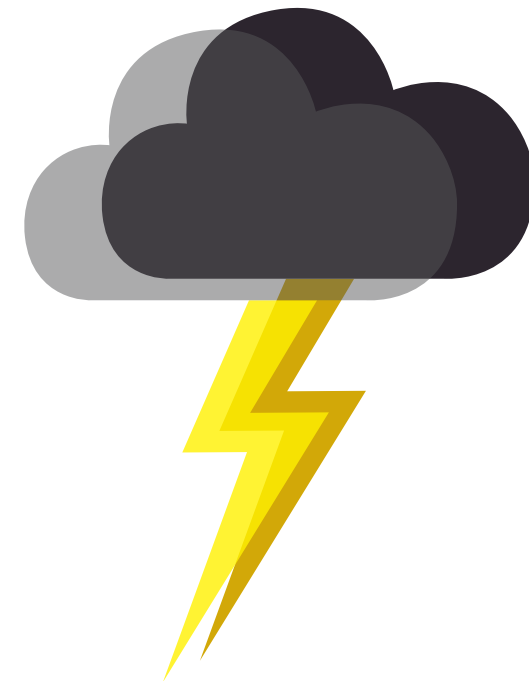
blessings



‘And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.’

Deuteronomy 28:2

curses



Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’

blessings + curses

Scripture is full of references to blessings and curses. From the very first book in the Bible, we repeatedly witness humanity being blessed or cursed depending on their faithfulness to God. The pattern we see emerging is that God's response to His people always relates to His covenant promises with them. Understanding, therefore, how blessings and curses operate in the context of covenant theology is crucial. It remains as important today as it was 4000 years ago, and gives us one of the richest veins through which to mine the gospel, illuminating it in all its brilliance.

God makes several promises with His people throughout history. Most of these are part of the same overarching promise, called God's covenant of grace. The covenant of grace is the central theme and narrative to the entire Bible. It is God's promise of a rescue plan for humanity and our groaning world. It is inaugurated in Genesis 3:15 with the promise that the 'seed' of the woman (Jesus) would crush the serpent's head.

God renews His covenant of grace on several occasions with key representatives in history, including Abraham, Moses, David and finally Jesus. We could understand this as a series of updates to the same core agreement. Although the final update with Jesus is often referred to as the 'new covenant', it should be understood in context as the closing agreement in God's one overarching covenant of grace.

It's important to note that the basic structure of each agreement remains the same. Each contains a set of conditions to uphold. If the conditions are kept, blessings are received; if the conditions are broken, curses are received. So, it's fairly straightforward: if we do what we agree to do, we get blessed; if we break our promise, we get cursed. In that sense, blessings and curses are always necessary components of God's promises. It's helpful to observe that the conditions, the blessings and the curses remain essentially the same throughout the entire covenant of grace. The condition is always faith; the blessing is always to be with God in paradise; and finally, the curse is always separation from God's favour.

If we looked at each covenant update more closely, we would notice how the detail of the agreement expands and develops with each update. So for example, the paradise where God promises to dwell with His people moves from Canaan, to Jerusalem, to our hearts (the Holy Spirit dwelling within us), and finally, to a new heaven and a new earth in the age to come. The curse of separation from God's favour would initially have meant exile from the promised land but, in the final

covenant update with Jesus, the curse is hell—a complete separation from His grace.

Setting aside the development of the details over time, the critical thing to see is that the entire Bible rings out with this same overarching narrative: God promises to dwell with a faithful people in paradise. Look at the consistency of the promise over the following cross-section of Scripture:

'And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.' (Gen. 17:8)

'My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' (Ezek. 37:27)

'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' (Jer. 31:33)

'I will make my dwelling among them, and I will walk among them and be their God, and they shall be my people.' (2 Cor. 6:16)

'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.' (Rev. 21:3)

So how does this covenant of grace continue to make sense to us today? When the Israelites were attempting to live out their covenant promise with God, we witness them, again and again, failing to remain faithful. As a result, they are cursed and suffer exile from the land. Between moments of repentance and subsequent faithfulness, they also receive great blessings from God. They appear to stumble through history in a washing machine of blessings and curses, raising the obvious question: what prevents this cycle of blessings and curses from occurring indefinitely throughout their history, and ours?

The answer is found in Christ.

'And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.' (Luke 22:19-20)

The problem of our ongoing infidelity to God would, in the end, be resolved by God Himself! The new covenant, the final chapter in the one overarching covenant

of grace, is made with Christ, with God Himself. It ends our cycle of infidelity, and humanity is effectively taken out of the washing machine and hung up to dry.

To understand how this works in practice, we need to know something specific about the covenant of grace. Despite the various updates in history, the agreement is only officially sealed once. This takes place in the first instalment of the agreement, in a ceremony enacted in Genesis 15 between Abraham (then Abram) and God. After God and Abram enter into this first instalment of the covenant agreement, Abram lines up a corridor of severed animal pieces.

Today, if we make an agreement, we might shake hands on it, or sign a piece of paper, for example. This action represents us binding the agreement personally—putting ourselves ‘on the line’ so to speak. At that particular period in Israel’s history, when two people entered a covenant agreement together, the person of lower rank had to walk between a corridor of dead animal carcasses. This is how they put themselves ‘on the line’. Walking between the animal pieces symbolised the curse of the covenant. The person walking through was officially accepting the penalty clause if they broke the agreement. In other words, if the person of lower rank broke his side of the promise, his body would be subject to death—subject to the same fate as the dead animals around them. The shocking surprise in this ceremony is that despite being of lower rank, Abram never actually goes through the corridor of animal pieces. Instead, God goes through. Twice.

... a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.... (Gen. 15:17-18)

The significance of God going through the animal pieces twice should not be lost on us. It means that not only will God take the curse of the covenant if He breaks His side of the bargain; He’ll also take the curse if we break our side of the bargain. In other words, what God is saying to us today, through this one covenant of grace, is this: I will be your God, and you will be My people; and, if you cannot uphold your side of the bargain—if you cannot be a faithful people—My body will be broken for you, and My blood will be shed, just like these animals. Thus ends the cycle of humanity’s perpetual unfaithfulness.

Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that His body was broken for us. Two thousand years later, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, died on our behalf to honour this agreement and free us from the curse of the covenant. He not only fulfilled the conditions of the covenant by living a perfectly faithful life, He also took the curse of the covenant by dying for our inability to live perfectly faithful lives. He died so that we might be legally free to receive the blessings of the covenant: to be a people with God in paradise.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’ (Gal. 3:13)

This is incredibly good news for us! It means that when we enter by faith into the final instalment of this same covenant of grace, officially sealed all the way back in Genesis 15, we receive the blessing of being ‘a people with God in paradise’. Moreover, the very way in which God is ‘with us’ today—living by His Spirit in our hearts—provides us the help required to break our cycle of infidelity, as declared in Jeremiah 31:31–34 and foretold by Moses:

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. (Deut. 30:6)

This is the unexpected blessing that Jesus leaves with us: the Holy Spirit—the presence of God—who by His sanctifying work in our lives, circumcises our hearts and ends our cycle of infidelity. The Spirit also brings unity in the church, which gives us the earthly realm of God’s blessing today. In that sense, ex-communication from the church (as Paul commands in 1 Cor. 5:13: ‘Purge the evil person from among you’) is the equivalent of being cursed—exile from God.

We should note, however, that cursing remains a confusing issue for many today. In the Bible, there is evidence of men cursing men, and we see the influence of other spiritual forces negatively affecting people’s lives. There is also the reality of the consequences of sin lingering through generations. We know this from David’s story (2 Sam. 12:10-14), which reveals how David’s life—and his children’s lives—are devastatingly impacted after his episode of sin with Bathsheba. We also know this truth by experience—abusive adults are often first abused themselves as children. Sin often has severe repercussions in our lives, and there is constant spiritual warfare going on all around us (2 Cor. 10:4).

None of this, however, should be understood in the context of the ultimate curse of separation from God. Furthermore, when we are in Christ, the Holy Spirit—who is at work in our lives—is more powerful than any other spiritual influence we may encounter. Despite all the brokenness we may face, the critical curse has been lifted, and nothing can separate us from the love of God:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38-39)

In conclusion, a covenant-shaped view of blessings and curses should help us see a new abundance of blessing in our lives today. Since blessing is always defined

in the covenant as the presence of God, we should recognise blessing every time God is present. By definition then, we are blessed every time we walk in the Spirit; we are blessed every time we pray; we are blessed every time God reveals Himself to us in Scripture; we are blessed every time God reveals Himself to us in nature. Through the body of the church, God especially blesses us that we might be a blessing to others. So then, we are blessed every time our brothers and sisters in Christ encourage us, teach us, admonish us, pray for us, heal us, prophesy over us... in short, blessings are everywhere.

For those who receive Jesus by faith, the curse is removed. Blessings abound!

Thanks be to God.

