

IF ... (Part 1)

LEVITICUS 26:1-46

OUR LIVES ARE MEASURED IN RELATIONSHIP WITH AND PROXIMITY TO GOD

I. REFLECTION (VS 1-2)

Taking Time To Evaluate Our Lives And Recalibrate Them So They Are In Synch With God Is Critical.

- A. SUBMITTING TO TRUTH (1)
- B. TAKING TIME TO RECALIBRATE OUR LIVES (2)

II. RECEIVING REWARDS (VS 3-13)

Living In Synch With God Brings Incredible Blessing.

- A. PREREQUISITES (3)
- B. PROVISION (4-5)
- C. PEACE (6-8)
- D. PROSPERITY (9-10)
- E. PRESENCE (11-13)

III. RECEIVING REPRIMANDS (VS 14-39)

Living In Rebellion To God Brings Incredible Disaster.

- A. BREAKING FAITH (14-15)
- B. BREAKING OUR BACKS (16-20)
- C. BREAKING OUR SPIRITS (21-39)
 - 1. CHAOS (21-26)
 - 2. DESTRUCTION (27-35)
 - 3. HUMILIATION (36-39)

IV. REPENTING (VS 40-46)

God Wants To Bless Us.

- A. GENUINE REPENTANCE (40-41)
- B. RESTORATION (42-46)

IF ... (Part 1)

Leviticus 26:1-46

We have studied through 25 chapters of laws, regulations, and particular ways in which God wanted His people to worship Him and honor Him. Chapter 27 will deal with substitutions, blessings, and more redemption. But here in verse 26, God lays out the rewards for obedience and the consequences for disobedience. The word that drives this section is that little two-letter word, "if". When we make mistakes in life or miss opportunities, we often say, "If only had done this or that." Even though "if" is such a small word, it carries a lot of weight. For example:

If my computer Were a Car...

- It would crash two or three times per day for no apparent reason. The driver is often hurt, but the car itself receives no permanent damage. I'd just accept this fact, restart the car, and begin my trip again.

If my computer Were a Car...

- Occasionally, my car would fail to restart after a crash, and I'd have to reinstall the engine. For some strange reason, I'd just accept this too.

If my computer Were a Car...

- I would be forced to buy a new model every 18 months, and my old model would have no resale value. Each new model would be bigger than the previous one, require more gas, and would operate differently. Furthermore, parts from the old car would not be interchangeable with the new car.

If my computer Were a Car...

- I could call a special phone number when I had a problem. The phone would be staffed by people who know less about my car than I do.

If my computer Were a Car...

- There would be a special Macintosh model, powered by the sun. However, it would only run on 5 percent of the roads and require different driving skills.

If my computer Were a Car...

- I would have to spend additional money to buy the operating manuals.

If my computer Were a Car...

- The oil, engine, gas and alternator warning lights would be replaced by a single warning light: "This car has performed an illegal operation."

If my computer Were a Car...

- Before engaging, the airbag system would display a message, "Are you sure?"

If my computer Were a Car...

- Every time I looked under the hood, an obnoxious cartoon character would appear and ask if I need help. No matter how many times I refused help, it would keep appearing.

If my computer Were a Car...

- A special feature would let me automatically record the route for a particular trip, so I could repeat the trip automatically later on. However, after repeating the trip I always end up at a different location.

In this passage, God lays out how serious He is about the commands He has given to Israel. I think oftentimes we take God for granted. We think He will just forgive all our disobedience and wipe out all the consequences. I'm thinking that we may want to rethink that position as we study through this passage.

Like all of you, I live in the modern world. In particular, we find ourselves living in Western culture. We are taught to measure success in terms of quantity. The more money we make, the more stuff we own, the more people we find ourselves over, the more successful we judge ourselves to be. However, the entire Bible refutes that definition of success. In fact the Bible's measure for success is found in the measurement of our nearness to God. In other words, the main idea of this morning's text is this. **OUR LIVES ARE MEASURED IN RELATIONSHIP WITH AND PROXIMITY TO GOD.** The closer we are to God and the more obedient we are to Him, the more successful we are according to Bible standards. I'm no different than all of you. I continue to struggle with getting my priorities and values in synch with God's. I'm constantly confused by worldly values. But it is critical that we align our lives with God's standards for life.

I. REFLECTION (VS 1-2)

Taking Time To Evaluate Our Lives And Recalibrate Them So They Are In Synch With God Is Critical.

Verses 1-2 remind us that reflection is an important step in being successful at this. **TAKING TIME TO EVALUATE OUR LIVES AND RECALIBRATE THEM SO THEY ARE IN SYNCH WITH GOD IS CRITICAL.** Before we get into the text itself, I want to point out that this kind of blessing and curses section is consistent with other second millennium B.C. documents. The Assyrians and Arameans used it. This style is also found in Exodus 23:25-33, Deuteronomy 28:1-68, and Joshua 24. It was common to write blessings and curses at the end of treaties and covenants during this time. Much of the Deuteronomy material is written in Hittite Treaty form. This is consistent with the document being written during the time of Moses as the Bible asserts.

A. SUBMITTING TO TRUTH (1)

Verse 1 reminds us that any true and good reflection must be done by first of all submitting to the truth. Some commentators connect verses 1 and 2 with the previous section that talked about Sabbath and Jubilee Years. Other scholars feel these two verses fit nicely with this chapter. I think it is a good transition section, which connects these covenant conditions with the whole book of Leviticus. Blessings come only when we worship the One true and living God. Israel was in the wilderness, headed for the Promised Land, provided with food and water, and personally guided by Jehovah, the God of the Bible.

The sad fact of history is that Israel almost never lived up to worshipping God alone. In fact, much of their history up to the Babylonian captivity that took place during the 6th century B.C. was characterized by idol worship. For us, idolatry is replacing God and His values with worldly things and values.

Let me take a very simple example. When a Christian chooses to date a non-Christian, knowing that God forbids this in Scripture, they are actually committing idolatry. What it means is that the Christian loves the non-Christian more than they love God. We do it with our attitudes towards money, power, sex, and views on morality. Whenever we substitute God's views with our views, we have committed idolatry. We must start from knowing God's will as He has revealed it in the Bible.

I'm sad to say that most Christians I come in contact with don't even know what's in the Bible. They know snippets but they are like beginning karate students: they know just enough to be dangerous and get themselves hurt. So the first step in placing ourselves in a position to be blessed by God is to read, study, and absorb the entire Bible.

B. TAKING TIME TO RECALIBRATE OUR LIVES (2)

Verse 2 goes on to remind us that we are not only to be hearers of the Word, we are to be doers of the Word. We must take some time to recalibrate our lives. As we said before, there is no evidence that Israel ever practiced the different Sabbaths. Sabbath is not something that most Christians take seriously or even spend much time thinking about. Keeping the Sabbath holy is one of the Ten Commandments. We would never think of breaking one of the other Ten Commandments. Why are we so lackadaisical when it comes to not keeping Sabbath?

I'm not saying that we should develop a lot of rules, but we should set time aside to rest our minds and bodies in order to allow God to speak to us, change our hearts and minds, and to refresh us. We spend so much time in the world that we need to take times to make sure we have not abandoned God's values nor have we neglected our relationship with Him. We spend so much time with people who worship the gods of this world that we need to recalibrate our lives so they are in tune with the One true and living God. It's not enough to just know stuff about Jesus; we must know Jesus and follow Him in faith. It takes quiet time alone with Him so He can make and mold us into the men and women He desires us to be. In order to place ourselves in a position to be blessed by God we should start from this premise: **TAKING TIME TO EVALUATE OUR LIVES AND RECALIBRATE THEM SO THEY ARE IN SYNCH WITH GOD IS CRITICAL.**

II. RECEIVING REWARDS (VS 3-13)

Living In Synch With God Brings Incredible Blessing.

This is not meant to sound like the popular health and wealth gospel being preached today. In other words, we are not to treat this as if we are trying to manipulate God into blessing us. First of all, God defines blessings much different than we do. In talking to the Hebrews here, the blessings are indeed material blessings. However, we have seen the most righteous and holy person in all of history suffer and die like no other person. Jesus suffered in the most horrible way, yet He was the most righteous. Many of the prophets who served God suffered a great deal and many were tortured, mistreated, and killed. Keeping that balance in mind, let's see that verses 3-13 lay out conditions for receiving rewards from God. **LIVING IN SYNCH WITH GOD BRINGS INCREDIBLE BLESSING.**

Before I get into this, I want to remind you one more time this is not some magical formula. Look at it like this. If I am playing shortstop in baseball and I take time to study the opposing team and each hitter, I will position myself in a spot that the batter is most likely to hit the ball. In other words, I am putting myself in the best place to make a good play. When we obey God's commands, love Him and follow His lead, we are placing ourselves in the best position to be blessed.

A. PREREQUISITES (3)

Verse 3 gives us the prerequisite to being blessed. I want you to quickly look through this passage. The word "if" is used to divide up the passage. Here in verse 3, God lays out the two main conditions for blessings. The first condition that places us in a position to be blessed by God is following His decrees. I like the Hebrew much better. Literally it says, "walk in my limits." The word for decree can mean statute, ordinance, or limits. The second command is for us to keep God's laws. Here is what I think God is saying to us here. He has given us several laws. We are to obey them. However, the laws merely set limits for us in order to protect us. However within these boundaries, we are given a great deal of freedom. Let me put this in children's terms. Let's say that our parents put a fence around our backyard. In our back yard are several toys. We may have a basketball court, a slide, playground toys, and a ton of other stuff. Now we could play with anything we wanted. We were merely constrained to remain in the yard. Outside of the backyard was a busy street. As long as we stayed within the backyard, we would be relatively safe. Outside the backyard we could get killed by cars. Listen to how the Psalmist puts it:

"5 You both precede and follow me. You place your hand of blessing on my head" Psalm 139:5 / NLT).

As we learn to love God, obey God and trust God, we put ourselves in a place where God can bless us. The first step we made was to read and study our Bibles so we could know what God expects of us. The second step is to committing ourselves to obey God and to follow Him.

B. PROVISION (4-5)

The first blessing God promised the Hebrews was listed in verses 4-5. God would provide for them once they entered the Promised Land. I had an archaeology professor that used to say, "It takes three things to build a successful culture in the ancient world: water, water, and more water." In an agricultural community like Israel, it would take rain at the proper time to ensure successful crops. Too much rain in the beginning of the season would delay planting. Too little rain during the growing season would kill the crops. Too much rain during the harvest season would rot the crops. God said that as long as Israel remained faithful to Him, they would enjoy rain at the proper time. Think about this. If the country as a whole was unfaithful to God, and God denied the proper rains, even the individual righteous people would suffer along with the unrighteous. We tend to think too much in individual terms. Personal sin can end up destroying a community. In God's eyes, there is never personal sin. All sin is detrimental to the entire community. God promised that if the nation of Israel remained faithful to Him and followed Him in love, He would abundantly provide food for them.

C. PEACE (6-8)

Secondly, in verses 6-8 God promised them peace for obedience. There are actually three separate chaotic and violent situations that God promises to protect them from. The first situation God promises to protect them from is danger in general. In other words, if they follow God's commands about justice, fairness, and community love, they will create a just society where good would be rewarded and evil would be punished. Unfortunately, the Hebrews never did create a just society. Listen to the very ending of the book of Judges:

"25In those days [there was] no king in Israel: everyone did [that which was] right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25 / KJV).

Sadly, Israel only followed God and His decrees for very short periods of time during their entire history. I think this passage at the beginning of the book of Judges summarizes the state of affairs:

"8Then Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110. ...

10After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the LORD or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel. 11Then the Israelites did what was evil in the LORD'S sight and worshiped the images of Baal. 12They abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They chased after other gods, worshiping the gods of the people around them. And they angered the LORD. 13They abandoned the LORD to serve Baal and the images of Ashtoreth. 14This made the LORD burn with anger against Israel, so he handed them over to marauders who stole their possessions. He sold them to their enemies all around, and they were no longer able to resist them. 15Every time Israel went out to battle, the LORD fought against them, bringing them defeat, just as he promised. And the people were very distressed" (Judges 2:8-15 / NLT).

Throughout their entire history, Israel's prophets preached against the social injustice and the idols Israel started to worship. Instead of being a light to the nations around them, they adopted the same values. And so because they failed to develop a just society, God brought all sorts of unrest internally and externally. An unjust society breeds anger, resentment, chaos, hopelessness, and violence. I don't think that it takes a degree in sociology to see that we live in an unjust society that is a part of an unjust world.

And we like the Hebrews have started to worship the gods of wealth, power, and pleasure. This kind of injustice leads to war and chaos. Think for a moment where Israel is located. It is located on a small strip of land that connects Africa with the Middle East. In the ancient world, when an empire became powerful, they looked to conquer other lands. When Egypt was powerful and wanted to conquer other empires like Syria, Assyria, and Babylon, they had to get there by marching through Israel. When Babylon, Syria, and Assyria became powerful, they had to march through Israel to go and conquer Egypt. Israel was a small country and a land bridge between great empires. Perhaps God placed them there to keep them dependent on Him. When they were faithful to God, He miraculously protected them, kept them safe, and gave them amazing victories. However, when they disobeyed, He brought foreign armies to wipe them out, carry them off into captivity, and destroy the cities by siege.

When there were no longer city walls, wild animals would come in to look for food. The appearance of wild animals wandering free through the cities was a sign that the city had been destroyed by foreign armies or plagues.

Israel's peace depended on their relationship with God. Notice that peace did not mean the absence of conflict or trouble. Peace meant God's presence and protection through trouble and conflict. Israel never really learned these lessons. If we are truly Christian, then we live in a hostile culture and a hostile world. If we want to appropriate the peace of God, we must commit ourselves to obeying Him and living life according to His plan, not what seems right to us in our own eyes.

D. PROSPERITY (9-10)

In verses 9-10 God promises the Hebrews prosperity if they will obey Him. In particular, these blessings are directly related to their keeping the Sabbath and Jubilee years. God promises to feed them during the years they are required to rest and not to work. The Sabbath concept, whether taking about the weekly Sabbath, the 7-year cycle Sabbath or the 50th year Sabbath, the point is this. God promises to finish up on the Sabbath what we could not complete in the days or years preceding it. We need to learn to trust in God. Before we leave this concept, I want to revisit this concept of tithing.

I hear many Christians find all sorts of excuses for not tithing. But the fact is this. When we give 10% of our money to God, that is a demonstration of our faith and love. If we were to examine on how we spend our money and what we give to God, could we say that we really love and have faith in God or would we have to say that we don't trust God much nor do we have much faith in Him? Here God promises them that if they keep the Sabbath years, they will be still harvesting last year's crops when it's time to start planting next year's crops. It would be for us as if we went to pay our bills and money seemed to be magically appearing to pay them and future bills. Again, I'm not preaching a health and wealth Gospel. I am saying that we demonstrate our faith in God and love for Him based on our faithful giving.

E. PRESENCE (11-13)

And that brings us to the greatest blessing. God promises His presence in verses 11-13. There is no greater blessing than this. Keep this in mind. When God gave Israel these commands, He was living in the middle of their camp. God visibly led them through the wilderness by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. God protected them and provided for them. He sent them *manna* each day to eat and miraculously provided them with water. God miraculously delivered them from their slavery in Egypt.

The sad fact for most people who claim to be Christians is that they know a lot of stuff about God, but they don't know God. God delivered us and set us free from the bondage of sin, Satan, fear, and death. He gave us new life and changed our eternal destinies from hell to heaven.

Listen to some of the facts promised us in the New Testament of our lives in Christ:

"33I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 / NLT).

"4But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won your fight with these false prophets, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world" I John 4:4 / NLT).

"35Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death? ... 37No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

38And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away. 39Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35-39 / NLT).

"5Stay away from the love of money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, 'I will never fail you. I will never forsake you.' 6That is why we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper, so I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:5-6 / NLT).

I think that we come to equate blessings with material blessings and that directly relate to our personal happiness. In other words, if we have plenty of money, we think we are blessed. If we are not sick we think we are blessed. If our jobs are going well, if school is going well, we think we are blessed. However, the Bible makes clear that the greatest blessing we can receive is to be right with God. Let me straighten out some bad theology yet one more time. People are not born into this world good and innocent. People are not by nature good. In fact the Bible is clear about this. The Apostle Paul quoting the Hebrew Scriptures says this:

"10As the Scriptures say, "No one is good— not even one. 11 No one has real understanding; no one is seeking God. 12 All have turned away from God; all have gone wrong. No one does good, not even one." 13 "Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave. Their speech is filled with lies." 14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." 15 "They are quick to commit murder. 16 Wherever they go, destruction and misery follow them. 17 They do not know what true peace is." 18 "They have no fear of God to restrain them" (Romans 3:10-18 / NLT).

The Apostle's conclusion is this:

"23For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard" Romans 3:23 / NLT).

The point is this. All of us are born into this world physically alive but spiritually dead. We are born guilty and sinful. We are natural enemies of God. Through our own sin and personal rebellion, we alienate ourselves farther from God.

The greatest blessing anyone could ever receive is to be reconciled with God, forgiven of sin, and given spiritual life and eternal life. Jesus said that when we open the door to our hearts in faith, He will come into us and set up house in us.

When we come to understand that we have received something we could never earn or deserve, we start to live all of life as a blessing. Our happiness and peace no longer depend on worldly things. Our happiness is dependent on what God did in our lives through Jesus:

"12But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. 13They are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan—this rebirth comes from God" (John 1:12-13 / NLT).

LIVING IN SYNCH WITH GOD BRINGS INCREDIBLE BLESSING.

But we must remember that we only place ourselves in a position to be blessed by knowing God's will by studying the Bible, and then living in faith and love according to it. But before I leave this section, I need to warn us again when I say read and study our Bibles, I mean READ and STUDY! When thinking about an issue, we need to be able to inform that decision with information from the whole Bible; Genesis thru Revelation. It is all God's Word. We really do need to quit letting the world squeeze us into its mold. We need to be conformed to God's will by allowing Him to transform our minds through studying and obeying His Word as revealed in the Bible. **OUR LIVES ARE MEASURED IN RELATIONSHIP WITH AND PROXIMITY TO GOD.** That is the only way to find peace and happiness.

During this past Lenten season, one of the weekly Psalms was Psalm 23. Listen to life as described by David:

"¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." (Psalm 23:1-6 / NIV).

That truly is a description of peace and happiness. That kind of peace and happiness can only be found by being in a right relationship with God.