

Amen to the Curses

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 December 1996

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] Now, Father, we pray that your word will take deep root in our lives and bear much fruit for your glory. For Jesus' sake. Amen. In September last year, I went to Israel leading a group of students.

And one place, above all places I wanted to go to, was a place called Shechem. Admittedly, I've been to Israel a number of times before, so most of the standard places I'd seen.

But Shechem was the highlight of last year's trip. And one of the days off, six of us went there. It's not a very safe place to visit. The modern city just beside it is Nablus.

You may have heard of it. It's the largest Arab city at the centre of the West Bank. Many tourist buses or cars or taxis are stoned there from time to time.

The Palestinians express their frustration at the Israeli government. It's not the sort of place you'd take a whole tour group to visit. But six of us decided to go.

[1 : 0 4] I was going to go anyway because I was so keen to see Shechem. As it was, when we got there, it wasn't too bad. We were very cautious. When we eventually found or got near the site, we stumbled across a Jewish yeshiva school.

And one of the young Jewish chaps offered to take us around the archaeological site, which was very good because we found out things that my guidebook wouldn't have told me. He went and got his submachine gun first because he thought that would be safer.

So we were escorted around this site with this Jewish chap with a submachine gun, feeling rather nervous, I must say. And then afterwards he drove us around a bit and then eventually we got into an Arab taxi and sort of got straight through Nablus and eventually back to Jerusalem.

It's about an hour's drive north of Jerusalem, about two hours on the buses, of course. And it was a well worthwhile day. Shechem literally means shoulder.

And it lies in the shoulder of two hills. To the north, Mount Ebal, and to the south, Mount Gerizim. They're hardly snow-capped mountains, but they're reasonable sized hills.

[2 : 1 2] Roughly the same sort of size. And Shechem lies in the shoulder of these two hills. Why was I so keen to go to Shechem? It was at Shechem that God promised Abraham, at the beginning of the Bible, the land.

He'd made various promises to Abraham whilst Abraham was in Mesopotamia. But it wasn't until he arrived in the land and came to Shechem that God promised him land and the land that he was in, the land of Canaan.

Indeed, the land that Israel eventually inhabited hundreds of years later. It was to Shechem that Jacob went after spending 20 years out of the land.

Jacob, you may remember, went out of the land to get a wife. He ended up with two wives because the first one wasn't the one that he bargained for. And then after getting two wives, he worked for a few more years for his uncle, who was fairly deceptive, and got some sheep and flocks and so on as well.

When, having got all his children, sheep, flocks and two wives, and their assistants, he came to Shechem. It was at Shechem that the bones of Joseph were buried eventually.

[3 : 20] Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob, became the prime minister of Egypt, you may remember, at the end of the book of Genesis. And when he died, the end of the book of Genesis records that his bones were embalmed and kept waiting for the day that his descendants would go back to the land.

And when they did, under Joshua, perhaps 400 years later, Joseph's bones were buried in Shechem. And indeed, it's at Joseph's tomb, so-called, that we came across this Jewish school and this student who took us around the site.

But it was also at Shechem that Israel was to conduct the ceremony that we've heard about in the first reading today. And it was for that reason that I wanted to go there.

My PhD thesis, which I was working on at the time, was on Deuteronomy. And I wanted to go to Shechem to envisage this ceremony that was performed here in Deuteronomy 27.

And standing in the site of Shechem, in the centre, in the place where they've excavated remains of the altar and the central place of worship, one can envisage, if you take away the noise of the traffic and the buildings and the people, an amphitheatre of Ebal in the north and the tribes on Ebal and Gerizim on the south with the tribes there.

[4 : 35] And you can imagine the people shouting out their amens and they would be heard in Shechem, in the centre of these two hills. What more appropriate place to go to for Israel than Shechem?

Because after conquering the land, they were to go to Shechem and perform this ceremony at the very place where God, hundreds of years before, had promised the land in the first place. So to go there and perform the ceremony is in a sense a statement that God is faithful and has kept his promise.

Six hundred years before to Abraham, now that promise is fulfilled as Israel arrives in Shechem under the leadership of Joshua and there they claim the land in this ceremony. Within the book of Deuteronomy, the laws that we've seen over recent weeks and the last couple of months are completed.

Now from this chapter onwards in Deuteronomy comes in a sense the final push for the Israelites to obey the law. It's the conclusion of the sermon.

Having heard all the law, now comes the decision time. Now is the crunch time. Moses is calling Israel to obey the law and to do it. And this ceremony at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim in Shechem is part of that decision for Israel.

[5 : 50] Verses 12 and 13, the choreography, if you like, is arranged. When you've crossed over the Jordan, these tribes, that is, shall stand on Mount Gerizim in the south for blessing.

Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. Six of the tribes of Israel, half the people of Israel, are to go to Mount Gerizim for this ceremony. The other half, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali, are to go to the north to Mount Ebal for this ceremony.

We don't know why they're divided in that way. It doesn't quite fit the geography of where the tribe settled in the land. It doesn't quite fit the mothers of the various people because there were four mothers for all the sons of Jacob in the end.

Some think that it was divided like that but it doesn't quite fit. Maybe it's just arbitrary. Maybe it doesn't really matter. Six tribes to the south, six to the north, the people divided in two. And standing in the centre in Shechem, at the place of the centre settlement where people lived in Shechem, were the Levite priests.

The tribe of Levi itself was a special tribe but within the tribe, it seems here, they're especially set aside people to be priests. The rest of the tribe has gone to the south to Mount Gerizim for the blessing but the priests within the Levites are to stand in the centre to conduct this ceremony.

[7 : 12] It's unclear exactly what the tribes did when they're on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal because all we get in the rest of the chapter are the curses which we've heard read this morning.

There are no blessings here. So what the tribes on Mount Gerizim, the Mount of Blessing did, we're not exactly sure. But what we get are twelve curses that are read out.

Cursed be the person who does this or does not do that. And all the people, whether it means only the tribes on Mount Ebal or whether it means indeed all the people on both mountains, we're not sure. But all the people shall say, Amen.

The twelve curses involve things to do with God and idolatry, relationships with people, property, there's concern for the underprivileged, so there's a curse about those who abuse the blind, the immigrants and the widows.

There are curses on those who indulge in various forms of sexual sin, killing and bribes. The last one is a summary curse.

[8 : 12] And after each of the twelve curses, the people shall say, Amen. That is, we agree, we assent, we accept these conditions, these terms, we accept God's standards that he is proclaiming to us this day.

That's what Amen is all about. When we say it at the end of a prayer, we're saying, Yes, I agree, I accept, I affirm what is said in this prayer or this statement. Amen.

There's nothing new in these twelve curses. All the things that are prohibited in these curses have been prohibited earlier in the law section of Deuteronomy.

But what seems to bind them together here in chapter 27 is the notion of things being done in secret. So in verse 15, Cursed be anyone who makes an idol or casts an image, anything abhorrent to the Lord, the work of an artisan.

That's been prohibited many times in Deuteronomy. Even back in the Ten Commandments. But the key to it here is that the person sets it up in secret. Verse 24, the same sort of thing.

[9 : 18] Cursed be anyone who strikes down a neighbour in secret. It's hardly likely that anyone would do it in public, but the secretness is stressed here. But what's going on here are things that people might do in secret that are not detected by anyone else.

Earlier in the law in Deuteronomy, various forms of punishment were to be meted out for the offenders against the law. So the killers or murderers, they would be put to death.

Same with some adulterers and the idolaters. Others would have other forms of punishment meted out to them. All of that presupposes that somebody has detected and found out who did it.

And the guilty is brought to public justice. But what happens when somebody sins and it's not found out by others? It's done in secret.

What happens then? The curses here are saying that whether done in public or private, revealed or secret, detected or undetected, nonetheless, the person who sins stands under the curse of God.

[10 : 25] Whether that's meted out by public justice in the court system, or whether it's meted out in a sense privately and secretly by God himself, in the end doesn't matter.

For anyone who sins stands under the curse of God. It's a reminder to us that our morality and piety is not just private, but public.

It's both together, public and private. What we do and think in our hearts is as important as what we do in our actions. We cannot get away with sins that are committed privately or in our hearts, the lusts or desires or evil thoughts of our hearts.

For God knows our hearts. And the statements here of curse are to those of us who practice sin in private and in our hearts that God knows. And we stand under his curse if we practice those things.

Remember some of the statements of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount that you don't have to go out and actually kill your brother to hate him in your heart is enough to commit murder. And God knows our hearts.

[11 : 30] And so this is a statement that God's justice and judgment will prevail on those who sin in public or in private. We cannot get away with it. Fairly strong stuff.

The last verse, I think, is stronger still. Because if we were to read the first 11 curses, we may think, well, that's alright because I don't stand under those curses.

I've never committed the sexual sins that are mentioned here or killed my neighbour or taken a bribe. But when we get to verse 26, something else is being said. Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law, meaning all that's gone before in Deuteronomy, by observing them.

What we get in the first 11 curses is not the most important list, but rather a representative sample of things for which people would stand under curse.

It's just a sample, just some examples. But the point of it all in the end is what's said in verse 26. The cursed is anyone who fails any bit of the law, meaning anything that's gone before in Deuteronomy.

[12 : 39] And though we may read verses 15 to 25, the first 11 curses and think, well, I'm innocent of all of them. If we were to read all the laws in Deuteronomy, then it would be a very boastful person who could say, I am innocent of all of that.

For indeed, remember back some weeks now, virtually to how the law began. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and love your neighbour as yourself is implied in much of the rest.

None of us can say that we've perfectly kept that law. And so then, in the light of verse 26, we're saying in effect about ourselves that we have failed the law and therefore stand under it accursed of God.

For none of us is perfect. Verse 26 is saying that anyone who infringes one aspect of the law breaks it all. Because God's standard is 100% perfection.

Not 50%. Not 70%. But 100%. And in the light of that standard, we all fail. If this ceremony says only that, it would be an odd ceremony indeed.

[13 : 51] Because it would then be only a ceremony that says, we stand accursed of God. And what would be the point of that? But it says more than that.

Because before the list of curses, three things are to be done. Three things which give us the key to how we respond to these curses. In verses 2 to 4, the first is the setting up of stones covered with plaster and inscribed upon them the words of this law, meaning all the words of the book of Deuteronomy.

It was an ancient Near Eastern practice to erect tablets of the law and the instructions. Hamni Rabbi's laws in Babylon of the second of 1700 BC or thereabouts were erected on stones and inscribed in stones.

In Egypt, stones were covered with plaster and the laws written on them. In Egypt, of course, the climate is very dry and plaster-covered stones would last a long, long time. Less so in Israel.

It's a puzzle why these stones here were to be covered with plaster. But regardless, they were to stand as a witness to God's standards, to the law, to the demands of God on his people.

[15 : 09] If you were organising a ceremony and you had tablets of stone with the law on it, which is so important for Israel's life and identity, where would you put them?

In the church I was involved with in England before coming here. We had at the wall of the chancel tablets, in a sense, against the wall covering the Ten Commandments and the creed, central in the church.

And I would imagine that, well, that's certainly where I would put these tablets of the law here in Deuteronomy. If I were orchestrating this ceremony, I would have the Mount of Blessing there and the Mount of Curse there and here in Shechem in the centre where the priest stood, I'd have the tablets of the law because people's lives were to have the law central to it and our response to the law would determine whether we have a curse or a blessing.

So that's where I would put the law, in the centre. But it's not where they're put here because the tablets covered with plaster and inscribed with the words of the law are put on Mount Ebal, not the Mount of Blessing, but the Mount of Curse.

And that at first sight looks odd. Why have the law if you then go and put it on the mountain of curse? What it's saying is that blessing and curse are not equal options.

[16 : 31] In chapter 27 it talks about having a ceremony of blessings and curses, but all we get are curses, no blessings. Read on into chapter 28 and you get a whole long list of blessings and curses, 68 verses of it.

54 of them are about curses. Only 14 are blessings. The predominance at the end of Deuteronomy is on curse, on failure, on the sin of the people.

It's saying that Israel fails, Israel sins, all of them sin. Every person fails in the light of the law of God. It's an acknowledgement of failure.

That's a fairly hard thing for us to grasp because our world is full of a high view of humanity. We often hear people think that people say that people are inherently good, and if left to their own devices, they'll do good rather than evil.

I don't believe that. We're a mixture of the two. But in the end, I think, our evil works. Our society will never change, will never be better unless God does something drastic because of the evil hearts of humanity.

[17 : 40] People are like, I think, a car that's got some faulty steering. If you take your hands off the steering wheel, it doesn't go straight. It veers to one side or the other. I think that's what people are like.

That's a biblical view of what people are like. The left to our own devices will veer off the straight and narrow to one side or the other. And that's the principle here being demonstrated by the law being put on the mount of curse.

What the law, you see, does is two things. I said already in sermons past that the law expresses the ideal, the picture of perfection. It tells us what God's like and what we're to be like in imitation of God.

And that's a great thing. But in enunciating the ideal, in describing what is perfection, it actually shows up my failure because I'm not perfect. So the law not only points me to the ideal, but it exposes my sin and failure as well.

And that's why the stones of the law are to be put on mount Ebal, the mount of curse. Because one of the functions of the law is that it exposes where I fail, and I do, before God.

[18 : 52] Paul wrote in the New Testament, all have turned away from God. There is no one who does good, not even one. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law.

Rather through the law we become conscious of sin. If that were the end of the story, the future would not look good. But it's not.

Because the opening verses of the chapter go on from talking about the plaster covered stones with the law, to talk about another thing that would be put up alongside this on mount Ebal.

Verse 5. And you shall build an altar there to the Lord your God, an altar of stones on which you have not used an iron tool. You must build the altar of the Lord your God of unhewn stones, then offer up burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God.

Alongside the law is the altar. The unhewn stones mean stones that are just sort of broken out of the ground. It's a fairly rough altar. I think to distinguish it from the altars of other religions which would have finely cut stones like bricks that would fit together.

[20 : 06] It's also like the altar that Israel built back in Exodus at Mount Sinai. But what's important is not how it's built, but what's offered on it. Verse 6 says, and you shall offer on it burnt offerings.

That's not a reflection of how bad Israel were to be as cooks. Burnt offerings were just one of many types of sacrifice. Burnt offerings were distinctive because they were the sacrifices that were offered for the atonement of sin.

All sorts of other sacrifices were to be offered, but they weren't sin sacrifices. Burnt offerings were. Here on the Mount of Curse, where the exposure of Israel's sin is made by the law, stands an altar on which could be made sacrifices for the atonement and forgiveness of that very sin.

Burnt offerings acknowledge the need for forgiveness and atonement. Burnt offerings are the way in which God provides a means for people to be forgiven for their sin in the Old Testament. For in the Old Testament, animal sacrifice, and burnt offerings in particular, symbolized the forgiveness of sin.

And here you see on Mount Ebal we have the very heart of what God's character is. A holy and perfect God, represented by stones covered with the law. The perfect, the ideal, God and his standards.

[21 : 32] But alongside it is the altar of God's mercy and forgiveness. For he recognizes that none of us is perfect according to his standards. All of us need his forgiveness.

All of us need his atonement. And there you see epitomized in the altar and the law is the character of God who is holy and merciful. Both together, not clashing, not in disharmony, but united in harmony.

The heart of God himself, holy and merciful. It's the means for a sinful people to keep on relating to him.

This very idea is picked up of course in the New Testament as well. Again by St. Paul in Galatians 3. For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse.

For it's written, and he quotes this verse in Deuteronomy, cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law. It is evident that no one is justified before God by the law.

[22 : 37] But Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written that cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.

That's what's being suggested here at Mount Ebal. That God provides the means for forgiveness and atonement. And in the New Testament we see how he does it in reality. In Jesus' death on the cross.

For in Jesus' death on the cross he takes from us the curse that is ours because we fail God and he takes it on himself as he hangs on the tree or on the cross of Calvary and dies in our place.

And there again is the heart of God who is holy, hence Christ dies, but is merciful in that he dies for us to enable us to be accepted by God. And it's there in the Old Testament, hinted at in this ceremony on Mount Ebar, the law and the altar which combine in the cross of Calvary in the New Testament.

God's heart is unchanging in Old and New Testaments. A heart that is holy and a heart that is merciful. And rather than leave us under curse, God in Christ provides us the means for acceptance, forgiveness and atonement for our sin.

[23 : 48] Paul goes on in that passage in Galatians to say that the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ. To lead us to Christ who is perfect because the law is perfect, the ideal of God.

But to lead us to Christ because it exposes our sin and shows us our need for Jesus in his death atoning for our sin on the cross. But again that's not all because there's a third thing that is to happen on Mount Ebar.

Not only the law on the stones covered in plaster, not only the altar and its burnt offerings, but then after forgiveness in verse 7.

Make sacrifices of well-being, literally fellowship, and eat them there, rejoicing before the Lord your God. After forgiveness, rejoicing in fellowship with God.

This fellowship offering that was to be made was another sacrifice, but not for sin. This was for people who have already had their sins atoned for. This was to celebrate fellowship with God. After forgiveness, celebration of fellowship with God who accepts forgiven sinners.

[24 : 55] and only can we have fellowship with God when our sins are forgiven. Not on our own merits can we come before God and have fellowship with him.

Not because of anything we have done. Though we're not celebrating communion today, it's worth pondering what we do in a communion service that picks up these notions. We recall God's perfect standards, usually in the recitation of the Ten Commandments or the Two Great Commandments early in the service.

We hear the Bible read and sermon preached, reminding us of God's perfect standards. Then later in the service we confess our sin. We don't make a sacrifice, we don't slay an animal, but we confess our sin based on the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for us.

We hear our sins being absolved by God in the words of absolution that are declared because of Jesus' death for us.

And then we come to the Lord's table, not on our own merits, but because of God's mercy, to celebrate and rejoice as we eat together in fellowship with the Lord, not because we're good, but because we're forgiven through Jesus' death on the cross for us.

[26 : 09] This ceremony in Deuteronomy 27 was a covenant renewal ceremony. It was to renew the covenant promises of God and the pledge of Israel to follow God's demands and commands.

As Jesus celebrated the first Lord's Supper, he said, this is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Let us thank God that he is both holy and merciful.

But despite the fact that his perfect standards show up our weaknesses, failures and sins, grace, he in his abundant grace has provided us an eternal means of fellowship with him through the atoning death of Jesus on the cross so that we may no longer stand under the curse for Jesus has died as the curse for us.

Amen.