

Blessings and Curses?

By Brad Jersak

QUESTION:

I am currently on my fourth read of *A More Christlike God* and each time I read it, I am getting to know God more and more. Regarding your notion that wrath is a metaphor for God's consent, I wonder how to interpret God's blessings and curses, which God seemed to bring about directly. Can this be reconciled?

RESPONSE:

Re: God's blessings and curses, I think a good way to approach that question would be to take a walk through the Bible as follows:

1. OLD COVENANT PROMISES:

First, notice how the old covenant (Deuteronomy 28 for example) seems to say that IF you are good, God will directly bless your crops with sun and rain, but if you disobey God, he will curse your crops with drought or hail, etc.

Sample Blessings:

And the Lord will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand (Deuteronomy 28:11-12).

Sample Curses:

*The Lord will strike you with consumption, with fever, with inflammation, with severe burning fever, with the sword, with scorching, and with mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish. And your heavens which **are** over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you **shall** be iron. The Lord will change the rain of your land to powder and dust; from the heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed* (Deuteronomy 28:22-24).

2. OLD COVENANT GLITCHES:

Notice, next, how an honest reflection by the Psalmist questions the reality of the Deuteronomic covenant from his own experience. He cites examples of the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering. He *wants* the covenant to be true when he thinks he is righteous but is also relieved when he has been sinful that God "did not treat us as our sins deserved."

Psalmist's Complaint:

*For I **was** envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For **there are** no pangs in their death, but their strength **is** firm. They **are not** in trouble **as other** men, Nor are they plagued **like other** men. Therefore pride serves as their necklace; Violence covers them **like** a garment.*

*Their eyes bulge with abundance; They have more than a heart could wish. They scoff and speak wickedly **concerning** oppression; They speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth* (Psalm 73:3-9).

Psalmist's Relief

*He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel. The Lord **is** merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive **with us**, Nor will He keep **His anger** forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities* (Psalm 103:7-10).

To summarize thus far, the old covenant promises that God will directly bless the righteous and curse the wicked, using weather phenomena for example, to create or destroy prosperity. But the Psalmist is bewildered and frustrated at how these promises are not obviously fulfilled in his own experience. Sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper.

This contrast between Deuteronomy and the Psalms can also be seen at times between the patriarchs and the prophets. Again, the patriarchal voice tends to emphasize how God elects to bless his chosen family, while the prophets lament their suffering.

Sometimes these are related to being righteous vs. wicked, but other times, the blessings are pure grace and the curses are pure tragedy, apart from behavior.

3. NEW COVENANT GRACE:

Notice, finally, how Jesus challenges the old worldview with his own revelation of the nature of God. God in his perfect and indiscriminate grace causes the sun to shine and the clouds to rain on both the righteous and wicked. He is good to ALL and his compassion shows no favoritism.

Conversely, when tragedy hits, Jesus rejects the idea that God has selected some for salvation and others for calamity. Tragedy is neither caused by God nor is it selective according to human behavior. To summarize as I did in *A More Christlike God*, "Sh*t happens and God is good."

God's Indiscriminate Grace to All

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not

*even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more **than others**? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect* (Matthew 5:44-48).

French philosopher-mystic, Simone Weil, pointed out that the sun shines and the rain falls on the righteous and the wicked...but so do earthquakes and tornados. God is not the direct cause and we cannot infer who is righteous or wicked according to how life treats them. It doesn't work that way. Jesus addresses this in Luke 13.

Tragedy's Indiscriminate Targets

*There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all **other** Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all **other** men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish"* (Luke 13:1-5).

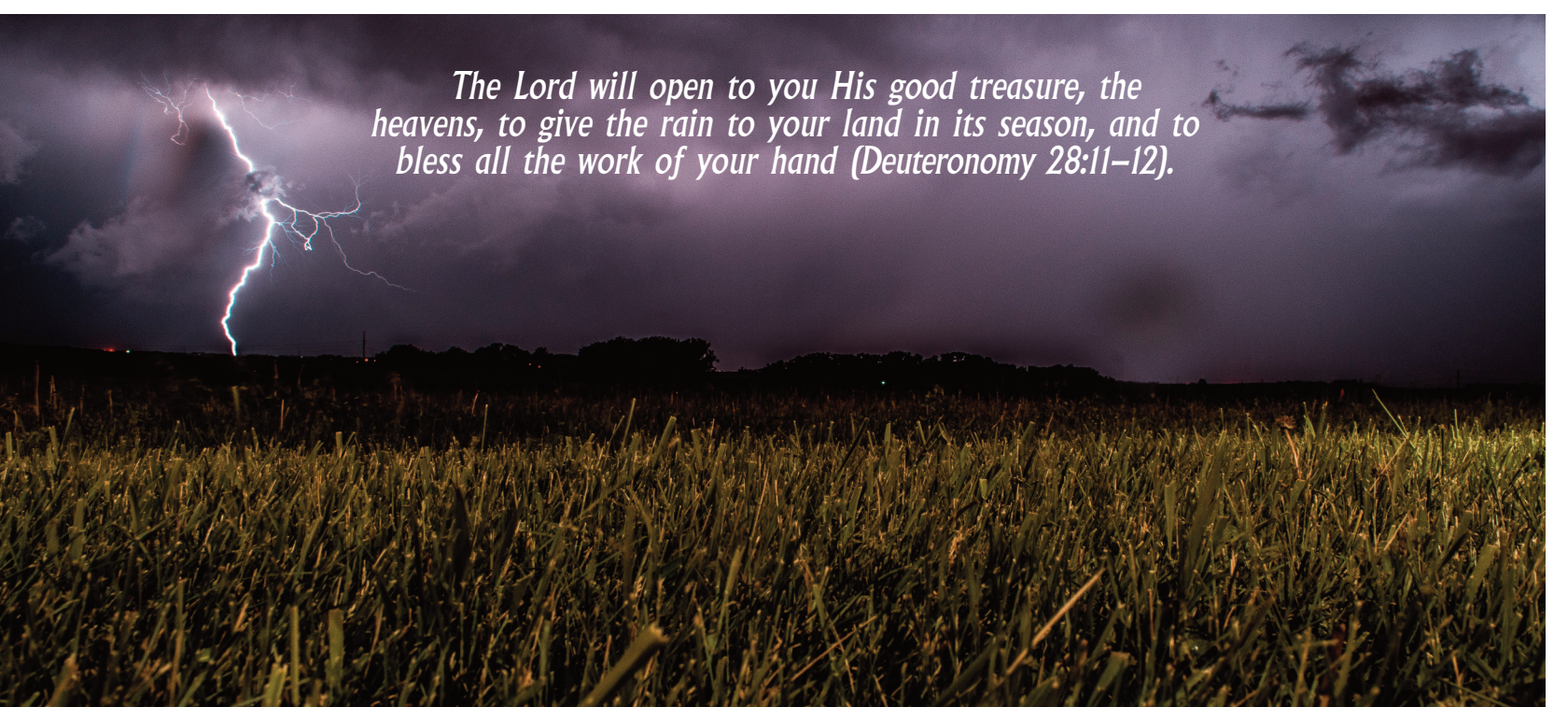
Note: Jesus adds the warning that all alike must repent. He's not saying, "Sh*t happens, so 'let us eat and

drink, for tomorrow we die!" (cf. Isaiah 22:13, 1 Corinthians 15:32). Somehow he concludes that if the violence of man and nature could strike anyone at any time, our response should be sobriety rather than hedonism. He calls us to recognize that if life is so hazardous and fleeting, how we live matters. We will, in fact, *all die*, but we need not *perish*, in the sense of wasting our lives and decomposing. There's a resurrection coming, so let's turn or reorient our lives toward the life of Christ! It's not a threat of divine violence, but an urgent invitation to eternal life...and the randomness of life serves as a wake-up call.

SUMMARY: THREE DISTINCT PERSPECTIVES

So here we have three distinct perspectives. From these, we might derive these principal takeaways:

- 1) The Scriptures show a **developing understanding** of who God is and how God works;
- 2) These **developing understandings challenge each other**, and the authors are not embarrassed about this; and
- 3) **Jesus gets the final word** on who God is and how he works. Whereas the early covenant was transactional, David is already seeing how grace operates above law, and Jesus expresses this through his own perfect revelation. □



The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand (Deuteronomy 28:11-12).