

# A Blessing and a Curse (Deuteronomy 11)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

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## I. Background / Review

- a. The **Book of Deuteronomy** consists of a few speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness.
- b. The second of those begins in **Deuteronomy 5**, with Moses recounting the Lord giving the 10 Commandments at Mount Sinai. Thus far, in **chapters 5-10**, Moses has issued a number of warnings, admonitions and reminders, including:
  - i. Don't forget God's commandments.
  - ii. Don't let future generations forget them, either. Each generation will be responsible to pass this on to their children.
  - iii. When they enter Canaan, make no treaties with the Canaanites. Do not intermarry with them and thereby pick up their wicked ways and become corrupted and worthless.
  - iv. God had tested the people through their time in the Wilderness. God tests people through affliction, suffering and difficult times. They should expect it, and not get discouraged or surprised when it happens. Stay faithful to the Lord, and persevere.
  - v. The people were fed by manna for 40 years to teach them that "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God".
    1. This highlights the importance of the Scriptures as our spiritual food to sustain us in this Wilderness of life. We should be meditating on it every day.
  - vi. When prosperity comes in the future, do not fall into the temptation to pridefully take all the credit for it, and thereby forget the Lord and turn away from Him.
  - vii. Don't become fearful and faithless when facing the giants in the land of Canaan; and when you defeat them, don't become arrogant.
    1. Have a sober estimate of yourselves, and of all the wickedness and rebellion against the Lord over the past 40 years in the Wilderness.

- viii. Circumcise your hard hearts. God is not just looking for outward observances of the flesh.
- ix. Be kind and considerate of the resident aliens among you; remember that you were aliens in Egypt.
- c. One of the benefits of reading and understanding Deuteronomy is that it prepares us for everything that follows (good and bad) in the Old Testament.
  - i. We will see the promises and warnings Moses gave here were heeded or ignored, with predictable consequences, throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Everything will happen exactly as Moses foretold.
- d. In **Deuteronomy 11** this speech by Moses to the Israelites continues.

## II. Reminder of What God Has Done in the Past, that They Have Seen

- a. Review **Deuteronomy 10:20-22**.
  - i. God has blessed and multiplied Israel, and done great things for the nation. *Therefore...* (continues in the next chapter)
- b. Read **Deuteronomy 11:1-7**.
  - i. He is addressing the adults who were under the age of 20 when the people left Egypt, who are still alive (and now would be in their sixties or older). They had seen the things Moses was referring to with their own eyes, "the chastening of the Lord".
  - ii. Here Moses reminds them of four things. For the most part, they have to do with destroying those who opposed the Lord.
    - 1. Signs and wonders the Lord did in Egypt, to Pharaoh and his land. This refers to the 10 Plagues. (**Exodus 7-13**)
    - 2. The destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea, after Israel had crossed safely. (**Exodus 14-15**)
      - a. Read **Exodus 14:22-31**.
      - b. Read from the song Moses taught them to remember the event, **Exodus 15:1-10**.
        - i. They sank to the bottom like a stone... they sank like lead.
    - 3. What the Lord did for Israel in the desert. (**Exodus 16+, Numbers**)

- a. Miracles of water from a rock, manna, quail, pillar of cloud and fire leading them, etc.
  - b. Victory over the Amalekites and later over Sihon and Og.
- 4. The earth swallowing up the households of rebellious Dathan and Abiram, who were descended from Reuben, at the time of Korah's rebellion. (**Numbers 16**)
  - a. Read **Numbers 16:1-3**.
  - b. Read **Numbers 16:20-38**.
    - i. This event must have been extremely traumatizing for all those watching what happened, especially for the children.
    - ii. The earth opened up, and the wicked were "swallowed alive to *Hades*".
      - 1. This comment suggests to me that Hades (the abode of the dead awaiting final judgment) is "in the heart of the earth", which would be consistent with what Jesus said in **Matthew 12:40**.

### III. **Keep the Commandments so They Will be Blessed in the Land They Will Inherit**

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 11:8-17**.
  - i. They had come from Egypt, a desert climate of flat land where it rarely rained. Therefore, the fields had to be irrigated with fresh water from the Nile River.
    - 1. In arid climates, water is everything. It is life, and makes the difference between abundant crops and starvation.
    - 2. In Egypt, the fields were watered "by foot, like a vegetable garden". Water transported by canals and through gravity furrows.
      - a. Some think this referred to foot-operated sluice gates.
      - b. Others think it referred to people using their feet to dig trenches for water, or to divert water in furrows.

- c. Others think “by foot” meant the people had to manually carry water to where things were growing.
- 3. In Canaan, God would be watering the fields and vineyards directly, through seasonal rains. That would be sufficient to take care of the needs of the field crops, olive trees, grass for grazing livestock, etc.
  - a. However, if the Israelites abandoned the Lord and started worshiping other “gods”, He would shut off the rains!
- b. Read **Deuteronomy 11:18-25**.
  - i. This is why it was so important for the Israelites to be immersed in knowing, treasuring and following the word of God. They needed to keep it in front of their eyes and minds, memorize it, pass it on to each succeeding generation. If they let go of the Lord, everything would quickly fall apart.
  - ii. On the other hand, if they held fast to the Lord, no other nation would be able to stand against them. The Lord Himself would protect them and fight their battles.
    - 1. The Lord would put the fear of them into all the other nations around them.
  - iii. They would inherit all the land from the Euphrates River (in Iraq) to the Western Sea (which we call the Mediterranean Sea).
    - 1. This reminds me of the chant of those supporting the Palestinian cause: “From the River to the Sea, Palestine shall be free”.
      - a. Except “the River” in that chant refers to the Jordan River, not to the Euphrates!
    - 2. **Question:** Does this promise from the Lord support Zionism (the modern idea that the Israelites are entitled to territory in what was before World War II referred to as ‘Palestine’)?
    - 3. This is not a trivial question. There is major fighting going on now between the State of Israel and the Palestinians.
      - a. Iran is not directly involved (at this time) but has been supporting groups who are on the side of the Palestinians.

- b. If Iran gets directly involved, Israel will likely strike Iran directly, potentially leading to a major regional war or even World War III, with Israel (possessing nuclear weapons) surrounded by hostile forces.
- c. There has been major political pressure in the U.S. to support Israel militarily in this conflict. A lot of this support comes from politically 'conservative' evangelical Christians who see Israel as entitled to this land (with supporters of modern Israel pointing to passages like this from the Old Testament).
- d. **Question:** Does this passage promise that Israel will always have the land described?
  - i. First of all, let us recognize that "from Euphrates to Western Sea" includes not only Israel/Palestine, but also includes major parts of the countries of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and even Iraq!
  - ii. Second, let us be aware that there was a certain **CONDITION** to the promise of this land!
    - 1. Re-read **Deuteronomy 11:22**.
    - 2. The promise of inheriting this land and conquering all the inhabitants was dependent on a condition: *IF* they would "carefully keep all the commands" of the Lord.
    - 3. After Joshua and the elders with him died, Israel quickly abandoned the Lord.
      - a. Read **Judges 2:1-15**.
  - iii. **Question:** Have the Jews kept all the commands of the Lord?
    - 1. **Answer:** Absolutely not. If any doubt about that, let us ask a very religious Jew, the apostle Paul.
    - 2. Read **Romans 10:1-3**.
    - 3. Read **Romans 10:20-21**.

- a. Paul says they are a *disobedient and obstinate people*, despite the fact that the Lord has “stretched out His hands” to them.
- 4. In **Romans 11** Paul says that only a small “remnant” of the Jews, those who followed Jesus, were reserved for God. Only a few would be saved.
  - a. Paul then illustrates this using the analogy of a cultivated olive tree (the kingdom of God). Here, “branches have been broken off” (the Israelites who have rejected Jesus and God), while other wild branches were grafted in (the Gentiles who believed).
- 5. “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.” (**Romans 2:28–29**, NKJV)

iv. **Bottom Line Regarding Modern Zionism:**

- 1. The promise of inheriting that land was *conditional*, based on Israel’s ongoing obedience to all the commands of God.
  - a. **Important Take-Away:** *Whenever* we find a promise of God, we also need to examine whether it is based on a *condition* that someone needs to meet!
- 2. Most of them rejected God and His commands repeatedly throughout their history. We see it in the Old Testament, in the life of Jesus, and in the New Testament letters of Paul.
  - a. As a result, God has rejected most of the Jews, those who do not

follow Jesus. However, the opportunity is still there for them to repent and be restored as God's people.

- b. Christians who follow the teachings of Jesus are now in the kingdom of God, and are God's special people, His holy nation. We who are following the commands of God and have the circumcision of the heart are the true Israel of God now.
- 3. The modern Jewish Zionist movement and the right-wing American Christians who support it remind me of the people of Israel who, after rejecting the Lord at Kadesh Barnea, attempt to take the land of Canaan by their own power. (**Numbers 14:39-45**)
  - a. Note: It did not go well for them!

#### IV. A Free Choice to Make

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 11:26-32**.
  - i. After all his warnings and admonitions, Moses sets a choice before the people. They can either:
    - 1. *Obey the Lord*, in which case they will receive the blessing promised; OR
    - 2. *Disobey the Lord*, in which case they will be cursed, as warned.
- b. This is one of many classic passages (another significant one is in **Deuteronomy 30**) that remind us that the Lord has given us *free choice* in this life: whether we want to follow Him or not.
  - i. We are made "in the image of God" (**Genesis 1:27**). The early Christians understood that an important component of this is that we have been *created as free moral agents*.
    - 1. We each have the ability to choose right or wrong, good or evil. That did not end with the Fall of Man in **Genesis 3**.

- a. Early Christians saw this free will as essential if we were to be truly made “in the image of God”. God Himself has free will (although He always chooses to do good, and never chooses evil).
- 2. We see in **Deuteronomy 11** that Moses certainly believed we still had free choice, the ability to choose to do what was good, to follow God.
- 3. All mankind *did not* become “totally depraved” after the Fall of Adam and Eve, in contradiction to what John Calvin has claimed.
- c. Early Christian writers commented on this idea that we have free will (in contrast to what some Greek philosophers and others taught).
  - i. From Irenaeus, bishop of the church in Lyons, in Gaul, writing c. 180 AD:
    - 1. “CHAP. XXXVII.—MEN ARE POSSESSED OF FREE WILL, AND ENDOWED WITH THE FACULTY OF MAKING A CHOICE. IT IS NOT TRUE, THEREFORE, THAT SOME ARE BY NATURE GOOD, AND OTHERS BAD.
    - 2. “This expression [of our Lord], ‘How often would I have gathered your children together, but you were not willing’, (**Matthew 23:37**) set forth the ancient law of human liberty, because God made man a free [agent] from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests (ad utendum sententia) of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God, but a good will [towards us] is present with Him continually. And therefore does He give good counsel to all.
    - 3. “And in man, as well as in angels, He has placed the power of choice (for angels are rational beings), so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves. On the other hand, they who have not obeyed shall, with justice, be not found in possession of the good, and shall receive condign punishment: for God did kindly bestow on them what was good; but they themselves did not diligently keep it, nor deem it something precious, but poured contempt upon His super-eminent goodness.



4. "Rejecting therefore the good, and as it were spuing it out, they shall all deservedly incur the just judgment of God, which also the Apostle Paul testifies in his **Epistle to the Romans**, where he says, 'But do you despise the riches of His goodness, and patience, and long-suffering, being ignorant that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But according to your hardness and impenitent heart, you treasure to yourself wrath against the day of wrath, and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God.' 'But glory and honour,' he says, 'to every one that doeth good.' (**Romans 1:4, 5 and 7**)
5. "God therefore has given that which is good, as the apostle tells us in this Epistle, and they who work it shall receive glory and honour, because they have done that which is good when they had it in their power not to do it; but those who do it not shall receive the just judgment of God, because they did not work good when they had it in their power so to do.
6. "But if some had been made by nature bad, and others good, these latter would not be deserving of praise for being good, for such were they created; nor would the former be reprehensible, for thus they were made [originally]. But since all men are of the same nature, able both to hold fast and to do what is good; and, on the other hand, having also the power to cast it from them and not to do it,—some do justly receive praise even among men who are under the control of good laws (and much more from God), and obtain deserved testimony of their choice of good in general, and of persevering therein; but the others are blamed, and receive a just condemnation, because of their rejection of what is fair and good.
7. "And therefore the prophets used to exhort men to what was good, to act justly and to work righteousness, as I have so largely demonstrated, because it is in our power so to do, and because by excessive negligence we might become forgetful, and thus stand in need of that good counsel which the good God has given us to know by means of the prophets."
  - a. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 37; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 518–519)
  - ii. From Tertullian, preacher in Carthage, North Africa, writing c. 207 AD:

1. "I find, then, that man was by God constituted free, master of his own will and power; indicating the presence of God's image and likeness in him by nothing so well as by this constitution of his nature. For it was not by his face, and by the lineaments of his body, though they were so varied in his human nature, that he expressed his likeness to the form of God; but he showed his stamp in that essence which he derived from God Himself (that is, the spiritual, which answered to the form of God), and in the freedom and power of his will.
2. "This his state was confirmed even by the very law which God then imposed upon him. For a law would not be imposed upon one who had it not in his power to render that obedience which is due to law; nor again, would the penalty of death be threatened against sin, if a contempt of the law were impossible to man in the liberty of his will. So in the Creator's subsequent laws also you will find, when He sets before man good and evil, life and death, that the entire course of discipline is arranged in precepts by God's calling men from sin, and threatening and exhorting them; and this on no other ground than that man is free, with a will either for obedience or resistance.
3. "...Therefore it was proper that (he who is) the image and likeness of God should be formed with a free will and a mastery of himself; so that this very thing—namely, freedom of will and self-command—might be reckoned as the image and likeness of God in him."
  - a. (Source: Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 2, chapters 7-8; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, pp.301–302)
- d. Jesus and the prophets and apostles also show this respect to us, giving us free choice between two alternatives.
  - i. Recall the challenge given by Jesus near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, offering a choice between two alternate gates through which to travel:
    1. "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." (**Matthew 7:13–14**, NKJV)

- ii. Consider the prophet Elijah at the showdown with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. While the people wanted to 'hedge their bets' and not choose sides, Elijah challenged them:
  - 1. "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is god, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." (**1 Kings 18:21**)
- e. There are practical implications for us.
  - i. Man is truly a free moral agent, made in the image of God. We have a choice whether to do good or evil. We are not "totally depraved".
  - ii. God is just, and not coercive. He sends men to warn us, but leaves the choice (and consequences) in our hands.
  - iii. How we see God impacts how we treat others.
    - 1. In parenting, avoid coercion. Help children understand early in life that they have choices to make and will face the consequences of those choices.
      - a. **Example:** A story of my two young grandsons, Noah and Elijah, regarding a discussion on child discipline.
    - 2. In how we preach to and disciple others (whether sharing the gospel with unbelievers or encouraging believers).
      - a. Don't try to control people or be coercive. This is not how God is and it should not be how we are!
      - b. Treat people with respect as free moral agents made in God's image.
      - c. It's okay to lay out alternatives, explain to them the consequences of their choices (good or bad), and call them to make a decision, just like the prophets did. However, must allow people the freedom to make their own choices and to accept (and learn from) the consequences, like God does.