

Sermon Deuteronomy 28 Blessings and Curses Bruce Stanley

Part Four “Consequential Love”

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III – Jigsaw puzzle – (Zoom out from close up) When you put together a jigsaw puzzle, if you only focus on the individual pieces, you can forget the big picture. On their own, the small pieces don't make sense.

Deuteronomy reminds us of the big picture – that we are more than individual pieces. We are a community. The big picture of Deuteronomy (28) is simply:

* **God's people, in God's place, under God's rule.** (It's actually the theme of the whole Bible!)

In Deuteronomy 28, God is talking to his people. The **nation** of Israel. A **community**. He's not talking to individual people, but a community.

If we can go back to the idea of the jigsaw puzzle – every piece fits together. When all the pieces are together, locked into the right place, we have a complete picture, the right picture, a good picture. It represents what it's supposed to represent. When the community of God are together under God's commands, under God's rule, they are the perfect picture of what God intended. Every individual is designed to have a place in the big picture. As a nation following God, Israel are promised blessing.

And that's where we need to start as we look at *ourselves* today. Do we see our individual selves as part of the **community** of God? Do we see our own faith as part of a bigger picture? Or do we look at ourselves and our spiritual growth just as individuals? Because we are more than individuals. Together, we are the **church** of God, the **nation** of God.

So when we come together, we have a great big problem if we continue to act only as individuals. We are blessed only as the community of God. If we're talking about being blessed as Christians, this is where we must begin – **together**. We are blessed in community. And without this community, we are cursed.

If you look at the way God talks about blessings, he always speaks about blessing the nation **together**, as God's people, in God's land, under God's rule. But when we start looking at the curses, we see a picture of a community falling apart. Plagued with diseases and driven out of the land, crops destroyed, afflicted with boils and tumours, and robbed of everything they possess. Then driven to slavery. Becoming slaves that no one will even want to buy. A nation reduced to sick, dying individuals.

The curses are an image of the jigsaw being pulled apart. The loss of the nation, the loss of the land, the loss of God's leadership. The loss of community. Look at verse 63:

63 Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess.

In other words, just as it pleased the Lord to **build** this community, if you turn away from him, he will be pleased to **tear apart** this community.

* **Blessing comes from being a part of the community of God.**

* **Curses come when that community is taken apart.**

For us today, it's hard to understand that way of thinking about blessings and curses. It's hard to understand that God's definition of blessing is tied to the existence of community. Because the world likes to reduce the idea of blessing to *material* things. It's about being wealthy, being healthy, having a great family, being satisfied, being secure.

III – This week we received a copy of the Target toy catalogue – 64 pages of toys! This catalogue’s longer than some books I’ve read! And society will tell us and our children that if we can have the freedom to buy what we want out of these catalogues, we must be blessed! Fortunate. We tell children that they’re very blessed when they receive lots of nice presents for their birthday or at Christmas. We even talk about blessing others less fortunate by giving them toys at Christmas time. But is that blessing?

What’s wrong with calling that a blessing? It reduces blessing and prosperity to material wealth. And that’s a problem. Is someone blessed by having “things”? Do we bless someone by giving them “things”? Does God bless us by giving us material wealth? Because if you look at what he gave the Israelites – he gave them wealth **as a nation**. He gave them health and prosperity **as a nation**. **The blessing was always in the context of the community**. Imagine a child with every toy in this catalogue, but no-one to play with, no community. is that child blessed or cursed?

*** God blesses us in community**

So when we take an individualistic approach to blessings and curses, when we try to understand them *outside* the community context, I believe it becomes a big problem for us as the people of God.

Let me give you two different individual examples to show the problems that arise with an individualistic approach:

III – First example: A friend of mine was diagnosed with cancer. It was treatable. But his Christian friends told him that the cancer was God’s curse or judgement upon him. And he wouldn’t be healed until he confessed this sin in his life. Why did he have cancer? Was God punishing him? Did he do something wrong? Was this a curse? **Do we call every sickness a curse and every healthy day a blessing?**

III – Second example: 10 years ago I got the news that a Christian guy I went to school with had become a doctor, he had found a girlfriend, who was also a doctor. They were both embarking on amazing careers in medical research. They got married and on the way from their reception to their honeymoon, a drunk driver came down the M4 motorway the wrong way, crashed into them and killed them both. The drunk driver survived. Why does God let that happen? Surely that’s not fair. One drunk driver kills an innocent couple. Why didn’t the drunk driver die? Was my friend and his wife being cursed? Was the drunk driver being blessed?

It just doesn’t make consistent sense when we take the puzzle apart and look at the individual pieces on their own. The blessings and curses that the Bible speaks about, speak in the context of **community**. God always relates blessing and curse to community. There is a very specific example in Acts when a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, are killed on the spot by God because of their lies to the church. Some would say this is an example of God cursing individuals. But even this act was done for the sake of teaching the community.

Let’s keep focussing on this community line. As a Christian, if you’re wealthy, that’s not a blessing to **you**. It’s a blessing to the community you live in. The community of your Christian family or your Christian church fellowship. If you’re healthy, that’s a blessing to your community. If you’ve got ministry skills in leading or teaching – that’s a blessing to the community! What good are the gifts of wealth or health or teaching to you on your own? Nothing! Because God made us to be in community. As his people, God blesses us in community – in the community of a Christian marriage, a Bible study group, a church gathering – these are all opportunities to enjoy the blessings of God in the context of community. And even outside God’s community, we take the blessings of God’s community to the world. The blessing comes FROM the community of God.

* The poorest, sickest person can be blessed because they are part of a community of God.

* And the richest, healthiest person can be cursed because they are not a part of God’s community.

Let's stop there for a moment, and just consider the differences between the two communities we have in the Bible: the Old Testament community, and the New Testament community. In many ways they are the same. Both called to serve God and follow his commands. But there IS a difference.

In the Old Testament community, "blessing" meant they were a big and powerful nation living in the Promised Land of Canaan. * **God's people in God's place under God's rule.** But because of sin, they never enjoyed that for long. It was a temporary arrangement. There was *never* true rest in the land. They were *never* completely God's people in God's place under God's rule. The blessings were *never* completely enjoyed, because the community were *never* completely obedient.

What the Old Testament shows us is the impossibility of enjoying the full blessings of God because of our sinfulness.

In the New Testament community, blessing still means that we are to be **God's people in God's place under God's rule.** But God's people are now Jews and Gentiles from **every** nation. God's rule is exercised through Jesus Christ. And the place of the Promised Land is not *here*. It's in heaven – an eternal place.

When we turn to the New Testament community and talk about blessings and curses, it doesn't take a genius to see that we still cannot remain obedient to God. And because of that, we will never *fully* enjoy the blessings of God's community, but we also don't face the full gravity of God's curses. At least not yet. We're waiting. For one final day of judgement. One day when God will judge the hearts of humanity and make one final judgement of blessing or curse – heaven or hell. And that state of blessing, or curse, will be final and eternal.

Until that final day, every day here on earth, we are able to enjoy some of the great blessings of God through the community that he's given us. And we even suffer to some extent the curses of living in a sinful world where drunk drivers kill people. We still, every day, have a taste of the blessings of God and a taste of the curses of sin. We can witness the powerful healing hand of God and the destructive force of a Tsunami. As Mark 13 talks about, these are **signs** of the end of the age. In reality, Hell will be **far worse** than the curses on this earth, and heaven will be **far superior** to the blessings we have experienced on this earth.

Will God bless you materially with wealth and health on this earth? Maybe. But if he does, it will not be for you as an individual. It will be for the blessing of the community of God. God may also choose to take a very faithful, healthy and wealthy Christian, and allow them to face their death on the freeway because of a drunk driver. Whatever He does will ultimately be for His glory and for the benefit of His community.

Deuteronomy teaches us that God blesses us by building community. So here's a simple test. When you feel blessed with health or wealth or gifts in ministry, ask yourself,

* **"How does this blessing benefit the community of God?"**

What we need to do us to take that blessing and be obedient to God – to use that blessing to serve God and bless the community. That way we make sure two things happen:

1. God is glorified.
2. God's community is strengthened.

Let's pray.