



The Surpassing Greatness of His Blessing (Deuteronomy 28:1-14)

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The way many teenagers relate to their parents is strikingly similar to the way many employees relate to their boss. The goal in the relationship is to stay out of trouble. I don't want to get grounded and lose my driving privileges. I don't want to get fired or get put on a performance improvement plan. In your mind, the authority of that parent or that boss represents one thing – a potential threat to your wellbeing. We're like Bilbo trying to steal a cup from Smaug's treasure hoard in the Hobbit. Whatever you do, don't awaken the beast.

Many professing Christians relate to God in the same way. He's someone who can get you in trouble. Someone who's watching, waiting, listening for you to do something wrong so he can smack you for it. You think of God like a referee in a football game. His primary job is to throw flags and issue penalties for anyone who breaks the rules.

Friend, that is not the God of the Bible. That is not what God says he is like or what the history of his relationship with his people reveals he is like. Ps 31:19, "Oh, how abundant is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you and worked for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of the children of mankind."

The God who created the world and everything in it is an exceedingly good God. From eternity past, he has existed in a state of infinite blessing, and he delights in bringing us into the same experience. He's not a brooding sovereign waiting to smack rule-breakers or a scowling old man sitting on his front porch daring the neighborhood kids to set foot on his lawn. He's perfectly holy. He's perfectly just. And he's exceedingly good.

He has been good, is presently being good, and will forever and always be good to us through Christ Jesus our Lord. We're not lining up behind the mic during our Thanksgiving meeting next Sunday to recount all the ways we stayed out of trouble with God over the last year. We're lining up to tell the "glad news of deliverance" (Ps 40:9), the surpassing greatness of his unmerited favor and blessing. That's what the first part of Deut 28 is all about – the surpassing greatness of God's blessing.

The entire book of Deuteronomy is structured as a covenant document between the Lord and Israel. It arises out of the context of relationship, and it's designed to preserve relationship. And thus, it confronts Israel with a choice. In the context of a relationship



God graciously initiated, will you choose life by submitting to his authority? Or will you choose death by going your own way? There isn't a third option.

Friend, in the long-run, there is only one thing that will compel us to choose the same. It's the surpassing greatness of God's blessing. **The surpassing greatness of God's blessing compels us to choose life!** And that's why Moses lingers on the nature of God's blessing in vv. 1-14.

1) GOD'S BLESSING IS CONDITIONAL

Four "if" statements bookend the entire passage. V. 1, "If you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandment..." V. 2, "All these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God..." V. 13, "If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God..." V. 14, "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..."

What's Moses' point? Remaining faithful to the Lord – serving him, not other gods – isn't one of many paths that lead to blessing and life. It's the only path that leads to blessing and life. The path of blessing is the path of wholehearted devotion to the Lord, a devotion expressed by obeying his Word. That's the requirement. That's the condition.

That does not mean God's blessing is something Israel earned through her obedience. The entire book of Deuteronomy pushes in the opposite direction. Deut 9:4-5, "Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you...and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

When Moses says in Deut 28:8, "And he will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you," he's pointing to God's generosity and faithfulness, not Israel's obedience, as the ground or ultimate explanation for God's blessing in her life. Every blessing Israel received – abundant offspring, redemption from slavery, military victories, the gift of God's Word, a land to dwell in – all of it was an undeserved gift of grace.

Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob did absolutely nothing to earn the privilege of covenant relationship with God. Then and now, our obedience is not a work of merit. It never has

been. It never will be. It's always a response to God's grace, to his unmerited favor. And that raises two important questions.

First, if Israel wasn't earning or deserving God's blessings through her obedience, why was her obedience so important? It mattered because obeying God's Word was how she appropriated or received his blessings. It's how she expressed her desire for God's blessing, her dependence on God's blessing, and her faith in God's power to bless. Her obedience was an act of trust, the way she said, "Lord, I'm looking to you for life, and nowhere else. You are the One I will serve. You are the One I will worship."

Thus, God's blessings are conditional not in the sense that Israel had to earn them, but rather in the sense that they can only be received and enjoyed through faith-fueled obedience. God doesn't dish them out willy-nilly. They're the unmerited reward of holding fast to the Lord instead (v. 14) of going "after other gods to serve them."

Here's the second important question. **How does the person and work of Jesus affect the role our faith-fueled obedience plays in experiencing God's blessing?** If you read the rest of Israel's story, what happens? She's not faithful or careful to obey at all. Every blessing God graciously lavishes upon her is eventually lost because she refuses to hold fast to him. She continues to disobey his Word – over, and over, and over again. She's a profoundly unfaithful covenant partner.

So what does God do? He becomes the faithful covenant partner he requires! He takes the form of a servant. He's born in the likeness of men. And it's not simply so he can die for us. It's so he can live for us! That's what we celebrate at Christmas! The Eternal Son of God became a man to obey for us, to perfectly and completely and fully satisfy all the conditions Deut 28 establishes for receiving God's favor and blessing. As the True Israel, Jesus never turned aside from God's Word, to the right hand or the left. He never went after other gods to serve them.

So what difference does that make for us? As the people of God, it means we live under the smile of God's favor not because of our obedience, but because of Jesus' obedience! God's blessing no longer rises and falls on the tide of our faithfulness. It's eternally secured by his faithfulness. That's the good news of the gospel! God's favor, God's blessing, has been eternally secured for the people of God by the only perfect man who ever lived.

But that raises our final important question. **If Jesus meets all the conditions in the law, does our obedience really matter?** Is the good news of the gospel, "Jesus obeyed,

so now it doesn't really matter if you do"? Not in the least! That notion is just as much a lie under the New Covenant as it was under the Old.

The gospel doesn't remove the necessity of our obedience. Rather, it enables and empowers our obedience. And your faithfulness to obey (albeit imperfectly), is important because wholehearted obedience is how we express our faith in the sufficiency of Jesus' perfect obedience for us! James 2:17, "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." Obedience is not one bit less necessary under the New Covenant than it was under the Old.

So what's changed? What makes the New Covenant better? Two things. First, the forgiveness of sins that is ours in Jesus and the spotless record of obedience that is ours in Jesus ensure, Christian, that **you will not fail to receive or ever lose the divine favor and blessing Israel inevitably failed to receive and persistently lost**. They are eternally, unchangeably, irrevocably and justifiably yours! God's favor is your guaranteed inheritance in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Second, the Holy Spirit who indwells us under the New Covenant means **we have a supernatural power to obey that Israel never had**. Because of the Spirit, you are able to endure in the obedience of faith in Jesus. You can continue to appropriate and experience the goodness of all the covenant blessings he secured for you by running in the path of God's commands.

In short, we don't earn God's blessings through our obedience. We express our faith in Jesus and lay hold of the blessings he deserves through our obedience. Think of it this way. On Christmas Day, my children will be the recipients of lavish generosity from their grandparents. In fact, come Black Friday, most of their presents are already purchased. They are officially theirs. But they have yet to open them. They have yet to experience them. What's required? Do they have to earn their gifts? No. They're gifts – unmerited expression of their grandparents' love and affection.

So if they want to experience the joy of the gift, what must they do? They have to show up at their grandparent's home on Christmas Day, hold out their empty hands (so to speak) and say, "Grandad, Grampa, I'm ready to receive all I know you are eager to give!" Which usually comes out in the form of, "Can we start opening presents now?"

That's a picture of the relationship between God's blessing and the obedience of faith. Obeying his Word is an act of trust, an act of dependence, a way of coming to God with empty hands looking to him for all we need for life and godliness. Only those who

embrace the obedience of faith, who run in the path of his commands, receive God's surpassingly great blessings. They're not universal. They're conditional.

2) GOD'S BLESSING IS COMPREHENSIVE

If Israel was willing to follow the Lord, to look to him for life by obeying his Word, God promised his blessing would overflow in all places, at all times, in every dimension of life. Consider each of those categories. **First, God's favor means blessing in all places.** V. 3, "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field." V. 6, "Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out."

How does the promise of blessing in all places carry forward today through the gospel? It's surpassingly greater. Rom 8:39, "[Neither] height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Why not? Because the Lord doesn't just command blessing on you in the heights, the depths, and everywhere between. He is with you in the heights, the depths, and everywhere between. Matt 28:20, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Second, God's favor means blessing at all times. V. 2, "And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you..." What a picture that is! We know what it means to be overtaken by a rainstorm. Or overtaken by fellow runner or biker. What does it mean to be overtaken by the blessings of God? It means that no matter what's going on in your life, Christian, you cannot outrun or escape the overwhelming reality of God's favor upon you in Jesus.

Some of us feel like bad things, unfortunate circumstances, have a way of following us. Friend, if you're in Christ, "goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life" (Ps 23:6). You are not being hunted down by the specter of misfortune. You are being followed and overtaken by the overwhelming goodness and mercy of your God! It's the decisive reality in your life! How different that than the impoverished view of things we often adopt. We think of God's blessing as something we need to hold onto and do everything we can to avoid losing.

In reality, when you go to work, goodness and mercy are following you. When you go home, the goodness and mercy are following you. When you go to the hospital for cancer treatment, goodness and mercy are following you. When you apply early for social security because of a disability, goodness and mercy are following you. When you're making sales calls, goodness and mercy are following you. When you follow a grumpy teenager into their room, goodness and mercy are following you!

Finally, God's favor means blessing in every dimension of life. It means blessing in the domestic sphere. V. 4, "Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb..." – speaking of children. V. 5, "Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl" – speaking of food and the means of producing it.

It means blessing in the economic sphere. V. 4, "Blessed shall be...the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock." V. 8, "The LORD will command the blessing on you in your barns and in all that you undertake." It even means blessing in the dog-eat-dog world of international relations. V. 7, "The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you."

But how do we square all the tangible, physical blessings the Lord promised Israel with our present-day experience? Does a miscarriage mean God's lying in Deut 28 or that his favor does not rest upon you? Do financial difficulties mean God's stopped keeping his promises or that you need to obey more or trust more?

How do we reconcile the promise of blessing in all places, at all times, in every dimension of life in Deut 28 with Jesus' words in Jn 16:33, "In this world you will have tribulation", or the Apostle's words in 1 Pet 4:12, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you"?

Here's where we must remember several things if our expectations concerning God's blessing are going to be biblical. **First, God hasn't changed.** His faithfulness to bless, his eagerness to bless, and the all-places, all-times, in-every-dimension-of-life character of his blessing hasn't changed. Take comfort in that!

Second, the nature of his kingdom has significantly changed. Thanks to Jesus, the people of God are no longer a physical nation-state or part of an earthly kingdom complete with cities, fields, and international relations issues. We are a visible people, but we are a spiritual people. We're part of a spiritual kingdom defined by spiritual blessings. And when the nature of God's people and the nature of God's kingdom changed, so too did the defining mark of his favor.

Today, the defining mark of God's favor on a man or woman are not the size of your barns, the size of your family, or the number of surrounding nations you've conquered. The defining mark of God's favor is being chosen, predestined, loved, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, sealed and granted a glorious inheritance in Christ. Eph 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ

with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places..."If that's your story friend, God has been exceedingly, immeasurably good to you!

But maybe part of you still feels like you got the short end of the stick. No disrespect to all the spiritual stuff, pastor, but what really bothers me is the fact that even though I play by the rules, I'm the one who gets cancer. Even though I'm following Jesus, my neighbor has the big boat and the trophy wife. Can't you toss a little prosperity my way, God? Just a little? Ps 73:2-3, "As for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

If that's you, listen to me. The primary blessings God delights to pour out on his people in this life are spiritual. No, that doesn't mean he is disinterested in giving us all sorts of material blessings at the same time. The whole earth is at his disposal! We please the Lord when we ask him for financial provision or pray for physical healing. He delights in giving good gifts to his children!

However, **we must remember the spiritual blessings we already have in this life are a down payment on greater-than-we-can-imagine spiritual and physical blessings in the life to come.** Yes, the blessing in v. 1, "The LORD Your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth," points forward to the Israel's prosperity under King David and King Solomon. But it ultimately points forward to the coming age when Christ returns and his blood-bought people reign with him in glory! A day when sorrow and suffering are no more.

Until that day, Christian, God's blessing in your life is both already and not yet. So don't become disillusioned when God refuses to live up to the expectations of human wisdom. Instead, trust God's Word and wait patiently as the Savior works all things together according to the perfect counsel of his will until the day he makes all things new.

Here's what the promise of Deut 28:13 – "And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail" – looks like in action until Jesus returns. 2 Cor 4:8-10, 17, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies...For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison..."

3) GOD'S BLESSING IS PERSONAL

Moses repeatedly emphasizes the blessing for remaining faithful to the Lord isn't a karma thing – put good in, get good out – or a natural course of events where “the universe” favors God's people. No. It's distinctly and repeatedly personal. God doesn't just ensure blessing comes to pass in the lives of his own. He actively and personally brings it to pass.

In v. 1, he's the subject. “The LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth...” In v. 7, he's the subject. “The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you...” In v. 8, he's the subject. “The LORD will command the blessing on you...and he will bless you.” V. 11, “The LORD will make...” V. 12, “The LORD will open to you...” V. 13, “The LORD will make you the head and not the tail...” The blessings he lavishes upon us come directly from his hand.

In other words, it's not just that goodness and mercy are following you. The reason they're following you is because God himself is following you. God himself is blessing you. God himself is doing good to you. Because God himself delights in you and is gracious toward you and overflows in blessing toward you because he loves you!

I learned this week that there are people out there you can hire to do your Christmas shopping for you. It's called a gift concierge service. You hand over a pile of cash – a very large pile of cash judging from the fact that there are no prices on their website – and they take care of the whole project.

Friend, that is not how our God blesses us. He doesn't delegate the work. He does it himself. He personally, faithfully, day in and day out, in a hands-on, intimately-aware-of-the-details kind of way, brings his blessings to pass in our lives. Is that your happy expectation of the future? Or do you look at your own abilities, or look at the way other people are treating you, and despair?

Sometimes we think, “Well, I would be receiving all these amazing blessings I know God wants to give me, but I married Joe instead of waiting for Sam. Looking back, that was pretty dumb. And now I'm stuck in the path of life level C.

If Joe would just stop getting in God's way and manage our finances a little better, then I would be more confident in God's blessing. Or if Joe would just start discipling our kids the way the Bible tells him to, then I would be more confident in God's blessing. But he's not. I know in the “mystery of his will” God picked Joe to deliver all these blessings. Maybe one day he will. Until then, I guess I'll just keep dragging him to church...”

Friend, does God use means to bring his blessings to pass? Absolutely. Is a godly husband a gift from the Lord. Absolutely. But don't confuse the gift with the Giver or the means with the Cause. There isn't a Joe (or a Sam for that matter) who can stop Almighty God from being exceedingly good to you. Ps 84:12 doesn't say, "O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who marries Sam." It says, "Blessed is the one who trusts in you!"

And know this. **It's not only personal because God gives the blessing. It's personal because he is the ultimate blessing!** The blessings in Deut 28 (no less than God's blessings in Jesus today) all come to pass in the context of covenant relationship with him. V. 8, "And he will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you." It's not blessing in a random place. It's blessing in God's place, the place where God dwells!

V. 9 goes even further. If you walk in his ways, "the LORD will establish you as a people holy to himself." What does that mean? It means he will bless you by setting you apart for his priorities and purposes. He will draw you into relationship, grant you the surpassingly great gift of his presence, and never let you go.

It's no accident that Moses uses God's covenant name – Yahweh or the LORD in all caps – 14 times in 14 verses. The chief blessing of all is the gift of relationship with him. And it's only in the context of relationship with him that all the other blessings come to pass. Brothers and sisters, may we love the Lord for more than what he gives. May we love him for who he is, for in Jesus, he has given us the gift of himself.

4) GOD'S BLESSING IS MISSIONAL

God does not exist to make much of us, brothers and sisters. We exist to make much of him. His supreme aim, and what is ultimately best for you and me, is for him to bless his holy name. We must banish the notion that it is somehow God's job or God's responsibility or God's chief obligation to make our lives comfortable and convenient. It is not true. His purpose, his priority, is to glorify his name.

And here's the amazing thing. God glorifies his name, he displays the fullness of his surpassing greatness, by pouring out blessing on sinners like you and me. Look at v. 10. "And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD..." What's the final result of Israel receiving God's favor and blessing? It's not that all the other nations think, "Wow. Y'all are pretty amazing." No. Their eyes are drawn higher. "They will see the blessing you enjoy," Moses says, "And they will confess in wonder and awe, 'Surely, this is a people whom God has blessed.'"



The river of God's blessing will turn their attention to the fountain from which it flows. And that's by design. Because God's blessing always has a missional aim – to draw attention to his surpassing greatness. Setting Israel "high above all the nations of the earth," making her "the head and not the tail," was all about displaying God's glory to the nations.

Ps 67:1-2, "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations." When God blesses you on the path of obedience, friend, that's his goal. To make you a living testimony that draws people around you to taste and see that the Lord is good!

Here's what that practically means. When someone else comments about a blessing in your life, that's your cue to draw their attention to the God from whom all blessings flow, as we sang earlier. If someone makes an encouraging comment about your kids, your home, your character, your performance at work, you name it, seize that moment as an opportunity to tell them how much God has done for you.

May we never respond to God's blessings by patting ourselves on the back. We consider what we deserve. We consider the grace we have received. And we declare with the psalmist – "Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory" (Ps 115:1).

CONCLUSION

Conditional, comprehensive, personal, and missional. That's what God's blessing is like. That's what makes them surpassingly great. And that's how they compel us to choose life!

The blessings and curses, the promises and warnings, in Deut 28 are like the signs and guardrails on a highway. What do the signs do? The same things promises of blessing do! They tell us, "Turn here for Chick-fil-a waffle fries! Life is this way. Joy is this way. Goodness is over here!" What do the guardrails do? The same things the warnings we'll look at next Sunday do. They say, "Stay away. Death is this way. Suffering is this way. Don't drive over the edge. Stay on the road."

Both are a gracious gift from the Lord, brothers and sisters. But it's ultimately the surpassing greatness of his blessings that compel us to choose life. So choose life. Run in the path of God's commands. You won't be disappointed. He's faithful.