

Covenant Relationship

BELIEVERS FIND GOD'S BLESSINGS THROUGH OBEDIENCE.

We recently gave our teenage son his first cell phone. Not only is it a gift to him, but it's also a weighty responsibility that requires a measure of spiritual maturity. He was among the last in his friend group to receive one, and you can imagine why. The whole world, both wholesome and wicked, is now at his fingertips. In a real sense, the direction of his spiritual health depends on what he does with this gift.

Now, the cell phone came with built-in content monitoring, but we also outlined our expectations and stipulations as his parents. The built-in controls operate in the phone's background, blocking certain content and keeping him from accessing the depths of depravity displayed online. But, as his parents, our stipulations determine whether or not he can enjoy the benefits of owning a phone. He is free to enjoy conversing with his friends, but if the language isn't wholesome or the images being sent aren't appropriate—we are notified, and he loses his phone. He is free to browse the internet for entertainment and education, but if he attempts to access restricted websites—he loses his phone. As his parents, we have authority over these things because he is in our home, and we pay for the phone, which is a gift to be stewarded. Again, and essential to our point, there is an agreement between us that he will operate according to our stipulations to continue enjoying the gift of a cell phone.

Ancient covenant agreements functioned similarly, with expectations and stipulations within a relationship. A covenant relationship with God was a gift to His chosen people. It was a relationship that had accountability and consequences, both positive and negative. The biblical word *covenant* conveys the idea of a commitment with promises and obligations undertaken by the parties involved. In a covenant agreement, there were blessings for keeping the stipulations and curses for not keeping the stipulations of the relationship. When God established a covenant with His people, it was a “certain” reality. It's a reality of which Israel needed to be reminded. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses repeated God's Word of covenant given from Sinai to when the Israelites were on the verge of entering the promised land.

Deuteronomy 27:1–28:68

At this point in Deuteronomy, God’s law had already been outlined for the people of Israel. Deuteronomy 27–30 contains Moses’s third speech, where he gave God’s direction to His covenant people. In chapter 27, Moses instructed the Israelites to erect large stones when they crossed over into the promised land and write God’s law upon them that the people would remember the terms of their covenant with God. As long as the memorial stones stood, they would be a reminder to Israel of their life with God. While the monument was a marker of Israel’s history, it also provided direction for their future. The covenant reaffirmation reminded the Israelites of their identity as “the people of the LORD your God” (27:9) and called them to fresh commitment with the blessings of obedience and curses for disobedience laid out in Deuteronomy 28.

Perhaps no other section in the Torah articulates the importance of obedience and the implications of disobedience like Deuteronomy 28. Fifty-four verses are devoted to warning Israel of the curses of disobedience, and only fourteen verses speak of the blessings for obedience. The longer list of curses not only gives us an unfortunate glimpse of Israel’s future, but also provides the background for the blessings. The warnings are also a gift of grace. For God knows the propensity of His people to sin. The blessings and curses are implications of obedience or disobedience to the Mosaic covenant and its laws which outline what it meant to live as the people of God. Remember, Israel was called to live a holy lifestyle, exhibiting the character of God by living according to His law which reflects that character. In this sense, obedience is the proper response to God’s grace, while the blessings are the benefits of resting in His care and promise.

In the ancient Near East, covenants or treaties were typical in religious life. In ancient religions, covenants were brought before the deities, confirmed by oath in the names of those deities, and believed to be enforced by the deities. What is outlined in Deuteronomy between the God of Israel and the Israelites would have been familiar to ancient readers. However, unlike other religions, Israel’s God was a party in the covenant and not just an enforcer of the covenant. This difference speaks to the relational nature of God’s covenant with Israel. As we know, the God of the Bible is not a distant deity. God is sovereign over all things, a transcendent God. But He is also immanent and relational. That is, He is “our” God. Israel’s God sustained His people with His presence

and promise. He was with them. In many ways, God’s care for Israel prefigures Christ’s care for Christians (Rom. 8:15–17).

Regarding the curses of disobedience in the covenant relationship, we should remember as we read these passages in the Old Testament that Scripture also reveals to us that all people are subject to the curse of sin and the judgment that comes with it. We escape the curse and receive the blessings only through Christ’s taking the curse on Himself at the cross, as Paul wrote in Galatians 3:10–14. In this sense, the apostasy of Israel and the consequences of that rebellion anticipate the implications of rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news is that God offers salvation to all who will place their faith in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ provides power to the believer to obey God from the heart (Gal. 5).



Faithfulness (Deut. 28:1-6)

The relationship between God and Israel was a covenant relationship. Faithfulness to God’s commands would be rewarded. God would exalt the Israelites above all other nations. They and their children would be blessed. In addition, their land and crops would be prosperous.

VERSE 1

“Now if you faithfully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all his commands I am giving you today, the LORD your God will put you far above all the nations of the earth.”

The “if-then” structure of this passage outlines the conditions for Israel to live faithfully in covenant relationship with God—to **follow all his commands** as laid out in the Mosaic covenant. It’s important to note, however, that the blessings of God are not a reward for obedience. Rather, obedience is the worshipful response to who God is and what He has already done for Israel. The blessings of obedience come from resting in the provision and promises of God.

Remember, Israel had already been declared the people of God at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:3-6). God had already established their identity as His people. The call to obedience flowed out of this identity they had already been given. Thus, the blessings were not an identity they earned

as a reward but a reality to which they were called to enjoy through obedience. Keeping Deuteronomy 26:18-19 in mind is essential. It is foundational to understanding our passage, and comes two chapters earlier. “And today the LORD has affirmed that you are his own possession as he promised you, that you are to keep all his commands, that he will elevate you to praise, fame, and glory above all the nations he has made, and that you will be a holy people to the LORD your God as he promised.” Notice the declarative language of the verses—“you are” and “you will be.” Again, Israel’s identity and the blessings of the covenant relationship had been declared by God already. In other words, here they are being summoned to live according to who God has already declared them to be. Thus, flowing from their existing covenant relationship with God, the blessing of being elevated far above all other nations would be enjoyed when they lived according to God’s commands. In essence, Israel would be put far above other nations as they were set apart as God’s people when they exhibited their distinct lifestyle in covenant relationship with God. For the people to flourish, following God’s instructions seems intuitive. God created human beings and established how they were to live in relationship with Him to enjoy all the blessings of life. That God gave these specific instructions to Israel marked His special relationship with them as His people.

In living according to God’s law and proclaiming God’s glory Israel was to be a light unto the nations. In this sense, Israel’s mission was tied into their identity. The same is true for the Christian today. What God has declared of you in your salvation is not only something you grow into through sanctification but part of your mission in evangelization. Just as a parent reminds his teenager before the child leaves the house, “Remember, you represent this family,” so too does God call us to live according to His family’s values. We cannot separate who we are from how we live. In fact, how we live tells others who we are. This is why obedience was so important for Israel’s life, not only for them but also for the watching world around them.

VERSE 2

“All these blessings will come and overtake you, because you obey the LORD your God:”

Notice the aggressive language, the **“blessings will come and overtake you”** if the Israelites were obedient to God. Deliverance from slavery in Egypt was a gift of grace. Indeed, the giving of the law and the formation of the nation were gifts of grace. The promised land itself was a gift from

God's hand. It's no different when it comes to the blessings of covenant obedience. The promised blessings of obedience overtake them by the grace of God. Like a pleased father unexpectedly gifting a child with something they could not imagine, Israel would flourish and enjoy the fruit in the land from God's hand. But, this was not prosperity theology. Rather, God has promised to honor those who honor Him with proper actions and motives. All these blessings were tied to the Israelites living according to dictates of their covenant relationship with God.

VERSE 3

“You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.”

Notice that the blessings for obedience are tied to life in the promised land. First, the Israelites would be **blessed in the city and blessed in the country**. The *city* and the *country* (lit. “field”) represent everywhere the Israelites would live, the entirety of their existence in the promised land. Their lives would be blessed with security and abundance as long as they lived obediently in covenant with the Lord. This security is reflected in the Lord's later promise: “The LORD will cause the enemies who rise up against you to be defeated before you. They will march out against you from one direction but flee from you in seven directions” (v. 7).

VERSES 4-6

“Your offspring will be blessed, and your land's produce, and the offspring of your livestock, including the young of your herds and the newborn of your flocks. Your basket and kneading bowl will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.”

The Israelite society was both family and agrarian based, so God's blessings focus on the Israelites' **offspring** and their **land**. God's blessings extended to the Israelites' children and **livestock**. As the people dwelled in the land living according to God's law, their lives would be lived within the domain of God's desire to bless His people. The God who creates and sustains all life had given Israel His law so that they might live life to the fullest—that is, according to His design. Their **produce** would be abundant. The God who gives rain, grows crops, and fills baskets is attentive to those who depend on Him. “The LORD will grant you a blessing on your barns and on everything you do; he will bless you in the land the LORD your God is giving you. . . . The LORD will open for you his abundant storehouse, the sky, to give your land rain in its season and to bless all the

work of your hands” (vv. 8,12). Finally, as the people **come in** and **go out**, God would be with them. This figure of speech describes all of life’s activities lived in the presence of God. In the same way, Jesus has promised to always be with His people—even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

As we have seen, the relationship between God and Israel was a covenant relationship, personal in nature. Faithfulness to God’s commands reaped the blessings of life as God outlined in His law. The Israelites’ children would be blessed, and their land, crops, and livestock would be bountiful. Another of those blessings was that God would exalt the Israelites, His people, above all other nations: “The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he swore to you, if you obey the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples of the earth will see that you bear the LORD’s name, and they will stand in awe of you” (vv. 9-10). As we noted earlier, all these blessings were not a reward earned—but rather the enjoyment of life lived as God has designed.



Explore Further

Read the article “Covenants” on pages 355–360 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is a covenant? What is the relationship between covenants in Scripture and God’s overall plan of redemption? What are the six major covenants in the Bible? What are the differences between the five covenants found in

- the Old Testament and the new covenant of the New Testament?

Disobedience (Deut. 28:15-19)

Just as faithfulness to God’s commands was rewarded, failure to follow God’s commands would lead to consequences. If they disobeyed God, the Israelites would be cursed wherever they journeyed, along with their children. Their land and crops would not be fruitful.

VERSE 15

“But if you do not obey the LORD your God by carefully following all his commands and statutes I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overtake you:”

Just as faithfulness to God's commands would lead to blessings, failure to follow God's commands would lead to curses. Just as obedience to God's law would lead to all the blessings coming and overtaking the Israelites, so too disobedience to God's law would lead to all the **curses** overtaking the people. Verses 20-68 detail the consequences for disobedience in greater detail. One thing that is clear throughout these verses is that the consequences for disobedience come from the hand of God. "The LORD will send against you curses, confusion, and rebuke in everything you do until you are destroyed and quickly perish, because of the wickedness of your actions in abandoning me" (v. 20).

VERSES 16-19

"You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and kneading bowl will be cursed. Your offspring will be cursed, and your land's produce, the young of your herds, and the newborn of your flocks. You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out."

The curses detailed in verses 16-19 correspond to the blessings in verses 3-6. In contrast to the safety, security, and wholeness in the city and the country the Israelites would experience if they were obedient to God and His law, faithlessness would bring fear and uncertainty. The blessings of family would be lost, with both the Israelites and their **offspring** being curse.

The greatest crisis that could strike an agrarian-dependent society would occur as well. The abundance of the land's produce would be lost. As a result, food would be scarce and even lead to famine—**"your basket and kneading bowl will be cursed."** "The sky above you will be bronze, and the earth beneath you iron. The LORD will turn the rain of your land into falling dust; it will descend on you from the sky until you are destroyed" (vv. 23-24). The Israelites' land would not bear fruit: "You will sow much seed in the field but harvest little, because locusts will devour it. You will plant and cultivate vineyards but not drink the wine or gather the grapes, because worms will eat them. You will have olive trees throughout your territory but not moisten your skin with oil, because your olives will drop off. . . . Buzzing insects will take possession of all your trees and your land's produce" (vv. 38-40,42).

God's promises of victory over the Israelites' enemies (v. 7) would turn to curses of defeat. "The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will march out against them from one direction but flee from them in seven directions. You will be an object of horror to all

the kingdoms of the earth. Your corpses will be food for all the birds of the sky and the wild animals of the earth, with no one to scare them away” (vv. 25-26).

Now, we must guard ourselves against thinking that God is vindictive and punitive in these warnings. Every warning before final judgment is an act of mercy from God’s hand. As with any warning related to the committing of sins, the goal is repentance and restoration. If Israel were to become wayward and blind to their own sin, the downfall of their cities, the destruction of their crops, and the deterioration of their social life would function as a warning and wake-up call. After all, they had God’s word these things would happen.

The history of Israel details their continued failure to fulfill their covenant responsibilities in their relationship with God. The covenant renewal ceremony at the end of the book of Joshua is indicative of the continual struggle the Israelites faced—whom would they worship and serve. Joshua, nearing the end of his life, stated to the Israelites: “Therefore, fear the LORD and worship him in sincerity and truth. Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and worship the LORD. But if it doesn’t please you to worship the LORD, choose for yourselves today: Which will you worship—the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living? As for me and my family, we will worship the LORD” (Josh. 24:14-15). The peoples response seemed promising: “The people replied, ‘We will certainly not abandon the LORD to worship other gods! For the LORD our God brought us and our ancestors out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery, and performed these great signs before our eyes. He also protected us all along the way we went and among all the peoples whose lands we traveled through. The LORD drove out before us all the peoples, including the Amorites who lived in the land. We too will worship the LORD, because he is our God’” (vv. 16-18). However, ultimately their actions did not match their words.

As the book of Judges states, they failed to teach their children about the Lord and what He had done for them. “That whole generation was also gathered to their ancestors. After them another generation rose up who did not know the LORD or the works he had done for Israel. The Israelites did what was evil in the LORD’s sight. They worshiped the Baals and abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed other gods from the surrounding peoples and bowed down to them. They angered the LORD, for they abandoned him and worshiped Baal and the Ashtoreths” (Judg. 2:10-13). While there would be periods of hope and faithfulness, the cycle of sin and

abandoning the Lord their God so clearly detailed in Judges would continue throughout Israel's history. This faithlessness would culminate with the Northern Kingdom of Israel being conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC and the Southern Kingdom of Judah being conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Thus, the curses of Deuteronomy 18:15-68 would find their complete fulfillment as the people of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms were taken into exile.

It's noteworthy, however, that curses do not have the last word for the repentant people of God. This is where the gospel of Jesus Christ shines like a light through dark! In Galatians, the apostle Paul noted that Jesus became the "curse" for those who failed to abide by God's law (Gal. 3:10-14). It's interesting that Paul alluded to the Sinai covenant here, that both Jews and Gentiles are under the same judgment of God for failing to live according to God's good law. Indeed, all people are condemned by the law. The blessings of God come from throwing oneself onto the mercy of Christ in repentance and faith so as to receive salvation. While many of the blessings of salvation are experienced in part while we live in "God's kingdom" in this world (Matt. 5-7), they will not be fully realized until we reach the promised land of the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1-4).

The operative principle of the gospel is that God's blessings come by faith, by receiving the unmerited grace of God in Christ. This is a grace that overtakes us. Obedience, then, is both the believer's response and blessing—both from God's hand, all by the power of the Spirit. Obedience demonstrates the reality that one has found God's blessing in Christ and lives a blessed life in response to His grace. In this way, the New Testament echoes the Old Testament's relational view of both blessing and cursing. The blessings are primarily those of salvation—forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with God, receiving eternal life, growing in Christlikeness, and so forth. The material terms of the relationship so prominent in the Old Testament covenants (as seen in this passage regarding life in the land) are secondary in the new covenant, flowing from the relational experience of being God's people (through the work of Jesus Christ).

The realities of blessing and cursing find their eternal culmination in the biblical realities of heaven and hell. Those who have embraced God's salvation through Jesus Christ will dwell eternally with God in heaven (and eventually the new heaven and new earth) while those who refuse God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ in this life will be judged and condemned for their sins and cast out of God's presence forever into the place called hell. In Scripture, the words *punishment* and *destruction* stress the active side of hell, while the idea of *banishment* stresses

the horror of hell by highlighting what a person is excluded from—the blessed presence of God for all eternity. The curse of hell is a reminder that belief, obedience, and evangelism should weigh heavily on Christians’ hearts, not only for our own souls but also as the Spirit leads us to share the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ with those who are lost and enslaved to sin. Remember, God desires that all people would come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). The biblical concepts of blessing and curse—being inside and outside the covenant relationship with God—are just as relevant today as they were in the days of Moses.

How wonderful it is, then, that we have the opportunity to respond in faith and obedience in this life! Once more, the gospel teaches us that Christ bore the curse for us, so that we might receive salvation through our faith in Him—not by our obedience (Rom. 5:19; Gal. 3:13-14). Through Christ God established a *new covenant* and welcomes Christians into relationship with Him by grace. This new covenant is secured by Christ’s work and is both climactic and eternal. It is climactic in that all other covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic) in the Old Testament culminate in the New Testament covenant established by Christ. It is eternal in that the inheritance received by Christians in Christ is forever established by grace and cannot be lost. The ultimate eschatological reality awaits in the “new heaven and new earth.” Again, as Christians we experience some of the blessings of the new covenant in this life even as we anticipate experiencing the fullness of those blessings in the world to come.



Explore Further

One question we as Christians should ask ourselves daily is am I living according to God’s Word? Remember, how we live demonstrates who we are. As Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Again, obedience is not a means to earn favor with God or obtain blessing. Obedience is evidence that we are already in Christ. Obedience flows from a changed heart that has already obtained the promised blessings found in Christ and in Christ alone. Consider making it a priority to answer the question of how you are living in relation to God and His Word a daily practice along with prayer to God that He would guide and enable you through His Holy Spirit to consistently live your day-to-day life in faithfulness to Him.
