

“If You Faithfully Obey”

An Introduction to the Minor Prophets (2)

Texts: Deuteronomy 28:1-20; Galatians 3:1-14

God’s prophets have a very difficult task—they bring God’s words to a disobedient people who do not want to hear them. Those prophets whom we identify as “Minor Prophets” function as God’s process-servers, warning Israel of YHWH’s impending lawsuit against them. These prophets have the unpopular task of declaring that the covenant curses threatened to Israel are soon to be meted out because the people of God have repeatedly broken YHWH’s covenant. To fully understand the nature of their mission, we need to know something about Israel’s covenant with YHWH, as well as the nature of the covenant curses threatened to come upon God’s chosen people. What are the legal charges YHWH is bringing against his people through the mouths of his prophets?

We continue to establish some background for our series on the Minor Prophets. We move from considering the role which God’s prophets play in redemptive history (our topic last time), to the specific terms of the covenant God established with his people at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20), which is then renewed with them before the people entered the promised land as recounted in the final chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy (28-34)—a portion of which we will survey.

Recall that the people of Israel wandered through the wilderness of the Sinai desert for forty long years after leaving their bondage in Egypt. Led by the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night, miraculously they passed through the Red Sea on dry ground as those same waters destroyed the armies of Pharaoh. Israel was established as a nation when God gave them his law at Mount Sinai, making a national covenant between himself and his people—a covenant grounded in promised blessings upon their obedience, with covenant curses threatened should God’s people disobey him. Because of their disobedience many Israelites died in the wilderness without ever seeing the land which the Lord promised to give them. By the time we get to the closing chapters of Deuteronomy, the entire nation has passed through the wilderness and is now assembled on the plains of Moab, to the east of the Jordan River, just outside Canaan. Soon the people will cross the river and enter the “promised land.”

Before the people of Israel can enter Canaan under YHWH’s command to drive the Canaanites from his land, their covenant with their LORD must be renewed. Moses, their covenant mediator and the preeminent prophet in Old Testament, will read the terms of YHWH’s covenant to the assembled people, who, as Moses tells them in Deuteronomy 30:19, now stand before the Lord facing a fundamental choice between loving YHWH and obeying his commandments, or disobeying him and coming under his curse. The choice the Israelites faced that day was simple—life or death. Moses wrote down everything he said to Israel from the law of God as a binding record of God’s covenant and its requirements—that record of YHWH’s renewed covenant is the Book of Deuteronomy.

The scene in the closing chapters of Deuteronomy is dramatic and poignant. After forty years in the wilderness, God’s people are finally about to enter the promised land and receive the inheritance YHWH promised to them. This scene also has a certain poignancy about it, because Moses was prevented from entering the land because of his sin against YHWH. This is the last day of his life. Moses is 120 years old, and preparing YHWH’s covenant people for his death. Israel is about to enter the land of promise, but Moses will not be joining them. A successor must be appointed (Joshua) and the people must be

reminded of the terms of their covenant with YHWH. They must know what they must do to possess the land they are about to enter, and they must know what to do to remain in possession of it. The terms of the covenant were given them first at Mount Sinai when the people assembled at the foot of the mountain while Moses, Aaron, and the elders were given the two tables of God's law, and then renewed on this day at Moab, including hearing again the promise of blessing and threat of curse.

The Twelve (as the Minor Prophets are often known) begin their ministry in the years after the united kingdom was torn in two by a terrible Civil War. The Minor Prophets are sent by YHWH to Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom) in the years between 780 BC-450 BC—nearly seven hundred years after Israel gathered at Moab. These prophets left us the books of Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The Twelve bring God's word of warning to his disobedient people announcing that YHWH's people have broken the terms of his covenant with made them at Mount Sinai and renewed at Moab. Their words echo the words Moses spoke this day at Moab before Israel entered the land of promise. YHWH's chosen people will remain in the land and thrive there, *if* they love their covenant Lord and live in obedience to him. But the covenant curses will indeed come to pass should Israel turn from YHWH to serve other gods (those of their Canaanite neighbors), forgetting or breaking the terms of his covenant with them.

The Minor Prophets come on the scene at a time God's people are divided. Idolatry is rife in both kingdoms. Worship of Baal—the Canaanite weather/fertility god—was common among those who claimed to be YHWH's people. Many of God's people intermarried with pagans—adopting pagan beliefs and practices and raising their children outside the covenant community. The kings of Israel began to openly forsake YHWH and even sought to make forbidden treaties with pagan nations—instead of claiming YHWH's promise of protection. The poor and needy of Israel were treated unjustly and YHWH has heard their cries. God's people are in a spiritual free-fall, with but a remnant remaining faithful.

This is why YHWH sends a series of prophets to warn his divided and rebellious people of what is about to come—the curses mentioned in the renewal of the covenant in the closing chapters of Deuteronomy. God's prophets were called by YHWH to their prophetic office and then given YHWH's words from his heavenly court to deliver to his people. As such the prophets are not so much predictors of the future, but preachers of God's words—specifically the terms of the covenant lawsuit. The Minor Prophets announce to God's disobedient people the verdict of the heavenly court. Their message—“here are YHWH's charges against you.” But their warning also carries with it the reminder of YHWH's long-suffering patience and his mercy. “Repent now and seek to return to YHWH, lest all the curses mentioned in the Book of Law come upon you.” Given these words of warning by YHWH himself, these prophets are to declare YHWH's words to Israel, and then to Judah, warning the people of judgment, calling them to repentance, while still promising a full redemption yet to come. But the people of Israel hate these prophets, and wish to continue in their sin. They do not want to be called to repentance or warned of judgment soon to come. They mistakenly think others will be judged first.

Last time, in preparation for our study of the Minor Prophets, we discussed the role God's prophets play in redemptive history from the time of Moses until the coming of Jesus. YHWH's words are given to his prophets through dreams and visions—except in the case of Moses, to whom YHWH spoke as a man speaks to a friend. As mediator of God's covenant with Israel, Moses is also the preeminent prophet in a series of prophets yet to come: the so-called writing prophets (the Major and Minor Prophets), and the non-writing prophets, men like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha, who also confront the people with their sins and then call them to repentance.

But Moses is not only Israel's preeminent prophet, he is also called to serve as covenant mediator, interceding for his people in the presence of YHWH. This role prefigures the coming of Jesus Christ (who is not only the final prophet, but also the great and final high priest), and is clearly seen when Moses ascends Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-24), with Aaron the elders of Israel to receive God's law. Moses' role as mediator of the covenant continues until the day of his death, when, forty years later, Israel assembles on the plains of Moab to renew their covenant with YHWH.

As the scene unfolds we pick up with the opening words of Deuteronomy 28. *“And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.”* The idea behind the ESV's phrase “faithfully obey” is to hear these words and carry them out, to act upon what is commanded. God's people are to devote themselves completely to YHWH, obeying his commands. If they do so, YHWH promises Israel—as his chosen people—that he will bless them above all other nations.

The promised blessings are material. This is made clear in verses 3-5. *“Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.”* The blessing also extends to Israel's favored nation status as the apple of YHWH's eye and the object of his blessing. We read in verse 7, *“the LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you. They shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways.”*

The latter blessing becomes apparent as recounted in Joshua 2, when shortly after the covenant was renewed and Joshua chosen and installed as Moses' successor, Joshua sent spies into Jericho, the Canaanite fortress city which blocked Israel's way into Canaan. Those spies encountered an innkeeper named Rahab, who was a believer in YHWH. She told Joshua's spies, (Joshua 2:10–11), *“for we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.”* YHWH will bless his people by making their enemies terrified of their approach.

The promise of such blessing is reiterated in verses 8-10. *“The LORD will command the blessing on you in your barns and in all that you undertake. And he will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. The LORD will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you.”* Not only will Israel's enemies be terrified, and Israel will reap the fruit of the land now occupied by the Canaanites. This people, Israel, is “holy to the Lord,” that is, they have been chosen by YHWH, and set apart for his redemptive purposes—the bringing forth his word (Scripture) and the promised Savior (Jesus).

After repeating the promise of material blessing and protection from their enemies, in the latter part of verse 13 and into verse 14, we read the following condition to avoid the covenant curses—*“if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.”* The works principle is stated by Moses in no uncertain terms. There are great blessings in store for God's people, but these will come to Israel only upon the condition of perfect

obedience—*“if you faithfully obey.”* While the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai and renewed with his people on the plains of Moab is part of God’s gracious covenant promised to Adam (Genesis 3:15) and established with Abraham (Genesis 12, 15, 17 etc.), the specific terms of the Sinai covenant (blessing and curse) reflect the original covenant of works God made with Adam in Eden—*“On the day you eat from the tree (i.e., disobey the covenant) on that day you will surely die.”* We can rephrase this warning as a positive command, *“do this and you shall live.”* If Israel does these things, YHWH will bless them as promised. Adam failed to obey. Now it is Israel’s turn.

But what if Israel does not obey YHWH as commanded? What if his people forsake him? The covenant curses will be meted out instead of blessing. As we read in verses 15-20, *“but if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.”* Notice that curses negatively restate the promised blessings. *“Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. The LORD will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me.”* Should the people of Israel forsake their covenant Lord (YHWH) at any point after they enter the promised land, then the land of blessing flowing with milk and honey will become a desolate place of death and destruction.

As we press ahead in the closing section of Deuteronomy, the nature of the curses are spelled out in verses 21-68 of chapter 28. Pestilence and disease, heat and drought are threatened in verses 21-24. Under YHWH’s blessing, Israel’s fierce Canaanite neighbors will be no match. But during time of covenant curse, such will not be the case. We read in verses 25-26, *“the LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them. And you shall be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away.”* If the Israelites turn from faith in YHWH’s promises, and disobey his commands, desiring to be like their Canaanite neighbors, then YHWH will cease protecting his people from those they desire to be like. They will find the Canaanites to be YHWH’s avengers, wreaking havoc upon Israel.

The list of curses continues. In verses 27-35, a series of calamities is mentioned, including illnesses like that YHWH inflicted upon Pharaoh and Egypt before the Exodus. Instead of living in peace and safety, Israelite women and children will be ravaged by their pagan neighbors. The land YHWH promised them will be objects of plunder for Israel’s enemies. Israel’s children will find themselves slaves of their neighbors. But the worst of the curses is spelled out in verses 36-37. *“The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone. And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the LORD will lead you away.”* If his people do not worship and serve him, the same Canaanites the Israelites wish to emulate, will instead, become their oppressors. Israel will be cast from the land, or else remain under the thumb of Gentile oppressors while in the promised land. Instead of securing victory over Israel’s foes, YHWH will use them to inflict the curse upon his people. This is a major theme of the warnings and call to repentance issued throughout the Minor Prophets.

The description of the curse continues, reiterating the things previously mentioned. There is no way Israel can claim ignorance or confusion. In verses 38-42, we read again of illness, crop failure, and lowness in the eyes of their neighbors. In verses 45-52, the works principle—blessing for obedience,

curse for disobedience is restated.

“All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you. They shall be a sign and a wonder against you and your offspring forever. Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you. The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young. It shall eat the offspring of your cattle and the fruit of your ground, until you are destroyed; it also shall not leave you grain, wine, or oil, the increase of your herds or the young of your flock, until they have caused you to perish. They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land. And they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land, which the LORD your God has given you.”

Virtually every curse threatened here is announced to both Israel and Judah seven hundred years later by those prophets whom YHWH sends from the heavenly court to announce to Israel that these threats are soon to become a reality.

Again, the works principle is spelled out by Moses in Deuteronomy 28:58-60. *“If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting. And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you.”* But Israel’s greatest fear—being defeated by her enemies and cast from the land YHWH is about to give them—will be their fate should they turn from YHWH, the true and living God, to worship the gods of their pagan neighbors. As the passage closes (vv. 64-67), Moses warns the people of Israel,

And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot, but the LORD will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you. Night and day you shall be in dread and have no assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and at evening you shall say, ‘If only it were morning!’ because of the dread that your heart shall feel, and the sights that your eyes shall see. And the LORD will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer.”

The covenant curses are terrifying and after the Minor Prophets give Israel one final warning, Israel is expelled from the promised land.

In the opening verse of the next chapter, we read the following summation. *“These are the words of the covenant that the LORD commanded Moses to make with the people of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant that he had made with them at Horeb.”* Israel’s covenant with YHWH—first made at Mount

Sinai, has been renewed this day on the plains of Moab. It is time for Israel to choose. In what amounts to his final words as covenant mediator in Deuteronomy 30:15–20, Moses exhorts the assembled people:

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

The choice for Israel is simple. YHWH’s people can believe his words, and through the eyes of faith strive to obey him, believing that he is gracious and merciful—even when his people sin and break his commandments. Remember, God has not only given them his law and its pass/fail works principle, but he has also graciously given them sacrifices for sin to turn aside his wrath, priests who lead the people in proper worship and aid them as they seek YHWH’s forgiveness, and he has given them a tabernacle—the place of his presence in their very midst.

But should Israel turn away—as they did not long after they entered the promised land—the curses are sure to come. In the days of Joshua, Israel failed to cast the Canaanites from their land and within several generations the people of YHWH were as pagan as their neighbors. In the days of the Judges, God allows the neighboring Midianites to defeat and then oppress them until delivered by Gideon. Samson delivers the Israelites from the cruel Philistines. The people demand a king like their Gentile neighbors. YHWH raises up David and Solomon, and extends Israel’s empire from the Euphrates in the north to the River of Egypt in the south. Throughout this entire time, Israel sinks deeper into unbelief and paganism. God warns his people, yet they do not repent. He sends avengers, plague, drought, just as he said he would, and for a time, some of his people repent and seek his face. But then the united kingdom is divided (a theme we will take up next time), and the northern kingdom seeks peace with their pagan neighbors (Syria and the Assyrians to the north).

After God’s patience and long-suffering reaches its end, God sends to Israel a series of prophets (Amos, Jonah, and Hosea) and a series of prophets to Judah (Joel, Zechariah, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi). Throughout their various ministries, these prophets will do what Moses did this day—remind Israel and Judah of YHWH’s promised blessings, and his threatened curses. Throughout our time in the prophets the warnings of curse about which we read are announced to the people—“this is the covenant you made with YHWH. This is what he demands from you, obedience to the terms of his covenant. You have chosen death. All of these terrible curses will come upon you, unless you repent and seek YHWH’s mercy”

The word of curse is not the only thing which the Twelve proclaim to Israel. They also speak of a future time of restoration when Israel will enjoy all of the promised blessings because the covenant curses are removed when the promised Messiah (Jesus) appears in the fullness of time. Once Jesus has come—the one of whom Moses spoke and whom his mediatorial office prefigures—we learn that God’s method of dealing the covenant curses is to remove them through a final once for all sacrifice for sin. One of the

stipulations of Israel's law is found in Deuteronomy 27:26, "*cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them,*" is quoted by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:10. Looking back upon the scene at Sinai, on the plains of Moab, and in light of the words spoken to Israel by the prophets sent by YHWH, Paul knows that the Sinai covenant left Israel in a state of despair, just as it does for us today. We hear these words of blessing and curse and we say, "who can obey God perfectly?" No one can. We are under God's curse! This was the law's true purpose, to drive us to Christ. Not one of us has met the conditions of God's covenant—"if you faithfully obey." No, not even one. Well, on second thought, someone has.

The one to whom all this points—Jesus Christ—revealed himself to Paul. And it falls to Paul to explain how God's glorious blessings come to us, covenant breakers all, rightly deserving all of these curses. As we read in our New Testament lesson from Galatians 3:11-14, "*now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.' But the law is not of faith, rather 'The one who does them shall live by them.' Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*"

Christ became our curse, bearing in his own flesh all the curses of the covenant, so we might receive the greatest blessing of all—justification, the gift of God's Spirit, and eternal life.