**Reward for Obedience, Punishment for Disobedience**

The beatings will continue until morale improves! This line is often attributed to the infamous Captain Bligh of the HMS Bounty although I doubt he ever uttered those exact words. More likely it was a satirical observation about a harsh taskmaster boss. Although on the surface this statement appears farcical, sometimes behavior can only be changed by punishment. While one would prefer the carrot to the stick, some people act out of fear of consequences rather than the promise of rewards. The British philosopher Jeremy Bentham wrote “Pain and pleasure govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think”. There are countless online articles claiming that positive reinforcement is more effective than negative, however that does not work for everyone. I heard someone describe an athlete who hated losing more than he loved winning. While people will normally move toward a reward and away from punishment, those 2 outcomes are not always in equilibrium and people respond to stimuli in different ways. While it is difficult to estimate the percentage of people who are positive vs. negative, I do note that in chapter 26 of Leviticus, God devoted 10 verses to rewards for obedience and 26 verses to punishment for disobedience.

The chapter begins with reminders that the people were not to make or worship idols and that they were to observe God’s sabbaths. God then makes promises that were contingent on obedience to His decrees and commands. We have previously discussed how food security was so important and God’s first promise is about that subject. He promised to send timely rain so that the land would yield good crops and the trees and vineyards would yield abundant fruit. He said that their food would be so plentiful that they would have to move the previous harvest to make room for the new one.

Next God promises peace in the land, safety from wild beasts and waring nations. He would give them strength beyond their own strength so that one 100 of their soldiers could defeat an army of 10,000 (see Josh. 23:10, Judges chapter 7, also the small nation of Israel defeated Arab alliances of much larger countries in the wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973). God then promised to make them fruitful and increase their population. His greatest promise is that He would walk and dwell among the people.

After making multiple positive promises, God redirects their attention to the consequences for disobedience. He first says they would violate His covenant if they rejected His decrees and laws and failed to carry out His commands. The punishment would include physical harm (disease and fever) and psychological harm (terror) and they would be defeated by their enemies who would then rule over them.

In verses 18-35, God reveals that His punishment could be stopped by a change of heart and acceptance of His correction. This was similar to the progression of punishment inflicted on Pharoah as God gave him multiple opportunities to repent. The failure of the Israelites to repent would result in withholding of crops, attacks by wild animals, plagues and being handed over to their enemies. His positive promise of abundant food became a promise of the curse of lack of food. God predicted they would turn to idol worship and abandon His requirements of worship and sacrifice. Not only would God use enemies and animals to prey on them, He Himself would turn hostile towards them. The thing most feared by Moses was that God would withhold His presence from them. God vowed to destroy their idols, turn their nation barren and then drive them out from the land they would inherit. The small number who would remain in the land would have no respite from their enemies.

In verses 40-45 God offered some hope for the Israelites if they would repent promising to remember His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He also promised not to completely abandon them even as they were exiled into captivity.

While they were still nearly 40 years away from occupying the land that God promised, Go prophesied about their future disobedience. Numerous Old Testament prophets were sent by God with visions of his warnings to preach repentance to the Israelites (see Jerimiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and Amos). The books of Judges, Kings I and II and Chronicles I and II record the history of rejection of God followed by periods of temporary repentance culminating in the final defeat of Israel and Judah. God’s promise to not completely abandon them was realized with the return of a remnant recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Before announcing judgement on Israel and Judah in Amos, God first prophesied judgement for the nations bordering Israel (see Amos chapter 1). God’s reason for punishing Israel and Judah was their treatment of fellow Hebrews and their rejection of God. God ends the book of Amos with a message of hope, foretelling the restoration of Israel. David Guzik wrote that God intended to use Israel to reveal Himself to the world, making them so blessed or so cursed that all would know that it was possible only through God. Ultimately neither the hope of rewards or the warnings of punishment worked on the Israelites. A question to ponder: Do you desire Heaven more than you fear Hell?