Blessing and Curse
Gen 3:1-24; Gal 3:10-14

So this is the last in our summer series on Christ in the Old Testament.

Now, when I was at secondary school I did not enjoy standing up and talking in public. So I decided to join the debating club to try and get over it. And I got taught two maxims which I'm sure you already know. The first is, 'stand up, speak up and shut up'. And I suspect some of you wish I payed more attention to the last part of that. But the second was, 'tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you've told them.'

And this morning, I'm going to do the exact opposite. I'm going to start by telling you what I'm not going to tell you. Because we have only begun to scratch the surface of all the Old Testament has to say about Jesus. And we could wrap up this series by looking at how Jesus is the ultimate Wisdom of the wisdom literature - the One greater than Solomon. We could go to Isaiah 6 and Isaiah's vision of the Lord high and lifted up and see how the apostle John says that when Isaiah saw that he was seeing Jesus - the glory of God incarnate. We could go to the Tabernacle and the Temple and see how both point to Christ - the One greater than the temple. We could go to the prophet Zechariah and see how Jesus is *the* king, coming humbly on a donkey, but whose rule is from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Instead, we're going going back to the beginning, to Genesis, to where it all went wrong, to blessing and to curse, and to the very first promise that Christ is putting everything right.

So let me begin by asking you, would you rather be blessed or cursed? It's not a hard one is it? Even if you're not yet a Christian, even if your idea of a curse goes no further than the curse of Tutankhamun's tomb, or the curse of the Kennedy clan, or of a voodoo witch doctor sticking pins in a doll, however you define blessing and curse, you'd rather be blessed.

The Desire for Blessing
Now the Bible begins with the account of creation, but embedded in it is God's desire that his world, and you in it, should be blessed. He creates all the creatures that fill the seas and all the flocks of birds in all their array of stunning colours and then Genesis says, 'And God saw that it was good. *And blessed them*, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply." (Gen 1:21-22). And then he makes man and woman in his image, you and me, the pinnacle of his creation, and Genesis says, '*And God blessed them.* And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it."' (Gen 1:28).

Now maybe you've got a fridge magnet with the word *blessed* on it. Or maybe you've seen or posted on instagram *#blessed*. But what does that state of being *blessed* mean? It means to thrive and flourish in life, doesn't it? For life to be good, to be living into all you were meant to be. In fact, the great high priestly blessing of the Old Testament describes it as living under God's smile: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." (Num 6:24-26).

And look how one line is laid upon another, telling you: this is what it means to be blessed: it means to be kept by God, secure in him; it is to have his face shining upon you, to have his grace - his undeserved favour - poured out upon you; its to know his countenance, the goodness of his character toward you and as a result you enjoy shalom - a deep peace and rest and wellbeing.

And deep down, we all want that.

And if that were not enticing enough, Psalm 1 adds another dimension. '*Blessed* is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. *He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all he does, he prospers*. [But] the wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.' (Ps 1:1-4).

Now last week in our village we had a whirlwind come across the fields. Now, I know it's nothing like the kind of thing some of you Americans get in tornado alley, but for us this was something. And you could see it because it sucked up all the chaff of the harvest. And corn husks and barley stalks were all being whipped up and carried away in the funnel. And yet it didn't budge the trees - sure their leaves rustled and their branches bent. But they stayed where they were.

And the Psalmist is saying, that's what it means to be blessed. It's to be the opposite of chaff. You are fresh and fruitful in every season of life, and you're rooted. You're grounded. You're stable. Storms come, but once they've passed you're still standing,

And so in Deuteronomy 28, Moses makes clear that the blessing God wants us to live under stretches out over every domain of our lives: blessed in the city and the field; blessed in your family and farm; blessed in your basket and bread bowl; blessed when you go out and blessed when you come in. In other words, God's desire is that in every part of your life - physical, relational, work, leisure will flourish.

Now who would not want that? Who does not want to flourish and thrive like that, and still be standing when the storm's passed?

But there lies the problem doesn't it? Because what Deuteronomy 28 and Psalm 1 tell us that that blessing comes from walking with God and obeying his law. And what Genesis 3 tells us is that we want the blessing, but it's the God part we stumble over.

The Reality of Curse

And in the Garden of Eden the serpent tempts Eve to find that life of blessing apart from God. Genesis 3:4-5, 'The serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

It's the temptation to define for yourself what's right and wrong, good and bad. The temptation to make God's word subject to your judgment. To turn God's judgment of death on its head and make it look like the pursuit of life. And thriving under God's smile is made to look like death and death is made to look like life. It's the temptation to see God as opposed to your good, and find self-fulfilment, the blessed life, apart from him.

And not for the last time, humans listened to the creature rather than the Creator, and fell for it. And just as the serpent promised, their eyes *were* opened, opened to their nakedness; opened to shame; opened to an unease with each other; opened to accusation and blame shifting. And, again, not for the last time, sin delivered its terrible anticlimax. A life of freedom had been promised them, and instead, the life of flourishing withered before their eyes. And the blessed life God had for them and us disappeared like a puff of smoke.

And in place of blessing, they hide, first - metaphorically- from each other and then literally from God, v8: 'they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord.' And we've been hiding ever since.

You see, to pursue life, apart from the One who made you, can never deliver the life that deep down you're seeking.

And yet, Genesis 3 tells us that it's worse even than that. It's not just that apart from God you cannot achieve that life of blessing, it's that in place of blessing has come curse.

And standing in the garden, God pronounces judgment on the serpent: v14, "*Cursed* are you above all livestock." And v15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; *he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heal*."

But then he turns to the woman and in v16 says that from now he will multiply her pain in childbearing and her desire will be for her husband but he will rule over her. So in the very area where she was to experience blessing - in her relationship with her husband, in being fruitful and multiplying - she's going to experience pain and a wrestling match for power and control.

And then God turns to the man, and if the woman is to experience pain in being fruitful, so is he. Verse 17, 'Cursed is the ground because of you.' So from now on, all his work, all his efforts are going to be met with frustration, with things not working as they should, with what Ecclesiastes calls the *hebel* of life. And all of this until, v19, 'you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'

You see, we can be tempted to think that we can obtain the blessed life apart from God, but the reality's very different. Sure, we can know moments, even prolonged periods of joy and satisfaction, but in place of endless blessing we also experience physical and emotional pain, hiding and shame, frustration at work and ultimately, we all become like the chaff of Psalm 1, blown away by the whirlwind of death.

And yet, the curse doesn't just impact our physical and relational lives. Genesis 3 ends by telling us that God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden, v24, 'and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.'

And now everyone of us must live our lives east of Eden - a fact what was literally sewn into the great curtain of the Temple, that barred the way into the Most Holy Place - where God dwelt. Because these same cherubim were embroidered into it, as a reminder, there is no way through. There is no way back to the garden, you cannot return to the truly blessed life, without the sword of God's judgement falling on you.

And so, if the High Priestly blessing tells us that to be blessed is to have God turn his face towards you and smile upon you, the reality is that from our first parents on we have lived under the curse, the curse of being turned away from his presence.

And if Genesis 3 was the end it would be terrible. But it's just the beginning. And in Genesis 12 God chooses Abraham and says, "I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a

blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*." (Gen 12:2-3). As God makes it clear, he has a plan to reverse the curse and bless the world and he's going to do it through the offspring of Abraham.

You see, it's not just you who wants your life blessed. God does. The question is, if God wants that for you, how do you get it?

Christ, the Way Back

And in Galatians 3, Paul says that when you realise you can't live the blessed life apart from God, you're faced with a choice: two ways to seek God's blessing. But only one of them works. And the first way is by trying to earn his blessing, by obeying God's law: v10, to 'rely on the works of the law.' That if I live right, if I do good things, and obey God, God'll bless me. I'll do my part, and God will do his.

But that never works, Paul says. Verse 10, 'For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."' In other words, think you can earn God's blessing by living a good, righteous life, you're never going to get it, because you can't. The law requires you to obey all of it, in every detail, at all times, and none of us can do that. Everyone of us has a bad day. In fact, we have multiple bad moments every day. Moments when we're angry, or impatient, when we're selfish and self-centred.

And so to live thinking, 'I need to earn God's blessing' leaves you under a curse. Firstly, because you'll always feel anxious, 'am I doing enough? How am I comparing to everyone else', and that sense of condemnation will hang over you like a cloud. But secondly, because the judgement of the law really does stand against you - you have not kept this in full, you cannot keep it in full, so you are condemned.

So trying to earn God's favour is never the doorway into the life of blessing God has for you.

Instead, Paul says there is a way in, and it's the way of faith. But this time, not faith in your ability or what you can do, but faith in what Christ has done for you. Verses 11-13, 'Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live *by faith*."…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."'

And so, as Christ hung upon the cross, he became a curse for us. In ways we can never fully understand, Christ absorbed into himself, to the last degree, the curse of God upon our sin, upon our law breaking, and all the frustration and futility of a creation that is out of sync with its creator. It all fell upon him, and he didn't just *experience* what it was to be cursed, the ultimate blessed one, the only one who had always perfectly obeyed the law, became that curse.

And so, as Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, so at the cross God the Father turned his face away from his beloved Son, as he cried out, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' As they were sent away into darkness, so he was cast into darkness and the sun was blotted out. Why? He became a curse that you might be blessed. He was cast off that you might be kept. The Father turned his face away, so that he might turn his face toward you. He was plunged into

darkness, that the light of the countenance of God might shine upon you. He was in distress, that you might experience peace.

And so it was there, at the cross, as satan bruised Christ's heel, that Jesus crushed his head. Because as he breathed his last, the curtain, with its embroidered cherubim, barring the way to God's presence was torn in two, because the flaming sword of God's judgment fell upon Christ, and the way back to blessing was opened.

It's why Paul says in Colossians 2 that it was at the cross, that Christ 'disarmed the rulers and authorities [the serpent and his minions] and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them.' (Col 2:15). Because on the third day, God raised him from the dead, and death died, and the curse lay broken.

You and I can never earn God's blessing. But what we cannot do, Christ has done. Galatians 3 v14, Christ became a curse for us, 'so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.'

What's the blessing of Abraham? It's for God to look at you and count you as righteous because you trust him; to hear him say over you, 'I accept you'. It's the blessing of justification: that he holds nothing and counts no sin against you. And, it's the blessing of the Holy Spirit poured into your heart. That in Christ, we don't just have the ability to enter the Most Holy Place - the place where God dwells, the Most Holy Place enters us. Christ has torn the curtain down, and now, by his Spirit, we become his dwelling place.

You see, if you try and live a truly thriving life apart from God, ultimately it will fail. Or, if you try and earn God's blessing by your own moral goodness it's not blessing you'll experience but the unforgiving weight of the law pressing down on you. But look to Christ as the one who became a curse for you and the door to blessing is opened wide.

And what you'll experience is that it's also the door to obedience, to hearing his word and doing it. Not to earn his blessing, but because you already have his blessing.

Jesus said, 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.' (Luke 6:27-28). But how can you do that all the time you think you've got to create your own life of blessing? You'll see anyone standing in the way of that as an enemy to be taken out. Someone to be cursed, not blessed. But when you know Christ has already secured your blessing, you don't need to curse them, instead you can bless and pray for those who criticise you or oppose you at work, or hold different political views from you.

Or listen to what James says about our tongues: 'With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the image of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.' (James 3:9-10). Now, why do we bad mouth other people? Why do you trash someone's reputation or speak badly of them behind their back? Either because they've been bad mouthing you, or you see them as a threat to the life you want, or because they're not giving you what you want. But when you know 'Christ became a curse for me, and in him I am blessed', firstly, it deeply humbles you. Christ had to be cursed to save me - which means he could say far worse things about me than they're saying. But he doesn't, instead he blesses me. So how I feel about myself doesn't depend on what this other person is or is not saying

or doing. So I don't need to trash someone else's reputation to feel good about myself, I can bless, not curse.

And finally, it'll change the way you see the circumstances of life. You see, in the Beatitudes, Jesus said 'blessed are you who are poor, or hungry or weep'. And we can think, 'Really? When life is hard, I'm blessed?' But that's because we tie what it means to be blessed too much to our circumstances. Instead, when Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome he echoed God's promise in Genesis 3, 'The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet' (Rom 16:20). In other words, not everything will be put right until Christ makes all things new in the new heavens and the new earth, and evil is finally defeated. But in the meantime, as Paul says in Galatians 3, you are blessed 'in Christ Jesus' (v14). It's dependent on Christ, not circumstances. And when you know that you won't be blown around like chaff. Instead you'll find a deep stability even when life is hard.

On the verge of the people of Israel entering the Promised Land Moses said to them, 'I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life.' (Deut 30:19). It's the choice we all face. Try and find life by throwing off God's rules as satan tempted Adam and Eve to do, or by trying to obey them all as legalistic religion would have you do, and you'll just find curse. But look to Christ and trust him and you'll find life. So, choose life. Choose Christ.