

Holy Living

God blesses His people when they pursue holiness.



The psalmist Asaph struggled with the issue of the prosperity of the wicked (Ps. 73:3). Even though they were full of pride, they still possessed health (vv. 4-5) and wealth (v. 12). Asaph began to wonder if it was worth it to serve God faithfully (vv. 13-14)—until he went before the Lord in worship; “then I understood their destiny” (v. 17). Apart from God, the wicked are destined for certain destruction (vv. 18-20). For all the material wealth they had acquired, there was one thing they did not possess and had no concern about—a relationship with God Himself. Asaph soon realized that the blessing of that relationship meant everything (vv. 23-24). Asaph will have an eternity with God, something no material possessions can equal or replace. Why would he want or need anything else (vv. 25-28)?

For Israel to live as the people of God, the primary focus for their lives was to be their relationship with God. Because the Lord is holy and His law displays His holy character, a character Israel was called to reflect, the people’s lives were to display holiness by keeping His law. Living in relationship with God, expressed in the holy lifestyle He prescribes, is to be “blessed.”

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

Leviticus 17:1–27:34

Chapters 17–27 give teaching concerning “practical holiness.” How should God’s people display His holiness in their daily lives? These chapters teach holiness through laws, warnings about violating God’s covenant, and instructions for the holy days in the Israelite calendar. Since the Lord is holy, His covenant people have a responsibility to reflect His holy character. God reminded His people with repeated statements such as, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (19:2), “I am the

LORD who sets you apart” (20:8; see 21:15,23; 22:2,16,32), and “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be mine” (20:26; see 21:8). The expressions “I am the LORD” or “I am the LORD your God” combined appear almost fifty times in chapters 17–27. Since the Lord was the Israelites’ God who graciously rescued them, He deserved their undivided loyalty, which was to be demonstrated through their obedience to Him and His commands.

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

Faithfulness (Lev. 26:1-2)

Moses explained the blessings God’s people would experience in their covenantal relationship with Him. First, they would have to worship God alone as their God, recognizing Him by keeping the Sabbath and respecting His sanctuary.

VERSE 1

“Do not make worthless idols for yourselves, set up a carved image or sacred pillar for yourselves, or place a sculpted stone in your land to bow down to it, for I am the LORD your God.”

Chapter 26 breaks into several distinct sections: the fundamentals of the Lord’s law that Israel was to keep (vv. 1-2), God’s blessings Israel would receive if they obeyed Him (vv. 3-13), the curses Israel would receive if they disobeyed Him (vv. 14-45), and a summary statement (v. 46). This chapter is one of several “blessings and curses” passages in the books of Moses, the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy). Other blessings lists are found in Deuteronomy 4:29-31; 28:1-14; 30:1-10; and other curse lists are found in Deuteronomy 4:15-28; 28:15-68; 29:16-29; 31:26-29. Obedience to God’s commands would allow the enjoyment of the Lord’s blessings.

Moses laid out the fundamentals of God’s law in the opening verse, some of the most important points that Israel was to remember. The first one was faithful worship of the Lord alone, and the fundamentals given in verse 2 are outward expressions of that faithfulness. Giving these basic principles would prepare the Israelites to hear the Lord’s blessings and curses in the following verses. Through their obedience, Israel would

experience God’s blessing, but their disobedience would place them in jeopardy of suffering His punishment

Verse 1 is basically a restatement of the second commandment (Ex. 20:4-6; Deut. 5:8-10). **Worthless idols** is a scornful term meaning something that has no value and is of no help. **Carved image** is a general term for the likeness of a person or animal constructed or sculpted from wood, stone, metal, or some other material. A **sacred pillar** (“standing image,” KJV) is a monument or memorial stone, in this context associated with some “god.” A **sculpted stone** is a stone engraved with the image of a “god” or something that represents that “god.” It ranged in size from a boundary stone to a pillar. Together, these four different terms for *idols* encompass any kind of idolatry.

The Israelites were not to have any of these things in their **land**, that is, the promised land when they arrive there. Neither were they to **bow down** to worship any idol as their “god.” “**For I am the LORD your God**” reinforced that He was to be the Israelites’ one and only God.

The Lord’s command against worshiping idols emphasized to the Israelites that He demanded their wholehearted devotion. He would allow no rivals in His people’s hearts and lives. When God’s people worship idols, the Lord considers it as spiritual adultery. As Moses taught them, “Love the LORD your God with *all* your heart, with *all* your soul, and with *all* your strength” (Deut. 6:5, emphasis added). With *all* of one’s heart, soul, and strength devoted to the one, true God, there is nothing left to devote to another.

VERSE 2

“Keep my Sabbaths and revere my sanctuary; I am the LORD.”

This command emphasizes that the Israelites were to demonstrate that they were solely committed to the Lord by worshiping Him and Him alone. **Keep my Sabbaths** is the fourth of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15; see also Lev. 19:3,30; 23:3). The *Sabbath* was the day of rest from the Israelites’ labors and the time set aside each week to remember the Lord as their Creator and Redeemer. It demonstrated that God was Lord over their time, and therefore He determined how they were to use it. The Sabbath was the “sign” of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 31:12-17), where He consecrated Israel, setting them apart as His holy people (v. 13). The Sabbath was a constant reminder of the relationship Israel had with the Lord and how He had set Israel apart as His people and for His service. So serious was Israel to take the Sabbath that anyone who profaned it by failing to

observe it was subject to death (Num. 15:32-36). Neglecting the Sabbath was in essence breaking and rejecting the covenant with the Lord.

The second expression of commitment to the Lord was to **“revere my sanctuary”** (see also Lev. 19:30). The holy *sanctuary*, the tabernacle, was the place where the Lord chose to dwell among His people (Ex. 25:8-9). It was where sacrifices would be offered and where God would be worshiped in the ways He prescribed. To *revere* has the meaning of both “fear” and “reverence.” Revering the sanctuary, where God manifested His presence, was to approach Him in worship by recognizing who He is and what He demanded of the worshiper. How the Israelites treated both the *Sabbath* and the *sanctuary* indicated the priority the Lord had in their lives. “The placing of these laws on the proper worship of God at the beginning of the section on blessings and curses indicates that the issue of blessings and cursings is intrinsically related to one’s relationship and response to God.”¹

The repeated phrase, **“I am the LORD”** was a consistent reminder that the Lawgiver was none other than their covenant God. These commands given in Leviticus were part of the covenant made at Sinai where the Lord and His people were bound together in a binding, loving, covenant relationship. Their lives in covenant were to be guided and lived out in relation to who God was and what He had done for them.

Explore Further

Read the article “Idol” on page 788 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some people or things that serve as people’s idols today?

Blessings (Lev. 26:3-8)

If the people faithfully observed God’s commands, He would provide bountiful crops, plenty of food, and safety. He would make them victorious over their enemies.

VERSES 3-5

“If you follow my statutes and faithfully observe my commands I will give you rain at the right time, and the land will yield its

produce, and the trees of the field will bear their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest, and the grape harvest will continue until sowing time; you will have plenty of food to eat and live securely in your land.”

By walking in holiness before God, God’s people could expect certain benefits to flow from that relationship. The blessings fall into several sections, each beginning with the phrase **I will give**: the blessing of agricultural bounty (vv. 4-5,10), the gift of peace and security (vv. 6-8), the Israelites being fruitful and multiplying (v. 9a), and the gift of God’s divine presence (vv. 9b,11-13). Each of these topics was extremely important to the Israelites: agricultural prosperity and plenty of food; peace and safety from human and animal enemies; victory in battle, especially against great odds; and enjoying the benefits of God’s presence.

The blessings of plenty of food, peace and victory, and the community expanding in numbers were blessings God would give. The blessings listed in this section are expressed in material terms; however, the ultimate blessing was not the material benefits themselves but the relationship with God Himself through which these blessings flowed. Israel was to remember that all of the blessings were “I wills” from the Lord. These were blessings He would give to those who faithfully walked with Him.

Thus, the greatest blessing was to be a part of God’s covenant people, to belong to Him and have fellowship with Him. To be out of relationship with God is to be “cursed.” The curses that follow (vv. 14-45) served as a dire warning of what would happen if the Israelites did not take their relationship with God seriously. Who would want to suffer those consequences instead of His blessings?

The blessings the Lord would give were conditioned on the people’s obedience. By issuing commands, God reminded the Israelites of His authority as the Lawgiver. The Hebrew term for **follow** literally means “to walk.” In this context it is a metaphor for one’s lifestyle. The Israelites were to follow the Lord’s statutes as a way of life. They were to **faithfully observe** His commands. The Hebrew term for *faithfully observe* means “to keep,” here in the sense of watching over and guarding the Lord’s commands carefully so that they were kept.

The first blessing is that of agricultural bounty. For crops to grow, rain was necessary. Rain would come from the hand of the Lord, not some pagan fertility god. Heavy rains were needed in the fall (October-November) to water newly planted crops, and gentle rains in late winter/early spring (March-April) were needed to produce an abundance of crops. God would provide food for His people in the promised land. The rich

land they would possess would yield its produce, and the trees would bear their fruit.

Because of the abundance of agricultural produce, the threshing of the grain harvest of wheat and barley in the spring (April-May) would continue until the grape harvest in late summer (July-August), followed immediately by the harvest of other fruits such as dates, figs, and olives in September. The sowing time of beans and grains was in late autumn. The promise was of plentiful harvests, an overabundance of crops, **“for you will have plenty of food to eat.”** It would be such a bumper crop that it would be time to plant once more before the entire harvest could be brought in. They would **live securely in your land**, not needing to travel elsewhere for fear of starvation because of famine.

VERSES 6-8

“I will give peace to the land, and you will lie down with nothing to frighten you. I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword will pass through your land. You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall before you by the sword. Five of you will pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you will pursue ten thousand; your enemies will fall before you by the sword.”

The second blessing is that of **peace** and security. In Gideon’s day the land produced enough food, but enemies invaded and took it (Judg. 6:3-4,11). Thus, the blessing of peace to the land was quite significant. The Israelites would be able to eat and **lie down with nothing to frighten** them. **Dangerous animals**, such as lions and bears (Judg. 14:5; 2 Kings 2:24; Isa. 11:6-9), would no longer be a fear for them. And **no sword will pass through your land** refers to the violence and death that warfare brings. The Lord would allow no enemies to plague them. If enemies did attack, the Israelites would experience great victory.

Explore Further

Read the article “Blessing and Cursing” on pages 225–226 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Notice the connection between God’s blessing and a successful and satisfying life. Spend some time in personal prayer and worship reflecting on how God has blessed you and your life.

Fellowship (Lev. 26:9-13)

As His people, the Israelites would enjoy God's presence in an ongoing relationship. God recounted how He had brought them out of slavery in Egypt so that they could live in freedom.

VERSES 9-10

“I will turn to you, make you fruitful and multiply you, and confirm my covenant with you. You will eat the old grain of the previous year and will clear out the old to make room for the new.”

With the threat of all enemies, both animal and human, neutralized, the Lord promised the Israelites would be **fruitful and multiply**. The covenant God made with Abraham would be fulfilled, and Israel would increase greatly in numbers (Gen. 17:6), much like the command/blessing God gave to the people at creation (1:28) and after the great flood (9:1). God had promised that Abraham's offspring would be as numerous as the dust of the earth, the stars of the sky, and the sand of the seashore (13:16; 15:5; 22:17).

The great number of God's people would always have plenty to eat. The **old grain** from a previous harvest which had been dried and stored would need to be removed from storage to make room for the bounty of the following year's harvest. There would be an abundance of food to eat, and there would be no fear of ever running out.

VERSES 11-12

“I will place my residence among you, and I will not reject you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.”

Verses 11-13 are the climax to this passage. The greatest blessing was to have the Lord's presence among the Israelites. God promised Himself to His people. If His people remained in a close relationship with Him, they would have all they needed. The numerous blessings the people would possess from that relationship with the Giver of all blessings would far exceed those listed in this passage.

A more literal translation of the Hebrew for **“I will place my residence among you”** would be, “I will give my tabernacle among you,” the tabernacle being the place where the Lord dwelt among His people (Ex. 25:8) and where His presence would be known and experienced (29:45-46).

The Lord's presence would be the source of life for the Israelite community. As the Israelites walked with Him in obedience, God promised, **"I will not reject you,"** that is, they would be welcome in God's presence.

That the Lord would **walk among** His people denotes close intimate fellowship with the Israelites, living in relationship with His people. **"I will . . . be your God, and you will be my people,"** is a statement known as the "covenant formula." It summarizes what it means to be in a covenant relationship with God (Ex. 6:7; 19:5-6).

VERSE 13

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, so that you would no longer be their slaves. I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to live in freedom."

The covenant formula is tied directly to a reminder of the Lord's history with His people, the Israelites. He is **"the LORD your God,"** the covenant God of Israel. He is their Redeemer **"who brought you out of the land of Egypt,"** breaking their bonds of slavery and enabling them to live in relationship with the Lord as His people (Ex. 19:3-6).

The bars of your yoke is used metaphorically to refer to the oppression of the Egyptians the Israelites suffered under. A *yoke* was a wooden frame placed on the backs of two animals such as horses or oxen so that they could pull together such things as plows or wagons. The basic yoke was made up of a wooden bar with two loops of either wood or rope that went around the necks of the animals. The term *yoke* could be used metaphorically either negatively to refer to slavery and hardship as in this instance or positively such as in the New Testament where Jesus calls upon people who are weary and burdened to take upon themselves His yoke, about which He states, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

It's important to recognize that the Lord delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt before He formally made His covenant with them. The covenant was an act of love, kindness, and grace.

This passage of the Lord's blessings climaxes with the Source of all these blessings, His presence with His people. God mentioned over and over in the previous verses that all the blessings Israel would experience would be something He would do for the Israelites ("I will . . ."). Moses warned the people not to forget the Source of their blessings. Speaking of God's blessing of manna given to the Israelites in the wilderness, the "daily bread" for His people, Moses said, "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of

the LORD” (Deut. 8:3). God’s gracious gift of manna only lasted one day. Each day, except for the Sabbath, the Israelites were to gather only enough for that day (and enough for two days on the day before the Sabbath). Moses warned the Israelites of where they should place their focus. If one focused on the material provision, it would soon be gone. But what would not disappear was the Giver of the bread. If they had the Lord, they could trust Him to take care of all their needs. The One who had blessed them with manna wanted to give them so much more!

For many people, freedom is not being accountable to anyone. However, ultimately every person serves someone or something. True freedom is having the right master—the Lord, who is loving, kind, benevolent, and has the best interests of His people at heart. True freedom is found in living a life free from enslavement to sin and being able to freely serve the Lord.

God desires to bless people with His greatest gift—salvation in Jesus Christ. So in light of this, where should a person focus his or her life? On the gathering of the shopping list of material things this life has to offer or on a relationship with the Giver of “every good and perfect gift” (Jas. 1:17)? God is the loving Father who knows what we truly need better than we do ourselves. The depth of His love for us pales in comparison to the love of the best earthly father one could imagine (Matt. 7:7-12). What a tragedy to chase after the gifts and ignore the Giver!

Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, “tabernacled” among humanity, ultimately giving His life that we might be forgiven of our sins and come into a relationship with Him. In Jesus, God offers His greatest blessing—Himself. Through Jesus we are forgiven all our sins and are forever reconciled to God. Through Jesus we are adopted into God’s family and come to know God as our loving Father. All this and more is available through faith in Jesus Christ. It would be a shame to settle for anything less!

Explore Further

Read the article “Covenants” on pages 355–360 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What role did the old covenant play in God’s redemptive plan?

1. Mark Rooker, *Leviticus*, vol. 3A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 314.

EXODUS, LEVITICUS

Everyone has days when they wonder if God knows their name. We're all looking for that light of hope at the end of the tunnel. The Israelites were no different. After centuries of bondage, they cried out for help. And God answered through a man named Moses. The books of Exodus and Leviticus remind us that imperfect people can depend on a perfect God to lead them through whatever wilderness they face. As you study how God worked among His people, never forget that He is still at work in your life, as well. He still guides. He still cares. He still protects. Most important, He still delivers.

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