

Unity And Division: The Blessing And The Curse (Part Three)

by Charles Whitaker

Forerunner, "Ready Answer," January-February 2019

“And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.” — Colossians 3:15

In Part Two, we scanned several Old and New Testament illustrations of God’s activities, particularly judgments that resulted in division. He separates His people into two groups, often of equal size, in the context of judging. Typically, the members of one group receive blessings, while the members of the other group participate in curses. This division, which takes shape as a reconfiguration of what has existed before, may place people in unfamiliar environments and unexpected social contexts. Here in Part Three, we shall focus on a full-bodied, Old Testament example that has a singular relevance to God’s people.

Deuteronomy 27 records Moses’ instruction concerning the issuing of blessings at Mount Gerizim and curses at Mount Ebal. Joshua 8:30-35 records Joshua’s execution of these instructions shortly after the children of Israel had entered the Promised Land.¹

As we look at Deuteronomy 27, keep in mind that this chapter serves as a prelude to Deuteronomy 28, the more detailed exposition of the blessings and curses associated respectively with obeying or disobeying God’s law:

That day Moses charged the people, saying, “When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to *bless* the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the *curse*: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. (Deuteronomy 27:11-13, emphasis ours throughout)²

Plain as day, here is a fifty-fifty division of God’s people. The six tribes God selects to stand on Ebal³ were those who descended from Jacob’s concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, plus the descendants of Reuben⁴ and Zebulun, the oldest and youngest sons of Leah, respectively. Together, they received the curses. In Part Four, we will look at what those curses were all about and what they had in common.

The remaining six tribes, situated on Mount Gerizim⁵ and representing the blessings that naturally result from obedience, were the tribes descended from Rachel, that is, Joseph and Benjamin, as well as the tribes descended from Leah—save, as mentioned above, those descended from Reuben and Zebulun.⁶ It makes sense that the blessings should go to the tribes descended from the actual wives of Jacob, Leah and Rachel.⁷

The Blessing-Curse and Obedience-Disobedience Dichotomies

We see developing, then, the blessing-curse dichotomy, which strictly corresponds to another dichotomy, obedience-disobedience. The blessings and curses are just as much opposites as are their respective causes, obedience and disobedience. They are mutually exclusive. Try as one might, an individual cannot obey and disobey the same rule simultaneously.

But there is something intriguing about this particular division of God's people:

Now Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, "Keep the whole commandment that I command you today. And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. And you shall write on them all the words of this law, when you cross over to enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you. And when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones. You shall wield no iron tool on them; you shall build an altar to the Lord your God of uncut stones. And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God, and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God. And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly. (Deuteronomy 27:1-8)

What God says is perplexing for at least three reasons:

1. Why did God command the building of the altar⁸ on Ebal, the mountain of *cursing*?
2. Why were the stones on which the law was written to go on Ebal and not on the mountain of blessing, Mount Gerizim?
3. Why did God limit the type of sacrifices to be offered on that altar to burnt and peace (fellowship) sacrifices? Why no sin offerings? After all, in the symbology, Mount Ebal is related to disobedience, the cause of the curse. Symbolically, Ebal relates to rebellion and sin, but no sin offering was to be offered there.

In considering the puzzle, notice Matthew 25:12, where Christ tells the five unwise virgins, "I do not know you." They were running out of oil—short of God's Holy Spirit. In I Corinthians 2:14, Paul avers that individuals lacking God's Spirit are unable "to see spiritual things" (J.B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English, Revised Edition*, Copyright © J.B. Phillips, 1858, 1859, 1960, 1972). The devout among such individuals may be able to keep the law (to a degree, at least) *in its letter*, that is, the law written on stones, but not in its deeper intent, not in its spirit, written as it is on hearts, as God puts it in Jeremiah 31:33.⁹

Symbolically, those on Mount Ebal are cousins to the unwise virgins, lacking the oil necessary to get them to the marriage feast, as Christ says in Matthew 25:10. Unable to discern spiritual things, they have access only to the law written on stones. In His providence, God supplied those laws to them, there on Ebal.

On the other hand, those standing on Mount Gerizim represent those who have God's laws written on their hearts. There are no stones on Gerizim. There does not need to be.

Reflect on this, too: The people on Gerizim represent those in God's church who are fully at peace with God, enjoying fellowship with Him. For them, there is no need for a *further* peace offering. They need not offer peace offerings on an altar.

Also, Christ's comment in Luke 14:33 pertains to them: "[A]ny one of you who does not *renounce all that he has* cannot be My disciple." Those on Gerizim symbolize those who are Christ's disciples, truly repentant and fully committed to God, living sacrifices¹⁰ in His service. They have held back nothing. The burnt offering represents such a life, one lived in total dedication to God. Those on Gerizim need not offer burnt offerings anew. They do not need a stone altar, for they have *already* committed their lives to God.

Consequently, there is no more need that an altar be built on Mount Gerizim than there is for plastered stones inscribed with God's laws to be there. Both stones and altar are superfluous to those on Gerizim. Conversely, those standing on Mount Ebal, not at peace with God, not committed fully to His service, need an altar. That is why God provided one for them—if they will make use of it.

Clearly, Deuteronomy 27 has relevance to the members of God's church today. In Part Four, we shall find even more relevance as we look specifically at the curses the Levites shouted to those standing on Mount Ebal.

Inset: Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal

Both Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal lie west of the Jordan River, Gerizim a bit to the south of Ebal. The peaks of the two mountains are about two miles apart. The Valley of Shechem, which runs between them, is about three miles long and 1,600 feet wide. In this straitened valley, next to the Ark of the Covenant, the priests stood, pronouncing blessings toward Gerizim, curses toward Ebal.

Mount Gerizim rises about 2,840 feet above sea level, while Mount Ebal stands about 3,650 feet tall. Mount Gerizim later became an important center of worship for the Samaritans, whom the Assyrians imported into the land after the fall of ten-tribed Israel (that is, the Northern Kingdom) in 722 BC. The Samaritans eventually built a temple there, which was reputedly torn down by John Hyrcanus in the second century before Christ.

There is some evidence that Herod the Great later built a major temple on Mount Gerizim, a rival to the one he erected in Jerusalem. Archeologists have found remains of a substantial temple complex built there by Emperor Hadrian in the early second century AD.

When the Samaritan woman told Christ, as recorded in John 4:20, that her forefathers worshipped on "this mountain," she was referring to Mount Gerizim. To this day, the Samaritans claim (wrongly) that Mount Gerizim is Mount Moriah, the site of Isaac's abortive sacrifice. Samaritans, observing a highly syncretic belief system, still sacrifice lambs on Mount Gerizim on Passover.

The meaning of Gerizim may be "cut in two," an intriguing interpretation in terms of the thesis of these articles.

Endnotes

¹ The prepositional phrase "at the first" in Joshua 8:33 probably refers to Moses' earlier statements about the two mountains in Deuteronomy 11:26-29 (which see for supplemental information about the Gerizim/Ebal division). Here, Moses introduces the concept of choice, a concept he more fully develops in Deuteronomy 30:19, where he says to the people shortly before his death: "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.” Compare this to his remarks, probably made about a fortnight earlier, recorded in Deuteronomy 11:26-29:

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known. And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

³ The Hebrew noun ‘*Eybal*’ means “stone” or “bare,” from a word meaning “bald.” It is interesting to note that Ebal’s first use is in Genesis 36:23, within the genealogy of Seir the Horite. The Horites lived in Edom before Esau’s people invaded it. ‘*Eybal*’ (*Strong’s Greek Concordance* #5858) appears eight times in the Old Testament.

⁴ God probably chose Reuben to stand on the mountain of the curse because of his incestuous relationship with his father’s concubine, Bilhah (Genesis 35:22). As a result, Reuben became cursed with the loss of his right of the firstborn (the right of primogeniture), as his father, Jacob, mentions (Genesis 49:4).

⁵ The meaning of the Hebrew word *Gerizim* (*Strong’s* #1630) is quite obscure. It probably means something close to “cuttings off” or “cut in two.” It appears four times in the Old Testament, first in Deuteronomy 11:29. *Gerizim* is likely related to the verb *garaz* (*Strong’s* #1629, appearing on in Psalm 31:22), meaning “to cut off,” specifically from God’s sight, hence “exterminated.”

⁶ The listing of the tribes on Mount Gerizim appears in their forebears’ birth order, while the listing of the tribes on Mount Ebal does not (see Genesis 29-30).

⁷ Joshua 8:30-35 notifies us that the priests issued the blessings as well as the curses. Scripture, though, does not record the blessings.

⁸ Both Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 8 stress that the altar was built strictly according to the rules God set forth in Exodus 20:25.

⁹ See Ezekiel 36:26 and II Corinthians 3:3. Compare Romans 2:15.

¹⁰ See Romans 12:1-2.