

## **The Choice is yours**

### **Leviticus 26:1-46**

Some choices we make are what we could call "one-offs". We think about the decision, make up our minds and that's it. For example, take the choice to be an organ donor. I can investigate all the information. I can weigh up the pros and cons. I can make my decision. That's it. I don't have to think about it again. It doesn't affect my day-to-day life. The fact I've chosen to be an organ donor doesn't change the way I shop. It doesn't alter what sort of car I buy. Certainly, I could change my mind – if I so chose – but the choice doesn't have much impact on the way I live.

Other choices we make aren't like that. For example, take the choice to get married. The process of making the choice is much the same. I investigate all the information. I weigh up the pros and cons. I make my decision. But at that point, I can't say: That's it. This is a choice I live with for the rest of my life – and it does impact my day-to-day life. The fact that I'm married will affect the way I shop. The fact that I'm married may very well alter the type of car I buy.

In Exodus 19 and 20, the people of Israel come to Mount Sinai. They'd been slaves in Egypt – and their life as slaves wasn't pleasant. The Egyptians had treated them cruelly. But God rescued them from that. He sent a series of plagues against the Egyptians and eventually the Egyptian king – the Pharaoh – let them go. No sooner had they gone than the Pharaoh changed his mind and chased after them. God opened up the Red Sea for the Israelites to walk through the middle and then closed it

again when the Egyptian army tried to follow. Now He'd brought them to Mount Sinai.

At Mount Sinai, the Israelites reaffirmed their desire that this God be their God – and that they be His people. God told them what was involved in being His people – the things that are detailed in the rest of Exodus and all of Leviticus. They made a choice. They indicated they'd submit to God's will. They indicated they'd live as His people and follow His commands.

What sort of choice is it?

- Is it a "one-off"? Is it the sort of choice where one can make it and then continue on with life as usual?
- Or is it the sort of choice that has an ongoing impact on the way they live from day to day?

And what about today? What happens when someone today says they want to become one of God's people – when they want to become a Christian?

- Is it a "one-off"? Is it the sort of choice where one can make it and then continue on with life as usual?
- Or is it the sort of choice that has an ongoing impact on the way they live from day to day?

Having gone through much of Leviticus, it should be fairly obvious by now that it's the sort of choice that impacts the way these Israelites lived from day to day. The instructions God gave them related to all sorts of aspects of their day-to-day lives. We've seen that over the last few weeks. Leviticus 26 reinforces that message – but from a different perspective.

### **Summary of the Covenant**

The chapter begins with two verses that spell out a couple of important requirements that God gave them. Verses 1

and 2:

*Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it. I am the Lord your God. Observe My sabbaths and have reverence for My sanctuary. I am the Lord.*

There are three basic commands highlighted:

1. no idols;
2. observe the sabbath; and
3. respect the sanctuary.

All three have something to do with a proper attitude toward God – of having proper reverence for Him. They relate to treating God as God.

Now, of course, all God's requirements are like that.

- If God tells me not to steal and I go ahead and steal, then I'm not showing proper reverence for God.
- If God tells me not to murder and I go ahead and murder, then I'm not showing appropriate reverence for God.

You can't get away from that aspect. If God tells me the right way to treat my fellow humans and I don't treat them that way, then that shows I'm not really treating God as God.

Yet, these three commands aren't directly dealing with how I treat my fellow humans. Rather, they're dealing with how I relate to God. It's necessary that the people have and maintain a proper appreciation of just who God is – of the majesty and greatness and holiness of His being. For if they fail to maintain that proper awe and reverence, then it's highly likely they'll fail to keep His other requirements. Disrespect for God will naturally

flow into disrespect for His will and His commandments.

### **Blessings on Obedience**

Following these three laws is a list of the consequences that will flow if the people keep the covenant. If they live in proper relationship with God – if they truly live as His people – then they will experience the blessings of that relationship. We read these verses before – verses 3 to 13. I won't read them again now – just summarise them.

The consequences are spelt out in terms of blessings that are particularly relevant in an agricultural community.

- Rain in its proper season. That's very important – as we've been reminded in our own country in recent years. Without the rain the people won't be able to grow their crops or feed their flocks.
- With the rain, they'd have good, plentiful harvests. God would ensure a plentiful food supply. They'd have more than enough to put on the table.
- The absence of dangerous, wild animals.
- The absence of warring enemies. What's the good of harvesting plenty of food if the enemy takes it from you? That happened in Gideon's day. The Israelites did all the hard work and the Midianites took the crop.
- The ability to defeat their enemies in battle. God would enable them to beat those who attacked them – and to do so easily.
- Growth in population.
- The presence of God.

It's significant that the list finishes with the promise of God's presence in their midst. That was the goal of the covenant – that God be their God and dwell among them. As we've seen over recent weeks, there's danger involved

in that. God is a holy God. Israel's an unclean and sinful people. To serve a holy God means putting away their uncleanness and their sinfulness. God provides the means for them to do that.

- God explained to them what holiness looked like in terms of their day-to-day lives.
- God provided the sacrificial system to deal with their failures to be holy.

Thus, the possibility's there for them to live in proper relationship with God. The benefits of doing so are spelt out in terms of these blessings.

### **Punishment for Disobedience**

But there's also the possibility they'll fail – and that's dealt with in the next section of Leviticus 26. Have a look at verses 14 to 22:

*But if you will not listen to Me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject My decrees and abhor My laws and fail to carry out all My commands and so violate My covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it. I will set My face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you.*

*If after all this you will not listen to Me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over. I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like bronze. Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit.*

*If you remain hostile towards Me and refuse to listen*

*to Me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve. I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted.*

And so it continues down to verse 39. What we've read's enough to get the general drift.

It's fairly straightforward stuff. I don't think there's much need for explanation in regard to what God says in those verses. Most of it's quite clear – maybe not particularly comforting, but not hard to understand. It warns the Israelites that, if they ignore the choice they've made and don't pay attention to God, then God will take a number of disciplinary steps against them to try to bring them back to their senses. If they don't pay attention to God's disciplinary steps, then the discipline will increase in severity.

One of the best commentaries on these verses is found in another part of the Bible – Amos 4:6-12

*"I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to Me," declares the Lord.*

*"I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up. People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to Me," declares the Lord.*

*"Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to Me," declares the Lord.*

*"I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt. I killed your young men with the sword, along with your captured horses. I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps, yet you have not returned to Me," declares the Lord.*

*"I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire, yet you have not returned to Me," declares the Lord.*

*"Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel, and because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel."*

Several hundred years have passed since Mount Sinai. Israel had messed it up. They'd failed to live as God's people. God did exactly what He'd said He'd do. He acted on the basis of Leviticus 26. That's what Amos tells the people. He lists off what God's done in terms of the list in Leviticus 26. He warns the people and calls them to repent – to change their lives so they begin to look like God's people. He tells them God hasn't got to the end of the list yet – He's still got a few things to go. He warns them if they don't repent, God'll keep going down the list – and the rest of the things on the list aren't pretty. "Punishment for disobedience" is not the best heading – it's encouragement to get back to the way life's meant to be.

Choosing to be God's person means entering into relationship with God – a relationship where you acknowledge you'll actually treat God as your God – where you want to live according to how God made life.

- It's not the sort of choice where you simply make it and then forget about it.

- It's not the sort of choice that has no impact on what you do from day to day.

Rather, it's the sort of choice that continues to shape and mould the rest of your life.

Suppose you've chosen to get married. You've actually turned up on your wedding day and told everyone who's there you've made this choice. You hear the minister ask:

Will you now take this woman to be your wife, to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honour and protect her, and forsaking all others, be faithful to her, as long as you both shall live?

And you answer: I will. He pronounces you man and wife. You go off on your honeymoon and then return to settle down to your life together.

The first night, you don't get home till 10:30. Your wife opens the car door for you.

Where've you been all this time? I've been worried sick about you. I've been trying your mobile all night, but it's been switched off.

You're surprised. You didn't think your wife had any reason to be worried. After all, you were just doing what you've always done – spending the evening at the club with your soccer buddies. You calmly tell this to your wife. For some unknown reason, your wife doesn't speak to you for the rest of the evening – but you don't really notice because you're asleep twenty minutes after getting home.

The second night, you don't get home till 10:30 once again. Your wife opens the car door for you.

Where've you been all this time? I've been worried

sick about you. I've been trying your mobile all night, but it's been switched off.

Again, you're surprised. Why would she be worried what time you got home? You explain the situation to her.

My secretary didn't have anything to do this evening so I took her out to dinner. She's so much fun to be with. She's got a great sense of humour and she moves well on the dance floor. We had a great time.

Your wife mutters something about at least someone's having a good time and for some unknown reason sleeps in the second bedroom that night.

Marriage is a choice we make. When we get married, we enter into a relationship. Certain expectations are part of that relationship. Various consequences follow if those expectations aren't met. That's the nature of the relationship. It's like that with God and Israel.

### **Is this Relevant to us?**

What about today? What about our relationship with God? As Christians, we say we want to be God's people and we want God to be our God. Does our relationship operate on the same basis? I think the answer's both "yes" and "no".

It's "yes" because God hasn't changed and the concept of how people relate to God hasn't changed. God remains holy and pure and righteous. God still wants those who relate to Him to reflect His character. God still wants those who relate to Him to treat Him as God. The same basic principles are there that were there in Leviticus.

It's "no" because there are differences between Israel and the church – some very significant differences.

- Israel was a nation. Her people were citizens of that nation. The church is not a nation. Her people are citizens of other nations – although their true citizenship is in the world to come.
- Israel was tied to the land of Canaan. That's the land God promised her. That's the land in which her blessings were promised. The church is not tied to a land. We're pilgrims whose home is not in this world. That's why you can't simply take these bits of Leviticus 26 and apply them directly to Christians today.

Some people try.

- You hear people saying: If you obey God and keep His commands, then He'll bless you with the sorts of blessing mentioned here. Your land will prosper. Your barns will overflow. Your enemies will fall before you. You'll be healthy and wealthy. Try telling that to the persecuted church in Sudan.
- On the other hand, you hear people saying: If you've got some sickness in your life or if you're undergoing suffering, it must be because you've disobeyed God. You need to repent and obey His commands.

That approach doesn't pay attention to the context of Leviticus within the Bible as a whole.

The New Testament indicates other factors are involved. Some of them have to do with the differences between Israel and the church. Some of them have to do with what God actually thinks is important in our lives. Some of them have to do with the way in which Jesus fulfils the Old Testament.

- For the Christian, Jesus bore the curse of the law for us. Galatians 3 tells us that.
- For the Christian, all the blessings of God come to us

in Jesus. Ephesians 1 tells us that. This doesn't mean God no longer disciplines us as His children. He does. Hebrews 12 is one place in the New Testament that makes that quite clear. Yet His discipline has a purpose – to develop godly character in our lives. That's the blessing He wants to give us.

Let me come at this same point from a different angle. In establishing a relationship with us today, God offers us salvation. Some people misunderstand what salvation is. They think solely in terms of the future.

- Salvation is heaven.
- Salvation is glorious riches.
- Salvation is no more suffering.
- Salvation is me having a good time forever.

They're happy to look forward to that sort of change – but they're not happy to change in the present. They think God should give them all that stuff in the future, but they don't think they have to bother too much relating to God in the present – or changing their lives so they're more pleasing to God now. They're like the guy who gets married and thinks he can still date other girls.

The salvation God offers has an impact on our lives now. God wants to change us so we look like His people now. That's the heart of the salvation God offers. God doesn't want heaven to be full of greedy people. He's got enough of those on earth already – more than enough. The greed that infects us is part of our sinful natures. It's an evil that eats away at our inner beings and impacts the way we live. It's a good example of the sin from which God wants to save us. Yet, too often, we say to God:

I want to be saved from greed but I want to stay greedy.

We want the relationship with God – we even want God to save us – but we don't want to change. It's like saying: I want to be married but I still want to live as a single person.

Will you be rich in the kingdom of God? I suspect it's the wrong question to ask. The question has what may be a worldly value built into it – perhaps even several worldly values. The better question may be: Will you be in need in the kingdom of God? The answer is "no".

- But is it "no" because there'll be an abundance of all resources so there's plenty for all and we've got gold coins falling out our pockets?
- Or is it "no" because I'll only have godly desires – godly wants – and all my needs will be supplied by God and the question of whether or not I'm rich won't even enter my head.

### **The Possibility of Restoration**

Leviticus 26 finishes on a positive note. The threatened discipline of verses 14 to 39 isn't the last word. Even in those dire circumstances, there's hope. Verse 40:

*But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers – their treachery against Me and their hostility towards Me, which made Me hostile towards them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies – then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember My covenant with Jacob and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. For the land will be deserted by them and will enjoy its sabbaths while it lies desolate without them. They will pay for their sins because they rejected My laws and abhorred My decrees. Yet in spite of this, when they*

*are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking My covenant with them. I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the Lord.*

God knows our frailties. Even more, He knows the sinfulness that infects the very centre of our beings. He knows our rebellious nature. Yet, He's determined to save a people for Himself – a people who'll be pure and holy and righteous.

- He knew Israel would fail again and again and again. He knew they'd get to the point where He sent them into exile. But He didn't give up on them. He brought them back from exile and re-established them in the land of Canaan.
- He knew we'd fail again and again and again. He knew that when you became a Christian. Yet, still He called you. Still He didn't give up on you. Still He'll bring you to maturity. He'll complete the work He's begun in you.

That's not an excuse to continue the old lifestyle – as if it didn't matter. That's the lifestyle from which we needed rescuing. It's a lifestyle that damages our inner beings. Rather, we're called to cooperate with God's work in our lives. God wants to mould us more like Jesus. God wants to develop within us the fruit of the Spirit. God wants us to become people that look like we belong to Him. That's what's best for us. That's the salvation He wants to give us – true goodness. And so He uses all the circumstances of our lives to that end. It's not a one-off choice – it's a continual choosing to be the person God

wants me to be. I'm called to affirm that moment by moment for the rest of my life.

Where are you at this morning? It seems to me there are three possibilities.

- First, you've decided to be a Christian and you're living as a Christian. Good. That's how it's supposed to be. Keep going. Don't give up.
- Second, you've decided to be a Christian and you aren't living the way God wants you to live. You aren't choosing God's will day by day. Instead, you're choosing to do your own thing. That's not how it's supposed to be. You need to repent. You need to re-affirm your decision to serve God – because this is the salvation God gave you.
- Third, you've never decided to be a Christian and so you have no reason to live as a Christian. This morning I haven't explained how a person becomes a Christian – how a person gets into a right relationship with God. If you're in this third category and you'd like to investigate changing, come and talk to me later – or talk to another person here you know is a Christian.