

44.

MESSAGE 36

THE PENALTIES FOR BLASPHEMY AND FOR VIOLENCE DONE TO PERSONS AND TO LIVESTOCK AND APPLICATION OF THE CIVIL LAW TO SOJOURNERS

Leviticus 24:10-23

Introduction

This MESSAGE was given by Jehovah to settle questions of law which arose when a man with an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father blasphemed Jehovah. The laws that already had been given did not clearly settle questions about what should be done about such a situation. Therefore, Moses took those questions to Jehovah for a ruling, and Jehovah gave him an answer from the Tabernacle of Meeting. The answer added new laws to those that had previously been revealed in Exodus 20:22-23:19 and Leviticus 18-20 (see comments on MESSAGES 22-24).

Three areas of law are covered in this MESSAGE from Jehovah, all of which were directly related to the offense the man had committed: (1) The first area is the penalty for blasphemy. The man had blasphemed God, but the penalty for that offense had not been clearly defined by Jehovah. Jehovah settled that question in this MESSAGE. (2) The second area is the penalty for harm done to a person in a fight. The man's blasphemy had grown out of a fight between him and an Israelite from the tribe of Dan. Some situations related to damage done to a person in a fight had been dealt with in Exodus 21:18-19,22-27, but others had not. Jehovah prescribed penalties for other types of harm done in anger and physical conflict. (3) The third area is the application of the law to sojourners. Some regulations already had been given regarding sojourners, but some questions about how sojourners were to be treated remained open. Jehovah clarified that question by revealing that in all aspects sojourners were to be treated equally to native-born Israelites.

This MESSAGE can be outlined as follows:

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Interpretation

CHAPTER 24

Introductory Note: (24:10-13)

1. The occasion for the MESSAGE:
Blasphemy by a man of mixed
nationality (24:10-12)

Verse 10. Now a son of an Israelite woman and of an Egyptian man had gone out in the midst of the sons of Israel, and the son of the Israelite woman and an Israelite man had fought in the camp.

Now a son of an Israelite woman, and of an Egyptian man. The man whose offense occasioned this MESSAGE was the son of a mixed marriage. His father was an Egyptian, but his mother was an Israelite. He was part of the “mixed multitude” that went out of Egypt with the Israelites, as reported in Exodus 12:38. Most interpreters have assumed that the “mixed multitude” was made up of persons of other nationalities, and most likely that assumption is partially true. However, probably the largest number of the persons in the “mixed multitude” were children and grandchildren of mixed marriages, like this man.

Two factors strongly support the view that most of the “mixed multitude” were from mixed marriages: First, every use of the word translated “mixed” makes best sense when taken as a reference to people of mixed blood (Ex. 12:38; I Kings 10:15; Neh. 13:3; Jer. 25:20,24; 50:37; Eze. 30:5). Second, it is highly unlikely that many Egyptians would have left Egypt with the Israelites. The harsh treatment given to the Israelites and the sharp contest that took place during the Israelites’ struggle for freedom brought such a sharp division between the Egyptians and the Israelites that it is most unlikely many pure Egyptians would have taken the stigma upon themselves and run the risks that would have been involved in identifying themselves with run-away slaves. Third, the name of the mother of the man in this story is given (v. 11), but his father’s name is not, which probably indicates his father had not left Egypt with the Israelites. It is logical to assume that many mixed

families were broken by the Exodus, as the Israelite member of the family fled with his or her birth family while the Egyptian member remained behind. If so, the “mixed multitude” was not made up primarily of pure blooded people of other nationalities, but of people who were part Israelite and part some other nationality.

References to sojourners in verses 16 and 22 strongly indicate that the blasphemer in this story was considered to be a sojourner, that is, a person who had accepted Jehovah as his God and who had been accepted as one of the Israelites (see comments on Lev. 16:29b-31 in MESSAGE 20 under the heading [including] the native and the sojourner who sojourns among you; on Lev. 17:8-9 in MESSAGE 21, and on Lev. 19:9-10 in MESSAGE 23). Two kinds of people could be sojourners: (1) People of foreign blood who had accepted Jehovah and had been accepted among the Israelites as one of them. (2) People who had one parent who was an Israelite and one who was not an Israelite but who had accepted Jehovah and had been accepted among the Israelites. The man in this story belonged to the latter group.

Meyrick and Clements felt that the offender in this story was not a part of the assembly of Israel on the basis of Deuteronomy 23:7-8, which says that Edomite and Egyptian children of the third generation could enter Jehovah’s assembly. However, that law did not apply in this case for two reasons. First, that law applied to full blooded Edomites and Egyptians and not to persons who were part Egyptian or Edomite and part Israelite. Second, that law was not given until later and was part of a MESSAGE delivered by Moses on the plains of Moab that set forth how the laws were to be applied after the Israelites settled in the Land (Deut. 12:1). We do not know how many pure blooded Edomites and Egyptians lived among the Israelites in the wilderness, but many more of mixed nationality must have been among them. This man evidently left Egypt expecting to be treated as other Israelites, and his opponent probably did not want him received in that manner.

Jehovah had given some instructions concerning how sojourners were to be treated, but some questions still remained, at least in the minds

of the judges. Their uncertainty caused them to be undecided about how to deal with this man's offense.

had gone out in the midst of the sons of Israel. This statement implies that the "mixed multitude" or sojourners were living in a separate section of the camp at that time. Later when the Israelites moved away from Sinai, every tribe was allotted a certain area for camping around The Tabernacle (Num. 1:52-2:34). It must be assumed that even while they were still at Sinai every tribe had its own camping area. Therefore, those who did not belong to a certain tribe lived in a camping area of their own. Probably a family composed of an Israelite father and an Egyptian mother was considered to belong to the tribe of the father, but a family composed of an Egyptian father, and an Israelite mother was part of the "mixed multitude." That situation was especially true if the father had not left Egypt with the Israelites. The man in this story belonged to that group. So he was living in the separate area for sojourners. This man evidently felt isolated and resented it. He wanted to be free to move among the Israelites without restrictions. Others likely resisted his doing so. The matter cried out to be settled, and this man of mixed heritage evidently was testing out the limits. The old rabbis stated that the man wanted to live in the area that belonged to the tribe of Dan, his mother's tribe, and had been refused. That suggestion is intriguing, but it is not stated in the text.

On the day that the incident described in this chapter took place, the man was in the area of one of the tribes. There should have been nothing offensive about his doing so. No mention had been made of any restrictions on visiting in various areas of the camp, and the Israelites had been commanded repeatedly to treat and love sojourners as themselves (Ex. 12:19,48-49; 20:10; 22:21; 23:9,12; see comments on Lev. 16:29 in MESSAGE 20, ON Lev. 19:33-34 in MESSAGE 23, on Lev. 20:2 in MESSAGE 24, on Lev. 22:18-19 in MESSAGE 26, and on Lev. 23:22 in MESSAGE 31).

and the son of the Israelite and an Egyptian man fought in the camp. An Israelite man evidently objected to the presence of a man of mixed blood in the area that belonged to his tribe. Probably his objection grew out of his resentment toward

Egyptians, since the sojourner was half Egyptian. Racial prejudice and resentments between former slaves and masters certainly would have been areas for potentially sharp disagreements among the people who had left Egypt. The two men fiercely disagreed and then fought with each other. The word that describes the conflict means more than an argument. It describes a bitter fight. It was a physical combat in which the two men sought to hurt each other.

Verse 11. And the Israelite woman's son cursed and ridiculed the Name. So they brought him to Moses. His mother's name [was] Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan.

The bitter fight was uncalled for and wrong, but in the process of the fight, the sojourner committed an even worse offense. He cursed and ridiculed the Name. The name referred to is not given in the text, but it obviously means Jehovah's name. The word translated "cursed" means "to speak against" or "to speak evil of." The word translated "ridiculed" means "to belittle" or "to show contempt for." The two words together show that the man had not just thoughtlessly spoken curse words in anger. He had expressed disdain and contempt for Jehovah's name, which was equivalent to rejecting or disbelieving Jehovah. The old rabbis interpreted this passage to mean that even speaking the name of Jehovah was evil, because of the great holiness of Jehovah. Out of that interpretation grew the practice of substituting the word "LORD" for the name Jehovah when the Scripture was read. The rabbis were obviously wrong in their interpretation of the offense the man committed. The sin of the sojourner was not speaking the Name but speaking against the Name. His offense was a genuine case of blasphemy and rebellion. His actions had passed from a dispute with another man and had become an affront to God.

The sojourner may have had reason to resent the attitude of the Israelite man, but he was wrong to take out his resentment on God. Blaming God for ugly attitudes on the part of God's people is always a serious mistake. It was wrong for the man to travel among God's people and share their blessings but reject the God who provided those

blessings, even if one man among God's people disobeyed God and mistreated him.

Verse 12. And they put him in jail for Jehovah's mouth to explain to them.

Israelites who were around the two men may not have been surprised by the fight, but they were shocked by the man's speaking against God. They restrained him and took him before the judges, who had been appointed to pass judgment on offenders against the law (Ex. 18:13-26). The judges did not find clear direction in the law as to what decision they should render in this case, so they referred the case to Moses, as they had been instructed to do in difficult cases (Ex. 18:22,26). Probably in taking the case to Moses they had interrupted him while he was receiving Jehovah's instructions concerning holy assemblies. Their doing so would explain why those instructions, which were all on the same subject and closely related to each other, were broken into five brief MESSAGES instead of being spoken all together (see comments on INTRODUCTION TO SECTION IV .and associated Critical Note). It seems that even Moses was not able to render a firm decision. So the man had been kept in jail until Moses could finish hearing God's MESSAGES and then ask Jehovah about what they should do.

Did the Israelites have a jail in the wilderness? They certainly had been familiar with prisons in Egypt, ever since Joseph was in prison there long before the rest of the family joined him there (Ex. 39:19-40:5; 41:10; 42:17). It is reasonable that they should have prepared some kind of jail to control offenders, though it would have had to be a temporary arrangement that could be moved about as they traveled from place to place in the wilderness. The Hebrew word means "prison," so we should understand it in that manner.

The question is, why should the judges and Moses have been uncertain about what decision to render in this case? Three factors seem to have caused their uncertainty. First, Jehovah had clearly stated that cursing God was a crime, but He had not specified the punishment for that crime. The third of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:7) had commanded the Israelites not to take the name of

Jehovah in vain, but the Ten Commandments were basic moral principles not civil statutes enforceable by civil authorities. A civil law had been given in Exodus 22:28 (22:27 in the Hebrew text) that forbid ridiculing or disdaining God, but a penalty had not been specified. In Leviticus 22:32 Jehovah had commanded them not to profane "My holy Name," but again a penalty was not prescribed (see comments on Lev. 22:31-33 in MESSAGE 29). The death penalty had been specified for cursing parents (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9; see comments on Lev. 20:7-9 in MESSAGE 24). At least some of the judges may have believed the same penalty applied to cursing Jehovah, but the law did not definitely make that statement. Probably, the judges were reluctant to impose the death penalty without clear assurance that Jehovah intended that severe penalty for speaking against His name.

The second reason for their uncertainty was that the man had cursed God in the midst of fighting with another man. The judges probably wondered if the double offense affected the way they should render judgment. What penalty was appropriate for fighting with intention of doing bodily harm?

The third reason for their uncertainty was that they wondered how the statute against cursing God applied to a sojourner. In giving some statutes, Jehovah had specifically stated that those statutes applied equally to sojourners as to Israelites by birth (Ex. 12:19,48-49; 20:10; 23:12; Lev. 16:29; 17:8-9,10-16; 18:26; 20:2; 22:18-19), but Jehovah had not made that statement with regard to some other laws. Specifically he had not made that statement with regard to cursing God. Also, no blanket statement had been made concerning how the law in general should be applied to sojourners, even though the Israelites had been commanded to be generous to the sojourners and to love them as themselves (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:10,33-34; 23:22). Perhaps some judges argued that, since some laws specifically mentioned sojourners, the laws that did not mention them did not apply to them. Others no doubt argued that since some of the laws applied equally to sojourners and Israelites, all of the laws must have applied equally to both. Thus, the judges were not able to reach a clear decision, and Moses felt equally unsure.

Since the judges and Moses were not able to settle the questions involved, they chose to keep the man in jail until they could get answers from “Jehovah’s mouth.” “For Jehovah’s mouth to explain to them” was a strong statement. We should not try to soften it. It can hardly have any other meaning than that they wanted to hear the decision given to them by an audible voice spoken from the Tabernacle of Meeting. Jehovah had been speaking audibly to Moses out of the Tabernacle for twenty-eight days, ever since The Tabernacle had been erected. It was perfectly natural for them to expect God to give them directions concerning these important questions in the same manner.

2. Statement that the MESSAGE was spoken to Moses by Jehovah (24:13)

Verse 13. **And Jehovah spoke to Moses saying,**

This verse is the usual note by which Moses introduced a new MESSAGE from Jehovah. This MESSAGE was given to Moses in response to his request to Jehovah to settle the legal issues that troubled him and the judges.

- A. The penalty for blasphemy (24:14-16)

Verse 14. **Take the one who cursed out of the camp, and all the ones who heard him shall lay their hand on his head, and all the congregation shall stone him.**

First, Jehovah passed judgment on the major offense of the man who had cursed the Name and shown disdain for God. He quickly and firmly declared that the blasphemer was to be put to death. The man had shown disrespect for God both by his words and his attitude. His actions showed that he was in rebellion against God, and no one who rejected Jehovah deserved a place among Jehovah’s people. He was to be removed from them by death, just as other offenses that revealed rebellion against God were to be punished by death (see [Introduction](#) to MESSAGE 24; Lev. 20, and comments on all verses in that Chapter).

Jehovah went on to describe the method by which the death penalty was to be exercised. Twice

previously Jehovah had said that the death penalty was to be carried out by stoning (see comments on Lev. 20:2,27 in MESSAGE 24). In this MESSAGE He specified the procedure by which stoning was to be conducted. It was to be carried out in three steps: (1) The offender was to be taken outside the camp, to show that he did not belong among Jehovah’s people. (2) The witnesses to his offense were to press their hands on the offender’s head to testify that he was truly guilty. (3) All the congregation was to participate in the stoning, to show they would not accept among them a person who rejected Jehovah. Without doubt, Jehovah intended this procedure to be followed for all executions in Israel.

Verse 15-16a. **15 And you must speak to the sons of Israel, saying, Any man who ridicules his God shall bear his sin.**

16a And the one puncturing Jehovah’s name must be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him.

Then Jehovah clarified that everyone who was guilty of the same offense was to suffer the same penalty. He did not want them to quibble over minor details in the future but to know that the instructions He gave for one instance applied to all similar cases. Anyone who committed the same offense as this man was to suffer the same penalty. To make His point perfectly specific, Jehovah used a different word with the same meaning. For someone who ridiculed or disparaged His name, He used the same word as before. For someone who cursed Him, He used a word that means “to pierce” or “to bore holes in.” Cursing tears into a person like someone is piercing him with an awl. A person who bored holes in God deserved to die. He was to die by the method already described. All the congregation was to participate in stoning him to death.

Verse 16b. **Even the sojourner just like the native, when he punctures the Name he must be put to death.**

Then Jehovah clarified His intention concerning another aspect of their questions. He declared that the same principle applied to everyone in Israel, regardless of who he was or where he

came from. Any person who punched holes in God's name by disparaging it was to suffer the same penalty, whether he was a native-born Israelite or a sojourner. Jehovah had not chosen the Israelites in order to treat them differently or to expect them to live by different principles. He had chosen them so they could understand His ways and teach those ways to everyone else. Therefore, they were to accept among them anyone who would accept Jehovah as their God and commit to live by His commands. When people of other nationalities or mixed nationalities were accepted into Israel, they were expected to live by the same rules as the Israelites, even the rules that would cause them to be cast out and stoned if they showed they had not truly accepted Jehovah in their hearts.

B. Penalties for violence to persons and to livestock (24:17-21)

Verse 17. And a man who kills a human life must be put to death.

Since this case of blasphemy had arisen during a physical fight, Jehovah also answered questions that apparently were in the minds of the judges about how to deal with violent acts resulting from angry fights and physical conflicts. In Exodus 21:12-15, 18-27 Jehovah already had dealt with several types of violent crime, but He dealt with additional types in this MESSAGE. He mentioned only one crime of violence concerning which He already had given instructions, which was murder (Ex. 21:12). In referring to murder, He used a combination of two words to describe human life. One of the words refers to life in general, that is, both animal and human life. The other word means "mankind" or "human." Together the two words are a clear description of human life. The commandment clearly means that a person who maliciously takes another person's life was to be put to death. Because of the seriousness of manslaughter, Jehovah repeated what He had said before about that crime. The penalty for killing another person was death.

Verse 18. And one who kills a livestock life must replace it life for life.

Then Jehovah clarified that He not only forbade harming another person out of anger but also harming another person's livestock because of anger or resentment. As He had done in describing human life, He also used two words to describe the animal's life. One is the same word He had used before that refers to both animal and human life. The other word means "domestic animal." It describes an animal used in a person's occupation or livelihood (see comments on Lev. 1:2 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading from the livestock). A person who killed another person's animal was guilty not only because it harmed the other person but also because it revealed lack of respect for life in general, including the life of an animal. Life, even animal life, is a marvelous creation of God, unexplainable by human understanding even until today. It is not to be taken maliciously or carelessly. A man who killed an animal that belonged to another man was to be required to give to the owner an animal equal to the one he had killed.

Verse 19-20. 19 And a man who inflicts a permanent injury to his neighbor, thus it shall be done to him.

20 fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Just as he inflicted injury on a man, thus it shall be inflicted to him.

Jehovah also informed Moses that respect for another person's life went far beyond just not killing him. Doing physical harm of any kind to another person was a sin also. If a man maimed or caused permanent injury to another man, he was to be punished by being injured in the same way. Whatever injury he caused to another person in a fight, that same injury was to be inflicted on him. The principle behind this command was that the punishment was to be equal to the crime.

The general principle that a man who caused injury to another was to be punished with a like injury already had been stated in Exodus 21:23-24. That principle has been much criticized by modern writers and often has been called "the law of the jungle." Such criticism reveals a complete lack of understanding of the legal safeguards Jehovah provided for Israel and a total failure to understand the purpose for the principle.

The principle of returning injury for injury was one aspect of an elaborate system of justice for Israel. It was not a principle to be practiced by an individual, and it was not an endorsement of personal vengeance, as the expression “law of the jungle” implies. The penalty was not vengeance but just punishment, legally determined, for the offender’s wrongdoing. Jehovah had provided for accused persons to be tried by properly appointed judges (Ex. 18:24-26). They were to base their decisions on the testimony provided by legitimate witnesses (Ex. 22:13; 23:2; see comments on Lev. 5:1 in MESSAGE 2 under the heading And if a person sins, in that he hears an oath spoken and he [was] a witness [to what was said] whether he saw it or knew about it). In the ninth of the Ten Commandments, Jehovah had established the moral principle that no person should give a false witness (Ex. 20:16; Deut. 5:20), and Moses later declared that giving a false witness was a serious crime to be punished by a clearly defined penalty (Deut. 19:16-21). Soon afterward He specified that a person should be found guilty only after the testimony of at least two witnesses (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15), and in the case of adultery He had specified a method of determining a woman’s guilt if no witness was available (Num. 5:12-31). Furthermore, Jehovah provided for cities to which an accused person could flee for protection until he could have a fair trial (Num. 35:1-32). If the person was found guilty, his penalty specified by the law was to be ordered by the properly constituted authorities (Num. 35:24-27). Only then could the victim’s next of kin act as avenger and execute the prescribed penalty (Num. 35:19,21,27). None of these provisions resemble in any way the “law of the jungle.” Those who make such accusations base them on false assumptions without examining the evidence.

Furthermore, the purpose of the principle of returning injury for injury was to practice fair and equal justice by making the punishment fit the crime. That provision was far in advance of any other law code of the time. Today it is the ideal that is sought after in the practice of law, though the exact way it is administered is different from the way it was administered in ancient Israel. Doing physical harm to an offender seems cruel today, but is it crueler than taking away ten or twenty years of

a person’s life? Either way the offender suffers, yet without suffering few will ever recognize the seriousness of their evil deeds.

The most vicious attacks against the “eye for an eye” principle are made by those who contend that punishment is evil in and of itself and that it should be replaced by attempts to rehabilitate the offender. While reclaiming lives of criminals is a worthy goal, the belief that people can live in peace without inflicting punishment for crimes is folly. It fails to recognize the sinful nature of humankind. It is blind to the reality that if sinful people do not suffer for doing wrong, they will feel free to do more wrong. Abandoning punishment does not prevent crime or rehabilitate criminals. It multiplies criminals and increases their crimes. Those who attempt to banish the principle of punishment make themselves wiser than God, and modern society is paying a heavy price for attempting to heed their advice.

Verse 21. **So one killing a head of livestock must replace it, and one killing a man shall be put to death.**

This verse contrasts the principles already stated. It emphasizes that taking the life of a person’s animal was a crime, but taking the life of a human was a much more serious crime.

C. Application of the civil law to sojourners (24:22)

Verse 22. **It must be one law. It must be like the sojourner as for the native, for I am Jehovah your God.**

In verse 16b, Jehovah already had dealt with the question of how the law was to be applied to sojourners. Before closing the MESSAGE, He again answered the judges’ question about how they should treat sojourners when they pronounced punishment on them. He stressed that sojourners were to be treated exactly like native-born Israelites. Previously Jehovah had specified certain aspects of the law that were to be applied equally to native born Israelites and sojourners (see comments on v. 12 above). Jehovah closed this MESSAGE by clarifying once and for all that all aspects of Israel’s law were to be applied equally to sojourners as to

native-born Israelites. Israel was to have only one set of laws. No difference was to exist between what the law contained or how it was to be applied to sojourners from what it contained or how it was to be applied to native-born Israelites.

Some have misapplied this requirement by asserting that Israel's law applied equally to foreigners as to Israelites. That statement is not correct, because sojourners were not foreigners. They were people of other nationalities or mixed nationalities who had accepted Jehovah as their God and who had been accepted as one of the Israelites. In other words, they were converts to Jehovah worship and naturalized citizens to Israel (see comments on vs. 10). The law of Israel did not apply equally to aliens as to citizens, any more than the law of any other country does. But, the law of Israel did apply equally to all citizens, no matter how they became citizens. The Israelites were not to have two classes of citizens. The requirements, the blessings, the penalties all applied equally to all citizens of Israel, regardless of how they became citizens.

Equality under the law was both a great privilege and a heavy responsibility for sojourners. It meant anyone from any nation could be equally acceptable to Jehovah God. Jehovah opened all the blessings He promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to any person from any nation if they would meet the same requirements that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob met. Jehovah played no favorites. He offered the same privileges to everyone. However, He also expected the same commitment and

obedience from everyone. Both Israelites and people of other nations could be accepted on the same basis, and they could be rejected on the same basis. Just as sojourners could receive God's blessings on the same terms as Israelites, they also could be cast away from Him on the same terms as Israelites. The real offense that would cause any person to be cast away from Jehovah was not what he said or did but that he rejected Jehovah God. Their actions were simply evidence of whether or not they accepted Him. Obedience showed they truly made Him their God. Disobedience showed they rebelled and refused to accept Him as their God. The same principles held for everyone, native-born and foreign-born alike.

Conclusion: Execution of the blasphemer (24:23)

Verse 23. So Moses told all the sons of Israel, and they took the one who cursed outside of the camp, and they stoned him with stones. Thus the sons of Israel did as Jehovah had commanded Moses.

Moses told Jehovah's MESSAGE to the people, and the people executed the blasphemer by stoning him as Jehovah had commanded. The man had rejected Jehovah, and Jehovah had rejected him. The people obeyed and separated themselves from him as well. The man was not cast out and stoned because of who his father was or because he was of mixed blood. He was cast out because he had refused to make himself a part of true Israel by accepting Israel's God in his heart.

Application

Just as discrimination against people of other nations or of mixed nationality was a problem among the Israelites in the wilderness, racial, ethnic, national, and sectional prejudices continue to be serious problems today. Religious prejudice seems to be especially intense in our time. Christians are being persecuted all over the world. In some countries, that persecution is vicious. Violence and death are being poured out on believers, both from official and unofficial sources. While every effort needs to be made to lessen discrimination and persecution, God also holds every person responsible for how we respond to that persecution. If we use it as an opportunity to show our faith in Him, He blesses us eternally. If we respond by blaming and resenting Him, He does not excuse us. When we allow human prejudice and persecution to turn us against God, He decrees for us the same penalty that He bestows on our persecutors.

Blaming God and cursing God are serious sins, because they reveal we do not truly accept Him and trust Him. They reveal an unbelieving heart. The penalty for an unbelieving heart that turns against God is death. It is the same penalty God gives to every sinner, death both physical and spiritual. Because all have sinned, all must die. Physical death is the universal experience of humankind, because all of us are sinners. God decrees the same penalty on all people in all lands. Death is universal, because sin is universal. God bestows the same penalty for sin on everyone, whoever we are and wherever we are because all have sinned and keep coming short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23).

Yet because God treats all people alike, He also offers the same blessings to all people. Everyone can transform his death sentence into eternal blessings simply by turning from rebellion to faith. God offers the same blessings of salvation and eternal life to all people. He offers those blessings to you today through faith in Jesus. Will you accept them now?

Then when we have accepted Jesus, He unites us into a new and blessed fellowship. He expects us to develop that fellowship by affiliation with a vibrant, serving church. If that fellowship in our churches is to be meaningful, it must be kept pure. Allowing into our fellowship people who do not have a genuine relationship with Jesus opens a church to compromise and even heresy. A church is intended to be a fellowship of redeemed people. To preserve that redeemed fellowship, doors into and out of that fellowship must be carefully guarded. A church should have a means of trying to be sure that each person received into its fellowship is a true believer. Then once people have become part of the fellowship, a way needs to be available to remove a person who demonstrates by a stubborn sinful life that he or she has not had a genuine conversion experience through faith in Jesus. The New Testament clearly teaches that a member of a church who is guilty of a serious offense that has become an open shame and will not repent should be excluded from the church fellowship (1 Cor. 5:1-8). Most modern-day churches have neglected or even rejected that responsibility. As a result, many churches are influenced by people among them who are more secular in their outlook than spiritual. The result is embarrassment before the world and ineffectiveness in God's service. Serious study needs to be given in most denominations today about how to restore the responsibility of casting out one who blasphemes God by hardening his heart against Jesus.