

Curses and blessings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Blessings and curses? My usual relational language with God does not include curses.

by [Tim Conder](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

The people of Israel stand on the threshold of their inheritance, the land of promise. The long-awaited day of glory has come; it's time to remember their story, their failures and, most important, their deal with God.

We've all played out this scene with our families and friends. I've heard my sister-in-law say to her children before they embark on special opportunities or challenges: "Remember your baptism!" I'm sure she said the same thing to her two oldest boys before they deployed as marines to Iraq and Afghanistan. When we talk to our kids, my wife and I often contribute hints of threat, consequence and potential reward to the script. "This is a unique privilege—the kind that doesn't come around every day. . . . Don't expect every day to be like today. . . . Opportunities come to those who can handle responsibilities."

Like the family values our kids remember before a trip, this deal with Yahweh is a covenant of potential blessings—and curses! The preceding chapters (Deut. 27-28) are quite clear and specific about the nature of these blessings and curses. All that is left is Moses' final call to the Israelites to remember their past and to be faithful to the covenant.

When I get to this part of the story, however, I get nervous. There are so many elements in this text that offend my sensibilities. Blessings and curses? My usual relational language with God does not include curses. The blessings and curses here are very specific and material: the blessings of prosperity, progeny, victory over our enemies, long life—or the curses of death and destruction. A theology of blessing and cursing indicts my image of and hopes in God, and doesn't match my own experience.

In my world, the greedy and selfish seem to prosper at a much higher rate than the generous. Relationships begun with the best of intentions wither. In a world of unwanted pregnancies, faithful and capable would-be parents struggle with infertility and slow adoption processes. This world doesn't seem to mete out blessings and curses with any rhythm of justice or fairness.

But rebuttals to my observations fall flat in light of God's definition of blessing and prosperity. To add insult to injury, the paragraph preceding this week's text implies that the deal God makes "is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach." Are you kidding? Sometimes just answering the phone cheerfully is beyond my reach, much less faithfulness to God's moral code. I am further cursed by the fact that I've read this story many times. I know what comes next. The Israelites accept the mantle of God's promise and on divine orders purge the land of the Canaanites with the sword. Texts like this contradict my notion of a good and gracious God redemptively engaged with our world.

My problem is that I'm tempted to read these words too personally. The question, "What's in it for me?" always lurks in my mind. The indictment of God hangs on my personal circumstances. I ignore the perplexing reality that my personal circumstances are relative and too variable to evaluate except in those rare moments of great triumph or tragedy.

When I jettison my insistence on an overly personal or circumstantial reading of this text, there are other interpretative possibilities. Yahweh for the Israelites was not only a God who made personal covenants; Yahweh was the creator and sustainer of life. As N. T. Wright explains, "The creator God is the covenant God, and vice versa." Much disillusionment (and bad theology) comes from detaching these dual realities.

This text connects covenant and creation with the resonating directive to "choose life." With the blessings and curses of the covenant clearly in the foreground, the Israelites are told, "Now choose life. . . . For the Lord is your life." The covenant was for a particular people to bless the entire world of God's creation (Gen. 12:1-3). God's goodness is evident not only in faithfulness to the covenant but also in acts of blessing that bring the rain for our harvests, staying our hands when they are bent on destruction, and allowing the Spirit to guide our communities forward in mission despite our disunity, competition and infighting. Claus Westermann offers this: "The Old Testament knows a wholly different kind of divine acting not manifested in history; a constant acting not manifested in momentary events, namely, God's work

of blessing. Blessing really means the power of fertility. God's blessing causes a developing and growing, a ripening and fruit-bearing, a silent advance of the power for life in all realms."

This is a fresh perspective on God as Creator and on covenant faithfulness. Just as with the ancient Israelites, our covenant-keeping means living in a rhythm of holistic living and worship. Covenant-keeping fashions an awareness of the goodness of creation, a mandate of creation stewardship, and the ever-present hope of a new (redeemed) creation coming. Yes, the lives we live and the circumstances we encounter are filled with pain, injustices and the vestiges of a marred creation. Somewhere in this pain lurk our curses, the consequences of humanity's rejection of life. But life and hope remain. The imperative to "choose life" and the stipulation that that choice is obtainable are not naive or futile challenges. Life does exist in the blessing of God. The choice of life is the commitment to embrace the creative and re-creative work of God by living with an awareness of God's goodness.