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Blessings and Curses of the Mosaic Covenant



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Blessings and Curses of the Mosaic Covenant

The Blessings and Curses of the Mosaic Covenant

Two other aspects of the Mosaic covenant (that I wasn't able to address last week) are the blessings and curses attached to the covenant. Every covenant carries with it the promise of great blessings, but also the threat of a curse or self-inflicted penalty for infidelity. The punishment involves not only the loss of supernatural blessings, but even the loss of natural and temporal blessings, which are signs of the greater spiritual loss. For example, the penalties of original sin show the consequences of infidelity to the primordial covenant. These penalties are the loss of sanctifying grace and friendship with God, and also the loss of the blessed temporal condition of life in Eden.

The Mosaic covenant also offers a very dramatic promise of blessings and threat of a curse. Deuteronomy 28 gives the lengthiest account of them, beginning with the blessings of fidelity:

“And if you obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command you this day, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your beasts, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. “The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways. The Lord will command the blessing upon you in your barns, and in all that you undertake; and he will bless you in the land which the Lord your God gives you. The Lord will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and walk in his ways. And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord; and they shall be afraid of you. And the Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your ground, within the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. The Lord will open to you his good treasury the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the Lord will make you the head, and not the tail; and you shall tend upward only, and not downward; if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside

from any of the words which I command you this day, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.

The blessings are mostly temporal, but at the center of the picture is the supernatural blessing of adoption as God's people and the resulting holiness of their social life.

Infidelity to the Old Covenant was punished with *temporal punishments* that were *material and sensible*, involving the loss of the Promised Land. This would also entail the spiritual penalty of the loss of God's special indwelling with His people in the Temple. Warning of these temporal punishments is found in the terrifying passage of Deuteronomy 28:15–65:

But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. . . . They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land; and they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land, which the Lord your God has given you. And you shall eat the offspring of your own body, the flesh of your sons and daughters, whom the Lord your God has given you, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you. . . . Whereas you were as the stars of heaven for multitude, you shall be left few in number; because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God . . . and you shall be plucked off the land which you are entering to take possession of it. And *the Lord will scatter you among all peoples*, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no ease, and there shall be no rest for the sole of your foot; but the Lord will give you there a trembling heart, and failing eyes, and a languishing soul.

These temporal punishments were no idle threats, for history tells us that they were realized on two terrible occasions: the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity in Babylon in 597 BC; and the second destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD, followed by the second Diaspora and exile from the Promised Land, lasting nearly two millennia. Josephus, a first-century Roman Jewish historian, in his account of the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD, narrates the notorious action of a mother who killed her own child to eat his flesh.¹

¹ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, in *Josephus, Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1978), 6.3.4–5, pp. 578–79.

Why the Second Exile?

The second exile, almost thirty times longer than the first, poses an acute problem: the prophets of the Old Testament do not seem to mention it. The first exile to Babylon was prophesied by Jeremiah, and its cause is well known and documented by the prophets.

It is Jesus who foretells the second exile, giving an extraordinary series of prophecies about it. With regard to the destruction of the Temple, He says in Matthew 24:2: “Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.” With regard to the divine presence dwelling with the people, He says in Matthew 23:37–39:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”²

On Palm Sunday, Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying:

Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation.³

The reason for the second destruction of the Temple and the resulting exile is made clear: failure to recognize the divine “visitation” in the person of Jesus the Messiah.

A few days later, in Luke 21:20–24, Jesus prophesied:

“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it; for these are days of vengeance, to fulfil all that is written. Alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! For great distress shall be upon the earth and wrath upon this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

2 See Journet, “The Mysterious Destinies of Israel,” in *The Bridge: A Yearbook of Judaean-Christian Studies*, ed. J. Oesterreicher, 2:37: “It is this love, God’s fidelity, that in the end will lift from Israel the heavy weight of its resistance. There will be a day, the third epoch, when it will understand and accept the mystery of the Cross and sing hosanna, hoshi’ahna, ‘save us we pray!’; when the whole people will once again, and forever, welcome Jesus with the blessing from the ancient liturgy of thanksgiving: Blessed in the name of Yahweh be He who comes. There will be a day when the Israel of the flesh will again be one with the Israel of the spirit—the great ingathering of which the Apostle says that it will be like ‘life from the dead’ (Rom 11:15).”

3 Lk 19:41–44.

In this prophecy, Jesus indicates not only the destruction of Temple and the city, but also a long period—the time of the Gentiles—in which Jerusalem will be under Gentile political domination.⁴ However, He also indicates that there will be an end of that period. The fact that Israel is a sovereign nation today is perhaps an indication that that “times of the Gentiles” have been fulfilled. What that means exactly, will only be able to be fully understood in hindsight.

If there is a sin that is connected with the second exile, what is it? From the Christian perspective it ought to be clear. It is not the sin of bringing about the crucifixion of Jesus, for that was the sin of a small number of leaders in the company of Caiaphas. It would be rather the sin of much of the people to fail to recognize and embrace the Gospel, insofar as it sufficiently promulgated to them.⁵ However, it cannot be known if any given unbeliever is subjectively culpable for disbelieving the Gospel, for subjective culpability requires that the motives of credibility have been properly presented, and that the person is not open to a sincere investigation of them. Let no one be rash in judging another in this regard.

Israel Is Not Accursed

It is very important that the curse of Deuteronomy 28 be understood correctly. It does not mean that the people itself as such is accursed. The promises given by God are “without repentance.” The Second Vatican Council, in the Declaration *Nostra aetate* 4, states:

God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues—such is the witness of the Apostle (see Rom 11:28–29). In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and “serve him with one accord” (Zeph 3:9).⁶ . . . True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (see Jn 19:6); still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be

4 Many theologians have seen this passage as a *vaticinio ex eventu* (prophecy made after the event). That, however, is absurd, for the prophecy has a much longer reach than the events of 70 AD, in that the “trampling of the Gentiles” has extended for nineteen centuries.

5 See Fr. Elias Friedman, *Jewish Identity* (New York: the Miriam Press, 1987), 108: “Post-Christic Jewry is not responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus: it is guilty of not believing in him. . . . Diaspora Jewry did not reject Jesus; it rejected Christianity.” See also p. 106: They became culpable, not directly of his death, but of the sin of incredulity. Those who did believe made a personal option; the others did not, in obedience to their religious superiors. Since to follow the lead given by one’s chief is a duty of subordinates, we may see their behavior as a mitigating circumstance. . . . As for the majority, they were collectively culpable of incredulity, but who would hasten to throw the first stone? Who would impute culpability to them?”

6 See Is 66:23; Ps 65:4; Rom 11:11–32.

presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.

All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ. Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now, *Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love*, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the *cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows*.⁷

We have seen that St. Paul in Romans 11:28–31 teaches that the covenant with Israel is “irrevocable”:

As regards the gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy.

St. Paul thus firmly defends the continuing nature of God's plan for His Chosen People. The election continues because “God's gifts and call are *irrevocable*.” God is faithful, and will show His fidelity by removing the blindness of Israel with regard to the Messiah in the time that He has reserved in His eternal plan. St. Paul tells us that time will be after “the full number of the Gentiles” has come into the Church. What is meant by the “full number of the Gentiles”? The Gospel must be preached, we know, to all nations and cultures,⁸ so that all may receive mercy and the Church may be truly *catholic*, which means universal. Then it will be time for mercy to be shown superabundantly to all Israel, so that “all Israel will be saved.”⁹

Other texts from the Old Testament speak about the irrevocable nature of God's election of and covenant with Israel, as we shall see below.

Promise of Restoration

Deuteronomy 30 goes on to prophesy that Israel will not remain faithful, and after the blessings, the curses will fall

⁷ Vatican II, *Nostra aetate* 4 (my italics).

⁸ See Mt 24:14: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come.”

⁹ For a fuller interpretation of Romans 11, see Boguslawski, *Thomas Aquinas on the Jews*, 87–130. For the theme of the conversion of the Jews in the last times, see CCC 674, and Lawrence Feingold, *The Mystery of Israel and the Church*, vol. 1, *Figure and Fulfillment*, pp. 188ff.

upon them. However, Moses also promises that repentance will bring a restoration of the blessings.

“And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you this day, with all your heart and with all your soul; then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes, and have compassion upon you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will fetch you; and the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, that you may possess it; and he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. 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. And the Lord your God will put all these curses upon your foes and enemies who persecuted you. And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord, and keep all his commandments which I command you this day. The your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your ground; for the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”¹⁰

Thus the last word with regard to the blessings and curses is one of messianic hope. The prophets sound the same message. They predict exile and destruction, but then finally return and conversion. Hosea makes this prophecy in various ways. In Hosea 1:10–11, after giving the terrible prophecy that Israel (referring to the ten northern tribes) will cease to be the Lord's people and will go into exile, God says:

Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” it shall be said to them, “Sons of the living God.” And the people of Judah and the people of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head.

¹⁰ On the promise of restoration in Deuteronomy 30, see Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 78–83 and 92: “This future reversal constitutes the heart of the prophetic hope for postexilic Israel (Ezek 20:5–44; 36:1–37:28). Israel must be cursed in order to become the blessing to all the nations—the blessing that God had sworn to make of the “seed” of Abraham. The Deuteronomic covenant prepares Israel and humanity for a greater covenant that will ultimately depend on something more than any human party can offer. For that reason, it will be an altogether different kind of covenant, that is, it will be a grant-type covenant. Instead of being conditioned by human sin and characterized by divine curses, this covenant will bring about the reversal of both.”

In Hosea 3:4, God says:

For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.

Hosea 2:15–23 also gives a magnificent glimpse of hope for the final redemption of Israel:

And I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord. . . . And I will have pity on Not pitied, and I will say to Not my people, ‘You are my people’; and he shall say ‘Thou art my God.’

Another magnificent prophecy of restoration is given in Ezekiel 36:24–27:

For I will take you from among the Gentiles, and will gather you together out of all the countries, and will bring you into your own land. And I will pour upon you clean water, and you shall be cleansed from all your filthiness, and I will cleanse you from all your idols. And I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you, and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in the midst of you, and I will cause you to walk in my commandments, and to keep my judgments, and do them.¹¹

None of these texts give any indication that Israel will be completely repudiated. Quite the contrary: after a long exile, mercy will return and God’s promises will attain their purpose.

The Prophecy of the New Moses

Messianic hope also finds its place in the Mosaic covenant, although it is not as prominent as in the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12:4. Closely related to the blessings and curses and the promise of final restoration, is Moses’s prophecy of a new prophet like himself. In Deuteronomy 18:17–18, God says through Moses: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.” Jesus is referring to this warning when He speaks of Israel missing the time of its visitation in Luke 19:44.

¹¹ See also Jeremiah 23:5–8.