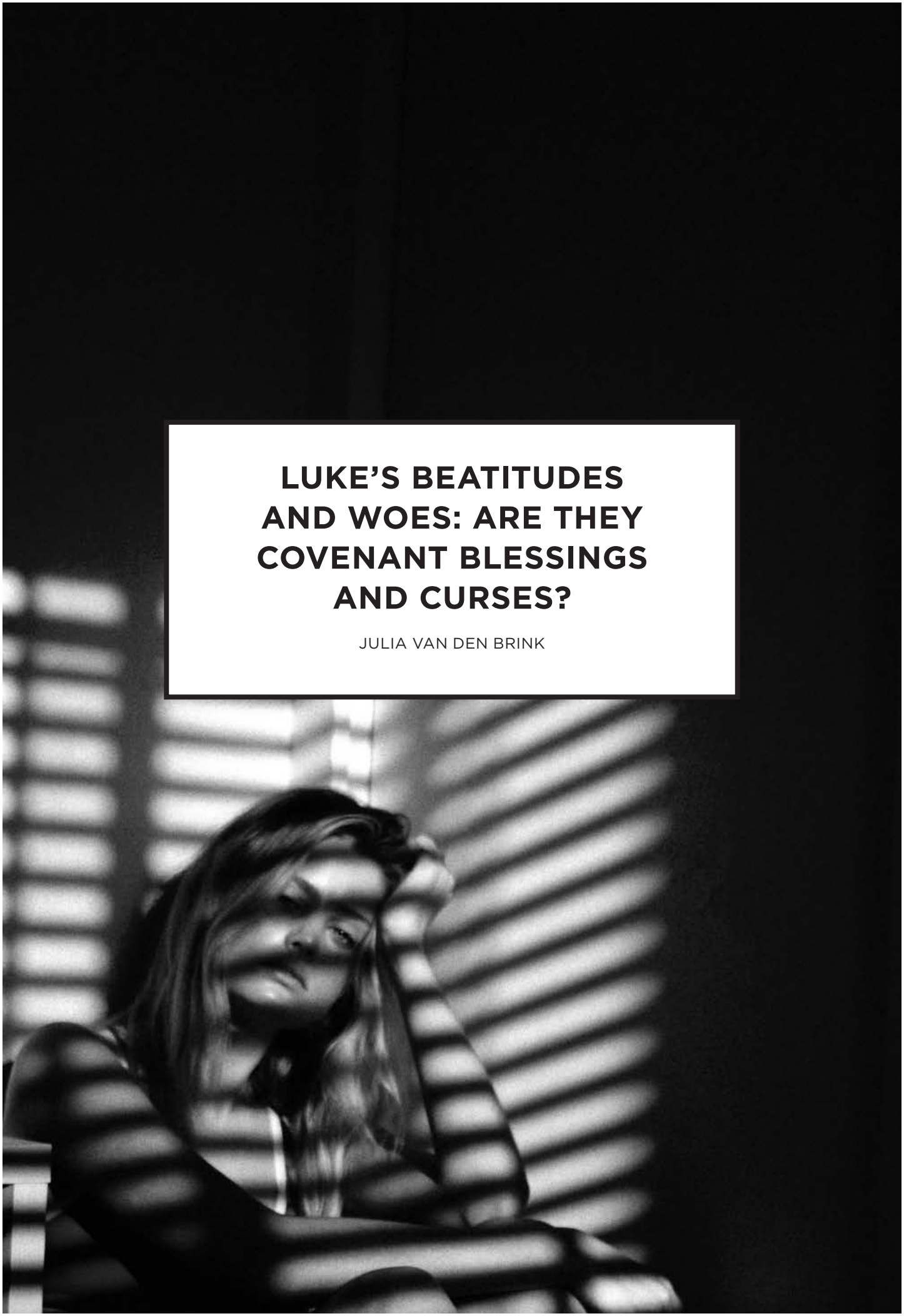

LUKE'S BEATITUDES AND WOES: ARE THEY COVENANT BLESSINGS AND CURSES?

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Luke's beatitudes and woes in Luke 6:20–26 are a rare New Testament example of a Jewish concept, best described as antithetical covenant blessing and curse. This concept occurs when blessing and curse statements appear in direct contrast to each other. They present opposing possibilities or realities which are part of the covenants between God and Israel. These blessings and curses present their audience with a choice between blessing and curse. They appear throughout the Old Testament as well as in non-biblical writings composed during the Second Temple period, also known as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha and sectarian literature such as the writings of the Qumran community.

JEWISH BIBLICAL AND NON-BIBLICAL WRITINGS

The first significant occurrence to blessing and curse is Genesis 12:1–3 in the promises God makes to Abram which form the basis for the covenant formalised in Genesis 15. In Genesis 12, it is the surrounding nations that will be blessed or cursed depending on how they respond to Abraham. In these initial promises, Abraham receives a blessing (12:1–2), while all those around him, although unaware of it, have a choice – between blessing and curse – depending on how they respond to Abraham (12:3; also 27:29). These statements apply to those who are not in a covenant relationship with God, but who are impacted indirectly by that relationship.

This situation continues throughout the patriarchal narratives. Abraham and his descendants are repeatedly promised blessing, but curses are never used to keep them from straying from their relationship with God (e.g. Gen 17:15–22; 18:18; 22:17–18; 24:1; 25:11; 26:3–4; 27:12–13, 27–28). One reason for the lack of curses directed at Abraham is that at this point in the narrative, God's people are a small group who need protecting from the curses of others rather than they yet needing to be kept in line by the threat of divine curses. So under the Abrahamic covenant, antithetical blessing and curse are instruments which God uses to protect his chosen people, to allow him to bless them and others through them.

Under the Sinai covenant, the situation develops; covenant blessings and curses form an extensive part of the agreement between God and Israel – exemplified in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Deuteronomy 28 is the more extensive of the two and will be my main example of antithetical covenant blessing and curse.

The book of Deuteronomy is concerned with detailing how Israel should go about keeping the Sinai Covenant. It is intended as a reminder to Israel of the many covenant commands and of their covenant responsibility (e.g. Deut 4:2; 5:32–33; 6:1; 7:11; 8:1; 10:13; 11:27–28; 12:28; 13:4; 15:5; 26:16–18; 27:10; 28:1; 30:10–11). Chapter 28 contains some of the most compelling reasons for obedience – prosperity and honour come from covenant obedience while destitution and shame are the results of disobedience.[1]

Deuteronomy 28 contains sixty-eight verses divided between covenant blessings and curses. The first fourteen verses detail the blessings, which are introduced by a conditional statement in verses 1–2 and in which blessing is dependent on obeying the covenant commands. The curses are introduced by a similar conditional statement in verse 15, highlighting that disobedience will result in the subsequent curses. These conditional statements place the blessings and curses that follow in the context of God's covenant with Israel and highlight the importance of how Israel responds to the covenant commands.

… COVENANT BLESSINGS AND CURSES FORM AN EXTENSIVE PART OF THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN GOD AND ISRAEL – EXEMPLIFIED IN LEVITICUS 26 AND DEUTERONOMY 28.

After verses 1–2, the blessings begin in verses 3–6 with a series of four statements. These blessings provide the foundation for the description of God's blessing that follows (28:7–14). Not only do they name every important part of life in ancient Israel – cities, fields, offspring, animals, crops and travel – but they spell out the means by which Israel will be raised up to their honourable and prominent position above the nations; through God's divine blessing.

The blessed situation of Israel is further elaborated in verses 7–14. They describe Israel's rise above the surrounding nations through numerous children, bountiful crops and herds, protection from their enemies, security, prosperity, peace and their position of honour above all others (vv. 13–14). According to Deuteronomy 28, this prosperous, honourable situation is what it means to be under God's blessing and it is the result of obedience to God's covenant.

The curses begin with a series of four statements which parallel almost exactly the four blessing statements (28:16–19). These cover the same areas of life as the blessings, but with the opposite force. Just as the initial four blessings are foundational for the blessings which follow them, these four

1 James Nicholas Jumper, "Honor and Shame in the Deuteronomic Covenant and the Deuteronomic Presentation of the Davidic Covenant" (Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University, 2013), 121–63.

curse statements are the curses which cause all the suffering described in the remainder of the chapter.

The curses are lengthy and detailed – in total, they take up fifty-four verses (28:15–68). As they progress, Israel is steadily stripped of everything. The prosperous situation of the blessings is taken away piece by piece. They lose their children, their crops, herds, safety, security, homes, land and dignity. By the end of the chapter, they have been reduced to captivity, cannibalism and slavery. They are in exile from the land the Lord promised them and are shamed beyond recognition.

Deuteronomy 28 provides insight into how Israelites perceived covenant blessing and curse. Blessing appears as prosperous life, filled with abundance and relative ease. Curse is the exact opposite, entailing an existence of fruitless labour, suffering, destitution and despair. These blessings and curses are situated at the heart of the Sinai covenant and become one way that the subsequent history of Israel is interpreted.

Moving on from Deuteronomy, antithetical covenant blessings and curses appear in other places in biblical and non-biblical writings, although they are uncommon and rarely as extensive as in Deuteronomy 28. Most are only one or two lines long, e.g. Prov 3:33. However, long lists appear in later literature such as in 1 Enoch 94–104; a list of woes against sinners and encouragements towards the righteous.[2] Another is found in 2 Enoch 52; a list of seven beatitudes paralleled by curses – correct behaviour leads to eschatological blessing while incorrect behaviour leads to curse.[3] Longer lists are also found in the writings of the Qumran community (e.g. 1QM XIII; 4Q286 7 I–II).

Before I move on to Luke, I would like to make one comment about prosperity and destitution in the Wisdom literature. While Deuteronomy presents prosperity as an indicator of blessedness and destitution as an indicator of cursedness, the situation is less clear-cut in the Wisdom literature.

In Psalm 112:1–3, riches belong to the righteous while in Psalm 73:6–12, the righteous suffer and sinners are wealthy. In Proverbs 8:18–19, wealth associated with wisdom, but twice, in chapters 13 and 31, Sirach feels the need to praise rich people who are blameless as though this is a rare occurrence (Sir 13:24; 31:8). In Job 15, Eliphaz argues that a person who opposes God will not be rich (15:29). Job counters this idea in chapter 21, where he argues that it is the impious that are prospering (21:7–16).

These examples show that there are two ways of interpreting prosperity: as a sign of righteousness or of sinfulness. In the Wisdom and Second Temple literature, there are occasions where blessing is presented as an eschatological reality that can only be attained post-mortem (Ps 109; 4 Macc 7:16–19; 10:15; 17:18). This shift towards eschatology provides hints that the righteous were not always those prospering.

Covenant blessings and curses, such as Genesis 12 and Deuteronomy 28, present blessing and curse as two opposing realities which are clearly defined – there are no shades of grey. In Genesis, their purpose is to protect God's people, while in Deuteronomy they encourage obedience to God, through the promises of good things and the threat of misfortune for disobedience. However, what is clear from the Wisdom literature is that the situation is rarely that simple and outward prosperity or destitution may not necessarily be indicative of blessing and curse.

BLESSING APPEARS AS PROSPEROUS LIFE, FILLED WITH ABUNDANCE AND RELATIVE EASE. CURSE IS THE EXACT OPPOSITE …

LUKE 6:20B–26

This outline of covenant blessing and curse leads into the discussion of the beatitudes and woes in Luke's Gospel. In Luke 6:20, Jesus begins his first section of sustained teaching to his disciples and the wider crowd which has gathered to hear him. In the narrative, the sermon is directed towards his disciples, but the crowd is also in the background listening in (Luke 6:17–20a). This audience implies that the sermon is directed broadly at those who are already followers of Jesus and those who are interested in learning more about him and his mission. This suggests that the Lukan beatitudes also apply to Christians today as much as they did to the disciples who heard them and the Christians Luke was initially writing to.

The beatitudes consist of four statements, each of which declares a particular group of people blessed. The first three focus on disadvantaged groups; the poor, hungry and weeping (6:20b–21). These groups have already become something of a focus for Jesus' ministry and continue to be so throughout Luke. They first appear in the Magnificat in Luke 1, where Mary praises God because he is working on behalf of the oppressed (1:50–53). Here, the downtrodden and lowly are those who fear the Lord, a designation which implies they are faithful to him. They appear again in the quotation from Isaiah in the Nazareth

2 Dated to second-first century BCE. E. Isaac, "1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983), 7; Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *1 Enoch 91–108* (CEJL; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 211–15.

3 Dated from pre-Christian to late middle ages. F. I. Andersen, "2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983), 95.

sermon in Luke 4:18–19. With this quotation, Luke's Jesus announces that his ministry and God's blessing are not necessarily focused on those whom the Jews think they should be. In the examples he uses in the rest of his sermon at Nazareth, in the stories of the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, blessing is given to those outside Israel while Israel suffered famine and oppression. These two individuals are not singled out because of their great faith in the Lord (although in the Old Testament they are notable for believing the words of his prophets). In Luke, they serve as examples of how the Lord helps those in need, whether they are those who his people think he should help or not. The example of Naaman and the widow prepares for the beatitudes and woes in which the recipients of the blessings and woes are similarly surprising.

In the beatitudes, marginalised groups are those whose circumstances will be changed due to the arrival of God's kingdom. This change is future in an eschatological, end-times sense, but also has implications in a more immediate way. In the remainder of the Sermon on the Plain, Luke's Jesus encourages his followers to be generous towards those less fortunate (6:33–36). They are part of the solution. This theme of generosity continues throughout the Gospel becoming the focus of the Parable of the Banquet in 14:7–24 and an underlying theme in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in 16:19–31, to name two examples.

The poor are given the kingdom of God in the present rather than the future. However, the "now-but-not-yet" nature of the kingdom implies that the result of their possession of the kingdom will have a limited impact on their lives in the present, but a greater impact in the future. This reality is made clear in the two beatitudes that follow where the change in situation is mainly in the future (6:21). In this contrast between the present and the future, the beatitudes emphasise that the present state of a person cannot be seen as a sign of whether they are blessed or not.

Luke 6:20–26 contrasts the blessings in Deuteronomy 28, where the blessed were prosperous and the cursed destitute. In Luke's beatitudes, this situation is changed and in some ways reversed. The poor are not promised wealth – but something more valuable: God's kingdom. The hungry and weeping will have their present situations reversed, becoming filled and laughing. Their current situation does not reflect their actual blessed state.

This emphasis reflects that found in Wisdom literature; that God's faithful do sometimes suffer oppression at the hands of wicked people and therefore, do not always appear to be as blessed as they should. One difference between the Wisdom literature and Luke 6:20b–26 is the means by which they express this problem. While beatitudes and woes do appear in Wisdom literature, they are more common as individual beatitudes or woes (e.g. Ps 1:1; 2:12; Prov 3:13; 23:29; Eccl 4:10; Lam 5:16). Occasionally, a beatitude-woe pair (Eccl 10:16–17) or lists of beatitudes or woes (Sir 2:12–14; 14:1–2; 25:7–9) are found, but not as lists placed in antithesis as in Luke 6:20b–26. So the content of Luke's beatitudes and woes bears the greatest resemblance to ideas found in Wisdom literature, while the form reflects the antithetical covenant blessing and curse lists, such as Deuteronomy 28.

In 2 Enoch 52's beatitude-curse list, the beatitudes are exhortations to live a certain way now. However, the reward for this behaviour is seen as in the future, giving them an eschatological element.[4] Luke's beatitudes emphasise the eschatological reality of the reward too, while Jesus' ministry allows for the poor, hungry and weeping to be cared for by his disciples *in the present*. The first three Lukan beatitudes do not encourage a specific pattern of behaviour but declare certain groups blessed. The discussion of behaviour is left for the rest of the sermon (6:27–49).

LUKE 6:20–26 CONTRASTS THE BLESSINGS IN DEUTERONOMY 28. WHERE THE BLESSED WERE PROSPEROUS AND THE CURSED DESTITUTE.

The fourth beatitude is directed at those who will suffer because of Jesus (Luke 6:22–23). This beatitude is addressed to Jesus' followers and provides encouragement; they will be rewarded for their suffering. The heavenly location of this reward implies that it will be eschatological and this is a reason to rejoice.

From this perspective, the beatitudes are addressed to two groups – the marginalised and Jesus' followers who face persecution. However, the poor, hungry and weeping can be interpreted as referring to spiritual poverty, hunger and grief.[5] There are occasions when a spiritual interpretation appears to be present in some regard (4:18; 7:22). However, limiting these to a spiritual interpretation runs the risk of ignoring or playing down the way Luke uses the language of poverty, hunger and weeping elsewhere in the Gospel (1:53; 4:2; 6:3; 6:25; 7:13, 32, 38; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8, 41; 21:3; 22:62; 23:28). As such, the spiritual reading should be treated as secondary to the physical

4 Larry Keith Drake, *The Reversal Theme in Luke's Gospel* (Ann Arbor, MI: Proquest, 1985), 144–49.

5 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts*, ed. Howard C. Kee and Douglas A. Knight (SBLDS; Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), 139.

description of poverty, hunger and sorrow. It is also suggested that they may also refer to the faithful remnant of Israel, an idea based on Luke's use of Isaiah 61:1–2 (Luke 4:18–19) where the reference to the poor could symbolise the restoration of Israel after the exile.[6] This interpretation is flawed in that it imports the meaning of Isaiah 61 directly into Luke without considering its new context.[7] So if the poor, hungry and weeping are both physical and spiritual categories, there is a likely overlap between them and the persecuted. This overlap implies that the beatitudes are addressed to the downtrodden and destitute of the world and the faithful followers of Jesus. They are a source of encouragement that the situations of the present age may be eased in the immediate future and will be rectified in the age of the kingdom.

Immediately after these beatitudes, come four antithetical woes. The first three are directed at fortunate groups of people; the rich, satisfied and laughing (6:24–25). Each is the opposite of those addressed by the beatitudes. This antithesis continues in the fourth woe which is addressed to those who are honoured by other people (6:26). The woes are a warning to those who place their trust in their comfortable situation and who receive honour from their society.

The rich in particular become the focus of numerous warnings in Luke, including in the Parable of the Rich Fool (12:13–21) and Jesus' encounter with the rich ruler (18:18–30). Both these rich men see their wealth as their source of security, which prevents them from using it to help the poor. It is this independence from God that places then in a woeful situation. They have in effect turned their backs on him, possibly without even realising it.

One of the reasons Luke may have included the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10) in his Gospel is to show that even the equation of wealth with woe is not accurate. Rather, Zacchaeus is an example of a rich person living out of kingdom values. He chooses to give away a majority of his wealth to aid those in need and make reparation for his career as a chief tax collector (19:8) in response to Jesus' acceptance of him (19:5). In the case of Zacchaeus, his response to Jesus speaks more of his state before God than his wealth or his reputation as a sinner (19:2, 7). Luke diverts his audience away from any association between a person's circumstances and whether they are blessed or cursed. Instead, those who are named as blessed by the beatitudes are those who suffer at the hands of other, while those addressed in the woes are insulated against such suffering.

The Lukan beatitudes do not idealise poverty. They are not commands or recommendations for all followers of Jesus to be poor, hungry, weeping and socially marginalised. Instead, the beatitudes show that God has a particular focus on the destitute and marginalised and calls those who follow him to meet the needs of the suffering in every way possible, whether they are in physical or spiritual poverty, hunger, mourning or persecution. The woes are a warning for the rich and comfortable among God's people that there is little security in their position if they are blinded by their possessions and if they place their security on what they possess rather than on God. The woes offer Luke's audience a choice between blessing and woe, in much the same way as Deuteronomy 28 offered Israel a choice between blessing and curse.

THE BEATITUDES AND WOES HAVE A SIMILAR PURPOSE TO DEUTERONOMY 28 WHERE THE ANTITHETICAL BLESSINGS AND CURSES URGE ISRAEL TO BE OBEDIENT.

A NEW SET OF COVENANT BLESSINGS AND CURSES?

The beatitudes and woes have a similar purpose to Deuteronomy 28 where the antithetical blessings and curses urge Israel to be obedient to their God and King. Luke's carefully balanced blessing and woe oracles are similarly intended to encourage disciples to follow God and his Messiah Jesus, to be obedient to his teaching and to live lives based on his understanding of the kingdom of God. As in Deuteronomy, they promise that God will reward such behaviour in the future and to a lesser extent the present. They are covenant blessings and curses to the extent that they identify those who are rewarded and disciplined according to the expectations of the kingdom (as in Deut 28 and the Sinai Covenant). They are distinct in that they also draw on ideas found in Wisdom literature in which outward appearances cannot be taken as evidence of a person's status before God (as either blessed or cursed). In so doing, they are encouraging the lifestyle highlighted in the rest of the sermon and worked out in the Lukan narrative that follows; one which seeks to mirror the mercy and generosity of God in all interactions with others.

Some of those identified in the beatitudes have already been singled out as central to Jesus' mission. Jesus announces the shape of his kingdom ministry in Luke 4:16–30, where he uses Isaiah 61:1–2a (with 58:6 inserted) to outline what his ministry will look

6 David Seccombe, *Possessions and the Poor in Luke-Acts* (SNTSU; Linz: A. Fuchs, 1982), 35–43.

7 Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, ed. James D. G. Dunn, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 77.

like. As with Luke 6, here there is an emphasis on the destitute and marginalised in society as well as those suffering under spiritual affliction.[8] This announcement broadens the scope of God's mission to include those on the edges of Jewish society who might otherwise have been considered outside God's people (4:18–19), as well as hinting at the inclusion of the Gentiles (4:25–27; also 2:32). God's particular care for the marginalised can also be seen in the Sinai covenant (e.g. Deut 15:1–18). Later in the Gospel, the Pharisees and lawyers are chastised with woes for their abuse of power and lack of concern for the plight of others (Luke 11:37–52). Jesus makes it clear that such behaviour is at odds with God's kingdom.

During the Last Supper, Luke's Jesus announces a new covenant, brought into effect by his blood which will soon be shed on the cross (22:20). While the beatitudes and woes are not explicitly identified as *covenant* blessings and curses as in Deuteronomy 28, they are part of this new covenant. Before the sermon, Jesus spends the night in prayer to God on a mountain before selecting the twelve apostles and coming down to teach the crowds (6:12–19). His actions reflect those of Moses at Mount Sinai (Exod 19:20–25; 24:12–18), hinting that Jesus should be seen as the foretold Mosaic prophet (Deut 18:15). The beatitudes and woes begin a section of teaching focused on how to live according to the new reality of the kingdom of God. The new covenant solidifies this new reality. Jesus' death is the sacrifice brings the new covenant into effect (see also Exod 24:3–8).[9]

This new covenant does not do away with the requirement of obedience – something clear from the rest of the sermon, with its discussion of how to behave in a manner which reflects the character of God (6:27–38). Instead, through the beatitudes and woes, the concept of covenant blessing and curse is altered to fit within the reality of the kingdom while preserving the importance of covenant obedience.

THE ON-GOING IMPACT

In summary, blessings and curses have been part of God's covenants with Israel since he first called Abraham. Under the Abrahamic covenant, blessings and curses were directed towards the nations to protect and nurture the people God was growing into a nation through his blessing. With Sinai and the introduction of extensive covenant commands and regulations, Israel was offered the choice between blessing and curse as part of that covenant with God, expanding the purpose of blessings and curses from protective of Israel to disciplinary. Deuteronomy 28 depicts blessing as prosperity and honour, while curse is destitution and shame, which came to be the way prosperity and destitution were often interpreted by others. This situation led to the reaction in Wisdom literature against this idea, with its insistence that sometimes the destitute are the faithful of God who are oppressed by wicked sinners.

Understanding Luke's beatitudes and woes as covenant blessings and curses highlights the importance of a person's response to God, their faithful obedience, rather than their social and economic circumstances. A choice is laid before Luke's audience, before the followers of Jesus. Just as Deuteronomy 28 is addressed to Israel, these beatitudes and woes are addressed to Christians and those considering following Jesus. This wide scope is seen by the dual audience highlighted in Luke 6:17–20a – the large group of disciples and the crowd of people. The beatitudes and woes offer them a choice. Despite almost certain resistance, they can follow Jesus and join those whose circumstances leave them on the edge of society. Yet, here they receive the attention of God. Alternatively, they can remain in their supposed security and self-reliance, even though the bubble will eventually burst, leaving them in a woeful situation.

THIS SHIFT IN LUKE IS IMPORTANT FOR THE CHURCH TODAY WHERE OFTEN MATERIAL PROSPERITY IS SEEN AS A SIGN OF GOD'S BLESSING.

Luke's beatitudes and woes differ from Deuteronomy 28 by removing the equation of blessing with prosperity and honour and curse with destitution and shame. They renew the focus on an obedient response to God, even in a largely negative situation of social ostracisation. This shift in Luke is important for the church today where often material prosperity is seen as a sign of God's blessing. When we ask for God's blessing, we are really asking for him to make things easy for us, to remove our troubles and smooth our road, or just to let us be happy. According to Luke, being blessed by God has the potential to make life harder, not easier, as being faithful provokes resistance from others.

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8 *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 211.

9 Ibid., 763.