

City of the Cursed

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No Journeying Mercies

A Jewish man set out from Jerusalem to go to Jericho, most likely on a business trip, but he didn't get very far. At some point, perhaps half-way, he ran into painful problems. Ambushed by highwaymen and badly injured, he was left for dead as they took off with all his goods (Lk. 10). This, of course, is the introduction to a famous story told by Jesus. A story it is, but we have no reason to think that things didn't actually happen like He said.

Crime Doesn't Pay

Now the storyteller didn't say how many criminals were involved, but with a bit of speculation, it is not difficult to imagine that two of these men got caught eventually and were condemned to death - execution by crucifixion! Then, when their fateful day comes round, they find that there's a third man who is to die also. And when they hear the name - Jesus of Nazareth - it brings a glimmer of hope! Isn't He the One who, on numerous occasions, lifted the curse of disease and disability, of demons, even of death itself? But, as the three of them hang there, nailed to rough crosses, helpless, naked, in excruciating pain, both criminals revile Jesus... Why? Because He isn't lifting their curse... He can't even free himself from the terrible curse of crucifixion that has come down upon him!

But a Criminal Can Pray

Matthew and Mark tell us about that in their Gospels, but Luke is the one to complete the story. In his chapter 23, it is as if he opens a window, and suddenly the scene of unmitigated curse becomes one of unlimited blessing. That is when one of the men humbles himself. Here we have a hardened criminal, and he's repenting and recognizing that they, as criminals, are only getting their just deserts, while Jesus is suffering innocently. Then he prays... Who does he pray to? He has realized that Jesus is, indeed, the King of the Jews, the Messiah himself. And so he asks to be remembered when Jesus has "come into his kingdom"!

First Down, then Up

Jesus isn't coming into his Kingdom just yet. He will first have to rise from the dead. For now He is going to Hades, the realm of the dead, "descending into the lower parts of the earth", as the apostle Paul says (Eph. 4). Peter affirms in Acts 2 that when the Lord arose, He arose from Hades. From another story (Lk. 16:19-31) you will remember, of course, how Hades stood out as a destination of curse and despair. That was the backdrop, but what we also discover in that story is that one section of the realm of Hades could not be more different - Jesus called it "Abraham's bosom". Then, in his conversation with the crucified criminal, he calls it "Paradise". It was a section filled with blessing and hope, and was reserved exclusively for all who were of the faith of Abraham.

Paradise on the Move

This spiritual Paradise was a wonderful reality. But before MAN chose to sin, Paradise, both spiritual and physical, was found on Earth. When, as a result of SIN, all of creation came under the curse, God moved Paradise from Earth to Hades. That situation was now coming to an end. From the moment of Jesus' victorious resurrection, Paradise would be found, not anymore in Hades, the realm of the dead, but in Heaven, the realm of the living. Paul quotes Psalm 68 and describes that moment of triumph in Ephesians 4: "**When he ascended on high, he led captivity captive...**" (see also Jn. 20:17; Rv. 1:18; 2 Co. 12:3-4).

With Christ

Before rising from the dead (holding the keys of Hades and death, wrested from Satan's clutches - Rev. 1:18, Hb. 2:14), Jesus promises to meet the repentant criminal right there, in Paradise (i.e., still in Hades): "**Today you will be with me in Paradise!**" No more curse there! Note that by simple faith in the Messiah this pathetic human being has been transformed into a subject of the King - the Curse of sin on his life is broken! It has been forever exchanged for God's Blessing! Though still in agony on the cross, he is now "**with Christ**". Jesus could not have said: "You will be **with me!**", unless the man was already '**with him**' before dying. No one **without** Christ at the moment of death, will be **with** Christ after death. The cursed criminal, now a true son of Abraham, is ushered into Paradise, there to be with Christ forever and ever! In other words, when the rising Christ transfers Paradise to heaven, this man is there. When later Christ reigns over the world from Jerusalem, and Paradise is at long last restored to earth, the erstwhile criminal is there, with Christ! Wherever Christ is, this man will be there with him!

History of a Curse

If you guessed that 'Jericho' is the city we're thinking of, then you're spot on! It is not unlikely that the criminals, mentioned by Jesus in his parable of Luke 10, were based there, operating on the highways and byways surrounding the city. Remember that the victim of the story was on his way 'down' from Jerusalem to Jericho.

But we have to go further back for a moment, all the way to Noah. Noah had a grandson, called Canaan. God knew beforehand what kind of a life Canaan would be living and what his father Ham was going to hand down to him, so God prophesied through Noah of the curse on Canaan's life, on his descendants and on the land that would bear his name - the Land of Canaan (Gn. 9). But then in God's wonderful way of moving, the Land of Canaan became Abram's 'promised land', just as it would later be to the Israelites - the land flowing with milk and honey. In other words, the 'Land of Curse' was destined to become the 'Land of Blessing'.

Nothing Worse than God's Curse

That curse on Canaan and the Canaanites was real and terrible. God's curse is always the result of sin and points directly to God's judgment. Judgment may seem delayed; the curse may seem unreal, but even in Abram's time, down in the south of Canaan, judgment suddenly fell on the cursed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. It shows us that the Canaanites of that area must have been "ripening" for judgment through many years, and when the point of no return had arrived, judgment was executed. The rest of the country though, was not yet ripe for judgment...

From chapter 10 we learn that a good number of clans, or tribes, all of them Canaan's offspring, gradually filled all of the land. When Abram arrived in ch. 12, "the Canaanites were in the land (*which sounds as if they weren't supposed to be*). Then the **Lord** appeared to Abram and said, **'I will give this land to your offspring'**." The Amorites were a prominent tribe of Canaanites. In ch. 15 Abram was told concerning their impending judgment, that "the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full". In other words, judgment was inevitable, but it was to be stayed until the Judge would give the word. God knew that another 400 years would be needed, so He tells Abram that his descendants through Jacob would be back in Canaan for that, once they had been liberated from Egypt. And that's exactly how it happened; 400 years later Moses brought the armies of the God of Israel right to the borders of Canaan, then Joshua led the invasion...

Who's in Charge?

But a surprise was in store for Joshua - he found that someone else was in reality the Commander of God's army (Josh. 5) – and all Joshua could do was worship! When we look at this meeting between the two, we realize that the "man with the drawn sword" was none other than the Lord Jesus himself. And, of course, from Revelation 19, we know that He is the One who is yet to command an invading army. In spectacular fashion, He takes back Earth itself, and then judges and reigns from Jerusalem, lifting at last the curse that's on all of creation.

In Joshua's time, it was Canaan that was then ripe for judgment. The Commander's sword was drawn - judgment was about to start... In Noah's time, God had used the Flood for judgment. At the tower of Babel, He used confusion of language and dispersion. For Sodom and Gomorrah He used fire. This time it was going to be the 'drawn sword' - and the children of Israel were the executioners...

Jericho and One Special Citizen

We may be sure that at this time, Jericho, the city of the cursed, was a bastion of idolatry & spiritism, violence, child sacrifice, gross immorality - all of that in utter defiance and contempt of the God of Noah and Abraham. Did the citizens of Jericho put up a fight? Ch. 24 says they did, but in ch. 6, where the fall of the city is described, there is no record of that. What we do read, again and again, is that "their hearts melted in fear", and well they might. Yet, even in that desperate situation, God's mercy was a reality. He intervened! Many centuries later, He would intervene on behalf of the crucified criminal.

Rahab was one of the cursed women of Jericho, but she put her faith in the God of Israel, and through that faith she was wonderfully saved from judgment - not only she, but her extended family as well. Joshua 2 & 6 tell us about that. And, just like Lot and his daughters had been snatched from Sodom before it burned, so Rahab and family were snatched from Jericho in the nick of time. Here we have a Canaanite woman, descendant of Ham, who has the curse exchanged for God's salvation and blessing. From now on she is counted among the descendants of Shem and Abraham. She even made it into the genealogy of the Messiah in Matthew 1. That distinction was due to the fact that Rahab, from the City of the Cursed, became the great-great-grandmother of King David!

Don't Nurse what's of the Curse

Jericho is destroyed, now what? First of all, God puts the Israelites on notice that if any man should have the temerity to rebuild the cursed city, he would be bringing back the curse - on himself and on his family. More than five centuries later, a man called Hiel does exactly that (1 Kings 16:34).

No sooner have we read about that in Joshua 6, when in chapter 7 we read of Achan going after the stuff that is cursed, just as God's people are entering into their inheritance. Does it remind you of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5? Just as God's **Ekklesia** was entering into its (spiritual) inheritance, this couple thought they could incorporate a bit of 'the curse' into their ministry. The curse on this world is not a trifling matter. His Word reminds us to **"come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord; do not touch any unclean thing!"** (2 Co. 6:17).

When the Curse Becomes Trendy

In Paul's time, just like in any other time, all people were "by nature children of wrath". As he writes about the "course of this world", you might take it to be the '*curse*' of this world: **"You... were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted**

ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others...” (Eph. 2:1-2).

In our own ‘post-modern’ times, two very, very old trends, symptoms of the universal mutiny pictured in Psalm 2 - when all moral restraint is cast off - stand out as perhaps never before. They are being increasingly ‘normalized’ and ‘legalized’, and to such an extent that even an article like this might get the author into trouble... I am referring, first, to the mothers who are having their precious babies killed, many millions of them every year, before these have had a chance to be born; and, second, to that specific aspect of the curse that was rampant in Sodom and Gomorra: homosexual practice and gay ‘marriage’. This too is well on its way to conquer whole sections, not only of Society in general, but of ‘Christendom’ in particular, in spite of what the New Testament clearly teaches on the subject (Ro. 1; 1 Co. 6; 2 P. 2; Jude).

There are, of course, many other aspects of the curse, all under God’s wrath, for which there is no room here. What is most important is to see what God in his love, patience and power has done about the curse through the centuries, and what He is still doing today.

Who all Are Cursed?

Jericho was under God’s curse, as we have seen. It is also true - and a Bible Christian is aware of it - that, in reality, God’s curse is not isolated or restricted to one city or one country. By man’s rebellion the curse came on the whole world. We are the heirs of our first parents (Gn. 3).

As Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, the world’s capital, before setting out to trace God’s wonderful way of salvation, he must establish for his readers, first of all, that Rome isn’t any better than Sodom or Jericho or Babylon. Rome is under God’s curse. In his first chapter he writes: **“Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”**

In chapter 3 he quotes from the Old Testament: **“As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.’”**

When the law was given at Sinai, it too established the fact: “It is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them’.” (Gal. 3:10). Later, John, the apostle, confirmed: **“We know that... the whole world lies in the power of the evil one”** (1 John 5:19). As Jesus spoke about the Judgment of the Nations, He, the Judge, made it quite clear that the destination of the cursed is **“the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”** (Mt. 25:41).

From Jericho to Jerusalem and Back

But then we remember that wonderful exception among the cursed in Jericho! When there was repentance and faith in God’s Word, the curse lifted. One young woman, Rahab, with her very dark reputation - a sinner like all the others - was snatched from the falling judgment to henceforth belong to God’s people. Rahab later happily married Salmon - quite possibly one of the spies that had lodged with her. She was destined to become King David’s great-great-grandmother! The Appalling Curse was no match for God’s Amazing Grace!

Nonetheless, the Old Serpent will again and again rear his ugly head to wreak havoc where he can, even amidst the signs of God’s grace. Joshua in chapter 6 prophetically foresaw Jericho’s rebuilding. It reminds us of the apostle Paul’s prophecy to the Ephesian elders. These were men wonderfully saved from the curse on this world, and solidly converted, yet how keenly aware Paul was of new inroads of the curse among them: **“For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears”** (Acts 20).

Joshua’s Forebodings

Israel was about to start down a slippery slope - once Joshua’s generation had passed. Five centuries later, the ‘ten tribes’, headed up by Ephraim (Joshua’s tribe), had arrived at the very bottom of that slope: King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were reigning in Samaria. She was from Sidon, the daughter of Sidon’s king. The city of Sidon was named after its founder, Canaan’s eldest son. Noah in his time, speaking for God, had pronounced the curse on Canaan and his descendants. Now Jezebel, the Canaanite princess, not only worshiped Satan herself, with the cults of Baal and Moloch, but she got her husband and most of their subjects, Abraham’s children, to do the same!

The ghastly and gruesome realities of the curse were only too evident. A temple, altars, images to Baal & Moloch (the baby-devouring god of fire), all was dedicated to the grotesque, implacable enemy of God’s chosen people (1 Kings 16). It was in *that* very time when Hiel started to rebuild Jericho, the City of the Cursed. Like Ahab and Jezebel, he too reaped a fearful harvest.

What is Satan after?

Satan's sights, for now, were above all on the House of David - from it the Messiah must spring! And his strategy through Jezebel, was stunning, and almost successful. She, his faithful servant, managed to get her daughter, Athaliah, married off into David's royal dynasty in Jerusalem. When, at last, the right time came, Athaliah's husband (King Jehoram) died, and then their son (King Ahaziah) died as well. Somehow, Athaliah was left as the sole reigning monarch... Seizing the opportunity, she took it upon herself to kill off all the possible pretenders to the Throne of David, including the (other) sons of Jehoram and herself and her grandsons...

So how about God's precious Messianic promises? Had Jezebel and Athaliah managed to make them null and void? It certainly looked like it, and Athaliah, under Satan's "blessing", continued to reign unimpeded on David's throne for six more years. The Prince of this world was giving the lie to all that God had told Abraham and King David - his promises so often and so emphatically repeated.

Is Satan Formidable? God is Faithful!

A tiny tot was God's answer to the crisis! One of Athaliah's daughters, Jehosheba, married to the Highpriest, was able to spirit her brother Ahaziah's youngest - Joash of one year old - away from the massacre and into the temple, where he remained hidden for those six years. Then he was brought out and solemnly crowned! When Athaliah found out, she nearly exploded, but with all her raging, she could neither stop her grandson of seven replacing her on the throne, nor, indeed, save herself from summary execution... With her, the very last member of Ahab and Jezebel's extended family had been uprooted (2 K. 11).

In case you ever wondered about the missing generations in Messiah's genealogy in Matthew 1, it was precisely this particular curse, pronounced on Ahab and all his family, by both Elijah and Elisha, that had the effect of banning three successive kings from the genealogy, Ahaziah, Joash and Amaziah. They were descendants, not only of David, but through Athaliah also of Ahab and Jezebel. God's sovereign plan - bringing his Messiah into the world in the fullness of time - must not have the slightest association with Ahab and Jezebel; no shadows as the Day of Redemption dawns in all its brightness for a world lost in the darkness of the curse.

God's Blessing Takes on the Curse.

Some thirty years after Hiel had rebuilt Jericho, the City of the Cursed, lo and behold, we find there is an active group of the Lord's prophets based there. And, in 2 Kings 2, Elisha, God's miracle-working prophet, spends time with them. He is told about a particular aspect of the curse - the water is no good!

That had happened before in Israel's history. At Marah in the wilderness, Moses was told to throw a "tree" into the bitter waters, and they were made sweet (Ex. 15). That "tree" is a type of the cross of Christ, see Galatians 3:13: "**Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us, for it is written, Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree**". The curse on this world, and its blight and bitterness, was on the One hanging on the "tree" of Calvary. Once "the cross" and all it stands for is applied to a life embittered by the curse of sin, that awful bitterness gives way to sweet love, deep peace, great joy...!

Israel, after Marah, was led on to Elim where the twelve fountains and the seventy palm trees give us a good idea of abundance and fullness. In the New Testament also we find this progression. In John 4, the Samaritan woman, whose life only knew 'dead water', was given 'living water' by the Savior. Then in John 7, to all who are thirsty for HIM, He offers '**streams** of living water'; and that means a marvelous overflow. The living water is welling up, not only **in** the ones who drink, but also **through** them for many others!

First Moses, then Elisha

What is it Elisha does in Jericho regarding the bitter waters? If Moses threw in the tree, Elisha calls for salt, and when he throws it into the water's source, the waters are healed - the curse has been overcome, at least this particular effect of it. Once again we find a wonderful progression - doesn't Jesus say that his disciples are the "salt of the earth"? He himself is the only one who overcame the curse, totally and absolutely, doing away with it on Calvary's 'tree'. But then his disciples are given the Great Commission to 'make disciples', to be God's "salt of the earth" - i.e., his anti-corruption force in a world of corruption; his salvation and blessing, his anti-curse, where all is saturated with the curse. In this dark and murky world, Jesus says: "**You are the light of the world!**" (Mt. 5).

"God Moves in a Mysterious Way his Wonders to Perform."

There is another mention of the city that Hiel rebuilt, and, in conclusion, we must refer to it. Jesus himself, the "Blessed One", radiates blessing in the midst of the accursed. This is so as He approaches Jericho, then on his way through the city, and again as He exits. Wonderful miracles happen, greater than Elisha's. Two or three blind beggars receive new eyes. One chief publican, Zacchaeus, receives a new heart (Lk. 18-19; Mr. 10; Mt. 20). But then, what happened to all the other hundreds of citizens who saw him and heard him? Did they prefer the curse? Did their dark hearts shut out the Light of the world as He illuminated them also?

City of Palms

Jericho had the reputation of being a 'pleasant' city, and its citizens had learned to live with the curse. You might say that the curse had become manageable to them, so why bother much about a Savior from the curse? Isn't that the attitude of most in this cursed world, enthralled and enticed as they are by all that the Prince of the power of the air throws at them? May our daily life and testimony not be negative, but always positive,

consciously seeking to live out the new LIFE our Lord gave us - in the midst of all the corruption surrounding us. In the process the 'salt' will be provoking thirst as well!

It is noteworthy that whereas the Old Testament closes with the word "curse", the very last page of the Bible tells us:

**“And there shall be no more *CURSE*,
but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it,
and his servants shall serve him!”** (Rev. 22:3).