

Blessings, Curses, and the Nations

Contemporary Application of Leviticus 26

^{ESV} Leviticus 26:1 "You shall not make idols for yourselves or erect an image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land to bow down to it, for I am the LORD your God.

² You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD.

³ "If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them,

⁴ then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.

⁵ Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely.

⁶ I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will remove harmful beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land.

⁷ You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.

⁸ Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand, and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword.

⁹ I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you.

¹⁰ You shall eat old store long kept, and you shall clear out the old to make way for the new.

¹¹ I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you.

¹² And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.

¹³ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

¹⁴ "But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments,

¹⁵ if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant,

¹⁶ then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever that consume the eyes and make the heart ache. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it.

¹⁷ I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down before your enemies. Those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when none pursues you.

¹⁸ And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your sins,

¹⁹ and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze.

²⁰ And your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit.

²¹ "Then if you walk contrary to me and will not listen to me, I will continue striking you, sevenfold for your sins.

²² And I will let loose the wild beasts against you, which shall bereave you of your children and destroy your livestock and make you few in number, so that your roads shall be deserted.

²³ "And if by this discipline you are not turned to me but walk contrary to me,

²⁴ then I also will walk contrary to you, and I myself will strike you sevenfold for your sins.

²⁵ And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall execute vengeance for the covenant. And if you gather within your cities, I will send pestilence among you, and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy.

²⁶ When I break your supply of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven and shall dole out your bread again by weight, and you shall eat and not be satisfied.

²⁷ "But if in spite of this you will not listen to me, but walk contrary to me,

²⁸ then I will walk contrary to you in fury, and I myself will discipline you sevenfold for your sins.

²⁹ You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters.

³⁰ And I will destroy your high places and cut down your incense altars and cast your dead bodies upon the dead bodies of your idols, and my soul will abhor you.

³¹ And I will lay your cities waste and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing aromas.

³² And I myself will devastate the land, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled at it.

³³ And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.

³⁴ "Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies' land; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbaths.

³⁵ As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest that it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were dwelling in it.

³⁶ And as for those of you who are left, I will send faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight, and they shall flee as one flees from the sword, and they shall fall when none pursues.

³⁷ They shall stumble over one another, as if to escape a sword, though none pursues. And you shall have no power to stand before your enemies.

³⁸ And you shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up.

³⁹ And those of you who are left shall rot away in your enemies' lands because of their iniquity, and also because of the iniquities of their fathers they shall rot away like them.

⁴⁰ "But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me,

⁴¹ so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies-- if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity,

⁴² then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

⁴³ But the land shall be abandoned by them and enjoy its Sabbaths while it lies desolate without them, and they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they spurned my rules and their soul abhorred my statutes.

⁴⁴ Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them, for I am the LORD their God.

⁴⁵ But I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD."

⁴⁶ These are the statutes and rules and laws that the LORD made between himself and the people of Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai.

(Lev 26:1-46)

“If My People Who Are Called By My Name...”

A question arises from Leviticus 26, a chapter dealing with blessings and punishments that God will send to Israel if they walk in his statutes or abhor them. The question concerns **contemporary application**. This is such a large question that I was not able to address it fully last time. But

it is really important. The question is, **is it proper to take such a chapter and apply it to a modern nation today?**

Addressing this problem might be easier if we take a verse that essentially implies everything found in Leviticus 26 in one concise statement. Such a statement can be found in **2 Chronicles 7:14**. The well-known verse states, “**If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.**” **Leviticus 26** is broken down into **three main parts**: **blessings** for obedience, **curses** for disobedience, and **forgiveness** and healing for repentance. In this verse we have all three. The wicked ways have clearly brought curses, humbling themselves and turning to God away from their sin brings forgiveness, and the healing of the land brings blessings.

It seems to me that there have been **three main ways of interpreting this** passage, two of which are closer to one another than the third. **The first** is represented by **Pat Robertson** who **applies it straight across the board** from its original context with Israel to the United States. The Christian Action Network reported in April of this year,

“The 90-year-old founder of Christian Broadcasting Network said he doesn’t think God will end the coronavirus outbreak until people ‘*confess your sins and forsake them. Then he heals the land.*’ It’s not before.”

He was addressing a caller to the *700 Club* who asked, “How can God heal our land and forgive the sins when abortion and same-sex marriage are laws and many people are anti-Israel. Doesn’t this prevent his healing and forgiveness?”

Robertson responded saying, “You are right. I think you put your finger on something very important. You know the Bible says — they turn from their wicked ways ... We are not turning when we have done terrible things.” In his response, Robertson specifically mentioned abortion and abuse of the poor as some of the reasons why “God would hold us guilty.”¹

I’m not certain how tempting it is for other countries to interpret it this way. I do know that *America has a peculiar history* that is in some ways unlike any other nation in history, and that this history in turn makes it very tempting for us. Many of our colony and even state charters have

¹ “Pat Robertson Suggests Same-Sex Marriage, Abortion Among Reasons for Covid-19,” *Christian Action Network* (April 28, 2020), <https://christianaction.org/top-stories-of-the-day/pat-robertson-suggests-same-sex-marriage-abortion-among-reasons-for-covid-19/>.

language that **directly invokes the God of the Bible** and even uses the language of “**covenant**.” For example, the famous Mayflower Compact, probably written by my ancestor **William Brewster**, the pastor on the Mayflower, states:

*Having undertaken, for the Glory of God, and advancements of the Christian faith, and the honor of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the Northern parts of Virginia; do by these presents, solemnly and mutually, **in the presence of God**, and one another; **covenant** and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic; for our better ordering, and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.*

It is for documents like this that some have called America a “Christian nation.”

But notice two things. First, it is done “**in the presence of God**.” Second, they “**covenant and combine [them]selves together into a civil body politic**.” The English Puritan **John Winthrop** carefully distinguished here what he called “**the**

covenant between God and man, in the moral law, and the politic covenants and constitutions between men themselves.”² In other words, this compact was not between God and man, it was between men *themselves* in *the presence* of God. In this way, it is more like a Christian marriage.

Winthrop’s “covenant between God and man” refers to **the covenant of works** that was put in place in Eden which binds all men to him in terms of their being responsible for their moral behavior. But the context of both Leviticus 26 and texts like 2Chr 7:14 has a different covenant in mind. Winthrop would have called it **the covenant of grace**. This covenant is the one God made specially with his chosen people in the Old Testament—the nation of Israel.³

² **John Winthrop**, *History of New England, 1630-1649*, ed. Sam Savage (Boston, 1853), 2: 279-282. The whole quote is great, “There is a two-fold liberty, natural (I mean as our nature is now corrupt) and civil or federal. The first is common to man with beasts and other creatures. By this, man, as he stands in relation to man simply, hath liberty to do what he lists; it is a liberty to evil as well as to good. This liberty is incompatible and inconsistent with authority and cannot endure the least restraint of the most just authority. The exercise and maintaining of this liberty makes men grow more evil and in time to be worse than brute beasts: *omnes sumus licentia deteriores*. This is that great enemy of truth and peace, that wild beast, which all of the ordinances of God are bent against, to restrain and subdue it. The other kind of liberty I call civil or federal; it may also be termed moral, in reference to the covenant between God and man, in the moral law, and the politic covenants and constitutions between men themselves. This liberty is the proper end and object of authority and cannot subsist without it; and it is a liberty to that only which is good, just and honest. This liberty you are to stand for, with the hazard (not only of your goods, but) of your lives if need be.”

³ I will use this umbrella term “covenant of grace” for this sermon. For my own views on how the covenant of grace should be parsed, see my *Covenant Theology: A Reformed Baptist Primer*.

Seeing these distinctions clearly, and understanding the covenantal contexts of our passages, many modern Reformed Christians take an almost exclusively negative approach to the interpretation of Pat Robertson and others like him. This would be our second way of interpreting the passage. Kim Riddlebarger says,

If by “Christian nation” we mean that America has some sort of theological charter or covenant with God as set forth in a biblical passage such as 2 Chronicles 7:14, we are sadly mistaken. 2 Chronicles 7:14 applied to Israel in the days of Solomon when God’s glory filled the temple he had just dedicated to YHWH. Passages such as this one are invoked the way they are because of a serious theological misunderstanding—the confusion of promises made regarding the kingdom of God with God’s providential purposes for the civil kingdom. Unless we are willing to rip the passage from its context, it cannot be invoked as a promise applying to modern America. In terms of our national relationship to God, America is every bit as “secular” as is Saudi Arabia, Iran, China, or even Israel, for that matter. America is not a divinely-ordained theocracy with either national promises or threatened curses as was true of Israel.

The reality is that the promise found in 2 Chron 7:14 has nothing whatsoever to do with a national revival or the current

fortunes of the United States. It has everything to do with the dedication of Solomon's temple nearly 3000 years ago.⁴

It isn't necessarily that this view sees no positive application today in a passage like 2Chr 7:14. It's more like it is drastically underemphasized in order to show how wrong the other view is. But while Riddlebarger does not focus on the positive, he does hint at it when he says, "Our Lord's promise of divine protection is given to the church (Matthew 16:18)."

Representing this **third view**, a positive application for today, squarely into the church, **John Piper** says,

First, in the original context where God speaks these words to Solomon, the term "my people" refers to the people of Israel, and therefore the term "their land" refers to a land that is really "theirs" in the sense of God's giving it to them as a covenant blessing, namely, the land of Israel. But when we apply this text to our contemporary situation, "my people" would refer to the Christian Church *who cannot say* [emphasis added], in whatever country that they reside, that this country is "their land." The church has no land, the way

⁴ **Kim Riddlebarger**, "Does America Have a National Covenant With YHWH? No, We Do Not!" *The Riddleblog* (June 19, 2013), <http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/the-latest-post/2013/6/19/does-america-have-a-national-covenant-with-yhwh-no-we-do-not.html>.

Israel had a land. The Christian Church is a pilgrim people. We are aliens and exiles (1 Peter 2:11). Therefore, the proper application of 2 Chronicles 7:14 would, perhaps, be that, if the church will humble herself and pray and seek God's face and turn from her wicked ways, God will incline to heal the church. But it goes beyond what this text assures if we say that any country where the Christian church humbles herself will experience a Great Awakening.⁵

The awakening he refers to seems to be a spiritual one—people will be saved.

I want to add one more comment to this view. Russell Moore rightly adds to Piper's understanding, "2 Chronicles 7:14 itself starts with the question of identity: 'If my people...called by my name...' This, or any other country, is not called by the name of God. The kingdom of God, on the other hand, is (Isa 62:3-5)."⁶ What is curious is that he says this in a piece he calls, "Sorry, The Bible Doesn't Promise to Make America Great Again," and it was a piece written only a few days prior to the inauguration of Donald

⁵ John Piper, *A Hunger for God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997): 115-116.

⁶ Russell Moore, "Sorry, The Bible Doesn't Promise to Make America Great Again," *The Washington Post* (Jan 14, 2016), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/01/14/sorry-the-bible-doesnt-promise-to-make-american-great-again/?fbclid=IwAR28jAa08UIMzSW6hw1yCbWmeGl3dtskyxVGFmaaC2EoeO9k3qaDapTnZE>.

J. Trump. In other words, at the very least, it was a call to conservatives not to confuse Christianity with American civil politics. And I agree with that idea. But also notice that it really reinforces what Riddlebarger does. As far as national application today, there really just isn't any.

Let's [summarize these three views](#). First, the passage applies to America. Second, the passage in no way applies to America. Third, the passage applies to the church. The second and third views can and often do overlap. Since [2 Chronicles 7:14](#) is in many ways a summary verse of [Leviticus 26](#), this leaves us with really only one contemporary application to our passage—the church.

Even here, many are careful to point out that the promises about the land and wars and animals and all of the other very [physical blessings](#) and curses in Leviticus 26 [cannot apply one-to-one to the church](#), because as Piper said, we don't have any land. Thus, we are left in many ways simply [spiritualizing](#) those somehow in the church. While I think this is acceptable, because I did this very thing last time when we saw Christ and our salvation from hell through his obedience to the covenant, and then Paul's appropriately using the chapter to tell us to keep ourselves from idols as our main application, [I'm now wondering two things](#). Is

there **no sense in which we can apply this to a secular nation** that we understand is not in a covenant of grace theocratic relationship to Yahweh? Are our options exhausted? And what about **the physical blessing/curse aspect** to this? Must we only spiritualize it all?

To these questions I've not seen many try to answer except in the negative from the narrow context of things like the passage we have looked at. But what if those ideas are not taking seriously enough other Scriptures? What if there really is something important here that we can glean not only for our own salvation in the church, but for the nation(s) in which we also happen to sojourn like pilgrims as we await our heavenly promised land?

God's Judgment Against the Nations

There is a curious truth that is **almost always overlooked** when addressing this. It is a truth found over and over again in the prophets of Israel. That is, time and again in God's holy word, **Yahweh addresses the nations**. Who are these nations? In alphabetical order they include Ammon, Arabia, Aram, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Assyria (Nineveh), Babylon, Damascus, Edom, Egypt, Ekron, Elam, Ethiopia, Gaza,

Hadrach, Hazor, Kedar, Lebanon, Moab, Philistia, Sidon, and Tyre. If we include prophecy, we might add Persia, Greece, and Rome to the mix.

Oracles against the Nations in the Prophets

	Isaiah	Jeremiah	Ezekiel	Joel	Amos	Obad	Jonah	Nahum	Zeph	Zech*
Ammon		49:1-6	25:1-7		1:13-15					
Arabia	21:13-17									
Assyria (Nineveh)	10:5-19; 14:24-27						(Nin)	(Nin)		
Babylon	13:1-14:23; 21:1-10; 46:1-47:15	50:1-51:64								2:9-12?
Damascus	17:1-6?	49:23-27			1:3-5					9:1
Edom	21:11-12	49:7-22	25:12-14		1:11-12	1-14?				
Egypt	18:1-20:6	46:2-26	29:1-32:32							
Elam		49:34-39								
Ethiopia									2:12-15	
Gaza					1:6-8					9:5
Kedar and Hazor		49:28-33								
Lebanon										11:1-3?
Moab	15:1-16:14	48:1-47	25:8-11		2:1-3				2:8-11	
Philistia	14:28-32	47:1-7	25:15-17	3:4-8					2:5-7	9:6
Tyre Sidon	23:1-18		26:1-28:19; 28:20-23	3:4-8	1:9-10					9:2-3

*Additional cities /states are denounced in [9:1-8](#); Hadrach, Aram ([v. 1](#)); Ashkelon, Ekron ([v. 5](#)); Ashdod ([v. 6](#))⁷

⁷ Chart at <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart-23-03/#chart-23-03-star-1>.

To state the obvious, these nations are not God's chosen people. Nor are they under any kind of covenant of grace. Nevertheless, they are **addressed in judgment cycles**, where God promises that he will judge them for one reason or another. The main texts that deal with this are **Isaiah 13-23**; **Jeremiah 46-51**; **Ezekiel 25-31**; and **Amos 1-2**. What I want to do for a moment is look at just one of these: **Amos**.

The book of Amos was written **during the reigns of Uzziah** king of Judah and Jeroboam king of Israel, putting the date roughly around **760 B.C.** Other than the last few verses of the book, it is **entirely negative** in content, focusing on the universal justice of God. While the majority of the book is taken up as an oracle against Israel (the northern kingdom), it begins with a series of oracles against the nations. Let's focus on what had the great Lion of Judah (**Amos 1:2**) so angry.

It begins with a judgment against **Damascus**, the famous city where both Abraham and Paul spent time just east of the eastern border of Israel. "**For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment**" (**1:3**). **Transgressions are sins**. God is punishing Damascus for its sins, even though they are not under the covenant of grace with Yahweh.

In fact, we see this exact same opening line fives more times against the nations: for **Gaza** (6), **Tyre** (9), **Edom** (11), the **Ammonites** (13), and **Moab** (2:1). Six makes the number of man. Add the seventh oracle against **Judah** (God's people, vs. 4) and you have seven, the perfect number. Add the final one against **Israel** (also God's people, 6), and you have 7+1. God will go after Israel for the rest of the book. The point here is, the exact same phrase is used against God's people and the nations. They are all committing transgressions and being punished. There is no distinction on that point.

Let's look at some of the things the nations were doing. **Damascus** is said to have “**threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron.**” Gilead is in the land of Gad, belonging to the people of Israel. God is saying that Damascus has treated the people of Gilead as though they were nothing but a pile of grain, crushing them into the ground.⁸

Gaza, southwest of Jerusalem along the Mediterranean, one of four Philistine cities mentioned by Amos, and part of the land Israel was not able to conquer in the days of Joshua, “**carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom.**” This seems to refer to one of the many times that

⁸ This is how the ESV Study Bible puts it.

they took the Israelites into captivity, as happened often for example in the days of the Judges.

Tyre, the city that helped Solomon build the temple in the days of king Hiram, was the great port city of the Sidonians northwest of Jerusalem. They committed the same sin as Gaza, but it was worse, because they apparently broke covenant with Israel.

The **Ammonites** take us back east of Israel, now south of Damascus. Their sin also involves Gilead. “**They have ripped open pregnant woman ... that they might enlarge their border.**” They went to war with Israel and committed terrible sins in God’s eyes.

Moab takes us south, but still east, of Israel. For the first time, we get a sin that does not seem to directly involve God’s people. They “**burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom.**” Importantly, “**The fact that Moab’s sin was against neither Israel nor Judah, but its southern neighbor Edom, demonstrates that these judgments are based not on ethnicity but on the universal justice of God**” [bold original].⁹ We can stop here in Amos in terms of the sins, because we have just witnessed that **God holds nations accountable for more than just hurting his own people,**

⁹ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1661.

though even that would have been enough for what I'm trying to demonstrate. There truly is a universal moral law that God holds all nations accountable to.

This is why **Isaiah** concludes **his oracles against the nations** by saying,

- ¹ Behold, the LORD will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.
- ² And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor.
- ³ The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the LORD has spoken this word.
- ⁴ The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish.
- ⁵ The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, **broken the everlasting covenant**.
- ⁶ Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.

(**Isa 24:1-6**)

Here we see that in fact **all nations are under a covenant with God**. This is the **covenant of works**. This is the “**everlasting covenant**” that they have broken. Since it is clear that he did not enter into a special covenant with them like he did with Israel, the only possible covenant it could be talking about is **the covenant of works**.

Notice for what they have done, God is “**cursing**” the earth. This is the very same language used in Leviticus 26 for the “curses” God is bringing upon Israel for transgressing their special covenant that God gave to Moses in the form of the Ten Commandments. Therefore, we have established that **God brings covenant curses** upon the nations and he tells us this in several books in the holy Scripture.

There is something important to say here about Israel. It is a point made by Peter who gets it from Ezekiel (9:6). Someone reminds us, “**Peter, in his first epistle, reminds his readers that divine judgment begins in God’s family (1Pe 4:17).**”¹⁰ This is absolutely true, and it is actually the rhetorical point of Amos. The point is made both in the brief list of sins committed by the nations and by Judah (**Amos 1:3-2:5**) compared to Israel (**2:6-9:10**), and in the way the list of nations comes at us. For what Amos is doing in listing

¹⁰ **Samuel J. Schultz**, *Leviticus*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1983), ch. 2.

these nations is effectively playing a game of darts. In darts, one of the games you can play is to throw your darts all around the board according to numbers, beginning at 1 and going up through 20. Only after hitting them all in order do you go for the bull's eye in the center.



So yes, judgment does begin at the house of God. In as much as this is true, it is that much more serious for God's people to obey him by loving his law.

But this same commentator who reminds us of what Peter goes on to say, “God has higher standards for those to whom He has revealed Himself. The nation of Israel was subject to curses and blessings (Lev. 26; Deut. 28) and was judged more severely than the surrounding nations (see, e.g., Amos 1-2).” Listen to Isaiah and tell me if the nations are judged less severely:

- ¹⁶ I say, “I waste away, I waste away. Woe is me! For the traitors have betrayed, with betrayal the traitors have betrayed.”
- ¹⁷ Terror and the pit and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth!
- ¹⁸ He who flees at the sound of the terror shall fall into the pit, and he who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare. For the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth tremble.
- ¹⁹ The earth is utterly broken, the earth is split apart, the earth is violently shaken.
- ²⁰ The earth staggers like a drunken man; it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again.
- ²¹ On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth.

²² They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.

(Isaiah 24:16-22)

This sounds pretty much horrific if you ask me.

What we have now added is that God not only **very clearly judges the nations**, all of which are under a covenant with him. He not only judges them **for sin** that they have committed against him, he does so **on a level that is every bit as frightening** as the judgments that God brings upon Israel in Leviticus 26.

Blessings and the nations?

A more difficult to question to answer is **whether or not God blesses other nations besides Israel**. There are **three ways** to answer this. The first is to use verses similar to 2Chr 7:14 and apply verses specific to Israel to the nations today. A second is to look at whether or not God physically blessed nations other than Israel in the OT. A third is to think theologically about the covenant of works. Since the first option is what many normally use, I'll start here.

One of the Scriptures that often comes up is **Genesis 12:3**, “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families [nations] of the earth shall be blessed” (**Gen 12:3**). Like 2 Chronicles 7:14, this verse has very similar interpretations.

On one end there are those who say that today this means you have to **bless the nation of Israel**, treat them right politically, and that if you do this, you will have God’s blessing as a nation. If you don’t, as Robertson said, God will curse your nation. These are, then, the same people who generally say that the Chronicles verse is for America. **What this view does right** is take seriously the idea that God is first and foremost blessing *Abraham* here. Abraham becomes the father of the Jews, and therefore, it follows that those who bless his descendants will also be blessed. **What it does wrong** is confuse the modern nation-state of Israel with the ancient theocracy of Israel. While they share the same land, and in some ways the same people, there are many differences.

First and most important, **God cursed the national theocracy, destroyed its second temple, and scattered its people**. Jesus makes this abundantly clear when he cursed the fig tree. Does this mean he ceased to be the God of the physical nation in a special way? **Yes, it does**. Jeremiah and

Isaiah called what happened to Israel the first time God did this a “**divorce**” (**Isa 50:1; Jer 3:8**). When you get divorced, you are no longer married. The covenant is over. There is no more special relationship present. That doesn’t mean you don’t have a history and it also doesn’t mean the marriage can’t be reestablished.

In fact, as we learn through Hosea, God would take Israel back, return them to the land, rebuild their temple, keep his promises to Abraham, and through this the Messiah would come. Once Jesus came in the flesh, it was apparent that the Jews had committed such a great sin in putting the Lord to death, that the curse was returned sevenfold. **The only question we could have** lingering about this is has God somehow taken the nation of Israel back again to be his covenant people?

A lot of people think this is exactly what happened in 1948 when Israel became a nation. The problem is, there is no record of God establishing a covenant with Israel at this time, like there is in the days of Abraham and again after the first captivity. Rather, unless you want to call NATO God, men established this nation.

But there’s **another problem**. Part of the reason why Israel is no longer a special nation is because first, Jesus has

taken a better nation to be his own. This nation isn't new, but rather came out of the old. The NT is replete with language that **the church is in fact the new covenant Israel**, that the nation was a physical type of a greater spiritual reality that covers not merely a tiny plot of land in Canaan, but the whole earth. We are called “**true Jews**” (**Rom 2:28-29**), the “**circumcision**” (**Php 3:3**), a “**royal priesthood and holy nation**” (**1Pe 2:9**), “**Jerusalem from above**” (**Gal 4:26**), a “**chosen people**” (**Col 3:12**), “**God's temple**” (**1Co 3:16**), “**sons of Abraham**” (**Gal 3:7**), even “**the Israel of God**” (**Gal 6:16**). How? Because the old covenant has given way to the new; the new has taken on the fullness of the promises that originated when God said all the nations of the earth will be blessed in you.

Furthermore, in divine council theology, Christ only had **the land of Canaan as his land** in the OT. But now that he has conquered the evil powers, risen from the dead, and ascended to the right hand of power in heaven, he is disinheriting them and inheriting the whole earth for himself (**Ps 2:8; 82:8**)! In other words, it's all his now, not just the land flowing with milk and honey.

All of this yields to **another interpretation**, which is that either the promise to Abraham in **Genesis 12:3** has been

completed, or more likely, that it is **fulfilled only in the church**. But the same kind of problem that accompanied our previous verse arises here as well. Does this mean that the only blessings that are found in the nations today are spiritual blessings that are to be had when Gentiles become Christians? Some seem to read it this way. At best, what many will say is that the nations are only blessed *in as much as* the church brings the light of the kingdom to them through mercy and justice. But while this is self-evidently true, is this the only way God would bless the nations physically today?

Let's move to the second point here. **Did God bless nations in the OT physically?** First, off, let's establish that God did bless them physically because of the promise given to Abraham. It is clear that in Genesis, God blesses those around him and his family who treat them well. For example, when **Joseph** is sold into slavery, the **pharaoh** listens to his interpretation of a dream, and Egypt alone out of all the nations around prospered during a time of famine. So here we have God blessing Egypt because of Abraham.

What about others who apparently did not know Abraham or the God of Israel?¹¹ Consider the boast of the king of Assyria. “When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes. For he says: ‘By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I remove the boundaries of peoples and plunder their treasures; like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples; and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken, so I have gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing or opened the mouth or chirped’” (Isa 10:12-14).

God responds (see the following verses in Isaiah, but I’m picking up the answer he gives to him later),

²³ Whom have you mocked and reviled? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes to the heights? Against the Holy One of Israel!

²⁴ By your servants you have mocked the Lord, and you have said, With my many chariots I have gone up the heights of

¹¹ Here, I’m using “the God of Israel” to refer to the Son, the Second Yahweh. As we will see below, they like all peoples know in some dim historical darkened sense who the Father is (Rom 1:21; Acts 17:28-29; etc.).

the mountains, to the far recesses of Lebanon, to cut down its tallest cedars, its choicest cypresses, to come to its remotest height, its most fruitful forest.

²⁵ I dug wells and drank waters, to dry up with the sole of my foot all the streams of Egypt.

²⁶ Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins,

²⁷ while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded, and have become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it is grown.

²⁸ I know your sitting down and your going out and coming in, and your raging against me.

(Isa 37:23-28)

Clearly, the king of Assyria is prospering. And God makes it known to him that this is his predetermined purpose. In other words, God is in fact blessing him physically. We see this with other world leaders such as Nebuchadnezzar as well.

Other than God raising him up to become the world-power, the question that is left unanswered is whether or not there was something morally superior about Assyria at this

point in time. Given that there is hardly a time in Israel's life where they are blessed like we read in Leviticus 26, and given what we know of the wickedness in the futility of the Gentile world, I would say that the blessings are coming mostly at the simple sovereign will of God which he has kept in his own secret purposes.

However, we can say a bit more. Even though the nations are not under a covenant of grace, we know from Jesus himself that God often acts graciously to the unjust. Remember that he says, “He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt 5:45). Surely, this is the blessing of God upon people that do not know him. Theologically, we call this **common grace**.

Second, if we think strictly about the **covenant of works**, we can think about how it has both curses *and* blessings attached to it. The curses are due to disobedience; the blessings to obedience. While spiritually speaking all it takes is one act of disobedience for someone to go to hell, the physical world is type of this. So, physical judgments are a type of the eternal hell. In the same way, **physical blessings are a type of heaven**. They aren't heaven, but they represent it. To show people something tangible of what heaven is

like, would it not make sense that God would reward nations with physical blessings when they make just laws in order to show them the riches of his goodness in Christ?

I honestly do not know how that would work, given that **all nations are simultaneously wicked in some areas and righteous in others**; they all have unjust and just laws at the same time. But we do know that in his sovereignty God does bless nations that never heard of him, that he at least does this in his common grace, and that it is quite possible that even this grace is tied to the covenant that all men are born into by virtue of their being in Adam.

Repentance and the Nations?

Finally, I want to turn to this idea of **repentance and the nations**. Someone writes about our oracle lists against the nations, “**It is obvious that these speeches were not primarily spoken or written to be heard or acted upon by the nations mentioned in the texts. Their function and importance were not dependent on the foreign power’s knowledge of or response to them.**”¹² While this author suggests that their

¹² **John H. Hayes**, “The usage of Oracles Against Foreign Nations in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 87:1 (March 1968): 81. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3263424?seq=1>.

purpose was to justify an imminent war against those peoples, something like Amos makes it clear that the focus could also be God's judgment upon his own people.

But the point about them being **primarily written never to be heard** by the pagans **cannot be entirely true**. First of all, we know that these nations had massive interaction with Israel, and they would have been quickly made aware that Israel's God was pronouncing doom upon them for their sins. In other words, the "bad news" would not have had a difficult time spreading, especially to the nations that were near to Israel and/or its people.

We actually have **two entire OT books** directed against this very same Assyrian that we have seen Isaiah speak to (in the form of the city of Nineveh). These are **Jonah** and **Nahum**. Jonah is prophesying perhaps as much as 150 years prior to Nahum's prophecy to the same nation. His is the first warning to these Gentile peoples.

Recall that in the story, God directs Jonah to go to Nineveh, a thought so repugnant to him that he flees in the absolute opposite direction towards Spain. After he had time to think about the error of his ways in challenging the Omnipotent God in the belly of a great fish, Jonah goes to Nineveh. The city was so large that it took three full days to

cross it (**Jonah 3:3**). About a day into his walk it says, “**And he called out ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’**” (**4**).

What’s so amazing about this is that we have **no evidence that Jonah preached anything other than unconditional immanent destruction with no hope of salvation**. Yet, it tells us that as soon as they heard these words, “**The people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes**” (**5-6**). The king issued a decree that all the people should “**turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish**” (**8-9**). Notice that they are confessing sinning against moral law and God—*violence*. They knew that was wrong.

Now, Jonah **does not seem to have told them that Yahweh was going to bring this disaster**, for it only uses the word Elohim (g-o-d) of the events in Nineveh. I suppose someone could argue that when they said, “*God may turn and relent...*” that maybe they were turning to one of their own

gods. However, the next verse makes it clear that it was in fact the Most High who relented. It says, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it” (Jon 3:10). Even though it still uses Elohim, no Jew would give credit to some fallen angel! This means that however they understood it, they most likely did not turn to Christ (Second Yahweh), but to the Father. They turned to Most High God, who heard their cry, saw their repentance, and had mercy on them.

We know from what we saw earlier about the blessings God gave this people in Isaiah’s prophecy that God in fact blessed them after this, for Isaiah’s prophecy comes between Jonah and Nahum, around 700 B.C. It is here that we see the blessings implied. But something happened over time. Winthrop noticed in the same place we quoted above, “The exercise and maintaining of this liberty [that comes through God’s blessing] makes men grow more evil and in time to be worse than brute beasts.”

It is into this, perhaps as much as 75 more years after Isaiah, that Nahum spends three full chapters essentially expounding Jonah’s earlier one-sentence sermon. Nineveh is coming to an end. The Assyrian will be taken over. If

Jonah is an indication, even here God would have heard them if they had turned back to him. They did not, and the Babylonian took them over in 612 B.C. Nevertheless, God did hear their cries for mercy when they offered them up, he turned when they repented, and he blessed them.

Leviticus 26 and the Nations Today?

What we have seen now is several features directly related to Leviticus 26 and the offshoot verses we have looked at as shorter parallels. **First**, the nations are **in a covenant** with God. This covenant binds them to do his will. It also means that they know in some rudimentary sense (i.e. the conscience) what right and wrong was (e.g. **Rom 2:14-15**). They were therefore held accountable for this information. This is what Romans 1-2 is all about.

Second, **God would curse** them if they persisted in their wickedness. This is the story of at least 20 different Gentiles nations in the OT. **Third**, **God clearly blessed** various peoples. We do not know for certain how his blessing is related to obedience to the covenant of works, but we do have reasons to believe that God might indeed show temporary blessings to nations that have moral laws, laws

that they understood simply by being in covenant with him as he wrote them on their hearts.

Finally, we know that God has at least at some points in time gotten the word out to the nations that he was angry at their sin. We know from that at least one nation repented, even though they weren't even given that as an option. And we know that God forgave them and blessed them even more than they were previously.

With all of this, I think we can make a few observations about how or if **Leviticus 26** can be applied to the nations, even though it was clearly given to Israel in its own peculiar covenant of grace.

First of all, we have to say that this chapter and like-minded verses such as **1Chr 7:14** were in fact written to Israel. Those verses have a context that is peculiar to them and therefore it is not proper to apply them one-to-one to any nation today. The covenant of grace is not the covenant of works.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that these passages are themselves rooted in principles that transcend Israel's peculiar covenant. Those principles are moral principles that were not invented on Mt. Sinai and apply to all peoples. The principles themselves go back to the Garden and even

further back into eternity itself in as much as they are reflections of the One True God who is Lord of all the earth. And God put them in the hearts of all men. We all know right from wrong.

Leviticus 26 is rooted upon obedience and disobedience to the LORD's precepts. Those were fleshed out in great detail for the nation of Israel. However, since each man and therefore nation has the moral law written upon their heart, and since each nation is also by virtue of their being made up of human beings made in the image of God who are born under the covenant of Adam and works, **the principles of cursing and blessing and repentance can and should be applied to every nation on earth.** God does not let nations off the hook for evil simply because they are not in a gracious covenant with Yahweh. This is why he curses them all. But neither does he refuse to give them blessings by only cursing them even though there is always evil (to a greater or lesser degree) in every nation.

To say this is **not in any way to confuse those nations with Israel.** Some do this when they take yet another famous verse, **"Blessed is the nation whose God is Yahweh"** (**Ps 33:12**), by whom I believe the Psalmist meant Christ. Well, there's only one/two of those: OT Israel and OT/NT

church. That's it. Other nations know the Father, and people within those nations might make charters before the Son, but he has only come to these two groups in a covenant of grace. Nineveh is not Israel.

In fact, that was why Jonah got so angry at God. He knew that these people did *not* have a special covenant with the LORD, yet he also knew, as he says, “**that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster**” (Jon 4:2). He knew it, didn't even tell them, and God still relented after apparently working grace in their hearts through the preached word of the reluctant prophet. This is God's prerogative. As the last verse of that book says, “**I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?**” (Jon 4:11).

All this said, it is up to the church to remember first that **judgment does not begin in our own nation(s)**. It begins in the house of God. Our duty is first and foremost to obey God's law as we understand it from the Holy Scripture. When we fail, we must repent and turn from our wicked ways, relying upon his mercy and grace to forgive us and lead us back to the narrow road. As the church, we have

things that we do wrong as well, and when those are made known to us, we are covenant-bound to change course and set our sails in a godly direction.

But a nation can do this, corporately, to a lesser degree. That's the point of Nineveh. I'm not talking here about God's sovereign prerogative to bless whomever he wants. That's up to him. I'm talking about applying Leviticus 26 with its blessings, curses, and promises of forgiveness if they repent to a nation. **For this to happen, the church has to make known the law and the gospel**, the Kingdom and the King—the Lord Jesus Christ. People have to hear about him.

God forgives even pagan cities when they repent. This doesn't happen often, and it isn't entirely clear what the minimum is for this to occur. Perhaps it must ultimately come from the leadership of that nation, like it did in Nineveh. Even though the people repented, it is interesting that the book brings the king's heeding of the prophecy into view. But whatever the case, the church must speak the truth to a new generation that does not know its right hand from its left. If we do, who knows, **God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.**”

If we do, then would it not make sense that God still cares today about people who do not know their right hand from their left?

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